

# WHAT FAMILIES OF ENGLISH LEARNERS SAY THEIR STUDENTS NEED:

## FIVE POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

OCTOBER 2021

### INTRODUCTION

As we enter a third consecutive school year impacted by the pandemic, educators and policymakers are grappling with how to respond to the needs of students and their families. While all students in California have been impacted by the pandemic, we know from experience that the past year has surfaced unique challenges and needs for English learners, and we believe it is vital to listen and respond with supports that are rooted in their lived experiences.

In the Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified), the second-largest school district in the nation, “Ever-English learners” (students who have at some point in their K-12 educational trajectory been classified as English learners) make up 48% of the almost 600,000 students in the district.<sup>1</sup> Of the approximately 14,000 LA Unified students served by the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools (Partnership), this percentage is even higher, with Ever-English learner students accounting for 62% of all students in the network. With LA Unified’s budget boosted for 2021-22 by about \$5.5 billion in state and federal pandemic relief, the District has an historic opportunity to invest resources to support and engage English learners and their families. In September, the Partnership published an [equity alert](#) that shares ways LA Unified can invest this infusion of state and federal dollars to create a lasting impact.

IN LOS ANGELES,  
ALMOST HALF OF ALL  
LA UNIFIED STUDENTS  
HAVE AT ONE POINT  
BEEN ENGLISH LEARNERS.

IN CALIFORNIA, A PUBLIC K-12 PUPIL IS IDENTIFIED AS AN “ENGLISH LEARNER” IF THE STUDENT’S HOME LANGUAGE OR PRIMARY LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH AND THEIR DISTRICT HAS NOT RECLASSIFIED THE STUDENT AS “FLUENT ENGLISH PROFICIENT” BASED ON STATE TEST SCORES AND OTHER CRITERIA DETERMINED BY DISTRICTS.<sup>2</sup>

With this context in mind, we have an obligation to listen to and respond to our communities to inform investments that meet the diverse learning needs of English learners. Beginning with our Spring 2021 *Listening to Learn* survey conducted in South Los Angeles, the Partnership is launching an initiative to learn from our English learner students and families, as well as the educators in our schools who support them. As we learn, we aim to publish a series of *Listening to Learn* briefs that highlight promising practices in our schools and identify potential solutions for the barriers that our students and families experience. We hope these briefs inform a direction for strategic investment by LA Unified to better serve English learners and their families.

Launched in 2007, the Partnership for Los Angeles School’s mission is to transform schools to revolutionize school systems, empowering all students with a high-quality education. The Partnership is a non-profit, in-District partner to LA Unified, not a charter network. As an independent nonprofit organization, the Partnership serves approximately 14,000 students across 19 LA Unified schools in Watts, Boyle Heights and South Los Angeles. The Partnership works within the Los Angeles Unified School District context, which includes honoring all collective bargaining agreements for its teachers and school staff.

### LA Unified English Learner Student Population, 2019-2020 (%)

Classification	LA Unified	LA Unified Partnership Schools
English learners	20%	25%
Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP)	28%	37%
Ever-English learners	48%	62%

### Partnership Network English Learner Student Population, 2019-2020 (%)

Community	English Learners	Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP)
Boyle Heights	15%	50%
South Los Angeles	32%	34%
Watts	30%	20%

## SOUTH LOS ANGELES SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS BARRIERS AND BRIGHT SPOTS IN ENGLISH LEARNER FAMILY SUPPORTS

In Spring 2021, we partnered with LA Unified staff in the Jefferson-South Central Community of Schools to poll primarily Spanish-speaking families through the *Listening to Learn: Understanding the Experiences of English Learner Families Survey*. Localized to the community of South LA, we received a total of 242 responses from over 20 LA Unified schools (including 10 Partnership schools)

COMMUNITIES OF SCHOOLS ARE REGIONAL GROUPINGS OF LA UNIFIED SCHOOLS WITHIN A NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE LOCAL DISTRICT STAFF ARE CLUSTERED TO BETTER ASSIST FAMILIES. COMMUNITIES OF SCHOOLS ARE USUALLY ARRANGED BY FEEDER PATTERN, WHICH MEANS THEY ARE CENTERED AROUND A HIGH SCHOOL AND THE MIDDLE AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS THAT ARE CLOSEST TO THAT HIGH SCHOOL.

from families of English learners. The survey focused on topics discussing distance learning, communications with schools, reclassification, and course access over the past year in particular with some insights about their experiences overall as well. Most responses were in Spanish, and were primarily from families who had a student enrolled at the elementary school level.

Across a range of questions focused on school-home communication, the majority of surveyed families responded positively about topics such as receiving information about their student’s progress on assignments and grades, support from the school in their home language, and teachers’ high expectations for students. At the same time, responses also indicate a persistent need for further support for English learners and their families, particularly in areas such as course access, initial classification and reclassification processes. These learnings represent a foundation for future conversations we seek to have with our schools and families across the communities we serve.

In this brief, we highlight key findings from aggregated survey responses coupled with our first-hand experience leading schools to inform policy and practice implications for systems and advocacy partners. Please see the Appendix for select survey responses.

## FINDING #1: Parents are proud of their English learner students.

When asked what made them proud of their students, parents shared an outpouring of strong belief in their students' abilities (see quotes, right). Parents cited their child's love for reading and math, their character, and their determination to succeed. For many families, the sentiment of how English learner students are doing is summed up by "Están esforzándose por dar lo mejor," which roughly translates to: "They are striving to do their best by giving it their all." From the survey responses, it is clear that parents believe that their students will overcome the challenges of the pandemic and will reach their goals.

### Policy and Practice Implications

Too often we focus on the challenges and barriers standing in the way of English learner students and we overlook their strengths. We owe it to the families of English learners to ensure our approaches are asset-based and that we partner with parents in accessing the many strengths our students bring to the classroom.



EVERYTHING ABOUT HER MAKES ME PROUD. SHE'S DOING GREAT IN MATH, READING, AND WRITING OVERALL. WE LOVE BEING THE PARENTS TO THIS LOVELY LITTLE GIRL. WE LOVE HER SO MUCH.

— South LA parent

PUES QUE A PESAR DE QUE LE CUESTA MUCHO EL ESTUDIO AHÍ ESTÁ Y NO SE DA POR VENCIDO.

— South LA parent

TRANSLATED: "WELL, EVEN THOUGH STUDYING IS DIFFICULT FOR HIM, HE IS THERE AND HE DOES NOT GIVE UP."

## FINDING #2: As a frontline source of support to families of English learner students, schools continue to provide a positive and welcoming environment, with adults on campus who speak their home language.

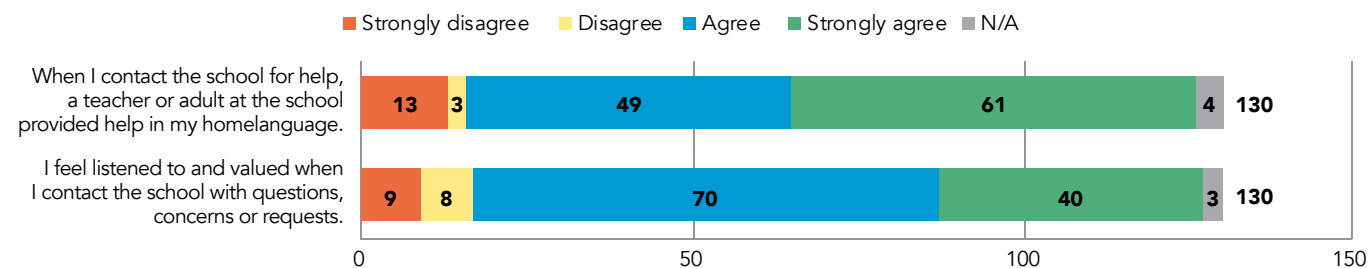
When asked about access to support in their home language, families overwhelmingly noted feeling supported by their schools. Families agreed or strongly agreed that when contacting schools directly, they were able to find an adult who was able to support them in their home language and made them feel listened to and valued.

### Policy and Practice Implications

School staff should be commended for maintaining a welcoming environment for the families of English learners, even when faced with the difficulties brought by the pandemic. While school systems provided schools

with support coordinating and broadly disseminating information to families during the period of distance learning, it is our experience that families continued to first turn to their schools for support and resources. It is not uncommon to hear Spanish, among other languages, spoken at schools in Los Angeles; a real asset that deserves to be highlighted and through which district communications can be more effectively channeled. As districts continue to improve their communication and family engagement strategies, it is important to invest in strengthening the existing systems at school sites that already provide support to parents in their home language.

### Families responded favorably to statements about finding support from schools directly. (N=130)



## FINDING #3: The increased technology use by schools during distance learning was a barrier for parent-student support and school-home communication.

When asked about the greatest barrier to distance learning, the top barrier identified by families was access to technology (56% of respondents), aligning with our findings in a previous [Listening to Learn](#) survey focused on distance learning and digital equity. Families surveyed noted that these conditions made it difficult to support their students at home, with one respondent describing the difficult process of learning applications on their own and how it impacted their student's learning. Survey responses also suggested that issues with technology were intertwined with issues of language for many families of English learners. Even when information was being provided digitally in their home language, parents were often unable to access this information due to their limited knowledge of and comfort with technology.

### Policy and Practice Implications

Despite schools actively sharing information in parents' home language, families of English learners are missing out on key resources and support for their students because of technology barriers. Considering technology will continue to play a crucial role in and out of the classroom, it is imperative that we make these tools more accessible to parents. To strengthen engagement with the families of English learners, schools and districts should consider families' home language and technology fluency as they further explore opportunities to build strong school-home communication systems crucial for English learner success. Channels for information sharing should be planned utilizing a equity-based, linguistic-justice lens<sup>3</sup> which takes into consideration the difficulties families face when information is not relayed in their home language. For families requesting additional support, districts should invest in virtual and in-person training oriented at supporting parents to access and understand the technology their students must use for learning.



I WASN'T REALLY FAMILIAR WITH ZOOM AND SCHOOL SO I HAD TO LEARN EVERYTHING AND THAT WAS HARD...A LOT OF THE APPS THAT THEY USE ALSO NEEDED TO BE DOWNLOADED SO THAT WAS A STRUGGLE FOR ME, WHICH IMPACTED [MY CHILD'S] LEARNING.

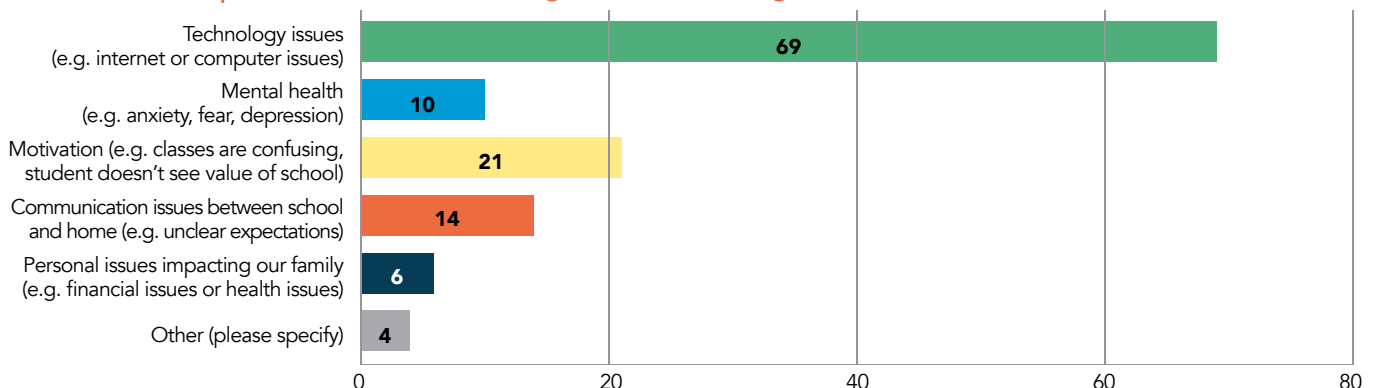
— South LA parent

PUSE 'DESACUERDO' PORQUE MUCHAS DE LAS PREGUNTAS NO CALIFICAN PORQUE AUNQUE MANDAN LA INFORMACIÓN A VECES UNO NO LA LEE [PORQUE] NO SABE ENTRAR A LOS LINKS.

— South LA parent

TRANSLATED: "I PUT 'DISAGREE' BECAUSE MANY OF THE QUESTIONS DO NOT QUALIFY SINCE ALTHOUGH THEY SEND THE INFORMATION SOMETIMES ONE DOES NOT READ IT [BECAUSE] WE DO NOT KNOW HOW TO ENTER THE LINKS."

### What was the top barrier to success during distance learning? (N=124)



## FINDING #4: Over a quarter of families felt their English learner students did not have access to elective courses such as music and arts.

When asked whether their students had access to elective courses outside of English Language Arts (ELA) and math, such as music and the arts, over a quarter of families felt their students experienced a lack of access to these courses.<sup>4</sup> These findings are supported by research showing barriers in access to enrichment and/or extracurricular opportunities, particularly for long-term English learners.<sup>5</sup> Our experience working in LA Unified schools also suggests that in the push to reclassify, students may be double-blocked in ELA and English Language Development (ELD) courses in ways that limit their access to more well-rounded and rigorous experiences in schools.

### Policy and Practice Implications

Research shows a rich array of courses and electives that allow students to tap into their unique talents and

passions are needed alongside core classes to support student success.<sup>6</sup> Given the importance and complexity in ensuring English learners complete reclassification and A-G requirements, districts should closely monitor English learner student course accessibility, and utilize course audits to find opportunities for the inclusion of elective courses and more rigorous content that will prepare these students for post-secondary success. Districts should also invest in counselor support, training, and capacity-building that focuses on supporting English learner students to pursue elective interests and fulfill graduation requirements alongside their reclassification requirements.

## FINDING #5: A small but significant group of families believe their students have been misclassified as English learners.

When asked about their student's 'English learner' classification, 10% of families surveyed disagreed with the classification, with multiple parents noting confusion with both the initial classification and the criteria for reclassification. One respondent who disagreed with their student's classification noted that they felt their student had only been designated as an English learner because their indicated home language was Spanish, rather than truly understanding their English-speaking capabilities. This aligns with research on the use of single assessments to classify English learners, as it can lead to over-designation into the classification.<sup>7</sup>

### Policy and Practice Implications

Districts should clearly communicate and engage families in the processes of initial designation and the trajectory towards reclassification to English proficiency, as it directly relates to families' ability to monitor student coursework towards reclassification and college eligibility. Doing so is a crucial step in setting the foundation necessary to disseminate support and resources available to both

“  
SHE'S PLACED UNDER THIS CATEGORY  
BECAUSE THE SCHOOL APPLICATION  
ASK[ED] WHAT IS HER FIRST LANGUAGE.  
SHE KNOWS ENGLISH MORE THAN SHE  
SPEAKS SPANISH. I DON'T AGREE ON  
HOW THEY PLACED MY DAUGHTER UNDER  
THIS CATEGORY.

— South LA parent

students and their families. Having both schools and families on the same page about students' language classification facilitates ongoing discussion to support the student at school and at home.

# CONCLUSION

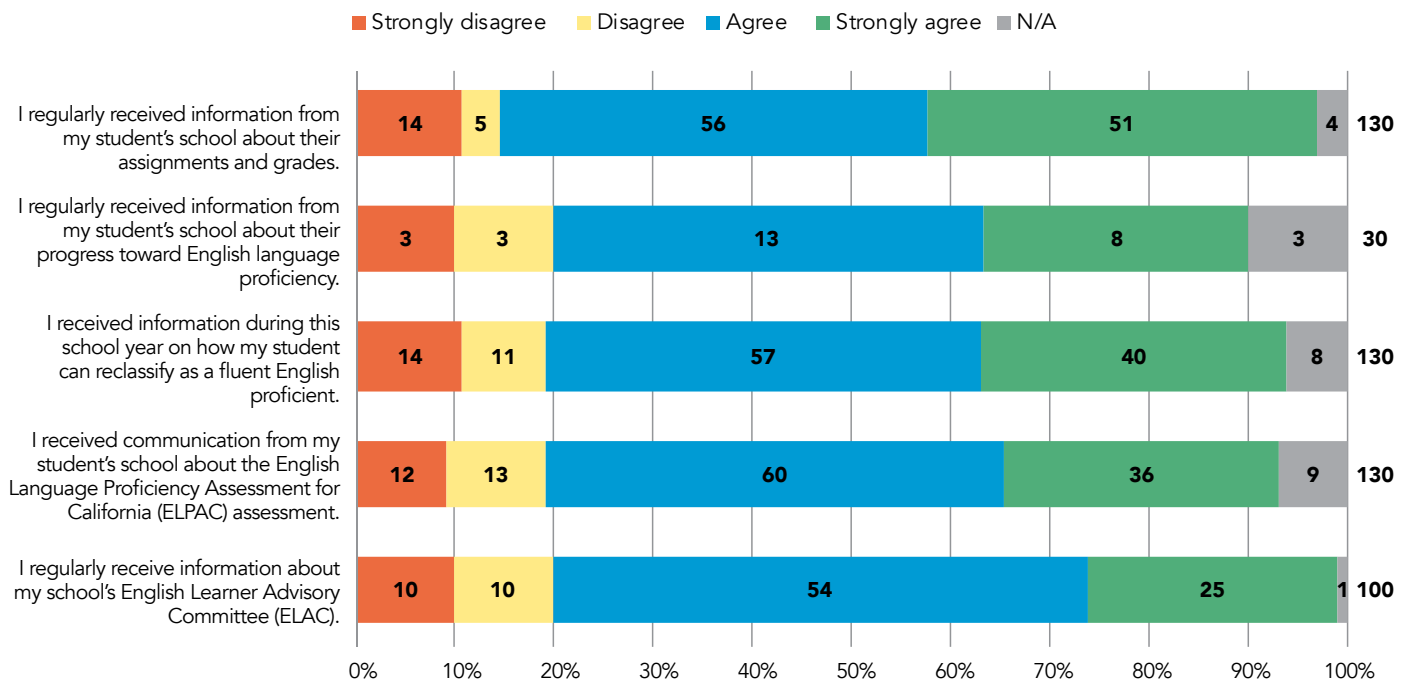
As schools and districts rebuild and reimagine their systems of support for students after more than a year of distance learning, it is important that we listen to and learn from the experiences of our students and families. This survey has helped to inform a learning agenda for the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools as we seek to better understand and support English learner students, families, and the schools who serve them. As an organization with direct access to -- and experience working with -- schools in the communities of Boyle Heights, South LA, and Watts, we have a distinctive opportunity to enhance our practice and inform policy change to support students. We welcome opportunities to partner with our English learner students and families.

## Endnotes

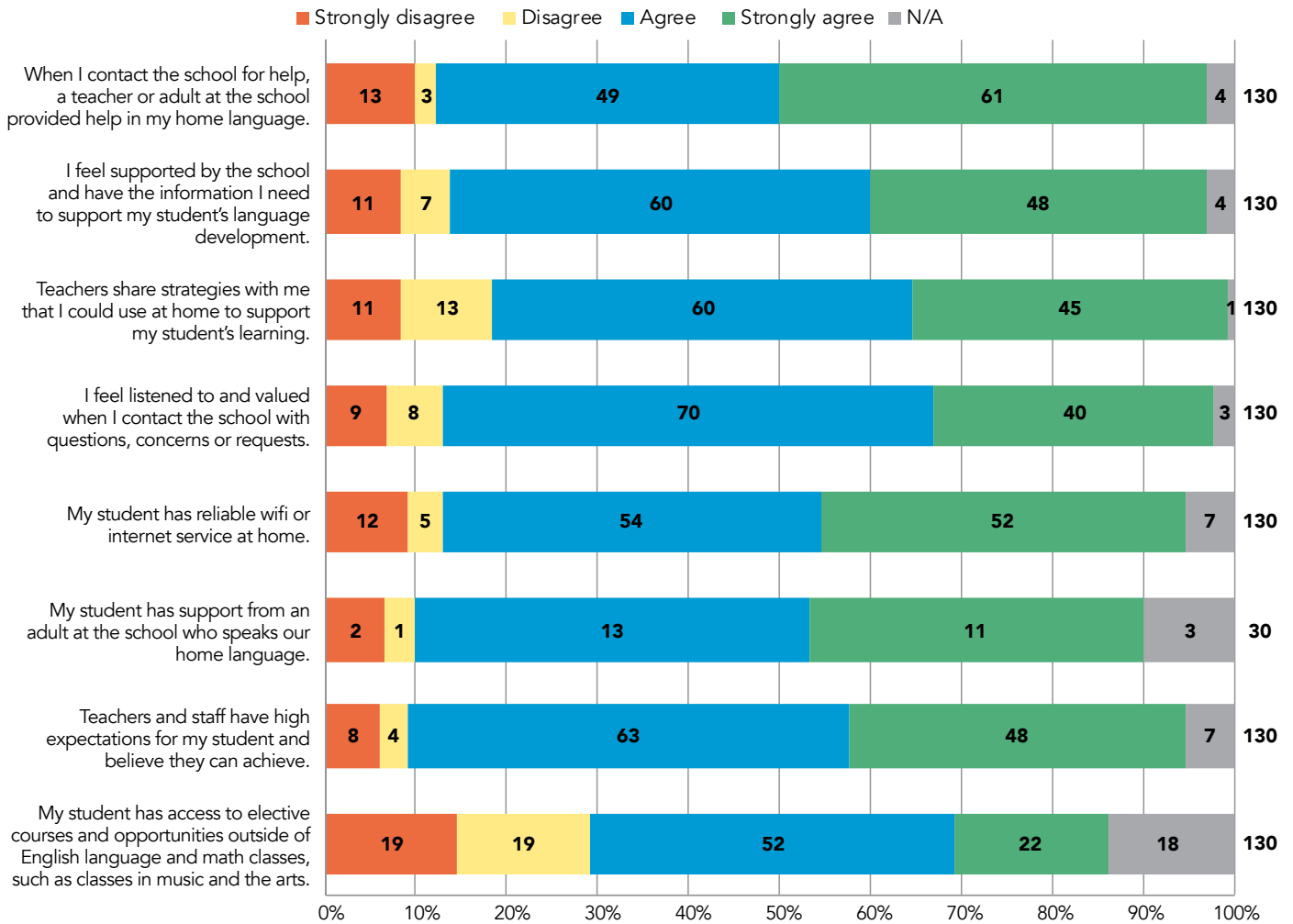
1. According to data by the California Department of Education, 2019-2020.
2. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sg/englishlearner.asp>
3. [https://nesfp.org/sites/default/files/resources/language\\_justice\\_toolkit.pdf](https://nesfp.org/sites/default/files/resources/language_justice_toolkit.pdf)
4. Note: this survey question strictly applied to families' beliefs as to whether or not their student had access to these courses. This survey did not do any course analysis or audit to authenticate claims.
5. <https://www.californianstogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/21007-LCAP-Report-Web-12.pdf>
6. Winsler, A., Gara, T. V., Alegrodo, A., Castro, S., & Tavassolie, T. (2020). Selection into, and academic benefits from, arts-related courses in middle school among low-income, ethnically diverse youth. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 14(4), 415–432. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000222>
7. Kim, J. (2011). Relationships among and between ELL status, demographic characteristics, enrollment history, and school persistence (CRESST Report No. 810). Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing.

# APPENDIX

Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements as they relate to you as the parent/guardian of an English learner and to your student's experience in distance learning this year.



Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements as they relate to you as the parent/guardian of an English learner and to your student's experience in distance learning this year. (continued from previous page)



We transform schools to revolutionize school systems, empowering all students with a high-quality education.

partnershipla.org | @PartnershipLA

1055 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 1850 | Los Angeles, CA 90017 | (213) 201-2000