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Politics of Belonging:  
Families and Communities Building Power to Transform Schools

by

Cassandra Diana Casanova

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requirements for the degree of

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in

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Bruce Fuller, Chair  
Professor Patricia Baquedano-López  
Professor Neil Fligstein

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## **Abstract**

### Politics of Belonging: Families and Communities Building Power to Transform Schools

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Bruce Fuller, Chair

The past decade of California’s education policy landscape has been shaped by two significant events and the interaction between them. First, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), signed into law in 2013, shifted the way that the state distributes money to local school districts and implemented mandatory stakeholder engagement in allocating the funds. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic was a shock to the public school system, and though there is ample research underscoring how difficult it is to change institutions, this crisis may have created the necessary conditions for enacting consequential change. The LCFF created the potential to restructure relationships between multiple stakeholders—district leadership, school site-level administrators, families, and communities—and we can examine how groups navigated a landscape of nascent education finance reform and implemented a new process of state-mandated stakeholder engagement. The COVID-19 crisis represented a much deeper and more destabilizing shock to the relationships between families and schools. During the initial onset of emergency stay-at-home orders, the global pandemic blurred the division between home and school—living rooms became classrooms with many parents and caregivers acting as de facto teaching assistants and school coordinators. These two events offer the opportunity to study ways that the relationships between families and educators may have changed and to evaluate the extent to which these changes have allowed families to influence local education policy discussions and share in decision-making.

This dissertation project consists of three substantive chapters and uses qualitative methods to examine how, if at all, a process of state-mandated stakeholder engagement in district-wide decision-making builds power for families to influence local education policy. Additionally, I illustrate how engaging in this process impacts both the micro-level experience of the individual and the organizational level of the district. Drawing on theories that examine institutional stability and change, collective action, and the role of families in schools, the overarching questions guiding my research are the following: (a) In what ways, if any, have school finance and accountability reform changed the balance of power between families and district administrators?; (b) In what ways, if any, has state-mandated stakeholder engagement expanded participation in decision-making and the process by which decisions are made?; and (c) How has participating in mandatory stakeholder engagement during various crises and shocks shifted the role and influence of families and communities in district-wide planning and decision-making?

In Chapter 1, I conduct a research synthesis that analyzes the literature on family and community engagement, with a focus on the policies and practices that empower diverse stakeholders to participate in discussions and decision-making related to education policy. The synthesis is guided by a framework used to map school-community literature along two dimensions—social stance and power and control. These dimensions help identify the extent to which families claim ownership of physical or symbolic spaces of engagement, author and control the agenda for engagement, and co-construct or shift the norms and beliefs of the education system. Based on a review of the literature, I conclude that conflict, not collaboration, is the status quo and that rather than mitigating conflict, family engagement may create structures and support venues for open negotiation of power. Additionally, although when families own engagement spaces and author agendas, they build political power to challenge status quo policies, there is minimal evidence to suggest they shift the norms and values of the existing education system.

The case study in Chapter 2 is a micro-level analysis of the parents who participated in a district-wide advisory committee; the chapter presents the motivations that drove parents to act collectively as they sought to impact the planning process. Drawing from interview data and parents' reports, I investigate how parents conceptualized and framed what it means to build power to influence change and to engage in the process and how this framing contributed to the collective identity and shared understandings of the parent members of the advisory committee. Based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted in a diverse urban school district in California, this study shows how families engage in local-level decision-making and build power to influence the policies and institutions that structure their lives; the findings speak to the limitations and affordances of state-mandated stakeholder engagement.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I conduct a field-level analysis of a diverse urban school district in California to explore the implementation of school finance and accountability reform and the influence of democratic participation in expanding inclusion within policy discussions and to identify potential shifts in the balance of power between stakeholder groups seeking to impact district-wide planning. Based on participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, my findings describe how school reform created and protected a relatively vague structure and process of mandated stakeholder engagement. It is because this engagement was codified into law that when conditions were ripe, the community could push and exert force. Therefore, while the law did not guarantee community power, it codified a process and created potential for collective action to push back against the status quo.

*To Grayson. Love you to the moon and back.*

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## Introduction

With the passage of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), California ushered in an era of equity-driven education finance reform and set in motion a decade of change. The LCFF, signed into law in 2013, changed the way that the state distributes money to local school districts and implemented mandatory stakeholder engagement for allocating the funds. Under the law, district leaders are required to engage their communities in developing their Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP)—three-year strategic planning and budgeting documents. This commitment to prioritizing local-level decision-making represented a major shift in the state’s education policy landscape and the LCFF created the potential to restructure and strengthen the relationships between multiple stakeholders (i.e., district leadership, school site-level administrators, families, and communities).

As educators and school communities navigated an unsettled education reform landscape, the COVID-19 pandemic further shocked and destabilized the public school system. While research has underscored how difficult it is to transform institutions (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2014; Tyack & Tobin, 1994), this crisis may have created the necessary and sufficient conditions for enacting consequential change (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Roy, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis represented an acute and destabilizing shock; emergency stay-at-home orders blurred the division between home and school, with living rooms becoming classrooms and many parents and caregivers acting as *de facto* teaching assistants. These two events—the passage of the LCFF and the COVID-19 pandemic—offer the opportunity to study ways that the relationships between families and educators may have changed and evaluate the extent to which these changes have allowed families to influence local education policy discussions and share in decision-making.

Much research has documented the benefits of parental involvement in schools and its positive effects on student achievement (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003). However, this involvement is not constructed in neutral ways. Researchers have highlighted the damaging ways that traditional conceptions of parental involvement interact with race, class, and culture, which contribute to the marginalization of nondominant<sup>1</sup> families and their relationships with schools (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Olivos, 2004; Valdes, 1996; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). When educators disregard values and beliefs that deviate from white middle-class norms of traditional parent involvement, they often turn toward deficit-based assumptions about nondominant parents and caregivers (Valdes, 1996). Therefore, research that examines the lived experiences and leadership development of nondominant families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, 1994) illustrates a counter-narrative that interrogates issues of power (Fine, 1993) and the assimilating nature of the school system (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Models of family engagement that draw from critical race theory and feminist standpoint theory amplify the lived expertise of marginalized families and suggest that parents and caregivers recognize the structural and cultural inequities that shape their schools, yet their perspectives and voices are rarely centered in policy and practice (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; McKenna & Millen, 2013).

In theory, California’s school finance reform and state-mandated stakeholder engagement have codified a more participatory decision-making process that brings to bear the lived experiences of marginalized families on district-wide funding decisions. Yet despite the spirit of the law, researchers have found that most school districts facilitate narrow participation and

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term *nondominant* to foreground the impact of power in structuring the experiences of parents of marginalized backgrounds (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; Fennimore, 2017).

shallow engagement strategies (Marsh et al., 2018; Marsh & Hall, 2018). In the literature examining the best practices of exemplary school districts, the perspectives of parents/caregivers and students are absent (Families in Schools, 2016; Humphrey et al., 2018; London, 2016), leaving us without a complete account of this district-level engagement process.

Researchers and policymakers have underscored the leadership potential of families to partner with educators in guiding and informing school- and district-level governance. Prior research on LCFF and LCAP has drawn attention to “who is involved, how they are involved, and for what purpose” (Marsh & Hall, 2018, p.248) but does not fully explore the motivations for *why* families participate. By focusing on the voices and lived experiences of parents, my research aims to understand how they experience the engagement process and study whether and how the relationships between families and educators change as a result of this engagement.

### **Research Questions**

In this dissertation, I examine how, if at all, a process of state-mandated stakeholder engagement in district-wide decision-making builds power for families to influence local education policy. Additionally, I illustrate how engaging in this process impacts both the micro-level experience of the individual and the organizational level of the school district. The overarching questions guiding my research are as follows: (a) In what ways, if any, have the LCFF and the LCAP process changed the balance of power between families and district administrators?; (b) In what ways, if any, has the LCFF and LCAP expanded participation in decision-making and the process by which decisions are made?; and (c) How has engaging with the LCAP process during various crises and shocks shifted the role and influence of families and communities in district-wide planning and decision-making?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theories guiding my research draw on frameworks that examine institutional stability and change and collective action, and critically interrogate the role of families in schools. In this study, I use the theory of strategic action fields (SAF) (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) as a set of orienting concepts to structure what I see taking place in the LCAP engagement field while I apply decolonial approaches to parental engagement (Baquedano-López et al., 2013) to examine the structural and cultural contexts that shape the field and the roles that families assume in the LCAP development process.

In this dissertation, I use SAF (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) to explore the impact of shifts stemming from the LCFF and the destabilizing shock of COVID-19. I take as a starting point that when relationships between communities, schools, and families are strong, we are better able to serve students. As LCFF set into motion an era of local decision-making, I use SAF to examine how the law and the stakeholders interacting within the LCAP field shifted the status quo rules of engagement, if they did so at all. Central to the theory is the idea that actors in a given field share an understanding of the field’s purpose, what is at stake and the rules that govern legitimate action, and that they have a sense of their position and relative power to influence the field. Using this perspective brings to the fore the underlying mechanisms that perpetuate field stability and/or change; it sharpens my focus on the power of families to transform a field, their ability to frame calls to action that mobilize support, the macro-level forces that influence the field, and how all this potentially expands who belongs within decision-making spaces and policy discussions.

Baquedano-López et al. (2013) brought together theoretical perspectives that underscore the interaction of power, race, and ethnicity in structuring the relationships between parents/caregivers and educators, calling on researchers to critique deficit-based assumptions about nondominant families. They explained that a move toward decolonial approaches to parent engagement requires us to consider educational sovereignty (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992), empowerment (De Gaetano, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1993; Torres & Hurtado-Vivas, 2011; Villenas, 1996), and community organizing for building power (Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2015). As decolonial approaches to parent engagement problematize forms of empowerment that assimilate nondominant families into white middle-class norms and reproduce the status quo, this perspective led me to question how I think about the ways in which “empowered” parents/caregivers can act collectively to disrupt and transform the systems that structure their lives. In addition, it helped me interrogate the degree to which parents/caregivers are empowered by participating in the LCAP space, how parents/caregivers frame their roles, and how their roles and participation may disrupt the status quo rules of engagement.

## Chapter Overview

In Chapter 1, I analyze the literature on family and community engagement, primarily focusing on the policies and practices that aim to empower diverse stakeholders to participate in education policy discussions and decision-making. The research synthesis is guided by the following questions: (a) What are the organizational factors and social structures that shape the role of families in education reform?; (b) How much agency do families have to shape their role for themselves? (c) What models—if any—build capacity, foster authentic participation, and empower families to affect education policy? I include literature from the fields of civic capacity, community organizing for school improvement, social movement organizing, family engagement and empowerment, school-community partnerships, full-service community schools, school leadership and organizational cultures for authentic partnerships, and parent participation in school governance, as well as research specifically focused on LCAP and stakeholder engagement.

To inform the analysis, the review is guided by a framework used to map school-community literature along two dimensions—*social stance* and *power and control* (Kerr et al., 2016). These dimensions help identify the extent to which families claimed ownership of physical or symbolic spaces of engagement, authored and controlled the agenda for engagement, and co-constructed or shifted the norms and beliefs of the education system. Based on the review, I conclude that conflict, not collaboration, was the status quo and that family engagement did not serve as a process for mitigating conflict so much as it helped create structures and support venues in which power could be openly negotiated. Additionally, when families took ownership of spaces of engagement and authored agendas, they built power to challenge status quo policies; however, there is minimal evidence to suggest they shifted the norms and values of the existing education system. Therefore, to better understand the role families may play in shaping educational systems, future research must investigate parents’ experiences, ideas, and opinions about what it means to be empowered to participate and *why* they seek to influence the macro context of education policy.

In Chapter 2, I use an embedded single-case study design (Yin, 2018) to conduct a micro-level analysis of the parents who participated in a district-wide advisory committee; the chapter presents the motivations that drove parents to act collectively as they sought to make an impact in the LCAP planning process. Drawing on interview data and parents’

reports, I investigate how parents conceptualized and framed what it means to build power to influence change and to engage in the LCAP development process and how this framing contributed to the collective identity and shared understandings of the parent members of the advisory committee. The study was guided by the following questions: (a) What issues draw parents into the LCAP engagement space and sustain their motivation? (b) How do parents conceptualize and frame what it means to build power and have an impact in the LCAP engagement process? (c) How does this framing contribute to the collective identity and shared understandings of members of the parent student advisory committee?

Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews in a diverse urban district in California, this study showed how families engaged in local-level decision-making and built power to influence the policies and institutions that structure their lives; the findings speak to the limitations and affordances of state-mandated stakeholder engagement. Further, this research suggests that laws and mandates that increase access to education policy making spaces hold the potential to bring forth a community's diverse perspectives and foster a culture of belonging where educators and community members have a hand in co-constructing a more holistic system of support for students and their schools.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I present a single-case study (Yin, 2018) used to conduct a field-level analysis of a diverse urban school district in California to explore the implementation of school finance and accountability reform and the influence of democratic participation on the expansion of access to policy discussions and to identify potential shifts in the balance of power between stakeholder groups seeking to impact district-wide planning. The study was guided by the following questions: (a) Over the course of LCFF and LCAP implementation, how has the balance of power shifted, if at all, between parents and district administrators in the LCAP engagement process?; (b) How have accountability and democratic participation influenced beliefs regarding who should participate in the process of district-wide planning and budgeting?; and (c) How have various crises and exogenous shocks shifted the LCAP development and engagement process and the patterns of interactions between parents and district administrators?

Using participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, I describe how school reform created and protected a relatively vague structure and process of mandated stakeholder engagement. However, because this engagement was codified into law, the community was able to push and assert their position when conditions were ripe. Therefore, while the law did not *guarantee* community power, it codified a process and created the potential for collective action to push back against the status quo. My findings illustrate a process by which community-engaged stakeholders shifted beliefs about who should have access to education policy making spaces to influence the decisions that shape the institution.

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## Chapter 1

### Family Engagement and Education Reform: Assimilation as a Means to Empowerment?

For decades, researchers have underscored that parent involvement in schools yields positive educational outcomes for students (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003). However, the effects of families engaging in district-wide budgeting and planning decisions, and the expectation that their input will authentically impact decisions, have not been widely studied (exceptions include Humphrey et al., 2018; Marsh & Hall, 2018; Marsh et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2015; Sanders, 2009; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). With this in mind, the purpose of this review is to analyze the literature on family, community, and stakeholder engagement policies and practices that seek to empower diverse stakeholders to become educational leaders, assume roles that involve substantive school- and district-wide decision-making, and build capacity to participate in education policy discussions and decision-making. The review is guided by the following questions: (a) What are the organizational factors and social structures that shape the role of families in education reform?; (b) How much agency do families have to shape the role for themselves?; and (c) What models—if any—build capacity, foster authentic participation, and empower families to affect education policy?

I begin the review by presenting the policy context for stakeholder engagement, along with a brief history of the scholarly work in the field of traditional parental involvement in schools, and then draw on the concept of civic capacity—communities coming together to support reform efforts—to situate the role that families *might* assume to influence education policy making. Next, I outline the criteria used for inclusion and exclusion from the review and introduce the framework used to map and analyze the literature. Finally, I describe my findings, discuss their implications, and identify questions that build on existing scholarship to generate new insights into the role of families in education policy discussions and decision-making.

## Background

### Federally Mandated Stakeholder Engagement

In 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), replacing No Child Left Behind (2002) and reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of (1965). In the text of law, the term “parent involvement” is replaced in many instances with “parent and family engagement,” signaling a semantic shift in the conceptualization of the relationship between schools and families. Additionally, ESSA provides funding for statewide Family Engagement Centers, which have replaced defunded Parental Information Resource Centers. The law requires that districts develop and evaluate parent and family engagement policies, which may include the establishment of parent advisory committees to participate in the development and evaluation process. Finally, as in previous laws, at least 1% of Title I funds—federally allocated money to support low-income students—must go toward family engagement activities. However, what is new in ESSA is that districts are required to use funds for at least one of the following strategies and/or activities: (a) professional development for educators and families regarding engagement strategies; (b) programs that foster home-school-community collaboration; (c) dissemination of information about best practices that relate to family engagement, with an emphasis on increasing the engagement of low socioeconomic status families; (d) sub-grants to school sites to fund collaborations with community-based organizations or businesses to increase family engagement; and (e) other appropriate activities or strategies that promote the district’s parent and family engagement policy (Henderson, 2015).

Six months after the ESSA’s passage, the then U.S. Department of Education Secretary, John B. King, Jr., issued a letter providing guidance for implementing and promoting “genuine stakeholder engagement.” He wrote:

Generally, the Department recommends that States and districts design processes that allow stakeholders the opportunity to provide meaningful feedback throughout the development of plans and policies related to ESSA implementation as well as throughout the implementation of the law. To facilitate continuous feedback, States and districts should develop and support high-quality systems of engagement and remove systemic barriers that could prevent meaningful and broad engagement. (United States Department of Education, 2017, para. 6)

The letter further enumerated best practices for establishing high-quality stakeholder engagement. It included recommendations for selecting meeting times and locations, ensuring transparency in the policy development process and broad participation of diverse stakeholders, providing accommodations such as translation to increase accessibility of the meetings for stakeholders, and enabling “all stakeholders who are participating in meetings or hearings to provide substantive input” (United States Department of Education, 2017, para. 6).

### **California Context: Local Control and Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement**

At the state level, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), established in 2013 and based on a principle of equity under the law, represents a significant shift in how California funds its schools. The state uses a weighted pupil formula, which allocates more money to school districts for high-need student subgroups as defined by the state: English learners (EL), foster youth (FY), and low-income (LI) students (California Department of Education, 2018). State funds take the form of base, supplemental, or concentration dollars. Every district receives the same amount of base dollars per student, determined by enrollment and grade span. Districts receive additional supplemental dollars based on their enrollment of the unduplicated count of students from the three subgroups of EL, FY, and LI. If a district has a student enrollment of over 55% across all three high-need student subgroups, they receive concentration dollars.

Included in the funding formula is a new planning and implementation process. As part of the LCFF, school districts are required to produce a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), which documents how supplemental and concentration funds are allocated to improve student services and academic, social, and emotional outcomes for the three high-needs student subgroups. A key component of this process is that districts must engage parents, students, and the community as they develop their LCAPs (California Department of Education, 2019). With the LCFF, at least in theory, there is a restructuring of relationships between multiple stakeholders—district staff, families, and communities—that allows us to examine how each group navigates the landscape of nascent education finance reform and implements a process for stakeholder engagement and shared decision-making.

### **Traditional Parent Involvement: A Brief History**

There is ample research documenting the benefits of parent involvement in schools and its effects on student outcomes (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003). Joyce Epstein’s (1995) Framework of Six Types of Involvement has become synonymous with traditional parental involvement and has been widely disseminated. For example, the National

Parent Teacher Association models their national standards for Family-School Partnerships on Epstein's framework (National PTA, 2009).

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological model, Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, on which she based her framework, asserts that students do better in school when they are supported by their families, school, and community. Each sphere—family, school, and community—is a stakeholder in helping students succeed. Using this theory, Epstein identified six types of parent involvement: (1) parenting, which encompasses child development and the home learning environment; (2) communicating, namely effective communication between school and home; (3) volunteering at school; (4) learning at home; (5) decision making, leadership, and governance; and (6) collaborating with the community.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) examined the behaviors and motivations that guide parents in defining the role they assume in their children's education. In their multi-level model of parental involvement they identified three major constructs at the center of a parent's decision to get involved in their child's school: (a) parents become involved because they have developed a parental role construction that includes involvement, (b) parents have a positive sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school, and (c) parents perceive general opportunities and invitations for involvement from their children and their schools. Further, the model demonstrates that parental role construction is a highly influential factor: parents who do not construct a role that requires them to be involved in their child's school will be much harder—perhaps impossible—to engage in family-school partnership efforts.

Researchers have also highlighted the damaging ways that traditional conceptions of parental involvement interact with race, class, and culture, which contribute to the marginalization of nondominant families and their relationships with schools (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Olivos, 2004; Valdes, 1996; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). When the rules of engagement privilege white middle-class norms, cultural values and beliefs that deviate from these norms are disregarded, giving rise to deficit-based assumptions about nondominant parents (Valdes, 1996). Thus, research centered on illuminating the lived experiences and empowerment of nondominant families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, 1994) offers a counter-narrative that brings into sharp focus the power imbalances between families and educators (Fine, 1993) and the assimilating nature of the school system (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999).

More recent models of family engagement have drawn on critical race theory and feminist standpoint theory to amplify the voices and insights of marginalized families and highlight their efforts to achieve more equitable educational outcomes (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; McKenna & Millen, 2013). Research has suggested that parents have a deep understanding of the complex ways that structural and cultural inequity exist in their schools, yet their voices, insights, and contributions are rarely central to education policy and practice (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; McKenna & Millen, 2013). This assessment begs the question: If families are key actors in school improvement efforts, what, then, is their role in the broader education policy landscape? In the following section, I draw on the concept of civic capacity to illustrate the role that families might assume to influence education policy making.

### **Civic Capacity**

A notion rooted in the work of urban regime theorists who have investigated relationships and coalitions between governmental and non-governmental actors, "civic capacity concerns the extent to which different sectors of the community—business, parents, educators, state and local officeholders, nonprofits, and others—act in concert around a matter of community-wide import. It involves mobilization—that is, bringing different sectors together but also developing a shared

plan of action” (Stone, 2001, p. 596). According to Stone (2001), cities with narrow reform agendas and diffuse community engagement exhibit low levels of civic capacity. Establishing high levels of civic capacity requires that communities acknowledge there is an issue to address and that they can work collectively to support reform. This involves both a strong leadership committed to sustaining cross-sector collaboration and a myriad of public and private sector actors motivated to adopt a community-wide solution-oriented perspective.

### ***Political Change from an Education Perspective***

Expanding on Stone’s notion of civic capacity, Dorothy Shipps (2003) identified limitations and offered a more nuanced view. Shipps contended that there might be certain education reform efforts that require a narrow agenda, which does not necessarily signal low civic capacity. Whereas Stone collapsed all reforms into the same typology and did not distinguish between types of reform, Shipps described four types of urban school reform “that help explain which local political arrangements and coalitions are compatible with various versions of this reform” (Shipps, 2003, p. 841). She differentiated between three activist reform regimes—performance, empowerment, and market—and a status quo, or employment regime.

Pertinent to this review, empowerment regimes redefine school governance structures and seek to change the balance of power and relationships between actors that work to support schools, namely school administrators, teachers, community leaders, and parents. The impetus for this type of reform is “to spur new thinking about, and experimentation with, old problems, and in its systemic mode, to provide the enabling conditions for institutionalizing new decision-making arrangements,” (Shipps, 2003, p. 850). In this type of reform, government actors must sanction new decision-making structures and actors “seeking greater decision-making power need a range of coalition partners both inside and outside government to buffer them from such criticism” (Shipps, 2003, p. 855).

### ***Race Matters***

As part of the original “Civic Capacity in Urban Education” study, Henig et al. (1999) investigated governance regimes in Black-led cities and examined the “ways race has complicated or facilitated the development of civic capacity to undertake and sustain educational reforms” (Henig et al., 1999, p. 8). They argued that the school reform literature de-emphasizes race and the “importance of politics and coalition building in determining the viability of reform endeavors” (Henig et al., 1999, p. 8). They described the study’s cities and schools as being oversaturated with reform initiatives and explained that though educators are invested in reform efforts, what leads to failure is the fragmented nature of the reforms, which are exacerbated by racialized politics that give rise to racial cleavages precluding cross-sector collaboration. Henig et al. (1999) suggested that the crux of the issue lies with sustaining reform efforts, as opposed to gaining attention or securing an initial commitment of support.

“Understanding race helps to explain the nature of local school-reform politics. It does not serve as an explanation on its own” (Henig et al., 1999, p. 15). In this sense, race is a central and confounding variable in the relationship between a city and its ability to create civic capacity to support systemic education reform. Henig et al. noted that a history of both *de jure* and *de facto* separate school systems “strengthened the special symbolic role that public education plays within the African-American political consciousness” (Henig et al., 1999, p. 43). For the Black community, education and democratic participation are inextricably linked. Further, jobs in education are a path to the Black middle class, and teachers and administrators are regarded as respected members of the community. Henig et al. (1999) described how in the past, separate

school systems united the Black community in a fight for “full citizenship rights,” including parity in pay, increased resources for students, and representation in leadership positions.

However, even though each of the cities investigated in the study was led by Black leaders, Henig et al. (1999) found that descriptive representation did not lead to substantive representation. That is, having local authority and descriptive representation in leadership roles does not translate to having the power to reform systems. There are multiple players involved in any reform effort, and while Black-led cities may have the formal authority to make decisions, they may lack the capacity to build a broad coalition to work toward education reform. Henig et al. (1999) demonstrated that it is difficult to coalesce around education reform, especially when it is seen as redistributive and deep racial cleavages exist within a city.

### *Ordinary Participants*

Whereas Henig et al. (1999) focused on the role of race, politics, and city-level governance in the development of civic capacity, Stone (2001) considered a broader base for civic capacity. “The highest levels of civic capacity rest on the ability to engage not just an array of strategic elites but also a broad base of ordinary participants. To withstand the corrosive power of public contention, civic capacity needs strong pillars of support” (Stone, 2001, p. 614). Here, Stone suggests that a rationale for bringing families into decision-making spaces is to mitigate the public’s ability to block and derail reform efforts. That is, ordinary participants are included in cross-sector collaborations as a sort of preventative measure; broad and inclusive engagement strategies rest on elites’—those leading reform efforts—aversion to disgruntled constituents. If this is the case, then we might expect to see civic elites inviting members of the community into spaces of engagement, not to share in decision-making but to gain buy-in and mitigate negative consequences.

Shipp (2003) offered a different perspective about empowerment that showed that redefining school governance structures authorizes new decision-makers (e.g., parents and community members) who may offer new and innovative solutions to better support school reform efforts. But while novel ideas may be important, it is necessary to examine whether this type of reform is an effective strategy to build power and agency for families or simply another method to solicit feedback and garner buy-in. If “empowerment” refers to families’ role as idea generators and rubber stampers, then it follows that it would require less civic capacity, but if we are talking about leveling power imbalances and sharing in two-way decision-making, then it seems that it would require substantive civic capacity to change hierarchical structures.

Civic elites will lead and make decisions but inevitably must contend with the community. But what value do families bring to, and gain from, these reform efforts? Are there cross-sector collaborations that proactively involve ordinary participants and empower them with an actual stake in making decisions? Federal- and state-mandated family engagement policies and their implementation allow researchers to examine a spectrum—if, in fact, one exists—of family engagement in education policy discussions and decision-making. At one end of the spectrum are institutional actors inviting the community to participate in highly circumscribed and delimited roles, which effectively silence their voices. This lends an appearance of community engagement while masking power imbalances. At the other end of the spectrum is a community that is valued as a partner in the decision-making processes. Here there is a sharing of power—evidenced by the role the community plays in developing and implementing policy. But does this end of the spectrum describe an unrealistic expectation for cooperation and collaboration? If so, then the notion of sharing power among stakeholders and expecting that it will maintain a co-operative equilibrium seems like an exercise in futility. Inherent to the nature

of power is the imbalance of its distribution. Those with power will seek to grow and maintain their stock; those without will conflict with, and be oppressed by, the powerful. And while conflict and oppression may be latent and hidden under a pretense of collaboration, tensions will persist, which has significant implications for the notion of civic capacity.

## Design and Method

### Selection Criteria

If the concept of civic capacity provides a rationale for drawing families into education policy discussions and decision-making, and our aim is to better understand the limitations and affordances of stakeholder engagement policies, it is necessary to consider the empirical research and conceptual literature<sup>2</sup> at the intersection of education reform, democratic participation, and family engagement that explores power dynamics and the potential for families to play a role in transforming the education system. At the outset of this project, I cast a wide net to get a sense of the breadth of existing research; however, it was not my intent to review the full corpus of literature pertinent to family engagement in schools. Rather, I sought to sample across fields to gain a better understanding of how researchers have conceptualized families in various engagement capacities and synthesize their findings to identify new perspectives to inform future research. This literature review can be visualized as a Venn diagram where families occupy the space where these sets of literature overlap, which is where I located the 50 pieces selected for the review. I included literature from the fields of civic capacity, community organizing for school improvement, social movement organizing, family engagement and empowerment, school-community partnerships, full-service community schools, school leadership and organizational cultures for authentic partnerships, parent participation in school governance, and research specifically focused on LCAP and stakeholder engagement.

As I stated earlier, the review was guided by questions that examined the organizational factors and social structures that shape the role of families in education reform. It includes literature on the agency of families to shape their own role and research that seeks to identify models that build capacity, foster authentic participation, and empower families to affect education policy. I excluded studies of traditional parent involvement, which largely examined home-school relationships through the lens of Epstein's six types of parent involvement (Epstein, 1995). I selected literature published after 2001, the date when the findings of the "Civic Capacity and Urban Education" project appeared, which influenced research on family engagement and education reform. Finally, I used Google Scholar and surveyed the bibliographies of pertinent works to identify relevant literature.

### Data Analysis

To inform my analysis, I used a framework developed by Kerr et al. (2016) that maps school-community literature along two dimensions—*Social stance* and *Power and control* (Figure 1). As they explained, the framework asks the following questions:

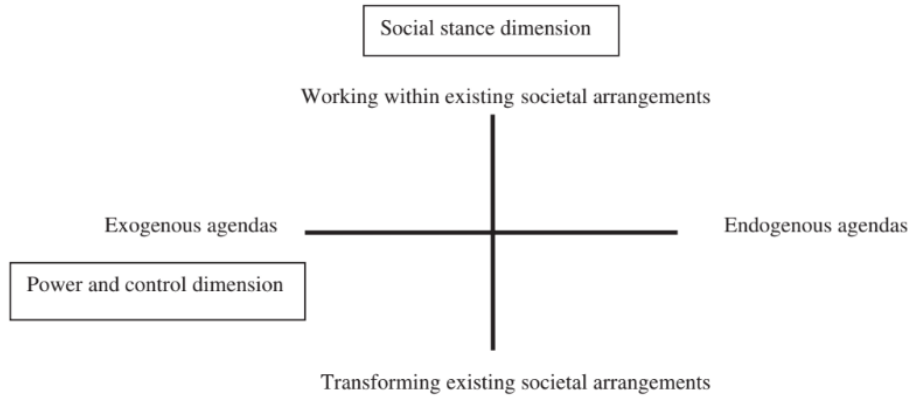
- (1) Where does the literature suggest the impetus for action comes from and who holds the power in school–community engagement activities?
- (2) What does the literature suggest are the purposes of action, and what social stances does it embody? (p. 274)

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<sup>2</sup> I include conceptual papers in this review as the ideas presented in this literature have influenced research and practice.



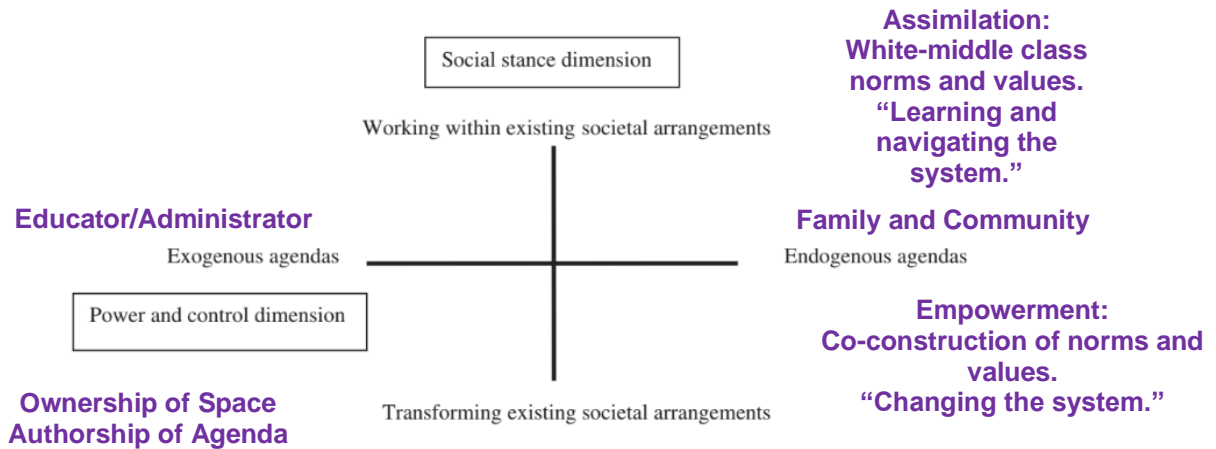
**Figure 1**  
*A Tool for Mapping the School–Community Literature*



*Note.* A framework for analyzing literature (Kerr et al., 2016).

While this framework provided a starting point for my analysis, I found it useful to relabel the dimensions to capture more explicit descriptions of power and societal arrangements (see Figure 2). For the power and control dimension I examined the literature to identify who claimed ownership of the physical and symbolic space of engagement and authorship of the engagement agenda. With regard to the social stance dimension, I considered “working within existing societal arrangements” as assimilation and “transforming existing societal arrangements” as a form of empowerment. On the assimilation end of the social stance dimension was literature describing how families learned to navigate an education system that was based on white middle-class norms and values, and on the empowerment end was the literature on how families and educators co-constructed norms and values to transform the education system.

**Figure 2**  
*A Tool for Mapping the School–Community Literature with Annotations*



*Note.* Annotated framework for analyzing literature (Kerr et al., 2016).

I began data analysis by identifying the methodological characteristics of each piece to map them along the social stance and power/control dimensions. I developed a deductive coding

scheme (Miles & Huberman, 1994) based on the Kerr et al.’s (2016) framework and methodological variables (Trujillo, 2013) that allowed me to descriptively analyze the literature. In terms of methodological characteristics, I coded for type of publication, type of article, research design, participants, and theoretical or conceptual framework. Next, I coded the social stance of each piece as either *assimilation—learning and navigating the system* or *transformation—co-constructing and changing the system*. For the power and control dimension, I coded the literature to identify the actors—*educator/administrators, community-based organization (CBO) professionals, and families*—who owned the space of engagement and authored the agenda.<sup>3</sup> Finally, I coded the quadrant of the framework (see Table 1) where I located each piece of literature (see Appendix A for the full list of literature included in the review and their corresponding quadrants). I acknowledge that a significant limitation of the analysis stems from the coarse labeling of the literature as fitting within one of four categories. More accurately, the dimensions represent spectrums in which family-school-community partnerships interact with space and change depending on time and context.

**Table 1**  
*Mapping the Literature: Quadrant Descriptions*

Quadrant #	Description
Quadrant 1	Educators own the space and author the agenda and families learn how to navigate the system.
Quadrant 2	Families and communities own the space and/or author the agenda (may be in partnership with educators) and families learn how to navigate the system.
Quadrant 3	Educators own the space and author the agenda and partner with families to change the system.
Quadrant 4	Families and communities own the space and/or author the agenda (may be in partnership with educators) and partner with educators to change the system.

## Findings

In this section, I begin by presenting a descriptive analysis, which includes identifying and describing the type of literature, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, research design, and the participants included in the literature. I then map the literature along the dimensions of social stance and power/control and present findings from each quadrant that speak to power dynamics and the role of families in transforming schools.

### Descriptive Analysis

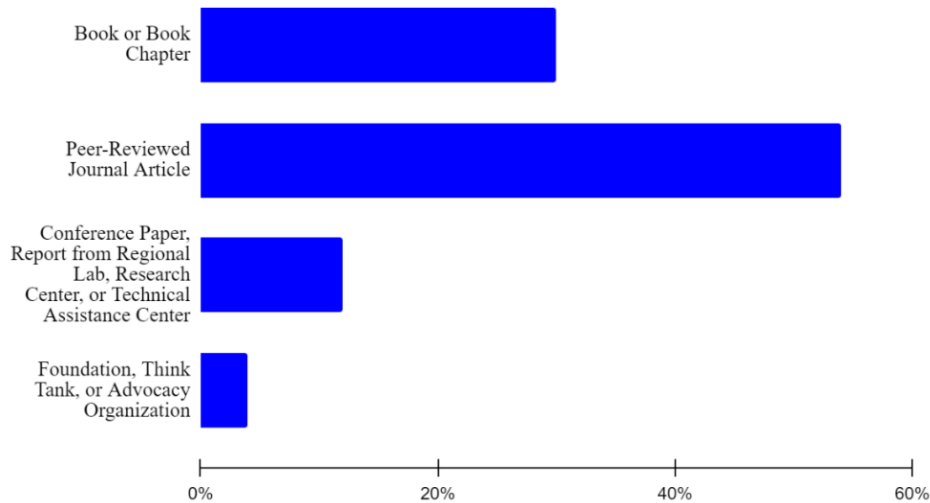
#### *Type of Publication and Articles*

Most literature in the review was published in either peer-reviewed journals (54%) or books and book chapters (30%). I reviewed a smaller percentage of conference papers and reports from regional labs, research centers, or technical assistance centers (12%) and publications from think tanks, foundations, or advocacy organizations (4%) (Figure 3). Most of the literature consisted of empirical studies (56%) or summaries of an author’s empirical work (i.e., synthesized for book

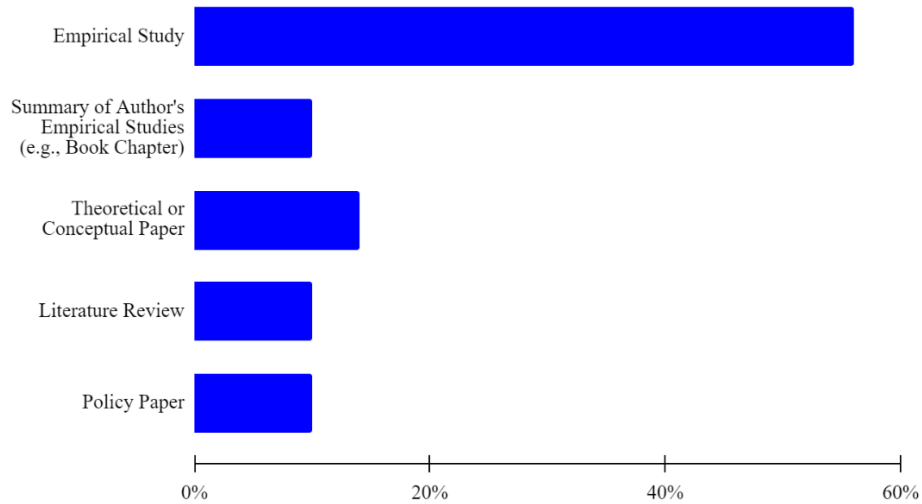
<sup>3</sup> I coded ownership and authorship separately.

chapters) (10%). The rest of the work I reviewed was coded as a theoretical or conceptual paper (14%), literature review (10%), book chapter (10%), or a policy paper (10%) (Figure 4).

**Figure 3**  
*Publication Type*



**Figure 4**  
*Article Type*



**Theories and Conceptual Frameworks**

The literature drew on a diverse collection of theories and conceptual frameworks (Table 2), but there were a handful that appeared consistently: social capital, democratic participation, relational trust, community organizing for school improvement/reform, and critical race theory.

**Table 2**  
*Theories and Conceptual Frameworks*

<b>Theories &amp; Conceptual Frameworks</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Social Capital	11
Democratic Participation	6
Relational Trust	6
Community Organizing for School Improvement/Reform	6
Critical Race Theory	5
Civic Capacity	4
Cultural Historical Activity History	3
Relational Power	3
Neo-Institutional Theory	2
Cultural Capital	2
Human Capital	2
Cultural Brokers	2
Ecologies of Parent Engagement	2
Critical Policy Analysis	2
Equitable Collaboration Lens	2
Authentic Participation	2
Essential Supports for School Improvement	2
Zone of Mediation	2
Organizational Theory of Change	2
Social Justice Theories	2
Types of Parents and Community Engagement	1
Boundary-Spanning Theory	1
Multi-dimension Conception of Scale -depth, sustainability, spread, and ownership	1
Structural Racialization and Targeted Universalism	1
Urban Regime Theory	1
Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft: Community and society social theories	1
Critical Social Theory	1
Dual Capacity Framework	1
Intellectual Capital	1
Communities of Practice	1
Critical Epistemologies	1
Institutional Scripts	1
Transformative Agency	1

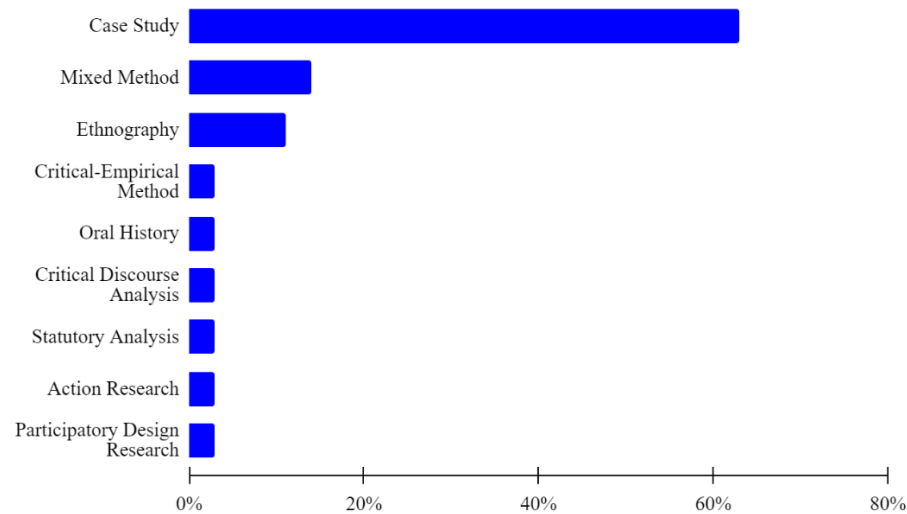
## **Research Design**

With a few exceptions, the literature was based primarily on qualitative methods (Figure 5). Case study (63%) designs were used most frequently, while mixed methods (14%) and ethnography (11%) designs appeared to a lesser extent. Some research designs that offered new perspectives on family engagement in education reform included oral history and a critical-empirical method. For example, oral histories provided a micro-level analysis of how individuals experienced macro-level reform and policy mandates. In their study examining the oral histories of key stakeholders participating in the Oakland Unified School District's full-service community school (FSCS) reform effort, Trujillo et al. (2014) detailed the lived experiences of individuals to better understand how they participated in the reform. They wrote, "This collection of micro-level historical narratives serves not to depict how entire urban regimes coalesce, disband, or perhaps never fail to take off, but instead how individuals, each representing a unique constituency, make sense of a district reform agenda based in large part on their prior experiences and sociopolitical positionalities" (Trujillo et al., 2014 p. 923). The oral histories demonstrated that while there was support for an equity-minded reform like FSCS, key stakeholder buy-in ultimately hinged on trust, or lack thereof, in the district's capacity to carry the reform and successfully manage a cross-sector collaboration. Notably, the student and parent participants included in the study expressed that democratic participation was limited.

Nakagawa (2003) used a critical-empirical method to examine whether Chicago's school reform effort delivered on its goal to increase student achievement through participatory democracy and local school councils. The method, initially developed to study higher education desegregation (St. John & Hossler, 1998), has also been used to identify, examine, and review the historical context, ideologies, and theoretical claims "that inform both the design of the reforms and the critiques" (Mirón & St. John, 2003, p. 9). Using this method, Mirón and St. John (2003) considered four major questions: "(1) How is the reform situated historically? (2) What ideologies drive the reform? (3) What theories underlie the success claims embedded in the reform? and (4) How does the research evidence support the claims? (And what are the unintended consequences?)" (pp. 9-10).

A central question that Nakagawa (2003) posed was, "Does such a mandated role, one that allows parents more voice in the school system and more rights to help decide curriculum, budget, and hiring, actually empower?" (Nakagawa, 2003, p. 210). She contrasted an *empowered* parent role with traditional parental involvement using the term *enablement*. Applying the critical-empirical method, Nakagawa demonstrated that while the ideology underpinning the reform draws from Alinsky-style community organizing and envisions parents empowered through a participatory democracy process, the overarching goal—namely to increase student academic achievement—makes parents enablers: they become tools used to meet the needs of schools rather than partners helping guide decisions to meet the needs of families.

**Figure 5**  
*Research Design*



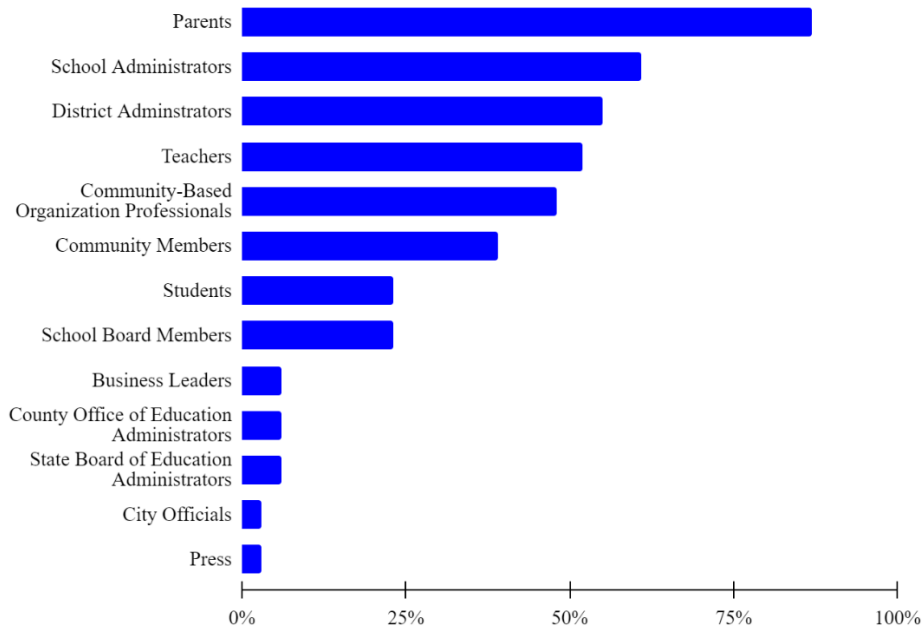
### ***Participants***

As expected, parents (87%) comprised the largest group represented in the studies included in the review. Additionally, researchers included the following participants in over half of the studies: school administrators (61%), district administrators (55%), and teachers (52%). Studies also included perspectives from CBO professionals (48%) and community members (excluding parents) (39%).

Absent from more than three-quarters of the literature are students (23%) and school board members (23%). As policy discussions shift from parent involvement to family engagement, future researchers might consider including student participants as their voice would add a more holistic view of family-school partnerships. Additionally, in their positions as district leaders and policymakers, school board members lend valuable insight into the influence of family and community engagement. For example, Finnigan and Lavner (2012) interviewed school board members to study the ways that the community interacted with the board during a process of school closures in an urban school district. They found that although public comment in board meetings were “symbolic attempts at political participation” (Finnigan & Lavner, 2012, p. 148), informal communication through private meetings, emails, or phone calls had more influence in shaping decisions.

Finally, while parents were included in nearly every study, their voices and perspectives were relatively absent from the literature that examined the role families play in school- or district-level governance (Humphrey et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2015; Marsh & Hall, 2018; Marsh et al., 2019; Sanders, 2009; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). These studies drew on theories of civic capacity, democratic participation, and community organizing for school improvement and education reform, which provided frameworks for analyzing the process and mechanisms of authentic participation but fell short in detailing how families experienced these governance spaces and whether they felt that their inclusion was, in fact, authentic and efficacious.

**Figure 6**  
*Participants*



**Mapping the Literature**

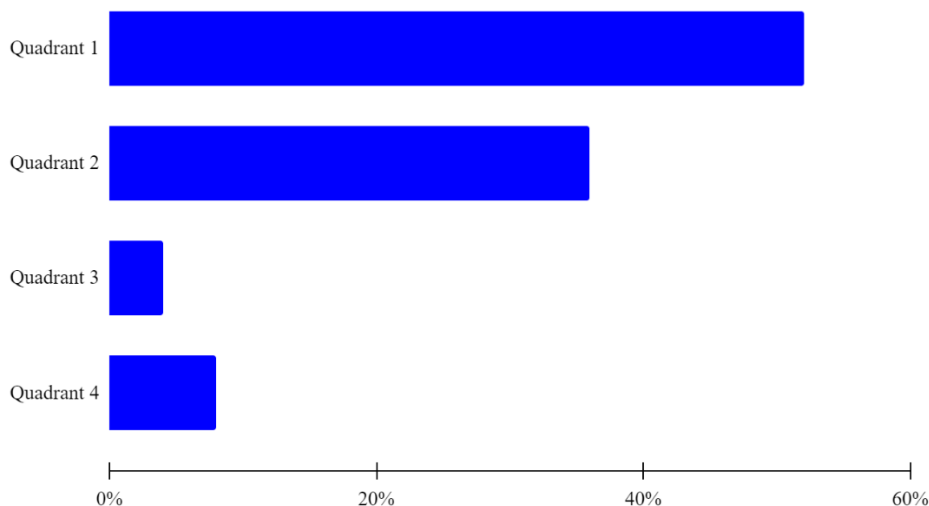
In their review, Kerr et al. (2016) located most of the literature on school-community relations in Quadrant 1 of their conceptual map, which corresponds to situations where professional educators owned the symbolic and physical space and authored agendas and families largely functioned within the existing education system. In this review, I also found that just over half the literature fell in Quadrant 1 (52%) (Figure 7). However, I located over a third of the literature in Quadrant 2 (36%), which describes models of family engagement that build capacity and suggests that families have gained some measure of agency to shape their role in the broader landscape of education reform and policy making. The handful of literature in Quadrant 3 and Quadrant 4 serves as a call to action to researchers and practitioners to partner with families in co-constructing an education system where there is a sense of belonging and empowerment. In the following sections, I walk through how I mapped the literature, identifying themes and patterns in each quadrant that illuminate mechanisms that speak to the ownership of space and authorship of agenda and the extent to which families assimilated into the current education system or were empowered to transform the system, offering insight into how these factors impacted relationships between families and educators.

***Quadrant 1: Educators Own the Space and Author the Agenda and Families Learn How to Navigate the System***

The literature in Quadrant 1 primarily examined the role of school and district leadership in mediating relationships between schools, families, and the community (Chrispeels, 2012; Crowson & Boyd, 2001; Gordon, 2012; Sanders, 2012). This work positioned educators and administrators as key facilitators of engagement and underscored the importance of integrating school improvement into larger community development efforts. Croninger and Malen (2002) discussed the use of school governance to mitigate conflict and build more collaborative

relationships within the community, which was useful for increasing buy-in for school improvement initiatives. Along this same line of argument, when school leaders viewed families as partners, they gained allies to share in the responsibility for improving student achievement (Weiss et al., 2010).

**Figure 7**  
*Mapping the Literature*



Researchers found that engagement policies that signaled collaborative partnerships yet remained vague about what was meant by engagement lent themselves to a broad base of support but lacked levers to enact authentic engagement. Henig et al. (2011) explained that “consensus (for the support of parent and community engagement) depends on keeping the definition of *engagement* vague” (p. 33). Yet when family engagement and school-community partnership were suggested rather than mandated, what ensued was often a “sporadic form of engagement” (Gordon, 2012, p. 141), making it easier for districts to opt out of engagement strategies altogether or provide “shallow” forms of engagement. However, an organizational culture of mandated engagement did not necessarily trickle down from the district office to the school site as implementation depended on the site leader and the culture of the school (Gordon, 2012).

Despite the rhetoric surrounding family engagement, policies at all levels dictated and delimited the roles of families engaging in schools and continued to marginalize families unless they conformed to the norms of traditional parent involvement (Fernández & López, 2017; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). In their research examining power dynamics and parent involvement in Latino midwestern schools, Fernández & López (2017) found that educators withdrew their support when families deviated from the institutionalized norms of how to be involved in schools. For example, when parents in their study initiated empowering forms of engagement by organizing for immigration reform, their efforts were ignored by educators because they were not considered legitimate forms of involvement. “Parents learn over time the circumscribed roles that they are expected to assume. They learn to think of themselves more as supporters, helpers, and fund raisers than decision makers, partners, and collaborators” (Smrekar & Cohen Vogel, 2001, p. 87). Additionally, power imbalances and school-centered norms of family engagement were codified and reinforced in policy documents such as Title I school-



family compacts which “primarily reinforce hierarchical models of parental involvement and emphasize transactional encounters over and above partnership activity” (Evans & Radina, 2014, p. 107).

**Missing the Mark.** The volume of literature mapped in Quadrant 1 made clear the unidirectional relationship between educators and families. Parents were welcomed into schools and classrooms and invited to partner alongside educators so long as they stuck to the program outlined in the educators’ agenda. Even when researchers, policymakers, and practitioners deliberately focused on leveling power differentials, we saw the intransigent nature of institutionalized educator- and school-centered norms (Ishimaru, 2019). In this section, I highlight examples of practices to empower families that at first may appear to be promising but that ultimately miss the mark when it comes to substantively transforming relationships between families, communities, and schools.

Ishimaru et al. (2016) studied cultural brokers (Delgado-Gaitan, 1996) in formal roles and settings (e.g., district staff and CBO professionals) working to bridge the worlds of families and schools. In these roles, cultural brokers connected nondominant families to the dominant culture and helped families understand how to interact in mainstream environments. In a comparative case study of three districts, their findings suggested that cultural brokers were training families how to navigate the current school system “with conventional efforts to socialize nondominant families into school-centric norms, expectations, and agendas” (Ishimaru et al., 2016, p. 864). However, they noted that when there was some ambiguity in the cultural broker’s role and responsibilities, they started to see more “collective, relational, or reciprocal cultural brokering” (Ishimaru et al., 2016, p. 851) and shifted from traditional parent involvement toward a more collaborative form of family engagement.

Calabrese Barton et al. (2004) introduced the Ecologies of Parent Engagement (EPE) framework, which views parent engagement as the “mediation between space and capital by parents in relation to others in school settings,” which “must be understood as both an action and an orientation to action.” They identified parents as both “authors and agents” (Calabrese Barton et al., 2004, p. 3) of parental engagement and argued that the “basic unit of analysis for understanding parental engagement cannot be the individual actions of parents taken alone, but parents interacting with other parents, teachers, and other school- and community-based people within particular spaces” (Calabrese Barton et al., 2004, p. 6). In a subsequent study, drawing on the EPE perspective, Carreón et al. (2005) described three “types of presence” (Carreón et al., 2005, p. 492) in schools among immigrant parents: *strategic helper* (volunteering in the classroom), *questioner* (gaining knowledge and resources from outside of formal education spaces to create a bridge from home to school), and *listener* (using nontraditional formal spaces—researcher-led trainings—to learn how to engage with schools). While the EPE perspective suggests that parents are empowered to author their engagement, it appeared that the parents in the study represented a continuum of assimilation to the white middle-class norms of traditional parent involvement in schools.

At the core of California’s state-mandated stakeholder engagement is the promise of a robust and meaningful shared decision-making process. Through the LCFF, districts have gained increased flexibility to decide how to spend state education dollars, but they have also been required to solicit feedback from stakeholders—parents, students, community members—on how to allocate funding. Here we have a family and community engagement policy that, at face value, offers the potential for richer democratic participation and bottom-up accountability. Yet despite this promise, research on the LCFF and LCAP has found that most districts facilitate narrow

participation and shallow engagement strategies (Marsh & Hall, 2018; Mash et al., 2019). And in the literature that highlighted LCAP engagement best practices among exemplary districts, the perspective of parents and students were conspicuously absent (Families in Schools, 2016; Humphrey et al., 2018; London, 2016; Partners for Each and Every Child, 2018). District administrators discussed working with families, offering anecdotes of how their input influenced policies, but absent the voice of parents and students, this literature falls short of providing a complete analysis of the impact of LCAP engagement. Would parents and students agree that their participation made an impact? Do they feel their voices and opinions were valued? How might they describe their power to influence district-level decision-making? Although the surveyed literature on the LCFF and the LCAP was not able to address these questions, what was evident was that educators and administrators owned both the physical and symbolic space, they authored the rules of engagement, and it was incumbent upon parents and students to learn how to navigate the education system before they attempted to influence it.

In his review of school-based engagement efforts, Schutz (2006) illustrated how strategies to engage families fail, time and again, to foster authentic democratic participation and empower marginalized communities. He argued that isolated individuals in urban settings yield very little power, but if they work as a collective (alongside other community members) they will move toward authentic community engagement. This work suggested that until we see a shift in the ownership of space and authorship of agenda (i.e., from educators to community), engagement strategies will ostensibly fail. Schutz highlighted community organizing for school reform as a promising practice to support authentic participation and to transform the nature of relationships between families, communities, and schools.

### ***Quadrant 2: Families and Communities Own the Space and/or Author the Agenda (May Be in Partnership with Educators) and Families Learn How to Navigate the System***

Research suggests that community-based education reform succeeds when we address the mechanisms that give rise to engagement, support a process by which the community can challenge local government and hold it accountable, and scholars have theorized that community organizing for school reform and building civic capacity may yield more collaborative and empowering models for family engagement (Ishimaru, 2014; Noguera, 2003; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). Working with the U.S. Department of Education, researchers developed the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnership, which described family engagement as integral to education reform (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) and highlighted that capacity must be built for all stakeholders, including educators and families. The framework laid out four capacity building goals: “(a) Capabilities (skills and knowledge); (b) Connections (networks); (c) Cognition (beliefs and values); and (d) Confidence (self-efficacy) (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 8). Mapp and Kuttner (2013) made clear that the framework was not a roadmap but rather a compass. In many ways, the compass metaphor, which conjures up visions of a guiding star and connotes morality, gets at the aspirational nature of this work, namely that we want family engagement to work. However, good intentions steeped in rhetoric only get us so far and the framework thus served as an attempt to bridge aspirations and best practices.

Turning again to the California LCFF context, per the statutory requirements of LCAP engagement, there were potential conditions conducive to supporting community-based advocacy, bottom-up accountability, and local control (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). However, for families to meaningfully engage, they had to understand the statutes, and for the reform to be successful, families had to be empowered to engage in a political process.

Organizing disenfranchised groups, people whose interests are often silenced, even ignored, is the great hope but also the great challenge of community-based reform in urban education. To represent groups whose interests were not necessarily part of education reform discussion requires grappling with the underlying issues of race, class, and power that permeate not just our public urban education system but societies as a whole. (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014, p. 874)

**Community Organizing for Education Reform.** Without a community-wide perspective, education reform falls short in sustaining change as this work requires the collaborative efforts of both educators and community members (Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009). “Organizing groups are distinguished by their emphasis on building power for social and political change through relationship-building, leadership development, and public action” (Warren, 2005, p. 152). Community organizers play a key role in helping families build social capital (Putnam, 2000) and navigate relationships with educational leaders. Warren (2005) suggested that community organizers should adopt a mediator role to help families and educators better relate to and understand one another. Additionally, Warren found that when parents came together and built community, they recognized that their issues were not simply an individual failure on their part, but stemmed from the “systemic inequities of public institutions” (Warren et al., 2015, p. 10). Working with CBO professionals, families shifted away from traditional parent involvement toward meaningful engagement, transforming from *private citizens* to *public actors* (Warren et al., 2015).

In the literature, CBOs helped families build capacity to engage in action, increase their knowledge of the education landscape, and learn the rules of the game. However, shifting dynamics in power relationships to fundamentally transform the education system to better serve nondominant families was often an elusive goal (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011). Studies and partnerships that focused on increasing relational trust (the level of trust within schools and between schools and the community) and relational power (power to act collectively to produce systemic change) provided insight into more collaborative approaches to family engagement (Bryk et al., 2010; Maier et al., 2017; Sanders, 2009). With these efforts there was a shift in ownership of space and authorship of agenda, giving rise to an environment more conducive to sharing power.

Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) used social capital theories of bridging and bonding capital (Putnam, 2000) to demonstrate the cultural brokering role of CBO professionals and illustrated a shift from individual to collective family engagement. They found that families increased social capital through bonding and forming tighter networks amongst each other, and CBO professionals acted as relational bridges, linking family networks to groups with more formal authority. In their study, they examined a program to increase family engagement in a Latino neighborhood of recent immigrants where capacity-building efforts focused on a network of families rather than individual parents and, though the program was housed within in a CBO with close ties to an elementary school, engagement efforts were planned and led by Latina mothers. Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) concluded that “efforts engaging low-income parents as communities of practice hold special promise for reducing barriers to children’s learning, especially when school leaders, community-based organizations, and social researchers leverage their resources and capital in ways that support parents’ efforts, insights, and aspiration” (p. 651). What remained unclear was the extent to which families were empowered to transform the system rather than just assimilating into a new system of neighborhoods and schools.

Building on the EPE perspective (Calabrese Barton et al., 2004), Hong (2011) conceptualized three levels of the parent engagement process: (1) induction (families learn about schools), (2) integration (families integrated into schools), and (3) investment (of families into schools). She underscored the need to share leadership and power, suggesting that “schools face the possibility that parent programs will continue to operate in ways that may change the activities of parents but fail to transform the power of parents” (Hong, 2011, p. 193). As part of a parent mentor program, supported in part through Chicago’s Logan Square Neighborhood Association, parents were encouraged to work in classrooms alongside teachers in roles that look more like teaching assistants than traditional parent helpers. Hong found that parents participating in this program became agents of their engagement and described that mutually engaging parent participation was not school- or family-centered but rather at the intersection of the two groups. Although Hong illustrated a tight-knit school culture that seemed to embrace diversity, the terms of induction and integration connote a process of assimilation and acculturation. And perhaps this was a necessary first step toward empowerment and transformation. It may be the case that community organizing for school reform begins with a focus on relationships and teaching families how to navigate the system, which then enables the community to make demands to transform the system.

**Ownership of Engagement Space Yields Meaningful Partnerships.** Studies have shown that when families initiated and owned the engagement process, partnerships between parents and families were stronger and the reform efforts were sustainable (Cooper et al., 2010; Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Though most research has focused on school-site partnerships between parents, teachers, and administrators, it provides valuable insight into initiatives that have attempted to reduce power imbalances and position parents as valuable stakeholders. “Authentic partnership creates a sense of ownership of the change process and commitment to making it a success” (Warren, 2005, p. 167).

At one Bay Area middle school, Latino immigrant parents founded a parent organizing project—La Familia Initiative—that focused on improving school site engagement and the academic outcomes of Latino students. Jasis and Ordonez-Jasis (2004) described that it was important for parents to organize independently of the school and claim ownership of their group. La Familia invited families to participate in less intimidating and more inclusive ways—parents met in their homes and families (not educators) facilitated meetings in Spanish. As the group grew its base, La Familia worked to build relationships with school leadership and proactively sought ways to partner as equals in school improvement efforts. This work offers a clear example of what families might gain when they own spaces of engagement. “Parent empowerment projects open symbolic spaces of leadership and participation in school and in society and have the potential to become valuable exercises in grassroots democracy and community self-determination” (p. 32).

### ***Quadrant 3: Educators Own the Space and Author the Agenda and Partner with Families to Change the System***

The literature in Quadrant 3 included conceptual pieces focusing on the role of school leadership in nurturing family partnerships. Auerbach (2011) developed a continuum for characterizing school leadership for partnerships: (a) leadership preventing partnerships, (b) leadership for nominal partnerships, (c) leadership for traditional partnerships; and (d) leadership for authentic partnerships. She highlighted the distinction between parents as partners and parents as supporters and resources—viewing families as supporters and resources failed to

reduce power imbalances where educators were positioned as experts and leaders. Thus, Auerbach called on school leaders to develop authentic partnerships, which she defined as “respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups that value relationship building, dialogue across difference, and sharing power in pursuit of a common purpose in a socially just, democratic schools” (p. 5).

Examining the epistemological assumptions undergirding models of school-community relationships, Green (2017) drew on critical theory to conceptualize a social justice framework where educational leaders “are concerned with advancing equity and reshaping unequal power relationships among-school community actors, contexts, and institutions” (p. 378). He explained that educators using this framework recognized that issues in schools were not isolated but rather historically linked to the communities they served and thus must be examined within a broader context. Green added that educators must also develop community equity literacy, which he described as “an awareness/consciousness (knowledge) and skill set (actions) to address inequities in schools and their neighborhood communities” (p. 371).

As I have outlined in the review, much of the literature found that ownership of space and authorship of agendas were the domains of educators and administrators; in this quadrant, Auerbach (2011) and Green (2017) implored those with power and control to critically examine their conceptualization of family and community engagement to create conditions that move toward transforming the system, calling attention to shifting the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of education leaders. Though it did not strike the same inspirational chords as studies that documented models to build capacity and empower marginalized families, this literature offered a pragmatic characterization of leadership that prioritizes social justice and seeks to engender authentic partnerships.

#### ***Quadrant 4: Families and Communities Own the Space and/or Author the Agenda (May Be in Partnership with Educators) and Partner with Educators to Change the System***

The literature in Quadrant 4 could be characterized as a call to action to researchers and practitioners to partner with the community to reject deficit assumptions about nondominant families, problematize traditional parent involvement frameworks derived from white middle-class norms, and actively resist school-based inequities stemming from structural and institutional barriers (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Fennimore, 2017). Baquedano-López et al. (2013) described a decolonizing approach to family engagement:

Above all, decolonizing approaches to parental inclusion in schools by necessity must point out and end all forms of epistemic, psychological, and physical violence as are experienced through silencing, linguisticisms, segregation, tracking, and the dehumanizing effects of the stunted academic potentials of youth of color. This work needs to identify and address deeply seated inequities that require social change processes rather than simply trust unilateral policy. (p. 169)

Given the call, the question of how we might transform existing systemic inequities becomes salient. Revisiting community organizing for education reform, Renée et al. (2009) argued that social movement organizing requires conflict—a “presence of protest” (Renée et al., 2009, p. 157)—and must attend to the political and normative aspects of reform, as educational institutions are embedded within *zones of mediation* (Oakes et al., 1998; Welner, 2001) that are shaped by these forces. They added that social movement organizing may shift the zone— “the boundaries, structure, and substance of local- and state-level education reform” (Renée et al.,

2009, p. 153)—toward more equity-focused reform as it activates the collective power of a diverse set of stakeholders.

Ishimaru and Takahashi (2017) paired the concepts of institutional scripts (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) from neo-institutional theory and cultural-historical activity (CHAT) (Engeström, 2001) from social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) to analyze tacit norms and beliefs that frame interactions between families and educators in schools. Powell and DiMaggio (1991) theorized that institutions inhibit human agency but are produced through human action. Thus, the way we structure our activity and share a system of rules and scripts both constrains us and provides opportunities in our lives. Taking a critical perspective, Ishimaru and Takahashi (2017) posited that “dominant institutional scripts about parents in schools are *racialized* scripts that shape the possibilities for collective learning and agency between parents and teachers across divides of race, culture, and class” (p. 347). Viewing family and school partnerships through a CHAT lens brought attention to structuring the collaborative activities between families and educators with the intent to level power asymmetries, shift definitions around expertise, and “disrupt racialized institutionalized scripts” (p. 344), which built collective agency to transform and co-construct a more equitable education system that was stronger because of, rather than despite, its diversity.

## **Discussion and Implications for Future Research**

### **The Paradox of Civic Capacity**

Civic capacity—communities coming together to support reform efforts—calls attention to the political dimension of education. However, as the literature describes, conflict, not collaboration is often the status quo, which we see at multiple levels—school, district, and state. Perhaps it is the case that tension and conflict are necessary preconditions for establishing collaborative relationships. In other words, it is resolution and reconciliation that give rise to cooperation. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) asserted that there will always be some degree of conflict between parents and schools. According to this view, family engagement may not mitigate conflict so much as create structures and support venues for open negotiation of power.

School- and district-level parent advisory groups call into question the authenticity and impact of shared decision-making and community-based accountability. When owned by educators and administrators, these spaces may be no more than time-consuming exercises in public relations to increase community buy-in. Conversely, the literature suggests that when families own these spaces and author the agenda, they build political power to challenge status quo policies. Community organizing and relational approaches to family engagement appear to build capacity for parents and students to engage with educators, but it remains to be seen whether increased engagement will transform the education system. To be sure, parents are learning how to better navigate the system, but this is more indicative of families assimilating to existing norms and values than partnering to co-construct the system.

### **In Pursuit of Clear Theory: The System and Family Empowerment**

While we can view the purpose of schools as to transmit knowledge and technical skills, we must also recognize that they serve a socializing function: the education system is structured to teach students the requisite norms and behaviors to become productive members of a modern and democratic society (Dreeben, 1968). As the literature in this review has demonstrated, these norms are largely the result of white middle-class beliefs surrounding independence and meritocracy, and the existence of a persistent achievement gap stratified along racial and class

lines suggests that these norms act as gatekeepers when students deviate from standardized ideals associated with success. With this perspective in mind, how might we reconcile cultural variation with the institutionalized bureaucratic education system?

The literature reviewed in this paper positions families as actors within education reform efforts, carrying tacit assumptions of what it means to be empowered as well as the results of such empowerment. Research investigating family engagement models focused on building capacity and developing leadership skills has shown parents participating in decision-making roles but having limited impact in shifting norms and beliefs. Thus, the transformative change of Quadrants 3 and 4 remains an elusive goal. Yet as we see from the literature in Quadrant 2, when students and families assimilate and learn how to navigate the system, they access powerful forms of social, cultural, and political capital that benefit their children and themselves. Perhaps assimilation is an initial step as it is first necessary to understand the system to recognize possible opportunities to transform it. Once families gain the necessary social and cultural capital to achieve partnership status and exert their power, they may be able to manage the space and create conditions to productively shift normative beliefs.

### **State Mandated Stakeholder Engagement**

Research and policy point to theories of action that elevate the leadership potential of families, and California's LCAP process is a realization of family engagement in policy-making spaces. However, while using a democratic participation framework to evaluate the implementation of the engagement policy draws attention to "who is involved, how they are involved, and for what purpose" (Marsh et al., 2019), it does not clarify *why* stakeholders participate. Future research might investigate the following questions: (a) Why do parents take part in an engagement process that perceives them as a deficit and expects strict adherence to institutional rules of engagement?, (b) What are the issues that motivate their participation?, (c) How do parents experience the space of engagement?, and (d) What value do they feel their participation adds? In addition to these lines of inquiry, within the context of LCAP stakeholder engagement we need a micro-analysis of the families who seek to influence the macro context of education policy through district-level governance. Developing a better understanding of who these stakeholders are and why they participate may help facilitate more authentic democratic participation and increase the impact of their engagement.

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## **Chapter 2**

### **Stakeholder Engagement and School Reform: How Families and Communities Build Power to Influence Education Policy**

If there is a time when we most need to:  
--make meaning of the moment in which we are living as a community,  
--gather to set a direction for our leadership role,  
THIS is it.

I am hoping that you can all join me at my house to speak in an intimate family space...as family.  
*(Community Engagement Program Manager in an email to parents, Oakland Unified School District, March 2019)*

The Parent and Student Advisory Committee (PSAC) is a district-wide committee with elected representatives from local school councils; the PSAC is tasked with providing the superintendent and board of directors with recommendations to inform the district's budget and strategic planning process. This email to members of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) PSAC, which invited them to a special meeting, came after a head-spinning couple of weeks. Fresh off a seven-day teacher's strike in late February 2019, the OUSD Board of Directors approved a budget reduction of \$21 million, effectively proposing to eliminate programs and services that the PSAC had advocated for years to secure. These cuts included foster youth case managers, restorative justice coordinators, and the community engagement program manager, who coordinated the work of several parent and student advisory committees (e.g., English language learners, special education, foster youth). The superintendent's decision to recommend these cuts, and the board's forthcoming vote to approve them, would have profound implications for the role of the PSAC and its members' sense of efficacy.

It was dark by the time I made my way over to the meeting. Walking up to the house, through the living room window, I saw PSAC members settling in for a meal. I paused for a moment to take in the scene: one parent was pouring wine, another was ladling chicken and rice onto plates, and another was setting up a movie in the living room to keep their three children occupied during the meeting. Standing in the rain, I was drawn to the warmth inside and struck by how different these meetings looked when we gathered around a dining table instead of in a conference room. When we convened in this way, we were not showing up as professionals but as parents,<sup>4</sup> and part of what held us together was the collective responsibility we felt for the families of OUSD. I found myself looking forward to the meeting.

Over dinner we shared laughter and tears and expressed our frustration, disillusionment, and anger. Some members felt as if the district was trying to silence the PSAC, while others referred to the work of the committee as "fake engagement" and questioned whether OUSD leadership had ever actually shared decision-making power with families and communities. What seemed clear was that OUSD's interpretation of stakeholder engagement was falling short of the PSAC's expectation and that this group was determined to do something about it.

### **Introduction**

This vignette provides an example of family engagement that broadens and adds nuance to our understanding of the dynamics between families, communities, and educators. The PSAC

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<sup>4</sup> My fifth-grade son was a student in OUSD at the time of the events illustrated in this vignette.

is embedded within a broader education policy landscape shaped by California’s progressive school finance reform. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), signed into law in 2013, significantly shifted the way that the state distributes money to local school districts and implemented mandatory stakeholder engagement in allocating the funds. The LCFF provides districts with greater budgeting flexibility and increased funding for high-need students, and it requires a more democratic process of stakeholder engagement (California Department of Education, 2018). Districts must form and convene parent advisory committees and engage with families of high-needs students to develop their Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP)—three-year planning and budgeting documents.

Researchers and policymakers have pointed to theories of action that elevate the leadership potential of families to partner with educators in guiding and informing school- and district-level governance. Although prior research regarding the LCFF and mandatory stakeholder engagement had shed light on “who is involved, how they are involved, and for what purpose” (Marsh & Hall, 2018, p. 248), it does not clarify *why* families participate. By foregrounding the voices and lived experiences of families, my research aims to understand how they experience the engagement process, detail their motivations for participating, and examine whether and how the relationships between families and educators change as a result of this engagement. The study is guided by the following questions: (a) What issues draw parents into the LCAP engagement space and sustain their motivation?, (b) How do parents conceptualize and frame what it means to build power and have an impact in the LCAP engagement process?, and (c) How does this framing contribute to the collective identity and shared understandings of members of the parent student advisory committee (PSAC)?

In this chapter, I examine whether and how a process of stakeholder engagement in district-wide decision-making builds power for families to influence local education policy. I begin by reviewing the literature examining the role of families as key stakeholders and parents as education leaders and then present a conceptual framework that draws on perspectives examining power and collective action and interrogating the role of families in schools. Based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, my findings align with previous research and underscore that mere access to decision-making spaces does little to impact education policy (Marsh et al., 2018; Marsh & Hall, 2018). However, when parents gain ownership of these spaces and authorship of the agenda, they can build power to disrupt the status quo rules of engagement. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations and affordances of state-mandated stakeholder engagement and whether it truly shifts how families engage in local-level decision-making and build power to influence policy and institutional change.

## Literature Review

There is ample research documenting the benefits of parent involvement in schools and its positive influence on student achievement (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003). Yet when educators privilege the white middle-class norms of parent participation,<sup>5</sup> they dismiss the values and beliefs that deviate from these norms, which give rise to deficit-based assumptions about nondominant<sup>6</sup> parents and caregivers (Valdes, 1996). Researchers have

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<sup>5</sup> Activities in line with these norms include helping with homework, attending parent-teacher conferences, chaperoning field trips, volunteering as room parents, volunteering at school-sponsored events, Parent Teacher Association membership, and fundraising activities such as coordinating galas and auctions (Levine-Rasky, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> I use the term nondominant to foreground the impact of power in structuring the experiences of parents from marginalized backgrounds (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; and Fennimore, 2017).

highlighted the damaging ways that traditional conceptions of parent involvement interact with race, class, and culture, which contribute to marginalizing perceptions of nondominant families and their relationships with schools (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Olivos, 2004; Valdes, 1996; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Research centered on illuminating the lived experiences and empowerment of nondominant families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, 1994) offers a counter-narrative that underscores the power imbalances between families and educators (Fine, 1993) and the assimilating characteristics of the educational system (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999).

A growing body of literature serves as a call to action to researchers and practitioners to partner with actors in the community to reject deficit-based assumptions about nondominant families and problematize traditional frameworks of parental involvement derived from white middle-class norms (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Fennimore, 2017; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). The research suggests that parents/caregivers and community members have deep understandings of the complex ways that structural and cultural inequity exists in schools, yet their voices, insights, and contributions are rarely central to policy and practice (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; Ewing, 2018; McKenna & Millen, 2013). In the following section I review literature that positions families as key stakeholders and examines the extent to which they build power to transform the education system.

### **Educator-led Efforts Reproducing the Status Quo**

The literature presented in this section makes clear the common unidirectional relationship between educators and families, especially in under-resourced schools. Parents are welcomed into schools and classrooms and invited to partner with educators so long as they stick to the program outlined in the educators' agenda. Even when researchers, policymakers, and practitioners deliberately focus on leveling power imbalances, we see the intransigent nature of institutionalized educator- and school-centered norms (Ishimaru, 2019). Despite the rhetoric surrounding school-family-community partnerships, policies at all levels dictate and delimit the role of families engaging in schools and continue to marginalize families unless they conform to the norms of traditional parent involvement (Fernández & López, 2017; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). In their research examining power dynamics and parent involvement in Latino midwestern schools, Fernández & López (2017) found that educators tended to withdraw their support when families deviated from the institutionalized norms of how to be involved in schools. For example, when parents in their study organized for immigration reform, educators ignored their efforts and rejected their advocacy as a legitimate form of involvement. "Parents learn over time the circumscribed roles that they are expected to assume. They learn to think of themselves more as supporters, helpers, and fundraisers than decision makers, partners, and collaborators" (Smrekar & Cohen Vogel, 2001, p. 87).

Researchers examining the role of school and district leadership in mediating relationships between schools, families, and community (Chrispeels, 2012; Crowson & Boyd, 2001; Gordon, 2012; Sanders, 2012) found that educators and administrators were key facilitators of engagement and underscored the importance of integrating school improvement initiatives into larger community development efforts. Croninger and Malen (2002) discussed the use of school governance to mitigate conflict and build more collaborative relationships within the community and to increase buy-in for school improvement initiatives. Along this same line of argument, when school leaders viewed families as partners, they gained allies to share in the responsibility for improving student achievement (Weiss et al., 2010). However, when educators manage the physical space and define the rules of engagement, it seems prudent to question the



authenticity of this partnership. Additionally, studies have suggested that when families initiate and take ownership of the engagement process, it yields stronger partnerships between families and schools and more sustainable reform efforts, which offers valuable insight into initiatives that attempt to level power imbalances and position parents as valuable stakeholders (Cooper et al., 2010; Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). “Authentic partnership creates a sense of ownership of the change process and commitment to making it a success” (Warren, 2005, p. 167).

The promise of a robust and meaningful shared decision-making process is at the core of California’s LCAP engagement policy. Mandated stakeholder engagement offers the potential for a more participatory decision-making process, yet despite this model’s promise, researchers have found that most school districts facilitate narrow participation and shallow engagement strategies (Marsh et al., 2018; Marsh & Hall, 2018), and in the literature highlighting best practices, the perspectives of parents are absent (Families in Schools, 2016; Humphrey et al., 2018; London, 2016). Research has documented the perspectives of district administrators working with families; thus, we are well informed about how they consider and respond to parent input. But without the voices of families, this literature falls short of rendering a complete analysis of the impact of LCAP engagement. This study addresses this gap by examining whether parents feel that their participation makes an impact and that their voices and opinions are valued. Further, my work details how parents describe their power to influence district-level decision making.

### **Learning How to Navigate the System and Building Capacity to Engage in Action**

Research has suggested that community-based education reform succeeds when we include the mechanisms that give rise to engagement and support a process by which the community can challenge local government and hold it accountable; some scholars have theorized that community organizing for school reform may yield more collaborative and empowering models of family engagement (Ishimaru, 2014; Noguera, 2003; Schutz, 2006; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). I agree with scholars who have argued that education reform, absent a community-wide perspective, will fall short in promoting equity as this work requires the collaborative efforts of both educators and community members (Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009). Community organizers play a key role in helping families build social capital (Putnam, 2000) and navigate relationships with educational leaders. Warren (2005) suggested that community organizers should adopt a mediator role, helping families and educators better relate to and understand one another.

Community-based organizations can help families build capacity to engage in action and increase their knowledge of the education landscape so that they learn the rules of the game (Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009). However, shifting power dynamics to fundamentally transform the education system to better serve nondominant families is often an elusive goal (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011). Studies and partnerships that focus on increasing relational trust (the level of trust within schools and between schools and the community) and relational power (power to act collectively to produce systemic change) have provided insight into more collaborative approaches to family engagement (Bryk et al., 2010; Maier et al., 2017; Sanders, 2009). With these efforts, we have begun to see a shift in ownership of space and authorship of agendas, giving rise to an environment more conducive to power-sharing. What remains unclear is the extent to which families can build power to transform the education system rather than just assimilating into the existing system. My findings support the position that community organizing for school reform must begin with a focus on relationships and

teaching families how to navigate the system, which then enables the community to make demands to transform it.

### **Conflict, Collaboration, and Power to Influence Change**

The literature cited above positions families as actors within education reform efforts, carrying tacit assumptions of what it means to build power as well as the results of such power. When students and families learn how to navigate the system, they access powerful forms of social, cultural, and political capital, benefitting their children and themselves (Calabrese Barton et al., 2004; Hong, 2011; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Warren, 2005).

When considering the power (or lack thereof) families can access by participating in school- and district-level parent advisory groups, we are forced to question the authenticity and impact of shared decision-making and community-based accountability. Such group meetings, when owned and managed by educators and administrators, can be time-consuming exercises in public relations to increase community buy-in. On the other hand, when families own and author the agenda, they build political power to challenge status quo policies (Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009). Community organizing and relational approaches to family engagement appear to build capacity for parents and students to engage with educators, but it remains to be seen whether increased engagement will transform the education system (Bryk et al., 2010; Maier et al., 2017; Sanders, 2009).

Finally, conflict, not collaboration, is often the status quo, which we see at multiple levels—school, district, and state. Perhaps conflict is a necessary precondition for establishing collaborative relationships. That is, the act of resolution and reconciliation gives rise to cooperation and trust. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) asserted that conflict may always be present between parents and schools. In this view, family engagement may not serve as a process for mitigating conflict but rather creates structures and supports venues for open negotiations of power.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theories guiding this study draw on frameworks for examining social orders and collective action and interrogating the role of families in schools. In this section I introduce two frameworks that I use to examine parents' experiences with LCAP engagement: theory of strategic action fields (SAF) and decolonial approaches to parent engagement. In my work, I use SAF as a set of orienting concepts to help make sense of what I see taking place in the engagement space, while I apply decolonial approaches to parent engagement to critically examine the structural and cultural contexts that shape the field.

#### **Strategic Action Fields**

I use the theory of *strategic action fields* (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) as an orienting perspective to examine the impact of shifts stemming from the LCFF. According to this theory, actors share an understanding of a field's purpose, what is at stake, and the rules that govern legitimate action, and they have a sense of their position and relative power to influence the field. Within fields, there is always a measure of contestation, and actors draw on *social skill*, which is the "ability to induce cooperation by appealing to and helping create shared meanings and collective identities" (p. 46). Actors use social skill to frame their calls to action in ways that resonate with others and mobilize support. Importantly, collective action in service of material gain requires a shared sense of identity and meaning. Thus, group membership also serves the *existential function of the social*—namely a shared sense of belonging and purpose. In this study,

I use the concept of social skill to operationalize an ambiguous idea: empowerment. As I am interested in understanding whether and how the LCAP process allows parents to build power, using this concept helps focus my data collection and analysis on examining how parents develop and use social skill to mobilize action within the PSAC to influence change within the field. I can then consider how the use of social skill impacts the individual (e.g., building capacity and self-efficacy), the PSAC (e.g., developing shared identity and meaning), and the LCAP strategic action field (e.g., shifting the balance of power and influence).

### **Decolonial Approaches to Parent Engagement**

Baquedano-López et al. (2013) brought together theoretical perspectives that foreground the way power and race/ethnicity structure the relationships between parents and educators, calling on researchers to critique deficit-based assumptions about nondominant families. They explained that moving toward decolonial approaches<sup>7</sup> to parent engagement involves looking at educational sovereignty (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992), empowerment (Torres & Hurtado-Vivas, 2011; Villenas, 1996), and community organizing for building power (Warren, 2005). Decolonizing parent involvement in schools disrupts the power of Eurocentric ideology (i.e., individualism, universalism, meritocracy) to structure and stratify educational experiences. Thus, decolonial approaches to parent engagement reject forms of empowerment that assimilate nondominant families into white middle-class norms and reproduce the status quo rules of parent engagement.

I use this perspective to examine how a critical mass of “empowered” parents may act collectively to disrupt the systems that constrain their lives. It allows me to consider whether and how parents can push a strategic action field in ways that lead to educational sovereignty—where parents participate in making decisions about the school district. This perspective helps me problematize the empowerment parents may gain through participating in the LCAP space, pushing me to think more deeply about the ways that parents frame their involvement in schools and the degree to which their involvement assimilates them into the status quo rules of engagement or disrupts the status quo.

### **Method**

For this project, I use an embedded single-case study design (Yin, 2018); the context I study is the district LCAP engagement process in Oakland, CA, from school years 2013–14 to 2020–21, which include the first year of implementation. The case is the Parent and Student Advisory Committee (PSAC),<sup>8</sup> and the embedded units are the individual parents who had served, or were serving, on the committee.

### **Setting and Participant Selection**

Situated in the progressive-leaning San Francisco Bay Area, OUSD enrolls approximately 36,000 students with 72% of the population eligible for free and reduced lunch.

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<sup>7</sup> “Decolonizing approaches to parental inclusion in schools by necessity must point out and end all forms of epistemic, psychological, and physical violence as are experienced through silencing, linguisticisms, segregation, tracking, and the dehumanizing effects of the stunted academic potentials of youth of color” (Baquedano-López et al. 2013, p. 169).

<sup>8</sup> The PSAC includes student voting representatives elected during OUSD’s annual All-City Council student elections. Although students play an important role in LCAP PSAC work, the focus of this study is the parent/caregiver PSAC members.

As is the case with many urban school districts, OUSD struggles with declining student enrollment, budget cuts, low teacher retention, and rapid turnover of district leadership. Because of this, OUSD is also an illustrative urban education setting to work with and learn from. The district has some of the most diverse schools in the nation with respect to family income and socioeconomic status, parent/caregiver education level, and race and ethnicity (44.2% Latino, 22.1% African American, 12.1% Asian, 11.2% White, 6% Multiple Ethnicity, 1% Pacific Islander, 0.7% Filipino, 0.3% Native American) (Oakland Unified School District, 2021). District administrators strive to reflect this diversity in the families that participate in the district's LCAP development and engagement process (see Table 1).

Between academic years 2015–16 and 2020–21, there were 16 to 21 parents<sup>9</sup> serving as voting members on the PSAC each year. Per the bylaws, the PSAC must meet eight times a year: four quarterly LCAP PSAC meetings per academic year, one election meeting to vote on new members, and three additional study and discussion meetings with district staff. However, these meetings do not fully represent the scope of the committee's work as subcommittees also meet on a regular basis. Subcommittees include the Foster Youth Advisory Committee, the District English Language Learners' Sub-Committee, the Community Advisory Committee for Special Education, and the Committee to Empower Excellence in Black Students' Education. In addition, during the time in question, a core group of LCAP PSAC lead delegates met on a weekly basis with district staff from April 2020 to June 2021 to check in and plan for upcoming meetings. All PSAC members must be voting members of their school site councils at which point they become eligible to be nominated and elected at-large to the PSAC by parent representatives of the school site councils within their electoral districts.<sup>10</sup> PSAC elections typically take place during an annual School Site Council Summit in the month of October and members are elected to serve on the committee for two years.

In this chapter, I focus on the experiences of the parents/caregivers who participate in the PSAC. As I had been an elected parent member of OUSD's LCAP PSAC since May 2018 and had been attending meetings since October 2016, my familiarity with the district and the engagement process allowed me to develop strong relationships with members of the OUSD community. Thus, I used a purposive (Palys, 2008) and a snowball sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) to identify and select participants to reflect the diversity of the PSAC along multiple characteristics (see Table 1).

## **Data Collection**

For this project, I employed ethnographic methods, which were well-suited to illuminate the shared beliefs, identities, and practices of the PSAC. Data collection methods included interviews and participant observations.

## **Interviews**

I used interviews to better understand how parents became involved in the LCAP process,<sup>11</sup> how they viewed and defined their role in the process, and how they described the

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<sup>9</sup> I use the term "parent" to encompass a broader category of caregivers such as guardians, family members, and foster/resource family members.

<sup>10</sup> OUSD consists of seven electoral districts. Each district is represented by one school board director and includes elementary, middle, and high schools.

<sup>11</sup> The inferences I make regarding how parents conceptualize and frame what it means to build power, as well as how this framing contributes to shaping a collective identity and shared meanings, are limited to the interactions that have been structured and constrained within the LCAP engagement process.

impact—if any—they have made on their district (see Appendix B for Interview Guide). I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979; Weiss, 1995) with parents/caregivers who were serving, or had served, on the LCAP PSAC, with each interview lasting from one to two hours.<sup>12</sup> I have included interviewee demographics in Table 1. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Data of PSAC Parent Interviews*

Characteristics	Parent/Caregiver <i>n</i>	Parent/Caregiver <sup>a</sup> %
Years of PSAC Membership		
1–2	5	26%
3–5	11	58%
6–8	3	16%
Membership Status		
Current	11	58%
Past	8	42%
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	9	47%
Latinx	5	26%
Multiple Ethnicities	1	5%
White	4	21%
Gender		
Female	15	79%
Male	4	21%
School		
Elementary School (K–5)	13	68%
Middle School (6–8)	3	16%
High School (9–12)	3	16%

<sup>a</sup> May not sum to 100% due to rounding.

### ***Participant Observations***

To identify the ways that parents of the PSAC interact with various stakeholder groups, observing and participating in LCAP meetings was a key element of my study design. From October 2016 to June 2021, I attended 30 LCAP general meetings as a participant observer<sup>13</sup> (Spradley, 1980) and I documented my participation and observation in field notes (Emerson et al., 1995). I attended meetings both in person and online through Zoom. In addition to LCAP general meetings, I observed and participated in public comment sessions at school board meetings where the district’s LCAP was listed as an agenda item to be discussed, and in “Lead

<sup>12</sup> This chapter draws from a larger study that includes additional interviews with three stakeholder groups—district administrators, parents/caregivers, and community partners.

<sup>13</sup> I attended an additional 10 meetings before I began my research; while these meetings provided helpful context, this paper does not draw on data from these meetings.

Delegate” planning meetings where parent members, community partners, and district employees discussed objectives and logistics for upcoming LCAP meetings.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began using a deductive coding scheme (Saldaña, 2021) drawn from the conceptual framework and the project’s research questions to analyze parents’ experiences as members of the PSAC engaging in the district’s LCAP process (see Appendix E for Code System). I used MaxQDA to code interviews, field notes, and artifacts to identify emerging themes and patterns, after which I added codes inductively as they arose in the analysis (Kuckartz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Data matrices allowed me to display code frequency counts, code co-occurrences, and examples of recurring patterns and themes (Miles et al., 2014). I also wrote analytic case memos of emergent findings about the PSAC as a collective and about individual parents (Maxwell, 2012). Finally, I triangulated findings with field notes, interview transcripts, and artifacts to verify that I was drawing valid conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Positionality**

My roles of researcher and parent advocate shaped how I approached this study. As my time with the district predated my graduate studies, I often felt a tension between approaching my work analytically and the need to advocate for OUSD families. My familiarity with the district has strengthened my research as I was deeply embedded within the community and have developed strong relationships with parents, district administrators, and community partners (e.g., professionals working within community-based organizations). I gained first-hand experience of being a parent participating in the LCAP development process, and my long-term commitment to the group ensured that I remained connected to the LCAP community and granted me membership status within the group. Finally, throughout the research process I remained aware of the ways my participation in OUSD may have biased my research or impacted the group and implemented various strategies to mitigate threats to validity and reliability (Maxwell, 2012).<sup>14</sup>

### **Findings**

In this section I demonstrate that parents arrived at the PSAC space seeking to advocate for all OUSD students and engage with the district in shared decision-making. A commitment to consensus created a collaborative environment and a sense of community and bonding, which sustained parents’ motivation. Throughout this work, parents gained knowledge, developed and deployed social skill, and built power that afforded them access to district administrators and gained them entry to decision-making spaces. Although the findings suggest that being invited to the decision-making table did not translate to power to impact the decisions being made, I did find evidence that when PSAC parents gained ownership of the space and had authorship of the agenda, they built power to disrupt the status quo rules of engagement, thus influencing the LCAP engagement field.

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<sup>14</sup> Using strategies from Maxwell’s checklist (2012), I maintained *intensive, long-term involvement*, included *rich data* that was both detailed and varied to depict a full account, I *searched for discrepant evidence and negative cases*, and *triangulated* findings with field notes, interview transcripts, and artifacts.

## **Motivation and Collective Responsibility**

Parents described wanting to advocate for all OUSD students and that the PSAC's commitment to consensus—fostering a culture of learning and collaboration—helped to build community among the group's members and sustained their motivation. Most parents described being recruited to participate in the PSAC, which may have taken the form of an email forwarded from the principal, a suggestion from community-based organizer to attend a PSAC meeting, or an invitation from a fellow parent doing similar work. Parents often described wanting to take their advocacy work to the district level, and they cited a desire to learn more about how the school system works. There is never a dearth of crisis in Oakland—from budget cuts to school closures—and working at the district level seemed to expand their perceptions of their potential for influence. Parents recognized the systemic nature of the issues impacting their schools. They described the lack of quality curriculum in their schools as stemming from larger issues including funding allocations and spending constraints imposed by local, state, or federal governing bodies. Parents also described feeling a sense of responsibility to advocate for all students within the district: supporting the collective well-being of families within the district was the committee's north star. One parent explained,

I've spent so much time going to the meetings to learn about this, and I want to be able to just do my part.... I have at times been on my school site council [and] have been the only one to raise the issues around, like, we need to make sure that we're looking at how these resources are getting to our special education program on the school site. Or we need to talk about how these resources are being used for English language learners at our school site.

Another parent described that joining groups like the PSAC was a “labor of love,” and she underscored the need for parent and district leaders to “be on the same page and come together for this common interest, vested interest that we have, which is our children.” One parent added,

Everybody has our different ideas and input, and we listen to whatever stories and realize the similarities, not all the differences, but the similarities that we all have. And the biggest similarities: we're in this for our kids, whether it's the ones I gave birth to, or the 400 and some odd students in the elementary school, high school...whatever your reason for coming in this space is still one common goal and it's to fix.

Parents voiced the importance of increasing collective action and access for families across the district, and PSAC members described their motivation to be connectors and ambassadors. One parent elaborated,

I hope that I would have the ability to help other parents to understand these processes so that parents can get stronger across the board in knowing how to advocate for resources and supporting our school sites in utilizing the resources in a way that they will best meet the needs of the school site.

Parents also described the steep learning curve regarding their role as elected members of the PSAC, and they expressed the desire to be a resource for parents across the district.

Commitment to consensus was a central theme throughout the data. Per the bylaws, PSAC members must reach consensus amongst the group on all their recommendations and plans for action. PSAC meetings—whether general or planning—included constant negotiations between parent members. For the most part, it was not difficult to reach consensus as the group remained cohesive in their focus on students with the highest needs; however, at times, members engaged in contentious discussion. For example, when deciding whether to publicly support a resolution to defund the school district police department, most PSAC members were on board endorsing the resolution, but at least one member expressed reservations. The group went through multiple rounds of voting (specifically, the “Gradients of Agreement” group decision-making process) until they agreed to ultimately support the resolution. Engaging in this type of negotiation ensured that all members had a voice in the process and fostered a climate of collaboration. Disagreement within the group did exist, but members worked toward common goals in service of supporting the school district. A parent explained, “I don’t necessarily think that we were always in agreement.... I think we were always learning. I think that was huge because just the energy to take the information in.... that was a subtle and strong bonding piece.”

### **Building Power**

For parents, a key aspect to feeling empowered was knowledge. They described the dense and technical nature of the work, discussed their confusion around navigating school- and district-level systems, and expressed that through their participation with the PSAC, they learned how to be better advocates and parent leaders. This included learning about their children’s educational rights: “If I as a parent ask for help, the district gives it to you...because the law requires you to supply my kid’s needs. But if I don’t ask and I don’t know, the district won’t tell you. Never. Never.” Within the LCAP planning and development process, parents learned how to play by the district administrators’ rules of engagement, which allowed them to frame their actions in ways that signaled to the administrators that they knew what was at stake within the LCAP engagement field—they knew their rights and would hold the district to account. As one parent explained,

There’s a checks and balances issue, there’s a transparency issue, I feel like it has a corporation vibe to it. ...If you’re not well versed in it, then you’re not going to know that you’re being misled. Or if you’re not knowing which questions to answer, you already feel uncomfortable as a parent or community member.

Developing social skill allowed parents to build power; PSAC members grew their networks and leveraged connections with influential district administrators to access policy making spaces. One parent member described using the PSAC as a bully pulpit to advocate for re-hiring their school secretary. She recounted,

Being able to sign emails that lean heavily on the words “unacceptable with PSAC Parent” does have a little bit more push with whoever you’re writing to because it sort of implies that you are engaged and more informed than someone just firing things one-off. And the email reply, because I cc’d our then board member, was, “And thank you for your service,” which I feel like that then gave credence to it.



Parents also described gaining access to various district-wide committees and internal-facing district meetings and attributed their inclusion to their work as members of the PSAC.

Echoing the literature on community organizing<sup>15</sup> and relational approaches to family engagement, PSAC parents expressed that committee participation benefitted their personal development and advocacy work. One parent explained, “I saw how to hold space for everyone to be able to speak up and feel like they were just on the same plane as anybody else.” Another parent described shedding her sense of shyness and feeling confident using a microphone to speak, “I think it’s something that gave me the confidence that I need to move forward on everything else, in my personal life, on [the] PSAC, on the SSC, and have the confidence of being a good leader.”

Once included within these various school governance venues, parents described learning skills that built their capacity to navigate the district’s rules of engagement. Reflecting the literature surrounding white middle-class norms of family engagement, parents talked about learning to be more politically correct and being more tactful with their words, “I try to curb my cussin’.... I think I have developed patience for foolishness and people who will just express foolishly. I didn’t have the patience before. Normally I would just read someone the riot act.” Here, I see evidence of parents being socially skilled actors who framed their behavior in ways that encouraged district administrators to recognize them as legitimate. While on the surface the parents seemed to be assimilating into the status quo rules of engagement, when considering the awareness and agency they brought to their interactions with administrators, I was able to recognize the power they built by deploying strategic action to gain access to influential actors within the LCAP engagement field.

### **Shared Decision-Making and Authentic Partnership: Power and Impact**

Parents described the PSAC as a venue for community voices to be heard but were quick to note the often superficial nature of this government-mandated stakeholder engagement. Although families had gained access to decision-making spaces, parents rarely cited moments during the LCAP planning process where they engaged in shared decision-making or experienced authentic partnership with district administrators. One parent explained,

What sometimes makes me feel [like I want] to stop coming to those meetings, it’s not always, but yes, sometimes I feel like a puppet. I feel like they call us and ask for our help in order to fill a requirement from the state or from the federal. So even though we give them our ideas, our complaints, our suggestions, or whatever, in front of us they say, “Okay, yes, we’ll think about it, we’re going to plan it, we’re going to try to fix, we’re going to get some budget, we want to work on it,” but behind, they already made their decision. And at the end, next week, they’ll just say, “Oh, we couldn’t do it.” And they already worked and they’re already spending the money.

When asked about their experiences with shared decision making in education spaces, most parents referenced their work with their local SSC, not the PSAC. These parents described SSC activities such as helping write agendas and voting on how to spend Title I funds, as well as

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<sup>15</sup> School site administrators and community partners (e.g., professionals with community-based organizations) shaped some parents’ path to empowerment by encouraging them to join the SSC and attend PSAC meetings and offering leadership development training.

being included through the process of decision-making. Yet for some parents, simply attending PSAC meetings constituted shared decision-making—perhaps this had to do with the venue being a space that supported dialogue between families and district administrators. One parent described the work of the PSAC as coming up with shared statements and recommendations rather than producing action. Indeed, the primary objective of the committee is to produce a comprehensive set of recommendations, which is then presented to the school board at the end of the school year in June. A few parents described a process in which they ranked their choices for various recommendations, which they felt served the goal of shared decision-making. What emerged clearly was that shared decision-making required shared information and two-way communication—more conversations, fewer presentations. As one parent explained,

Help is defined by the person who's receiving it, with some caveats.... But for the most part, there will be people that come to you, particularly white people, my perception, that will come and say, "I want to help you."... That help was never a conversation. They'll look at you and say, "Okay, this is what I think your situation is, and this is what the help I think you need." No, that's not necessarily the case. Even if you got a piece of what my situation is, you don't understand my situation. You may think you know it, but you don't understand it. Two totally different things. So your help isn't based on an understanding of where I am, your help is based on your perception of where I am. And many times, that perception comes with no conversation.

PSAC members elaborated on this notion, explaining that authentic partnerships and meaningful engagement required dialogue, relationship-building, and connecting with one another. A parent described authentic partnership as a situation where both "my opinion matters" and "you are taking action to bring my idea/suggestion to fruition." Within the PSAC, many parents discussed a sense of partnership among committee members and the district staff that work most closely with the group (e.g., family and community engagement staff). Further, to the extent that the PSAC provided a venue for families across the district to engage with administrators, some parents viewed the committee as an authentic partner to the community. Overall, though, parents were hard-pressed to identify specific activities or examples of a time when they felt like they were authentically partnering with district administrators.

When parents described making an impact, the effect was, at times, minor and symbolic. A parent explained,

Yes, the PSAC helps draft the LCAP, and the LCAP does put certain constraints, but it is a small effect as opposed to the: "We've gathered these voices and we've made a change that made people's lives either better or worse." There's a river, and you've tossed a rock in, and yes, that rock has now made a different ripple, but in general the river hasn't changed that much. Whereas somehow you feel like when you're starting PSAC, it's, "Oh, this is a lever, so you push a boulder in and divert the river a little bit." No, it's not. It is tossing large rocks into a river but not enough to make notable changes.

Nearly every parent member interviewed described LCAP engagement as a "checkbox" for the district. Yet, through their participation, PSAC members gained a measure of clout to demand access to meet with district leaders and be included in decision-making spaces beyond superficial

engagement requirements. From demanding meetings with the chief academic officer and superintendent to meeting weekly with district leadership during the onset of COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, PSAC parents continued to press for increased accountability from the district and their role evolved from passive listeners of presentations toward agentic parent representatives and leaders engaging in contentious and difficult conversations with key district decision-makers. Their presence defied the status quo, extending the edges of the field to redefine who belongs in these policy making spaces.

### **Crisis, Conflict, Collective Identity, and Action**

Throughout the implementation of the LCFF and the LCAP development process, the misalignment of the budget and feedback cycle hampered the ability of families to meaningfully participate in shared decision-making. Parents and community stakeholders noted a parallel process in which they worked to develop recommendations; meanwhile, district administrators engaged in their own planning. As demonstrated, parents described the PSAC as an “ornamental” or “rubber stamp” committee and LCAP development as “fake engagement.” PSAC members acknowledged that experiencing conflict and tension was a necessary part of their work, which contributed to their collective identity as advocates tasked with fighting for the needs of the district’s most marginalized families. One parent commented, “I don’t like the politics of it, but I understand the necessity of it. Right? I don’t like feeling unwelcome at a table, but I understand being at that table anyway.” Nearly every parent interviewed described, at some point, that their role on the PSAC was to hold the district accountable and to push for transparency in planning and district spending. As one parent said, “I think it’s sad that we have to, as parents and community, have to pressure, pressure, pressure.” She recognized that pushing the district was necessary to enact any change and added, “At some point they couldn’t handle it, and it’s sad that they need to wait until parents have to do that in order to listen to them.”

Crises in the form of budget cuts, school closures, and the global pandemic galvanized parents into action and transformed the LCAP engagement field into a legitimate venue for parents to assert their influence. PSAC parents recognized the unsettling nature of these crises and mobilized to claim ownership of the LCAP PSAC engagement field. Developing a collective identity as a challenger of the district’s status quo rules of engagement, the PSAC became a space where parents were able to build power to author agendas, assert their authority in holding the district accountable for their planning and spending, and provide innovative perspectives to address issues within the district. In this section, I highlight an episode that illustrates parents’ leadership and capacity for collective action.

### ***Budget Cuts, Shallow Engagement, and Disrespect***

In the spring of 2019, district administrators presented school board members with their proposed budget cuts—some of which had implications for the LCAP—and the board was set to vote on these cuts before the PSAC had been able to convene to discuss them. PSAC members quickly mobilized to draft a letter to board members, which was then read at the board meeting. In the letter, parents expressed being “gravely concerned about how the proposed changes will impact the goals and outcomes that we seek for students.” They added,

We have stated repeatedly to staff that any changes to the LCAP that eliminates actions, adds actions, or significantly changes the nature of an adopted action must be presented to the LCAP committees ahead of presentation and approval by the School Board as part of a comprehensive LCAP engagement process.

The biggest issue by far was the disrespect shown for the LCAP engagement process. This was a point of contention for many members, who expressed feelings of disrespect and disempowerment. Parents perceived partnership with the district—if ever there was one—as performative on the part of administrators.

After drafting the letter and commenting publicly at the school board meeting, the PSAC held a regularly scheduled general meeting. Several parents, all of whom had served on the committee for over five years, later described feeling a sense of power and ownership during this particularly contentious meeting. The entire agenda was developed by parents and centered around discussing and making sense of the budget cuts, with the goal of arriving at a collective statement about the proposed budget reductions and changes. Meanwhile, district administrators arrived at the same meeting wanting the PSAC to discuss and offer feedback on a grant that the district had recently received, which they included in their presentation alongside the proposed budget cuts. PSAC members were incensed and voiced their frustration at the district's attempt to bring forward dense information with the expectation that parent members would sign off on the district's agenda, thus letting administrators say that they had completed their due diligence in engaging the community. As PSAC members gathered in a circle at the center of the meeting, they refused to allow the chief academic officer to join their discussion. The act of denying access to a powerful stakeholder captivated a room filled with district leaders, community partners, and parents. One PSAC member described finally feeling ownership in that moment. She explained, "We had been telling them [district leadership] for months, you can't drop this stuff on us the day before. We're not discounting whatever it is you're going through, but that doesn't make it okay. This is still our boundary." Another parent described receiving feedback from a community member in attendance telling him that, "'Man, you guys have power. You might not notice that, but these people were scared.'" They were like, 'Whoa, these parents are something else.'" In this moment, the PSAC rebuffed the district's agenda and positioned themselves as powerful actors capable of rejecting the status quo rules of engagement and effectively denying administrators the space to direct the LCAP PSAC engagement field.

In this moment of crisis, parents enacted their power—they had learned to navigate the system, they had built social capital upon which they could draw, and they used social skills to move others to action. As one said,

All the sadness, all the anger, all the, "You won't be in this circle today," all of those things are so worth it because in the end I do it for the children. I do it because I know there are other people that aren't able to use their voice for the power that we should be using it for, which is the young people or even ourselves, even adults.

This episode illustrates the potential impact that results from parents gaining ownership of the space of the engagement and having authorship of the agenda and represents a decolonial turn in parent engagement. The PSAC built power to stand firm in their belief that they were key stakeholders within the decision-making process and felt emboldened to deny district leadership access to influence their process and work. For this meeting, at least, the box remained unchecked.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Families show up in school governance spaces where they feel a sense of responsibility, self-efficacy, and power to influence decision making. For most parents, this appears to be at their school sites. A parent described the effect of a principal who valued community: "That

made me feel like...I'm being part of the decision-making process, even though I'm not making the final decision, and I don't expect myself to make the final decision either, but I'm being part of the process." Ultimately, decisions are made by educators with power and families recognize that. They also know that the pressure they place on the district may yield results, especially if it reaches a tipping point where the magnitude of collective action cannot simply be ignored.

Lessons offered by the PSAC suggest that while district administrators continue to have the power and final say in decisions, what has changed is the value placed on engaging with and learning from the lived experiences of families and community. Building power in the PSAC space is a subtle process. As parents learn how to navigate the education system, they develop the social skill necessary to act and push back against the district, which guides them toward framing their interactions using the language and logic of district administrators, thereby legitimizing, and strengthening their actions. The PSAC parents interviewed in this study discussed learning the jargon and acronyms that initially allowed them to follow presentations and ask clarifying questions and then provided the tools to frame their calls to action and challenge the district through various advocacy efforts (e.g., board meeting public comment, letters, recommendations). Through this process they built power to influence the LCAP strategic action field to at least demand time with district leadership and assert their authority over the PSAC space.

These kinds of stakeholder engagement venues bring families and communities closer to weighing in on decisions, and parents continue to fight for access to these spaces. PSAC members also build relationships with educators, and for some parents this is powerful and rewarding. However, as many parents mentioned, authentic partnership requires reciprocity, which remains elusive within the district. Parents have clear ideas of what it means to authentically partner, meaningfully engage, and share in decision-making, actions which they feel have rarely been supported by the district. This leads to frustration and burnout for families and communities.

Nevertheless, there were times when the PSAC disrupted the status quo rules of engagement and wrested control from district staff. In these moments, PSAC members laid claim to the space and asserted that they too belong in these meetings and schools. One example, discussed above, was when PSAC members refused to allow the district's chief academic officer to enter their discussion circle and parents claimed ownership of the meeting. In that episode, it was the PSAC who wielded the power to grant access within their space and who wrote the rules of engagement. When parents denied institutional representatives' entry into their discussion circle, they underscored that this was *their* meeting and agenda, and that community engagement would go beyond checking boxes that night.

When viewed through a decolonial lens (Baquedano-López et al., 2013), at first glance it may seem that PSAC members conform to the status quo rules of engagement set by the district and that this intentional assimilation into the system is leveraged to gain access to district policy making spaces. However, I argue that the PSAC is a site for parents to enact agency by claiming space to interact and negotiate meaning against the backdrop of their community and centered around their schools. The committee consistently tackles difficult conversations, where consensus is never guaranteed, and holds space for diverse perspectives and disagreement. This aspect speaks to the transformative potential of the PSAC space where I found commitments to building relationships and a culture of care. These commitments allow PSAC members to engage in productive argumentation where they encourage one another to have a voice and speak their truth. Despite differences in values and politics, there is a shared purpose to the work, and while

parents' voices and opinions may be disregarded by district administrators, they are valued within the PSAC space.

Fligstein and McAdams (2012) argued that the “essence of human sociability is collaborative meaning making” (p. 49), and this is what I see when I consider PSAC as a meaning-making enterprise. The findings I present demonstrate that PSAC members share an understanding that the group is working for the collective, showing up for all OUSD students, and that families must have a voice in the LCAP development process. Checkboxes, rubber stamps, puppets—PSAC members frequently use these metaphors, demonstrating that they are keenly aware of their position. Members recognized the rules of engagement and deployed social skills, interacting with symbols and framing their actions in ways that, at times, resonated with powerfully positioned actors within the field. What at first may seem like assimilation—namely curbing the cussing—I view through a lens of strategic action and social skill, interpreting parents' behavior as an indication that they are able to carefully intuit rules of the field, understand how they are positioned within the power structure, and act in ways that induce cooperation.

The LCAP process and the PSAC serve as a case study in how parents develop leadership and engage in consensus building, illustrating a shift from fighting for the competitive advantage of their own children to advocating for the collective well-being of all students within a school district. Parents arrive at this district-level committee by way of their local school site council, with many citing individualistic motives for initially participating (e.g., advocating for their site to receive more funding and resources). Laws and mandates that increase access to these policy making spaces hold the potential to elicit a community's diverse perspectives and foster a culture of belonging where educators and community members have a hand in co-constructing a more holistic system of support for our students and their schools.

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### Chapter 3

## Politics of Belonging: Community Shifting Beliefs and Transforming Schools

In the past decade, California's education policy landscape has been shaped by the influence of and interaction between two significant events. First, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)<sup>16</sup> changed the way that the state distributes money to local school districts and implemented mandatory stakeholder engagement in allocating the funds. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic destabilized the public school system, and though there is ample research underscoring how difficult it is to change institutions (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2014; Tyack & Tobin, 1994), this crisis may have created the necessary conditions for enacting consequential change (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Roy, 2020). The LCFF created the potential to restructure relationships between multiple stakeholders—district leadership, school site-level administrators, families, and communities—and we can examine how these groups navigated a landscape of nascent education finance reform and implemented a new process of state-mandated stakeholder engagement. Under the law, district leadership must engage with their community to develop a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP)—a three-year strategic planning and budgeting document. The COVID-19 crisis represented a much bigger and more destabilizing shock for the relationship between families and schools. During the initial onset of emergency stay-at-home orders, the global pandemic blurred the division between home and school—living rooms became classrooms with many parents and caregivers acting as *de facto* teaching assistants and school coordinators.

These two events offer an opportunity to study ways in which the relationship between families and educators may have changed and evaluate the extent to which these changes have allowed families to influence local education policy discussions and share in decision-making. The study is guided by the following questions: (a) Over the course of LCFF and LCAP implementation, how has the balance of power shifted, if at all, between parents<sup>17</sup> and district administrators in the LCAP engagement process?; (b) How have accountability and democratic participation influenced beliefs around who should be included in the process of district-wide planning and budgeting?; and (c) How have varying crises and exogenous shocks shifted the LCAP development and engagement process and the patterns of interactions between parents and district administrators?

Drawing on theory of strategic action fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) to examine the underlying mechanisms that yield institutional stability and change, I illustrate a process by which community-engaged stakeholders shifted beliefs about who should have access to education policy making spaces to influence decisions that shaped the institution of public education. Research has demonstrated the ways in which families and students have sought to partner with educators to foster more inclusive school environments (Hong, 2011; Ishimaru, 2014; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Yet in pursuing this aim they are often confronted with the formal and rationalizing logic that structures public education, which makes it difficult to nurture relationships and impedes the development of a sense of belonging within these school communities (Ishimaru, 2019; Schutz, 2006). Thus, this is a story of aspirations and action grounded in belonging, set against a

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<sup>16</sup> The Local Control Funding Formula was signed into law in 2013.

<sup>17</sup> I use the term “parent” to encompass a broader category of caregivers including guardians, family members, and foster/resource family members.

backdrop of school reform, crisis, and contention regarding whose voices and experiences matter in policy making spaces.

In this study, I conducted a field-level analysis of the Oakland Unified School District LCAP engagement process, tracking the resources and crises that moved through the district. I explored the implementation of school finance and accountability reform and the influence of democratic participation in expanding who belongs within policy making spaces and identified potential shifts in the balance of power between stakeholder groups seeking to impact district-wide planning. I begin by reviewing the literature on institutional reform, belonging, and community engagement and putting it in conversation with a theoretical framework that foregrounds the influence of the broader field environment, power, and collective action on effecting institutional change. Next, I provide an overview of the district's LCAP field and detail the policy context of the research. Based on participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, my findings describe how the LCFF created and protected a structure and process of mandated stakeholder engagement that, despite being vague, allowed the community to exert its power and push back against institutional norms when conditions were ripe. In other words, while the law did not *guarantee* community power, it codified a process and created potential for collective action to push back against the status quo.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

The themes of institutional change and belonging were central to this study, and I examined how these themes played out within a broader macro environment. I used the theory of strategic action fields (SAF) (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) as an orienting perspective to chart a trajectory of institutional change, to account for moments of crisis influencing a specific field, and to explore conflicting views surrounding membership and belonging. *Strategic action fields* are constructed social orders that constitute the foundation of collective action in society; according to SAF theory, actors share an understanding of a field's purpose, what is at stake within the field and the rules that govern legitimate action, and they have a sense of their position and relative power to influence the field. Thus, SAF theory provided a framework for examining the influence of shifts and changes stemming from the LCFF and the destabilizing shock of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this section, I detail core elements of SAF theory and connect these concepts with the literature surrounding institutional change, community engagement, and belonging. I begin with a high-level overview of institutional theory to demonstrate what can be gained by considering a field and organization, such as OUSD, as a unit of analysis. Next, I detail how SAF theory conceptualizes actors and collective action and examine whether and how collective action created a sense of belonging within the field and/or contributed to institutional change. I outline the impact of crisis and conflict according to this theory, drawing on research investigating education reform and institutional change, as well as literature examining OUSD specifically. Finally, I discuss belonging and membership in connection with research that explores the complex relationships between school, families, and communities.

### **Organizations and Fields as Units of Analysis**

Neo-institutionalism (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2014) theorizes that organizations become constrained by the common understandings found within the rules and sanctioned behaviors that exist throughout the broader environment. That is, the pressure to conform and signal legitimacy stems from the environment outside of the organization. This

view stands in contrast to traditional institutionalism, which depicts institutionalization happening within organizations and being shaped by internal pressures to maximize technical efficiency (Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1968) and inward-facing socialization processes keyed to an organization's norms, values, and attitudes (Selznick, 1949). Neo-institutionalist theory accounts for an organization's capacity to strategically respond to institutional pressures. According to neo-institutionalism, the tacit scripts, rules, routines, and classifications that permeate the environment become the salient factors impacting institutions. These understandings become institutionalized within the broader environment, operating across organizations, and creating a lens through which actors perceive and interact with the world.

An organizational field is comprised of multiple organizations influenced by similar institutional environments—as opposed to any single organization—and institutionalization happens within the field, leading to organizational homogeneity. Yet it is the collective action of actors within these fields and constructed social orders (Fligstein and McAdams, 2012), that reproduce status quo rules of engagement and contribute to potential shifts within these institutional environments. Thus, studying the patterns of interaction within a field, accounting for the broader environment in which the actors in the field exist, and taking stock of actors' relative power to influence the field is central to understanding institutional change.

### **Actors and Collective Action Within Strategic Action Fields**

Fligstein and McAdam (2012) outlined three categories of actors within their SAF framework: *incumbents*, *challengers*, and *governance units*. Incumbents set the rules of engagement and wield power to control resources and influence the rules governing action—their is a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. This is born out in the literature as researchers studying LCFF and LCAP engagement have shown that most school district administrators support narrow (e.g., small number of participants) and shallow engagement strategies (e.g., information sessions) (Marsh et al., 2018; Marsh & Hall, 2018). Challengers seek to transform the field but lack the powerful positions that incumbents occupy to substantially influence the rules or the distribution of resources. Governance units keep watch over the field, protecting the interests of incumbents and ensuring that actors within the field reproduce the status quo. Mapping the field of LCAP engagement onto this framework, I conceptualized district administrators as incumbents, community-based organizers and parents as challengers, and the state department of education as the governance unit.

As fields exist in an “inherently conflictual world,” (Fligstein and McAdams, 2012, p. 97) there is always a measure of contestation, and actors draw on *social skill* to frame their calls to action in ways that resonate with others to motivate them to cooperate and mobilize support. Importantly, collective action in service of material or instrumental gain requires a shared sense of identity and meaning. Thus, group membership also serves what Fligstein and McAdam (2012) term the *existential function of the social*—that is, it meets our need to share a sense of belonging and purpose. Acting as challengers, professionals from community-based organizations (CBOs) have underscored the importance of strengthening relationships amongst individual community members, as well as the fact that an organized collective must recognize the throughline of its work and have a strong sense that its work matters (Fuller, 2022; Schutz & Miller, 2015; Thompson, 2019).

Researchers have shown how deepening relationships within school communities and working collectively has allowed stakeholders to recognize that their issues stem from the structural and systemic failures of public institutions (Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009; Warren et al., 2015). When they partner with CBOs, parents shift from

traditional parent involvement toward meaningful engagement, transforming from “private citizens” to “public actors” (Warren et al., 2015). Community organizers can play a key role in helping families build social capital (Putnam, 2000) and navigate relationships with educational leaders. Further, parents engaging in social movement organizing build their leadership capacity and their participation becomes a gateway to increased civic engagement (Terriquez, 2011).

### **Crisis and Conflict**

The SAF framework describes the way that strategic action fields are embedded in and linked to a *broader field environment*, where shifts and changes within a given field impact proximal fields. While change is more often of an incremental nature in stable fields, the “destabilizing force of exogenous change pressures” (Fligstein & McAdams, 2012, p. 85) has the potential to create more dramatic change. In extreme cases, *exogenous shocks* lead to crises and a climate of uncertainty, giving rise to *episodes of contention* where socially skilled challengers can mobilize innovative forms of action to transform the field. A field becomes *settled* when actors share a sense of the rules governing action. In field settlement, new incumbents and challengers may appear or the status quo may be restored. In either situation, we expect to see incumbents working to reproduce the status quo and challengers pushing for incremental change. Within the OUSD context, the implementation of school finance reform (e.g., the LCFF), mid-year budget cuts, permanent school closures, teacher strikes, and pandemic-induced distance learning represent crises of varying magnitude with implications for triggering episodes of contention.

By foregrounding conflict and paying explicit attention to the ways in which actors vie for power, I complicate the literature on community engagement and education reform where researchers underscore the primacy of cross-sector collaboration and broad-based coalition work (Ishimaru, 2014; Noguera, 2003; Noguera & Syeed, 2020; Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). Urban regime theorists have documented that a community’s capacity—their *civic capacity*—to carry out reform efforts requires broad-based civic mobilization and agreement on how to define the issues at stake (Henig et al., 1999; Stone, 2001). This research has suggested that reform efforts falter due to their fragmented nature (e.g., issue definition), which are exacerbated by politics that give rise to cleavages precluding coalition building and cross-sector collaboration (e.g., civic mobilization) (Henig et al., 2011; Shipps, 2003).

In the context of Oakland, researchers have described the challenges that stakeholders encountered when attempting to build civic capacity to unite around a shared vision to garner broad-based support for education reform efforts. Oakland’s education landscape has been described as an advocacy coalition (Ansell et al., 2009), where shared policy beliefs facilitated alliances among like-minded groups but stymied broad civic mobilization and issue definition across the field (Ansell et al., 2009; Trujillo et al., 2014). This work has also highlighted how incumbents appropriated the tools of community engagement and democratic participation to “manufacture public consent” during episodes of contention and increased conflict (Espinoza Kissell, 2022, p. 1).

Drawing a contrast with the notion of civic capacity, where divergent interests lead to fragmentation, Fuller (2022) traced the ways in which a pluralist politics, or *new pluralism*, supported venues where community stakeholders within the Los Angeles Unified School District negotiated meaning and coalesced around politically viable policy levers in service of institutional change. Eschewing the unity necessary to cohere around a broad set of goals, new pluralism foregrounds what is gained when diverse civic actors explore tensions and navigate contradictions to arrive at feasible solutions. This work suggested that the ebb and flow of

coalition work, driven by a diverse collective, might lead to innovative policy and positive shifts in students' educational outcomes. Considering this perspective, I see how consensus and collaboration in OUSD might initially stem from accepting diversity as the status quo and that the convergence of differences in a community need not preclude coherence around a common path.

### **Belonging and Membership**

Belonging in a collective extends beyond inclusion. To belong means to have a hand in co-creating a space, whereas inclusion requires that an invitation be extended by actors with full membership (powell, 2021). Speaking at the 2015 Othering and Belonging Conference, powell (2015) argued that “the most important good we distribute in a democracy is membership; membership structures all of the other distributive decisions, including the rules of society. In that regard, barriers that would prevent members from participating, whether they are political, social, or economic, become profound.”

powell theorized that as individuals and groups attempt to expand the membership of a given collective, they engage in actions that hinder or facilitate bringing these intentions to fruition. When groups turn inward, he explained, they erect barriers and engage in *breaking*, which inhibit expanding membership in the collective. In contrast to breaking, the act of *bridging* creates social ties across differences and constructs a space that nurtures belonging and recognizes the full spectrum of humanity. Although individuals and groups may seek connection, acceptance, and a sense of belonging, powell described how dominance and hierarchy, closely associated with the superiority of whiteness, are deeply embedded in our culture, politics, language, and actions, and impede acts of bridging. His work helps illuminate the potential rationale underpinning incumbents' vested interest in maintaining the status quo rules of engagement.

Researchers have shown that privileged parents (e.g., higher socioeconomic status) seeking the best for their children often do so at the expense of marginalized families who do not have the same capacity to navigate the complex bureaucracy of the educational system (Posey-Maddox, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). Yet when families bridged across communities—nurturing connection and affirming a commitment to collective well-being—they fueled the communities' capacity to elevate the voices and experiences of the families and youth with the highest needs (Dyrness, 2009). When communities included more voices in policy conversations and prioritized learning from lived experiences, they built power for individuals and groups whose lives were most impacted by the issues to interrogate how to shift policy and create institutional change (Fuller, 2022; Gandin & Apple, 2002). My findings support the idea that solutions do not rest entirely within the hands of policymakers and that those on the ground—living in the wake of policies crafted by experts—have legitimate expertise, which should be included within policy discussions.

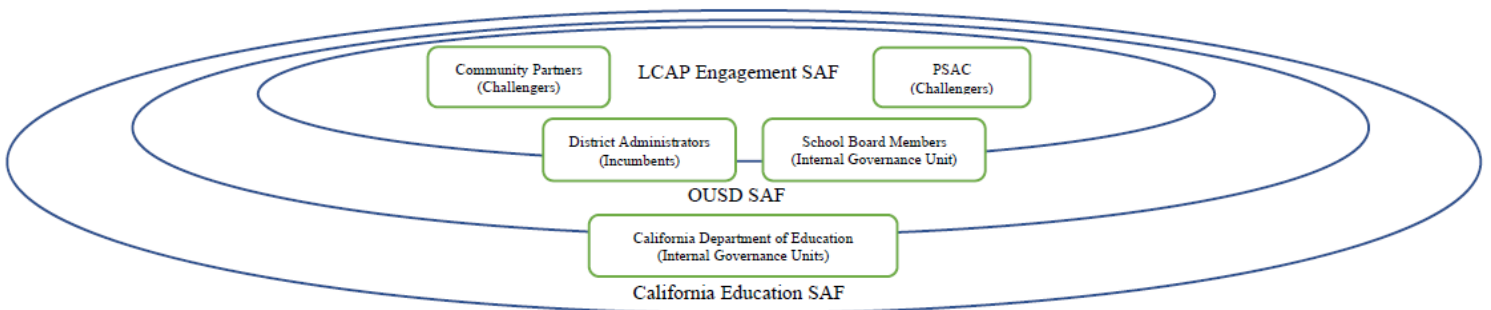
### **LCAP Engagement Field and Policy Context**

Within the state of California, OUSD's LCAP engagement field is nested within multiple layers of education governance. The outermost layer is the California Department of Education (CDE), the state agency tasked with implementing and monitoring education law and mandates. Within the CDE field are California's 58 county education offices that coordinate support and provide services to the local education agencies embedded within their respective fields; for example, the Alameda County Office of Education is responsible for OUSD. If one were to draw



a circle around OUSD’s LCAP field—the strategic planning and budgeting process for the school district—the following actors interact within this space: PSAC parents/members, district administrators and staff, school board members, community partners from various community-based organizations, and the broader OUSD community (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
*LCAP Engagement Strategic Action Field*



Each year, school districts must either adopt a 3-year LCAP or provide an annual update evaluating their current plan. Outlined in each LCAP, districts must include how they address the state’s education priorities which include:

- (3) (A) Parental involvement and family engagement, including efforts the school district makes to seek parent input in making decisions for the school district and each individual school site.... (B) Family engagement may include, but need not be limited to, treating families as partners to inform, influence, and create practices and programs that support pupil success and collaboration with families and the broader community, expand pupil learning opportunities and community services, and promote civic participation. (Public School Accountability Act of 1999, n.d.)

Districts are required to establish a parent advisory committee to advise the school district and school board on the development and evaluation of the district’s LCAP. Additionally, each year, districts are required to present the LCAP to the parent advisory committee. Finally, the school district governing board must convene at least one public hearing to solicit public feedback on the proposed planning and budgeting recommendations.

The final layer within OUSD’s school governance field is the school level. Each school site convenes a school site council, on which parent members can be elected to serve. School site councils are tasked with developing school site plans, including the allocation of Title I funding to support the academic and social emotional needs of the school’s low-income students. In OUSD, parent members of school site councils and site English language learner committees may also be chosen to serve on the LCAP PSAC through annual elections. Once elected, members of the PSAC become representatives of not only their school sites and electoral districts but also the district-wide committee tasked with making recommendations to the school district superintendent and school board to inform the district’s LCAP. Finally, housed within the PSAC is a network of subcommittees including the state-mandated District English Language Learners

subcommittee, the Community Advisory Committee for Special Education, and the Foster Youth Advisory Committee.

## Method

For this chapter, I used a single-case study design (Yin, 2018); the context was the Oakland Unified School District from school years 2013–14 to 2020–21, which included the first year of LCAP implementation. The case was the district LCAP development and engagement process.

### Setting

The community of Oakland—birthplace of the Black Panthers and home to social justice movements of all stripes—prides itself on being fiercely liberal, yet conflicting political identities occupy the center of tensions related to education. The city’s progressive propensities are delimited by a history of conservative policies that privilege private rights, creating conditions that undermine public systems and democratic governance structures (Self, 2005). Drawing enrollment from the low-income “flatland” communities of color to the majority white, upper-middle class homeowners nestled in the “hills,” OUSD resides at the heart of this mercurial milieu. Given the community’s ethos of activism and the fact that the district is tasked with serving all Oakland students, the climate is ripe for questioning whom the institution serves, as well as who gets a hand in shaping decisions.

During the 2020–21 school year, OUSD enrolled approximately 35,000 students, 72.5% of whom were eligible for free or reduced-price meals (California Department of Education, 2023). Over the course of this study, OUSD struggled with declining student enrollment, budget cuts, low teacher retention and a teacher strike, rapid turnover of district leadership, physical school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and an extended period of remote/distance learning that stretched into spring of 2021. Given these factors, OUSD presented an illustrative case to investigate institutional change in an urban education setting.

The district has some of the most diverse schools in the state with respect to family income and socioeconomic status, parent education level, and race and ethnicity (44.2% Latino, 22.1% African American, 12.1% Asian, 11.2% White, 6% Multiple Ethnicity, 1% Pacific Islander, 0.7% Filipino, 0.3% Native American) (Oakland Unified School District, 2021). To further illustrate this convergence of difference, Table 1 compares the school and neighborhood characteristics of two elementary schools—a “Hill” and a “Flatland” school—and includes districtwide characteristics as a reference. The schools highlighted in Table 1 are 1.2 miles apart with a major highway dividing the neighborhoods they serve. Notably, the students at these elementary schools typically feed into the same middle school (that is, if the students continue with a public, non-charter school option), which is situated a couple blocks northeast of the highway. Although both schools enrolled similar counts of students during the 2018–19 school year, the populations and their neighborhoods varied significantly. Students at the Flatland school were more racially/ethnically diverse, with large proportions of the population identifying as Asian (45%), African American (21.7%), and Hispanic or Latino (21.1%) (California Department of Education, 2023). In contrast, white (58.6%) students represented a majority of the Hill school population. The Flatland school served higher proportions of English learners (41.2%), students with disabilities (18.6%), and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (80.6%) (California Department of Education, 2023). Finally, when taking into consideration neighborhood characteristics, the median household income for residents within the census tract

of the Hill school neighborhood was over \$144,000 more per year than the median household income of residents of the neighboring Flatland school (US Census Bureau, 2019).

**Table 1**  
2018-19: Comparison of Neighboring “Flatland” vs “Hill” Schools

	Bella Vista “Flatland School”	Crocker Highlands “Hill School”	Oakland Unified
<b>Characteristic<sup>18</sup></b>			
Total Enrollment Count	469	466	36,524
<b>Race/Ethnicity (%)</b>			
African American	21.7%	7.7%	24.5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.1%	0.0%	0.3%
Asian	45.0%	8.6%	12.8%
Filipino	1.5%	0.6%	0.9%
Hispanic or Latino	21.1%	10.1%	42.2%
Pacific Islander	0.4%	0.0%	1.1%
White	3.4%	58.6%	11.6%
Two or More	4.7%	10.7%	4.3%
Not Reported	1.1%	3.6%	2.2%
<b>Student Subgroups (%)</b>			
English Learners	41.2%	1.5%	32.8%
Foster Youth	0.0%	0.2%	0.4%
Homeless Youth	0.9%	0.0%	2.1%
Migrant Education	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
Students with Disabilities	18.6%	7.7%	14.2%
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	80.6%	6.0%	73.8%
<b>Housing and Income Characteristics<sup>19</sup></b>			
Renter Occupied Housing (%)	68.6%	8.0%	59.3%
Median Household Income	\$59,875	\$204,412	\$73,692
Median Value of Owner-Occupied Home	\$563,200	\$1,358,800	\$687,400

<sup>18</sup> Student characteristics for each school were drawn from publicly available data through the California Department of Education’s DataQuest reporting system (California Department of Education, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> For Housing and Income Characteristics of each school, statistics reflect the census tract location of the school site. For the district, the statistics reflect citywide census data (US Census Bureau, 2019).

## Participant Selection

Drawing on the literature and SAF theory, I focused on three stakeholder groups—district administrators and staff, parents, and community partners (e.g., OUSD’s term for professionals from community-based organizations). Having served as an elected parent member of OUSD’s LCAP PSAC since May 2018 and having attended meetings since October 2016 allowed me to develop strong relationships with members of the OUSD community. Therefore, I used a purposive (Palys, 2008) and a snowball sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) to identify and select participants that were key stakeholders within the LCAP engagement field (see Table 2) and reflected the demographics<sup>20</sup> of the PSAC parent members (see Table 3).

**Table 2**  
*Stakeholder Interview Counts*

Stakeholder Group	<i>n</i>
PSAC Parent	19
District Staff (e.g., coordinator, manager, director)	7
School Site Administrator (e.g., principal)	2
Community Partner (e.g., organizer, legal advocate)	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>

**Table 3**  
*Demographic Data for PSAC Parent Interviews*

Characteristics	Parent/Caregiver <i>n</i>	Parent/Caregiver <sup>a</sup> %
Years of PSAC Membership		
1–2	5	26%
3–5	11	58%
6–8	3	16%
Membership Status		
Current	11	58%
Past	8	42%
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	9	47%
Latinx	5	26%
Multiple Ethnicities	1	5%
White	4	21%
Gender		
Female	15	79%
Male	4	21%
School		
Elementary School (K-5)	13	68%
Middle School (6-8)	3	16%
High School (9-12)	3	16%

<sup>a</sup> May not sum to 100% due to rounding.

<sup>20</sup> District administrators strived to reflect OUSD’s diversity in the families that participate in the district’s LCAP development process.

## **Data Collection**

For this chapter, I used ethnographic methods to trace the power dynamics at play within the LCAP field that structured the rules of engagement, actors' ability to impact decisions, and the patterns of interaction between stakeholders. Data collection methods included interviews, participant observations, and document analysis.

### ***Interviews***

I used interviews to better understand how stakeholders experienced the implementation of the LCAP process, including how they described the impact, if any, the PSAC made in helping the district develop their plans. I conducted 32 semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979; Weiss, 1995) with stakeholders (see Table 2) who had participated in the LCAP engagement field, with each interview lasting from one to two hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide (see Appendix B, Appendix C, Appendix D) focused on questions that covered the following themes: background, how each participant framed and defined their role in the LCAP process, how participants described the impact—if any—they have made on the district's LCAP, perceived changes to the ways that district administrators bring parents into a district-wide decision-making process, and how participants described the PSAC's influence on the LCAP.

### ***Participant Observations***

Observing and participating in LCAP meetings was central to my study design. Between October 2016 and June 2021 I attended 30 LCAP general meetings as a participant-observer<sup>21</sup> (Spradley, 1980) and documented my participation and observation through field notes (Emerson et al., 1995). I attended both in-person meetings and online meetings through Zoom. In addition to LCAP general meetings, I observed school board meetings where the district's LCAP was listed as an agenda item to be discussed, "Lead Delegate" planning meetings where parent members, community partners, and district staff discussed objectives and logistics for upcoming LCAP meetings, and house meetings hosted by district staff and PSAC parent members.

### ***Document Analysis***

I conducted an analysis of artifacts (Yin, 2018) that included PSAC-authored advocacy letters, meeting minutes, email communication between stakeholder groups, PSAC's LCAP recommendations and superintendents' responses, and district LCAPs from school year 2014–2015 through school year 2020–2021. I used the documents to identify themes and patterns as they related to community engagement in the LCAP process and looked for evidence of the PSAC's influence.

## **Data Analysis**

To analyze data, I used a deductive coding (Saldaña, 2021) scheme drawn from the theoretical framework and the study's research questions to analyze stakeholders' experiences and actions engaging with the LCAP process (Appendix F). I used MaxQDA to code interviews, field notes, and documents to identify emerging themes and patterns (Kuckartz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Data matrices allowed me to display code co-occurrences and examples of recurring patterns and themes (Miles et al., 2014). I wrote analytic case memos of emergent findings

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<sup>21</sup> I attended an additional 10 meetings before I began my research; these meetings provided helpful context, but this chapter does not draw on data from these meetings.

(Maxwell, 2012) and triangulated findings with field notes, interviews transcripts, and artifacts to verify that I was drawing valid conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Positionality**

Regarding my time spent in Oakland, I recognize how my dual roles of researcher and parent advocate shaped my approach. My familiarity with the district strengthened the research as I was deeply embedded within the community and had developed strong relationships with parents, district staff, and community partners. I gained first-hand experience of being a parent participating in the LCAP development process and my long-term commitment to the group ensured that I remained connected to the LCAP community and continues to grant me membership status within the group. Finally, throughout the process I remained aware of the ways my participation in OUSD may have biased my research or impacted the group and implemented various strategies to mitigate threats to validity and reliability (Maxwell, 2012).<sup>22</sup>

### **Findings**

In this section, I present findings organized around three episodes of destabilizing change marked by policy shifts, exogenous shocks, and/or crises impacting OUSD. The first of these was the onset of recently legislated school reform that ushered in the implementation of the LCFF, which shifted the way OUSD received and accounted for education funding. In this episode, OUSD actors navigated pressures associated with stronger accountability requirements and broader stakeholder engagement and worked to define the contours of the new LCAP engagement field. The second episode corresponds to a span of time characterized by retrenchment during which cycles of crises and shocks—in the form of midyear budget cuts, school closures, and a teacher strike—rallied the LCAP PSAC, strengthening the social cohesion within the group and its resolve to act. During this episode, an ethos of community organizing and group norms that fostered a sense of belonging and membership facilitated relationship building and shifted “ownership” of the LCAP engagement field toward the PSAC. All of these factors contributed to the PSAC building power to influence incremental change within the district.

Finally, episode three is set against the backdrop of a global pandemic. My findings speak to the ways in which PSAC was primed to meet the moment given their development as leaders and depth of engagement within OUSD. This was seen most clearly during the initial months following the statewide stay-at-home order (March 2020) that resulted in the physical closures of all schools. It was a moment of acute uncertainty and unsettlement, during which the PSAC played a key role in facilitating open and transparent communication between district administrators and the broader community of families. My findings show that at the peak of uncertainty—between March and August of 2020—the PSAC gained access to internal-facing strategic planning venues and, through innovative action, influenced decisions and shifted beliefs around the role of families and communities in education policy making spaces.

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<sup>22</sup> Using strategies from Maxwell's checklist (2012), I maintained *intensive, long-term involvement*, included *rich data* that was both detailed and varied to depict a full account, *searched for discrepant evidence and negative cases*, and *triangulated* findings with field notes, interview transcripts, and artifacts.

## **Episode 1 (Fall 2013–Spring 2017): School Reform and Settling into an Era of Local Control and Accountability**

As an equity-driven reform, the LCFF represented a broad state-level policy shift aimed at providing districts serving high-needs populations with additional funding, and the community played a pivotal role in terms of accountability. A district staff member explained that the state could not possibly be accountable for how every district in California was allocating their funding. She outlined how districts had not previously been accountable for the results of this spending: they would spend money on expensive programs but were not required to demonstrate whether and how the programs worked or if they were even serving students. Underscoring the transformation in school finance and accountability, a community partner described, “We built in the most accountability around, ‘Hey, these increases in dollars should really be going to close the equity of opportunity gaps that have been created by structural racism and underservice of underserved communities.’” She added that the increased funding created opportunities and possibilities for new educational programming to realize the reform’s equity-oriented goals. Thus, the LCFF and the LCAP not only represented a major change to the way that school districts developed plans for allocating funding but also instituted a paradigm shift in how districts were accountable to their communities.

### ***Field Unsettlement***

During this time of early implementation, OUSD district administrators characterized the LCAP field as unsettled. A district staff member shared, “There were zero systems for being able to capture the story of all our money...it was not operationalized in any way...I think at the very beginning there wasn’t really an understanding of the LCAP.” She further described district-wide confusion surrounding how educators and administrators thought about funding regarding the LCAP: “When the LCAP came out, [district leadership] used to always say LCAP dollars. And that was one of the big course corrections. The LCAP is not money, it is a narrative of our money...I did over a hundred presentations that first year, of what the LCAP was, what its purpose was, what was needed from the academic team, the fiscal team.” Finally, there was ambiguity surrounding the role of stakeholder engagement and the PSAC. A district staff member described the PSAC as a “catchall” and said that questions remained as to the purpose of the committee: “What are they advising about and making recommendations [for]?”

Regarding the engagement process for the LCAP, there was similar unsettlement, which created opportunities for community partners to provide the district with technical assistance and thus to have a strong hand in shaping the field of LCAP engagement. A community partner recalled,

We started talking about that in the fall of 2013 and how to ensure that there would be a strong democratic structure, where low-income students and families of color would really have voice in the process, because there wasn’t anything [codified in law] that said how you had to construct your parent advisory committee.

Another community partner explained that districts were writing their initial LCAPs before there was even widespread awareness surrounding the requirements for convening parent advisory committees. She recalled coalition meetings with the district and multiple OUSD-serving grassroots organizations where district staff and partners became familiar with one another and strategized about how to engage with the process. She added,

So how can we support the parents who are part of the PSAC to make sure that they have relevant information to be able to make informed decisions? So, there was like, how are we creating spaces for community to learn this stuff and be a part of the bureaucratic processes that did have to be bureaucratic? And then what are the spaces that can be created that don't have to be as bureaucratic?

District staff recalled looking to community organizing groups to help shape the engagement spaces.

In addition to working with OUSD staff to articulate a structure for the LCAP PSAC, community partners underscored their commitment to ensuring families were brought into the decision-making spaces. A community partner shared, "As an organizer, I never went to meetings by myself, ever. It was always with [parent] leaders." Recognizing the LCAP field as unsettled with ambiguous rules of engagement, one community partner described mandated stakeholder engagement as an aspect of the LCAP development process that "wasn't fully fleshed out." He added that the concept of shared decision-making while "great in the abstract" was difficult to implement as it required significant resources. He viewed his role in the early stages of LCAP implementation as ensuring the "informed consent" of participants. He explained, "How do you make sure that folks have, not just this piece of paper that has a line item, but what informed that decision? Some of the more detailed information I felt was often missing...there was this information imbalance."

### ***Incumbents, Challengers, and Field Settlement***

It was in the early days of collaboration that community partners (i.e., CBO professionals) and parent leaders developed their roles as *challengers* to district leaderships' *incumbent* roles. As challengers, they advocated for a structure of representative democracy that would draw in families from school sites across the district with the potential of integrating school site governance and district-wide community engagement centered around the LCAP as a single, unifying plan. A community partner shared,

That was kind of the ideal, the vision, the dream. The idea was that people would elect, because they elected the people on the site governance teams, then there would be elections at the district level of people that were representing other families and students in their schools to be then elected to this body [PSAC].

Another community partner recalled, "Almost all my public comments were about how the LCAP shouldn't be this thing on the side...The LCAP should be the plan for the school, for the district instead of being this thing on the side you're doing for compliance." One district staff member described the collective action by community partners in structuring the LCAP engagement process as feeling "very different because it was coming from grassroots organizing and people were trying to turn out all the schools." Further, signaling an incumbent-challenger agreement with regards to the LCAP field's rules of engagement, the district staff member added, "you're not a unified district if you don't have a unified space where you can collectively analyze all of us, what all of us need."

As challengers, community partners and, to an extent, parent leaders influenced key aspects of OUSD's initial LCAP. Given their strong community organizing culture, community partners strategized around opportunities where "wins" could happen, and when a sizeable sum of money—approximately \$4M—became available via the governor's revised budget in May



2015 (i.e., May Revised dollars), challengers pushed for district leadership to allocate the unencumbered funds to PSAC-identified priorities. This challenger-led effort ultimately resulted in the PSAC including LCAP recommendations for creating district-level positions that supported school governance and LCAP engagement—the School Governance Specialist and LCAP Engagement Manager—that were eventually adopted by the district. Additional wins that parents, district staff, and community partners attributed to the PSAC’s engagement during the initial implementation of the LCAP include establishing a Foster Youth Advisory Committee (the first school district in California to convene a LCAP subcommittee focused on supporting foster youth students), hiring district Foster Youth Case Managers, and including students on the advisory committee (thus the “S” in PSAC).

A district staff member recalled being impressed with parents having a hand in establishing the rules of engagement—writing the rules, regulations, and bylaws—within the LCAP engagement field and then taking up the work of learning the “arguably complicated” LCAP templates provided by the state in their efforts to craft their committee recommendations. With regard to presenting their recommendations to the school board, one parent emphasized the influence of PSAC’s commitment to engaging in the process,

I felt that the fact that we were presenting and that we had prepared our presentation and that the PSAC centered the student presentation, what the students were asking for and that was a part of this official record that was being given to the school board. That was powerful. And it was canonized in this way, I felt that was powerful and I felt like it was impactful.

During this episode, as incumbents and challengers jockeyed for position in the field, parent members described feeling a sense of optimism around LCAP engagement and development work. In contrast to other district-wide committees (e.g., District English Learner Advisory Committee, District Advisory Council) where parents described listening passively to presentations and having minimal ability to influence the meeting agenda, the LCAP PSAC meetings were seen as venues that valued parent and community voices. One parent described, “I felt like, okay, now I think I have a say. Like, if I want to say something, at least I’m being heard.” He added, “And for me, that’s a good step moving forward because, eventually, I don’t only want them to hear me. I want them to take action on what I’m saying.”

### ***Waning Motivation, Engagement, and Questions Surrounding Impact***

As enthusiasm waned and the PSAC’s “vision” was met with the reality of shifts in organizational priorities and turnover in district leadership, the “ideal” LCAP PSAC structure proved difficult to sustain. PSAC parents described that low meeting attendance hampered the committee’s work and potential impact. Further, the timing of district and board budget decisions never aligned with the PSAC’s cycle of engagement. While district leadership hashed out budgeting decisions to deliver to the school board by early January of the school year, the PSAC timeline was geared for delivering LCAP recommendations to the board in June. Community partners, PSAC parents, and district staff recognized the misalignment in the decision-making process as funding priorities were already baked into the budget well before the PSAC could put forth their ideas and recommendations. All of this contributed to a tapering of momentum and energy to sustain and engage in the LCAP process. A community partner explained,

The level of frustration that people started feeling around their input being respected and valued and actually having [an] impact given the amount of time they were spending, and what it was like to get from East Oakland to the board meetings on Second Ave, it was frustrating and devastating. For the leaders that I worked with that were part of the Parent Student Advisory Committee, part of what happened ... was they just felt like it wasn't worth their time to be spending the hours and hours and hours that they kept spending in the advisory committee meetings, in different spaces.

Noting the change in parents' enthusiasm levels as the LCAP process stagnated and their efforts seemed to stall, a district staff member described these early PSAC members as "tired veterans." A past PSAC parent explained,

I feel people really like diversity until diversity opens its mouth. And then when you have to listen and take [in] a different perspective that doesn't align with what you want to do, then it's, let's get busy dismissing why that is not a reasonable approach or why we shouldn't even examine it. And maybe you can't do it today, but you can acknowledge the merit of it and let's build an infrastructure to gradually move ourselves in that direction. Anything like that, I couldn't see that at the district level, but I could absolutely see it at my school site.

Echoing the sentiments expressed by this parent during this episode, PSAC parents and community partners described patterns of retreating to their school sites where there was a stronger sense of shared decision-making. Additionally, this parent underscored the waning energy and sense of agency to influence the field, providing evidence that the LCAP field reached a point of settlement, with district leadership secure in their incumbent roles and rules of engagement that relied heavily on a compliance-driven engagement process.

## **Episode 2 (Fall 2017–Fall 2019): Retrenchment and Building Power**

In a departure from the field settlement of Episode 1, which was marked by an influx of funding into the district, OUSD opened the 2017–18 school year dangerously close to being taken over by the state given the district's pattern of year-to-year budget deficits and financial precarity. To restore minimum reserve funding—underscoring a commitment to fiscal solvency—the OUSD Board of Education approved \$9 million in mid-year cuts to the district's 2017–18 budget. Under these conditions, Episode 2 opened with a period of retrenchment, where school site budgets were slashed by \$3.8 million with the average elementary school (~450 pupils) shouldering over \$50,000 in cuts (Tadayon, 2017). Community outrage reached a fever pitch during Fall 2017 when "Chop from the Top" became a rallying cry for parents, students, teachers, and community members demanding that the district's central office staff bear the burden of forthcoming budget reductions. Responding to community outcry, in December 2017, the district's Community Engagement team launched a controversial campaign intended to signal transparency. In partnership with the PSAC and the school board, OUSD hosted a community study session to investigate central services and investments in the district. With a spirit of full transparency, the meeting featured a gallery walk of OUSD central office staffing, with job titles and salaries on full display. There was something sensationalistic—even scandalous—about seeing the walls of an elementary school auditorium lined with central office organizational charts (names redacted using permanent marker), staff FTE, and salary amounts. The study

session and gallery walk drew a sizeable crowd of more than 100 participants—a significant increase for a PSAC-affiliated meeting—signaling renewed energy for contesting the rules of engagement within OUSD’s LCAP field.

During Episode 2, OUSD experienced sharp retrenchment where cycles of crisis and shocks—in the form of mid-year budget cuts, school closures, and a teacher strike—galvanized the PSAC’s resolve to act. Additionally, an ethos of community organizing and a commitment to strengthening trust and relationships within the PSAC deepened the connectedness and social cohesion of the group. Thus, as each crisis moved through the district, the PSAC mobilized to push back against district leadership, asserting their position as conveners of families and community, and, with each crisis, built their capacity to become legitimate challengers within the LCAP engagement field. I begin this section by presenting how the various actors—parents, district staff, and community partners—drew on principles of community organizing to develop relational trust, build parents’ leadership capacity, and foster a sense of belonging within the PSAC. Next, I demonstrate how the sense of belonging and membership imbued within the LCAP community engagement process facilitated co-learning and collaboration, which allowed the PSAC to bridge diverse stakeholder groups. I then detail how the PSAC’s social cohesion guided decision-making within the group that centered around equity and the collective well-being of OUSD students and families. Finally, I present findings that speak to how internal norms allowed the committee to build power in the LCAP engagement field, gain access to decision-making spaces, and shape the tools used to guide policy discussions, suggesting the group’s influence in expanding ideas about whose experience matters and who belongs in the field.

### ***Belonging and Membership in the PSAC***

Central to creating and sustaining a sense of belonging and membership within the PSAC was an ethos of community organizing within the LCAP field, as well as the broader OUSD strategic action field. Organizing activities included opening each meeting with community-building ice breakers, scheduling one-to-one meetings to learn more about an individual’s interests, hosting house meetings, and focusing the group’s strategy and actions on meaningful issues where they could achieve wins. The district’s LCAP Engagement Manager, a self-identified community organizer, described how she approached the work:

It is a community building space. If everything fails, it’s a community building space...It doesn’t matter what you call it, it’s a committee, a consortium, a club. We are a group of people who need to relate really well, who need to figure out what are the needs that we’re going to meet and define problems for ourselves together and go after them. I don’t care what you call that. And that is a community organizing mindset. That is a community.

Drawing on organizing strategies, district staff supporting the PSAC engaged in deep relationship building work to foster connections between PSAC parent members and built up the committee’s capacity to advocate as a cohesive and representative body working on behalf of OUSD students. A PSAC parent explained,

It was true authentic advocacy work. Community work. She [LCAP Engagement Manager] had us being like community organizers. I’m serious. That’s who we were, and I now recognize that. And she modeled it after community organizers,

work she had done prior to coming to OUSD....The way that...there was no one better than the next. There was no one that...knew more than others, but we were all at this table and we were all doing it together. And we would all try to bring someone along to do it. And in homes, you know what I'm saying? That's true organizing work. Coming in meetings, coming with food that, "Hey, this is all I have." And we're like, "That's good." ...And I think the importance of that communal type of atmosphere is what was so critical. And if you don't know how to do that, if you don't know how to lay that kind of foundation for people to build upon, you can't, the outcome doesn't even look like that. That group doesn't even look like that. And she allowed people to be who they were.

A community organizing lens encouraged social coherence amongst PSAC members, allowing individuals to develop a sense of belonging and membership in the committee.

Activities that fostered leadership development strengthened the PSAC's challenger identity and built their capacity to push back against district administrators to expand the range of stakeholder voices included in policy discussions. Speaking to this, a PSAC parent reflected,

Well, I think one of the skills is empathy and being able to be empathetic to other situations and open to that. Others, I think it's confidence, encouraging people to speak who wouldn't normally want to speak in front of a large audience and knowing who needs to get thrust out there, just pushed into the deep end and those who need a little bit of coaxing and push, pull, getting them out there.

He further described how doing this work tapped into each member's strengths, which motivated them to contribute: "Help people be the leaders or be the number crunchers or be the person who's good at seeing patterns and finding the key points of the data that we need to address." He also described how the LCAP engagement manager played a key role in on-boarding new members.

She has a good eye for seeing when people show up, identify what brought them there, what activated them and then trying to take that activation and broaden it. So, it's not just, "Okay, so you feel this way. You're here for your child and the child's going through this but there's other kids that are going through this as well. We need to speak for all of them." She's very good at subtly growing that in people.

Speaking about how she approached supporting the work, the LCAP Engagement Manager explained, "There's ways in which you can do this as a performance and it appears that people are coming up, it appears that people are proposing things, it *appears*... But the person, the staff is doing a lot of it." She described being aware of that fine line between the performance and community-driven engagement. She added,

I will start with making it super easy and then at the end of the day, I'm going to write your letter because you don't have time. It's still going to be your letter because I do understand class and the challenges of gender and parenting, and the stresses and the mental health of people involved. So, my job is to make your role easier, but it's not to take over your role. So, the thing is that for certain

committees at certain points the membership hadn't cohered, it wasn't steering. And I'm willing to hold the process and put things in front of people, have them present it and have them practice what it looks like. Even knowing that it's not what I want. But the more I am being told to do things by people, the better.

A PSAC parent described how the engagement manager's method of support played out in real time as he recalled the pre-meeting texts and chats.

I will frequently have conversations with her before a big meeting and it's just like she'll say...I [PSAC parent] really need to say this, but I don't think she's doing that because she's got an agenda that she's trying to plant that. I think she knows where I'm coming from and my concerns.

He explained that he recognized this as a community organizing strategy for building the leadership capacity of PSAC parents adding that the LCAP Engagement Manager would say, "Don't sit in the back and stew. Actually, you're going to want to say this. Come out and say this sort of thing." This also suggests that PSAC parents felt a strong sense of trust toward the Engagement Manager and her role in supporting their LCAP work.

District leadership was also, to an extent, accustomed to a culture of organizational change that drew from an inside-outside advocacy strategy as district staff recognized the limitation of their incumbent roles in shifting the field. "Our PSAC partners really drive a lot of what happens, which is really great because the only time I've actually seen change happen, like institutional change, has been when the community pushes," described one district staff member. She added, "It's not that there aren't some things that we can do internally to change, but it's not transformative." Thus, a key aspect of collaborating with the community within the LCAP field relied on ensuring that engagement staff approached the role in a manner conducive to pushing for change. As a district staff member explained,

I think it says something about the district to have hired [her] in the role that she's in, that there are districts that would never have done that. We know [she's] an organizer and that's fine, it's fine. We want that parent engagement; we want that parent voice. We want folks to coalesce and to problem solve together and to get in the same room. We want all of that to happen. That's great.

**Meeting Spaces.** During this episode, most LCAP PSAC meetings were held at school sites—in multi-purpose rooms, libraries, cafeterias—along with a once-a-month planning meeting hosted at OUSD's downtown central office. Given the commitment to drawing on community organizing principles, district staff were sincere in their efforts and intention to build community during LCAP meetings. They provided childcare, meals, and translation, which made it easier for families to join and substantively participate. However, when PSAC parents interfaced with district staff in these spaces the tone was formal (i.e., Robert's Rules of Order), and parents recognized that it was necessary to engage in this manner when interacting with district incumbents.

In contrast to these meetings at school sites and OUSD's central office, the PSAC, along with district staff supporting LCAP engagement, hosted meetings in their homes. These house meetings, another classic organizing strategy, became a crucial component to deepening relationships between PSAC parents. A district staff member shared,

A lot of the most beautiful ideas and the most generative ideas came from house meetings... You brush up against each other, and you brush up against the reality of people's lives... I love when the definitions of who we are get more nuanced and more, or more similar even.

The house meetings created spaces where parents felt more comfortable sharing and being vulnerable about their experiences. A community partner noted,

I think some of the house meetings...were really valuable because I think folks were just able to speak honestly about their experiences and not have to be political about how they were speaking. There was no district official necessarily in front of them. And if there was, they were allies. So, I think people could just vent and just say, this is what was supposed to happen. This is what actually happened to my child, or this is the experience that I had as a parent.

Meeting in each other's homes made it easier to build trust and create connections between parents, which strengthened their relationships and their commitment to the PSAC's work. Offering an example of how a meeting's setting shifted the tone of PSAC parent interactions, a community partner shared his experience meeting in a home where district leadership was also present:

Usually, it's like the district holds a space and they invite parents in. This one...the parents essentially held a space, and they invited the district in. And I think it created a very different dynamic. It wasn't butcher paper up on a wall. It wasn't like conference tables. It was a home setting. And I think in that particular setting, it was more community oriented. I remember just people sharing meals together, just sharing stories with each other.

This community partner illustrated the importance of setting and space, how they influence whether people have a sense of agency to set the tone and rules of engagement, which in turn structures how people show up and their ability to bridge across their individual experiences. He added that, "People could just be really honest about how they were feeling, but also be really strategic about how to handle a particular situation." He noted that these spaces were conducive to building the capacity of the PSAC as a legitimate challenger within the LCAP engagement field: "It gave them a place to just be themselves and be comfortable expressing their thoughts and develop some confidence in speaking out. And just over time, I saw a lot of leadership development and people really stepping into their power."

**Bridging.** In relation to how trust was built, the LCAP Engagement Manager described the primacy of relationship building in LCAP engagement work: "It's like you never embrace a person just in a role. You have to embrace people in their wholeness—they're parents, they're partners, they're members of networks, all of that." Given this lens, she explained what the work entailed: "So, if I'm not engaging with people, with their children and their mama...I'm not engaging with them. So, it does require intimacy and not cheap intimacy. Not for its own sake." She described taking a Freirean approach, learning from the lived experiences of primary stakeholders. "If you're trying to understand your own experience, the people who generate the knowledge and generate the questions are from within the experience." Underscoring the need to

expand inclusion in policy discussions, she continued, “To have someone external set the questions...defeats what you’re trying to do because it’s people, the closer to the experience, the people who are helping us set the questions and set the spaces.” Finally, the Engagement Manager described the importance of supporting venues that promoted bridging individuals as a necessary step to transform the LCAP field. She explained,

If you are not doing that level of comparing experience, you’re not doing the work...so what I feel is that you have to cultivate spaces where people can exist in their wholeness and are able to share whatever constraints...because those constraints are the very substance of what you’re dealing with in the institution.

An orientation toward forming deeper connections allowed parents to bridge their experiences with those of other families, which facilitated social cohesion amongst the PSAC members and strengthened their commitment to expanding inclusion in districtwide decision-making spaces.

Bridging within the group allowed the PSAC to tackle difficult conversations. The Engagement Manager described using one-to-one pairings of members and drawing on existing relationships to help open lines of communication. Further, bridging encouraged PSAC parents to show up for one another, thus building the capacity of individual members to insert themselves in policy discussions. One PSAC parent described,

I was able to see that we had parents that may not have grown up with the type of advocacy I grew up with, but I could still give that to them at this time and age. I’m willing to go up, stand right next to you at that mic, not say anything to that board member, but allow you to know that you’ve got that comfort with you right next to you. I’m willing to do that because that’s what it takes.

This willingness to show up and stand with parents as they delivered public comments at board meetings is an example of the value that PSAC placed on building relationships and developing the capacity of parents to have a voice and express their views. She added,

And then next time you don’t even need me. I’m like, “Girl, you better try going up there and say what you going to say. Okay. Okay. And not use the crutch of my language or not use, “I can’t do it, because I’m afraid, I’m embarrassed.” If you see everybody doing it and if you know people have your back because what? You build a relationship with them.

This PSAC member’s confidence in parents’ ability to take the reins and make public comments without the “crutch” of using someone else’s words suggests that PSAC parents were sincere in their efforts to expand ideas about whose voice matters in policy discussions. It also speaks to the PSAC’s broader acceptance of myriad ideas, values, and ways of interacting with powerfully positioned actors within the LCAP field. All of this broadcasted the message that OUSD parents and the expertise of their lived experience belong in decision-making spaces.

In its role as a convener of OUSD families and community, the PSAC actively sought opportunities to bridge with parents across the committee and with families at school sites from across the district, as well as with district staff. PSAC parents recognized that bridging was critical to their work. One parent member shared,

My thing is, we're here to listen to all voices, whether we agree or not, from a different perspective, from a different lens, so that we can do more communal work to get things done. It's hard to...really build any ingrained movements if all you're doing is working with the same group of people that agree with you, right?

Further, she underscored that through these acts of connecting and bridging, the PSAC space embodied the spirit of community engagement in the LCAP field. She explained,

I think meaningful engagement to me is when we could bring together parents from all different schools and find something that we could connect to, to build upon, to be successful, the outcome, whether or not the outcome was actually successful, the fact that all parents would come together and support the cause and then figure ways to lift that up and bring it to the end. Now, whether or not that was successful, that's not here or there. But I think the successful in it is to know that parents could come together and support a cause. I don't have children that speak another language, but I can support those parents that have children that do. And I can back them with, "You need us to come with you to do that work?" I could do that. So, I think that has played a huge part in how people show up.

This parent's ideas about success, as well as the PSAC's focus on bridging with OUSD parents, suggest that a key aspect of this work lies in building the capacity of families and community to shift the field in ways that expand ideas about whose expertise should have a hand in shaping decisions.

Community partners and district staff similarly noted the positive impact of bridging and partnering with the PSAC. When talking about the community study session that featured the OUSD gallery walk, community partners highlighted the leadership of the PSAC in facilitating the meeting and remarked that it was powerful for the PSAC to hold the space as it built their capacity to facilitate cross-stakeholder conversations. A community partner recalled, "I remember actually, it was a moment also of bonding with the district staff because they actually saw the level at which PSAC showed up to hold that space with the board." District staff shared that bringing the PSAC and Board together for the meeting helped to set a neutral tone and signaled transparency. An OUSD board member highlighted that the meeting was an opportunity to engage in shared decision-making, which empowered the PSAC and local school site councils. "I remember in the [study session] debrief, it might have been [district staff] who was like, 'This is...I felt [like] an us, like a we. Not us versus them, but we,'" the community partner shared. These impressions speak to what may be gained when the community co-constructs the scope of LCAP engagement. At a moment when district staff needed to repair trust and signal fiscal transparency, the PSAC provided a venue and facilitated a process that projected a sincere effort to encourage shared decision-making and appeared to have bolstered, if only briefly, the district's credibility in terms of engaging meaningfully with the community.

**Social Cohesion, Co-learning, and Consensus.** Intentionality around relationship building and bridging created a space where PSAC parents were able to share stories and appreciate each other's differences (e.g., motivations, ideas, life experiences). One parent explained, "Diversity of skillset, diversity of experiences...we're all bringing that and we're all respecting it and we're all just recognizing what each one was capable of." This atmosphere of respect within the PSAC helped build camaraderie amongst parent members.



So, we built up trust, we built up relational trust and I can say things to [PSAC parent] that I would never say to another random...person...off the street and so I got to know them, and I got to make jokes and we learned each other's sense of humor.

The relational trust that this parent described helped bridge differences, which allowed PSAC members to recognize and value the intimacy that developed through their connections to one another. Another parent explained, "We understand each other's plight and it all was down to the children and we come from particular walks of life, and we have a particular set of needs and interests and wants for the children and ourselves." She highlighted how parents were positioned around different aspects of the PSAC, representing different student subgroups or subcommittees, adding that, "There's just this, this wonderfully unspoken respect and understanding that we have in some...we just know where we're a little different. We, we are who we are. We are what we are, unapologetically."

Camaraderie, respect, and bridging between PSAC parents not only strengthened social cohesion within the group but fueled knowledge sharing and co-learning, which in turn facilitated building new relationships with the broader community, reinforced existing connections with one another, and deepened their dedication to the PSAC and LCAP engagement field. As one PSAC parent recalled, "It would be very, quite frankly, it would be really bonding...I think the first part is again, the genuinely showing up, like we're here because we're serious about the children." Further, she described how co-learning activities (e.g., studying student group data and developing feedback for the LCAP) supported relationship building and bridging across differences. She added,

That was really strengthening for a group of people who don't know each other, whether they agree or not, because the learning piece doesn't really, you don't have to come to the same conclusions. But then having to agree on what you wrote down again, whether you agree or not, there's interactive work in that...There's something that then connects all of you.

This example also alludes to the tensions and contradictions inherent in shared decision-making given the dual objectives of holding space for differences of opinion and moving forward in a common direction. Underscoring the tensions within consensus-driven decision-making, a district staff member highlighted the challenges and opportunities that Oakland presented. He explained,

We have such diversity that maybe that Venn diagram doesn't overlap for everybody. Maybe it does. I'm not saying it doesn't, but maybe it doesn't. And we still got to move forward, even if it doesn't. It's an opportunity, because we have an opportunity to learn from all those different pieces of the Venn diagram and move forward with the wisdom from all those different places. But that's a huge challenge. The more circles you have, that you have to come [up] with a diagram that overlaps, that's a huge challenge.

Yet, as parents illustrated, co-learning and "interactive work" demonstrated the committee's commitment to consensus and exhibited the norms and values to which the group aspired.

### ***Equity, Collective Well-Being, and the Greater Good***

The PSAC’s norms, values, and consensus process coalesced to form a strong set of guiding principles that steered the group toward advocacy and decision-making that centered equity and collective well-being. PSAC members drew on these principles to orient the committee’s focus after OUSD became eligible to receive differentiated assistance<sup>23</sup> as a result of low educational outcomes (e.g., suspension rate, graduation rate, and academic achievement) experienced by the following student groups: (a) English learners, (b) homeless students, (c) students with disabilities, and (d) African American students. During spring 2018, conversations around differentiated assistance had not been a focus for the committee given the shock and tumult caused by mid-year budget cuts and the push for increased transparency surrounding central office investments. However, when the PSAC met in August 2018 for their annual retreat, OUSD’s eligibility for differentiated assistance took center stage. A district staff member recalled a PSAC member saying, “Where there’s a fire, you help the students closest to the fire.” By the close of the retreat, the PSAC had committed to focusing their 2018–19 LCAP study on the highest-need students, as determined by their eligibility for differentiated assistance, with the objective of looking at the overlap of the student groups’ experiences.

After designating its focus on studying the experiences of students with the greatest needs, the PSAC pushed the district in ways that shifted the norms and rules around how they analyzed data. In requesting overlap data (e.g., academic achievement data for students represented within multiple student subgroups), the PSAC instituted a fresh way to consider student experiences and outcomes. The data chart in Figure 2 was shared during a Fall 2018 PSAC meeting and provides an example of the way that PSAC’s concern with equity influenced how the district used data. The chart visualizes the district’s 2017–18 Reading Assessment Participation Rates for African American Middle School Students with Disabilities/IEPs. Having the data displayed in this manner allowed PSAC members to consider the root causes of low levels of academic achievement in English Language Arts (ELA). Moving past a simple comparison of ELA outcomes for all African American students within the district and requesting that these data also include meaningful variables (e.g., disability status, grade levels), provided much-needed context to the PSAC’s LCAP study.

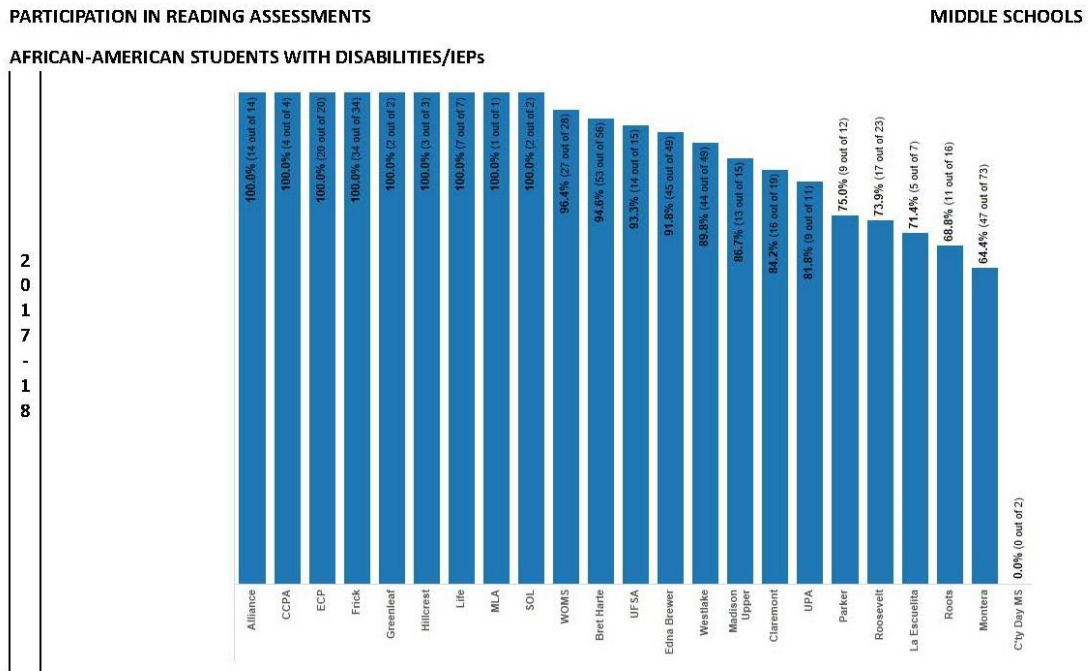
In this choice of focus, I see evidence that the PSAC was guided by a concern for equity and the collective well-being of all OUSD students. One PSAC parent explained that the importance of elevating the experiences and needs of OUSD’s most marginalized students became a “lens through which [they were] looking” when making LCAP recommendations. Further, the PSAC shared a clear theory of action that prioritized the provision of support and services to students with the greatest needs and those who were furthest from opportunity as the path to improving all OUSD student outcomes.

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<sup>23</sup> Differentiated assistance is part of the State Department of Education’s System of Support. Districts become eligible for differentiated assistance when educational indicators measuring academic achievement, student engagement, and school climate show negative outcomes for their students: for example, low levels of proficiency in math or high rates of suspension. Districts identified as eligible for differentiated assistance receive guidance from their County Offices of Education to plan improvements to support the underperforming student groups. These improvements must be included within their LCAP cycles, and districts must include public stakeholder engagement.

**Figure 2**

*2017–18 Participation in Reading Assessments by Middle Schools: African American Students with Disabilities/IEPs*



Themes related to targeting support toward the highest need students, decision-making in service of collective well-being, and working toward the “greater good” were present in every aspect of the PSAC’s LCAP process. As one PSAC parent described, “Whether you call it a flatland school or a hill school, the kids who need the most help is where the most money needs to go.” Expanding on this idea, he continued,

It is best for society that we help each other. One can’t get ahead without the other. These white people live up in the hills. OK, you have a nice house, you drive a nice car. You have a good job. But you’re prey to the people who they feel are down in the flatlands or below them. How do you stop that? Teach everyone. Give everyone the opportunity to excel on their own.

When considering the PSAC’s focus on students with the highest needs, members described how approaching the process through this lens developed their commitment to collective well-being as a guiding principle. Underscoring their commitment, the PSAC formally adopted the “LCAP PSAC Principles for the LCAP and Budget Process” during their December 2019 meeting, which centered equity, outlined support for student groups under differentiated assistance, and affirmed the right of students with disabilities to participate as “full members in all aspects of school and district life” (See Appendix G). PSAC members shared that they felt responsible for working toward the greater good. As one parent explained,

I have learned over a period of years that there is a need to advocate for...students and families who have the highest needs and face challenges...There is a role for all of us to play in giving voice to that in whatever school space we're in, or whatever district space we're in. If we're at our school site council or at some, I don't really go to PTA meetings, but if you are in a PTA meeting, or if you're talking to teachers, if you're talking to administrators that having the conversation about how resources are used to really prioritize the needs of students who...face the greatest needs, that we can all help speak to that and remind everyone that we have to be accountable to that.

Whether it was a public display of district employee salaries or committing to centering students with the most acute needs, PSAC members' ideas about accountability in service of collective well-being extended to all stakeholders. Further, they framed this work as requiring collaboration from everyone. A PSAC member described,

I want there to be an understanding that we are in partnership...this is supposed to be a partnership where we make decisions for the greater good of the education of our children, for the empowerment, inclusivity of our families. And if we're not doing that, how do we expect people who don't have the time to make the time? How do we expect people who already feel jaded or unwelcome to insinuate themselves at the table? We have to adjust the dynamics.

This parent's ideas reflect the way that the PSAC began to develop a challenger role within the LCAP engagement field, recognizing the work required to hold incumbents accountable in a partnership and challenging them to go beyond mere compliance with laws and mandates.

The PSAC's guiding principles drew heavily on idealistic notions of caring for the community, and although it could be dismissed as empty rhetoric, their framing created a compelling call to action that resonated with parents and community members. One PSAC member described her participation in the SSC and the PSAC, explaining that when she was working on these committees, she was showing up for all the students, not just advocating for her own. She explained that educators had a hard time recognizing that her committee work was not premised on self-interest, namely gaining a competitive advantage for her own children, but, as she put it, driven by concern for "all 400 students," at the school. PSAC members echoed this sentiment and there was a sense that even though their own children might be fine, they felt called to engage in advocacy work that extended beyond their children and family. A parent explained,

Now on the one hand I justified, for myself, more engagement because I felt like I was advocating, not just for my kids because honestly, I know my kids will be fine. I was advocating for my kids' peers. There were lots of parents who could not do what I was doing. They just, their work schedules or also just the "edu-speak" was so obtuse ... that even if they had stumbled into Wonderland, like I had, they were not going to stay past dinner.

Similarly, another parent described how her high-achieving daughter did not necessarily need the support she was fighting for, "So the heart of that, like making sure she's okay but also showing up and making sure, wait, but did those kids get what they needed? ... I fell into LCAP PSAC,

and...I just was further exposed to the need.” These quotes underscore the influence that the PSAC’s commitment to equity and student well-being had on the development of a shared identity among committee members; supporting students with the highest needs reinforced their commitment to being a representative body that advocated for all OUSD students. In modeling a community of care, PSAC members demonstrated their commitment to the collective well-being of the district. While the committee’s commitment to equity provided a lens for focusing their LCAP study and recommendations, it also became a touchstone that grounded their work as they sought to bridge with the broader community and expand conceptions of who belongs within education decision-making spaces.

### ***PSAC Building Power During Crises***

Transitioning from internal PSAC practices to how these norms and values impacted the field, in this section I present findings that demonstrate how the PSAC built power within the LCAP engagement field by gaining access to decision-making spaces and shaping the tools used to guide policy discussions. These findings speak to the group’s influence in expanding ideas about whose experience matters and who belongs within the field. As I discussed in earlier sections, during the summer of 2018, PSAC parents had a strong sense of being a cohesive group, which allowed them to designate OUSD students with the highest needs (as determined by differentiated assistance eligibility) as the focus of their forthcoming 2018–19 LCAP recommendations, thus establishing a set of guiding principles to steer their work. The shock of mid-year budget cuts from the previous school year appeared to have mobilized non-PSAC parents’ interest in participating on the committee. Several new members recalled learning about the PSAC after being asked by their principals to attend OUSD’s School Site Council Summit, which also hosted the PSAC’s annual elections. From there, PSAC parents described that this district committee was promoted as a space for parents to engage in district-wide decision-making; thus, for families wanting to impact decisions at the school and district level, the PSAC appeared to be the committee to join. When compared to the waning engagement of Episode 1, a resurgence of an active and engaged committee, with 12 newly elected members,<sup>24</sup> suggests that the 2017–18 budget crisis served as a catalyst for increasing engagement in school site governance spaces and the LCAP engagement field.

Over the course of Episode 2, I observed a pattern of increased enthusiasm and engagement in the LCAP engagement field as subsequent crises and shocks moved through the district. Budget cuts that threatened to eliminate the LCAP Engagement Manager position, foster youth case managers, and program support for restorative justice, school closures and a teachers strike all mobilized PSAC members and galvanized support for using the LCAP engagement field to represent the interests of OUSD families. During each wave of crisis, PSAC’s actions included making public comments at board meetings, taking “ownership” of the PSAC space (i.e., not allowing district leadership to influence the committee’s agenda), and delivering formal advocacy letters to district leadership reiterating their consistent focus on pushing the district toward equitable funding decisions and prioritizing the needs of the district’s most marginalized students.

District administrators noted an increase in PSAC’s power and influence when they demanded and secured a meeting with the superintendent to discuss the implications of budget cuts for the LCAP engagement structure and support. A district administrator described how the

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<sup>24</sup> The PSAC committee includes up to 28 parent members (4 from each electoral district, with 13 seats set aside for the English Learners’ Sub-Committee).

PSAC was “very in charge” of their meetings, citing how they “ran the agenda” and placed district staff in the “hot seat” with regard to expectations surrounding the transparency of the budget and LCAP development. She described how the group continued to assert their authority “over and over until it became the norm.” As another district staff member noted,

I think anytime parents feel empowered to speak truth to power to folks who are from central office in those spaces and able to share either their experience or ask a critical question that holds us accountable. ...Which they tend to do very regularly. So I think it is a space where parents feel empowered, where the district central office folks feel accountable.

These observations by district staff speak to the PSAC developing their role as legitimate challengers with some measure of power to push back against district leadership.

Recalling the study session that the PSAC co-hosted with the school board and the OUSD central office gallery walk, a district staff member noted,

You saw all these mid-level staff...sitting there and following the lead of parents and that was powerful. ...Because I think internally there were a lot of people who were upset, troubled by what had happened. And they wanted that openness. ...And I think that parents presented that opportunity.

District staff, acknowledging the community’s call for financial accountability, recognized that the PSAC was well-positioned to deliver the kind of transparency that both internal and external stakeholders sought. Another district staff member recalled that the PSAC “Was a less reactionary space than most of the other spaces that I worked in where we were constantly reacting to either a crisis that we ourselves had created or that was thrust upon us.” She added the PSAC was, “The most proactive and the most well-positioned to respond to actual crises that would come up.”

PSAC parents characterized their influence as staying committed to a process that put pressure on the district and pushed them to change. Describing the impact of the PSAC’s collective action, a committee member shared, “If it’s put on the record and there is enough dedication and consistency, the change—change will come. I hate that...change will come; change will be made. Right? Change will happen because...we’re going to make it happen.” Additionally, building power to influence the LCAP engagement field fostered a sense of “ownership” among PSAC members for leading their committee work, steering the direction of their meetings, and pressing district leadership to respect their role in representing the interest of OUSD families and community. A PSAC parent explained,

And that’s what I’m saying about making sure you understand the power of what you have. It may be small or minimal, but yet still it provides a space that lets people know, “You can’t just run that by us and just keep moving. You’re going to have to stop and have a conversation, you’re going to have to stop and try to build a relationship, or at least know that I’m at the table to provide a yes or no.”

However, not everyone agreed that the parents of the advisory committee owned the PSAC space. One PSAC member explained, “District staff owns the PSAC space. And it is managed and directed and the decisions about what’s going to be discussed, what the purpose of the

meeting is, and what needs to happen is entirely decided upon by district staff.” Another PSAC parent added that, “They’re always going to write the agenda. It’s just, can we lobby to get items on it?” A community partner added, “I felt in my experience of it, that the staff owned the space the whole time. Whoever it was that was in charge of it on the staff side constructed knowledge, decided what information would be presented or not.”

Yet incumbents noted that the PSAC did, at times, influence decision-making within OUSD and the LCAP engagement field. A district administrator recalled, “In terms of shared decision-making, there were times when PSAC definitely influenced the course of what was decided.” Another district administrator spoke to PSAC’s impact,

Absolutely, I’ve been in the room...I’ve been in meetings where we have taken some written feedback of PSAC and other community groups, looked at what we’re doing and figured out how we incorporate... or adjust so that we maintain what the integrity of why we’re going whatever direction we’re going.

Although the PSAC’s influence may have been “small or minimal,” in Episode 2 there was a shift in how the various actors—the PSAC, community partners, district staff—interacted with each other within the LCAP engagement field. As cycles of crisis and shocks moved through the district, PSAC parents stepped into their leadership role as conveners of OUSD families and community and developed their role as legitimate challengers to district incumbents. They consistently pressed district staff to center equity in the LCAP development process and pushed OUSD to adopt innovative data analysis practices that influenced how stakeholders studied students’ educational experiences and outcomes. A community organizing orientation toward relationship building and developing trust strengthened PSAC parents’ sense of belonging and membership, which encouraged the group to bridge differences, connect with diverse stakeholder groups, and continue expanding conceptions of whose experiences matter and who belongs within the LCAP engagement field.

### **Episode 3 (Spring 2020–Spring 2021): COVID-19 Shock, Episode of Contention, and Field Resettlement**

It shined a light on inequities in a way it never was exposed before. Now it felt like the curtain was pulled back on the breakdown in their relationships between us, it felt like this exposure on the part of everyone for that matter, everyone was exposed in their lack of engagement with each other, that there was just this very brutal—like someone had charged into your bedroom while you were changing your clothes—type of exposure, to just how far and separate we are from each other, with all of our children in the middle. So, you have the authority over here and you have the parents or community over here, and we can never be further apart than we are at that moment that they shine the whole light, all the roaches scattered in the kitchen, the light came on and holy crap, is this what we’ve been doing all this time?

—PSAC Parent discussing COVID-19 and district-family partnership

The COVID-19 pandemic was a destabilizing exogenous shock that created tremendous uncertainty within OUSD, triggering an episode of contention where PSAC parents mobilized to challenge the extent to which families and communities were included in policy discussions and decision-making spaces. It was a period of acute upheaval for the field, and the PSAC facilitated

open and transparent communication between the district and the broader community of families. This was reflected in a PSAC parent's description of the threat and opportunity that the physical school closures during COVID-19 created for stakeholders within the field:

If COVID taught us anything, it taught us that we can survive in ways that we swore we couldn't before. You had to have a medical issue to be out of school a certain amount of time because you had to satisfy 180 days of mandated education. Well, now we're Zooming. We've figured out how to adjust to that and everything was by the seat of our pants. So if the expectation was put on the parents to adjust and pivot and figure it out, okay, well then guess what? We should probably partner.

Underscoring the threat posed by these extraordinary circumstances and the call to action for stronger partnerships between families and educators, another PSAC parent shared,

I said this to the teachers, I said this to administrators—you're now making decisions based upon different roles. Parents are now the teachers. You cannot come into my home through a portal and then try and tell me how it should be in my home...you have to have a different relationship with that person, you have a different relationship. You can't dictate to people and tell them X, Y, and Z should be happening when...your classroom is no longer your classroom. This is...the conversation many of times I've had with my friends that are teachers. I keep telling them your classroom is no longer your classroom. It is now homes of other people who have the major decision-making power. You could say what you want, but that doesn't mean it's going to happen.

This parent's account illustrates how the blurring of boundaries surrounding school, home, families, and educators transformed the rules of engagement in the field, requiring educators to rethink their approach to interacting and making decisions with students and families.

When the COVID-19 crisis moved through the district, the PSAC was primed to meet the moment given their depth of engagement within OUSD. A district staff member explained, "There was a readiness because these were developed leaders to say, 'We're going to set the table even if we don't know how.'" The PSAC's gradual building of power was key to gaining access to policymakers and decision-making spaces during the extreme upheaval of COVID-19, which was most evident during the initial months following the statewide stay-at-home order (March 2020) that resulted in the physical closure of all schools and students transitioning to remote/distance learning. This development was destabilizing, and educators, administrators, and policymakers could no longer solely rely on their expertise to carry the day. However, the district had a group of highly activated parents that had been learning about the system and engaging with district leadership. A PSAC parent recalled,

I think because there was such a scramble and a panic happening during quarantine, that there was an opportunity to listen and put value on what PSAC is providing. We're going to engage with PSAC because, I'm sure they realized, you guys can't do this by yourselves. You honestly cannot figure this out. You need the support and you need, there are some brilliant minds in PSAC. There are some brilliant minds contributing for free 99, their knowledge and experience.



Further, as district staff explained, there remained a measure of ambiguity surrounding the PSAC’s function within the LCAP field,

There’s never been authority or sufficient follow through of, here is what we understand the law to say about the role of PSAC. Here’s how locally, we’re going to implement that law, and fidelity to the law, and to the way that we view as a local organization to operate. And what we’re going to hold ourselves accountable to do that structure, whatever it is. And so, when crisis hits, everybody is...scrambling.

Thus, the destabilizing shock of COVID-19 sparked an episode of contention where the PSAC recognized that strengthening partnerships between the district and families would be imperative to navigating the pandemic. During this episode, the committee skillfully appropriated its role as a bridge between key stakeholders and pushed to expand the role of families and community within decision-making spaces. A district staff member recalled,

PSAC became—because OUSD as a communications body, like the department or the district as a whole, hadn’t yet developed this sense of COVID forums and COVID Q&As and communication around how things are going to work and what comes next—PSAC became a clearing house. It became sort of an axis of stability within all the swirl of figuring things out. People came to those meetings in record numbers just to be able to talk about what was going on. And I think that community caretaker role...became PSAC.

Throughout Episode 3, the PSAC sought to be an integrating and representative space that worked to support the needs of parents and students during an unprecedented crisis.

### ***PSAC Challenger Mobilization and Innovative Action***

Within days of Alameda County issuing an emergency shelter-in-place order, effectively shuttering schools, the PSAC, as well as the Community Advisory Committee for Special Education (CAC), met remotely via Zoom to discuss the needs of the community and their “collective capacity to respond to those needs.” In these initial meetings, PSAC parents raised concerns surrounding communication with OUSD families and agreed that they were uniquely positioned to collaborate with the district in a community liaison role. With this objective, the committee reached out to OUSD leadership via email requesting to meet and discuss how to support: (a) communication with families, (b) accounting for and catching students that were not accessing digital platforms and resources, and (c) informing planning updates and communicating about what was happening “behind the scenes.”

Two and a half weeks after sending the email, PSAC members secured an initial meeting with district administrators during which they asked for, and established, a regular weekly check-in with district leadership. This speaks to the PSAC’s capacity to help support the district in moments of crisis. That is, rather than being placed on the backburner during the early COVID-19 response, the PSAC became a partner in responding to the crisis. I see evidence of this happening during the first few months of the pandemic (e.g., March to August 2020), when the PSAC was in regular communication with district leadership, as well as, when PSAC parents were invited by district administrators to participate on the COVID-19 Action Team—the task force convened during Summer 2020 to plan for the 2020–21 school year.

Regular meetings with members of OUSD’s leadership and inclusion on the COVID-19 Action Team signaled the value placed on PSAC’s insight; district staff appeared to be open to inviting stakeholders from the community into decision-making spaces and learning from their perspective as opposed to taking their ideas “into consideration.” In one of the meetings, a district administrator shared how the issues and questions that the PSAC raised during the weekly check-in meetings provided content for communications with the larger community. PSAC meetings with district leadership facilitated the exchange of valuable information and knowledge sharing, and parent members were able to update the community through General LCAP PSAC meetings, their local school site councils, or more generally through their social networks, all of which served an important function in helping to bridge the district with the community and facilitating open lines of communication.

During this episode, there was an openness to learning from each other and a transparency that had not been present in previous spaces where the district and the community had intersected. As a PSAC parent noted in a Zoom chat after the initial meeting with district leadership, “Thank you all for your transparency, it’s very helpful to hear directly, how Central [e.g., central office] is supporting our students and families.” Meeting minutes reflected similar themes, including “transparency; committee is strong; being in the weeds, bridging, completing the feedback loop, staff making time, [district staff] holding the space, community partners and members also making time.” Additionally, district staff discussed how the weekly check-in meetings with the PSAC opened lines of communication between committee members and between parents and staff. A community partner noted that the meetings served a valuable connection between PSAC and OUSD families; she shared that families in other districts lacked a similar resource.

Throughout the episode, there was a disruption in the usual hierarchy of expertise, as one district staff member explained:

I feel that there was a flattening of authority level. Everybody was coming into that space kind of more fluidly. There was a lot of gratitude about the fact that these meetings existed. It’s almost like that space was ready to go...when other things weren’t yet ready to go. So, I experienced it as gratitude. We’re glad that these parent leaders are actually doing this. And that carried through to affirming their role as internal partners because they have fulfilled that function.

In this moment, the district *needed* parents as the tables had turned and parents represented key stakeholders with valuable lived experience and expertise. The district staff member added, “And that’s, I think, when I experienced internal leaders as most equal with parent leaders.”

**Equity-Minded Conveners of Community.** After joining and then working with the COVID-19 Action Team, the PSAC hosted a meeting in June 2020 to share about their work with OUSD staff (e.g., school administrators, district staff, teachers, classified staff, and community partners) to plan for the 2020–21 academic year. The meeting was well attended, with over 70 participants logging in to join via Zoom. During public comment, a PSAC parent circled back to a question he had posed to the Chief Academic Officer: “The question was: Does the district now have leeway given the pandemic to move resources around from schools that may not need it as much [to] schools that do?” In asking this question, the PSAC parent proposed an innovative way of managing resources during the pandemic, steering the discussion toward considering the equitable reallocation of resources given disparate needs at school sites across

the district. In response, the district administrator began framing the discussion around uncertainty and austerity, sharing that this was the first time the district was adopting a budget without a clear sense of the state or federal funding model and explaining that they were expecting reductions to the budget. She continued her response by outlining the status quo rules of engagement, providing justification for their adherence, and effectively delimiting the extent of possible action, thus illustrating a disconnect between the district's equity-oriented objectives and a compliance-driven mindset. The Chief Academic Officer added,

I think that what [PSAC parent] was asking is, is there a possibility to move resources? And the conversation from what I was able to capture originally came from the notion that Chromebooks were being held at certain school sites and other school sites needed them. And so, they were saying why were there not cases of school sites just shifting their resources to other schools. This is a discussion that we can have. We don't traditionally move resources from one school, like technology or what we consider non-labor resources. We also have a funding formula for our school sites. So, there are choices that school sites make in how they're going to use their dollars and that's through the school site council. So, it would, I feel, get a little complicated to do that if this group would like to have that conversation we can. We would just need to look at certain policies like our funding policy, it's called 3150 to discuss and bring back. I think our board members are also open to this conversation and would like to have that conversation. But they do feel that we try to give governance to our school sites because we feel that they have the best knowledge about what investments are needed for their school sites.

Dissatisfied with the administrator's pivot toward compliance, a parent (non-PSAC member) un-muted herself to interject,

I want to comment on that because at this point, I understand that in the past different schools were given governance over their resources. But this is a different world. We're living in a different era where we need to make sure that all students are equally resourced. And if there is money at one school or resources at one school and they're not using those resources and you have students who are at other schools without resources, why not move those resources to the students at other schools and not spend excessive money getting more resources when you have resources already available? That's a waste of money. I don't understand why you would not, in this, this is not the norm. This is something that, this is the first time we've ever been, I guess faced with something like this. This is our first experience of having something like this and what I see the district not doing is coming together as a whole and doing whatever is necessary to make sure that our students have the resources that they need in place. And if we have those resources, utilize those resources. Don't go spend extra money we don't have, buying extra resources.

Echoing the call to redistribute resources, another parent (non-PSAC member) added,

I have to say if a PTA bought a Chromebook cart and put the OUSD label on it, that's OUSD's. I'm sorry. We need to spread those resources around. Yeah, I think [PSAC parent] is right. We need to look at actual resources and actual school sites and, without the kid gloves for our more affluent schools, get those resources where they're needed.

With this exchange—initiated by a PSAC challenger's question—there was the seeding of innovative action in service of equity. Further, as the committee developed ownership of the LCAP PSAC space and cultivated a community-driven engagement process, the conditions were ripe for parents and families to voice their concerns and contribute their ideas. At this meeting, the PSAC served a valuable bridging function between the district and the community. Finally, this exchange speaks to the way that PSAC's access to internal-facing planning venues built their capacity to convene the community and facilitate dialogue with district leadership at the peak of uncertainty, thus signaling a shift in beliefs around who belongs in education decision-making spaces.

### ***Field Resettlement: New Field Rules and Norms***

As I have shown, during the spring and summer of 2020, the PSAC mobilized to partner with district leadership to strengthen communication between district staff and the OUSD community. Extreme uncertainty and the shock of the pandemic appeared to have created conditions where district staff were more amenable to an “all hands-on deck” approach and open to bringing PSAC parents into districtwide decision-making. Yet gaining access to these spaces did not necessarily translate to PSAC members experiencing a sense of influence or power. As one PSAC parent reflected, “I know I felt effective while we were in the act of having meetings over the COVID-19 taskforce. [A] year later looking at the results, I have doubts that we were ever effective.” Another PSAC parent recalled not feeling valued or heard. “That was another...checkbox thing. Like, oh, look at us, we have parents in our task force.... And then it was like things actually took off, they were like, never mind, we don't need you.”

**COVID Funding and Status Quo Action.** Additionally, as millions of dollars in COVID-19 relief funding<sup>25</sup> flowed into the district without requirements mandating stakeholder engagement, district staff transitioned back to status quo action and a compliance mindset, which limited the community's ability to hold the district accountable for how it spent the funds. A PSAC parent recalled,

We were starting to hear that funds were going to be coming in, relief dollars were coming in and there was a bunch of meetings that were planned with parents and PSAC members...where we started to talk about these emergency one-year learning plan for the entire district. And this was going to take place of the LCAP. And I was asking many times like, “Specifically, what are we talking about when we have these meetings and the district staff are asking our opinion on certain things, are you asking us our opinion on these things because this is going to be tied to COVID relief funds?” And even that question was not a question that

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<sup>25</sup> In total, OUSD received over \$244 million dollars from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (March 27, 2020), the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (December 27, 2020), and the American Rescue Plan Act (March 11, 2021) (Willis & Allen, 2021).

district staff were willing to answer in my experience, from what I saw in those initial meetings.

She described ensuring that the district recorded the meeting so that community members could later verify that district staff had “informed us so that we can show up as real partners in a discussion about how we navigate this most historic moment and scary time and be included as real partners to talk about how things were going to look.”

This parent illustrated a familiar tension within the LCAP engagement field. When mandated stakeholder engagement is tied to funding, the district must comply, which PSAC parents often described as checking a box. However, when the PSAC refuses to allow the box to get checked, they ostensibly leverage power, although it is difficult for parents to associate that power with being influential and having an impact. Perhaps it is easier to recognize this power by its absence. To put it another way, when federal and state dollars poured into the district without an accountability mechanism requiring community input, the district incumbents were back in charge and directing the field.

“We got bamboozled and the district got a lot of money,” explained one PSAC parent. He recalled a noticeable shift in how the district engaged with community in allocating the funding, likening it to his experience participating on his local school site council,

So, sitting on an SSC, principals will tell you, “Well, you know, this isn’t Title I funds, so you really don’t get a say to how we spend it.” And then the district was like, “Oh, we can do a whole bunch of COVID money now, so you don’t get a say on how we get to spend it.”

He added, “I think the focus became, how do we keep the money and how do we get more money. It wasn’t, well, how do we teach our kids. That was a smokescreen.” Further, this parent offered the following advice, “Stop thinking about how to spend the money. Think about how...you support the child. From that will come how best to spend the money. I don’t think that’s how they looked at this.”

District staff acknowledged that with the COVID-19 relief funding there was potential to engage in shared decision-making. “I think, coming back to this idea that there was suddenly funding that could be allocated, I think it created a space to practice those things,” noted a district staff member. “I don’t think that always is what happened in some cases. In part, because also some of the COVID funding I think was ultimately kind of used to mitigate our financial crisis, that would’ve otherwise been more impactful on schools.” She explained that large portions of the COVID-19 relief funding were dedicated to pay for one-time bonuses written in existing contracts adding that, “Those were going to be necessary, even if COVID had never happened. And we kind of got a pass to be able to say, ‘Oh, here’s this one-time funding and this is an eligible, allowable use of it.’”

**New Field Rules and Norms.** With the influx of COVID-19 relief funding and absent a mandated stakeholder engagement process, district incumbents were able to appropriate a non-trivial amount of resources and unilaterally make decisions without engaging the community. This speaks to a period of LCAP field resettlement where district staff shifted back to the status quo rules of engagement, tightly adhering to compliance with the statute as opposed to partnering with the community to move toward transformational change. Yet there is evidence of new rules and norms that speak to the PSAC’s power and impact within the LCAP engagement

field. A parent described the PSAC as having an “informer and a reviewer role,” which speaks to the committee being a hub for families to connect with district staff. As one parent described, “I guess the biggest impact on me was how other people showed up, that we now have LCAP PSAC meetings that have 140 people, at least initially. That never happened when it was in person.” Reflecting on the committee’s work during the pandemic, a PSAC parent explained, “People needed somewhere to go get support, help, answers. And PSAC was that space, LCAP is that space, and still [is] that space.” Another PSAC parent shared that the meetings had become a “place for district administrators to engage” and described them as “a public forum that’s slightly smaller than board meetings, [where] more parents can get informed.”

Additionally, district staff credited the PSAC with piloting synchronous interpretation during Zoom meetings, which allowed more families to access the meetings; it was later implemented across various meetings, including Board of Education meetings. Finally, the crisis and shock of the pandemic underscored the PSAC’s focus on collective well-being. A district staff member explained, “There was a mutual support structure that was created mostly through PSAC.” She described how parents compiled resource documents for families to access information and learn about various support and services during the onset of the pandemic, and then using the LCAP engagement space and the PSAC platform to publicize the information. She added, “The role there was social, community, emotional, informational, common space. ...It’s like the plaza in the middle of a town.”

**Grassroots Accountability, Influence, and Impact.** Interacting with powerful stakeholders within the LCAP engagement field built the capacity of PSAC parents to push back against district staff to hold OUSD leadership accountable to their primary stakeholders—students and families. As a district staff member explained,

Because these committees are asking the questions, and if you don’t create the tool in a way that generates the answers, you’re going to brush up against them at the end. So, these lines and these requirements to generate this information and these strategies and whatever comes from the questions that they’re asking—they’re shaping the internal tools to then force people to say, “Oh, we haven’t done anything about that before.” .... Or “We’re doing something about that, but we never talk about it.” So they’re having an impact that is not so easy to see.

This excerpt demonstrates the ways in which the PSAC, with its steady engagement in the LCAP development process, shaped the field and performed a key grassroots accountability function. The district staff member continued,

I could have amazing processes where we’re learning together and we’re creating accountability and transparency systems and there’s responsiveness just to questions and we see where things are and have you transformed anything? But you have made the institution more ready to listen, and that’s an impact. People don’t see that impact. That’s the one that they cannot account for very well. Because I’m telling you, you have no idea how much people are shifting behind the scenes and how proactive they’re getting because they know you’re there. That’s the hardest to see.

This account shows that the PSAC influenced LCAP engagement by acknowledging the importance of community voices and expanding conceptions of whose ideas should gain traction and be included in decision-making spaces.

Finally, the PSAC's leadership during the pandemic, specifically in bridging the divide between families and district leaders, increased its power to influence districtwide decisions. A district staff member noted an increase in central leaders' interest in presenting at PSAC meetings, which was not the case before the pandemic. She explained, "They think it's important for PSAC to understand their programs, and that's part of protecting their programs." She continued,

I do think there's a receptiveness to PSAC that is different than it was before the pandemic, which I actually think is partly because we had so many central staff in those meetings that I do think, I shouldn't misspeak here, but I think sometimes before the pandemic, there was a sense that people were just asking for everything on the list, and there wasn't an understanding of what was happening within the district and what the other needs were. And I think sitting in that space week after week helped build trust in terms of, especially central leaders understanding, many of the folks in this room do understand these pieces. They still think these are the priorities over these other things.

Although it fell short of the transformative power that PSAC parents sought, their persistent and year-to-year engagement with district leadership prepared the committee to quickly mobilize their networks and secure an influential partnership with OUSD staff at the onset of the pandemic. During this episode of contention, PSAC parents shifted the LCAP engagement field toward a more expansive view of whose ideas have value and belong in policy discussions, suggesting that they built power to demand a more community-informed approach to districtwide decision-making.

## **Discussion**

The power to convene, as outlined in statute, does not in and of itself grant access to decision-making spaces. "What [the] LCFF did, and one of the biggest...successes whether or not it's actually experienced in [people's] lived experience, was changing the mindset of districts," explained a community partner. She continued, "People expect to be engaged now. That wasn't the case before. Those decisions were just made." However, prior research shows that gaining access, let alone having a seat, at the decision-making table is an elusive privilege (Marsh et al., 2018; Marsh & Hall, 2018). Therefore, at the core of shifting beliefs around who should participate in policy discussions is a politics of belonging.

In this chapter, I have used Fligstein and McAdams's theory of strategic action fields (2012) to examine institutional stability and change, the impact of crisis and conflict within strategic action fields, and the relative power of actors to influence change. I observed cycles of settlement, unsettlement, and resettlement of the LCAP field as exogenous shocks and destabilizing changes moved through the broader OUSD environment. During these episodes of contention, actors in the field mobilized their networks and drew on available resources to galvanize support for either changing or maintaining the status quo rules of engagement. The findings I present in this chapter demonstrate that the PSAC, in its role as a challenger, built power to assert the legitimacy of its presence in districtwide decision-making venues and its

value as a convener of OUSD families. While these findings, to be clear, fall short of signaling a shift in the balance of power between district leadership and parents as it relates to making decisions, I have shown throughout this chapter that the PSAC engaged in a process that began with building the capacity of the community to navigate the rules of engagement set by district incumbents (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). PSAC challengers claimed space and authored agendas that strengthened and affirmed the inclusion of community voices (Terriquez, 2011; Warren et al., 2015). Committee members' connection to each other and commitment to prioritizing students with the highest needs guided them and fueled their collective capacity to lift the voices and experiences of the marginalized families and youth that policymakers consistently deemed underserved and underperforming (Dyrness, 2009). Attuned to the broader field environment, they recognized opportunities to mobilize and engage in innovative action to shift beliefs about whose experience and expertise was valued and who belonged in decision-making spaces (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

These findings demonstrate that the LCAP development and engagement process, within the context of OUSD, has been a tool that has helped families build power to evaluate district priorities and hold leadership accountable. All of this serves a core function of promoting democratic participation and facilitates transparency within the public system. As I have shown, as there was no mandate for stakeholder engagement, millions of dollars in COVID-19 relief funding might have been spent without public oversight if not for the advocacy efforts of groups like the PSAC, which relentlessly demanded transparency and accountability.

I have also shown how conflict and deliberation in spaces like the PSAC and the LCAP engagement field yielded collaboration, as stakeholders negotiated meaning within these venues to arrive at consensus. Departing from literature that underscores broad-based civic mobilization and issue definition as key indicators of a reform's success (Stone, 2001), my findings speak to the ways in which conflict generates innovation within a strategic action field. PSAC parents built their capacity to deliberate and manage conflict within the LCAP engagement field, which encouraged co-learning and deepened relational trust between stakeholders. Moreover, navigating crisis and conflict pushed district leadership to include more voices and perspectives within policy discussions.

The LCFF created a relatively vague structure and process of mandated stakeholder engagement, but I argue that it is because such engagement is codified into law that the community can exert its power and push back against institutional norms when conditions are ripe. In other words, the law does not *guarantee* community power; rather, it codifies a process and creates potential for collective action to push back against the status quo. My findings show that this power was most potent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when district leadership partnered with PSAC parents to facilitate open and transparent communication, creating a critical feedback loop, and acting as a bridge to the community. Throughout this episode, the district gained much-needed credibility and the PSAC gained recognition for their expertise and commitment to partnering with the district. Though these findings are limited to the experience of stakeholders within OUSD, future research might evaluate the extent to which school districts partnered with families and communities during the pandemic and examine the organizational factors that contributed to the presence or absence of family-school-community partnerships. My research also suggests that stakeholders' ideas about what it means to engage in shared decision-making and authentically partner with district leadership diverge in non-trivial ways. Given this intersubjective disagreement, my findings suggest that future research should take up questions that explore the meanings that stakeholders ascribe to these terms to better articulate policy and



strengthen best practices for these engagement strategies. Finally, this work is important in the California context given that education policymakers have allocated billions of dollars to fund the California Community Schools Partnership, with these resources being intended in part to support school-site shared decision-making.

Over the course of this chapter, I have detailed the ways in which state-mandated stakeholder engagement altered how district leadership partnered with and learned from parents. My findings have shown how the PSAC came to understand the ebb and flow of power and the delicate balance between collaboration and conflict (Fuller, 2022). The committee recognized that the fight for transformative change required gaining access, however symbolic it may have seemed. Underpinning the PSAC's fight was its determination to partner with district leaders to serve OUSD students (Hong, 2011; Ishimaru, 2014; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). With this objective, the committee recognized that building relationships with stakeholders in the field was essential to bridging differences that might otherwise have precluded their ability to change beliefs regarding whose ideas have value in policy discussions (powell, 2021). Therefore, when the field expanded to include community expertise and lived experience, the PSAC gained access to decision-making venues and moved closer to belonging in these spaces. However, as powell states (2015), "Belonging, or being fully human, means more than having access. Belonging entails being respected at a basic level that includes the right to both co-create and make demands upon society." Although gaining access falls short of this ideal of belonging, it is a step along a path toward more transformative change. Researchers have described the LCFF as a grand experiment (Fuller & Tobben, 2014), and in this chapter I have illustrated a case of social possibility. I have shown how, within the field of OUSD's LCAP engagement, parents partnered with educators, contributed to crucial conversations, and offered critical feedback with the goal of caring for the collective well-being of families and the community.

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## Conclusion

It seems like we keep trying to fit square pegs into round holes and concluding that when they fail to fit, it is they and not the holes that must change. As nondominant<sup>26</sup> families—the square pegs in this metaphor—assimilate into the white middle-class norms of public education, their culture is whittled away so that they fit into the existing system. In this pursuit of belonging (powell, 2021), sanding away the edges of our differences causes a certain amount of harm, which begs the question: Why not change the shape of the hole and transform the system?

Throughout this dissertation project, I have been interested in understanding how families and communities are motivated to build power, both individually and collectively, to change institutions so that they better serve and address their needs and, subsequently, to better understand what impact, if any, they wield on these institutions. I see the public institution of education mediating the change process in a couple of ways, the first of which is rooted in that oft-cited platitude that education is the key to a “better life.” I do think that public schooling is, for all intents and purposes, a powerful and accessible policy lever for transforming life outcomes vis-à-vis access to opportunities that impact social mobility. I also see that public education is democracy on a miniature scale. It is a training ground where community and parent advocates cut their teeth in pursuit of greater enfranchisement. If we look specifically at California’s school finance and accountability reform, which mandates that school districts serving high-needs students get more money and have more flexibility in spending it and requires community engagement, conditions are ripe to observe and generate questions about the way families and communities build power, as well as their role in influencing institutional change.

Situated within the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), my dissertation project examined how, if at all, a process of state-mandated stakeholder engagement in district-wide decision-making built power for families to influence local education decision-making. I detailed how stakeholders’ beliefs about who should gain access to engage in local policy discussions shifted and illustrated how the implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which codified mandatory stakeholder engagement into law, broadened ideas about who belongs in education decision-making spaces. In the dissertation, I have argued that although the law did not *guarantee* community power, it codified a process and created potential for collective action to push back against the status quo. My findings show that OUSD’s Parent and Student Advisory Committee (PSAC) built power to assert that they belong in districtwide decision-making venues and that they add value as conveners of OUSD families. To be clear, these findings fall short of signaling a shift in the balance of power between district leadership and parents as it relates to making decisions.

This study speaks to the ways that power reaches every corner of a school district and how powerfully positioned actors (e.g., district leadership) structure the rules of engagement that families and community must follow to influence change (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) and that having a seat at the decision-making table remains an elusive privilege (Marsh et al., 2018; Marsh & Hall, 2018). However, these stakeholder engagement venues bring families and communities closer to weighing in on decisions, and parents continue to fight for access to these spaces (Fuller, 2022; Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009, 2015; Warren & Mapp, 2011). As parents learned how to navigate the education system (Hong, 2011; Ishimaru,

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<sup>26</sup> I use the term nondominant to foreground the impact of power in structuring the experiences of parents of marginalized backgrounds (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; Fennimore, 2017).

2014; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012), they developed social skills to act and push back against the district, which guided them toward framing their interactions using the language and logic of district administrators, thereby legitimizing and strengthening their actions (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). While the theory of strategic action fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) allowed me to foreground power when examining stakeholders' influence on institutional change, using a decolonial lens (Baquedano-López et al., 2013) in addition helped me critically consider whether and how this power expanded the spectrum of experience and expertise (i.e., lived vs. professional) that had a hand in shaping the institution. In this dissertation, I have shown how PSAC parents simultaneously borrowed the symbols and logic of district administrators to gain access to decision-making spaces as well as extended the edges of the field so that more community members may experience a sense of belonging and agency within these spaces.

Throughout the research for this dissertation, I saw how conflict and deliberation led to collaboration as stakeholders negotiated meaning within these venues to arrive at consensus. In a departure from the literature that underscores broad-based civic mobilization and issue definition as key indicators of a reform's success (Stone, 2001), my findings demonstrate that conflict generates innovative action within education decision-making spaces. PSAC parents became adept at deliberation and managing conflict, which encouraged co-learning and strengthened relational trust between stakeholders. I also saw how navigating crisis and conflict pushed district leadership to include more voices and perspectives in policy discussions. My findings show that this tendency was the most pronounced during the destabilizing shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, when district leadership partnered with PSAC parents to facilitate open and transparent communication, creating a critical feedback loop and a bridge to the community.

In this dissertation, I have presented a case of social possibility where parents partnered with educators and provided valuable feedback in service of caring for the collective well-being of OUSD families and the larger community. Though these findings are limited to the experience of stakeholders within OUSD, future research might evaluate the extent to which other school districts have partnered with their communities during episodes of crisis and examine the organizational factors that interacted with such family-school-community partnerships. This study also suggests that stakeholders' ideas surrounding shared decision-making, authentic partnerships, and meaningful engagement diverge in significant ways. Researchers seeking to contribute to this work might explore the meanings that various stakeholders attribute to these terms and examine how they influence the engagement process. Finally, in this project I have shown how laws and mandates that increase access to local education policy making spaces make it possible to draw on a community's diverse perspectives and nurture a culture of belonging where educators and families can co-construct a holistic and integrated system of support for our students and their schools.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Literature and Quadrants

Article Name	Authors	Date	Quadrant
“Seeing the Whole Elephant”: Changing Mindsets and Empowering Stakeholders to Meaningfully Manage Accountability and Improvement	Bush-Mecenas, S., Marsh, J.A., Montes de Oca, D., & Hough, H.	2018	1
The Importance of Presence: Immigrant Parents’ School Engagement Experiences	Carreón, G. P., Drake, C., & Barton, A. C.	2005	1
Parents as Action Learners and Leaders: Lessons for Administrators in Working with Families and Intermediary Organizations	Chrispeels, J.H.	2012	1
The Role of School Governance in the Creation of School Community	Croninger, R.G. & Malen, B.	2002	1
The New Role of Community Development in Educational Reform	Crowson, R.L., & Boyd, W.L.	2001	1
Great Expectations? Critical Discourse Analysis of Title 1 School-Family Compacts	Evans, M.P. & Radina, R.	2014	1
Ready or Not: How California School Districts are Reimagining Parent Engagement in the Era of Local Control Funding Formula	Families in Schools	2016	1
When Parents Behave Badly: A Critical Policy Analysis of Parent Involvement in Schools	Fernández & López, G.R.	2017	1
A Political Analysis of Community Influence over School Closure	Finnigan, K. S. & Lavner, M.	2012	1
Creating Organizational Cultures of Family and Community Engagement	Gordon, M.F.	2012	1
Parent and Community Engagement in New York City and the Sustainability Challenge for Urban Education Reform	Henig, J.R, Gold, E., Orr, M., Silander, M., & Simon, E.	2011	1

How Stakeholder Engagement Fuels Improvement Efforts in Three California School Districts	Humphrey, D., Koppich, J., Lavadenz, M., Marsh, J., O'Day, J., Plank, D., Stokes, L., & Hall, M.	2018	1
Reinforcing Deficit, Journeying Toward Equity: Cultural Brokering in Family Engagement Initiatives	Ishimaru, A. M., Torres, K. E., Salvador, J. E., Lott, J., Williams, D. M. C., & Tran, C.	2016	1
From Family Engagement to Equitable Collaboration	Ishimaru, A.M.	2019	1
Conceptualising school-community relations in disadvantaged neighborhoods: mapping the literature	Kerr, K., Dyson, A., & Gallanaugh, F.	2016	1
Family Engagement Practices in California Schools	London, R.A.	2016	1
Taking stock of stakeholder engagement in California's Local Control Funding Formula: What can we learn from the past four years to guide next steps?   Getting Down to Facts II	Marsh, J. A., Hall, M., Allbright, T., Tobben, L., Mulfinger, L., Kennedy, K., & Daramola, E. J.	2019	1
Democratic Engagement in District Reform: The Evolving Role of Parents in the Los Angeles Public School Choice Initiative	Marsh, J. A., Strunk, K. O., Bush-Mecenas, S. C., & Huguet, A.	2015	1
Challenges and Choices: A Multidistrict Analysis of Statewide Mandated Democratic Engagement	Marsh, J.A. & Hall, M.	2018	1
Parental and Community Engagement	Nakagawa, K.	2003	1
Process and Protest: CALIFORNIA: How are Districts Engaging Stakeholders in LCAP Development?	Partners for Each and Every Child.	2018	1
Achieving Scale at the District Level: A Longitudinal Multiple Case Study of a Partnership Reform.	Sanders, M.	2012	1
Home Is a Prison in the Global City: The Tragic Failure of School-Based Community Engagement Strategies	Schutz, A.	2006	1
The Voices of Parents: Rethinking the Intersection of Family and School	Smrekar, C. & Cohen-Vogel, L.	2001	1

Community Schools as Urban District Reform: Analyzing Oakland's Policy Landscape Through Oral Histories	Trujillo, T.M., Hernandez, L.E., Jarrell, T., & Kissell, R.	2014	1
Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform	Weiss, H.B., Lopez, M.E., & Rosenberg, H.	2010	1
Ecologies of Parental Engagement in Urban Education	Barton, A.C., Drake, C., Perez, J.G., St. Louis, K., & George, M.	2004	2
Empowering Stakeholders to Meaningfully Manage	Bolivar, J.M. & Chrispeels, J.H.	2011	2
Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lesson from Chicago	Bryk, A.S., Sebring, P.B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton J.Q.	2010	2
Leading and Learning with Diverse Families in Schools	Cooper, C.W., Riehl, C.J., & Hasan, A.L.	2010	2
A Cord of Three Strands: A New Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools	Hong, S.	2011	2
Rewriting the Rules of Engagement: Elaborating a Model of District-Community Collaboration	Ishimaru, A.M.	2014	2
Convivencia to Empowerment: Latino Parent Organizing at La Familia	Jasis, P. & Ordonez-Jasis, R.	2004	2
A Case Study of School-Linked, Collective Parent Engagement.	Lawson, M. A. & Alameda-Lawson, T.	2012	2
Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence	Maier, A., Daniel, J., Oakes, J., and Lam, L.	2017	2
Partners in Education - A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships	Mapp, K.L. & Kuttner, P.J.	2013	2
Community Organizing for Stronger School	Mediratta, K., Shah, S., & McAllister, S.	2009	2
City Schools and the American Dream	Noguera, N.	2003	2
Collaborating for Change: How an Urban School District and a Community-Based Organization Support and Sustain School,	Sanders, M.	2009	2

Family, and Community Partnerships.

Empowering Parents and Building Communities: The Role of School-Based Councils in Educational Governance and Accountability	Shatkin, G. & Gershberg, A.I.	2007	2
Community-Based School Finance and Accountability: A New Era for Local Control in Education Policy?	Vasquez Heilig, J., Ward, D. R., Weisman, E., & Cole, H.	2014	2
Communities and Schools: A New View of Urban Education Reform	Warren, M. R.	2005	2
Beyond the Bake Sale: A Community- Based Relational Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools	Warren, M. R., Hong, S., Rubin, C. L., & Uy, P. S.	2009	2
From Private Citizens to Public Actors: The Development of Parent Leaders through Community Organizing	Warren, M.R., Mapp, K.L., & Kuttner, P.J.	2015	2
Conceptualizing Leadership for Authentic Partnerships: A Continuum to Inspire Practice	Auerbach, S.	2012	3
From Positivism to Critical Theory: School Community Relations toward Community Equity Literacy	Green, T.L.	2017	3
Equity Issues in Parental and Community Involvement in Schools: What Teacher Educators Need to Know	Baquedano-López,P., Alexander, R. A., & Hernandez, S.J.	2013	4
Permission Not Required: The Power of Parents to Disrupt Educational Hypocrisy	Fennimore, B.S.	2017	4
Disrupting Racialized Institutional Scripts: Toward Parent–Teacher Transformative Agency for Educational Justice	Ishimaru, A.M. & Takahashi, S.	2017	4
Social Movement Organizing and Equity-Focused Educational Change: Shifting the Zone of Mediation	Renée, M., Welner, K., & Oakes, J.	2009	4

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Guide: Parent**

Thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me today! I want to start by giving you a quick background about me and my project. I am a mom and student at UC, Berkeley. I have a son who is 14—he's in the 8th grade—and I am studying education policy. In my research, I am really interested in looking at the role of families in district-wide decision-making processes. For this project, I am specifically looking at parent engagement as it relates to the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) in your school district. I'm looking forward to hearing more about your work with the LCAP committee.

Before we dive into the interview, do you have any questions for me?

Also, at any point during the interview, please feel free to stop me and ask anything. Whether you need more clarification or come up with something else, please don't hesitate to ask.

### **Background**

Please say your name.

What race/ethnicity do you identify with? How about your children?

What are their grades?

Where do they (children) go to school?

Would you describe what family engagement looked and felt like when you were in school? Elementary, middle, and high school?

How did your parents relate/interact in your school?

Has this influenced the ways that you show up in your children's schools?

### **LCAP Origin Story**

Please walk me through how you learned about LCAP and what keeps you showing up.

How did you hear about the LCAP committee?

What interested you about joining the committee?

What has your experience been like learning about the district's LCAP?

### **LCAP Engagement Terms**

What activities come to mind when I say the words:

- Shared decision-making

- Authentic partnership
- Meaningful engagement

Have you ever engaged in these activities in the LCAP development process?

Would you describe a time in LCAP or on SSC, when you engaged in shared decision making?

- Can you think of activities/decisions that yield shared decision-making?

How do you think the district partners with families and the community?

- Can you think of activities where you have felt effective in partnering with the district?
- Can you name some low-quality engagement activities?
- Can you name some high-quality engagement activities?

In what ways would you do it differently?

How about working with families?

What are some of the skills you've gained from working with the PSAC?

How about the connections with other families?

Has it made you more committed to the district?

Has it encouraged a sense of belonging and community?

## **COVID**

Please describe your experience with distance learning (highs, lows).

In what ways did COVID change, if at all, how you showed up in the LCAP PSAC space?

Did it make you want to volunteer more?

Was it a space to connect with other parents and process the uncertainty of the moment?

Did your participation yield a sense of agency during the uncertainty?

When we think about the terms—shared decision-making, meaningful engagement, authentic partnership—and the activities that you described earlier, how do you think COVID and working with the district shifted these processes of shared decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and partnering with families and the community?

How about the *purpose* of shared decision making or the LCAP?

In what ways—activities, meetings, relationships—have you influenced the district during the COVID-19 years? How about the PSAC?

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Guide: District Staff**

Thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me today! I want to start by giving you a quick background about me and my project. I am a mom and student at UC, Berkeley. I have a son who is 14—he's in the 8th grade—and I am studying education policy. In my research, I am really interested in looking at the role of families in district-wide decision-making processes. For this project, I am specifically looking at parent engagement as it relates to the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) in your school district. I'm looking forward to hearing more about your work with the LCAP committee.

Before we dive into the interview, do you have any questions for me?

Also, at any point during the interview, please feel free to stop me and ask anything. Whether you need more clarification or come up with something else, please don't hesitate to ask.

#### **Background:**

Please say your name.

What race/ethnicity do you identify with?

How many years did you/have you participate(d) in the OUSD LCAP PSAC?

Please describe your position/role with OUSD.

How long have you been/were you in the position?

#### **LCAP Involvement**

How did you first become involved with the LCAP process?

When did you first become involved with the LCAP PSAC?

Describe how you experienced the initial PSAC meetings.

What activities do/did you support in the LCAP development process?

Describe a memorable moment in your LCAP PSAC experience.

Who writes the PSAC agenda?

Who "owns" the PSAC space?

Who, in your opinion, has decision-making power in OUSD?



Describe a time when PSAC influenced district-wide decision-making?

What was the context in which these decisions were made?

### **LCAP Engagement Terms**

What activities come to mind when I say the words:

- Shared decision-making
- Authentic partnership
- Meaningful engagement

Have you ever engaged in these activities in the OUSD LCAP development process?

Would you describe a time in the LCAP development process when the PSAC engaged in shared decision making?

Can you think of activities/decisions that yield shared decision-making?

How do you think the district partners with families and the community?

Can you think of activities where the PSAC seemed effective in partnering with the district?

Can you name some low-quality engagement activities?

Can you name some high-quality engagement activities?

### **Crisis and Conflict**

When you think of your time working with the OUSD LCAP PSAC, can you identify moments that felt collaborative? Please describe.

Please rank the impact of the collaborative moments.

Did the way you show up in the PSAC space shift as you experienced collaborative moments?

If so, in what ways did it shift your work?

When you think of your time working with the OUSD LCAP PSAC, can you identify moments that might be characterized by conflict? Please describe.

Please rank the magnitude and/or severity of crises.

Did the way you show up in the PSAC space shift as you experienced moments of crisis and conflict?

If so, in what ways did it shift your work?

How did moments of collaboration influence PSAC work?

How did moments of conflict and crisis influence PSAC work?

## **COVID**

In what ways did COVID change, if at all, how you showed up in the LCAP PSAC space?

When we think about the terms—shared decision-making, meaningful engagement, authentic partnership—and the activities that you described earlier, how do you think COVID shifted these processes of shared decision making, stakeholder engagement, partnering with families and the community?

How about the *purpose* and/or the *importance* of shared decision making or the LCAP?

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Guide: Community Partner**

Thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me today! I want to start by giving you a quick background about me and my project. I am a mom and student at UC, Berkeley. I have a son who is 14—he's in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade—and I am studying education policy. In my research, I am really interested in looking at the role of families in district-wide decision-making processes. For this project, I am specifically looking at parent engagement as it relates to the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). I'm looking forward to hearing more about your work with the LCAP committee.

Before we dive into the interview, do you have any questions for me?

Also, at any point during the interview, please feel free to stop me and ask anything. Whether you need more clarification or come up with something else, please don't hesitate to ask.

### **Background**

Please say your name.

What race/ethnicity do you identify with?

How many years did you/have you participate(d) in the OUSD LCAP PSAC?

What organization do/did you work with?

Please describe your position/role with the organization.

How long were you in the position?

### **LCAP Involvement**

How did you first become involved with the LCAP process?

When did you first become involved with the LCAP PSAC?

Describe how you experienced the initial PSAC meetings.

What activities do/did you support in the LCAP development process?

Describe a memorable moment in your LCAP PSAC experience.

Who writes the PSAC agenda?

Who "owns" the PSAC space?

Who, in your opinion, has decision-making power in OUSD?

Describe a time when PSAC influenced district-wide decision-making?

What was the context in which these decisions were made?

### **LCAP Engagement Terms**

What activities come to mind when I say the words:

- Shared decision-making
- Authentic partnership
- Meaningful engagement

Have you ever engaged in these activities in the OUSD LCAP development process?

Would you describe a time in the LCAP development process when the PSAC engaged in shared decision making?

Can you think of activities/decisions that yield shared decision-making?

How do you think the district partners with families and the community?

Can you think of activities where the PSAC seemed effective in partnering with the district?

Can you name some low-quality engagement activities?

Can you name some high-quality engagement activities?

### **Crisis and Conflict**

When you think of your time working with the OUSD LCAP PSAC, can you identify moments that felt collaborative? Please describe.

Please rank the impact of the collaborative moments.

Did the way you show up in the PSAC space shift as you experienced collaborative moments? In what ways did it shift your work?

When you think of your time working with the OUSD LCAP PSAC, can you identify moments that might be characterized by conflict? Please describe.

Please rank the magnitude and/or severity of crises.

Did the way you show up in the PSAC space shift as you experienced moments of crisis and conflict? In what ways did it shift your work?

How did moments of collaboration influence PSAC work?

How did moments of conflict and crisis influence PSAC work?

## **COVID**

In what ways did COVID change, if at all, how you showed up in the LCAP PSAC space?

When we think about the terms—shared decision-making, meaningful engagement, authentic partnership—and the activities that you described earlier, how do you think COVID shifted these processes of shared decision making, stakeholder engagement, partnering with families and the community?

How about the *purpose* and/or the *importance* of shared decision making or the LCAP?

## Appendix E

### Chapter 2 Code System

District Buffering	Race
Motivation	Educator role
Past parent engagement	OUSD power and decisions making
Navigating tension and conflict	Diagnoses of OUSD Issues
LCAP Origin Story	Law
Impact	Trust
Empowerment	Oakland
Shared Decision-Making	Dismissive leadership
Authentic Partnership	Ideas
Meaningful Engagement	Culture Keeper Influence
PSAC value for the individual	Solutions
Navigating uncertainty	Connection
Individual impact on district during COVID years	Collective Well-Being
PSAC purpose and importance during COVID years	Consensus
Experience with distance learning	Ownership and Authorship
Change during COVID years	White Middle-Class Norm of Parent Engagement
PSAC Purpose in General	LCAP confusion
Parent Call Out	LCAP History
Parental role	

**District Buffering:** Participant describes district administrators and educators buffering against community when they are not mandated to engage on various topics (e.g., COVID relief funding).

**Motivation:** Motivation to show up to the LCAP PSAC space and to continue working in the LCAP PSAC space

**Past parent engagement:** Participant describes what family engagement looked like when they were in school.

**Navigating tension and conflict:** Participant describes navigating tension and conflict in OUSD, PSAC space, LCAP process.

**LCAP Origin Story:** Participant describes how they became involved in the PSAC space.

**Impact:** Participant describes making an impact. It can be framed as a negative or positive. Includes experiencing “wins.”

**Empowerment:** Social skill, capacity building, knowledge building

**Shared Decision-Making:** Participant describes what it means to engage in shared decision-making. Includes listing activities and examples of shared decision-making.

**Authentic Partnership:** Participant describes what it means to engage in authentic partnership. Includes listing activities and examples that support authentic partnership(s).

**Meaningful Engagement:** Participant describes what it means to meaningfully engage. Includes listing activities and examples that support meaningful engagement.

**PSAC value for the individual:** Instrumental and an “existential function of the social.”

**Navigating uncertainty:** Participant describes how they navigated uncertainty, mostly as it relates to disruptions due to COVID-19.

**Individual impact on district during COVID years:** Participant describes their perspective on the impact they’ve potentially had on OUSD, via the LCAP process.

**PSAC purpose and importance during COVID years:** Identifying shifts to the purpose and importance of the committee.

**Experience with distance learning:** Participant describes their experience with their child’s /children’s distance learning during Spring 2020 and school year 2020-21.

**Change during COVID years:** Personal shift (individual level) and procedural shifts (organizational level).

**PSAC Purpose in General:** Participant describes what they believe is the purpose/objective of the LCAP process.

**Parent Call Out:** When parents call out administrators who aren’t following the “rules” or being authentic in their partnership.

**Parental role:** Participant expressing their role in raising their children (as compared to the role that educators play).

**Race:** Participant refers to race in a response

**Educator role:** Participant’s opinion about an educator’s role (as compared to parent’s role)

**OUSD power and decision-making:** Participant identifies who or what group has power to make decisions in the district.

**Diagnoses of OUSD Issues:** Participant describes what they believe to be the root of the problem.

**Law:** Participant cites legal mandate as the rationale for pushing/motivating the district to take a certain action.

**Trust:** Participant refers to trust (in/with schools and district) in both positive and/or negative ways.

**Oakland:** Participant describes an aspect of Oakland, perhaps unique to the community.

**Dismissive leadership:** Participant describes an action where district leadership was dismissive.

**Ideas:** Ideas to increase meaningful engagement

**Culture Keeper Influence:** Participant describes how culture keepers influenced the LCAP PSAC process. Culture keepers are seen as influential PSAC members who had multiple years of experience and were tapped to help build the capacity of newer members.

**Solutions:** Participant offers solutions for improving the PSAC, the LCAP process, or OUSD.

**Connection:** Participant describes feeling/being connected to other PSAC committee members. Also describes a connection to larger Oakland/Oakland Unified community.

**Collective Well-Being:** Participant describes working in service of the collective well-being of all Oakland Unified students.

**Consensus:** Participant describes how PSAC members engaged in a process of consensus.

**Ownership and Authorship:** Participant describes who “owns” the LCAP PSAC space and who “authors” the agenda. This also includes the participant describing an example of when parents/communities/families gained ownership of the PSAC space and authored the agenda.

**White Middle-Class Norm of Parent Engagement:** Examples of white middle-class parent engagement.

**LCAP confusion:** Participant describes confusion surrounding the LCAP process and their participation in the PSAC.

**LCAP History:** When an “older/more experienced” member shares some history that predates researcher’s time on the committee.



## Appendix F

### Chapter 3 Code System

<b>Belonging and Membership</b>	<b>SAF</b>
Bridging	PSAC Power/Impact
Culture Keeper	New field rules + cultural norms
Trust	Status Quo Action
Care	Innovative Action
Social Cohesion	Social Appropriation
Collective Well-being North Star	Attribution of Threat/Opportunity
Community Organizing Logics	Exogenous Shock/Crisis
Relationship Building	
Consensus	

#### **Belonging and Membership**

**Bridging:** Action(s) where an individual (or group) creates social ties across differences. Actions include empathetic listening and engagement that expand who belongs with the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

**Culture Keeper:** Description(s) and/or action(s) of an individual that demonstrate facilitating the continuity of norms, beliefs, and values within the LCAP Parent and Student Advisory Committee.

**Trust:** Description(s) and/or action(s) signaling and demonstrating trust between actors within the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

**Care:** Description(s) and/or action(s) signaling and demonstrating care between actors within the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

**Social Cohesion:** Description(s) and/or action(s) demonstrating social cohesion (e.g., camaraderie) between and within collectives of field actors (e.g., PSAC members, district staff, and professionals from community-based organizations).

**Collective Well-being North Star:** Description(s) and/or action(s) demonstrating a commitment to serving the collective well-being of Oakland Unified School District students.

**Community Organizing Logics:** Description(s) and/or action(s) drawing from community organizing activities. For example, one-to-one meetings, collective action in service of garnering “wins,” building relational trust, house meetings, and building capacity of participants to lead actions and organizing efforts.

**Relationship Building:** Description(s) and/or action(s) signaling and demonstrating relationship building between actors within the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

**Consensus:** Description(s) and/or action(s) demonstrating a commitment to decision-making by consensus between actors within the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

### **SAF**

**PSAC Power/Impact:** Description(s) and/or action(s) demonstrating the power and impact of the Parent and Student Advisory Committee (PSAC) to influence the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

**New field rules + cultural norms:** Description(s) and/or action(s) demonstrating new field rules and cultural norms. Provides evidence suggesting that a shift occurred within the field, thus leading to new rules of engagement as well as field settlement within the LCAP strategic action field.

**Status Quo Action:** Description(s) and/or action(s) demonstrating the capacity of actors within the field to maintain the status quo rules of engagement within a field. Provides evidence suggesting that there are minimal shifts and changes to the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

**Innovative Action:** Description(s) and/or action(s) demonstrating the capacity of actors within the field to use novel and innovative tools, methods, and ideas to influence and shift the field. Provides evidence suggesting potential shifts and change within the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

**Social Appropriation:** Description(s) and/or action(s) demonstrating an actor/collective of actors commanding resources to mobilize and sustain action. Evidence suggesting the onset of an episode of contention and emergent mobilization within the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

**Attribution of Threat/Opportunity:** Description(s) and/or action(s) demonstrating an opening for making change within a field. Provides evidence suggesting the potential for shifting and change within the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

**Exogenous Shock/Crisis:** Description of a disruptive external event or condition(s) that influences field stability. Provides evidence suggesting that the exogenous shock may contribute to destabilizing change and unsettlement within the LCAP engagement strategic action field.

## Appendix G

### **LCAP PSAC Principles for the LCAP and Budget Process**

**1. Our Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) is the plan that integrates all plans in our district.** It helps us to show transparently how OUSD is using all available resources to meet our goals for students<sup>1</sup> in support of the state priorities<sup>2</sup>. As an integrating plan, the LCAP must:

a. Include all actions, services, and investments that support:

- our Annual Measurable Outcomes<sup>3</sup> for all students,
- identified areas of need for specific student groups, and
- targeted outcomes for those specific student groups.

b. Include as much of the budget as possible to provide context for strategic actions and to help the community understand the base program that is provided to all students.

c. As a first step, OUSD must include in the LCAP all actions and services funded with federal and state categorical dollars<sup>4</sup>, not just Supplemental and Concentration<sup>5</sup> dollars. These funds are all similar in that they address opportunity gaps and support the specific needs of high need students.

**2. OUSD must embrace the mandated advisory function of LCAP PSAC.**

To that aim:

a. Any proposals for budget changes that would significantly reduce, increase, or change current LCAP actions and investments in the subsequent school year, must be directly and officially communicated to the LCAP PSAC. The changes must be communicated in time for review at the December LCAP PSAC meeting, or in time for the committee to hold a Special January meeting.

b. The School Board directors must review and discuss the committee's recommendations at a public School Board meeting before making any decisions about the budget that would have an impact on the LCAP. Not doing so would be the same as adopting an LCAP without the feedback of the committee.

c. We must sustain the staffing and structures that directly support the LCAP advisory committees and the overall LCAP and budget engagement process. Any changes to the staffing and structures must be the result of a needs assessment process led and undertaken by said committees in collaboration with the stakeholders they represent. One element of that process must be to understand the outcomes already achieved by said committees and how the current engagement process works.

**3. The LCAP is THE main equity plan for our district.** To ensure that the LCAP performs that function, we must make sure that, as part of the plan, we do the following:

- a. Demonstrate with data that there is equitable access to all programs, actions, and services by all student groups for which OUSD is receiving differentiated assistance<sup>6</sup> and all overlapping (intersectional<sup>7</sup>) student groups.
- b. Support schools and programs that have already demonstrated that they improve access or specific outcomes for all of the groups under differentiated assistance. Those schools and programs track the participation rates for all of the student groups, establish access/participation goals, and establish specific indicators<sup>8</sup> to demonstrate that each of the student groups is benefitting.

One key way of addressing the needs of all the identified groups is to focus on students that have overlapping experiences (e.g. African Americans with IEPs, Unhoused English Language Learners, etc.)

- c. Engage directly with the sub-committees<sup>8</sup>, as well as with the LCAP PSAC. We must all proactively understand the needs and priorities that sub-committees and their communities have established, so that we can better incorporate them into the LCAP and budget.
- d. We must continue to support fall and winter multi-stakeholder<sup>9</sup> dialogues for feedback on our annual budget priorities and the overall budget. Those dialogues must continue to be planned in collaboration by committee members, staff leaders, and School Board directors.

**4. We must focus primarily on the following key outcomes for the groups under differentiated assistance and overlapping student groups:**

- a. increased access to needed/effective programs and services
- b. improvement in reading development (reading growth at all grade levels)
- c. reduction in suspensions, especially highly disproportionate suspension

These core indicators cut across grade levels and experiences. They are also foundational for ensuring positive life outcomes for students and interrupting key inequities.

- d. For the same reasons, we must also focus on actions and investments that increase the reclassification<sup>10</sup> rate of English Language Learners (ELLs) with a special emphasis on ELLs who are also part of other identified student groups (e.g. Students with Dis/abilities, Pacific Islanders, Unhoused, etc.)

**5. We must better express through our LCAP how central and school site actions, and related investments complement each other.** We must avoid either/or arguments about the merits of school site and central planning and budgeting. For this reason, we must do the following:

- a. Show access and outcomes for specific student groups across our district through analyzing ranked school site data<sup>11</sup>. In doing so, we must understand the specific student populations and experiences at the schools that are showing increased outcomes and the schools that are not. District-wide data is necessary but not sufficient.
- b. Identify and describe school site actions and investments under each goal and action area. Schools are main LCAP implementers through the choices they make in their School Plans for Student Achievement<sup>12</sup> (SPSAs). Only by understanding what schools are doing and what they are choosing to fund can we learn what is effective and analyze patterns across schools.
- c. Provide strong, centralized support for small, high-need student groups who experience a large degree of mobility and instability: foster students, unhoused students, newcomer students. School-site planning and budgeting has not and cannot adequately support the needs of these students on its own without district-school collaboration.
- d. Clarify throughout the LCAP how we specific schools for the implementation of particular central strategies and for receiving related resources.

6. Special Education has been perceived for too long as a “catch-all” for all the needs of students with dis/abilities. **We affirm that students with dis/abilities are inherently diverse, have many overlapping experiences and needs that must be addressed by everyone, and have the right to participate as full members in all aspects of school and district life.**

For this reason:

1. We must understand Special Education as an additional service that supports the disability-related needs of students. This means that Students with IEPs must also have access to all programs and services funded by Base, S&C, Federal, Local, and other dollars. Special Education complements or augments those services; it does not replace them.

2. We must all undertake education about specific dis/ability experiences, dis/ability as a whole, dis/ability access and inclusion, and about the purpose and function of Special Education. Dis/ability cuts across all experiences and cannot happen without it. Working for dis/ability equity must include carefully understanding, developing, implementing, and integrating the Local Plan for Special Education as part of our school and district planning.

3. Understand the true costs of providing full dis/ability supports for students and avoid stigmatizing the dis/ability-related needs and experiences of students. To do so, we must embrace these supports as a core function of our district, not as something to which our district “contributes.”

Everyone has needs that must be met. Continually calling out this type of need from among other types of student need can encourage resentment for this valuable and often vulnerable segment of our student population.