

# Parent Leadership Academy: A Parent-Led, District-Hosted Partnership for Parent Engagement

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY September 2008

### INTRODUCTION

The Parent Leadership Academy (PLA) was a pilot effort of the School District of Philadelphia (the District) and the William Penn Foundation which were interested in finding ways to empower and promote the development of parents as leaders in their children's education and schools. PLA operated between 2005 and 2008 during the tenure of Paul Vallas as CEO, a time of rapid reform and turbulence in the District which was acclimating to the 2001 state takeover, resulting from continued poor performance and budget deficits. There were also accountability pressures resulting from the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001. PLA was positioned as a District initiative but was not seen as central to any of the numerous other reforms of the Vallas administration and was ultimately forced to compete for scarce resources and attention.

PLA combined elements of various parent engagement strategies used around the country including leadership training models such as those used by the Pritchard Committee in Kentucky, community organizing models and school-based parent centers. PLA emphasized training as its primary strategy for leadership development and, drawing on community organizing models, its structure was intended to be sensitive to the power dynamics between parents and the District giving parents a strong governing voice.

Tensions were, however, inherent in the structure of PLA. It was led by a Parent Advisory Board (PAB) that was expected to be somewhat autonomous and parent-driven yet had to work within the often challenging District bureaucracy to which it was legally and fiscally accountable. Ultimately, the parent-driven board was not a sufficient lever for changing the District's relationship with parents. The complicated relationships and distrust between existing parent groups and the District further complicated the ability of the PAB to work effectively with other parent groups.

PLA was able to provide valuable programs to over 1,000 parents but challenges limited PLA's ability to fully implement its model.

Research for Action (RFA) has been the evaluator of the PLA initiative since its inception and has reported on the initiative's development while also providing formative feedback. The final report on which this executive summary is based identifies lessons from the PLA initiative that hopefully will inform future parent involvement efforts. This executive summary is organized into four sections; three that outline challenges and obstacles that limited the effectiveness of PLA and a final section with summary lessons and recommendations.

### THE DISTRICT AS HOST TO A PARENT-DRIVEN INITIATIVE

PLA was designed as a joint initiative of parents and the District. The PAB was the primary governing vehicle and was comprised of 14 members: 8 parents (2 per pilot region and 2 at-large), 2 representatives of community agencies and 4 District staff from various departments. The District Office of Family, Community and Faith Partnerships oversaw the initiative.

Parent board members and District staff experienced a sense of frustration and futility that comes from trying to make change without more powerful means. The concept of a parent-driven advisory board did not prove to be a powerful enough lever to ensure PLA's importance in the District during turbulent times. Nor was it powerful enough to change the bureaucratic culture. In addition, the governance model itself – an independent board within another organization – may have been problematic in any type of organization because it could not be legally and fiscally accountable for the initiative.

### **Lesson I: Locating an initiative within a District does not guarantee it will get the support and attention that it needs to be successful.**

The decision to locate PLA within the District and to structure PLA's governance with a parent-driven advisory board within the District created one of the central tensions within the initiative. Ultimately, PLA found that a parent-driven governing board was not a powerful enough lever to make the District prioritize parent involvement, bend inflexible policies and procedures, or accommodate parents' visions for the initiative.

PLA was piloted at a time when numerous reforms were being implemented in the District. While CEO Vallas and others pledged support to the PLA effort, in reality, because PLA was not positioned as integral to any of the other reforms, it was seen as an add-on and was essentially forced to compete for attention and resources. PLA was never able to get the consistent support from District offices that it needed. In the context of an underfunded school system, a parent engagement program such as PLA, even one with significant private funding, was seen by many as a luxury that was not central to accomplishing the District's mission.

*In robust times you can think more laterally. In tough times we think how we can bear down...nobody has the stomach for extravagances. And so educating parents, while people think it's a good thing – as far as the mission of the District, it's an extravagance. The District is struggling to produce the basics, the requirement, the legal mandates, etc.*

### **Lesson II: The District bureaucracy was not flexible enough to host a parent-driven governing board.**

The governance model – a semi-autonomous parent-driven board overseeing the development and implementation of a District initiative – was one of the primary levers for change. The advisory board was intended to play the role of a governing board of a non-profit organization which included supervising staff. In actuality, the PAB could not take on this role because the District rather than the board was legally and fiscally accountable for PLA.

Parents on the PAB were promised a voice in the implementation of the initiative and were determined to see this promise realized. As the PAB evolved, it pushed for autonomy in ways that required the District to alter policies or make exceptions to its procedures. For example, they requested hiring a program manager at a higher salary grade than the District allowed. They asked to screen resumes received for their staff positions, wanted more transparency in budget procedures, and requested that child care be provided for parents who participated in their workshops—an original component of the PLA grant.

The PAB spent much of their time battling the standardized, unresponsive and, at times, resistant District culture to be able to determine what PLA would look like, how it would be staffed, as well as many other issues. Locating PLA within the District did not result in providing parents greater support from District offices as was intended. Furthermore, it was difficult for parents to have the sense of respect and collaboration they had hoped for. As one District staff who was also a parent explained, “PLA was a learning process for parents and within this bureaucracy there was no room for parents to make mistakes and learn.”

### **Lesson III: A parent-driven governance board was not a powerful enough lever to change the relationship between the District and parents.**

PLA was set up to depend upon the District and was constrained by limitations on the amount of advocacy parents would be able to do without jeopardizing their financial support. They were in a bind of wanting to hold the District accountable for its promise to allow PLA to be parent-driven while also needing the District's support to continue the program.

Some District staff came to believe that PLA would have been more successful if the parents had chosen to work with “the 10,000 pound gorilla” instead of seeking independence from it. The PAB as a lever for changing the District culture was “an exercise in futurity” in such a large system. The PAB did not have the ability to act independently or to alter the “gorilla.”

### **DEVELOPING PARENT LEADERSHIP**

The idea of a parent-driven model emerged from an underlying belief that parents know best what other parents need and want, and that parents are in the best position to guide recruitment efforts in their own neighborhoods. However, as the concept of a parent-driven initiative was put into practice, several flawed assumptions about empowering parents became evident.

Challenges to developing parent leadership in PLA emerged from the lack of a thoughtful start-up process: a process that took into account historic divisions between parent groups as well as the history of negative experiences parents had had with the District. In addition, training and team-building activities prior to the convening of the board could have alleviated some of the confusion surrounding the roles and procedures of the board and enabled the board to broaden and deepen the parent leadership of the initiative.

### **Lesson IV: Developing parent leadership requires recognizing historic divisions and intentionally moving beyond them.**

Many parent board members came to the PAB table with a distrust of the District and a desire to change the way the District related to parents. Both the history and inconsistent parent-friendly culture within the District set the stage for parents to have difficulty accepting and trusting the bureaucracy.

PLA also had to negotiate relationships with other parent groups in the District, several of which had existed for years and were well-established. This was particularly true for the Philadelphia Home and School Council (PHSC). From the very beginning, there was a tension between PLA and the PHSC. While the PHSC had a role in the PLA planning process, it did not have an official seat on the governing board. The lack of an official relationship between the primary parent organization in the District and PLA set up a competitive and conflicted relationship between the two organizations.

The divisions between parent groups also influenced the development of the PAB. The group of parents that formed the PAB represented different sections of the city and diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. They already belonged to various parent organizations that had taken distinct positions vis-à-vis the District. While all the PAB members shared a similar passion for educational reform and equity, their differences made it difficult for them to recognize these common goals.

The PAB parents did not have the opportunity to develop trust and recognize their common goals with other parents at the outset of the initiative and, as a result, were often divided. Mistrust and tension undermined not only the ability of parents to work together but also their ability to present a unified front to the District.

More intentional start-up processes were needed that took into account the historic context of relationships between parents and the District and various parent groups. This would have allowed an opportunity for individuals to get to know each other and recognize their common commitments to the success of the initiative.

### **Lesson V: An intentional and thoughtful start-up process is needed to develop effective parent leadership.**

The need for thoughtful start-up processes, such as board training or team building activities, were intensified by the difficult context, ambiguous governance structure, and problems of trust previously described. The lack of such training exacerbated all of the challenges that were confronted during PLA. From early on, board members were aware that proper board training would be helpful but, due to more seemingly pressing priorities, it fell off the agenda.

Without opportunities to clarify the role of the board and build trust before the board began to meet, the PAB meetings became the site of conflict and tension and an ongoing source of frustration. Training also might have minimized some of the attrition of board members that occurred (seven parents left the board over the course of the initiative). In addition, as the board's role became more hands-on, including staff supervision and other program management tasks, some began to question whether the board as a group had all the skill sets and qualities that were needed to play this role.

PLA training could have been helpful in developing more effective parent leaders among board and staff and on-going training for board members could have helped enhance all PAB members' skills in areas needed to facilitate the development of more effective parent leadership.

### **Lesson VI: Building breadth and depth of parent leadership are of key importance to developing an effective PLA initiative.**

All the conflict and tension that consumed the PAB and its relations with the District made it difficult for the board to broaden the parent leadership of the initiative. The PAB had a history of member turnover although four core parent members were constant members since the board's inception. However some staff and members felt that the PAB had failed to broaden parent leadership beyond the founding four. They felt that the PAB needed to reflect the diversity of the parent leaders across the city, that founding members needed to transition leadership to a new cadre of parent leaders and the staff needed to have a leadership role and a formal mechanism to share ideas.

## **THE SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES OF REACHING PARENTS**

PLA experienced notable accomplishments in the area of participation and recruitment. However, PLA also encountered several obstacles that hindered efforts to reach as many parents as they had hoped. Internal infrastructure issues severely impacted PLA's ability to attract and retain a large number of participants. Furthermore, the challenges PLA encountered at two school-based sites suggest that it is much more difficult to attract parents to non-neighborhood school-based sites than to neighborhood school-based sites.

### **Lesson VII: Educational and recreational programs are particularly effective in supporting adult goals and needs.**

PLA offered an array of courses and program for parents and served over 1,000 unduplicated participants through more than 400 activities and workshops. The most successful were adult education and recreation courses. Well-attended adult education classes included GED programs, an Associates Degree program called I-Lead, ESL courses and computer classes. Well-attended recreation classes included line dancing, softball, and Family Fun Day. Parents appreciated the fact that PLA gave them opportunities to "dream again" and

provided needed skills and confidence that could open new doors. Although at first glance this may seem to be peripheral to helping parents be better advocates for their children, building relationships and networks among parents is a critical strategy for increasing parental engagement.

Increases in educational attainment for younger and less educated mothers are related to gains in children's achievement, particularly reading skills. It is not surprising, then, that benefits experienced by parents in PLA adult education programs were beginning to shift some parents' relationships with their children's education. A few parents talked about being able to provide more homework help, being academic role models for their children, and feeling more confident in interacting with their children's school.

### **Lesson VIII: It is important to connect educational and recreational programs to ones more focused on leadership and advocacy.**

Unlike other parent leadership initiatives, PLA did not focus exclusively on parental advocacy workshops but endeavored to meet other human capital needs of parents. While PLA's success in reaching parents in educational and recreational programs was evident, a few board members and others associated with PLA raised concerns that PLA was drifting too far away from the original mission of leadership development. PLA had difficulty attracting and retaining a large parent base to their leadership and advocacy training workshops.

### **Lesson IX: Programming must be consistent in order to attract and retain participants.**

Challenges of recruiting and retaining a core group of participants partially had to do with the lengthy process of contract approval for PLA program vendors. Initially, approval was through the District which was lengthy and slow. Eventually, approval was through another outside organization, the Philadelphia Health Management Cooperation (PHMC), but delays still occurred as a result of PAB's slow decision-making processes and PLA staff's delays in submitting all supporting paperwork.

The slow approval process frequently led to significant delays and program inconsistency. Staff noted that this had a negative impact on participation and hindered their ability to do their job effectively.

### **Lesson X: Neighborhood school-based sites are more effective in drawing parents than non-neighborhood school-based sites.**

Participation by parents was the highest at the site with a strong connection with the surrounding community and a very supportive principal and school staff. The activities offered by PLA were fully embraced as an integral part of the school. The two other sites were not neighborhood schools. Rather one was a special admission high school and the other a middle school which busses a majority of its students from across the city. The principals of the two non-neighborhood-based schools were also supportive but these PLA activities were more separate from the rest of the school.

This suggests that there may be some limitations in the original conception of PLA. The initial model proposed regional training centers to which parents would come for programs. Experience from PLA suggests families are more likely to go to a site with which they are familiar and that is nearby.

The lack of child care was identified as a barrier to attendance. None of the sites had full child care available. Although easily overlooked, research suggests that child care is one of the most important factors influencing how and when parents become involved in their children's school.

## Lesson XI: Moving beyond school walls is a promising strategy for reaching parents.

Typically schools and districts invite parents to come to them while community-based initiatives are more likely to go to parents. As PLA became concerned about the difficulty in attracting parents to school-based sites, it took on a more community-based focus—“reaching parents where they are.” This proved to be a promising strategy increasing the number of participants and connecting the District to other parent networks. This “On-the-Go” model was identified by board and staff as one of the greatest accomplishments of PLA and one of the most rewarding.

On-the-Go activities rapidly expanded during the second full year of PLA programming, accounting for 60% of the 408 PLA sponsored activities during the 2007-08 school year and accounting for 44% of total attendance. Through On-the-Go programs, PLA had the chance to reach large numbers of parents living in shelters or transitional housing who are often hidden and disconnected from the District.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE DISTRICT’S RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

- Parent engagement initiatives must be linked to other reform efforts. Parent engagement efforts will receive more attention and support when they are linked to, and allowed to, contribute to the reform efforts that are central to the District’s agenda.
- It is important to create realistic and more powerful vehicles for parent voice in the School District. The District can benefit from parents’ voices and perspectives and should look for other vehicles for parent voices to be heard by the top level of the administration. The School District could benefit from high-level parent advisory boards that represent the views of a diverse range of parents throughout the city. Additionally, any board in which parents are invited to participate should take time to clarify the role of the board and develop any skills and understandings that appear necessary as well as identify clear term limits so a wide range of parents have an opportunity to participate.
- Cross-talk and coordination among District offices working with parents is crucial. In exit interviews, District staff emphasized the importance of having more coordinated cross-talk between all District offices that work with parents.
- Future parent leadership initiatives should offer training for Central Office and school staff on the value and importance of parent engagement. Parents and District staff emphasized the importance of training school-based staff, particularly principals, to be more “parent friendly” and to have a real plan for parent involvement.
- Capitalize on social networks in neighborhood schools. The District should consider capitalizing on the parent networks of neighborhood schools and seek to create centers for parents within neighborhood schools. However, such centers should be primarily focused on their local school rather than trying to attract parents from an entire region, so that centers could be fully integrated into the life of the school.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENT AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

- Parent-driven initiatives should be situated outside of the School District. The PLA pilot demonstrated how challenging it is for parents to direct an initiative for which the School District is ultimately responsible. Parent driven initiatives may be more easily developed outside the confines of a bureaucracy such as the School District.



- Build power among parents. Parent engagement initiatives situated outside the School District face the challenge of engaging the District. A lesson from PLA, as well as from other parent engagement initiatives such as the Alliance Organizing Project, is that a powerful organization is needed to ensure that parents' concerns for their children are heard. This can only happen by bringing together parents from across diverse communities and from differing parent groups and organizing a common agenda among such groups. While different parent groups can be expected to have different agendas and priorities, the larger the coalition, the more power and influence it will be able to have within the District.
- Create spaces for cross-talk and relationship development among parent groups. While it is unrealistic to expect all parent groups to share a common agenda and work together on all issues, more "parents only" spaces for cross-talk among parent groups could be created to support the development of more common agendas. One PLA board member proposed that representatives of major parent-serving entities in Philadelphia be brought together to serve as a leadership board of future parent engagement initiatives.

## PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- The District should look for ways to continue to offer parent leadership training and partner with adult education providers in this process. A lesson of PLA is that adult education programs may be a critical site through which to share School District information and develop parent leadership. The adult education programs offered in the three regions in which PLA operated were the most popular among PLA's workshops, indicating that there seems to be a demand for adult education programs. Research shows that when parents attain higher levels of education, children's educational performance is affected.
- Taking District programs outside the walls of schools and Central Office is a promising strategy for reaching parents. Many stakeholders maintained that the On-the-Go model should be continued including offering District programs in more community-based settings such as transitional housing shelters, District health centers, or public housing communities.
- Consider keeping the PLA brand. Several PLA stakeholders recommended that the PLA "brand" be retained, however the model should be more inclusive of bringing all stakeholders together, including community agencies that work with parents and the District.
- Consider innovative ideas such as Parent Messengers and Parent Coaches. A few stakeholders had very creative ideas and strategies for how to recruit and retain parents. One identified strategy was to have parent messengers recruit parents. A parent board member described parent messengers as "soldiers" who do the necessary foot work to make sure parents get the message. Another board member expounded on this concept and suggested parent coaches. Parent coaches would be PLA staff who are parents and who would operate like case managers working with parents one-on-one to connect them to community resources.
- Recreational programs can help schools build relationships with parents. This evaluation also found that some parents were seeking opportunities to meet and connect with other parents, and consequently, social/recreational programs could be utilized as a strategy for engaging parents in their school communities and for initiating parent networks.
- Programs for the whole family may be a highly effective way of reaching parents. A few board members and staff suggested that the parent programs be more inclusive of children. One board member talked about the importance of engaging students first and then reaching parents once students are engaged. Similarly, a staff member recommended that the activities and workshops offered involve both parents and their children. This staff member pointed out that parents are usually away from their children all day and in the evenings want to spend time with their children, make dinner and help them do their homework.

Programs that hope to attract parents in the evenings would fare better if they provided dinner and offered activities that parents could do with their children or, at minimum, provided child care.

- Providing child care is essential for the success of parent leadership programs. District programs hoping to attract parents must find ways to provide child care services. According to research, child care is one of the main obstacles to parent attendance at school events.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, PLA set out to fill a critical need in the School District of Philadelphia—the need for parents to have the knowledge, skills, and resources to be effective advocates for, and leaders in, the education of their children. All stakeholders engaged in PLA were committed to that goal and desired to see the mission of PLA achieved. The dedication of these individuals can be honored by learning from the experience of PLA and using PLA's lessons to develop other avenues through which parent leadership can be brought to bear on the efforts to create a more equitable education for all children in Philadelphia.

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