Understanding Parent Engagement in Atlanta

prepared and presented by
Movement Matters

for The United Way of Greater Atlanta

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WWW.MOVEMENTMATTERS.NET

Layout and Design by Karen Hurtado Ocampo

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OUR PROCESS

The United Way of Atlanta recognizes that parent engagement and parent organizing [1] are critical approaches to systems change and racial equity work in the Atlanta region. Further, these approaches are often misunderstood or overlooked; this includes a lack of detailed knowledge about the existing body of work being done by community based organizations. In order to better understand the scope and breadth of parent engagement/organizing work in Atlanta, the United Way contracted Movement Matters to complete a landscape analysis that would highlight the state of parent engagement, as well as to identify important steps towards building the field.

The United Way provided Movement Matters with an initial list of 12 organizations to contact. This list represented a range of groups from statewide organizations that are active in Atlanta to neighborhood-focused organizations. Movement Matters also reached out to our own network to identify other organizations for us to interview. Overall, we reached out to 15 organizations and were able to make contact with 9 (see Appendix A for list). While this is an admittedly small sample, they represent almost two thirds of the organizations that were on our lists. We also asked each group we interviewed to provide suggestions of other organizations we should talk with. Given that no additional names came up, we feel that we have a reasonable representation of the local groups that are doing at least some variation of parent engagement.

We interviewed each organization for approximately 1 hour, with a standard list of questions designed to help us understand their actual work, their perspectives on their work, their understanding of the broader landscape for parent engagement, and their ideas for how this landscape should and can change.

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[1] Parent engagement and organizing does not have to focus only on the education system, though it often does. Child care and paid family leave are other explicitly "parent issues" but parents are also impacted by the need for affordable housing, sustainable income, environmental justice, etc. However, education reform is the lens through which most groups view parent engagement, as opposed to more general community engagement. This is true for most of the groups that we interviewed for this report.

POLITICAL CLIMATE

Before beginning with a more in-depth look at the work, we feel it is critical to talk about the current political climate surrounding parent engagement and education reform in Atlanta and Georgia more broadly.

Deep parent engagement work has always come with some intrinsic risks. Whether parents advocate strongly for the individual rights of their children in schools or try to create change at the systemic level, they run the risk of, among other things, being ostracized from the school community or having their child targeted by school officials. These risks, however, have become exacerbated in the current political climate in the United States, with Georgia being one of the hotbeds.

Our interviews identified the extremist measures being taken by far-right groups to push a white supremacist, anti-LGBTQ agenda in the Georgia public school system. These measures include harsh potential repercussions for those parents, students, and teachers who are speaking out for equity in school practices, the education system, and/or legislation. Interviewees told stories of doxxing, public records requests, social media flaming, attempts (some successful) at getting people fired, and even death threats aimed at those who speak out for systems that simply recognize the history of Black people and other people of color, that support LGBTQ youth, or that attempt to reconcile racial equity gaps.

This environment is felt by many of the groups we interviewed, whether grassroots or grasstops (see below for further distinction between these approaches). However, those more closely aligned with a grassroots organizing approach feel it more directly, precisely because they are on the front lines. As we will discuss later in this report, these groups are also most likely to be poorly resourced, leaving them even more vulnerable to these kinds of attacks.

In this moment, in this climate, it is critical that support for deeper parent engagement aimed at systems change and racial justice needs to seriously take into account the safety, health, and well-being of our communities. It is not enough to simply lament the loss of common courtesy and cultural norms in the public sphere. We need to recognize these actions as an intentional strategy of organized groups of people designed to promote a white supremacist agenda. The moment calls for those of us committed to true engagement to actively defend it, to roll up our sleeves and get to work. And for those who are looking to resource true parent engagement, it means taking these threats and the current political climate seriously; it means moving away from a "business as usual" perspective.

A less threatening, but no less impactful, element of the current climate also involves the co-optation of parent engagement by these far-right organizations. These groups have seized existing mechanisms for parent engagement (e.g. school board meetings) and are championing "parent rights" as weapons to push an extremist agenda that erases the history and presence of non-white, non-cis, non-straight students and communities. These groups leverage the participation of a minority of parents (sometimes not even from the school district in question) to disrupt and commandeer school board meetings and drown out genuine debate over important issues. Again, this is an intentional tactic being used by organized groups to push an agenda to get rid of any material found objectionable to a small group of extremists. These groups have successfully redefined "parent engagement" as practices that allow parents to veto any content they might find objectionable, regardless of their relationship to the school or their commitment to strengthen public education outcomes.

While this external threat is uniting school officials, students, and parents concerned with the well being of all students, the response and approach is lagging behind the offensive mounted by the far-right. More strategic interventions are needed.

In addition, and equally important for the purposes of this report, investment in ongoing parent engagement beyond the crisis is critical. Firstly, this investment will help to inoculate against this kind of attack in the future. Secondly, it will strengthen parent/community capacity for a future in which the external threat goes into remission and the alliance between school officials and parents of color dissipates, requiring these parents to once again demand to be heard by the officials who were their allies when faced with a common enemy.

Breakdown of Atlanta's Existing Approaches

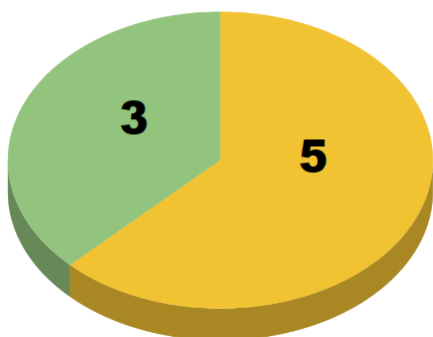|	Grasstops	Grassroots			
		Individual / Service	Cooperation	Civic Engagement / Advocacy	Organizing
Role of Parent	Testifier	Client	Volunteer	Testifier	Leader
Level of Change	Structural	Individual	"Structural"	Individual+ Structural	Individual+ Structural
Relationship to Power Structure	Accepts	Accepts	Accepts	Accepts	Challenges

GRASSTOPS AND GRASSROOTS

For the purposes of this report, we define *grasstops* organizations as those that engage in systems change and policy reform from an advocacy perspective. They are one step removed from those directly impacted by an issue. These community members may have the ability to give input to grasstops organizations and may be called upon to support the organization's agenda, but they do not have formal membership or decision making power within the organization. Paid staff, who may or may not have direct lived experience, make the decisions as to what change goals the organization works toward and how. Grasstops organizations may also offer some opportunities for impacted community members to participate in efforts to make change (e.g. testify at a hearing, accompany staff on a visit to an elected official), but paid staff set the strategy and structure the engagement. These organizations rely primarily on research, policy expertise, and insider relationships to try to impact decisions.

Three of the groups we interviewed could be classified as grasstops organizations.

Grassroots organizations, on the other hand, are those directly connected to those most impacted by the issues. We will discuss in more detail below the different approaches that grassroots organizations can take and the different roles that impacted communities can play within them, but the important distinction between grasstops and grassroots is that grassroots organizations maintain direct and regular contact with impacted communities as a primary function.
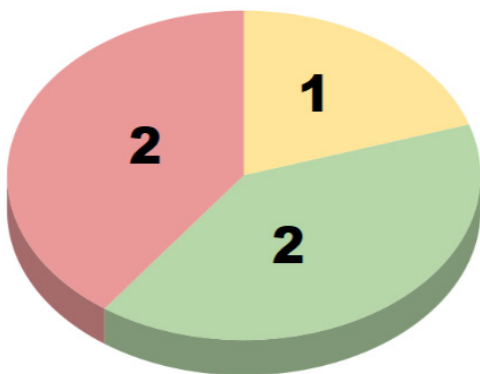

Key
- Grassroots
- Grasstops

Five[2] of the groups we interviewed could be classified as grassroots organizations. For the remainder of this report, we will also refer to grassroots organizations as parent engagement groups.

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[2] One of the organizations we interviewed is a government agency, and therefore does not fit into the grassroots-grasstops paradigm.

INDIVIDUAL/SERVICE ORIENTED PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Parent engagement with an individual/service orientation indicates groups that work directly with parents to help them build the skills and abilities they need *individually* to help their child navigate the school system, move themselves/their families out of poverty, etc. In many ways, this approach is similar to traditional case work done at social service nonprofits, with one major distinction - the depth of relationship and connection with parents. In larger, more institutional service nonprofits, parents/community members are often treated as clients. The volume of services provided minimizes the opportunities for deep and lasting relationships between staff and community members.

The individual/service oriented parent engagement groups that we interviewed spoke of a more personalized way of delivering services and a stronger, more lasting connection between the organization and the parent. In some cases, these groups maintain an alumni network among parents who have moved past the need for the organization's services. This deeper level of engagement, however, also means that the parent engagement organizations often do not reach the scale of more traditional nonprofits.

One of the grassroots organizations we interviewed falls squarely in the individual/service approach. Two others are hybrids that include some level of individual service delivery alongside other parent engagement approaches.

Key

● Service   ● Systems Oriented   ● Hybrid

SYSTEMS ORIENTED PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Another approach to parent engagement is to focus on changing systems, as opposed to changing the individual conditions of the parent. Based on the spectrum of work discussed in our interviews, we further break down this systems approach into two categories: cooperation and organizing.

COOPERATION

Under the cooperation approach, parents are encouraged and given resources to integrate with and support the system as it currently operates. Underlying this approach is an assumption that the existing structure (policies, procedures, power dynamics, etc.) is fine, but that it will produce better outcomes for families if parents are more actively involved in support roles. Within the education system, this is most commonly seen when parents are encouraged to volunteer in the classroom or engage in fundraisers to support school programs. Two of the groups we interviewed fell, in part, into the cooperation approach to parent engagement. While these groups also engaged in an organizing approach, they leaned more heavily into cooperation.

ORGANIZING

In an organizing approach, the knowledge, expertise, leadership, and participation of the parents is centered and becomes the lens through which systems change work happens. As one of the groups most directly impacted by these systems (children/students being the other), parents are viewed as critical to the process of identifying change goals and developing the strategies through which change happens. As identified below, civic engagement tactics are often a part of a parent organizing approach, but so are "outside" strategies that involve more direct confrontation with those in power. In addition, parent organizing seeks to change the power dynamics themselves, holding decision-makers accountable to parents, and not vice-versa. While the goals of parent organizing are often ostensibly to make an institution do what it is already supposed to do (for example, closing a racial equity gap), an organizing approach rests on parents holding the institution accountable for changing its policies and practices to meet these goals.

This is in contrast to the cooperation approach which assumes that parents becoming more involved in the institution as it currently operates will be enough to meet these goals.

Two of the groups we interviewed engage in parent organizing as part of a hybrid strategy. As noted above, they lean more heavily into cooperation, but do engage in organizing activities as well. Two groups could be considered to operate exclusively in an organizing context. However, one is a student organizing group and therefore does not organize parents directly.

Key
- Organizing
- Hybrid Cooperation and Organizing

A Note on Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is a process that promotes parent engagement in official, sanctioned mechanisms for parent/community involvement (e.g. testifying at public hearings) - assisting in skills development to participate and/or encouraging broader parent participation in these spaces for larger impact.

In a cooperation context, parents may be asked to testify *on behalf* of the school, its budget, or its leadership. The resources for engagement are offered solely within this lens of support. Parents are selected for stories and experiences that validate the institution and its framing of its needs. Parents are selected for stories and experiences that validate the institution and its framing of its needs.

In an organizing context, the stories and experiences shared by parents in civic engagement forums come from a collective process of critical inquiry into how the

institution needs to change. Civic engagement is viewed as a "necessary but not sufficient" element of an organizing strategy; sanctioned participation in civic engagement needs to be paired with "outside" pressure if change is going to occur.

Civic engagement can also be an approach in and of itself. Some organizations work towards systemic changes exclusively through participation in "sanctioned" vehicles for public input. The strategy of these groups is to bring community stories, expertise and research, and moral suasion to bear on these public processes in an effort to change policy or practice outcomes. Most grasstops organizations engage in this way. All of the grasstops and most of the grassroots organizations we interviewed utilize some degree of civic engagement in their work.

OBSERVATIONS

Against the backdrop of this breakdown of approaches are several key observations about Atlanta's parent engagement landscape and the ecosystem that supports it.

GRASSROOTS GROUPS LESS RESOURCED

Likely the most important observation is that grassroots groups are hugely under-resourced; the vast majority of the grassroots groups we interviewed were operating with one paid staff member or less. Additionally, groups that were focused more exclusively on an organizing approach to parent engagement were among the least resourced. So, in summary, there are few grassroots organizations to begin with and those that focus most intentionally on systems change work are lowest on the resource scale.

This is not necessarily a unique phenomenon to Atlanta, many regions have few grassroots organizing groups and those that exist tend to be under-resourced. However, the extent to which this is true in a major metropolitan area, and in a state

with key political struggles going on that affect both the state and the country, this deficit is striking and concerning.

This fact is not only meaningful for parents and communities, but also for the grasstops organizations. Grasstops groups, including those we interviewed, often rely on grassroots organizations to mobilize parents/community members in support of regional and state-wide policy initiatives. A weaker grassroots infrastructure, therefore, means weaker grasstops impact.

Again, as noted in the introduction, the far-right is developing a strong infrastructure for turning out parents and community members in support of their agenda. Those concerned with equity, justice, and a basic commitment to our institutions do not have a similar capacity. This impact of this imbalance is epitomized in our interview with one of the grasstops organizations who recognized that Georgia would eventually have "don't say gay" and "anti-CRT" legislation; it was not a question of if but a question of when.[3] While this is not exclusively a result of under-resourced grassroots organizations, a weak grassroots infrastructure sets the stage for this kind of result.

FEW ORGANIZING GROUPS

Related to the observation above, there are few parent engagement groups that prioritize an organizing approach in Atlanta. As noted in the descriptions, the two groups that incorporate organizing as part of a hybrid strategy lean more heavily towards cooperation. Organizing is part of their overall philosophy, but not a well developed part of their organizational capacity. It is much easier, in many ways, to engage parents along a cooperation approach. It engenders less conflict with institutional officials, it requires less intense engagement with parents, and is often more easily understood by parents.

It is again important to note that of the two groups that engage primarily from an organizing perspective, one of them is a student organizing group. That means we were only able to connect with one grassroots organization in Atlanta that is exclusively organizing parents for systems change, and this organization operates on a neighborhood, not city-wide, basis.

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[3] This prediction came to pass between the interviews and the writing of this report.

AN EMERGING FOUNDATION FOR CROSS-CULTURAL WORK

Most of the groups we interviewed tend to work in a mono-cultural context, usually with exclusively Black or Latine communities. However, two of the groups mentioned integrating parents from different racial, cultural, and even language groups in their efforts. Moreso, several groups mentioned working in collaboration with other organizations that primarily engage parents from a different cultural background.

This cross-cultural work seemed to be recognized as necessary and desired among those we interviewed. However, it still feels like an emerging approach without deep capacity at the individual organizational or collaborative level. While many communities of color are disproportionately negatively impacted by disparities in the system, these impacts can be felt and understood differently. Pitting one community against another is a time tested tactic of those in power to undermine organizing efforts. As organizations dive deeper into parent engagement work, it will become important to have clear understanding and skills as to how to strengthen ties among communities for a common equity agenda.

INTERSECTION WITH GENTRIFICATION

Another dynamic that emerged from our interviews was the impact that changing neighborhood conditions have on grassroots parent engagement work of all types. Several organizations mentioned the impact of gentrification in either displacing parents from their communities and community based organizations or in creating stressors that decrease parents' ability and likelihood to get engaged. Gentrification is a complicated issue and very hard to combat without tremendous resources and policy shifts. It is likely beyond the scope of an emerging parent engagement sector. However, it is an important part of the environment and will likely impact the resources and strategies grassroots groups need to engage parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our interviews, conversations with the United Way, and our own assessment of the landscape, there is a desire for deeper parent engagement work in the Atlanta area, particularly work that moves into the civic engagement and organizing approaches. The following recommendations are ways that the philanthropic and nonprofit community could foster such growth.

RECOMMENDATION 1: PROVIDE MORE SUPPORT TO GROUPS ALREADY DOING GRASSROOTS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND ORGANIZING

This recommendation is pretty straightforward and may seem obvious. However, it does have some nuance.

INCREASE FUNDING

As noted above, the majority of grassroots groups, particularly those engaged more in the systemic change arena, are among the least resourced. They have little to no paid staff and little budget to invest in other organizational resources, including the increased privacy and security needed as a result of the current actions of far-right institutions and individuals. Increasing the funding that these groups receive will allow them to bring on new staff, invest in technology and data management, and otherwise strengthen their existing capacity. Being clear that this increased funding is for systems change work, and not institutionalizing service work, is also necessary for this funding to have the desired impact on the sector.

It is also important to note that some of the groups we interviewed identified the need for funding to come from non-governmental and non-ideological sources. Groups receiving government or school funding are often limited in both what they advocate for and how they can advocate for it. In addition, some groups in the parent engagement arena are funded by institutions that have an explicit political agenda (e.g. the expansion of charter schools); funding can be explicitly or implicitly tied to creating parent engagement in favor of their political agenda. Therefore, "neutral" and independent funding for parent engagement becomes even more critical.

A Note for Funders

Funding systems oriented engagement requires *philanthropic* courage. Some of the groups we interviewed noted that funders are often hesitant to support groups that are "too edgy". Funders need to understand that parent organizing means confronting power. It is not always polite or pretty. A true commitment to parent power requires backing parent voice, especially when it runs up against institutionalized power.

This support goes beyond dollars. Philanthropic organizations often have reputation and political heft. Speaking out on behalf of parent-led agendas, and on behalf of parents challenging power, can be radical steps for philanthropic organizations to take.

This type of support requires a knowledge and culture shift for many philanthropic organizations. It requires putting resources and reputation behind parents, instead of behind the existing power structures. Given that many philanthropic organizations have more natural ties and relationships to these power structures, this shift can be difficult. But to foster change that is genuinely led by those most impacted, this shift is necessary.

CAPACITY SUPPORT

In addition to increasing the financial resources that organizations need to do their work, many groups we interviewed identified the need for increased knowledge, training, and other capacity support. The following are some areas that surfaced explicitly in our conversations, as well as some that the Movement Matters team added based on our assessment of what we heard from grassroots organizations.

1   A MORE NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF POWER

Many of the groups did not have a clearly articulated vision of how power is held within existing systems, nor what it takes for communities to build power to change these systems. Deeper training and support in building this understanding could help groups develop more targeted strategies for their parent engagement work.

2   BETTER SYSTEMS FOR BASE BUILDING AND MEMBERSHIP ENGAGEMENT

In addition to not having the needed staff to truly build a constituency, many of the grassroots groups we interviewed also did not have a clear sense of the approaches and systems needed to build membership and member engagement. Providing models and accompaniment in the implementation of these models would create much deeper opportunities for parent leadership within grassroots work.

3   STRENGTHENING SECURITY AND PROTECTION

As noted above, the political climate for parent engagement is particularly dangerous right now. Many groups mentioned the need for increased support in protecting their members from external attacks. Connecting groups with legal support to plan for and respond to direct attacks on the organization and its members would be a critical resource. In addition, groups would benefit from increased learning and systems development that protects their online security and privacy.

RECOMMENDATION 2 : FACILITATE SHIFTS ALONG THE SPECTRUM OF ENGAGEMENT

Another way to transform the parent engagement ecosystem would be to provide targeted training and accompaniment to help move groups doing individual/service and "cooperation" engagement to incorporate civic engagement and organizing into their body of work. The deep relationships that these organizations hold with parents make this sort of transition a potentially powerful effort. This type of transformation requires three active components.

KNOWLEDGE SHIFT

In order for groups to change their approach, they need clarity on what the new approach would entail and its relationship to the work the groups are already doing. While some organizations practicing a hybrid approach understand these differences, sponsoring training and ongoing learning tables could nest this knowledge within key leadership of organizations practicing individual/service and cooperation approaches. This knowledge is a critical foundation for organizational transformation. Embedding this knowledge in an ongoing process (e.g. a learning community) allows groups to also experiment with new approaches and have a supportive community in which they can process their implementation.

CULTURAL SHIFT

Understanding the difference between approaches and what each requires is an obvious starting point for incorporating new ways of doing parent engagement. However, equally important is a culture shift within the organization. Deeper parent engagement requires reconceiving our assumptions about what parents can do, getting comfortable with balancing power between organizational staff and parent members, and reorienting our relationship to the external power structure. Creating space for explicit conversations about these culture shifts is another critical step in shifting organizational approaches.

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Obviously, organizations will find that they need new resources as they shift and incorporate new approaches. Expecting organizations to change without providing them the resources to do so is a recipe for failure. These resources can range from the funding to hire new staff members to paying for the time existing organizational staff and parent volunteers will spend in trainings and learning cohorts.

Organizational Transformation: A Hypothetical Example

One of the groups we interviewed discussed that many of the Black parents they were connected with were not sending their children back to in-person learning. The break from the norm forced by the pandemic helped these parents to recognize the detrimental impact that racial disparities in discipline and learning opportunities were having on their children. When faced with the prospect of returning their children to these institutions, many parents opted out, either taking advantage of virtual learning when offered or moving to a home school approach.

The organization that brought this to our attention was a grasstops organization that did not do direct parent engagement, but provided some opportunity for parents to participate in civic engagement. As a result, this information from a relatively small group of Black parents became simply another data point or anecdote to share in efforts to improve school performance.

However, if this same trend had been noted by a parent organizing group, it could have become the catalyst for deeper work. Organizational staff could have pulled together larger meetings of parents to discuss these kinds of challenges with sending their children back to in-person learning. These types of meetings could have then transformed this parental decision from an individual one to a collective one.

One potential mid-term outcome could have been a parent-led platform for school policies and practices designed to make schools actually support the healthy development of Black children and other children of color (which in turn would support the healthy development of white children living in multi-racial spaces). On a longer-term basis, parents could have developed a campaign to hold school officials accountable for implementing this agenda.

If parents were not interested in transforming the schools, the same parent organizing process could have helped them build collective infrastructure for educating their children. These same parents could have created a homeschooling collective or even built up toward the establishment of an independent school.

Regardless of the outcome, a parent organizing approach could have taken these anecdotes from parents and turned them into a collective opportunity for action based on the lived experience of those impacted by the school system.

RECOMMENDATION 3: SUPPORT CONNECTIVE TISSUE BETWEEN GRASSTOPS AND GRASSROOTS

In many ways, the parent engagement, systems change, and racial justice arena functions as an ecosystem. Within this context, strengthening the inter-connectivity between grasstops and grassroots groups can be an effective way to build system-wide parent engagement. This process doesn't require either group to change their core approach, but rather necessitates resourcing the potential sites of collaboration and connection. Some of the key elements of strengthening this collaborative ecosystem involve:

HELPING GROUPS UNDERSTAND ROLES AND CONNECTIONS

It was clear from our interviews that grasstops organizations often rely on grassroots groups to provide parent voice to (occasionally) inform their policy solutions and to (more often) provide community support for those solutions. Similarly, grassroots organizations often look to grasstops groups for information, data, and research to help support demands emanating from parent engagement processes. Helping groups better understand how to coordinate these kinds of roles can strengthen a parent engagement infrastructure while allowing groups to focus on their unique contributions.

While seemingly simple in theory, organizational coordination does take designated work to successfully implement. Learning cohorts, facilitated conversations, case studies, and other mechanisms can help groups understand how to better coordinate these roles. In addition, managing effective organizational coordination takes resources. Staff time on both sides is necessary to build the needed places and spaces for policy work to be informed by parents and vice versa.

Along with this increased knowledge, some culture shift is also necessary. Grasstops organizations, if they are to be in deeper relationship with grassroots groups, often need to learn to defer to the expertise and perspectives of parent leaders. Also, basic logistics

like meeting times and expectations need to be rethought if parent engagement is at the center of the process. And grassroots groups also need to better understand the value of the policy perspective often brought by grasstops groups.

FUNDING CONNECTIVITY

As noted above, the first step in building a more robust parent engagement ecosystem is helping groups understand how and why they could strengthen their work together. The next step is to actually resource the things they need to make this happen. These resources sometimes look like funding staff to anchor the inter-group spaces; nesting people within organizations whose role is to think about how to better connect and coordinate organizations with similar systems change goals but different approaches to meeting these goals. Other options include funding convenings that bring grasstops and grassroots groups together on a regular basis to learn, vision, and most importantly, build relationships. These common spaces often become the bedrock for future work, as much because people know and begin to trust each other as because of organizational alignment. Resourcing convenings can involve hiring skilled facilitators and meeting designers for these spaces, as well as actually providing direct financial resources to participating organizations to underwrite their time in participating. This funding may be especially important for under-resourced grassroots organizations who otherwise might not be able to participate.

SPOTLIGHTING GRASSROOTS WORK

Both grassroots and grasstops organizations that we interviewed recognized that much of their work can go unseen, but that this invisibility especially applies to the work of grassroots groups. Because they are often poorly resourced, these groups do not always have the tools at their disposal to highlight their work through social media, to garner dominant media attention, or to send staff to participate at local, regional, or state tables. As a result, their work and value is often underappreciated in local and statewide coalitions. The ecosystem we are referring to here has a built in bias towards overlooking one of the most critical pieces of its system. Finding ways to raise the profile of grassroots efforts can help correct this bias.

THINK STATEWIDE, AND BEYOND THE STATE

As we mentioned earlier, the number of organizations in Atlanta doing parent engagement work, particularly in the systems change arena, is small. While we suspect that this is also the case in other parts of Georgia, some of our interviewees mentioned parent engagement efforts in Cherokee, Clarke, and Cook counties. To the extent that robust or emerging parent engagement work is happening in other parts of the state, the same approaches of convening and highlighting described above could apply on a statewide level. Creating better connections to and knowledge of parent engagement work across the state could strengthen the local work in Atlanta, and vice versa. Along the same lines, there is tremendous and exciting parent engagement and organizing work happening in Boston, Chicago, Mississippi, New York and many other cities and states. Some of the groups we interviewed are already connected to these efforts through national networks and campaigns. Finding ways to resource local groups to connect to other cities/states and national coalitions is another way to increase their capacity and vision.

RECOMMENDATION 4: STRENGTHEN CROSS-CULTURAL SOLIDARITY, BASED ON RACIAL EQUITY AND JUSTICE

Making parent-led systemic change happen is hard work. At multiple levels, the deck is stacked against parents being able to shift the policies and practices of those institutions that impact them and their families. When this work shows the most promise, a deep and broad group of parents is engaged in supporting it.

There are many factors that keep parents separated, especially across race, culture, and class. Anti-Black racism, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and other factors teach parents that the problem is each other and erode the potential for trust building and collective work. Addressing these "isms" and providing support for cross-cultural work is a critical piece of the parent engagement puzzle.

As noted above, the foundation for this work already exists. Organizations and coalitions are already working across racial and cultural divides. Highlighting and resourcing this existing work is critical. As is investing in the capacity for it to spread. This capacity can mean helping monocultural groups of parents better understand the history, culture, and experiences of other groups. It can mean sponsoring learning about the ways that

race and class have been used throughout history as a wedge to keep communities apart so that an elite group can maintain power. It can mean helping groups develop a racial equity lens for their systems change work. It can also mean resourcing groups to take initial steps in working together in new ways. Regardless of its form, finding ways to strengthen cross-racial and cross-cultural solidarity is imperative for parent engagement work.

An Example of a Racial Equity Frame

One school system recently engaged parents in a conversation about increasing resources for "high-performing" students (e.g. adding more AP classes). On its face value, this proposed change in policy and practice is race neutral, having the potential to benefit "high-performing" students from all racial backgrounds.

However, a parent engagement strategy based on racial equity and justice would take a deeper look at this type of decision. A racial equity approach would mandate that parents and administrators look at data that breaks down the percentages of students who benefit from "gifted and talented" programs by race. A racial justice perspective would demand a more systemic analysis of childrens' experience throughout their schooling to identify the various interlocking pieces that underlie any racial disparities in the data.

Embedding these frames in a parent engagement process would open up deeper, and likely more difficult, conversations about how to allocate resources within the school system. It would allow for data-driven discussions about how school budgets are poised to increase or alleviate racial discrepancies in student outcomes. As importantly, it would make more explicit an often hidden values-based conversation about which groups of students are prioritized and supported.

Bringing these issues to the surface has as much potential to sow division among parents as it does to unite them behind a common commitment to address the impact of implicit bias and explicit racism within the education system.

As noted above, building a sense of cross-cultural and cross-racial solidarity as part of a racial equity and justice approach is critical. By the same token, however, this solidarity work also has to be informed by racial equity and justice.

RECOMMENDATION 5: STAND UP FOR TRUE PARENT ENGAGEMENT

As we mentioned earlier, the far-right is successfully redefining parent engagement as a reactionary process designed to allow parents to veto school decisions with no process or commitment to improving educational outcomes. This approach has created challenges for the groups we interviewed. By opposing the policies that are emerging from this effort, they are put in the position of seeming to be "anti-parent voice", despite having spent years arguing for more parent engagement in the education system.

At this moment, it is all of our responsibilities to stand up for true parent engagement. This also means developing a nuanced critique and a vigilant response to the current cooptation of parent engagement by a far-right, white supremacist agenda. In addition to speaking out against these efforts, we also need to talk about the value and importance of real parent engagement work, to use our public platforms to highlight and defend it, and to find ways to move the current "parents rights" fervor toward genuine parent engagement practices rooted in equity and proven educational practices.

CONCLUSION

Parent engagement work, especially that focused on systems change, is in a nascent state in Atlanta. Several strong grasstops organizations are holding down policy work at the local and state level, though they face stiff opposition from an increasingly well-mobilized far-right agenda. Local, less well resourced, grassroots organizations engage parents around critical individual and systemic issues, but often lack the resources, infrastructure, and connectivity to have system-wide impact.

However, more intensive resource provision, combined with a strengthening of the capacity of individual groups and the ecosystem as a whole, can help the parent engagement sector level up its impact in the Atlanta region. The interviews conducted by Movement Matters provide a variety of insights and next steps for those interested in strengthening parent engagement work. Equally as exciting will be the iterative learning and growth that happen as grassroots, grasstops, philanthropic, and capacity building organizations walk this road together.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEWED ORGANIZATIONS

Atlanta Bright from the Start

Georgia Family Connections

Georgia Youth Justice Coalition

Gwinnett SToPP

Latino Association for Parents of Public Schools

Parent Avengers

Parents Prosper

Partnership for Southern Equity

Public Education Matters Georgia

ABOUT MOVEMENT MATTERS

Movement Matters ensures the development of greater infrastructure and capacity for movement-based community organizing, solidarity economy projects, and transformational justice. We work directly in partnership with organizations and individuals to provide training, technical assistance, accompaniment, and mentorship that strengthens their approach to creating change. We serve as a catalyst and convener that brings groups together to build collaborative infrastructure, develop joint actions around intersectional issues, and strategize around changes to the broader political and social landscape. We identify and vet opportunities with members of the organizing community and serve as the mortar for these initiatives to reach fruition. We work with philanthropic partners to build their vision and capacity for supporting robust movement ecosystems

Movement Matters is committed to values-based organizing and movement building that is intersectional, anti-oppression, anti-colonial, and anti-racist. Our educational approach and capacity building framework are firmly based in popular education, cultural organizing, and other liberatory pedagogies with the ultimate goal of transforming not only the outcome of our work but also the process by which it is done.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MOVEMENT MATTERS, PLEASE VISIT:

WWW.MOVEMENTMATTERS.NET