



# Voices for Change: Parent Leadership & Advocacy at Rocketship Public Schools

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Research indicates that family engagement in school, or the act of parents and school staff collaborating to support children at home and school, leads to stronger relationships between teachers and students, more consistent student attendance, improved student behavior and social skills, and stronger student achievement.<sup>1</sup> Family engagement efforts are most effective when they are student-centered, focused on addressing students' learning needs, and related to activities linked to academic outcomes, like setting goals.<sup>2</sup> The benefits of family engagement on student outcomes is true for families of all racial, ethnic, and cultural groups and income and education levels.<sup>3</sup>

Recent studies show an increasing appetite from parents to be more engaged in their children's schooling. The COVID-19 pandemic, with extended periods of at-home learning during the 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years, changed how parents and teachers interacted and increased both parties' interest in building strong parent-school partnerships. According to a fall 2021 national survey, parents reported being more likely to participate in activities to support their children's learning and planned to be as or

## Rocketship Public Schools 2022-23

**Locations:** Bay Area, CA; Nashville, TN; Milwaukee, WI; Fort Worth, TX; Washington, D.C.

**Number of schools:** 22

**Number of students enrolled:** 10,335

### Student Demographics:

- 85% Latinx or Black
- 72% Socio-economically disadvantaged
- 43% Multilingual learners

more involved in their children's education than during the 2020–21 school year. Additionally, most teachers and principals reported planning to spend as much or more effort on family engagement than they did in 2020–21 and indicated that building trust with families, communicating authentically, and seeking and incorporating feedback were their top priorities.<sup>4</sup> Educators can leverage this desire for stronger parent-school partnerships as they make critical decisions about family engagement moving forward.<sup>5</sup>

The term “parent” and “family” are used synonymously throughout this brief. Both terms refer to children’s caregivers, such as family members, guardians, or other individuals with close ties to the child.

In particular, educators may consider supporting interested parents to move beyond engaging in and advocating for their own children’s education to addressing the needs of the broader community through community organizing and advocacy initiatives. Parent engagement in community organizing—a practice in which community members come together to build social power and collectively act on issues that impact their lives—can help ensure that children have access to a high-quality education.<sup>6</sup> Studies show parent mobilization and advocacy leads to changes in policies and practices, stronger school-community relationships and school culture, better student outcomes, and increases in educational funding.<sup>7</sup> Community organizing also leads to public officials viewing parents as assets in their community, parents developing new skills and capacities, and parents experiencing personal transformations and becoming more civically engaged.<sup>8</sup> Research shows that organizing groups achieve the most impact when they utilize data and research and are engaged in efforts at both the system and school levels.<sup>9</sup>

Rocketship Public Schools (RPS)—a national network of public charter schools—has dedicated significant time and effort to building a strong family engagement culture across its campuses and developing a parent leadership and advocacy program, in which a subset of RPS families participate. Through participating in this leadership development program, RPS parents are learning how to effectively use their voices and have influenced local and state policies that directly impact their families and communities.

This brief shares strategies RPS has used to engage parents and help them move from participating in their own children’s schooling

to more broadly advocating for solutions to community needs. It first explains how RPS has centered parent voice and developed a strong family engagement culture, a critical foundation to parent advocacy. It then describes successful parent-led advocacy events and the specific strategies RPS has used to support parents as advocates and leaders. This brief is informed by interviews with RPS staff and families conducted in 2021 and 2022 and RPS parent engagement data from the 2020-21 school year.

## RPS’ Commitment to Parent Voice and Engagement

RPS is built on three core pillars: personalized learning, talent development, and parent power.<sup>10</sup> At RPS, parent power refers to “unleashing the power of parents to champion their children’s education, hold leaders accountable, and enable high-quality charter schools to thrive.”<sup>11</sup> Helping parents learn to use and believe in the power of their voices is especially important given the population of families RPS serves. One network leader stated, “I feel like so much of society conditions [families], particularly the population we serve which are African-American families, Latino families, and immigrant families, to think that my voice doesn’t matter.” RPS provides coaching to parents to help them understand that their voices do matter, and they can create change.

**“To me, that’s the ultimate vision, that our families realize their power. I know that’s super broad, but in every sense of that—families realize their power, they realize they are an asset and a value to their student, their family, and the broader community—and our families are able to harness that power and voice to advocate well beyond their years at Rocketship.”**

**–Education organizer**

RPS educators and families described family engagement as a primary distinguishing feature of RPS schools. According to one teacher, “We definitely have a very strong attitude and narrative

of our families and our parents are the most important people in our students' lives and we cannot make the impactful and transformative change that we want to make without their partnership." For many families and educators, the emphasis on parent engagement is very different from what they have encountered in the past and is an essential and valuable part of the RPS experience.

**"RPS gives you the opportunity to have a say—in everything. I don't know any other district that offers that. The kids are getting an education, but they make it so that the parents have a big say in what goes on within the school, within the organization."**

—RPS parent

RPS operationalizes parent power by providing families with many opportunities to be involved. RPS encourages families' participation even before schools officially open their doors. Founding RPS families are involved in providing input and deciding on key elements of their school's culture. For example, they vote on the school's name, help decide on one of the school's core values, and interview and provide feedback on job candidates.

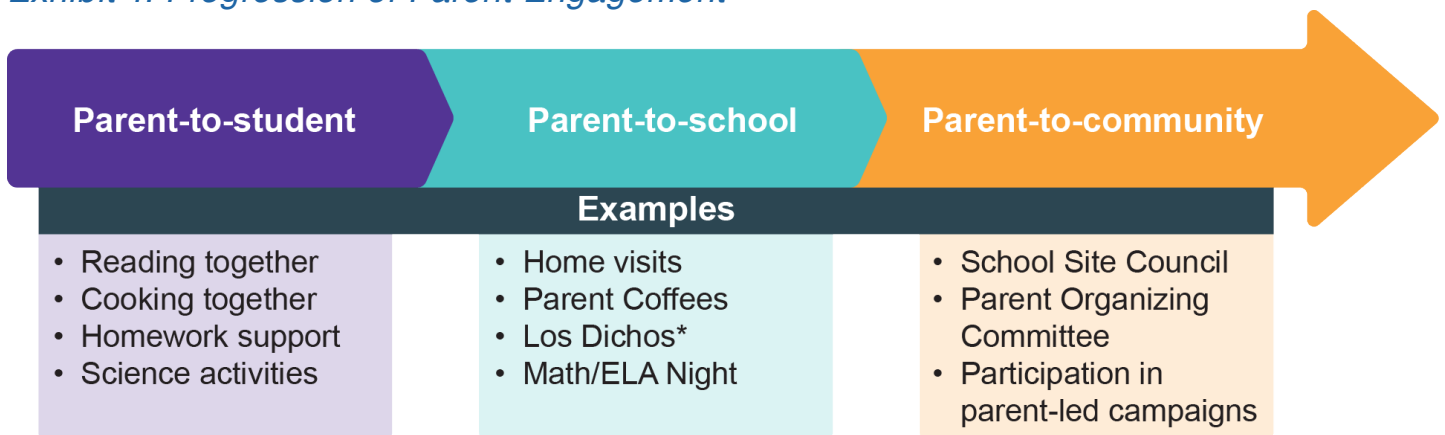
Once schools are open, families continue to play an active role on school campuses and at home. At the beginning of the school year, teachers

complete home visits to get to know students and families and develop relationships. RPS strongly encourages parents to complete 20 "parent partner" hours, which they log for engaging in activities with their children at home—including reading together, cooking a family meal, or completing a science experiment—or attending school events. During the year, RPS hosts events such as parent coffees, math or literacy nights, parent-teacher conferences, and community events. RPS also invites parents to participate in Los Dichos (a multilingual reading program where family members come into classrooms and read to students), School Site Councils, and Parent Organizing Committees. Families and teachers also communicate frequently through phone calls, texts, or social media.

## Transition From Parent Engagement to Advocacy

Over time, RPS encourages parents to progress from engaging with just their children to engaging with the broader community (exhibit 1), understanding that family interest and capacity to take on leadership and advocacy roles vary. According to one parent, "Rocketship wants to meet you and your family where you are so that they can get a better understanding of what the whole family needs, not just the kids that are in school, but the whole family."

*Exhibit 1. Progression of Parent Engagement*



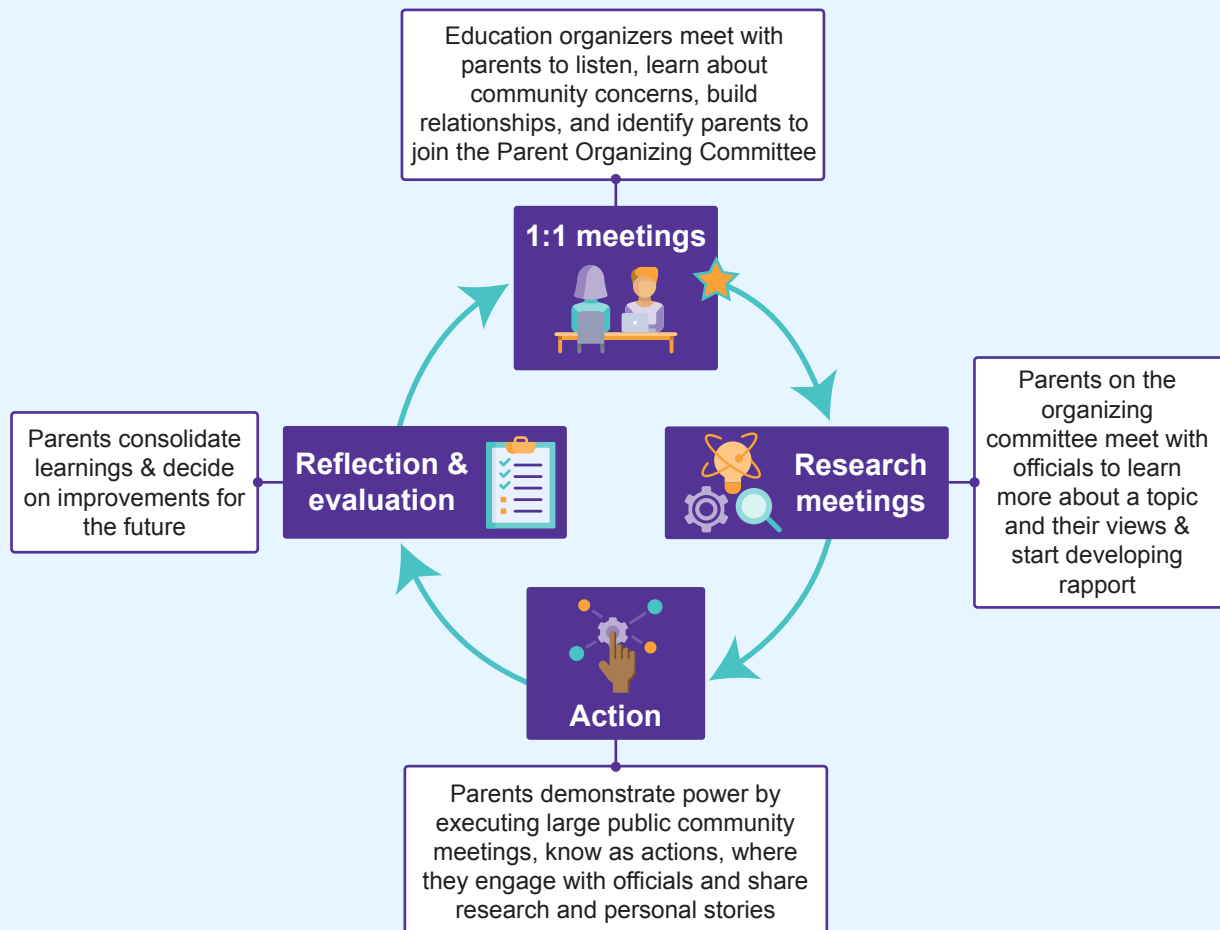
\*Parent volunteers come into classrooms and read stories to students.

To support families' involvement in advocacy work, RPS hires education organizers—full-time, regional-based staff dedicated to building parent leaders—who teach families about community organizing and then support them in leading grassroots organizing efforts. At each school, RPS seeks to establish a core group of 10-15 parents who form the Parent Organizing Committee and lead the organizing work. Education organizers use the PICO model (see sidebar) and meet with families to learn about their experiences, build relationships, and coach them on advocacy and leadership skills.

While early advocacy efforts focused on opening new RPS schools and seeking reauthorization for existing RPS schools, they have since evolved to address family-identified community needs, such as community safety and voter registration. Moving forward, RPS is invested in helping families be less reactive in responding to what is happening in their communities and more proactive in raising issues that matter to them and proposing solutions.

### *PICO Organizing Model*

RPS education organizers primarily use the People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO) model to guide their interactions with families.<sup>12</sup> The PICO model includes four steps: (1) one-on-one meetings, (2) research meetings, (3) action, and (4) reflection and evaluation. RPS provides scaffolded opportunities for parent participation, starting with listening at meetings and culminating in leading large actions for those that are interested.

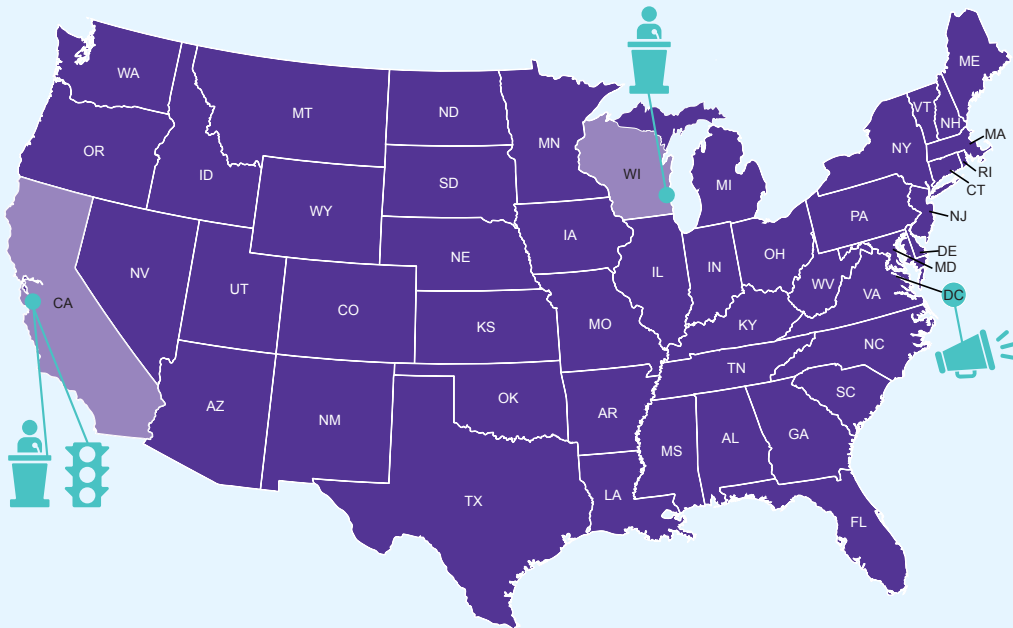


## Successful parent-led campaigns

Across the country, RPS families have led and participated in many successful campaigns on issues ranging from localized, school-specific concerns to those that impact families across the country (see sidebar). They have launched community safety campaigns, led local voter registration efforts, hosted mayoral candidate forums, participated in marches and rallies, pressed for higher per-pupil funding, and advocated for policies that are supportive of

charter schools. As a result of these parent-led campaigns, parents have influenced decisions made by local and state officials that have direct impacts on their families and communities. Family advocacy is particularly strong in San Jose, California. As the flagship region, RPS has been present in the community for over a decade. San Jose holds the most parent-led meetings and campaigns each year and serves as a valuable model of what parent advocacy can look like for organizers in other regions or schools.

### Parent-led Campaigns at RPS



**Community safety campaign in San Jose, California.** In 2021, in response to an incident where a student was nearly hit by a car at an intersection outside of an RPS school, families led a campaign on traffic safety. Parents met with the Deputy District Attorney and Department of Transportation staff and researched the effectiveness of different traffic safety measures, such as speed humps and crossing guards. Parents found that the traffic safety measures in their community were much less robust than those in a nearby, more affluent neighborhood and launched petitions about securing access to better traffic safety measures, including crossing guards. An RPS leader explained, “[The campaign was] about equity in general—all schools should have crossing guards and all schools should have similar safety measures put in place—and bringing to light the lack of equity for underserved communities.” As part of this campaign, RPS families worked with school staff to develop an incident reporting system to document safety incidents and share data with the Department of Transportation. Through this campaign, RPS families raised awareness among community members and government workers about the need for more equitable access to traffic safety measures in San Jose.



**Mayoral forum in San Jose, California.** On May 19, 2022, RPS families hosted an in-person mayoral forum that attracted over 1,000 attendees. Prior to the event, RPS families visited local businesses and left flyers to inform community members about the event and invite them to attend. During the forum, parents asked candidates about issues they identified as concerns in their community, including the increasing cost of housing and subsequent rise in people without homes, immigration rights, community safety, and improving access to high-quality education. Through this forum, families hoped to increase community members' awareness about the candidates and their policies. According to one parent, "We can't really steer anyone towards a certain candidate, but we can invite them and ask questions that are important to our community and questions that are important to our schools—not just public charter schools but public traditional schools as well." Over time, aspiring and elected officials in the area have come to recognize RPS parents' power. One network leader said, "[Representatives] know that we tend to organize hundreds to thousands of people here, and that creates respect from the representatives."



**Mayoral forum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.** RPS, in collaboration with City Forward Collective—an organization dedicated to eliminating educational inequity in Milwaukee—hosted a virtual mayoral forum in advance of the spring 2022 mayoral special election.<sup>13</sup> The goal of the forum was to provide families with information about the candidates and their positions on topics, particularly those related to education, to help inform their voting choices. RPS and City Forward Collective brought together 30 families from charter schools, traditional district schools, and private schools to host the forum. The event spanned two nights and had more than 1,000 families attend virtually. The forum was especially notable for bringing together multiple education sectors that rarely collaborate. According to one event organizer, "We felt very good about that [cross-sector collaboration] because there is a narrative in the City of Milwaukee that all three of these education sectors have been separated, and we all came together, because we had one goal and that was getting high-quality public education in the system for our kids, making that the frontrunner for anyone's campaign or anyone's position in office. We wanted to make sure that education was on the table, and I think we made a pretty big splash for the City of Milwaukee."



**Charter School March in Washington, DC.** More than 100 RPS families from across the regions participated in a rally in Washington, DC, in May 2022 to protest new regulations proposed by the U.S. Department of Education impacting the federal Charter Schools Program (CSP). CSP grants provide charter schools with funds to open new schools, replicate existing high-quality schools, and disseminate information about effective practices to the broader education community.<sup>14</sup> During the rally, RPS families joined over 700 other charter-school families to oppose the new CSP regulations, arguing that they make it much harder for new charter schools to open and for existing schools to continue to operate effectively. Families protested in front of the White House and the U.S. Department of Education and met with senators' aides to share their stories about the positive impact attending RPS has had on their children and families. In describing the experience, one parent stated, "We've met some really great people in DC who are definitely for our school, even senators from other states. We had our Rocketship shirts on and standing outside of that building to have representatives from other states say, 'We like your school, we [have] heard about your school.' My head turned and I was in awe. I was like, I didn't think many people knew about us, but I guess we've been speaking loud enough."

## Strategies for building parent advocacy

RPS' experience working with families across different regions and schools points to several key strategies for building and supporting parent advocacy. These strategies and the corresponding implementation steps highlight practices that have been successful in developing parent leaders at RPS.

Strategy	Implementation Steps
<b>Build a strong family engagement culture</b>	Cultivate relationships with families Honor families' voices and experiences
<b>Commit to prioritizing parent leadership and advocacy across the organization</b>	Involve school staff in parent advocacy efforts Develop and invest in structures that support parent participation Strategically hire and train education organizers
<b>Tailor advocacy efforts to meet the needs of the local community</b>	Use an organizing approach that allows for flexibility Collaborate with mission-aligned organizations

### Build a strong family engagement culture.

RPS network leaders, education organizers, and parents signaled the importance of building a culture of trust and family engagement as the foundation for parent advocacy work. Family engagement starts with educators, including teachers and principals, interacting with and developing relationships with families.<sup>15</sup> Over time educators build trust with families through these encounters, which in turn leads to parents' continued engagement with the school. RPS' attention to encouraging parent participation, building relationships, and honoring parents' voices has created a strong family engagement culture across its campuses.

### To help build a strong family engagement culture:

#### *Cultivate relationships with families.*

- **Recognize that parent engagement is the foundation for parent participation in advocacy.** In the words of an RPS network leader, "Without family engagement, there is no parent leadership." RPS ensures that family engagement is prioritized across its campuses by offering many opportunities for families to become involved and creating a school culture where parents are strongly encouraged to complete their "parent partner" hours. During the 2020–21 school year, 84% of families completed their 20 parent partner hours, with parents across the network most consistently participating in home visits (96% participated in one or more home visits) and attending academic-focused events (93% participated in three or more events). On average, RPS parents across the regions participated in 16.7 events during the 2020-21 school year. In comparison, a 2018–19 national survey showed that on average, parents with students in grades K-12 participated in 6.5 school-related events that year.<sup>16</sup>



Participating in family engagement events provides an opportunity for parents to develop relationships with RPS staff and other families and to learn how they can become more involved in the school community including through advocacy initiatives. One parent said, “They want you to be a part of it. They ask for your input, ‘What do you think about this? What do you think about that? Can you join this organization?’” Many parents said they joined the Parent Organizing Committee after hearing about it at another RPS event, such as their school’s morning assembly, a parent-principal coffee, or kindergarten orientation.

- **Take time to develop trusting relationships with parents.** RPS network leaders and education organizers emphasized the need to invest time in building relationships at the school-level to support family engagement and later participation in advocacy efforts. Many of the families in the neighborhoods served by RPS have a history of distrust of the education system and joined RPS because of disappointing experiences at other schools. According to a RPS network leader, part of relationship-building involves “deconstructing those power dynamics” and building trust between families and the school.

One way RPS builds trust with parents is by helping to meet families’ needs. For example, at the start of the COVID pandemic, RPS launched Care Corps, a program designed to check on families to see if they needed additional support. RPS staff texted parents a daily survey that asked if their child was participating in distance learning that day, if they felt safe, and if they would benefit from resources to meet any housing, food, or healthcare needs. Since then, RPS has expanded CareCorps and other mental health and wellness supports for students and families. Eleven of the 13 RPS schools in California received funding through the California Community Schools Partnership program, a 7-year initiative funded by the California Department of Education to develop

community schools.<sup>17</sup> RPS also provides families in Milwaukee with access to social workers and has built out a wellness department and school-level wellness teams in Washington, DC. The wellness teams work closely with classroom educators and provide targeted social and emotional support to students, many of whom have experienced trauma. By checking in with parents frequently, listening to their concerns and ideas, and providing resources, RPS staff develop strong, trusting bonds with families.

- **Prioritize one-on-one meetings with parents.** Using the PICO model helps ensure that education organizers are consistently prioritizing relationship-building with families. An education organizer described, “With the PICO model, it really is about relationships. It’s one-on-one. It’s really building those relationships and then listening to the parents. What are their hopes and dreams, what are their concerns, and you find out that a lot of them, they have similar concerns, similar dreams.” Education organizers have a goal to meet one-on-one with 10-15 parents weekly to understand individual families’ needs and values, receive input and feedback on how RPS can better support them, and learn what strengths families can bring to the work. One parent acknowledged that it can be difficult for families to share their struggles, and the one-on-one meetings provide a safe space for them to open up. The one-on-one meetings also help keep families engaged in advocacy initiatives throughout their time at RPS and beyond.

“When I think about organizing work, if you’re not doing one-on-ones, you’re not organizing. When it comes to the root of that, this work [has] to happen from a place of being authentic to our families and being able to create sustainability and long-term change needs to happen from a relational way.”

–RPS leader



## *Honor families' voices and experiences.*

- **Recognize the power of parents' voices and testimony in advocating for a school.**

Parents' voices carry weight in their communities and contribute to the effectiveness of school recruitment efforts as well as larger scale school authorization, reauthorization, and funding initiatives. An education organizer, who began as an RPS parent, explained how hearing testimony from other parents persuaded her to enroll her child in RPS: "A school leader can come on and say the school is great and you may be willing to sign up your child. ...[But] having a parent speak on their experience was what ultimately pushed me towards going." Another parent who advocated for charter school policy in Sacramento believed that sharing her RPS story with a co-author of several charter school bills helped make positive changes to the legislation: "There were a lot of parents and a lot of public charter schools going in and talking to these representatives, but I'd like to think that maybe my story helps just a little [in] making a positive change for our schools and our school choices."

- **Ask families what they want and need to ensure priorities are authentically chosen by parents.** An RPS leader reflected that educators often make assumptions about what families want or need rather than asking them directly. By encouraging RPS families to choose priorities to focus on, education organizers give parents autonomy in decision-making, further develop trust, and make sure campaigns will be ones that parents are invested in leading. An education organizer said, "Make sure you emphasize what parents are concerned about, what their collective experiences are, the changes that they want to see and the things that they want to be implemented, because parents are central to everything that happens." For example, RPS parents in Nashville, Tennessee, decided to advocate on behalf of some RPS families who lost their homes due to a redevelopment deal; parents across regions chose to go door-to-door

to register people to vote and raise awareness about the importance of local elections, and families in Concord, California, decided to lead a campaign to have a playground installed on their district-owned campus.



- **Build upon the power parents feel when their voices are heard.** Participating in advocacy efforts made parents realize the importance of their own voices and increased their self-confidence to stand up for themselves, their children, and what they value.

"[Participating] gave us that confidence that we needed to be able to speak on our kids' behalf, because if we don't do it, who is going to do it?"

–RPS parent

Parents said the experience has made them want to continue speaking up and encourage other parents to do the same. One parent said, "Parents need to know that their voice matters and it's not a scary thing to raise your voice... to be engaged and vocal and pave the way not just for your child." As a result of their experiences organizing at RPS, some parents have run for public office or assumed other leadership roles, pursued advocacy as a full-time job by becoming an education organizer, or launched new organizations within their community, such as a neighborhood association.

- **Leverage parent-to-parent relationships.**

Members of the Parent Organizing Committee often help recruit new parents to join and serve as mentors to more junior members. For mentors, witnessing other parents realize their power has been a source of motivation: “One of the best parts is when I see a single woman, a single mom with two, three kids, afraid to speak at the beginning, and four, five, six months after, able to speak in one of the public hearings with courage. When I see that, I say it’s worth it.” Many parents have also gained lasting personal friendships and a sense of belonging from participating in organizing activities. One parent said, “I have benefited greatly because apart from all this learning that I have had, I have found a group of parents with whom I identify.” For many parents, these relationships have enriched their personal lives and have led to their continued involvement in advocacy.

“Getting to know each of the parents one-by-one and seeing that I was not alone, having been discriminated against at a school first before arriving at Rocketship gave me fear, but being there [at an organizing meeting] I felt safe, I felt free to be able to speak and express everything that worried me.”  
-RPS parent



## **Commit to prioritizing parent leadership and advocacy across the organization.**

To be most effective, parent advocacy must be a priority across the organization. Leaders at all levels, from principals to network leaders, must understand and champion the advocacy work. Principals and school staff provide the space for education organizers to connect with families and encourage parents to participate in organizing initiatives, and network leaders provide resources, such as funding for staff positions like education organizers, that are critical for advocacy efforts to succeed.

### **To help ensure parent advocacy is a priority:**

#### *Involve school staff in parent advocacy efforts.*

- **Communicate with principals about the importance of engaging families in advocacy efforts.** RPS network leaders and education organizers shared the need to communicate with principals so they understand the purpose of the advocacy work and support education organizers and families in these efforts. School staff are critical to making large advocacy events happen by helping education organizers coordinate logistics and encouraging parents to attend. For example, principals have let education organizers post information on the school’s Facebook pages, encouraged teachers to collect handouts to estimate numbers of attendees for meetings, and provided technology resources for an event. Given the critical role principals play in supporting advocacy, education organizers emphasized the value of investing time in building relationships with principals to build their support for advocacy work.
- **Create spaces for school staff to see how advocacy work is done.** While RPS provides teachers and principals professional development on parent engagement strategies, education organizers stressed the importance of school staff seeing the effort that goes into advocacy work and the results it produces. One network leader noted that giving school

staff opportunities to see the work in action is the most effective way to build understanding: “I’ve done so many trainings and conversations about this, but I feel like what’s been most effective every time is to show rather than tell.” RPS education organizers have invited RPS staff to advocacy meetings, campaigns, and other parent-led events. Many RPS teachers and school leaders want even more resources on how to engage in advocacy, as indicated by an RPS network leader: “I think they understand the why and the what, but it’s how do we actually do these things effectively?” RPS network leaders are continuing to build out resources to share with school staff, including ongoing trainings and materials to codify best practices.

### *Develop and invest in structures that support parent participation.*

- **Allocate resources to hire staff who can dedicate their time to parent advocacy and leadership.** Engaging and supporting families in advocacy initiatives requires staff who can dedicate their time to that role. According to RPS network leaders and education organizers, parent advocacy work often gets tacked on to positions that already have multiple other responsibilities and as a result, does not get the attention it needs to be effective. An education organizer shared, “I think if you can get past [resource limitations] and hire an education organizer that can dedicate their time to this, it makes an enormous impact.” RPS has committed to staffing advocacy-focused positions, growing from one education organizer for the whole organization in 2018 to nine organizers across all regions in 2022. An RPS network leader affirmed that allocating resources to these positions reflects their priorities as an organization: “It’s just more than your words but how your actions [reflect] your priorities.”
- **Reduce barriers to parent participation.** Many RPS families have responsibilities, including balancing multiple jobs and taking care of small children, that make it challenging for

them to easily visit schools or attend meetings. Additionally, many parents do not speak English as their first language. To encourage and facilitate parent engagement in meetings and organizing events, RPS provides resources such as food, childcare, and translation services at its events. One parent said that having a translator present made them feel more confident attending meetings. RPS also provides flexibility in how parents can participate if they are unable to attend meetings in person. A parent described how RPS uses multiple methods of communication to ensure parents’ voices are heard: “Rocketship [makes sure that] everybody’s voice is going to get heard no matter whether it’s through Zoom, through a phone call, if it’s an email, it doesn’t matter. Rocketship, they make it a point to be as flexible as they can. That’s what makes it special.”



### *Strategically hire and train education organizers.*

- **Involve families in the hiring process.** Giving parents input into hiring processes and decisions gives them a sense of power and inspires collaboration with RPS staff. Multiple parents said RPS involves families in the interview process when hiring new education organizers. One parent explained how RPS involved parents in the process for replacing an education organizer who left the network. An RPS leader asked parents on the organizing

committee what worked well with the previous education organizer, priorities for the group moving forward, and what qualities they were looking for in candidates. Including parents in the hiring of new education organizers lends transparency to the process and reaffirms the organization's values and priorities around honoring parents' voices.

- **Hire education organizers who meet key criteria, including having common backgrounds to and understanding of the communities they will be working in and goals that are aligned with the organization.**

Education organizers are responsible for recruiting and supporting parent leaders, making it essential that parents can connect with and trust them. Education organizers with similar backgrounds to the communities served by RPS have been able to more readily relate to families' needs and concerns. A parent reiterated the imperative of education organizers' understanding families' backgrounds and what is most important to them: "I try to explain to them, you need to understand our community better. If you're coming to organize our community, you better learn from our grassroots." A commonality among education organizers is their desire to understand and positively contribute to the community. An education organizer said, "I think that's a common practice, the mission and vision for Rocketship, they believe in it, and they want to make an impact in their community, and this is one way of working with parents, doing advocacy." RPS has experienced success hiring RPS parents as education organizers as they are familiar with RPS' vision and goals and have existing relationships in the local community.

- **Invest in training education organizers.**

RPS network leaders and education organizers explained that candidates for education organizing positions often have a passion for the mission but may lack experience in organizing. RPS hires individuals with a range of prior experience and has both junior and senior

education organizer positions, which allows individuals to progress within the organization and develop their skills over time. Education organizers participate in weekly check-in meetings with their managers, weekly meetings with organizers across the network, facilitated professional development sessions, and off-site reflection days at the end of every year. RPS has found it effective for managers who previously held organizing positions to coach education organizers as they can share their experiences and learnings. An RPS network leader explained, "It's been great that I've been organizing on the ground because they can come and take a look at what I've done and then I make sure that they implement that for themselves so that they can learn how to do it on their own." RPS network leaders have found that implementing these professional development practices makes education organizers feel more efficacious and helps retain them in those positions. Consequently, retaining education organizers leads to parents remaining engaged in organizing efforts over time as they have established relationships, trust, and commitment.

## **Tailor advocacy efforts to meet the needs of the local community.**

An essential way organizers can respect parents' voices and encourage family participation is by aligning advocacy efforts to the needs of the specific community and working in collaboration with other organizations that do the same. Parents' primary concerns vary by their community and their personal experiences. It is important for parents to have a space to share these concerns, learn more about local issues, and come to consensus on what topics to address. Equally important is having staff who support the advocacy work who know the local context and can tailor the coaching and support they provide to parents accordingly. The ability to be responsive to local needs and engage other community members is a critical component of successful advocacy work.

To help ensure that advocacy efforts meet local needs:

*Use an organizing approach that allows for flexibility.*

- **Adopt a model that provides a shared structure while still being flexible to meet different needs.** Implementing an overarching model or framework helps maintain a united organizational identity and set of goals. At the same time, the shared framework must be able to adjust to account for different regional and community contexts, cultures, and needs. As one organizer stated, “The model can’t be universal.” Education organizers at RPS all use the PICO model, but they have flexibility to adjust or augment it as necessary. For example, in Milwaukee, RPS is pairing the PICO model with trainings designed to develop parents’ financial literacy skills as many families in the region are experiencing economic instability. RPS is providing parents with access to courses on budgeting, home ownership, and credit resources, and then plans to incorporate these topics into future advocacy efforts.
- **Collaborate with mission-aligned organizations.** RPS education organizers and families often collaborate with local and national organizations on shared issues and advocacy initiatives. In Milwaukee, RPS parents collaborate with other educators and advocates through the City Forward Collective; in Santa Clara County, California, RPS is part of a coalition of organizers and parents from both charter and traditional public schools that address education-related issues; and in Fort Worth, Texas, RPS parents are partnering with the Fort Worth Education Partnership to provide community members with information related to voting. Collaborating with other organizations provides access to more resources and a larger network, expanding the reach of advocacy efforts beyond the RPS community.

## Conclusion

RPS recognizes parents as critical champions for their children and communities and teaches parents how to use their voices to advocate for what they believe in. RPS parents described shaping the educational opportunities available in their communities, impacting the results of local elections, and tackling other community concerns such as traffic safety. For many parents, the benefits of participating in advocacy initiatives are also personal—through these experiences they reported gaining community, self-confidence, and an understanding of their power. The strategies that RPS has implemented across its campuses can provide a useful example for other districts, networks, and schools interested in deepening their parent engagement practices and supporting parents to advocate for their communities.



# Endnotes

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- 13 Milwaukee held a special mayoral election in spring 2022 following mayor Tom Barrett agreeing to accept a position as the United States ambassador to Luxembourg under the Biden administration.
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