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. However, 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. 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 following systemic barriers:

1. **Lack of 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.

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 fulfilling 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. This report highlights the outcomes of these community discussions and offers key recommendations.

OUR APPROACH: ABC 2016 Leadership Roundtable Series

The roundtable discussions were developed in partnership with a leading community and/or advocacy organization from each sector. Each session 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.

“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
SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

The 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.

WHAT WE FOUND

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. This was particularly true of parent and student leaders who expressed disappointment in 1) the incomplete set of information provided 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

FINDING #3: Schools sites are primary access points for information

By and large, school sites are trusted primary sources of information for families and students. However, 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.

“WHEN WE BRING STRONGER ALIGNMENT AND COORDINATION BETWEEN OUR EARLY EDUCATION SYSTEM AND OUR K-12 SYSTEM, WE CAN SUPPORT OUR FAMILIES TO BETTER NAVIGATE THROUGH THE SYSTEM AND IDENTIFY THE SCHOOL OPTIONS THAT MEET THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF THEIR CHILD.”

- Early Care and Education Leader
Based on the central themes that emerged and aggregating the specific suggestions and proposals that arose from each roundtable, recommendations from participants fell into three main categories: Direct family engagement and outreach, technology and family outreach tools and resources. See the full report for an expanded list of recommendations in each area.

1 DIRECT FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- Partner and leverage the strong relationships Early Education Centers have with parents to provide effective outreach and information regarding school options
- Utilize existing parent outreach tools such as Parent-Student Handbooks and parent portals (LAUSD PASSport) to deliver information on school options.
- Create a highly-promoted system-wide “school options/choice” week/month that provide regional and local opportunities for families to visit schools, obtain information about schools and understand application/enrollment processes
- Partner with community organizations, service delivery organizations, public libraries, etc. that regularly engage families to share information about school options
- Ensure all school staff, especially teachers, principals, parent center staff and front office staff can provide parents accurate information about school options and/or direct families on where to get more information

2 TECHNOLOGY TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create a filtering tool with comprehensive profiles of both District and charter schools so students and families can easily find school options that match their family’s individual needs.
- Utilize texts, emails and social media to keep parents informed of upcoming program and enrollment deadlines.
- Create a mobile application for families that can provide general information, updates on application status, school profiles, etc.

3 FAMILY OUTREACH TOOLS AND RESOURCES TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure parent outreach materials and resources are comprehensive—reflecting the entire range of school choice programs
- Develop standardized school profiles that reflect the quality and achievement of school academic programs, health and wellness resources, school climate and college readiness.
- 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.

CONCLUSION

The findings and recommendations in this report reaffirm that families are struggling to understand and navigate the current system. They help us to 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) substantial 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.