

Community Coalition ♦ Los Angeles

SECURING A COLLEGE PREP CURRICULUM FOR ALL STUDENTS

I am pretty convinced that no amount of intellectual framing and data and research that we could have provided would have moved the district. We needed the 800-plus Latino and African American parents to mandate rigor. It was organizing unlike anywhere else I've seen in the nation.

— Russlyn Ali, executive director, The Education Trust–West

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second-largest school district in the nation, is plagued not only by insufficient educational resources, but also by vast disparities in how those resources are allocated. Community Coalition, an organizing group based in South Los Angeles – the site of some of the most overcrowded and lowest-performing schools in the city – has confronted these realities with organized political action.

In 2000, after several years of focusing on facilities issues, Community Coalition initiated a campaign to increase student access to college preparatory coursework. The campaign responded to the concerns of area high school students that their schools did not provide the challenging coursework necessary for college. Community Coalition's youth leaders collected data on course offerings, using the master schedules at their high schools, and discovered that many South Los Angeles schools offered far more classes preparing students for low-wage jobs than for college. One student leader pointed out that his high school offered nine cosmetology classes but only four chemistry classes. The students' claims were supported by district data – large numbers of South Los Angeles students routinely dropped out of high school, and those who graduated lacked the required coursework to attain access to the state university system.

In 2004, after several years of “small wins” at local high schools, Community Coalition co-convened a broad-based citywide coalition – Communities for Educational Equity (CEE) – to tackle the problem of college access districtwide. Less than a year later,

CEE's organizing led the LAUSD school board to pass a resolution mandating college preparatory courses as the default curriculum for all students in the district. Then—school board president José Huizar declared, “This is one of the most significant reforms this district is embarking on in the last twenty years. The payoffs will be huge; the impacts will be huge.” CEE continues to monitor implementation of the policy in Los Angeles.

To examine the impact of Community Coalition's organizing, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform conducted a six-year research study based on an extensive document analysis and interviews with youth, teachers, district administrators, and the organizers themselves. The study found that Community Coalition's organizing contributed to greater educational opportunities by increasing equity in resource allocation and in access to rigorous coursework; raising the district's accountability to the community; and developing new political leaders.

Community organizing enhanced equity in the district

Community Coalition's organizing led to a more equitable redistribution of school construction funds. Because of CEE's campaign, access to college preparatory coursework was expanded to all high school students in Los Angeles. Furthermore, the mandated curricular changes prompted the district to retool its policies and practices on a broader scale.

Community organizing increased district accountability to the community

District officials gave credit to Community Coalition and CEE for effectively mobilizing a wide and credible range of stakeholders, including youth leaders, in support of the college preparatory curriculum policy and for creating the pressure necessary to hold the district accountable for implementation. Community organizations continue to play a formal role in ensuring the quality implementation of the policy.

Community organizing developed new political leadership in Los Angeles

Karen Bass, founder of Community Coalition, was elected as Speaker of the California State Assembly – the first African American woman to achieve that position. Mónica García, who served on the CEE steering committee, was elected to the Los Angeles Board of Education, later becoming president. Bass and García epitomize a larger vision of organizing efforts in Los Angeles – to create unity among African American and Latino communities, build power both inside and outside the system, bring new voices to the political discourse in Los Angeles, and fundamentally change the nature of representation in the city’s political landscape.

Though it is too early to measure the impact of Community Coalition’s work on student educational outcomes, the effects of their organizing on school district policy and the development of community power are clear. Community Coalition’s efforts transformed the curriculum of a large urban school district and built new forms of parent, youth, and community power in one of the most economically and socially marginalized communities in the nation.

Community Coalition’s work offers important lessons for intergenerational organizing. Organizing campaigns were rooted in the daily experiences of young people and leveraged the organization’s political relationships and considerable strategic and data analytic capacities in ways that amplified young people’s interests and demands. Community Coalition’s campaign for rigorous college preparatory high school coursework demonstrates how young people’s leadership brings essential and vital urgency to the task of improving urban public schools.