

PODS IN ACTION:

The Oakland REACH

POWERFUL PARENTS: THE EVOLUTION OF THE HUB AT THE OAKLAND REACH

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The Oakland REACH (REACH), a parent-run education advocacy group embedded in a predominantly Black and Latinx community in Oakland, California, responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by developing programming in response to community needs and found an opportunity to shape practices in schools. REACH's story demonstrates the potential for community-based organizations to play a larger role in addressing both current challenges and longstanding iniquities in the public education system.

KEY LESSONS:

1

Centering families: Believing Black and Brown families know what is best for their children allowed REACH to effectively tailor its offerings to community needs.

2

Relationships and funding: REACH's connections with community members and active fundraising enabled the organization to deploy resources quickly and nimbly.

3

Partnership: REACH's demonstrated ability to meet the evolving needs of the community opened up opportunities for the organization to partner in more meaningful ways with the Oakland Unified School District.

Origin and evolution in response to crisis

REACH was founded in 2016 by CEO Lakisha Young to promote “parent power” and support Black and Latinx parents to become agents of change in education systems. REACH’s maiden program was a 10-week fellowship where parents learned about the history of education and systemic racism and were trained in education advocacy. To remove barriers to participation, REACH provided a stipend to participants and childcare.

By 2019, the organization grew into a 501(c)(3) with the mission “to make the powerless parent powerful,” continuing its parent education programs and leading education policy campaigns.

Fast forward to spring of 2020, as the pandemic shuttered schools and caused cascading economic fallout, REACH leaders heard from their membership that parents were struggling with finances and worried about student learning loss. Young recognized that Black and Latinx families should not expect support from the district, which had served them poorly even before the pandemic. She believed that no one else was coming to “save” her community and decided that the organization had no choice but to step in and provide that support. Through surveys and dialogue with their families in the spring of 2020, REACH began to assess needs and make plans for addressing them. As a result, in the summer of 2020, the organization pivoted its existing assets and built new capabilities to launch a virtual summer school program called the Hub.

Serving the whole family: Core components of the “Hub”

Young and her staff knew that to serve the needs of her community, the Hub must not only address students’ learning loss but also serve the holistic needs of the entire family. To do this, the Hub was designed around four major components:

- The Family Sustainability Center (FSC)
- Extensive tech support
- Academic and enrichment programs
- Family liaisons

Family Sustainability Center

REACH heard from their families that many were struggling financially. As a result, REACH initiated a relief fund, raising \$300,000 and providing small grants to families of up to \$550 for rent and groceries. REACH also provided Christmas presents to help alleviate families’ financial burdens in December 2020.

One parent described receiving a grant as a lifeline for her family. Her unemployment payments had stopped because “things were backed up” at the start of the pandemic, she said, but REACH could disburse the grant with minimal red tape. “I just had to fill out an application questionnaire, and I got a check in the mail,” she said, calling the funds “a blessing.” In this way, REACH filled in the void and was a “stimulus before the stimulus.”

In the fall of 2020, REACH shifted from providing parents with direct aid to fostering families' economic development through the Family Sustainability Center (FSC), which offers weekly workshops on socioeconomic topics. As one REACH leader described, "If you're having challenges just paying your rent, here's some resources . . . [We're] having the next one on finances."

In addition to economic resources, REACH used the FSC workshops to communicate directly with parents about Hub programming, public safety, and family well-being resources. For instance, one FSC workshop topic was on Covid-19 vaccinations. As one REACH employee described,

We have these things called the FSC meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays where we have different topics about just everything. Like this week—his week we're having a discussion about Covid, how to protect yourself more and where to get vaccinations and just all kinds of . . . updates on what's going on.

Educating parents was an essential part of the FSC, but the FSC also helped foster community among parents, who could ask questions and share parenting concerns during the sessions. One appreciative parent said,

They all have been very helpful. I mean, when you can gain knowledge and improve yourself and your family, you become a better person than you were on the day before. So anything that can help us is greatly appreciated. And Black and Brown families are not always offered these services, or they're not put out there for us to know about. So when someone brings them to you and gives you an opportunity to say this is what's being offered or we're going to make this happen for you, because you've asked, if it can help you become successful, why not take advantage of what someone is presenting to you.

Extensive tech support

In the spring of 2020, the technological divide in Oakland was apparent. So REACH worked to provide families with laptops and hotspots, eventually partnering with the city's [Oakland Undivided](#) campaign.

REACH also recognized that connectivity was not enough; parents and grandparents needed help using the technology, so REACH stepped in to provide tech support. As one parent expressed, "I'm not very well-versed with electronics, so it's been kind of hard navigating it." The Hub provided extensive tech support to families. For instance, REACH partners with a Black-owned technology company called SydeWAYZ to give families tech support. Each Wednesday, SydeWAYZ hosts a virtual workshop for parents. The company is also available for in-the-moment assistance for all Hub families.

Academic and enrichment programs: The Literacy Liberation Center and the Opportunity Fund

In the summer of 2020, the Hub operated as a virtual summer school with a K-2 program centered around literacy and a 3-8 program offering enrichment classes.

REACH's spring 2020 survey of families revealed that parents were worried about virtual learning, especially how it might negatively impact early literacy in younger children. REACH decided to focus summer programming for K–2 students around literacy, adopting a science-based early literacy curriculum for which the organization had already been advocating as part of its Literacy for All policy campaign.

Calling the summer program the Literacy Liberation Center (LLC), REACH hired literacy teachers, all Black and Latina women who were tutors in either OUSD or local charters, to facilitate the program. The LLC teachers led small groups of students through a systematic approach to language decoding called [SIPPS](#). LLC teachers also had a daily meeting with families to train parents on SIPPS and encourage reading practices at home. One of the LLC teachers explained as follows:

Our parents are very much a part of the LLC. That is what the whole REACH program is about. It's empowering parents who feel powerless. So the reading portion of that [is], when we did it last summer we had our morning meeting, and then we went into our SIPS instruction, and then the [students] went and did something on their own. They did some online activity, and then we would come back together for family leadership workshops, and that was a time where we spent about an hour together, and we would talk about different topics, how to help your child learn to read, what could you do at your home and at your activities that you could do at home to support your child in their reading group, so we talk about that, and then we would share as a group and community.

REACH reported 60 percent of students increased two reading levels, and 30 percent increased three after five weeks.

Meanwhile, students in grades 3–8 could participate in the Opportunity Fund, the Hub's summer enrichment programming offering classes such as martial arts and cooking. REACH sought to provide Hub students with the same caliber of educational enrichment offered to more affluent students. Overall, parents expressed their appreciation for the caliber of classes provided in the Hub. One parent said she came in expecting “just some tutoring” but was surprised at the high quality of the Hub programming. “We've participated in some programs besides Oakland REACH and they were nice . . . but I never came across an agency that has provided the type of programs that they're providing,” she said.

Family liaisons

At the onset of the Hub, REACH formalized support for families by transitioning its community organizers, which had previously conducted outreach into Oakland schools, to become dedicated family liaisons. Each family enrolled in the Hub received a family liaison, who functioned much like a social worker. All Black and Latina parents and grandparents, the family liaisons had a caseload of 15–25 families and aimed to help families with all aspects of pandemic parenting. As one of the REACH leaders explained, “Every parent needs help.”

REACH family liaisons reported the following work-related tasks: calling parents on caseload at least once a week, providing resources and information on Hub and community programming, helping parents enroll students in Hub classes, providing

technological assistance, monitoring Hub attendance, checking in with parents if students did not attend class, and administering family surveys. One of the parents explained how the family liaison assisted her over the year:

I love my family liaison. She's very supportive. Always sending out information, always checking in throughout the weeks, you know, every couple of days or so. She's always sending out some information. If there's anything that applies individually as a parent, she provides the resources, or if there's classes that your student is interested in and some things come about or you know, she knows that my daughter had been struggling with reading, so she made it a point to tell me about different reading classes that were offered. She's awesome, she's on top of it.

Undergirding all of these tasks was lending emotional support to parents who were facing extraordinary challenges with learning during the pandemic. For example, one of the parents said the following:

There were some things that I was going through in my own family, and she has just been there for me, you know? She'll call me to see how I'm doing and also to remind me about different meetings and classes that are being offered. She has prayed for me, and she just has my best interest at heart. So I appreciate her and I love her, because she doesn't have to be there, you know, she could just do just the reminders and check in, but she does more for me than just that.

REACH leadership described the family liaisons as the “secret sauce” of the Hub.

Putting families in the driver's seat helped the Hub meet real needs

Because REACH was founded on the belief that families are the primary fulcrum of change, they designed programming based on what families said would benefit them the most.

As the director of the Hub's summer 3–8 program noted, REACH is one of the few entities that centers families in this way:

[REACH] is looking at, you know, what happens if [parents are] in the driver's seat and we take control and do things that we've always known to be right. And we've been asking people to do these things for our benefit, and they haven't done them, so let's just do it ourselves, right?

REACH's reliance on firsthand feedback from the families they serve enabled more accurate needs assessment—for example, they identified financial sustainability and technical support as foundational needs. Knowing this, REACH was able to design programming to address issues at the root of recovery, not just the symptoms of the issues.

REACH's “ear to the ground” has also set up the organization to pivot quickly when it senses changing needs in their community. Even before the pandemic, for example, REACH shifted its policy agenda from advocating for open enrollment to advocating

for reforms to school closure policies when a budget crisis caused OUSD to begin closing schools. REACH's response to the pandemic was no different.

As one REACH leader explained, “We saw a need, and we just pivoted on everything that we were doing and turned around and tried to meet the needs of our families where they needed to be met.” The ability to see a need and move quickly was an asset in the ever-evolving circumstances of the Covid-19 era.

Agility enabled by relationships and funding

Seeing a need is one thing, but being able to act on it takes relationships and resources. As Young said, “Every leader's charged with getting information from the people they serve. The question is, what are you going to do with that? Where's your innovation?”

Relationships

REACH staff stressed they were able to be responsive because they had deep relationships with the community, facilitated by the shared experience of being Black and Latinx parents. One leader explained what distinguishes REACH from other organizations and why the organization is able to accomplish what it has:

[It] is because we have what we call “skin in the game.” All of us are either parents or grandparents, so therefore when we're talking about these things, we're talking about changing things, not just for somebody [else]. We're talking about impacts to our own families.

Thanks in part to their deep community relationships, REACH mobilized community members at considerable scale in order to provide services that would best meet community needs. It is no small feat that they could find, hire, and train a cadre of community members to serve as family liaisons for every family participating in the Hub, for example. Their ability to hire a teaching staff of entirely Black and Latinx tutors to provide instruction for the LLC outshines most district efforts to diversify their educator workforce to mirror student representation—Oakland included.

Funding

To mobilize people and launch programs in response to need, an organization like REACH needs a “war chest” of resources that they are able to allocate at their discretion. As Young shared, “To do the work we do, we need to be well resourced, period and point blank.” Based on the success of the Hub, REACH has seen an increase in public donations. The Hub is also funded through philanthropic dollars.

Sustaining the work

After successfully running the Hub in 2020, REACH recognized that its families would continue to need support during the school year. In the fall of 2020, the LLC launched after-school tutoring in K-2 literacy. Tutors met with groups of four to six

students twice a week during the 2020–21 school year. As of March 2021, the LLC had 66 active K–2 students. The Opportunity Fund also expanded enrichment programs during the 2020–21 school year and began offering tutoring services to students in grades K–12. Family liaisons continued to work with their families throughout the 2020–21 school year, and LLC teachers met monthly with parents.

REACH still continues its summer programming, having held its second year of the summer Hub in 2021. Year two included a pilot program for high school students called [REACH U](#), which aspires to provide high school students engaging programming, mentorship, and stipends.

The Hub and its influence are growing. Through a \$900,000 grant, REACH partnered with OUSD to scale the Hub’s literacy and family liaison models. In the fall of 2021, REACH began providing push-in support for students attending OUSD’s virtual school.

But while REACH programming has gained a foothold, the organization must still navigate dynamics of power and decision-making that still tilt toward the district. A grant can provide a stepping stone for collaboration, but it does not automatically align with the visions of district and community partners, nor does it free up money and decision-making influence typically housed in the district. For REACH, this dynamic meant that while they were supporting OUSD virtual students with literacy instruction and enrichment programming, much of that work was funded by REACH.

Despite these challenges, the work of REACH continues. In January 2022, they announced a new initiative in partnership with OUSD to recruit, train, and support literacy tutors in Oakland so that every K–2 student has access to high-quality literacy support. Further, REACH is launching a program called the Math & Technology Institute (MTI), which will provide instruction and tutoring in math (similar to the LLC model).

Supporting innovation from Black and Latinx communities

The evolution of the Hub is a prime example of the innovation that can occur when Black and Latinx families are in the “driver’s seat.” The question for policymakers is, how do we support future innovation from Black and Latinx communities? REACH shows that meaningful, mutual partnerships between districts and community-based organizations aren’t just possible; they may deliver powerful benefits to students and families. REACH’s ability to respond to the evolving needs of its community—a feat accomplished through its continuous efforts to respond to parents, raise unrestricted funds, and mobilize human power via relationships —opened up opportunities for REACH to support OUSD more directly in pandemic recovery. And though their partnership may retain areas for improvement, other districts and community-based organizations can nonetheless learn from their example.

About the Author

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