

FAMILIES KNOW WHAT'S NEEDED: PARENT VOICES ON OUR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

A Listening Brief From UPLAN Parent Leaders

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A Letter from the Co-Chairs

UPLAN's Real Parent Engagement Policy Committee

DEAR PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS,

We are deeply thankful to our member organizations that hosted listening sessions in their communities: Choice for All, National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI), Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative Parent Ambassadors, Ohio Parent Advocacy Network (OPAN), and Parent Engagement Academy (PEA). Across all sessions, we heard from parents connected to 27 member organizations nationwide. Their voices and experiences shaped the themes and priorities of this brief.

To the parents who joined us in these conversations, thank you! You spoke with honesty, courage, and commitment. You named barriers, shared ideas, and reminded us that even in the face of challenges, there are bright spots to build on. Families lifted up dedicated teachers, trusted bilingual staff, and school leaders who welcome parent voices.

These listening sessions took place in 2023 and 2024, and since then, the national education landscape has shifted significantly. Families continue to raise their voices in local districts and on the federal stage as new challenges emerge, from shifts in the U.S. Department of Education priorities to funding decisions that directly impact school stability. This moment reinforces what we heard across communities: schools are stronger when families have a real voice in decisions that affect their children.

This brief is not just a report. It is a reflection of the consensus we heard from parents across the country. Real parent engagement means families are equal partners in shaping education. When our voices are valued, schools are stronger. And when decision-makers center parents, especially those most directly impacted by these decisions, we create real and lasting change.

We hope you read this brief not just as a summary of what families shared, but also as an invitation to act with us. Together, we can ensure that every child has access to safe, supportive schools and that every family has a real voice in decisions that affect their children's lives.

In partnership,

Co-Chairs, UPLAN Real Parent Engagement Policy Committee



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Why This Brief

Real parent engagement means families, especially those whose voices have too often been unheard, leading in shaping the programs and systems that impact children. We created this brief to highlight what families say is working, what's getting in the way, and what real engagement looks like.

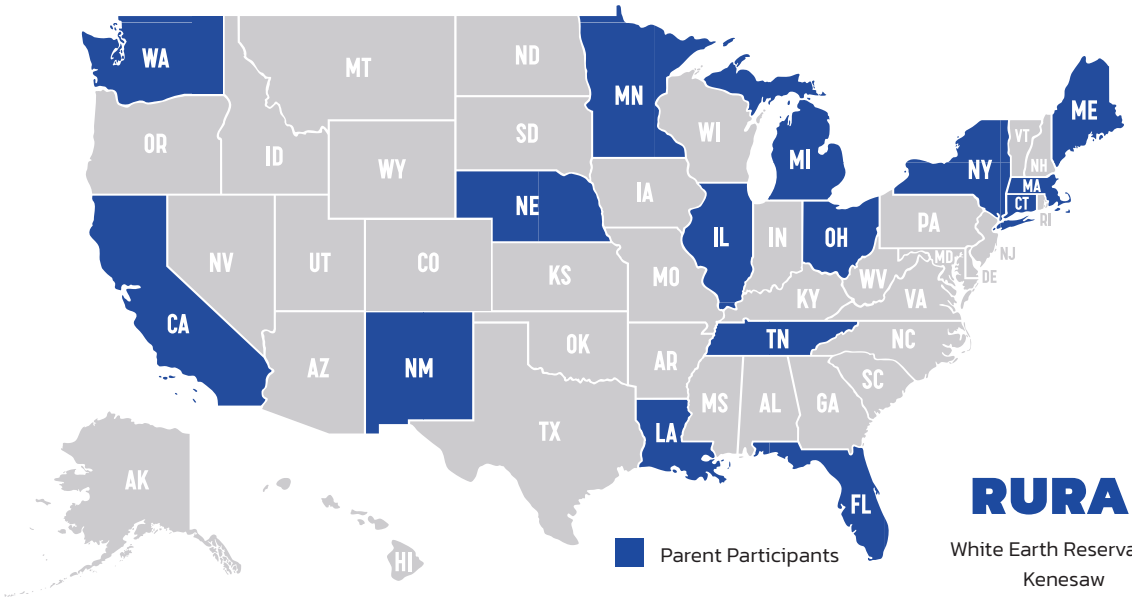
Between 2023 and 2024, UPLAN hosted a series of listening sessions with more than 100 parents[1] and caregivers from across the country. Despite differences in location, language, and background, four key themes emerged: shared power, access to information, safe and stable schools, and equitable special education.

While these conversations reflect a moment in time, families have continued speaking up, organizing, and responding to new challenges in schools and communities. Since then, parents have continued to raise our voices and take action, showing the power of families to respond to new challenges while pushing for lasting change.

WHEN WE ARE VALUED, SCHOOLS ARE STRONGER

We are not observers in our children's education. We are co-leaders. When we are valued, schools are stronger. And when decision-makers center our voices, especially parents from marginalized communities, we create real, lasting change.

1. Throughout this brief, we use the word "parents" to include all caregivers such as bonus parents, grandparents, foster parents, legal guardians, and chosen family who are caring for children.



67 CITIES

across

15 STATES

& WASHINGTON, DC

RURAL & URBAN

White Earth Reservation, Kenesaw

Los Angeles, Cleveland

Diverse Family Structures

Participants included mothers, fathers, grandparents, raising their grandchildren, foster parents, and single parents, representing a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

Age Range

Parents and caregivers ranged in age from their 20s to over 60

Who Participated?

SNAPSHOT OF FAMILIES

- From 67 cities in 15 states
- Mix of rural and urban residents
- Diverse family structures: mothers, fathers, grandparents raising grandchildren, foster parents, single parents, caregivers
- Age range: 20s to 60+

NETWORK PARTICIPATION

- Parents connected to 27 member organizations
- Sessions held in English and Spanish

Member organizations represented:

Abriendo Puertas/ Opening Doors

Choice for All*

Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth

Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)

Familias en Acción

Fathers, Families, and Healthy Communities

Hustle Mommies

Maine State Parent Ambassadors

Mama Be Brilliant

National Parent Leadership Institute*

Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative Parent Ambassadors*

New York City Coalition for Educating Families Together

Ohio Parent Advocacy Network (OPAN)*

OLÉ – Organizers in the Land of Enchantment

OneAmerica

Parent Engagement Academy (PEA)*

Parent Institute for Quality Education

Parent Leadership Training Institute–Kansas City

Parent Voices California

PAVE – Parents Amplifying Voices in Education

Parents for Healthy Homes

Parents for Public Schools

Parents United for Change

Partnership for Community Action (PCA)

Supporting Partnerships in Education and Beyond (SPEB)

Washington State Parent Ambassadors (WSA)

White Center Parent Ambassadors

*Hosted listening session





ABOUT THE LISTENING SESSIONS

We gathered parents and caregivers from across the country in conversations rooted in trust and honesty. These sessions were not surveys or checkboxes. They were spaces where we could share what's happening in schools, what's missing, and what real engagement would look like.

In total, 27 UPLAN member organizations took part in this process. Together, they hosted and supported listening sessions in their communities, including three sessions facilitated directly by UPLAN staff. Parents came from rural, urban, tribal, immigrant, and multilingual communities, with sessions held in both English and Spanish.

We listened to each other, named barriers, and lifted up solutions.

Together, we shaped the themes you'll read in this brief.



HEAR

OUR VOICES.
OUR STORIES.
OUR ASKS.



Key Themes from Parents ▶



Real Engagement Means Shared Power

We shared a clear message: real engagement is not a one-time invitation. It's a commitment to partnership and shared power. Too often, we are asked for input only after key decisions are already made. Participation feels performative, not purposeful.

Some of us fear retaliation for speaking up. Others are simply never invited to engage. When invited, meetings and roles often don't reflect the realities of working parents, families without transportation, or families navigating language or technology barriers.

Shared power means families are not just asked for input after decisions are made. We are partners in shaping solutions from the start. We are not asking for favors. We are asking for schools to invest in trust-building staff, offer flexible and meaningful roles, and co-create priorities with families, not for us.

Parents also shared examples of what strong engagement can look like: teachers who reach out early, bilingual staff who build trust with families, and principals who create welcoming environments.

Parents also shared that shared power can only happen when systems are understandable and transparent. That leads to our next theme.

Building Partnership Through Shared Power

Stanley, Washington State Parent Ambassadors (WSA)

In Spokane, Washington, Stanley is known as a parent who shows up. He and his wife have six children and are active in their local school community. For Stanley, being present in his children's education means working with schools early and often. "I am always going to speak up for my kids," he says. "Not to fight with the school, but because I want us to understand each other and look for solutions together."

He remembers a moment when his son came home and said recess was taken away. Stanley talked with his son first, then connected with the school. He explained that recess is an important part of the school day, especially for children who need a chance to reset, and should not be taken away as a punishment. He approaches these conversations with intention. "I have to do it the right way," he says. "I don't want to be stereotyped as the angry Black man."

The school responded by meeting with Stanley and adjusting their approach. A teacher who knew his son well stepped in to support him and kept communication open. For Stanley, moments like this are shared power in action.

He brought his voice as a parent, the school brought its experience, and together they made things better.

Stanley believes this kind of collaboration strengthens schools and wants schools to recognize the importance of father involvement. "Shared power means we all have a voice in shaping what works for kids," he explains. "Dad voices matter too," he says.

He appreciates when schools call with good news and when his children are invited to help with performances and celebrate progress. He also stays engaged by attending Spokane Public Schools' Board meetings to hear what is being discussed and to better understand how decisions may affect families. "What gives me hope," he says, "is when families show up and use our voice. When we do that, and when schools listen, we can improve almost anything together."



SHARED POWER REQUIRES SYSTEMS THAT ARE UNDERSTANDABLE AND TRANSPARENT



Understand the Systems Shouldn't Be This Hard

Many of us want to be involved, but we face systems that are confusing, inconsistent, or inaccessible. We described missing critical information about curriculum, budgets, or school services. Some shared that information was unclear or hard to access, that they didn't know where to turn for help. And when asked, they were often ignored or given late, conflicting responses.

This isn't just a communication problem. It reflects deeper systemic barriers. Families in rural, immigrant, or tribal communities like ours said they often didn't receive information at all. Others received materials in the wrong language or were directed to digital platforms without support or instruction on how to use them.

Some families described strong communication practices — such as one-on-one check-ins, clear text updates, or dedicated staff who guide families through transitions — showing what is possible when schools prioritize access.

Families called for communication that is clear, consistent, and truly two-way, not one-directional or last-minute.

Understanding how our children's education works shouldn't depend on our ZIP code, primary language or internet access.

Even with strong communication, families cannot engage meaningfully if children do not feel safe and supported in school. Parents spoke clearly about the conditions that shape engagement.

A Parent's Path to Navigating the System

Thalia, Parent Ambassador, Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative (NECC)

In the small Nebraska town where she lives, almost everyone at her son's elementary school knows him by name. "It takes him ten minutes to leave school every day," she says, smiling. "He has to stop and say goodbye to everyone."

As a Native American mother raising her fourth-grade son in a rural community, Thalia has seen how systems work differently depending on where families live. Before settling in Nebraska, she lived on a reservation in South Dakota, where connections between families and schools were familiar and personal. "You knew who to go to if you needed help," she recalls. "Here, I had to learn who to ask and how the system worked."

Early on in Nebraska, a parent advocate through Head Start helped her learn how to advocate for her son and find the right supports. That experience showed her what family engagement looks like when institutions invest in people whose job is to connect with and guide families.

Now that her son is in elementary school, Thalia relies on open communication with teachers and staff. When challenges come up, like transitions between grades or questions about supports, she knows who to call and how to ask for help. But she also knows not every parent has that experience. "I've seen parents get lost trying to figure out who to talk to," she says. "It shouldn't take having the right connections or background to get answers."

Thalia believes every family should have an advocate, a trusted person in the school who listens, explains, and helps families support their children. "It's not enough to just send flyers or use apps," she says. "Families need real people who make sure we're part of what's happening with our kids."

Thalia's story shows how relationships and clear communication help families find their way through complex systems. The supports she experienced are one example, but schools can take steps to ensure families understand and access information through clear communication, language access, and trusted staff who guide families along the way. Lasting change means building those supports into every level so no parent has to find their way alone.





Schools Must Be Safe, Stable, and Supportive

We shared that real engagement begins with safe and supportive schools for our children. Parents in our conversations talked about bullying, racism, harsh discipline, and classroom instability. These challenges often come from school systems that do not have enough staff, resources, or support. We are not pointing to individual teachers. We are asking for stronger investments that help schools provide stable and caring environments for every child.

We also pointed to broader instability. Teacher shortages, staff burnout, and reassigned roles were leading to inconsistent instruction and emotional stress for students and educators alike.

These are not isolated issues. They are symptoms of underfunded and overstretched school systems. And they are causing families to lose trust.

Families also shared examples of staff who responded quickly, counselors who checked in proactively, and principals who partnered with parents early. These moments show what is possible when schools have the resources they need.

Before parents can be true partners, schools must be places where students feel safe, respected, and supported. Strong relationships and meaningful engagement can only grow when the foundation is stable.

Finally, parents shared that engagement must include equitable, consistent support for children with disabilities and learning differences. Many experiences with special education highlight opportunities for stronger partnership.

REAL ENGAGEMENT BEGINS WITH SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS FOR OUR CHILDREN

A Mother's Call for Safe and Well-Resourced Schools

Erica, Parent Engagement Academy

Erica is a mother of five. While one of her children is in college, she has a child in elementary school, one in middle school and two in high school in a public school district in Los Angeles County. She has seen how safety concerns and school conditions affect several of her children.

Her older children have experienced bullying, school violence and unsafe conditions on campus. Her middle schooler told her that students smoke, vape, and fight in the bathrooms. Her daughter faces bullying about her appearance, which makes her more anxious about attending school. Her high schooler says the lockers often smell like marijuana and that students offer drugs and warn others not to speak up. "These are things our kids should not have to navigate, and things we should not have to worry about as parents," she says.

Erica does not blame the schools. She believes overcrowded campuses and staffing shortages make these situations harder to control and allow problems to grow until students no longer feel safe. She has also seen how comments about weight or exercise deepen her daughter's insecurity. She wishes more training were available so adults understand what adolescents are carrying. "It is not that people do not care. They just do not have the support or training they need to help every child," she says.

She briefly had the opportunity to place her daughter in a private school, where she saw what a smaller setting could feel like. When it became financially unsustainable, her daughter returned to the public schools. Although she knows the two systems cannot be compared, the experience showed her that safe and supportive schools are possible when there are fewer students and enough trained staff to meet children's needs.

Through Parent Engagement Academy, Erica learned to advocate for her children and partner with her children's schools by showing up at programs and school meetings, raising concerns, and encouraging other parents to use their voices so change can happen. Erica believes all children deserve to feel safe and supported at school. Safety is foundational. "We all want a better future for our children," she says. "That is why we keep pushing for change."





Special Education Systems Must Be Equitable and Transparent

Parents see clear opportunities to strengthen special education so every child's needs are met with dignity and consistency.

We shared stories about raising children with learning differences, including stories of exclusion, confusion, and frustration. Some of us had positive experiences, but many described the special education process as full of jargon, delays, and gaps in support.

We weren't informed of our rights, or included in meaningful decision-making. Families with limited English or literacy faced even steeper barriers. Some Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) weren't fully implemented. Others lost support during school transitions. Many families struggled to get staff to follow up or provide clear plans.

What we want is simple: early meetings, accessible language, well-trained staff and systems that honor every child's dignity and needs.

Families and schools deserve systems where special education is a reliable guarantee for every child.



Learning the Special Education System and Lifting Up Other Families

Daphne, Choice for All

Early on, Daphne faced challenges as a parent navigating the education system. At age two, her son's child care teachers raised concerns about his behavior. Daphne took him for an evaluation, but because he met most developmental markers, she was told he was fine, and left without clear guidance.

When he entered preschool, her son began receiving speech therapy. During her first formal meeting, Daphne listened as the school staff listed everything he was not doing well. She noticed how often Black boys are viewed as aggressive or lacking structure. "Sometimes it felt like they decided who he was before they understood what he needed."

A turning point came when the district recommended placing her son in an alternative education program for kindergarten. Daphne was told that his needs would be "better served elsewhere," which made her feel like he was being cast out before anyone truly understood him. "I knew he needed support, but not that level of placement," she says. "He deserved a chance to learn in his own community first."

Before her next IEP meeting, she reached out to a parent leader she had met through Choice for All, a community-based organization in Long Island, New York that provides training on the rights of children and families in the special education system. The parent leader walked Daphne through the process step by step, defined the commonly used acronyms and jargon, and offered to attend the meeting with her. "For the first time, someone explained my rights," she says.

At the meeting, Daphne felt confident speaking up. She asked for her son to begin in his district school with the services he needed, and the team agreed. He entered his neighborhood school, where he continues to make progress. "When families do not know their rights, children can miss out on the support they deserve," she says. "Seeing my son flourish showed me what happens when we have the information we need."

Today, Daphne herself is a parent advocate with Choice for All. She joins families during IEP meetings and helps them understand their rights. She has stood beside families who were threatened with losing services for their children, and has seen the change that comes when parents are prepared. "Once families understand the process, everything looks different," she says. "That is what keeps me doing this work."

> **HE DESERVED A CHANCE TO LEARN IN HIS OWN COMMUNITY FIRST**





Where We Go From Here

Real parent engagement is more than a conversation. It is a commitment to action.

We turned those experiences into a clear, actionable policy agenda. Since the listening sessions, parents have continued organizing, pushing back against attacks on public education, speaking out for immigrant protections, and fighting to protect vital school programs.

These themes shaped a policy agenda developed by parent leaders across UPLAN. As the national context shifts, including federal changes that affect school systems, parents are continuing to refine these priorities. We invite partners, districts, and funders to explore the working agenda and join us in building solutions that center family expertise.

Want to know what families are calling for, and how to make it real?

Explore our companion policy recommendations, shaped by parents across the country.

SINCE THE LISTENING SESSIONS

2023-2024

These listening sessions took place in 2023 and 2024 with families from 27 UPLAN member organizations. Since then, the national landscape has continued to shift. Parents are still organizing, responding to new challenges, and shaping solutions based on lived experience.

Parent leaders have continued organizing to protect and strengthen public education. Together we are:



Speaking out against threats to federal education protections and programs



Demanding protections for immigrant families' data in schools and districts



Fighting to keep education programs fully funded

These actions show that parent leadership is ongoing and responsive to today's challenges.

To learn more about what families are calling for, explore the full Policy Recommendation for Real Family Engagement.





With Gratitude

We are also grateful to the UPLAN member organizations that hosted listening sessions in their communities and created space for families to share openly and honestly.

We also want to thank the UPLAN members and policy partners, including the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), who participated in our Think Tank strategy session and offered guidance in support of our parent-led policy agenda. We extend special appreciation to Sixth Street Associates (Danielle Ewen) for thoughtful policy guidance and partnership throughout the development of this brief.

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Who's Behind This Work

United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN)

UPLAN is a national network of parent leaders and parent-led organizations building collective power to advance family-centered policies. Our work focuses on Early Care and Education (ECE), immigration and real parent engagement.

We center the leadership and lived experience of parents and families, especially those from communities historically excluded from decision-making, to shape programs and systems that impact families.

This brief was led by UPLAN's Real Parent Engagement Policy Committee and reflects the voices of over 100 families across the network. The listening sessions that informed this brief were hosted by five UPLAN member organizations. These organizations opened their communities, shared their trust, and created the space for honest conversations with families.

Choice for All

Choice for All provides direct services and intergenerational leadership development across education, health, and financial stability, with a particular focus on helping families navigate education systems – especially special education and early childhood – so communities can lead, organize, and thrive.

National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI)

The National Parent Leadership Institute prepares parents for leadership in schools, districts, and communities. Through training and leadership development, NPLI builds skills, confidence, and relationships and connects parents to leadership opportunities where their voices shape decisions affecting children and families.

Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative – Parent Ambassadors

Through Parent Ambassadors, parents and child care providers from across Nebraska engage in a year-long leadership and advocacy program designed to grow their confidence and elevate their voices in support of early childhood and other issues impacting themselves, their families, and their communities.

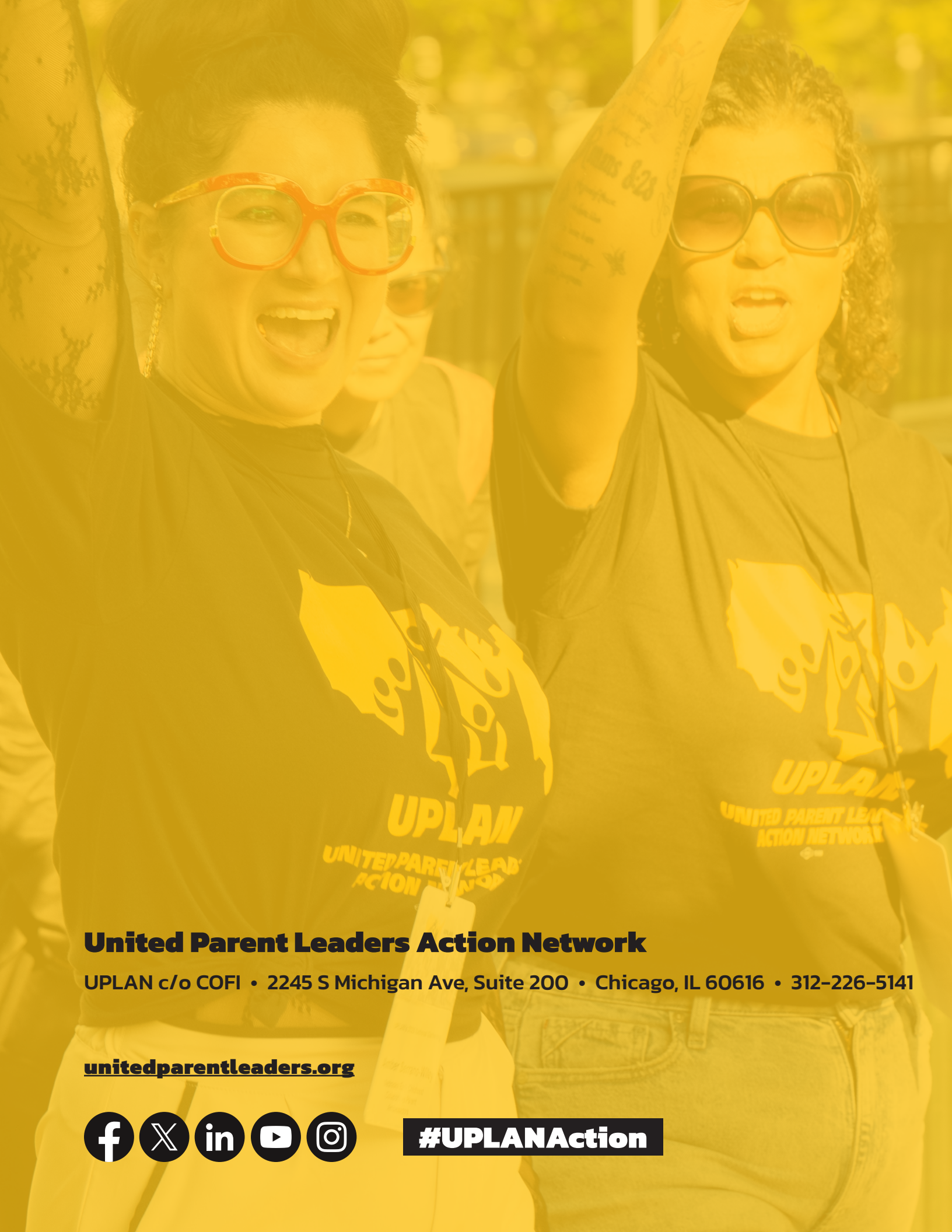
Ohio Parent Advocacy Network (OPAN)

Ohio Parent Advocacy Network trains and supports parents and caregivers to advocate for high-quality early childhood education and family engagement. Through leadership training and advocacy, OPAN equips parents to share their experiences at the local, state, and national levels to advocate for stronger awareness, smarter policy, and protected funding for Head Start.

Parent Engagement Academy (PEA)

Parent Engagement Academy prepares parents to advocate for safe, supportive schools and strong partnership between families and schools. Through training and peer learning, PEA supports parents in building the skills and confidence to engage with educators, raise concerns, and participate in school and district decision-making.





United Parent Leaders Action Network

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