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An Online Hub for Queens Parents

Abe R. Levine

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

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Abē Levine

Lessons from Queens Parents on Leadership

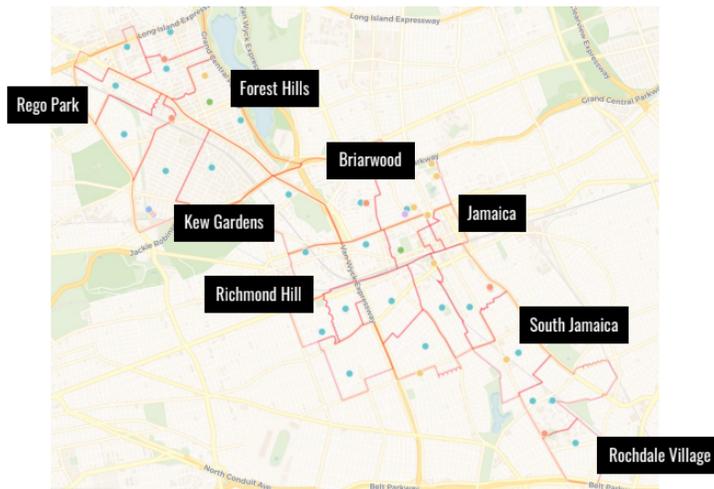
My Community

My initial goal was to work with Latinx parents in District 28 of Queens. I wanted to see if an online platform could help advance the conversation on educational equity in the educational district. While I had worked in the Latinx community in Minneapolis as an educator and a food justice organizer, getting to know the communities of this sizable district, expanding from Forest Hills to Rochdale Village, would be an entirely novel endeavor.

While many parts of the district have significant Latinx populations, there are barriers to parent involvement and advocacy in schools. In 2019, the district's former superintendent Mabel Sarduy secured a grant to implement a diversity plan. While white and east Asian parents in the north of the district expressed their discontent with the plan, few, if any Latinx voices were present.

I wanted to create a platform where Latinx families—and other underrepresented parents— could share ideas and stories and find information about education issues, and create an alternative road to parent participation.

Community Background



District 28 contains multitudes. Racially, ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically, the district contains a wide variety of people and communities. In fact, there's not a clear answer of how the boundaries of this district, which make up such a large swath of territory, came to be. Until the 90s, Queens was primarily non-hispanic white, but immigration to the borough exploded in the mid-90s. During the 90's the overall population in Queens expanded by 14%, with

the foreign born population comprising 46% of that total, and by 2000, Latinos made up 24% of the total population.¹ Other important stats² about D28 include:

¹ U.S. Census data from Miyares, I. M. (2004). From Exclusionary Covenant to Ethnic Hyperdiversity in Jackson Heights, Queens. *Geographical Review*, 94(4), 462-483. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30034291>

² Student population data from NYC Dept. of Ed, Dept. of District Planning

- 66% of K-12 students in the district are economically disadvantaged
- In grades K-12, Latinx students make up between 27 to 30% of the student population
- 16% of students have disabilities
- 13% of students in grades K-8 are ELL (English Language Learners)

Reporting before the practicum

I began my work with this community on July 1st, a few days after I arrived in NYC. I was reporting for School Colors, a podcast focused on power, race, and class in American schools and cities, and our second season focused in on Queens. There, a [Diversity Plan](#) broadly aimed at desegregating schools garnered vocal criticism from parents concerned that the plan would cause the quality of schools to suffer. The reality behind this vocal dissent was that many voices, particularly Latinos and voices from the south of the district were not a significant part of the conversation. According to Atina Bazin, a mother from Kew Gardens in the north, said that the information pipeline informing parents of the plan was controlled by parents in the north, and her PTO (parent teacher organization) in particular.

I wanted to know, beyond the diversity plan, what Latino parents thought of their kids' education overall. Did they feel agency over their childrens' educational opportunities as immigrant parents? Were there concerns they had about equity and opportunity in their childrens' schools? My initial approach to this process was to do man on the street style interviews at NYC's summer program called Summer Rising. While I found that parents were willing to talk with me, I found it difficult to form more enduring relationships.

I also tried using Facebook groups, not necessarily for education conversations, but just to find where people gathered in the community. I posted in a group based around the main thoroughfare Roosevelt Ave, [a.k.a La Roosevelt](#), and I attempted to find Zumba classes to meet people. I think if I had longer term ties to the community, as well as familiarity with how this diverse and expansive community communicated on social media, I could've had more success.³ I also reached out to newspapers catering to the Latino community, including: Queens Latino, El Correo NY, Impacto Latino, and Ecuador News.

I also reached out to local organizations including Make the Road NYC, Documented, and Integrate NYC. While I learned more about Make the Road's parents in action committee's campaign to fund inclusive curriculum, I didn't form lasting bonds. I also tried reaching out to parent resource coordinators at schools but found they were unresponsive, and most likely overworked. Lastly, I contacted the Queens Public Library to see if I could collaborate with their adult ed classes to recruit students to report or help develop a listening post. While I was successful in setting up meetings with staff [and garnered excitement](#) with a presentation I offered, I didn't ultimately get to work with any of the adult learners. I think the challenge here

³ For more information on social media engagement, see appendix.

was that I was not collaborating with an organization that directly engaged youth or parents but focused rather on adult learners.

One-on-One Conversations

My greatest breakthroughs came from word of mouth contacts including Blanca Calderón. Blanca is the president of her PTA at a charter school called Growing Up Green II in Jamaica Queens. She talked to me about the discrepancies in resources and programming between two different GUG sites in Long Island City and her sons' in Jamaica. She also discussed bullying and retaliation she experienced from administrators for expressing concerns at multiple schools that her sons attended including GUG.

Through a DOE staff person named Sonia Rueda, who coaches emerging parent leaders, I also met Carol Niebles who talked about her fight to get Wifi at her daughter's school in Jamaica, and I met Shadiatu Moustapha whose son's suspension highlighted the issue of systemic racism and disproportionate suspensions in schools.

I listened to the concerns of these moms and others, particularly about distribution of resources across schools including access to after school programs, advanced and remedial learning opportunities, and services for children with disabilities. While I knew I wasn't in the position to organize an extended campaign around these issues, I thought a central information hub could connect parents with shared struggles. I also had Blanca's encouragement.

"Don't disappear," she said after our second conversation. "It would be great if we could stay in contact to give a voice to parents. And to see what stories they can tell. My story isn't that big, but there are definitely a lot of stories that will surprise you." I did think that Blanca's story was important, particularly how she had encountered several hurdles to being an involved parent, (including having child protective services ([ACS](#)) called on her out of retaliation). I wanted to highlight stories like Blanca's and generate an ongoing conversation about equity including the Diversity Plan, while also sharing critical resources and information to other parents not yet activated to push for change.

Barriers to Information

The Department of Education, which governs NYC public schools, is notoriously opaque. Most parents aren't going to visit the website to get information they need. And in situations, for example, where your son has been suspended, your daughter isn't getting the disability services they deserve, or child protections services (ACS) arrives at your home, it's important to know what resources you have. As an experiment to fill an info gap, I began a bilingual newsletter called the [Queens Boletín](#).

I did research looking into whether similar platforms exist, particularly in English and Spanish. I found that the New York State Education Department does release a newsletter three times a year, and I was also informed that the Department of Education had a newsletter, but I wasn't

able to locate it. I also looked at community organizations. The most curated newsletter I could find was [PLACE NYC](#), a conservative-leaning platform that caters to families who want to strengthen preëxisting public school offerings, rather than create changes predicated on equity and racial justice. I thought that my newsletter could be more nimble, more narrative, and more community based than these other offerings.

In Startup Sprint, I looked at examples of other successful newsletters- how they laid out their design, what kinds of content they offered, and who their potential audiences were. I also looked at how they supplemented newsletter content through other channels such as using Instagram stories and providing other offerings, such as consulting. I knew I wanted to make my newsletter:

- Visual
- Conversational
- Easy to digest
- Aesthetically clean and not overwhelming with too much text or content
- Have a clear niche

I was able to make three editions of my newsletter. The editions focused on the difference between [equity and equality](#), [disproportionate suspensions](#), and [mental health](#). I tried to give the newsletter texture by adding an audio profile, a section specifically for community resources, and integrating a written reflection in addition to linking to outside content. I also included a survey and a link for people to sign up for the newsletter.

To supplement the newsletter, I also held four group meetings, which focused on discussing issues parents encountered and ultimately how we could transmit resources to other parents via a parent manual. This is where I experienced the most energy from parents, who shared an eagerness to support other parents (and also take down the system). Also, out of these conversations emerged the idea of having a more dynamic platform where two-way conversations could occur. One parent, Atina, had already created a Facebook page called “D28 Equity Now.” She added that she had recruited other important organizations and organizers to be a part of the page, though it wasn’t currently getting a lot of traffic, nor was she actively posting on it. Half of the visitors (15) to my newsletter have come from Facebook, making a good argument for posting there. The rest have come from direct emails.

In recent meetings we’ve been adding to a parent manual, which I’ll touch upon shortly.

Metrics and Impacts

An issue I knew I’d encounter was determining what specific impact and/or what problem I’d want to address within the community. What I’ve learned from Startup Sprint is that when designing a new product it’s key to know what problem or “pain” you want to solve. A pain could be as simple as an inconvenience or something that could be done better or with better design. That said, attempting to solve a problem in a community, especially one that’s not your own can be fool-hearted at best and detrimental at worst. And very often, making progress on an issue is

not a linear path, with consequences that are difficult to quantify or categorize. I saw this first hand in our metrics and outcomes where we didn't ultimately answer the question of whether our voter engagement efforts increased turnout, though certainly the effort was highly organized. All this to say, addressing the issue of school inequity by providing more information is a large, complex, and "[wicked](#)" problem.

I feel the main impact I've had is to bring parents together to talk and find commonalities. Getting to solutions is tricky and takes time, but I've planted a seed, and I can see that if there is a similar push for a diversity plan or other district-wide campaigns that these parents could have the beginnings of a network.

The group of parents and I are also slowly workshopping a parent manual for distribution. These are the manual sections we're filling out:

- Filing a complaint
- Applying for special services for your child
- What to do in cases of retaliation
- Organizing parent teacher organizations

In regards to PTOs, this could be one of the first parent to parent efforts based on politicizing PTOs. Typically (and perhaps by law), a DOE official teaches parents the by-laws, procedures, and functions of a PTO. This is Sonia Rueda's (mentioned above) role. Getting information from the top down is one form of capacity building, but in the case of Shadiatu, Blanca, and Carol, they were able to organize their PTO's to challenge systemic failures. Shadiatu and Blanca, along with one other parent I spoke with, Tina, filed a complaint with the New York State Education Department against Growing Up Green⁴. Tina said that the greatest accomplishment was not getting to file the complaint but building solidarity amongst parents. She said this:

"The Fight is Long and Multi-generational. Most of the time you lose in the fight for justice, in the fight for what's right. But the thing is the metrics shouldn't be the campaign. The metric should be the culture. The metric should be how did people feel when they joined together? How did we feel? That's what we accomplished; what we did so much more than the complaint."

That's the place I'm in, and the work feels unfinished. If you look at the specific metrics of my newsletter, they're not mind-blowing. I have 10 subscribers, though my open rate is over 60%, cumulatively, and visits outnumber subscribers. If I really wanted to build this newsletter out, I'd have to substantially increase connections in the community and place a focus on routine publishing and outreach.

I think there are a lot of parents who I haven't been able to build connections with. As I mentioned, I began this process of getting out into the community by talking with parents outside of schools and at community meetings. I found it difficult to sustain and grow my

⁴ The purpose of the complaint was to provoke the school to change a culture of racial bias, undeserving students with disabilities, and excluding and bullying parents. They're still waiting on a summary of findings from the NYSED.

network of connections, instead choosing to build solidarity amongst the tight-knit group of parents I'd begun to engage. Ideally, I would be able to distribute a physical parent manual and reach more people that way or even create a listening post. While I skillfully used social media for other reporting projects, I didn't find much of a place for social engagement here. Social media engagement works well when there are groups that bind around a particular interest or shared identity, and I was not sure how to define my community more narrowly.

I'm regularly working on accepting imperfection and messiness, particularly during the pandemic.

Sustainability/Agency

I was clear with parents that we have to think of an exit plan for me, for once I graduate. Ideally, I could continue supporting this project. I'd like to produce one more episode of the newsletter about services with students with disabilities, and interview an advocate I recently found on INCLUDE NYC's website. At this point, I don't see any parent taking over the newsletter or an organization, but it's something I will bring up when we have a concluding meeting.

Some Conclusions:

Prior to beginning this program, I had no idea what engagement journalism was. I had the feeling it would be a way to wed my past experiences of community organizing with a desire to learn the fundamentals of journalism. I also thought that there would be less pressure to publish. I now understand that social or engagement journalism seeks to address acute problems in communities with services in addition to publishing stories. The openness of the field is both encouraging and evolving in terms of an approach a newsroom can take. I do feel a pang of disappointment in wishing I had been able to publish while at grad school, as well as hone the craft more of writing news and long form narratives, as I take a lot of pleasure in that creative process. I'm looking forward to continuing to develop the craft of storytelling after my time here.

The best practices I have for engaging this community would be to first of all TALK to people. All journalism begins here. And, as I suggested, parents who had the time were excited to share their stories. I would also say that, if possible, collaborate with orgs that are doing similar work. I started conversations with Documented to learn more about their two newsletters and their Whatsapp platform for getting information out to immigrant communities. I believe they and Conecta Arizona have great models for maintaining two-way conversation with Latinx communities using Whatsapp. I am also interested in engaging with INCLUDE NYC, which supports families of children with disabilities. Lastly, in speaking with classmates, sometimes specific questions are better when trying to seek insight, i.e. ask "do you have questions about getting a supervised behavioral assessment might be more helpful than what do you want to know about disability services.

I'm grateful that parents have been willing to talk and work with me and hope that I can use that as a foundation for future engagement work.

Appendix of Community Guidelines and Degree Highlights:

Social Media Engagement:

While social media engagement was not a centerpoint of my practicum project, I have used social media skills a lot for my internship at Connecticut Public Radio. I've located sources and initiated conversations on [Reddit](#), Twitter, [Instagram](#), and Facebook. Topics I've researched include: the health impacts of climate change, sourcing questions for local mayoral candidates, reclaiming witchcraft, and Purdue Pharma's role in the opioid crisis. I also used Facebook for my engagement reporting story on caregivers (see below).

Community Ethics Guidelines: [Community Ethics Guidelines](#)

These were guidelines I developed when working with water protectors resisting the construction of the [Line 3 pipeline](#) in Minnesota. The guidelines were in response to two prompts on avoiding conflicts of interest and managing privacy concerns.

Other Stories I've made at J-School

Articles

Disproportionate Suspensions: [AbeLevine_Suspensions_02](#)

I wrote this story after speaking with a mother from Queens about how her son was suspended in his third week of school. Here, I learned how to approach an institution for their side of the story. I hadn't had the opportunity to confront the powerful or the party accused of misconduct before, so that was a good experience. I also valued getting to hear this mom's story and hope that I can put it out into the world.

Caregivers: This was a story I wrote during our first semester reporting class. I enjoyed building connections with caregivers by finding folks on Facebook and using personal connections. At the time, I was caring for an elder and recognizing all the complexities of the work, particularly during Covid. Reporting with this community, I realized how critical and underpaid care work can be and how personal and significant connections between caregivers and the clients they serve are.

<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jxJsTDnnx3VYWE7MF18jRgA5NC4-x1WH6xotAihCjM/edit?usp%3Dsharing&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1639246130676000&usq=AOvVaw3RfE76vsV1E3GmsNm0V4Kd>

Indigenous defenders of the Amazon: I wrote this article during my Climate Crisis class. We had to find a story related to the U.N.'s climate conference known as COP 26. To research this story, I spoke with two sources in Spanish, an Indigenous activist and a lawyer from Ecuador. I gained confidence in my ability to interview in Spanish. And I also thoroughly enjoyed writing about the complexity of the Amazon. It also reinforced my understanding that protecting land is fundamentally about respecting Indigenous rights to land sovereignty. Native land defenders make up 5% of the world's population but protect 80% of our biodiversity. While I realized the

Amazon was in danger, I didn't realize how close we are to a tipping point, where the Amazon could cease to exist as it's known and change into a grassy savannah. This would have drastic effects on the world's weather systems. How interconnected our biological systems and how vulnerable they currently are.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/11LQJsOVcPd0UTAJEj_LeRG4ydHyk7Tuf/edit?usp=sharing&oid=103101609614326781575&rtpof=true&sd=true

Reviving Indigenous Foodways: I wrote this article in our advanced reporting class last semester. I thoroughly enjoyed talking to this chef about the connection he has with elders through food. As a food writer, cook, and grower myself, it touched a personal note. I wished I got this one and the above published!

<https://mixednmoody.medium.com/for-a-native-chef-feeding-elders-revives-old-traditions-and-builds-new-ones-f9ebdbfb4590>

Data Story, Oil Pipeline Spills: I produced this story for our data class. I was able to locate data about oil spills throughout the country and map them. I, at first, struggled to locate useable data that could tell a story. I miraculously found this robust set of data, with initially confusing terms and definitions. Through cleaning the data and inputting it into DataWrapper I made this comprehensive map. I was proud and excited that it came out this well. It was beautiful to see that numbers could be turned into a visual that could tell a story, in this case the concentration of spills in Texas and the enormity of other spills, and I was encouraged to do more data reporting.

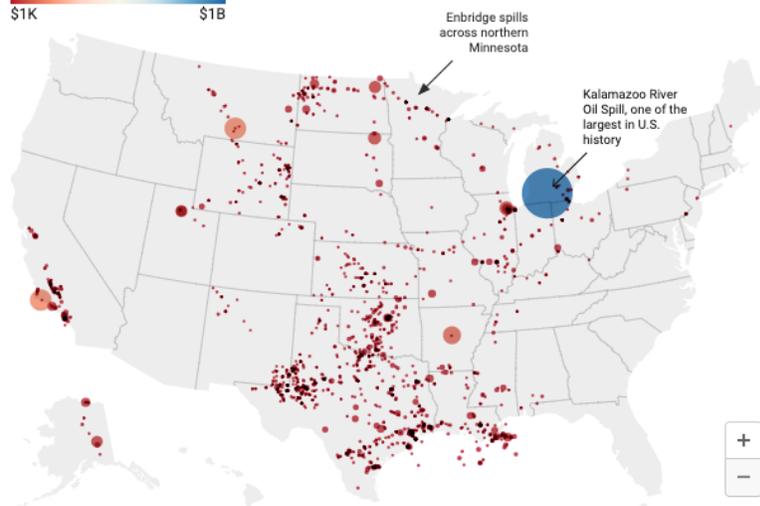
<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jKxJsTDnnx3VYWE7MF18jRgA5NC4-x1WH6xotAihCjM/edit?usp%3Dsharing&sa=D&source=docs&ust=163924613067600&usq=AOvVaw3RfE76vsV1E3GmsNm0V4Kd>

Crude Oil Pipeline Spills and Cost

Crude oil pipeline spills from 2010 to 2021

Cost in current dollars

\$1K \$1B



Data does not include pipelines carrying refined oil

Map: Abe Levine • Source: Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), Department of Transportation
• Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Video:

Slow Roll: A story of biking as a community. I stumbled upon this Black led biking club on a celebratory day. I got lucky to run into the Slow Rollers on the day Joe Biden was declared the winner of the presidential elections. I learned a lot in the process of making this video including the variety of shots needed to tell a compelling visual story. I also felt grateful to be welcomed into the ride.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TNxLk0gRGg>

Line 3 Protests: These two videos I made documenting Indigenous and women-led protests against the Line 3 Pipeline. I learned that I had the capacity to edit video and that I needed to get over my fears of talking to folks at protests, and also that it's important to have insulated mittens when doing coverage in the Minnesota winter. The first video is of an interfaith protest acknowledging past harm by Christian institutions and declaring solidarity in the fight to defend Indigenous sovereignty. The second is an interview with a water protector from the Resilient Indigenous Sisters Engaging.

By The River: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiZGM_u3k7k&t=71s

Backus, Minnesota: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKmpeRrHLFH/>

Audio Doc

Fungi/Mushroom People: I've been fascinated by psychedelics since reading about Michael Pollan's experiential recounting in How to Change Your Mind. I would've liked to go into broader detail about the history of the war on drugs and the role of plant medicines as a means of community bonding and healing in Indigenous societies. I also think I needed to get at least one more compelling narrative to build the story around. That said, I got experimental here by having a mushroom be the central narrator of the story with help from an actor friend. I also wove together three stories about foraging, transformation, and healing trauma.

<http://audiodoc.nycitynewsservice.com/2021/06/04/mingling-with-mushrooms/>

