

The Belmont Zone of Choice: Community-Driven Action for School Change

by Jeremy Nesoff

During the summer of 2006, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and union officials announced that the Pico Union area of East Los Angeles would soon be home to the Belmont Zone of Choice (BZC). The BZC encompasses the Belmont High School attendance area and will include up to 10 Belmont Pilot Schools, each with a targeted enrollment of 400 students. The small schools will be open to all Pico Union students and represent the demographics of the local district. This groundbreaking agreement, formalized in February 2007, will create a network of high-caliber, theme-based public schools for families to select from based on students' interests.


While many stakeholders were crucial in getting to this moment, the intent was originated through a partnership with the leadership of LAUSD Local District 4 and the Belmont Educational Collaborative (BEC), a powerful group of Community Based Organizations (CBOs). This coalition of 40 local organizations and Local District 4 educators kept the players at the negotiating table, especially in the early going. BEC is dedicated to promoting a secondary education reform agenda that prepares Belmont students to pursue college, career training, and civic participation in a democratic society. According to Maria Casillas, president of BEC member Families in Schools, these organizations asked this critical question: "Across all urban school districts, powerful institutions that play a high stakes game at a legislative level with high powered players, the essential question is: who do the parents have as their voice?" The members of BEC, with deep roots in their community's history of struggle, worked to get parents' voices heard by acting as the social capital of their community.

In September 2007, two new pilot schools opened their doors: The Los Angeles High School of the Arts



and Civitas School of Leadership (SOL). As in-district public schools, they can show the city and district the possibilities of effective reform and will blossom into a network of Pilot schools. "This is real education reform," outgoing Superintendent Roy Romer said in *Education Week* on August 9, 2006. "It really is huge," Richard Alonzo, the local district superintendent, commented to the *Los Angeles Times* on July 25, 2006. "The community could have taken the easier route and turned to charter schools," but "we want to bring change from inside of the district to improve things in the district, not try to improve it on the outside."

This groundbreaking agreement marked "the culmination of years of collaboration between Local District 4, School Board members, teachers, students and the Belmont community," according to Mr. Alonzo. It is the legacy of a history of activism and the product of recent work by the coalition of community activists searching for an answer for their children's education. According to many people involved, this agreement would not have been reached without the activism of BEC, which kept the involved parties at the negotiating table over a period of several years. At key moments, BEC leaders placed supportive yet firm pressure on the LAUSD and the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) to step up to the table and support the Pilot concept.



The significance of this agreement is made clear by looking at the long list of organizations inspired to make the Belmont Pilot Schools a reality and in the comments of their leaders. Angela Sanbrano, formerly Executive Director of the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), one of the lead agencies of the BEC, sees the agreement as “a landmark achievement for the members of the Belmont community, who have been working toward this day for five years. This community-based effort changes the way parents and students interact with the district and will provide families the opportunity to take a more active role in the shaping of our schools.” Co-Director of the Los Angeles Small Schools Collective and leader of the Civitas SOL design team Cris Gutierrez emphasized, “This is a huge step forward for the Pico Union community. We are putting into place one of the most thoughtful, inventive, and comprehensive plans to redesign schools for a twenty-first century culture of learning.” In a July 2006 LAUSD statement, UTLA President A.J. Duffy said, “This agreement brings cutting-edge reform and local control to neighborhood schools. All along the way, UTLA members helped craft the groundbreaking agreement, and the result is a true partnership, with the community at the forefront.”

The plan calls for a network of Pilot schools patterned after the Boston Pilot Schools, a group of 20 innovative schools within the Boston Public School (BPS) system. In the Pilot school model, schools have autonomy in five significant areas: staffing, budget, curriculum and assessment, governance, and scheduling. The Boston Pilot Schools are outperforming the district average across every indicator of student performance and engagement. Pilot schools demonstrate higher achievement by students at all grade levels on the Massachusetts statewide-standardized assessment, higher college-going rates, and higher attendance rates.

The story of how community members and educational leaders in the Belmont area of Los Angeles were able to reach agreement to create the Belmont Pilot School Network is filled with lessons for those working for educational equality and reform across the United States.

The Need

Data from Los Angeles over the last few years provide distressingly urgent examples about the quality of education students are experiencing. In particular, schools in the Belmont area have disappointed the community.

The Pico Union neighborhood has long been a point of entry for immigrants, mostly of Mexican and Central American origin. Today, it is the most densely populated neighborhood in California, with a total of 18,552 people occupying every square mile, compared

with a state average of 2,093 people per square mile. Pico Union has high rates of under-education and unemployment, and it has the highest crime rates in the city. The poverty rate is 46 percent, twice that of all of Los Angeles. Fifty-one percent of children under the age of 18 live in poverty, compared with 31 percent in the rest of the city. More than 50 percent of adults over 25 do not have a high school diploma.

The central neighborhood high school, Belmont High School, houses 5,400 mostly Latino students on a year-round basis in a facility built for 1,600. LAUSD has a long history of not being able to build new schools to meet the needs of its communities, which has resulted in extremely overcrowded schools with year-round schedules instituted 26 years ago, and extensive busing out of students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Four thousand adolescents are bused out of the neighborhood due to a lack of high school facilities. Teachers at Belmont High School have daily student loads more than 200.

Low-income students represent approximately 75 percent of all students, as indicated by participation in the free or reduced-price meal program. The school's dropout rates dramatically exceed the state average and the four-year graduation rate hovers at 30 to 35 percent. Low college acceptance and attendance rates, rapidly increasing teacher attrition, under-qualified teachers, high student and staff absenteeism, and lack of parental and community engagement challenge any positive efforts. According to Richard Alonzo, these factors all “equaled a dire situation that families found their children in.” Edmundo Rodriguez, currently Director of Secondary School Redesign for Local District 4, said he felt like an “educational hospice worker” during this period, forced to make students comfortable as they headed to failure and dropping out.

The Movement for Educational Equity in Pico Union

With a national and state backdrop of eroding gains in educational equity, the struggles of the Pico Union community to influence significantly the quality of its schools have a valuable history. The key lies in the coalition of CBOs and educators that worked over many years to clarify what equity looks like.

The genesis of the BEC agenda can be traced to a variety of historical events, most importantly the issue of school overcrowding and the need for new schools. Marvin Andrade, the current Executive Director of CARECEN, described the circumstances as a “perfect storm that had been created due to decades of neglect of the community of Pico Union.” The district had not built any new schools for decades until 1995, when several building projects began,

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including the new Belmont Learning Center, the first comprehensive high school built in LA in more than 30 years. The school was to be critical in alleviating the extreme overcrowding in Pico Union schools and ending busing to distant schools, offering parents and students a chance at a quality, local education.

However, in 1999, the LAUSD school board stalled the construction of the school due to political and environmental controversies. The fiasco of the abandoned plans became infamous for the amount of money and years of work wasted. According to Veronica Melvin, director of Alliance for a Better Community (ABC), the real issue was that the community did not have representation that was powerful enough to advocate for its needs. Recognizing this fact, several CBOs, including CARECEN, started organizing to finish the construction. In 2000, their efforts resulted in the establishment of ABC to address Latino policy, issues, and voice, with an initial focus on school construction. ABC's initial goal was to ensure the completion of the halted Belmont Learning Center. As a result, ABC, with partner organizations, spent the first three years of its existence educating and engaging area parents and students to advocate for the school's completion.

While working with students, parents, and other CBOs, ABC's work to make a positive difference for Belmont children focused on three areas: education, empowerment, and engagement. Identifying the need to educate partners on current conditions of LA schools, this coalition aimed to develop critical and analytical consciousness in order to see current conditions in schools as educational injustice.

Ms. Melvin notes several important points about the demand and supply sides of educational transformation that ABC and the other CBOs articulated early in this struggle. Students and parents know what good education and bad education look like – they come to the table with an understanding of what they want to change. And such changes require external activism. LAUSD would not change its status quo without community members demanding, “We need change, and what is currently happening is not acceptable.” While CBOs can agitate for change, they do not create conditions for change. This understanding highlights the need to have school and district leaders who are willing to work with community partners to create conditions for change.

The appointment of Richard Alonzo as the Superintendent of Local District 4 in 2000 emphasizes Ms. Melvin's point that externally demanded changes must come from within the system. Mr. Alonzo wanted to work for the population to which he felt connected, that educated him, and where we worked as a classroom teacher, co-administrator, and

principal of three schools. After bringing in Edmundo Rodriguez, who had knowledge of Pilot schools from working in Boston, they immediately began strategizing how to improve their area schools. They met with ABC and other CBOs to focus on the broad issues involved in school design. Mr. Alonzo recognized that the proximity of the new school sites in the Belmont area provided a wonderful opportunity to allow students and parents to choose schools rather than be assigned by home address. It was also clear that they would need community support to successfully advocate for change.

When Superintendent Romer asked Mr. Alonzo to put together a plan for the completion of the Belmont Learning Center (BLC), he focused on involving the community. Mr. Rodriguez and educator and community activist Cris Gutierrez subsequently worked to put together the Belmont Task Force to provide input and advice on the BLC. The group was made up of local educators, representatives of local CBOs, parents, and students. It quickly became clear that they couldn't stop at windows and walls, but needed to broaden their scope to include all new schools and add the voice of the Pico Union community. Eventually, the task force was reformed as the Belmont Educational Collaborative and ABC stepped up to fund the coordinating work. This is when talk started about the Belmont Zone of Choice.

The struggle for new school facilities continued in subsequent years. In March 2003, ABC led a march made up of more than 500 students and parents from the existing Belmont High School to the School Board to advocate in favor of the newly planned school, now renamed *Vista Hermosa*. As a result, the LAUSD School Board voted 5-1-1 in favor of the new design. *Vista Hermosa* – the school, park and soccer field – is to be completed in 2008. Several other educational complexes are emerging, with plans to be simultaneously constructed or refurbished.

During these years of struggle, the network of CBOs gained a clear vision of what equity meant to them and the agenda they needed to implement. It became clear that they needed to expand their focus of work to ensure a college preparation curriculum for every high school that Belmont students attend. This work led to the district-wide adoption of a sequence of 15 required (and three more recommended) high school courses, a bold step to provide education on equal terms. Any student wishing to study at a four-year public college in California must now complete these courses, referred to as the A to G curriculum.

The Belmont Pilot School Network

In 2004, the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) awarded a Small School Network planning grant to Civitas SOL, providing both national network

connections and local support. The Los Angeles Small Schools Collective, led by Civitas founder Cris Gutierrez, UCLA Professor Karen Hunter Quartz, and Wildwood Outreach Center Director Jeanne Fauci, helped support the design team. The grant from CES included a mentorship with New York City's Urban Academy. The realization of the Belmont Zone of Choice gained momentum with this partnership, bolstered by additional local partners such as UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, & Access and national partners such as Stanford University's School Redesign Network. Participants concluded that a non-charter policy for autonomy and accountability had to be in place in order to create successful reform from inside.

The coalition determined that what their community wanted was a range of excellent small schools from which their students and families could choose. They focused on creating different educational models, including small schools and Small Learning Communities (SLCs). It became clear that they shared a belief in granting as much autonomy as possible to these schools. Along with their national and local partners, they started to focus on the Pilot School model as the best small school model. The Los Angeles Small Schools Collective, which became a CES affiliate center, played a large part in keeping the BEC focused on the Boston Pilot School model, which provides a framework for the Pico Union community and LAUSD to tailor to their needs. The key elements of school based autonomy and accountability; schools founded on the principles of equity and high achievement; collaboration between union, district, and community representatives; a supportive professional network; and leadership preparation are being interpreted by community and educational leaders.

In the summer of 2004, the BEC initiated a partnership with the Boston-based Center for Collaborative Education (CCE). CCE is a CES National Affiliate Center and serves as the coordinating organization for the Boston Pilot schools. In late 2004 and early 2005, the Belmont community, Local District 4, the BEC, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), and Administrators Association of Los Angeles (AALA) settled on the Belmont Zone of Choice as the vehicle for change. The plan called for the establishment of both SLCs and the Belmont Pilot Schools.

Through 2005, BEC and Civitas leaders pushed the LAUSD School Board, then-Superintendent Roy Romer, UTLA leadership, teachers, students, parents, and community member to gain a greater understanding of the Pilot model. They spent time in schools in New York City, and visited Boston Pilot Schools multiple times. In March, CCE Executive Director Dan French spent time with leaders from the district,

UTLA, and AALA to discuss the advantages and promise of a Belmont Pilot Schools Network.

Having a school far into the design process and supported by established partners was another crucial piece of the puzzle. The Civitas SOL design team forged ahead with its work during this period. Members included representatives of BEC, parents, Linda Guthrie of UTLA, local educators, and students. Rosa Estrada, currently an eighth grade student, got involved with the team through a CARECEN after school program and worked with the team for two years. She was excited about the opportunity to be "involved in something really big and get my ideas to be a part of it." Most important, she felt that her voice was clearly heard and that the student members were always given a chance to speak. Her hope was to "get teachers that would help you out a lot, pay attention to you, and this can happen with smaller class sizes."

Consistently throughout this process, BEC members worked to keep all the necessary parties at the negotiating table and to lay the foundation for future success. Maria Casillas of Families in Schools remembers that when union support wavered at one point, the suggestion of parents picketing their UTLA "friends who spoke consistently about social justice" had a powerful effect. Casillas remembers a school board meeting marked by a tone of imposing decisions without community input. "I interrupted and made it clear that it was really important to understand that Pilots are in district schools, not charter schools. Ownership needs to be shared by all parties. As a community activist and former educator, I knew it was a foreign concept for a school to 'go off and do its thing' and have district support. It was very important that the perspective was shared accountability." The members of the BEC were such a presence that they were eventually invited to the negotiating table, something that was previously unheard of.

Once the decision to support Pilot schools was made by the UTLA, their contributions were considerable. Marvin Andrade of CARECEN says "the leadership of UTLA – this was something completely new and out of the traditional way of doing business. Their willingness to compromise and work with the BEC made a significant contribution." UTLA Vice-President Linda Guthrie was instrumental in building early collaboration, and President Duffy has added his vocal and consistent support.

By early 2006, the years of organizing, and building support began to pay off and pick up steam. At the end of 2006, negotiations began for the Belmont Pilot Agreement. The uniqueness of the process was highlighted by the range of representatives involved; outgoing Superintendent of Schools Roy

The Pilot School Model

The Pilot School Model may offer a proven solution to Los Angeles' concerns as well as national issues. To understand how the model may work in the Belmont Zone of Choice we need to look at its history and indicators of success in Boston.

Pilot Schools were created in part as a response to the opening of charter schools in Boston and statewide in 1995, aiming to keep human and financial resources within the Boston Public Schools. Pilot Schools are granted maximum autonomy in exchange for increased accountability within a school district. Pilot Schools have five areas of autonomy: staffing, budget, curriculum and assessment, governance, and schedule, and are subject to increased school-level accountability. They are held to high standards of performance by a School Quality Review process, which assesses each school every five years on common benchmarks of a high-performing school. The model has proven to be a successful and sustainable strategy in transforming urban public schools.

A crucial aspect of the success of Boston Pilot Schools and a lesson for creating the Belmont Zone of Choice is the advocacy and role of the Pilot School Network. Pilot schools learned early on, after being launched with little external support, that there is power in numbers. Many Pilot schools realized that to make progress in achieving the full scope of their autonomies they needed to work with one voice. In the spring of 1997, CCE hosted a retreat at which the Pilot School Network was born. CCE coordinates the Pilot School Network, establishing a new model of a nonprofit organization supporting a subset of schools recognized by both the teachers union and the district within an urban public school district. CCE serves the Pilot Schools by providing onsite coaching, network-wide professional development, budget and policy negotiations, fiscal management of external funds, community support, and a research agenda. Valuing the fact that practitioners learn best from each other, CCE creates and facilitates opportunities for teachers and principals to engage in dialogue, share practices, solve problems, and learn from each other.

To learn more about Pilot Schools as they have evolved in Boston, consult *The Essential Guide to Pilot Schools* available on the CCE website at www.ccebos.org/pilotguides.

Romer, School Board President Marlene Canter, UTLA President AJ Duffy, AALA President Mike O'Sullivan, ABC Executive Director Veronica Melvin, BEC Executive Director Angela Sanbrano, and finally, indicating his support entering his new position, incoming Superintendent of Schools David Brewer III signed the memorandum of understanding completed on January 25, 2007 that the Los Angeles School Board ratified one month later.

What's Happening Now, and What's Next

On September 6, 2007, all the hard work culminated

when the first two Belmont Pilot Schools opened: Los Angeles High School of the Arts, with approximately 420 students, and Civitas SOL, with approximately 100 ninth graders. There are four high school campus sites, including two newly constructed school sites, at which Belmont Pilot schools will be located. The schools will receive direct support through the Los Angeles Small Schools Collective and BEC members. CCE will work to help the Los Angeles Small Schools Collective build its capacity to support the Belmont Pilots and create a cohesive network. Succeeding Urban Academy, Wildwood School and Outreach Center will be the CES Mentor School for Civitas SOL. BEC members such as Families In Schools will also provide support.

The importance of these schools was reinforced when Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, LAUSD Superintendent David Brewer, and school board president Monica Garcia visited and had lunch with school community members on the Belmont campus to celebrate the beginning of school. All three were emphatic about their support for Pilot schools. "When you talk about reinventing public education, when you talk about transforming schools with parent and community involvement, this is what's happening here," Garcia said on a September 6, 2007 KNBC television broadcast, "LAUSD Starts School with Big Idea: Smaller Campuses." In an LAUSD statement on the same day, Superintendent Brewer observed, "The Belmont Pilot Schools represent the type of innovative change that can occur when the District partners with members of the community to develop an education model that puts our children and their families first. This is an in-District innovation to redesign schools and create a portfolio of quality school choices for Pico Union students."

The significance of this visit should not be underestimated. The last few years have been filled by heated struggles for the control of Los Angeles schools, with the Mayor and charter school organizations citing the failure to enact change as the rationale for attempting to seize control. Yet the Belmont Pilot Schools are creating a possible point of unity between the Mayor, the district, and the communities they serve.

At Civitas SOL, the realities of this work have manifested. With a staff of four regular education teachers and one special education teacher, the school has embarked on the rich and exhausting journey familiar to many new schools. According to Larry Simonsen, biology teacher and member of the design team, Civitas' challenges are common and unique at the same time. The majority of their students, in school since kindergarten, have experienced nine years of traditional and standardized education, focused on English as a Second Language. According to Mr. Simonsen, their educational experiences "have not

produced skilled critical thinkers. Many are reading well below grade level and lacking basic math skills. So starting a project-based and authentic assessment program is a bit like basic training.” Other challenges included a lack of promised resources and being innovators in a system not used to innovation.

While the staff is returning home exhausted every night, the rewards have already begun. The positive impact on school culture afforded by Civitas’ status as a small school is already evident. Mr. Simonsen said, “No matter how hardened urban high school students are, when you get them in a place with small numbers, they feel cared for. It is already evident in the school culture that they feel safer.”

Civitas’ mission focuses on civic engagement with students’ education, emphasizing that the classroom is too small to answer all of the students’ questions. That vision is already being realized. On Monday, September 24, Los Angeles City Council President Eric Garcetti came to speak to students about water issues in Los Angeles. He delivered a promise to hear their ideas and support them in internships and senior projects. Mr. Simonsen describes students’ reactions to this visit as “having the door kicked open” to the possibilities of their education.

According to CARECEN’s Marvin Andrade, “The community is very excited about the Pilot School Network. To know that there are small schools that place an emphasis on community engagement and empowerment, and will include [community members] from curriculum to hiring, with a different way of looking at classrooms, is very innovative and refreshing.” Currently, eight proposals for new Belmont Pilot Schools are being considered for rollout in the fall of 2008 and/or 2009.

Middle schooler Rosa Estrada will soon apply to high school and will have choices to make. While she is proud of her contribution to the Civitas design team and the school she helped to create, she and her mother will need to decide which school is the best fit for her and her family. If she goes to Civitas she will know that “I was a part of the great idea to help improve schools.”

Conclusion

Many progressive educators feel that after an exciting time of possibility for reform during the 1990s, we have been pushed backward by the heavy hand of No Child Left Behind. As Ann Cook and Phyllis Tashlik wrote in “Standardizing Small,” published in *Rethinking Schools* in Summer 2005, “At some point, the political winds will shift again. Policymakers will face growing public dissatisfaction with test-driven education and high-stakes consequences for school and students. People will search for more enlightened

and thoughtful approaches to school improvement and assessment...our educational future depends on it.”

The Belmont Pilot Schools and the activism and collaboration that created them may provide one picture of what equity looks like. The story points to the powerful potential for reform that exists when dedicated, innovative educators collaborate with community members.

Yet, the proof of success is still to come. Access is the twin of equity, as Maria Casillas points out. “We will be successful when our kids are successful at having access to all the resources of the district. This won’t spread to scale as a small school experiment without the type of central office leadership and organization that realizes this.” With the opening of two new schools and plans for eight more, the dedication of educational leaders, the encouraging comments of the Mayor and Superintendent, and the vigilant commitment of BEC, the Belmont Zone of Choice promises a brighter educational future for Rosa Estrada and thousands of other students.

Many thanks to the many people who gave significant time and input, in particular CCE colleagues, Dan French, Jeanne Fauci, and Cris Gutierrez.

Jeremy Nesoff, formerly of CCE, recently began working for Facing History and Ourselves (www.facinghistory.org). He is a graduate of the Principals Residency Network and was a teacher and administrator in two small schools: the New York City Museum School and the Compass School, a CES school.