



WHEN PARENTS DRIVE THE PROCESS: A NEW MODEL FOR SCHOOL CREATION

In Washington, D.C., a first-of-its-kind effort puts parents at the center of deciding what kind of school is right for their neighborhood.

Case Study: Parents Amplifying Voices for Education (PAVE)

Washington, D.C.

Inside Washington, D.C.'s Southeast quadrant lies Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, where many enlisted men and women work and live with their families. Southeast D.C. is also home to Ward 8, where residents, the majority of whom are Black, face housing and food instability, high rates of gun violence and homelessness.

Over the years, Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling has developed a reputation among military families for a lack of high-quality schools, especially those close to the base, leading some military families to seek other assignments or retire from the armed forces altogether to avoid it. With families moving frequently, many students struggle with “splinter skills” – gaps in learning that come with moving between schools with different curricula.

For non-military residents in Southeast, navigating local education options posed its own challenges. While the city's public schools operate on a weighted lottery, meaning students can apply to options outside of their zoned school, the majority of D.C. students end up assigned to a school in their neighborhood.

A promising solution to strengthen the educational options for both military and Ward 8 families came in 2016, when the city government passed a law allowing for the establishment of a new school in Ward 8, with 50% of enrollment reserved for military families and 50% for neighborhood families.

PAVE-ing a New Way Forward

One critical question remained – what type of school would best serve the unique needs of both communities? Base leadership turned the process over to Friends of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS) and Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE), a newly formed group with a clear mission: engage communities and parents as equal partners in creating great schools.

Both organizations quickly settled on a game plan. Rather than have traditional organizations and structures make decisions in a top-down manner, parents would engage in community outreach to determine what worked best for their families – asking school operators, including D.C. Public Schools, to submit school proposals from which they would choose.

PAVE and FOCUS formed the new Ward 8 Parent Operator Selection Team (POST) project in fall 2016 with two goals: ensure the availability of a high-quality educational option for both military and non-military families and create a new city model for school selection that happens in partnership with families and the community. Ultimately, POST would solicit proposals from local and national operators and select a school concept that met the pressing educational needs of both groups.

“There was a disconnect between the base and the neighborhood. It was great to bring together the two communities and allow the families to envision the kind of school they really wanted to see. It was an opportunity for a brand new diverse school by intention, a first for the city.”

-Maya Martin Cadogan, Founder and Executive Director, PAVE

To get there, FOCUS and PAVE organizers met with local community members and leaders, conducting informational meetings to inform the public and recruit parent participants for the selection team. The resulting group included a diverse and dedicated cross-section of Ward 8 and military parents. The group worked with a project specialist to coordinate logistics and conduct research, and enlisted experts in school finance, real estate and academics.

“No matter how diverse we are, we all have children. That was the thing, the glue that held us together.”

-Tara Brown, Parent Advocate, POST

Working together, POST agreed on a common vision for the school they wanted:

“A welcoming school environment where students are challenged to be their best and prepared for life in our fast-changing global world. [One that] values the teaching of the whole child with a focus on individualized instruction and experiential learning; academic and social emotional learning support services; and a diversity of extracurricular activities. We envision a school led by a culturally competent and committed school leadership, faculty, and staff. As parents, we advocate for a school committed to building strong partnerships with families and the community to guarantee children’s success in learning.”

To achieve their vision, POST met 11 times over five months – reading hundreds of pages of material, gathering feedback from their communities, reviewing proposals, attending four national field trips to visit schools and, ultimately, choosing a school operator. Notably, parents were the *only* stakeholders with a literal seat at the table in each of these meetings.

Eventually, the group selected LEARN, a charter operator based in Chicago with experience serving military families in a nurturing environment.

Lessons

FOCUS and PAVE remain involved as LEARN D.C. plans to open its doors to 250 scholars in the fall of 2021, with construction of a new \$30 million permanent space beginning the same year.

This process is proof positive that parents want a say in their schools, are willing to invest considerable time and energy into the process and add wisdom and perspective that education policy experts don’t always bring on their own.

With the project nearing completion, the sentiment of one POST parent rings true: “How come no one ever thought of this before?”

“Nine times out of 10, it’s the school providers that come in, and they ask if they can open a school in a community. Our community said: this is what we’re looking for, and they asked the providers to submit an application; they interviewed these operators and asked them to come be a part of the community. It was the reverse of what it normally is.”

- Horace Franklin, School Liaison Officer, Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling

Pursuing community-demanded, community-driven and community-led change can and does work, but it requires a number of factors to be successful. In Washington, D.C.:

- The city and other public entities made land and buildings available.

- Parents were able to lead the process for opening a new neighborhood school.
- Parents designed the school they wanted before, not after, recruiting operator proposals.
- Community organizations and education nonprofits initiated this project in their community.

It's a formula relatively unprecedented in the education community, and it's one that demonstrated a school selection process led by parents who are committed and equipped with information and guidance can lead to consensus.

Another critical factor? Funding. POST received some funding, but benefitted tremendously from support from FOCUS and PAVE. If parents or community groups were to run a similar process, they would need money, access to experts and connections to people and organizations in the community.

PAVE executive director Maya Martin Cadogan says parents want to engage, but need the best information to make smart choices, concluding, "We should trust parents more." Working together, two distinct community groups found common values and a school model that worked for their unique needs, proving that when parents make the decisions, the best interests of children will always come first.