INTRODUCTION
Families have a tremendous amount of insight about the needs and interests of their children and type of supportive learning environment where they will thrive and reach their highest potential. When families have the tools they need to fully understand the educational options available to their children and can easily access those options, students’ lives are positively impacted and educational outcomes improve. Within the Los Angeles school ecosystem (including both school district and charter schools), understanding and navigating school options is difficult and complex, and does not allow for an informed and equitable process for school choice. Families need a better, more transparent and accessible system that truly engages, empowers and supports them in making informed decisions on behalf of their children.

THE CONTEXT: An Explosion of School Options in Los Angeles
Over the past 10 years, more than 130 new public schools have been built throughout the Los Angeles region. These new schools not only provided much needed relief to the chronic overcrowding that many community schools were experiencing, but also significantly expanded existing school choice programs, and gave rise to new ones. For example, at LAUSD there are numerous school choice programs such as the Zones of Choice, Open Enrollment, Permits with Transportation, Public School Choice, Inter-District Permit and the Magnet Program, each with dozens of participating schools from which parents can choose, in addition to their local neighborhood boundary school. Moreover, the growth of independent charter schools throughout the region has further expanded the number of school options available to families.

THE CHALLENGE: Inequitable Access to School Options
These opportunities - desperately needed by students whose neighborhood schools are failing to meet their needs - remain elusive due to the lack of a centrally coordinated system that can equitably inform, engage and empower families to select schools that better meet their children’s needs. These systemic barriers include:

1. **Lack of a centralized information system** that can quickly and easily inform families about the full menu of school options available to their children;
2. **Lack of standardized information** regarding school quality and academic achievement that can help parents determine a good fit for their children; and
3. **Multiple application and enrollment processes** with different deadlines and requirements.

This haphazard system has created a great inequity between the families that possess the necessary time and resources to untangle the maze of school options and those that do not. If we are to ever realize the goal of providing every student a quality education that prepares them for success in the 21st century, we must start by unlocking the gates that keep our most vulnerable students from accessing some of the highest performing schools in Los Angeles and reaching their full potential.
THE NEED:
Empower Families to Make Informed Decisions

While public education leaders have acknowledged the importance of addressing some of these systemic issues, it is critical that Los Angeles stakeholders including parents, students, advocates and civic leaders are meaningfully and consistently engaged to inform and drive solutions that ensure the needs of our students are met. Alliance for a Better Community (ABC), in partnership with local community and advocacy organizations, sought the experience and expertise of over 120 parent and student leaders, as well as professionals in the areas of early care and education (ECE), higher education, and health and wellness, in a series of small roundtable discussions examining this issue. These discussions explored opportunities to address these challenges and develop a set of recommendations to streamline information and strengthen parent outreach systems that will empower all families to make informed decisions once they have access to and understand the full menu of public school options available. This report highlights the outcomes of these community discussions and offers key recommendations.

OUR APPROACH:
ABC 2016 Leadership Roundtable Series

The ABC 2016 Leadership Roundtable Series, composed of five sector-specific roundtable discussions, was conducted over the summer months to garner feedback and insight from over 120 civic leaders with unique perspectives within the education field.

Each roundtable discussion was developed in partnership with a leading community and/or advocacy organization from each sector, as follows:

Bringing together leaders from these various sectors created an opportunity to engage them in examining this specific issue as well as related education issues more specific to their respective sectors. The sector specific approach was chosen to allow for deeper conversations between leaders working within a similar context and framework in the larger discussion on public education, helping both to lift the perspectives of that sector and maximize the opportunity for input. In addition to getting direct feedback and dialogue on the issue at hand, this format also allowed each group to confer on related topics from their sector that resonated with them. This was particularly true with the participants of the higher education roundtable, in which college readiness and ensuring all students had access to and were prepared for postsecondary success was explored in depth. This aspect of the roundtable series allowed ABC to expand upon the public education discourse that informs the school option discussion and is reflected in these recommendations.

Each roundtable began by assessing the group’s familiarity with the variety of school options available in Los Angeles, as well as their awareness of the multitude of school selection and enrollment processes. ABC staff then briefed participants on the key barriers faced by families in accessing quality schools to ensure a shared understanding and common language, and finally engaged them in a solution-oriented discussion on each of the three major barriers noted above.
Although each roundtable was unique in makeup and discussion, three key findings underscored the set of recommendations developed through the roundtable series.

**FINDING #1: The Level of Knowledge Regarding the Full Breadth of School Options is Minimal**

Overall, across the sectors, while there was some level of awareness of the variety of school options in Los Angeles public schools, most participants were only familiar with a few of these options. In fact, many participants were alarmed that they were so uninformed given their extensive engagement with public education. This was particularly true of parent and student leaders who expressed disappointment in 1) the incomplete set of information provided them by their schools and counselors and 2) difficulty in obtaining information online or through direct phone inquiry about newly discovered options.

**FINDING #2: Word of Mouth Remains the Strongest Factor in School Selection**

Word of mouth and interpersonal connections with a school (i.e. schools attended by family and/or trusted friends) remain the primary factors in school selection for families. Parents and students also listed the following factors as very important in determining school selection:

- **Location:** proximity to home, workplace, transportation needs, or specific communities
- **Academics:** achievement indicators, enrichment opportunities, thematic or career orientation
- **Support resources:** availability of counselors, wellness centers, bilingual staff, parent centers
- **Extracurriculars:** sports, music and arts, student clubs, afterschool and summer programs

Knowing the determinants most important to families when selecting a school is essential in developing effective tools and materials that support their decision making process. Providing information that accurately reflects the level of quality, availability and progress in the areas above across all schools can significantly improve a family’s ability to find a school that best matches their child’s needs.

**FINDING #3 School Sites as Primary Access Points for Information**

By and large, school sites are trusted primary sources of information for families and students. Parents rely on information received from school channels when making decisions about their child’s future school options. However, the information distributed by school sites regarding school options was not always consistent or comprehensive. Concerns were raised as to whether it might be a conflict of interest for school sites to be responsible for distributing school choice information that might ultimately affect their enrollments and consequently, their budgets. Although, families might prefer to receive comprehensive and consistent information from their school sites, this might not always be realistic.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS**

These findings from the roundtables affirm that the full menu of school options in Los Angeles has not been made readily available to all families. Moreover, exposure and access to the full menu of school options through a family’s social network (“word of mouth”) will inevitably vary depending on the breadth and depth of that network, advantaging those with strong social networks that have access to and experience with high performing schools and disadvantaging those whose social networks have less knowledge and experience in this area. Collectively, the findings underscore the need for a simplified, central information and outreach system that can equitably inform, engage and empower all parents, regardless of where they live or who they know, of the full spectrum of educational opportunities available to their children. The next section discusses a set of recommendations and key elements of a new system that can do just this.

“All these programs [and school options] should be talked about more with parents and students because many are not spreading the word. I only knew about two of these school options.”

- Student Leader
Below is an overview of the general feedback from roundtable participants regarding the major barriers families currently face in accessing school options throughout Los Angeles.

BARRIER #1: Lack of Centralized Information System
Participants across the roundtable discussions felt strongly that systematic changes are needed to ensure families have a centralized entry point (online, as well as offline) where they can easily access all the information they need to be fully informed about the full menu of options available to their children.

BARRIER #2: Lack of Standardized Information
Across the leadership sectors, participants felt strongly that the public education system needs to develop systems, tools, training and processes to support a family’s ability to effectively assess the various educational opportunities available to them to find alignment with their child’s unique needs. Specifically, there should be overarching metrics across the Los Angeles family of schools, inclusive of its charter schools, to aid families in understanding and comparing the academic success, school climate, parent engagement strategies, health and wellness programs and/or academic supports available at any given school. The early care and education, higher education and health and wellness roundtables had a particular focus on exploring the various added dimensions that should be embedded in the information shared with families in a systematic fashion.

BARRIER #3: Multiple Application and Enrollment Processes
There was wide agreement across the roundtable discussion, especially among parents and students, that it is imperative that we move away from the current system that has many separate enrollment application processes for various in-District and charter school options to a more simplified and coordinated system across programs and schools. This includes changing the application and enrollment period to a narrower window that ensures families can meet the application deadlines and more easily navigate through the process.

Specific recommendations to address these barriers were developed from the roundtable discussions and fall into the following three categories:

• Direct Family Engagement and Outreach: strategies for effectively engaging families to ensure they have the information they need to make informed decisions
• Technology: strategies to keep families regularly updated with the information they need using their preferred modes of communication and technology
• Family Outreach Tools and Resources: recommendations on the development of standardized tools that reflect the type of information about schools that parents want and need to make informed decisions

Direct Family Engagement and Outreach Recommendations:
Leverage the strong relationships that ECE providers have with families to begin parent engagement regarding school options in pre-school.
• Integrate ECE parent engagement best practice models

“COLLEGE READINESS BEGINS AT HOME AT THE BEGINNING OF THE EDUCATION PIPELINE. WE NEED TO WORK IN PARTNERSHIP AND SUPPORT FAMILIES ACROSS THE SYSTEM TO ACCESS THE OPPORTUNITIES IN OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM THAT HELP STUDENTS FULFILL THEIR POTENTIAL.”
– Higher Education Leader
• Align K-12 enrollment systems and choice programs with ECE to support greater articulation and empower parents to make informed decisions
• Co-train ECE providers with school choice information so they can outreach and guide families in the selection process

Utilize the entire education ecosystem to inform families about school options
• Partner with community organizations, service delivery organizations, health clinics, public libraries, etc. that engage families regularly to provide parent outreach on school options

Designate local schools to serve as primary hubs for information on school options
• Hire and train more counselors to work directly with students and families on deciding what schools best meet the student’s needs
• Invest in training key school personnel (parent center staff, front office staff, teachers and principals) to effectively engage parents about school options and/or to provide families direction to additional information and resources
• Engage families through familiar school communication channels, such as mailings, fliers, parent center postings, back to school nights, automated calls, school websites and parent newsletters to inform them of school options

Conduct central- and regional- based parent engagement outreach
• Host “school option fairs,” a central place families can visit and learn about school choice programs, as well as, charter school options
• Open all Los Angeles school campuses for a 2-week period during the year where families can visit campuses and take the time to learn more about the school options they are considering

• Collect parent feedback on their experiences in accessing school option information and/or their application and enrollment experience via an end of the year parent survey (e.g. LAUSD school experience survey)
• Create a hotline, and/or a central office team that can address questions for families about school options throughout the entire school year or, at a minimum, during peak application and enrollment periods

Technology Recommendations:
• Utilize text, emails and social media to keep parents informed of upcoming program and enrollment deadlines and status of applications
• Create online comprehensive school profiles for all schools (See Direct Family Outreach section)
• Create a school filtering tool that allows families to review schools based on individualized criteria such as the “School Match” feature from Denver Public Schools and travel websites
• Offer virtual online school tours that highlight academic, health and wellness, college readiness and school climate programs
• Create mapping tools such as Healthy Cities that allow families to view schools in proximity to the community’s surrounding public resources (e.g. health centers, child care, public libraries, community centers, etc.)
• Ensure this school choice information is easily accessible on District and charter websites and through parent portals such as the LAUSD PASSport
• Create a parent friendly online tutorial that provides parents with a comprehensive overview of the school choice process
• Make all school option information and applications available via a mobile application
Family Outreach Tools and Resources Recommendations:

- Survey families to see what programs/schools in which they are most interested and provide specific information including application and enrollment deadlines about schools/programs of interest
- Ensure consolidated and comprehensive information is available offline and in multiple languages (parent handbooks, school options catalogue, etc.)
- Provide enrollment and application workshops where parents can receive direct support in applying for school choice programs
- Ensure school profiles are comprehensive and inclusive of:
  - School academic performance indicators
  - Parent and student reviews
  - Student supports/school climate policies and programs (e.g. bullying, LGBT, uniforms, restorative justice, etc.)
  - Extracurricular activities
  - Special needs support
  - College readiness programs (e.g. PSAT/SAT prep, AVID, LA Promise Programs) and key indicators (e.g. graduation data, enrollment data, FAFSA completion data, A-G, w/a C or better, etc.)
  - Health and wellness programs (e.g. nursing services, psychiatric social services, preschool and Head Start programs, etc.) and key indicators

“When you live in a place that may not have many resources, it really is about building parent awareness of what opportunities are available to them and how they can access them to thrive in their community. We need to work together to build healthy communities that lead to education success.”

– Health & Wellness Leader

CONCLUSION

When stakeholders including parents, students, advocates and civic leaders are meaningfully and consistently engaged to help inform and drive solutions, we gain the clarity and depth on both the key issues that need to be addressed and the path forward that ensures the needs of our students are met. ABC led this effort with the intent to foster constructive dialog and generate community-driven solutions. The cross-section of the 120 voices representing parents, students as well as early care and education, higher education, and health and wellness perspectives yielded a wide ranging set of initial recommendations that can serve as a foundation for the work ahead to advance systemic change.

These recommendations reaffirm that families are struggling in the current system and that systemic change is necessary to ensure that students can fully access and maximize opportunities in our Los Angeles public education system. The breadth and depth of these recommendations demonstrates the great importance of engaging families and community voices in finding effective solutions and continued engagement will yield comprehensive and effective solutions in our public education system.

Finally, these recommendations help us understand that the necessary changes are not small, overnight fixes, but rather a comprehensive overhaul of the existing infrastructure and one that will require 1) a substantial public funding investment; 2) commitment to ongoing community engagement throughout the entire planning, design and implementation process and 3) review and alignment of District policies to ensure the creation of any new system truly supports the needs of all families and students.
ABC is a non-profit advocacy organization committed to promoting the prosperity, health and wellness of Latinos throughout Los Angeles. With a focus on quality and equity in education, health and economic development, ABC convenes community and civic leaders to create awareness about critical issues impacting Latinos, advocates for systemic change and holds Los Angeles leaders accountable to the communities they serve. Since 2000, ABC has successfully fostered partnerships and led regional movements on key issues impacting Latinos in Los Angeles including the adoption of a college-prep (A-G) high school curriculum, the publication of the Latino Scorecard, and the construction of over 120 new LAUSD schools to relieve chronic overcrowding in LA public schools, particularly within Latino neighborhoods.

OUR MISSION
The mission of ABC is to promote economic prosperity of the Latino community and the Los Angeles region, inclusive of an improved quality of life for Latinos in education, health and civic participation.

OUR VISION
The Alliance for a Better Community’s (ABC) vision is to ensure a vibrant Los Angeles region where Latinos fully participate in, contribute to and benefit from a prosperous, multi-ethnic community in which families enjoy:

- Full and meaningful participation in civic and economic arenas
- Full access to high-performing schools and increased opportunity to attend college
- Quality healthcare and
- Safe, affordable housing

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