Background
Over the past several years, the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) has faced numerous financial and administrative challenges. While challenges are not uncommon for many of the more than 1,000 school districts in California, the specific circumstances and level of tension between the parties primarily responsible for improving educational outcomes in the city of Sacramento are unique in many ways. From seemingly unresolvable annual budget crises to the distressing suspension rates for African American male students (Wood et al., 2018), there seems never to be timely, effective and mutually agreed-upon resolutions to address any number of challenges. As a result, an indefensible level of educational inequity for students across the district exists, particularly low-income students and students of color. A total of 46,657 students were enrolled in 81 K-12 schools during the 2019-2020 school year. More than half of the students (33,026) live in poverty as measured by USDA Free and Reduced Priced Lunch (FRPL) statistics (California Department of Education, 2020).

Add to this reality the traumatizing economic and social effects that COVID-19 has wrought on families (COVID Tracking Project, 2020), and this troublesome situation is even more distressing. In fact, as of this writing with more than half the 2020-2021 school year complete, the district and teachers union have yet to agree on a distance-learning plan, leaving 46,000 students in limbo as negotiations drag on. These circumstances are nested in a long history of disagreement and political infighting between the teachers union and the school district’s administration that has primarily focused on salaries, working conditions and benefits instead of student achievement and education inequity. Consequently, these debates have raged on for decades. Even the outcome of a recent state audit of the district’s financial status was disputed by the parties, leaving many observers feeling there is no effective path forward.

Parents Advocating for Student Success
With the SCUSD teetering on insolvency, there is a voice that has been mostly excluded from important discussions, but that could help move the balance in favor of students. The voice of parents who are concerned about the direction of the district and the impact that unresolved debates have on the quality of education their children receive often is missing. To be clear, parents have participated in important meetings. However, there is no support for parents to work and organize beyond school sites and on specific issues at a level sufficient to influence policy decisions. McKenna and Millen (2013) state that parent engagement “encapsulates both parent voice and parent presence” (p. 9).
To assist in creating a path forward that actively engages parents, we propose the Parents Advocating for Student Success (PASS) project, a parent-led school and community advocacy effort to connect and support parent advocates from across the district. For PASS, we use the term parent broadly to refer to positive, caring adults in the lives of students including caregivers, extended family members and guardians.

The mission is to establish a district-wide policy, finance and school climate influencers movement centered on equity and student well-being that is comprised of parents and their close allies. The vision is to ensure representatives of those who have been most closely impacted by the ongoing battle between labor and management (children) have their most committed and passionate advocates (parents) positioned and sufficiently empowered to influence the district’s future direction.

Framework of Practice
PASS will draw on several frameworks of practice to inform the project’s design, development and implementation. Ginwright’s (2015) revised radical healing framework will shape the foundational elements to simultaneously facilitate critical consciousness, collective healing and culturally responsive action toward positive change. To involve parents as educational advocates within their children’s learning environments and to engage parents as navigators of K-12 education, PASS strategies cannot solely focus on fostering advocacy. According to Ginwright (2015), an alignment of community organizing with the practice of healing merges the health and well-being of those involved in advocacy and organizing and ensures they do not unjustly suffer from health-related harms involved with such work. PASS will include healing to address external and internal influences that shape the conditions that disrupt the quality of lived experiences for adults and students of color.

Participatory action research (PAR) will guide parents’ engagement to ensure a focus on parent empowerment to identify their concerns through a research and analysis process and develop policy solutions to address those concerns. PAR linked with parent-school engagement can provide collaborative leadership (Ho, 2002). Through the practice of PAR, parents begin to see themselves as valued contributing members of the school culture while gaining viable transferable skills. While Ginwright’s (2015) framework will inform PASS’s foundational elements, PAR will guide how PASS structures leadership toward parent-informed system-level solutions.
To sustain the efforts of PASS and rethink the relationship between schools and communities, PASS will utilize a community-school practice. According to Maier et al. (2017), positive student outcomes and improved educational conditions, among various other promising proven outcomes, result from meaningful family engagement and collaborative leadership provided by community schools. Subsequently, through these noted frameworks of practice, PASS focuses on meaningfully engaging parents as advocates for student success for long-term, systemic-level impact and policy change.

Theory of Change
PASS seeks to deploy trained and supported parent organizers on school campuses to increase and facilitate parent engagement, prioritize parent concerns related to their children’s education, and collectively advocate for solutions to improve student achievement. This will result in more timely, equitable and effective responses to educational challenges and student well-being at the district and schools. Diagram 1 presents the PASS theory of change.

Multiphase Approach to Implementation
With support from funders, the PASS project will focus on several goals over two years of a multiphase approach to implementation. Following are the phases and corresponding goals.

Diagram 1: PASS Theory of Change

Parents Advocating for Student Success

PHASE 1: OPERATIONAL DESIGN PLANNING 2020-2021

Goal 1: Selection of PASS Project Manager
PASS funders will select a highly qualified and experienced PASS project manager, who will be responsible for overseeing the PASS project and its various components, including leadership oversight of developing a competitive process to select a nonprofit, or a nonprofit collaborative comprised of multiple organizations, which will be responsible for developing a detailed initiative design and implementation plan prior to launching the project. Additionally, the PASS project manager will be responsible for working collaboratively with the SCUSD, school site administrators, diverse community-based organizations, parents and labor to ensure timely implementation of PASS.

Goal 2: Selection of Operating Partner or Group
PASS funders will initiate a competitive process to select a nonprofit, or a nonprofit collaborative comprised of multiple organizations, which will be responsible for developing a detailed initiative design and implementation plan prior to launching the initiative. The plan must make clear the initiative is not meant to support or oppose labor
or school district administration, rather, the initiative's priorities are set by parents on behalf of their children. It is anticipated the selected nonprofit(s) will build linkages with similar efforts taking place in other jurisdictions in order to establish a learning community capable of engaging in ongoing knowledge and capacity building activities.

**Goal 3: Conduct Landscape Assessment to Identify Best Practice Models of Education-Focused Parent Advocacy**

A landscape assessment will be conducted to identify best practice models of education-focused parents organizing to design and implement a district-wide parent organizing effort. This effort will include 20 schools experiencing the most challenges in a variety of indicators, including school climate and academic achievement across the SCUSD. This activity is essential to ensuring the project’s design, management structure and operations are informed by successful efforts within California and nationally. Another outcome of this effort is to seek out and participate in ongoing learning opportunities in this emerging field. This will help to ensure the project is positioned to learn from and contribute to the parent-led, education and student well-being-focused advocacy efforts.

**Goal 4: Develop PASS Project Implementation Plan**

The implementation plan will be informed by parents, community advocates, educators and district administration to ensure communication lines remain open. The plan will be shared with district administration, labor stakeholders and the selected operating partner or group once it is complete. The implementation plan will help ensure the PASS project has concrete tasks, activities and processes necessary to guide the work based on the information collected through the landscape assessment and the resource needs identified to implement PASS within the determined timeframe.

**PHASE 2: IMPLEMENTATION 2021-2022 THROUGH 2022-2023 SCHOOL YEAR**

**Goal 5: Establish Communication Awareness and Information Sharing Strategy**

Establish a communication awareness and information sharing strategy for PASS to enable it to effectively and accurately describe its role, approach and rationale for the positions it adopts. Purposeful meetings with Sacramento City Teachers Association, SCUSD and other relevant
education leaders will be conducted to introduce them to PASS’s goals, secure support if possible, and create channels for open dialogue and communication going forward. This goal is essential to ensuring the project stakes out its independent status and positions PASS to control narratives about its mission, values and goals, given the contentious relationship between labor and school district administration.

Goal 6: Design and Develop PASS Curriculum
The selected nonprofit or collaborative group will design and develop PASS curriculum (may be adaptive or comprised of existing evidenced-based curriculum) guided by the frameworks of practice that inform the project and findings from the landscape assessment. The PASS curriculum will be designed for inclusivity, cultural relevance, parent-focused learning and engagement, and accessibility. The curriculum will include components on community advocacy and organizing, effective communications, meeting facilitation, school district budget management, de-escalation, the history of collective bargaining, and building consensus, to name a few. Additionally, the curriculum will clearly outline intended learning outcomes and supplemental materials. The PASS curriculum will provide the contextual framing of the PASS leadership and training institute.

Goal 7: Recruitment and Selection of Initial PASS Cohort
The selected nonprofit or collaborative group will design a process for selecting the initial cohort of school site parent advocates. This process will be done in partnership with school site leaders to ensure they are prepared to partner with the project’s manager and the selected school site parent advocates. The selected parent advocates must be willing and committed to participating in the training curriculum designed and provided by the PASS project.

Goal 8: Launch Cohort 1 PASS Leadership and Training Institute
The PASS project manager will serve as lead facilitator and will be responsible for scheduling and convening the PASS Leadership and Training Institute. The training should include components from the PASS curriculum. It is anticipated that each parent involved in the PASS project will be offered a monthly stipend. Additionally, each of the participating SCUSD school sites will have an annual budget that will be used to support site-based PASS organizing efforts. The nonprofit or collaborative group and the PASS manager will be responsible for providing the stipend and ensuring the school site parent support budget is used for appropriate purposes.
Project Timeline
Pending approval from funders, the PASS project will begin planning during the 2020-2021 school year, with the PASS project manager selected in Spring 2021, and continue through the 2022-2023 school year. Diagram 2 provides essential benchmarks in the multiphase implementation approach highlighting Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Conclusion
We are inspired by what we can achieve if we successfully partner with community-based nonprofits and parents to implement the approach and goals outlined in this concept paper. We believe it will connect parent advocacy and student achievement by successfully organizing parents in marginalized communities to act collectively and take on the role of “education reform architects” for students served by SCUSD.

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References


