CIVIC CHANGE CHAMPION ANNOUNCED - FAMILIES UNITED FOR EDUCATION

With over 400 community members and 44 community-based, non-profit organizations participating, Families United for Education is a leader in the nation when it comes to engaging families toward improving school outcomes. As one of four finalists for Everyday Democracy’s distinguished Paul J. Aicher Leadership in Democracy Award, and now announced as a Civic Change Champion, Families United for Education is a national model for diverse communities working to achieve educational equity. They have held dozens of one-on-one and small group meetings with the community and also partner with Everyday Democracy by employing its Dialogue to Change process toward improving educational equity and student outcomes in Albuquerque Public Schools and the community at large.

Everyday Democracy is committed to increasing opportunities for people from all walks of life to come together and speak honestly with each other, actively listen to each other and develop trusting relationships while coming up with solutions to community challenges. This type of community engagement is often overlooked in school districts across the nation even though the research is clear that parent, family, and community involvement in education correlates with higher academic performance and school improvement. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, the "community collective" Families United for Education understands this challenge and addresses it head on with fervor and persistence. With the help of Everyday Democracy’s Dialogue to Change process, Families United worked with the community to develop the first school / family engagement policy in the nation that was written – ‘by the community for the community.’ The policy was accepted and implemented by a school board resulting in an ongoing community connection toward the goal of building and maintaining education equity in the district.
Albuquerque has unique, regional challenges in striving for educational equity. Over the past 10 years, refugee resettlement agencies Catholic Charities and Lutheran Family Services have resettled 1,924 refugees in Albuquerque. Around 962 of these individuals were school-aged children enrolled in Albuquerque Public Schools. These newer students report high instances of discrimination, mistreatment and bullying, insufficient translation, interpretation and transportation services, inappropriate academic placements, and very little support to help them succeed at school. Immigrant students experience many of the same challenges. When a portion of students are marginalized like these newer students and immigrants are, disparities in educational outcomes and post-graduation economic equity are prevalent. Families United for Education and local advocates for refugee and immigrant rights like Global 505 and the NM Dream Team aim to get out ahead of the challenges, to help the school system better understand the unique challenges of this student population, reduce the inherent inequities and, in turn, create a more promising future for the whole community.

Policy, Practice and Persistence

Families United for Education strives to cultivate a collective vision of what is needed in the community to have equitable opportunities for all youth in the education system in the Albuquerque school district. They are committed to increasing the opportunities for “community voice” in decisions that impact students. They work toward breaking down bureaucratic barriers, increasing advocacy and amplifying the voices of youth organizers, parents and students. In 2012, with Families United’s convening of the community, a foundation for authentic family engagement was built, and a policy was developed, brought before the District Board, adopted and implemented.

POLICY

The K.01 Family and Community Engagement Policy stated that Albuquerque Public Schools affirms that the involvement of family and community partners is critical to student success. It also stated that to better engage families and community partners, Albuquerque Public Schools shall strive to utilize the histories and cultures of our families, community and students as the foundation of an educational program that ensures every student is eager to be a world class citizen.

The policy reflected four core principles:

1. Fostering safe and welcoming environments
2. Strengthening relationships and capacity with families, teachers, school and district administrators, and community partners
3. Expanding communication between families, community partners and schools, and
4. Cultivating equitable and effective systems

Still with many skeptics in the Albuquerque school district, development of the policy and the policy itself was not immediately embraced. When the policy was being developed, some felt the policy was racist toward white people, and that families were not equipped to write policy. This gatekeeping continued to prevent authentic family and community engagement. Families United for Education responded effectively by educating the dissenters and engaging supporters on the Board to help their peers understand that the policy was not racist but rather anti-racist.

IN THE PHOTO: Members of Families United for Education: Tony Watkins, Bich Hanh Nguyen, Candelaria “Candy” Patterson, Catherine Sanchez and Delma Madrigal. (Photo credit: Eric Martin)
PRACTICE

After the family engagement policy became a reality in 2012, Families United for Education’s efforts have focused on school board elections, hosting nonpartisan, school board candidate forums where candidates were asked if a) they would support the policy, and b) if they would be willing to attend an anti-racism training. To ensure systemic change, all of the meetings held regarding education were framed with the four core principles outlined in the policy, creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for the families and community on an ongoing basis. Many anti-racism training initiatives have occurred since. When funding allows, the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond’s Undoing Racism and Community Organizing workshops have been held. Other times, local advocates have facilitated the training sessions.

In addition to community and family engagement, focusing on intergenerational equity has been a key strategy for Families United for Education. Families United worked with Kiran Katira from the UNM Community Engagement Center who developed the Anti-Racist Youth Leadership Institute to prepare young leaders to advocate and educate others about issues that affect them. Working with a racial equity lens is key to working toward educational equity in the Albuquerque region. But gaining input and sharing the decision making with families, with members young and old, requires also working with an intergenerational equity lens. Intergenerational equity is all about fairness and justice between generations, recognizing that there are structural factors that privilege some age groups over others. Many of the Families United meetings are facilitated by young people – strengthening their voice in the conversations, and providing a pathway for them to collaborate on changes that may affect them.

Our partners in the Anti-Racist Youth Leadership Institute are:
- The UNM Community Engagement Center
- The NM Asian Family Center
- The NM Dream Team
- Young Women United
- Together for Brothers
- The NM Learning Alliance
- La Plazita Institute

Our Funders include:
- The McCune Charitable Foundation
- NM Women
- Presbyterian
- ENLACE and
- UNM Student Affairs

In November 2017, Everyday Democracy hosted a special webinar featuring Families United for Education and the work they are doing to address racial inequities in Albuquerque schools through an intergenerational equity lens. They provided ideas to other community agencies around the country on how to build family engagement policies, create safe environments, strengthen community relationships, expand communication and cultivate equitable systems for all.

PERSISTENCE

Families United for Education meets regularly to discuss changes, both positive and negative that are impacting their progress in striving for educational equity. They have conducted anti-racist training sessions for the district’s administration staff and many community area organizations. Each year, Families United for Education participates in
Anti-Racism Day at the state legislature, keeping the issues of education equity “top of mind.” And, they have been working with Ethnic Studies, Department of Sociology, and College of Education professors at the University of New Mexico to develop training programs to inform Albuquerque Public Schools curriculum and teachers. Further, Families United for Education has worked with UNM’s Institute for the Study of “Race” and Social Justice, and Ethnic Studies Programs, along with others in the community to develop and promote ethnic studies curricula. In fact, due in part to Families United for Education’s persistence, the number of ethnic studies classes in APS increased from three to twelve in the last two years, and that number appears to be growing.

As staffing changes and other environmental factors occur, many of the advances made by Families United for Education are at risk. There have been new threats to the Family Engagement policy, equity-oriented talk that is not supported by action, and continued shuffles of curriculum frameworks. Through policy, practice and persistence, and a non-stop 24/7 commitment to equity, improvements in the school system can be sustained, and the vision of educational equity can be more attainable. Ongoing vigilance and advocacy is a daily reality. Families United for Education is active in advocating for related legislation like Bill 579 (sponsored by Senator Linda Lopez and Representative Javier Martinez) that requires state agencies to review their policies and practices to ensure that they do not contribute to institutionalized racism. Lopez also introduced a “Student Bill of Rights,” initiated by young people from the Southwest Organizing Project, an organization that supports Families United for Education, calling for a diverse school curriculum in New Mexico.

Two years ago, Families United for Education worked with the District to develop an ethnic studies framework. With leadership changes in the District, there was less support for this framework and for the policy that was implemented. On July 30, 2018 Families United co-hosted a press conference with other community partners to shed light on the importance of a continued focus on educational equity. A 1-day hunger strike led by Nkazi Sinandile that focused on justice for political refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers in the school district followed the press conference, and at the Albuquerque School Board meeting 17 individuals signed up for comment. It is clear that Families United and its educational and community partners will stand “united” in its persistent and relentless commitment for education equity in the school system in Albuquerque. Partners in the press conference were: The Partnership for Community Action, NM Women’s Global Pathways, The Immigrant and Refugee Resource Village of Albuquerque, Global 505, Together for Brothers, The NM Asian Family Center, Juntos: Our Air Our Water, IRRVA and NM Women’s Global Pathways.

According to the NEA Education Policy and Practice Department, “When schools, parents, families, and communities work together to support learning, students tend to earn higher grades, attend school more regularly, stay in school longer, and enroll in higher level programs... The evidence holds true for students at both the elementary and secondary level, regardless of the parent’s education, family income, or background—and the research shows parent involvement affects minority students’ academic achievement across all races.” It is good that Families United for Education is going strong in Albuquerque, applying these research

![Emma Sandoval](image)
learnings for the betterment of the entire Albuquerque region. Everyday Democracy is pleased to share their story as a national model, and Civic Change Champion.

“Families United for Education has developed a large intergenerational network where youth leadership is encouraged in conversations about public education and people of all ages can learn from each other.”

- Malana Rogers-Bursen, Everyday Democracy, Program Associate

“There is something unique about the leaders of Families United for Education. They are articulate, they know how to use data, they are disciplined, and they can congratulate administrators when they do a good job.”

- Lorenzo Garcia, Albuquerque Public Schools board member and chair of its District Relations Committee

1 2008, NEA Education Policy and Practice Department, Parent, Family, Community Involvement in Education http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB11_ParentInvolvement08.pdf