



Organizing for Human Rights and Respect CADRE South Los Angeles, California

In the spring of 2007, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) adopted a new discipline policy for its 730,000 students. The new policy moves the district away from harsh “zero tolerance” strategies, and focuses instead on prevention through *positive* behavior supports, teacher training for better classroom management, and parent engagement.

CADRE, an independent, south LA-based parent organization launched in 2001, was a key actor in researching and advocating for the new policy. Its adoption by the school district was a significant victory for CADRE, for LAUSD, and for hundreds of thousands of Los Angeles students who have struggled for years under oppressive discipline policies that have stereotyped and criminalized them.

CADRE (Community Asset Development Re-defining Education) organizes for systemic social change. Rather than using a series of small issue campaigns to build a large membership base, CADRE goes deep on a single issue using a human rights-based analysis of how and why their school system fails to serve the community.

“The alienation of parents, particularly parents of color, is at the core of the problem,” says CADRE co-founder and director Maisie Chin. “Because of that alienation, low expectations and unjustifiable practices are allowed to persist and go unchecked because there’s no accountability, no monitoring, and no scrutiny.”

CADRE’s theory that the *exclusion of community* from educational decision-making is the *cause* of the decline in school quality provides a unique framework for education organizing. True accountability, they believe, is not what happens when a school is reporting up the ladder to policy makers, but instead when *parents* demand that the schools serve the *community’s* interests. It was this framework that inspired the Edward W. Hazen Foundation to fund the group soon after its inception.

“We are a movement of parents reclaiming – reasserting – our rights, our power and our ability,” says Chin.

In 2003, CADRE developed an action research report called “*We Interrupt this Crisis – With Our Own Side of the Story: Relationships between South LA Parents*”

and Schools.” (<http://www.cadre-la.org/index.php?s=9&>) The report exposed deep divides between parents and schools, and the wide-spread exclusion of parents from decision-making. On the heels of that report, the group launched a second effort to reach out to parents. Naomi Haywood, an African American mother of 5, was one of the CADRE leaders who walked door-to-door to interview and engage parents.

“What we heard, again and again, was about kids being suspended,” says Haywood. In response, CADRE conducted detailed interviews with families to understand their experiences: Did the parents think that suspension was fair punishment? Was their child treated respectfully through the process? Did the suspension impact the child’s academic progress? Could the suspension have been avoided? Did the school involve the parent in the disciplinary process?

Over three months, CADRE collected the stories of nearly 50 families. At the same time, they interviewed nearly 120 young people who had not completed high school. They understood that by removing students from the classroom through unfair disciplinary policies and practices, the district was denying them the fundamental human right to an education.

CADRE’s findings exposed a crisis in South Los Angeles. “It wasn’t about drop-outs,” says Haywood. “It was about *push-outs*. These were kids – mostly kids of color – being told they weren’t going to make it; kids being transferred; kids being suspended so many times they just quit.”

Angry at the painful stories and injustice they had uncovered, CADRE joined forces with other community organizations in 2006 to submit a public records access request for LAUSD’s disciplinary policies, practices, and data. That information, together with their own findings, convinced CADRE that a fundamentally new approach to handling behavioral issues needed to be developed in LAUSD.

In April 2006, CADRE and its partners learned that the district was already revisiting its discipline policy. Seizing the opportunity, the groups met with administrators, school board members, and the local teachers union to build support for a fresh and innovative approach to discipline, with a new policy as the critical first step. In June CADRE held a “People’s Hearing” to build pressure for a new vision in the schools. They presented their demands within a broad human rights framework anchored by: the right to dignity, the right to education, and the right to participation. They challenged school board members, teachers, and advocates to add their support.

CADRE was calling for a paradigm shift, away from popular “get tough” strategies. It was a bold proposal that promised to transform the relationships between students, parents, teachers and administrators. CADRE knew it wouldn’t be an easy

sell. One turning point, says Chin, was a *Los Angeles Times* story addressing the push-out crisis and endorsing CADRE's call for *supports* for students, teachers, and schools, instead of punitive measures that demoralized and sometimes criminalized students. The story set off a flurry of negotiations. CADRE held firm for the fundamental tenets of the new policy, and worked carefully through the concerns raised by teachers, the board, and administrators. At the end of February 2007, the LAUSD school board voted unanimously to pass the new policy.

On paper, the new Los Angeles school discipline code is one of the most proactive, comprehensive and progressive of any major urban school district in the nation. It creates the expectation that behavior problems will be identified early and prevented – without removing students from classrooms or the school when possible, says Naomi Haywood. It also requires schools to involve parents much earlier in disciplinary issues.

Knowing that implementation is the key to its success, CADRE is monitoring the process closely. Naomi Haywood sits on the district's implementation committee as a parent representative.

"This is a watershed moment in LAUSD," says Maisie Chin. "Five years ago people probably thought we didn't have a chance of creating something like this. We've come a long way."