

Audio Transcript

Lisa Mosko: Hi, everyone, my name is Lisa Mosko and I'm the Director of Advocacy for Special Education and Educational Rights at Speak UP, which is an LAUSD-based organization focused on empowering parents to become more involved in the decisions that impact their kids in public education. And Lauren Krempecki asked me to share with you the work I recently did with parents of kids with disabilities at Oakland REACH.

A little background info: during the pandemic, there were a lot of school districts who didn't really come through for kids with disabilities. Now, to be sure, there were a lot of logistical problems, no one foresaw the pandemic, no one foresaw school closures, everyone was scrambling. But there were many districts who actually did come through in ways that Oakland and LAUSD, for example, did not. So when I came to the table to work with the families at Oakland REACH, it really was about teaching them their rights, and teaching them how to analyze the situation, analyze the systems that were blocking their kids from accessing their free and appropriate public education, and figuring out in essence, to put it boldly, to start a movement.

So what I did was I offered them a series of four workshops. Workshop 1 was know your rights, IEP process. Workshop 2 was understand how special education in Oakland Unified is organized. Number 3, was, understand how special education is organized in the state of California, and also the federal level. So talking about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, how that filters down to Ed code, how their special ed local planning areas for either clusters of districts or their single districts help us etc. And then workshop number 4, was about parent power. What can parents do together to work with their school districts, with administrators, and teachers, and really partner with them to start a meaningful movement that will create deep and lasting change in our public education, special education system?

I have to say that working with these families was really incredible. We had two groups. We had one English speaking group, which was all African American. We

had one Spanish speaking group, which were all Latino. And we had some newbies in each group, and we also had some more seasoned parents, who would often jump in and coach the families or the parents who were still at the beginning of their journey in terms of acquiring knowledge. We had a lot of deep-dive conversations around how to defend our kids' rights individually and I heard a lot of very sad stories about kids really missing out on learning for a year and a half, suffering a lot of aggression. And in many cases, for reasons that could have been fixed. And that in another district might have been addressed more quickly. And then we also had very meaningful conversations around analyzing the systems that are impacting our kids, and why. So we talked about lack of funding, we talked about misallocation of funds. We talked about the teacher shortage. We talked about the systems that are creating "teacher flight", if you will. And we talked about what families can do to engage in the system, and with the teachers and administrators to create a more supportive environment for all and to really lift up our kids to help them meet their full potential.

Most importantly, we had very meaningful, deep dive discussions around what would be the most effective strategy to use to start a campaign. Do we want to tackle the issue of the teacher shortage? Do we want to find ways to better support teachers? Knowing that many teachers are not--especially general ed teachers--are not adequately equipped and supported in supporting kids with exceptional needs, who they may find in their classrooms in the spirit of inclusion? Do we want to tackle the fact that IDEA is vastly underfunded, and that has a cascading effect across all systems? So a lot of great conversations, a lot of opening up new pathways to new learning now. The parents want to do a deeper dive into "show us the money"--how is IDEA funding being utilized? How is the COVID relief funding being utilized? etc. And the conversation will continue. I will be reconvening with the families in a few weeks and working harder on our campaigns, leaning more deeply into the campaigns and figuring out which way they want to take it. So I hope you stay tuned. And thanks so much.