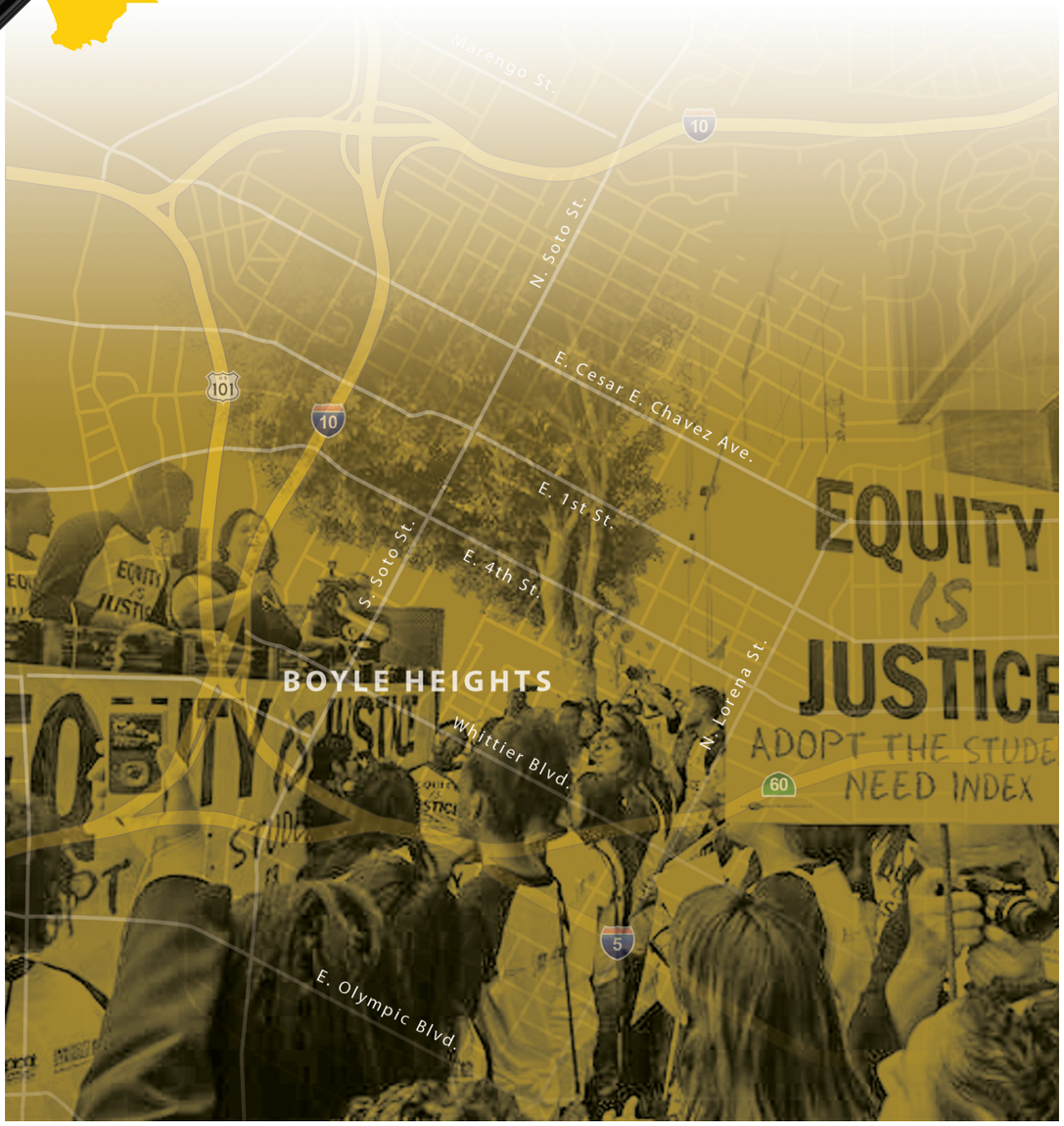
A RESEARCH SERIES OF THE PAT BROWN INSTITUTE AT CAL STATE LA

IN FOCUS: BOYLE HEIGHTS



Stakeholder Perspectives of Public Access to the Los Angeles Unified School District:

The View from Boyle Heights

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CAL STATE LA
PAT BROWN INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS
Unleashing the Power of Participation

Building Healthy Communities
Boyle Heights

IN FOCUS

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Stakeholder Perspectives on Public Access to the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education: The View from Boyle Heights

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Goals and Objectives of This Report

- This report examines Boyle Heights community members' access to, and participation in, formal decision-making structures of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). In particular, we examine to what extent and in what manner LAUSD Board of Education activities are made visible and accessible to stakeholders in Boyle Heights and how neighborhood concerns are considered at the school district leadership level.

Key Recommendations

- The LAUSD Board of Education should establish regular meetings of the Board's the Successful School Climate Committee.
- Access to official LAUSD Board meetings should be expanded by holding meetings at different times of day and in locations beyond the Beaudry Central Office building. The Board meets at 1 p.m. on the second Tuesday of the month at 333 S. Beaudry Ave.
- LAUSD Board members and the Los Angeles City Department of Neighborhood Empowerment should explore the establishment of Education Committees as part of the City of Los Angeles' Neighborhood Council system to expand local outreach and communication.
- University-based organizations such as Cal State LA's Pat Brown Institute should be identified and recruited as possible vehicles for delivering school district information to community stakeholders. Parent and community liaisons should be involved in developing accessible materials that explain decision-making processes and organizational structures for the benefit of marginalized constituents.

INTRODUCTION

Residents of the Boyle Heights neighborhood are underserved by a range of social services, as evidenced by high rates of childhood poverty and low graduation rates. Public education has stood out. Boyle Heights is also a community with a vibrant sense of identity and place-based pride; it is a place of great potential with a depth of experience and local expertise. While public education is held to be urgently important by most residents, many if not most cannot attend meetings of the LAUSD Board and thus may feel left out of decision-making processes. Although the LAUSD headquarters is just a few miles from Boyle Heights, many barriers exist to participation across the linguistic and socioeconomic divides that separate Boyle Heights from centralized power structures.

This project is guided by conceptualizations of educational policy research that prioritize the input of local stakeholders in examining top-down decision-making and leadership structures. We seek to give voice to community stakeholders and provide an asset-based characterization of Boyle Heights residents. As part of the California Endowment's focus on community health and equity in Boyle Heights, we examined how community members access and participate in formal decision-making structures in the LAUSD. We specifically investigated to what extent and in what manner the activities of the LAUSD Board are made visible to stakeholders in Boyle Heights and in what ways neighborhood concerns are considered at the school district leadership level.

Data presented in this report were collected from a range of sources, including observation of school board proceedings and community meetings in Boyle Heights, interviews with a sample of diverse stakeholders, newspaper and other media coverage, and materials specific to K-12 schools in the neighborhood. The overall question guiding this investigation is: How are LAUSD district-level decision-making structures and processes perceived and understood by community stakeholders in Boyle Heights? We were also particularly interested in exploring the degree to which constituents felt capable of identifying and accessing decision-makers and power brokers in the LAUSD and how this knowledge affected a sense of personal agency.

In this report, we first identify key areas of concern and contextual influences that shape the current landscape of educational opportunity in Boyle Heights. We then present an overview of the K-12 school options available in the Boyle Heights neighborhood and explain the structure and function of the LAUSD Board of Education. Next, we explore how education in Boyle Heights has been characterized internally by community members and externally by media sources. Finally, we suggest areas for intervention to promote positive interactions between community members and school district leadership.

Contextual Influences

Demographics of Boyle Heights

Boyle Heights is a predominantly Latino community that has long been a destination for new immigrants. Although the median age in the neighborhood is lower than in many other areas of Los Angeles, the local population is aging, reflecting state and national trends. Although slight improvements have been seen in the last two decades, overall educational attainment remains lower than the city average and is associated with economic challenges (interview with Board member Mónica García). A USC analysis of educational attainment in Boyle Heights between 2005-2009 found that 59% of adults lacked high school diplomas, and the L.A. Times Mapping L.A. project reported that 5% of current residents held college degrees based on the 2000 Census. If these rates rise only because of the arrival of middle-class home buyers from outside the neighborhood through gentrification, it would not be the result of public investment in existing residents.

The population of homeowners in Boyle Heights is aging, while members of the younger generation are overwhelmingly renters without economic resources necessary to purchase homes (see Modarres, 2017).

The number of households with school-age children is also declining, a significant issue for public education and the long-term prospects for community stability. Families that are unable to secure permanent housing are more likely to move frequently rather than establish roots.

Many young people who would like commit to Boyle Heights have trouble envisioning a future in which they have access to affordable housing and financial stability. Several stories in the local newspaper *The Boyle Heights Beat* have directly addressed the need for high school students and their families to understand financial aid and college admissions processes. In general, the more formal education people receive, the more they feel prepared to communicate with elected representatives and navigate systems like the LAUSD central office decision-making structure. It is therefore important for the district to meet the unique needs of neighborhood families by attending to issues of language, ethnic background, countries of origin, socioeconomic status, and education level.

Gentrification and Residential Development

Change in the neighborhood attributed to an influx of new development capital from outside sources (including private real estate developers and projects planned by city agencies) was mentioned by almost all stakeholders with whom we spoke. A high degree of anxiety is evident in Boyle Heights because of the socioeconomic vulnerability felt by many residents. The visible changes in parts of the neighborhood—and the arrival of new residents with different demographic characteristics than the largely working-class Latino population—are viewed with suspicion by many stakeholders who fear the loss of a cultural community. Others cautiously welcome infrastructure improvements to the neighborhood, such as expanded public transportation options, but call for careful oversight and outreach to current residents.

Media coverage also plays an important role in developing public perception of neighborhoods, both internally and externally. In a Neighborhood Spotlight feature on May 2016, the *Los Angeles Times* described Boyle Heights as a "center of Chicano culture" but also highlighted the "development potential" of the community. The neighborhood is linked to a history of political activism on the part of Chicano residents, Latinos of (primarily) Mexican descent. The inclusion of School Report Card information in this publication also appeared to provide a list of school choice options for future residents. Like other public spaces, including Hollenbeck Park and the Boyle Heights City Hall, schools reflect the character of the surrounding community. Community stakeholders want to see Boyle Heights grow sustainably, in a way that does not displace current residents and builds on existing assets.

Threats to Environmental Health and Safety

Boyle Heights is in one of three special districts designated by the Los Angeles City Council in April 2016 as being particularly impacted by industrial and traffic pollution. One environmental issue directly linked to schools in the neighborhood is an ongoing clean-up after decades of heavy metal pollution from the Exide Technologies battery recycling facility in Vernon. Most of the Boyle Heights neighborhood is within the radius of elevated risk posed by lead contamination. García described the Exide situation as one that LAUSD reacted to but not one that it had much power to control (personal communication, July 8, 2016).

When asked whether she believed Boyle Heights is a good place for kids (like her nieces and nephews, who live there) to grow up, longtime neighborhood resident "Olga" mentioned a difference between "perception and reality" relative to the prevalence of street crime. She noted that many people relied on anecdotal evidence rather than personal experience to assess the risk in the neighborhood and cited concerns about air pollution and traffic as of more immediate concern. Mario Soto, a social studies educator in the LAUSD and one of the authors of this study, lives in Boyle Heights and said he worries about his young daughter living near a busy street; he also described the actual dangers of living on a street that is frequently disputed by two rival gangs. Having heard

gunfire near his home late at night while working on lesson plans, he considers security to be critical for his family. Overall, however, most stakeholders emphasized that the actions of a few damage the collective reputation of the neighborhood in terms of threats to public safety in Boyle Heights.

Expansion of Charter Schools in Boyle Heights

Like many urban school districts in the United States, LAUSD has been a site of contentious debate over school reform, particularly marked by conflict between advocates for, and opponents of, charter schools. In much of the research literature and general public conversation about education, charter schools are alternately viewed as attempts by external, sometimes for-profit, political forces to privatize a public resource with less governmental oversight or as efforts to create learning environments subject to fewer constraints that offer improved opportunities for students in marginalized communities. The rate of students attending charter schools in LAUSD is double the state average (19% and 8% respectively; LAUSD Fingertip Facts, 2016; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). Both perspectives were expressed by stakeholders in Boyle Heights. For example, Almazan, the former City Neighborhood Council[1] representative who is a charter school teacher, touted what he called the consistently high academic achievement of students at the KIPP middle school[2] and cited the need for parents to have choices about where to send their children to school. Board member García is known as a proponent of charter schools.

Neighborhood resident "Olga," on the other hand, said she worried that new charter schools were being promoted to families as better alternatives without having proven track records and were in effect taking advantage of a perception that traditional LAUSD schools were universally bad, although parents were not given the appropriate resources to make informed decisions. Although this debate is often viewed as one of charters versus traditional schools, an increasingly wide range of charter school designs with varied educational philosophies has emerged, mirroring the diversity of programs offered by existing LAUSD schools.

Opinions about charter school programs or sponsoring agencies are sometimes focused on specific points of contention and in other cases are based on fundamental opposition or support for the charter school concept itself. Such tensions are increasingly evident in debates over location of new charter schools on the same campuses as existing public schools or in public buildings. In Boyle Heights, the STEM Academy, a charter high school, shares a campus with Roosevelt High School, but a second proposed charter high school's application was denied. This second proposal was advanced by the Celerity network, which is currently under investigation by federal authorities due to accusations of financial mismanagement. In February 2016, the LAUSD Board approved a new middle school charter in Boyle Heights that intends to eventually enroll 225 students in grades six through eight, with enrollment beginning in the 2017-2018 school year. The debate surrounding school choice and charter programs is certain to continue as schools compete for students and parents are required to make sense of an increasingly complex choice system.

Overview of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)

The city of Los Angeles is home to almost 4 million residents; when the larger urbanized metropolitan region is considered, this number rises to almost 10 million (US Census Bureau, 2012). Los Angeles Unified School District is the second-largest in the United States in student enrollment, with almost 650,000 K-12 students during the 2015-2016 school year, and the most expansive in terms of geographical boundaries. More than 30 cities and unincorporated areas are included in the student capture zone (LAUSD Fingertip Facts, 2016).

[1] A city program that created neighborhood boards to advise Los Angeles City Hall

[2] KIPP, or Knowledge Is Power Program, is a nationwide non-profit network that operates charter schools, including 14 schools in south and east Los Angeles through KIPP-LA.

The district provides education primarily at the K-12 level but also includes adult education and pre-K programs. More than 1,000 campuses are part of the district, including traditional public schools and public charter schools, operated independently but with oversight from the district. Approximately 19% of K-12 students enrolled in LAUSD attend independent charter schools (LAUSD Fingertip Facts, 2016), compared to 8% in the state of California overall and 5% nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

The district's stated vision is: "Embracing our diversity to educate L.A.'s youth, ensure academic achievement and empower tomorrow's leaders. We are L.A. Unified." Its companion vision reads: "L.A. Unified will be a progressive global leader in education, providing a dynamic and inspiring learning experience where all students graduate ready for success. A primary measure of progress toward these goals is high school graduation rates; over the last five years these rates have increased from 64.8% in 2011 to approximately 75% in 2016 (Kohli & Blume, 2016, *Los Angeles Times*). In a 2015 report, LAUSD highlighted improvements in the graduation rates of student subgroups who have historically graduated at much lower rates overall: Latino and African American students, English-learners, and students with disabilities. The district specifically highlighted Roosevelt High School Math/Science Magnet in Boyle Heights as achieving a "record [graduation] rate of 100 percent" (http://home.lausd.net/apps/news/article/577683).

The *Los Angeles Times* Editorial Board published a column in June 2016, however, that accused LAUSD and the California Department of Education of "fudging the numbers" by selectively removing students attending alternative programs, such as credit recovery for students who have been unsuccessful in traditional comprehensive high schools or are returning to earn their diplomas, from the count. The writers suggested a more accurate graduation rate of the district to be about 67%, but also cited educational researchers who have pointed out that such numbers alone are not a true measure of student success in the district. Determining how to define and measure quality education for students attending schools in Los Angeles is a topic of ongoing debate at the district and local level.

K-12 Schools in Boyle Heights

Almost 98% of students enrolled in Boyle Heights schools identify as Latino/a or Hispanic (L.A. Times), compared to 74% of the overall LAUSD student population (LAUSD Fingertip Facts). Public schools within the Boyle Heights neighborhood boundaries include traditional and charter schools, which are public schools with separate management structures and less control by the school district. Of the traditional schools, four are comprehensive high schools that enroll students in grades nine through 12, two are middle schools exclusively enrolling students in sixth through eighth grades, and 13 are elementary schools with students in kindergarten through grades five or six. Utah Street School enrolls students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Metropolitan Continuation High School and Boyle Heights Continuation High School enroll students who have fallen behind in their studies to complete the credits necessary to earn high school diplomas; East Los Angeles Occupational and Skills Center also offers credit recovery options along with adult and career education programs.

A longstanding tradition of parochial schooling, particularly Catholic schools, exists in Boyle Heights. Private school employees are not required to follow state educator credentialing requirements, and school curricula vary greatly across campuses according to each school's focus and mission. A majority of parochial and private school options available in the neighborhood serve the elementary grades, although Bishop Mora Salesian High School is an all-male Catholic school that counts current Los Angeles City Council member José Huizar among its graduates. A listing of schools in Boyle Heights is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: K–12 Schools in Boyle Heights

Traditional Public Schools *(grades enrolled)*	Charter Schools *(grades enrolled)*	Parochial Schools *(grades enrolled)*
• Bravo Medical Magnet High School *(9–12)*	• Animo Oscar De La Hoya Charter High School (Green Dot Charter Network) *(9–12)*	• Assumption Elementary School *(K–8)*
• Felicitas & Gonzalo Méndez High School *(9–12)*	• Extera 2nd Street School (Extera Schools Charter Network) *(K–8)*	• Bishop Mora Salesian High School *(9–12)*
• Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Academy of Boyle Heights *(9–12)*	• KIPP Los Angeles College Preparatory Middle School (Knowledge is Power Program National Charter Network) *(5–8)*	• Dolores Mission *(K–8)*
• Theodore Roosevelt High School *(9–12)*	• SIATech Boyle Heights Charter School Independent Study *(ages 16–24)*	• Our Lady of Talpa Elementary School *(K–8)*
• Hollenbeck Middle School *(6–8)*	• YouthBuild Boyle Heights Charter School (YouthBuild Charter School California Statewide Network) *(ages 16–24)*	• Resurrection Catholic School *(K–8)*
• Stevenson Middle School *(6–8)*		• Santa Teresita Elementary School *(K–8)*
• 1st Street Elementary School *(K–6)*		• School of Santa Isabel *(K–8)*
• 2nd Street Elementary School *(K–5)*		• St. Mary Catholic School *(K–8)*
• Breed Street Elementary School *(K–5)*		
• Bridge Street Elementary School *(K–5)*		
• Dena Christopher Elementary School *(K–6)*		
• Euclid Avenue Elementary School *(K–5)*		
• Evergreen Avenue Elementary School *(K–5)*		
• Garza Primary Center *(K–2)*		
• Lorena Street Elementary School *(K–5)*		
• Malabar Street Elementary School *(K–5)*		
• Murchison Elementary School *(K–5)*		
• Sheridan Street Elementary School *(K–6)*		
• Soto Street Elementary School *(K–6)*		
• Sunrise Elementary School *(K–5)*		
• Utah Street School *(K–8)*		

LAUSD Governance Structure

Unlike mayors in the cities with the two other largest school districts in the United States (New York City and Chicago), Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and the L.A. City Council do not have authority over public schools. This power resides with the LAUSD Board, which is responsible for developing and implementing local policies aligned with state and federal educational requirements. Seven members are elected to the Board from geographical districts, and they have the power to appoint and remove the superintendent. In a very unusual form of school district governance, the school board members serve full time, and as a result of a recent increase in salary, are among the better paid elected officials in the region.

The current board includes five men (George McKenna, Nick Melvoin, Richard Vladovic, Ref Rodriguez, and Scott Schmerelson) and two women (García and Kelly Gonez). The longest-serving current member (García) was elected in 2006, and the most recently elected representatives (Melvoin and Gonez) began their terms in 2017.

Figure 1 shows the overlapping boundaries of the seven LAUSD districts and the 15 City Council districts in Los Angeles. The geographic boundaries of the school districts expand beyond the city border in all directions and include many communities that have their own city councils and mayors but not their own school districts. The right side of Figure 1 shows that Boyle Heights is in School Board District 2 and is represented by García. This district is physically

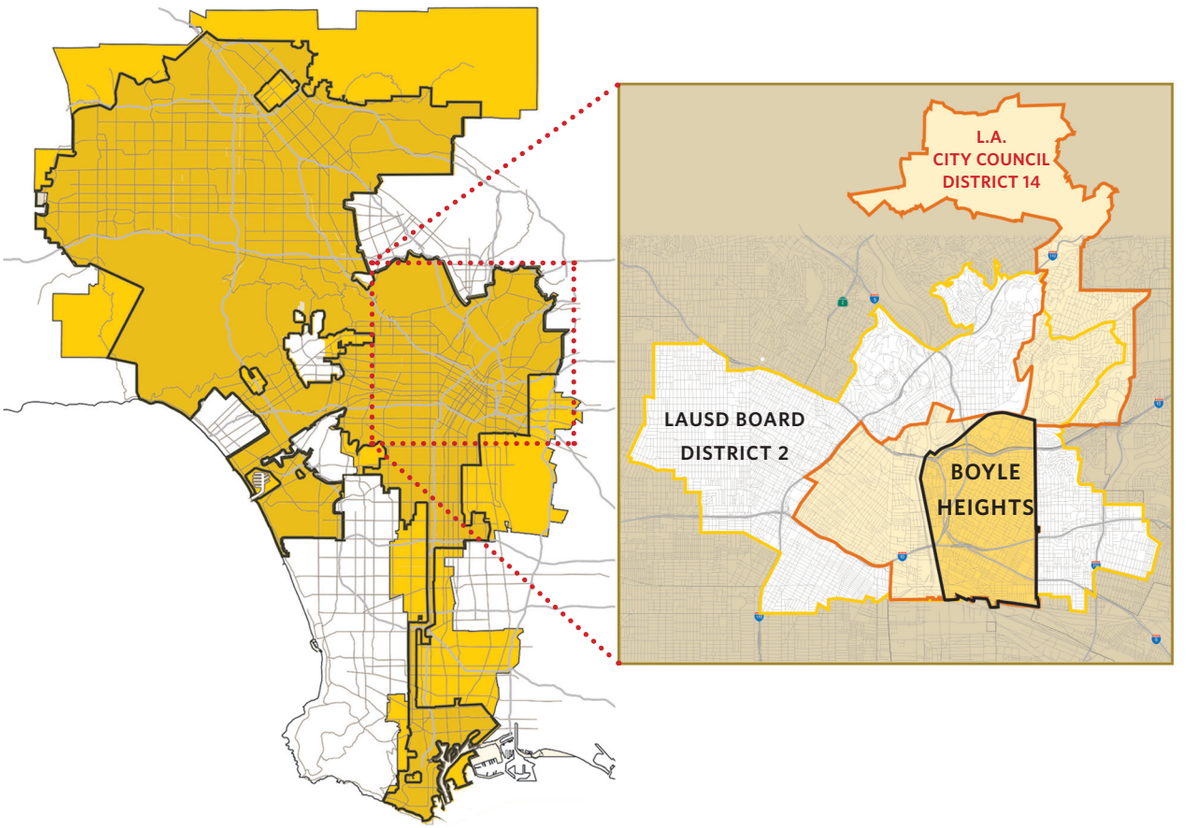


Figure 1: The borders of the LAUSD (in yellow) extend beyond the borders of the city of Los Angeles (bordered in black) (left); and the location of Boyle Heights within the overlapping jurisdictions of LA City Council District 14 and LAUSD Board District 2 (inset).

larger than City Council District 14, in which Boyle Heights is situated and which is represented by Huizar.

In the last three years, LAUSD has had three superintendents. John Deasy stepped down in October 2014. The Board replaced Deasy with his predecessor, Ramón Cortines, who was immediately named interim acting superintendent. After a national search, the Board hired as permanent superintendent Michelle King, a longtime LAUSD educator with experience as a classroom teacher, principal, and central office administrator. King assumed the post in January 2016 and is the first African American woman to lead the district.

King has expressed a public commitment to increasing graduation rates in the district and to implementing "restorative justice" programs, which are based on an approach to conflict resolution and community peace building that serve as an alternative to traditional school discipline policies that disproportionately result in suspensions and expulsions of students of color.

Boyle Heights and the LAUSD School Board

LAUSD Board sessions are public meetings of elected representatives making decisions about use of public funds, but the reality of how accessible they are to multiple stakeholders does not match the aspirations of open government. The 1 p.m. start time of meetings and the limited capacity in the Board's meeting space relative to demand for attendance (as indicated by long lines on the sidewalk starting early in the morning on meeting days) are barriers to attendance.

Implicit messages may also discourage participation. Official documents and communication from the

Board that advise community members on "tips for an effective presentation" on the Board's website promote a narrow form of participation based on Western-based expectations of behavior and speaking. Other elements of the assembly space contribute to an atmosphere that may be unwelcoming to visitors unfamiliar with the type of formal government-oriented decision-making procedures. On meeting days, the entrance to the building is flanked by armed police officers, and those entering must have their belongings searched and pass through a metal detector before reaching the meeting chambers.

In addition to these gatekeeping measures, many parent-organizing groups backed by philanthropic interests who also support the charter school movement and representatives of specific charter schools frequently use a strategy that limits entrance to school board meetings to their supporters. On days of regular board meetings, groups wearing matching T-shirts and carrying signs begin lining up on the sidewalk on Beaudry Avenue and around the corner on 4th Street many hours before the scheduled meeting begins. Interested members of the public who are not able to spend an entire day downtown are effectively denied access to the meetings. The strategy is effective because the meeting chambers themselves do not accommodate the demand for seats evidenced by those who arrive with hopes of attending in person. The community members on the sidewalk often hope to attend the meetings to advocate for their schools because they believe them to be at risk of closure, even though Board members often vote before such meetings to approve or continue a school's charter.

Many concerned parents show up in good faith based on messaging transmitted by particular organizers, rather than because they have reviewed information posted online about agendas and consent decree documents to be read into the record. Understanding the way issues are discussed and decisions are made requires knowledge of parliamentary procedure, and public comment periods are often rushed as meetings run long. LAUSD rules limit the number of speakers at a meeting to 15, and their comments are limited to three minutes. Speakers must sign up in person at the beginning of the meeting, requiring early arrival and attendance at the entire meeting. Beyond navigating meeting processes, however, is the need for stakeholders to understand the scope of responsibilities of the school board and how decisions made during its meetings affect local communities.

We examined LAUSD Board meetings from September 2015 through September 2016 and identified public debates and decisions specific to the Boyle Heights neighborhood. We attended meetings in person when possible, reviewed online recordings, and downloaded and analyzed all documents posted to the school board's website. These documents included meeting agendas, official minutes, and copies of materials provided by speakers invited by Board members to give presentations on a wide range of topics.

References to Boyle Heights schools were found in such routine required documents as personnel and staffing notices and budgetary records that addressed district-wide issues. In other cases, the Boyle Heights community or schools in the neighborhood were a specific topic of discussion. For example, a major renovation of Roosevelt High School is underway and was therefore discussed in the context of facilities design and budgetary allocation. In June 2016, the Board adopted a resolution that included approval of the Roosevelt High School Comprehensive Modernization Project for completion in the third quarter of 2021. The project includes demolition and rebuilding of virtually the entire campus, and planned new facilities that will consist of "approximately" 76 classrooms, an auditorium, a gymnasium (practice and competitive facilities), and a lunch shelter and includes site infrastructure and accessibility improvements.

The important role of advocates in schools and the community was emphasized at the June 14, 2016, meeting at which several educators, community ac-

tivists, and students from Boyle Heights spoke. Wearing a shirt with his school's name on it, a special educator at Lorena Street Elementary School shared his concerns about the location of a charter school on the Lorena campus. He said that "being co-located has created continuous problems" in terms of student safety and unethical recruitment of students from the traditional district school to the charter. He suggested that charter schools were "cheating" the system.

Ari Gutierrez, director of the Latin@ Equality Alliance and a member of the Boyle Heights Building Healthy Communities (BHBHC) coalition, echoed the Board's proclamation that June be recognized as Pride Month in honor of LGBTQ people and used the time to call for more mental health support in schools. Gutierrez said "I'm also here representing the Boyle Heights community… and Chicanos, and queer people, and people of color," comments that drew a clear connection between personal identities and collective connection to the Boyle Heights neighborhood. Several members of the Public Health Advocates program at Roosevelt High School, also part of BHBHC, spoke to the board in support of investment in preventive measures, rather than punitive or reactionary practices, in schools. A Roosevelt junior stated that "the community of Boyle Heights came to support our unity platform for the lens of restorative justice."

Media Coverage of Schools and Education in Boyle Heights

We reviewed selected media outlets for coverage of topics related to schools, education, and youth in the Boyle Heights community during the 2015-2016 school year. In this section, we present themes identified through an examination of two newspapers, the city-wide *Los Angeles Times* and the neighborhood-focused *Boyle Heights Beat*.

Los Angeles Times

According to its website, the *Los Angeles Times* is "the largest metropolitan daily newspaper in the country" and has been "covering Southern California for more than 135 years." As the local paper of record, the *Times* is an influential source of information for the broader community and therefore plays a role in creating messages about areas of the city and region.

Our content analysis indicated that when the topic of the *Times* was Boyle Heights, the neighborhood was suggested to be unsafe, and its youth to be alternately vulnerable or dangerous. This coverage constructs a negative image of a typical Boyle Heights young person. In a story about the closure of all LAUSD schools because of a bomb scare in December 2015, the writer quoted a Roosevelt High School senior as saying he was glad school was cancelled because he wasn't prepared for a history test and described himself and his little brother "glid[ing] by the deserted campus on hoverboards." Although it is unlikely the reporter consciously sought to portray these students negatively, the image is one of a student not focused on academic progress and wandering the neighborhood unsupervised.

Boyle Heights students are also frequently portrayed as needing help or intervention from outside. Two stories from March 2016 reported tragic stories about students in Boyle Heights schools. One concerned the drowning death of a high school senior and another reported an incident in which a fifth-grader stabbed a classmate while at school. In their initial report about a Boyle Heights high school student killed by a police officer, the newspaper began by describing him as having been suspected of gang-related activity, then relayed the LAPD's version of events, and mentioned the organization of a vigil by community mourners in the third paragraph. The article also indicated that police officers reported the suspect as a man in his 20s, and only later identified him as a teenager. Such misperception is linked to the maintenance of biases and stereotyping of urban youth of color.

A particular perspective of schools in the neighborhood is also evident in the *Times* coverage. In May 2016 a story that referred to the neighborhood as "a center of gravity for L.A. Latinos" included a list of

the more than 20 public schools in Boyle Heights and highlighted the charter KIPP Los Angeles College Preparatory School as "among the bright spots." In a November 16, 2015 article lauding the expansion of a college preparatory program funded by the widow of Apple founder Steve Jobs, Mayor Garcetti reinforced expectations that tools for improvement must come from outside the community.

Boyle Heights Beat

The *Boyle Heights Beat* is a print and online newspaper with a community focus. Described as "a bilingual community newspaper produced by its youth *por y para la comunidad*," *Boyle Heights Beat* is supported by a media partner, *Hoy*, the Spanish newspaper of the Times Media Group. Our analysis of this publication's coverage of community events indicates more nuance than that in newspapers with wider circulation. The bilingual character of the newspaper, along with other efforts to offer public presentations in locations such as local public libraries, shows respect for the Spanish language. This not only indicates cultural competence but also means that announcements and news shared through *Boyle Heights Beat* can potentially reach more members of the community, aided by its locally focused community outreach efforts. Many stories reflected the salience of public and environmental safety issues. Public health in schools was addressed in stories about the targeting of Latino youth by tobacco companies and coverage of the state Department of Toxic Substances Control's efforts to address lead-contaminated soil at several local schools.

In August 2016, coverage of the death of Jesse Romero, a 14-year-old Méndez High School student who was shot by a police officer, focused on neighborhood conversations about police-community interactions and gang activity.

Some *Beat* stories also offered a wider range of images of youth, rather than the more limited categories of "at-risk student" or "juvenile criminal" that often stereotype young people in Boyle Heights. For example, a February 21, 2016, story covered the return of sex education classes to public schools in California and described how students were instrumental in highlighting the need for health information. Another article from June 9, 2016, described the development of a course called "Boyle Heights in Me" by an Ethnic Studies Task Force at Roosevelt and quoted a student who described such classes as ways for students to "be united and empower one another." The participation of teenagers as reporters for *Boyle Heights Beat* offers an additional opportunity to acknowledge them as agents and community members in their own right.

Boyle Heights Community Perceptions of LAUSD

School Alumni

We conducted interviews with several people who had attended schools in Boyle Heights over a range of decades. These included individuals who attended public schools for their entire K-12 education and those who attended public elementary school and transferred to private schools for secondary education. As in other conversations with current and former residents, alumni expressed varied perspectives on education in Boyle Heights and the neighborhood itself.

"Ana," a recent graduate of Méndez High School, described knowing little, anything, about how official decision-making takes place in LAUSD but having a generally positive perspective about the district. In her words:

> *"I feel like schools and the teachers of our community try their best to help students be successful in their educational careers. Schools offer good opportunities to the students who actively are looking for something to benefit from whether it be educational or about one's [personal] well-being."*

Now a first-year college student, Ana also emphasized the importance of the community's involvement in advocating for changes in the educational experiences of students. She said,

> *"[O]ur community has the most influence over our schools…Without them the district would*

never know what each school needs and what should be improved."

"Daniel," who graduated from Roosevelt High School in the late 1990s, had a more cynical perspective about the quality of both education and community involvement in district decision-making. He stated:

"[T]he public education experience is sad…. It requires extra effort by students to give themselves a chance at attending a good university. Nonprofits [have to] step in to offer students opportunities that the schools do not."

"Chris," who grew up in Boyle Heights, demonstrated a clear understanding of the leadership of LAUSD, noting that "L.A. voters elect board members to represent each district. The board then appoints a superintendent to run the daily operations of the district," but he did not express much faith in the structure to allow for community input. He suggested that breaking the district into smaller more manageable districts could improve the system.

"Andi," a lifelong Boyle Heights resident, reported more positive impressions of the neighborhood itself than of the public school system. She said:

"I would describe the neighborhood at this time as hardworking. There are a lot of programs and organizations that are working to better the Boyle Heights community."

Having attended a private school from eighth through 12th grades, she compared her experience to that of her friends who went to neighborhood high schools:

"[W]hen I went to high school in a private setting, the curriculum was a lot harder than friends [who attended] public education. My friends were not talked [to] about the SAT or ACT until they reached the end of their junior year. I [learned] about both at the beginning of my freshman year and … took my first SAT at the beginning of my junior year, while my friends [at local public high schools] took it at the beginning of their senior year."

Chris also began his K-12 education at public elementary schools in Boyle Heights but attended parochial middle and high schools. His perceptions of the quality of public high schools in the community were heavily influenced by his parents' experiences of having attended, but not graduated from, Roosevelt High School. As a charter school educator, he expressed more positive views of newer, reform-oriented schools in the neighborhood:

"When it comes to school choice for students and families in Boyle Heights, they have been historically limited to what has been available in the neighborhood; you had your traditional local public schools [run] by LAUSD, or you had your private, parochial schools. That dialogue has changed over the course of the past 10, 15 years with the introduction of charter schools, [which] provide families more options for their students."

He also acknowledged, however, that many families in the neighborhood felt a strong generational loyalty to schools like Roosevelt and said he knew there were "amazing teachers behind those walls," but he said he felt there was a lack of structural support in place to help them promote academic achievement of all students.

"Olga", mentioned above, a graduate of Roosevelt who has returned to LAUSD as a teacher, expressed a perspective that reflects a combination of other alumni views. Echoing the sentiments of many Boyle Heights residents who are immigrants or whose parents immigrated in search of economic and educational opportunity, Olga compared the educational system in Mexico to that in the United States. She drew on her own family's move from the state of Michoacán when she was 10 to express an understanding of the challenges many of her own students face outside of school and to describe the uncertainty many immigrant parents feel about navigating the LAUSD system. Overall, public school alumni from Boyle Heights expressed positive feelings about their neighborhood but a degree of ambivalence about LAUSD. "Learning about your community and history builds pride," Olga said, adding that she still believes a stigma is attached to label of being from Boyle Heights. Focusing on the positives in the

neighborhood and in its schools while also acknowledging the need for improvement is a tension that was expressed by many with whom we spoke.

Los Angeles City Neighborhood Councils

In 1999, the City of Los Angeles established an official system of Neighborhood Councils to enhance opportunities for community engagement around issues of local importance. There are now 96 such councils, and each receives $37,000 in city funds annually; they have some flexibility in establishing the number of elected member positions and the focus of working committees. The Boyle Heights Neighborhood Council (BHNC) has 19 elected community representatives who serve two-year terms. It holds regular council and subcommittee meetings in the neighborhood and addresses a range of issues. We collected information about it by attending a meeting in July 2016 at which new representatives were welcomed and officers were elected. We also spoke with the current council president, Mynor Godoy, and Steven Almazan, the outgoing community outreach liaison; we also reviewed materials posted to the BHNC website and asked other stakeholders for their perspectives about the neighborhood council.

According to the BHNC's bylaws, the duties and powers of the council direct it to provide guidance to "the City government or any other level of government" on matters that may include "community, development, land use, transportation, education, services, public safety and environmental conditions." Of this list of suggested topics, however, education is typically the least discussed in neighborhood council settings. This is consistent with the absence of city authority over the LAUSD. The city charter provides specific avenues for neighborhood council input in City Hall decisions, but no provision is made for such a role regarding School Board decisions.

Seven standing committees are required by BHNC bylaws: executive committee, planning and land use, neighborhood, outreach and special events, budget and finance, rules and elections, and transportation and environment. Given the immediate concerns posed by rapid development and gentrification in the community, planning and land use are high-profile issues for the council. During the meeting we attended, we observed a mix of commitment to bureaucratic process and off-the-cuff expressions of diverse personalities and perspectives. Even at a meeting at which no specific community-wide topics were discussed, there were several residents in the audience, some of whom participated in public comment sessions. Simultaneous translation of the meeting was available, and audience members were observed using this service. Many moments of commentary and opportunities to address the group were available in Spanish and English, reflecting the bilingual nature of life in Boyle Heights. In general, the BHNC meetings are much more participatory in nature than LAUSD School Board meetings.

Conclusions

Promoting Community Knowledge and Involvement

In May 2013 the LAUSD Board unanimously approved the School Climate Bill of Rights, adopting an approach to student discipline based on restorative justice and other positive behavioral support practices. Advocates with strong ties to Boyle Heights actively pushed for this policy change, and Roosevelt High School's restorative justice program is hailed as a successful example as the district rolls out these practices with a goal of full implementation by 2020. One voting member of the School Climate Committee of the school board is a representative of Inner City Struggle, a Boyle Heights-based organization involved in grassroots activism for social justice.

At the LAUSD Board meeting on June 14, 2016, a representative from Public Counsel, a large pro bono law firm that addresses community issues in the Los Angeles area, reported a summary of a June 6 School Climate forum organized by community members and held at Roosevelt High School by presenting a letter with budget recommendations, stating: "We're not saying defund the police, we're saying it's important to consider when looking at school climate."

Belinda Campos from Public Health Advocates also challenged the board: "If you can find $60 million to fund [LAUSD] school police, you can definitely find $60 million to fund programs that are shown to work, like restorative justice."

At the end of the 2015-2016 school year, however, the school board voted to approve an increase in funding and staffing for the LAUSD school police. The 14th largest police department in the state, LAUSD's police department staffs 101 school safety officers working on school campuses and more than 410 sworn officers district-wide. Data presented to the School Climate Committee and Chief Steven K. Zipperman's reported experiences attest to disproportionate treatment of students of color, particularly boys, by the current disciplinary system. More than 50% of citations issued to students on school grounds or in the vicinity of a campus are for possession of marijuana. Although Chief Zipperman said during the October 20, 2015 School Climate Committee meeting that he believes marijuana use can serve as a gateway to future offenses, he noted that many of the district's challenges regarding arrests, citations, and placement of students in diversion programs could be reduced if the law addressed marijuana issues differently.

The Successful School Climate Committee has not met as regularly as other committees during the 2016-2017 school year as meetings were not consistently scheduled. Given the ongoing rollout of Restorative Justice in schools across the district and the clear connections between disciplinary practices and academic achievement, renewed attention to the School Climate Bill of Rights is an essential part of engaging community stakeholders in neighborhoods like Boyle Heights. Increased attention to the use of force by police in communities across the country and locally also highlights the need to address the ongoing role of law enforcement officers in schools.

Opportunities for Connection and Engagement

Currently, no state or district policy requires school board members to communicate with specific neighborhood entities. Additionally, neighborhood councils are not required to address educational issues specifically, as public schools are not governed by the city of Los Angeles. The section of the city's Charter that describes the role of Neighborhood Councils calls on them "to promote more citizen participation in government and make government more responsive to local needs;" helping community members become aware of how schools are governed by a separate body is aligned with this goal. The establishment of an educational committee on the Boyle Heights Neighborhood Council would present an opportunity to develop a formal reporting relationship between the LAUSD School Board and an existing representative body.

Such a move, however, must not supplant or co-opt the essential ongoing work of grassroots organizations that provide access to residents who may not trust elected representatives or quasi-governmental bodies such as the Neighborhood Council. Rather, members of this committee can build connections with community advocates to increase the sharing of timely and relevant information about school policies and practices with a greater number of constituents. Most of the public meetings held in Boyle Heights at which school board members or the superintendent were present during the 2016-2017 academic year were coordinated by local community-based organizations and family advocates. The efforts by Board District 2 Office or Local District East Office (located on Soto Street, in the heart of Boyle Heights) to coordinate regular meetings that function as listening sessions or town hall discussions could engender greater trust between LAUSD's leadership and Boyle Heights' educational stakeholders.

The importance of word of mouth communication among peers and neighbors about educational issues in Boyle Heights cannot be overstated. Although almost all participants said in interviews that they believe parents have the greatest potential power and influence over school decision-making, most people also described families as lacking access to

complete information. School personnel are therefore also crucial components of strengthening the quality of information that is spread through social networks. Andi described how teachers play a key role in building relationships with parents that can influence how they perceive LAUSD schools in positive or negative ways. Although she described her overall experiences in elementary school as inadequate, she did report:

> *"[M]y fifth-grade teacher was Mexican-American and spoke Spanish. This made it a lot easier for my mom to communicate with my teacher and explain [her] worries, plus understanding the cultural issues that are presented to a young Latinx."*

Several participants in this study noted that the budget-making power of the LAUSD Board is a key element of its influence. If the structure and function of the school board is poorly understood by community stakeholders, the budgeting processes of public schools are even less so. Although some interviewees, including Olga and Chris, acted in advocacy roles and could explain the community outreach components of California's Local Control Funding Formula regulations, most parents and other residents are poorly informed about these relatively new guidelines. As Cal State LA expands its GoEastLA partnership to develop a cradle to career pipeline to schools in Boyle Heights and works to develop a college-going culture in the community, the university should also support parents and guardians in understanding the K-12 system. For example, graduate student interns from the College of Education could work with the Pat Brown Institute to develop informational materials about how decision-making works in the district and at individual school. These interns could also work with the members of the BHBHC Partnership to document the existing knowledge and expertise of local student and family advocates and involve these stakeholders in coordinating workshops to inform others about important areas of school district policy and practice. Cal State LA and the Pat Brown Institute could play an important role in coordinating information-sharing, supporting the ongoing efforts of local organizations to conduct vital community outreach and education, and in establishing regular communication with the centralized LAUSD power structure.

About the Authors

Allison Mattheis, PhD is Assistant Professor of Applied and Advanced Studies in Education at California State University Los Angeles. As a teacher and scholar, she is broadly interested in issues of how power is wielded through policy and practice in communities and learning spaces, with the goal of disrupting systems that maintain unjust hierarchies and promoting advocacy and empowerment. Her current research projects include a critical ethnography of stakeholder interactions with the LAUSD school board, youth participatory ethnography of bicycling and transit use in seven urban communities in the U.S., and a national mixed methods study of queer-identified individuals in STEM fields. Recent journal articles include "Political contestation and discursive argumentation: Revising Minnesota's School Integration Revenue Statute" in *educational policy analysis archives* and "A mashup of policy tools and CDA as a framework for educational policy inquiry" in *Critical Policy Studies*.

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