



School Climate Truthing

Alliance for a Better Community

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Acknowledgement Page

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Executive Summary

The POSA (Padres Organizados por la Salud Ambiental) program arms parents with culturally relevant education on environmental justice issues in underserved communities to advocate for equitable climate solutions and sustainable practices. The program trains parent leaders in advocacy strategies and equips them with tools like infrared thermometers to monitor campus temperatures, connect with key stakeholders, and engage decision-makers to promote systemic changes.

Focusing on three regions, POSA aims to address challenges like extreme heat, pollution, and climate change impacts, while advocating for green spaces, improved infrastructure, and mental health support. By fostering collaboration among school parent leaders, policymakers, and the community, the program seeks to create healthier, climate-resilient environments that prioritize the needs of historically disadvantaged and compoundly impacted communities.

POSA serves as a peer-to-peer leadership pipeline, empowering parents to become community advocates with the knowledge and skills to successfully advocate for themselves, their community, and their children's schools in relation to green space and environmental health. Over the course of 7 sessions, cohorts of 10 parents engaged in workshops designed to build camaraderie and develop a shared narrative about the need for greening in their schools and communities.

At the conclusion of each cohort, a gathering was facilitated to broaden the narrative and create a new network of leaders connected through advocacy opportunities. ABC also conducted a focus group with POSA parents, which provided critical insights into the needs of the three target regions. Urgent needs raised by parents ranged from mental health support to extreme heat mitigation, preparedness, and access to outdoor classrooms and community gardens.

Key lessons for other communities include being prepared for unexpected challenges, such as technical issues or participant inconsistencies. Open communication and engaging training sessions, including discussions and partner presentations, proved essential in addressing challenges and fostering active participation from parents in the POSA program.

While significant work remains to make schools and communities more sustainable, the lessons learned and progress made show promise for the path forward. The recent passing of Los Angeles Unified School District's (LA Unified) Measure US, a \$9B school bond approved by voters in the 2024 Election, which allocates approximately \$1.25B over 34 years, further supports these efforts. This creates an extraordinary opportunity to allocate necessary funds to community-led and centered greening initiatives, including programs to increase parent participation. As a result of ABC's advocacy efforts and growing visibility on this issue, the organization has been invited by LA Unified to discuss how POSA can be implemented in other schools across the district. The Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) has also met with ABC to discuss implementing POSA programming in other districts across the County.

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Problem Statement

The POSA program aims to tackle inequities in three identified regions by empowering local parents at their respective schools to advocate for climate solutions and systemic changes that prioritize the needs of underserved areas. The initiative focuses on addressing critical challenges such as extreme heat, climate change impacts, and pervasive pollution that disproportionately affect historically disadvantaged communities.

One such disadvantaged community is Southeast Los Angeles (SELA), a historically underinvested region of Los Angeles County. SELA has faced years of disinvestment, resulting in limited access to quality healthcare, underperforming schools, and low levels of civic engagement. Home to 440,000 residents, SELA is predominantly Latina/o, with 90% of the population identifying as such (SELA Collaborative, 2021).

By emphasizing sustainable and resilient practices, the program seeks to create safer and healthier learning environments for students, staff, parents, and the overall community. Through strategic collaboration with schools, policymakers, and community members, the POSA program envisions equitable and sustainable educational spaces that address long-standing disparities while fostering environmental stewardship and climate resilience.

Project Description

The project created a cohort of parent leaders, referred to as POSA (Padres Organizados por la Salud Ambiental, parents organized for environmental health). The POSA program taught parent leaders about effective advocacy strategies surrounding equitable climate solutions and greenification of their schools, equipping them with tools such as infrared thermometers to track and collect data on temperature increases experienced on campuses.

Throughout the program, POSA parents were engaged by various organizations and key stakeholders to educate and inform them on effectively advocating for their communities. The overall goal and outcome was to see a positive investment in green spaces, infrastructure, and other key environmental resources to support students' physical health, mental health, and educational outcomes.

Project Results

Actual Outcomes

POSA Program:

Within the first three months of the grant cycle, ABC created the POSA Program curriculum. The curriculum highlights environmental literacy and community engagement, teaching parents about local environmental challenges and their impact on health and education. Over two years, ABC hosted 4 POSA Programs at 4 schools: Elizabeth Learning Center, Bryson Elementary School, Ellen Ochoa Learning Center, and Valley Oaks Center for Enriched Studies (VOCES). ABC surpassed the goals on parent training sessions across multiple regions. In total, ABC trained and worked with 40 parents.

These newly minted environmental advocates were previously unaware of many environmental issues that the POSA program introduced. Parent leaders were surprised to learn about the connection between environmental factors and student outcomes, becoming motivated to ensure that issues like extreme heat and air quality would not deter their children's access to education. Inspired by their newfound knowledge, parents expressed keen interest in participating in school sustainability efforts and exploring ways to make their schools more environmentally friendly.

Parent leaders shared how they had been raised with values for conserving and protecting local environments, discussing practices they implemented at home, priming them to be ideal advocates in their communities on these issues. These learnings transformed discussions of environmental justice in the POSA program and helped parents see themselves included in the narrative of climate change, recognizing their critical role in environmental stewardship.

Creation of a Policy Brief & Policy Recommendations:

Alliance for a Better Community (ABC) has taken a proactive role in addressing the critical issues of sustainability and climate resilience in schools and communities. Recognizing the increasing challenges posed by extreme heat and the need for environmentally friendly practices, ABC developed a comprehensive report titled, "[Protecting Students From Our Changing Climate](#)," which includes a list of five recommendations.

ABC's report emphasizes the need for sustainable school buildings and playgrounds to address climate change and ensure student well-being and academic success. Research highlights that deteriorating and hazardous facilities harm students' health, cognitive development, and self-esteem while contributing to climate change through large carbon footprints. Concrete and asphalt schoolyards intensify urban heat islands, leading to higher temperatures, increased health risks, and reduced physical activity. Additionally, it highlighted how many schools are not built to withstand extreme weather events, despite serving as a disaster refuge.

The report calls for urgent action to create greener, climate-adaptive school environments and move beyond outdated, unsustainable designs. These recommendations aim to enhance the well-being and safety of students and the overall community while fostering sustainable practices across schools. Since the launch of the report, portions of all five recommendations have been implemented. Key wins include:

1. **Green Schoolyards:** One of the policy recommendations in this section laid out the need to update the LA Unified Greening Index to be community-based and have six key characteristics (these can be read in the attached report), most of which were fulfilled. Due to ABC's advocacy, the greening index was updated and is now largely more reflective of community needs and experiences. The LA Unified's 100 Priority Schools list includes 63 elementary schools, and 33 of those (52%) are included in the district's "Category 1" (highest priority) on the new Green Schoolyards for All Plan, also known as the updated greening index.
2. **Green School Buildings:** One of the key recommendations in this section included conducting a new facilities condition assessment focused on sustainability and climate resiliency, which was accomplished through the Measure US Bond. The bond, passed by voters in the 2024 election, will allow LA Unified to update outdated and unsafe school infrastructure and replace it with climate-resilient and green infrastructure.
3. **Creation of an Eco-Sustainability Office:** ABC has built a strong relationship with the Chief Eco-Sustainability Officer, Christos Chrysiliou, who has been a close partner and ally for ABC.
4. **Community Engagement:** While ABC has led efforts to increase community education and engagement on these issues, the organization has also partnered with Board Member Dr. Rivas, who chairs the Greening Schools and Climate Resilience Committee. Recently, Dr. Rivas introduced a Community Centered Greening Initiatives Resolution which will help ensure that community engagement and partnerships are prioritized throughout the greening process.
5. **Funding:** As mentioned above, during the 2024 Election, ABC helped educate voters on the impacts of Measure US. The organization looks forward to seeing how the bond will help create greener infrastructure and ultimately build safer and healthier school communities.

To further ensure these initiatives are effectively implemented, ABC created a policy brief to lay the foundation with the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), leveraging their partnership to advocate for policy changes to provide schools and communities with the necessary resources to adopt green infrastructure and climate-responsive solutions. The brief is focused on promoting community engagement, the integration of socioeconomic and environmental indicators, and mitigating the effects of extreme heat on school campuses through the creation of a countywide heat action plan. This collaborative effort underscores ABC's commitment to creating healthier and sustainable learning environments for all students.

Focus Groups:

ABC conducted two focus groups with parents surrounding the need for greening projects at their local schools and insights on combating extreme heat. The focus group consisted of parents who had participated in one of the 4 POSA programs hosted in the last two years. The focus group highlighted several critical concerns regarding school infrastructure, student well-being, and mental health support.

Participants emphasized the urgent need for shade structures, more tree planting, and green spaces to mitigate extreme heat and reduce the overabundance of pavement. Issues such as dehydration, nosebleeds, and students playing sports in high temperatures, sometimes exceeding 101 degrees, were common. Air conditioning problems and the lack of action to address these challenges were also noted.

Parents expressed a desire for schools to create community gardens, teach students about plant harvesting, and provide opportunities to connect with nature, which could improve both physical and mental health. Many participants linked the rise in depression and anxiety among students to the pandemic, citing insufficient school support for these issues. They called for teachers to prioritize addressing pandemic-related mental health challenges, suggesting initiatives like trips to nature and expanded mental health workshops.

Parents highlighted the importance of participating in school workshops and mental health programs to better support their children. However, some felt their schools were not equipped to address student mental health needs adequately. A recurring theme was the necessity for parents to engage more deeply with their children, ask meaningful questions about their school experiences, and collaborate with educators to navigate ongoing challenges, including those posed by extreme heat events.

Barriers Encountered

In the initial planning of the proposal, ABC sought to include parent leaders in collecting data around school temperatures, viewing it as an opportunity to amplify parent voices and build their skill sets. However, this proved to be a more significant challenge than anticipated. Despite providing comprehensive training and one-on-one learning sessions, the organization encountered difficulties in collecting data that met research standards and would enable meaningful analysis. As a result, ABC was unable to gather substantial temperature tracking in the identified regions. To address this data gap, the ABC published report, "[Protecting Students From Our Changing Climate](#)," leveraged the expertise of a doctoral candidate researcher who compiled and analyzed publicly available temperature data across LA Unified.

External Factors

In ABC's initial proposal, the organization had hoped to work with LA Unified on small-scale greening projects but quickly realized that the funding needed even for small projects such as shading would not be feasible. Instead, ABC pivoted to focus on supporting parents to advocate within their local schools for small-scale projects such as community gardens. Additionally, ABC supported statewide efforts to increase coordination and decrease costs through legislation like:

- SB 394 - Senator Lena Gonzalez's Master Plan for Climate-Resilient Schools, creating a master plan on building climate-resilient schools (2023)
- Supporting Senator Gonzalez's one-time funding of \$10M to create a Statewide Master Plan for Healthy, Sustainable and Climate-Resilient Schools (2023)
- In 2024, ABC called on Governor Brown to request a three-year program to build local capacity and provide regional support for County Offices of Education (COEs) to support school districts in responding to climate emergencies and planning and implementing climate-resilient school buildings and grounds, along with creating a \$10M budget allocation to do so.

Participating Stakeholders

1. ACDP Center Director
2. Amanecer Consulting
3. CSUN
4. East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice (EYCEJ)
5. Education Leader of Color (EdLoC)
6. Greater LA Education Foundation
7. Innovate Public Schools
8. LA City Planning
9. LA Mission College
10. LA Promise Fund
11. LA Unified's Office of Eco-Sustainability
12. Long Beach Community Design Center
13. Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE)
14. Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (LADWP)
15. Los Angeles Trust for Public Land (LA TPL)
16. Los Angeles Unified School District
17. Pacoima Beautiful
18. Pomona College
19. Southeast Los Angeles Collaborative
20. TreePeople
21. Trust for Public Land (TPL)
22. UndauntedK12
23. University of California, Irvine
24. Young Invincibles

Lessons for Other Communities

Key lessons for other communities considering a similar project include being prepared for unexpected challenges like technical challenges with equipment or external delays that are out of your control. For example, during our air quality monitor project, technical issues with the monitor required us to pause the project. While UC Irvine worked on troubleshooting the monitor, ABC ensured the project stayed on track by having the next list of participants ready to host once the monitor was fixed. Having a flexible and nimble timeline is important to ensure that the desired outcomes are able to proceed even when things do not go as planned.

Additionally, it is important to be mindful of the time and commitment that parent leaders are investing into the program or initiative. A key factor that eased the process of recruitment was the offer of a stipend for hosting the air quality monitor or attending workshop sessions. While paying community members for their time may feel counterintuitive to some, it is important to acknowledge and financially recognize the important contributions that community members are making by participating in the various programs. While many community based organizations (CBOs) are not equipped to pay for community members time by the hour, we can provide stipends and accommodations to offset the financial impacts and barriers that community members acquire through participating in said programs. Stipends are just one example of compensation, accommodations such as childcare, transportation to and from events, and providing food during events are also great examples of how CBOs can be supportive of community members' active participation and sense of value in a space.

Finally, the POSA program did not only focus on giving parent leaders knowledge about environmental justice issues but connections to various stakeholders. Partner presentations and open discussions were key strategies in creating a welcoming environment where the parents felt comfortable having an open dialogue and asking questions with ABC partner organizations that were doing similar or adjacent work. This discussion based approach was effective in encouraging active participation from the parents and allowed them to build their own network in the advocacy space.

Next Steps

Advocacy for Proposition 2:

Proposition 2 allows the state to sell a \$10 billion bond for public school and community college facilities (LAO, 2024). Proposition 2 provides an opportunity for POSA parents to advocate for funding for their local schools since 8.5 billion of the \$10 billion will be directed towards public schools. The school districts will be awarded the funding on a first come first serve basis and it will be crucial for parents to actively participate and engage with local schools and LA Unified leaders for renovation projects in their local schools. Proposition 2 will help local California schools update our kids' learning spaces including building green schoolyards, a simple yet revolutionary way to cool schools, improve educational outcomes, and revitalize communities. (TPL, 2024) ABC's report, "[Protecting Students From Our Changing Climate](#)."

dives deep into updating school infrastructure across the country and in particular at LA Unified schools. The report found that the total cost to repair all existing LA Unified buildings and facilities, some of which are 100 years old and older, is estimated to be \$4.5 billion. This estimation is inclusive of all maintenance needs, including school greening. Ensuring that parent's voices and interest's are represented in this decision process will be crucial in ensuring that schools are reflective of our students and families' most urgent needs.

Advocacy for Measure US (\$9 Billion LA Unified bond):

Similarly, Measure US was passed by voters to fund schools within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified). Measure US would authorize LA Unified to sell \$9 billion worth of bonds in order to update school facilities for 21st century student learning and career/college preparedness; improve school facilities for safety, earthquakes and disability access; upgrade plumbing, electrical, HVAC; replace leaky roofs; provide learning technology; and create green outdoor classrooms/schoolyards. Additionally it will allocate \$1.25 billion worth of funds going to the restoration and upgrade of outdoor spaces and play areas. This funding provides an ample opportunity for our already trained and experienced parents to advocate for funds for their respective schools. Under both Proposition 2 and Measure US POSA parents will have the unique opportunity to aid in project identification, planning, implementation and maintenance. ABC hopes to expand the POSA program across the district to support parent leaders in schools that will receive funding for greening projects. In doing so ABC hopes to help create community centered and informed greening initiatives on climate vulnerable campuses in historically disadvantaged communities, which will create more viable outcomes to mitigating various climate factors in the long term.

Larger disaster preparedness, and mental health component in POSA program and ABC's Parent Academy:

ABC will incorporate a comprehensive disaster preparedness and mental health component into the POSA program and Parent Academy. This will equip parents with the knowledge and tools they need to effectively plan for and respond to natural disasters. By equipping them with essential preparedness strategies and fostering resilience through mental health education, parents can become valuable resource agents within their families and communities. This dual focus will ensure that parents are not only prepared for emergencies but also capable of supporting their own mental well-being and that of their loved ones during times of crisis. The recent wildfires that have been rampant across Los Angeles county this month have only made this urgent need more evident. Data shows that immigrant communities are disproportionately impacted by climate disasters and will also be the foundation to rebuilding and recovering. This work must ensure that our most vulnerable communities are also aware of not just coming impacts in a theoretical sense but also in a practical sense by way of preparedness.

ABC coordinating & facilitating advocacy opportunities for POSA parents (education leaders, local city leaders, peer-to-peer education):

Through the California Resilience Challenge, ABC was able to build the foundation for a network of environmental parent advocates who will work within their communities to build awareness about environmental justice issues and also help to change the narrative around who cares about said issues. Different methods will be utilized to create space for parents to participate in meetings with education leaders and overall advocacy efforts. With new funding on the horizon, parent engagement will be key to ensure green spaces which have historically been a problem in low-income & immigrant communities.

TARTA Air Quality Monitor:

ABC, in partnership with UC Irvine, is currently leading on the TARTA (Toxic-metal Aerosol Real Time Analysis) Air Quality (AQ) Monitor project. The TARTA monitor uses Spark Induced Breakdown Spectroscopy (SIBS) to measure metallic compounds in the air. Parts for the TARTA instrument cost only a couple thousand dollars, which for this caliber of an AQ Monitor makes it a cost-efficient way to monitor the toxic metals in the air. Air pollution negatively affects children's respiratory health and learning performance. (Current Environmental Health Reports, 2024) This project aims to measure and collect air quality data in Southeast Los Angeles (SELA) at the homes of POSA parent leaders. SELA is a heavily polluted region and ABC aims to use this newly acquired data to advocate for the communities in SELA and highlight the disproportionate effects on their health due to the air quality and to use these monitors to help community groups discover the toxic metals they are exposed to. With recent events related to the multiple wildfires in the region, the already poor air quality in SELA is bound to worsen due to the raging and ongoing fires. ABC has the goal of implementing new strategies and policies in how we measure and combat the poor air quality in SELA with the data gathered from the TARTA monitor.

LA Unified Advocacy:

ABC is working with LA Unified Board Member Dr. Rivas in the passing of the resolution: [Community-Centered Greening Initiatives: Strengthening Equity Through Parent Engagement and External Partnerships](#). This resolution would direct the Superintendent to enhance external partnerships for greening initiatives, reduce costs for partners using District resources, and streamline processes to support underserved communities. Additionally, the District will prioritize Black and brown community leadership in greening efforts, expand the Office of Eco-Sustainability for culturally reflective support, and increase parent-led collaboration in school based greening and climate resilience efforts. The Superintendent is tasked with conducting a Green Jobs Pathways Study focused on creating career opportunities in the green economy for students and families, emphasizing high-paying roles in sectors like renewable energy and sustainable construction. ABC is presently engaged in meetings with the

board members and their staff to provide feedback, recommendations, strategize and provide additional needed capacity to ensure the passage of the resolution. If passage of the resolution comes to fruition, which is looking very likely, ABC is well positioned to take lead and engage with POSA parents for increased collaboration in school based greening and climate resilience efforts as highlighted in the resolution. Additionally, enhancement of external partnerships by LA Unified provides a clear opportunity for ABC to step in and lead in greening initiatives in underserved communities.

Bibliography and Appendices

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3. School-Age Children and Adolescents.
4. SELA Collaborative. (2021). The SELA Agenda.
5. Trust for Public Land. (2024). Trust for Public Land Celebrates the Passage of California’s Proposition 2, Which Will Fund Green Schoolyards.

Attachments

1. [ABC Green Schools Report](#)
2. [LACOE Brief](#)
3. [Temperature Gun Instructions](#)
4. [200 priority schools for greening](#) as identified by the 2.0 Greening Index
5. [TARTA Monitor One-Pager](#)
6. [ABC Community Video](#)
7. [ABC7 Feature Story](#)