

Celebrating Black Leaders and PON's Progress in the Cross-Cultural Solidarity Project en español



Dear members and partners:

The overarching premise of the Parent Organization Network (PON) is strength through diversity. This concept drives the organization's priorities and efforts to design and implement programs that strengthen parents' ability to guide and support their children's development in a multilingual and multicultural society.

In this newsletter we highlight an outstanding Black leader, the late Mary Johnson, and a report on PON's *Building Cross-Cultural Solidarity* project. We share strategies that helped us foster a safe environment for parents and community leaders from different backgrounds to learn and engage with each other, and we offer key takeaways from the project, thus far.

Given the polarized environment and the intentional efforts to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, it is now more important than ever to remain committed to efforts that will raise critical awareness that caring only about one's own children perpetuates self-centeredness and undermines our interconnectedness and true transformation toward unity and justice.

I look forward to your ongoing partnership in efforts to continue bridge-building and network-weaving across diverse communities and organizations so we overcome this moment and emerge stronger than before.

In solidarity,

Araceli Simeón
Executive Director

Joyce Germaine Watts, EdD
Advisory Board Co-Chair

Adrián Sandoval
Advisory Board Co-Chair



Honoring Mary Johnson (1955-2024)



Mary Johnson was an unapologetic parent advocate for quality education, a champion for authentic parent engagement in schools, and a pioneer in co-developing models with UCLA and Pepperdine University to better equip future teachers to work effectively with families.

Although Mary passed away last April, her legacy continues through the parents and teachers she mentored in Lynwood and Southeast cities who share her passion and commitment to a quality education for all students.

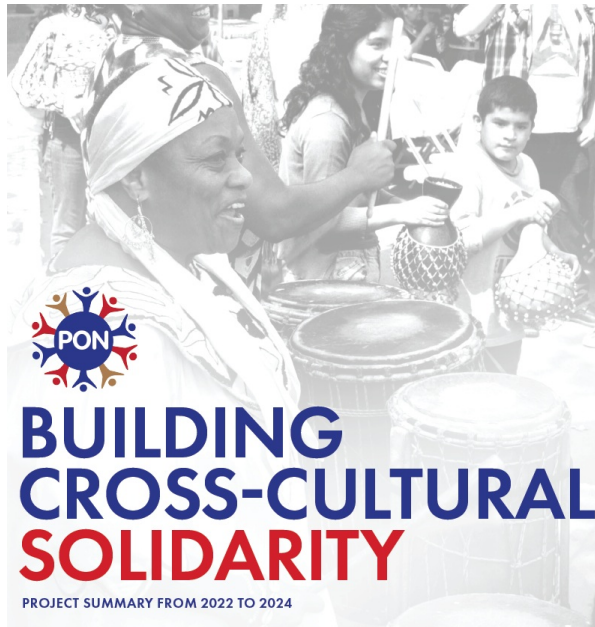
Mary and Parent-U-Turn were PON members for over five years. Our paths last intersected in February 2024 when she supported PON and California Family Engagement Network in advocating for passage of the new California Standards for the Teaching Profession that went before the Commission on Teacher Credentialing.

We are so grateful for Mary's lasting contributions to the field and we'll continue working with

Pepperdine University and others to ensure the implementation of the standards are fully realized.

May you rest in power, Mary Johnson! To learn more about Ms. Johnson, please click [here](#).

Report Highlights



NAAAPY
The National Association of African American Parents & Youth



February | 2025

The report outlines our program planning and implementation process over a period of more than two-years.

The project leveraged the new California Department of Education requirement for all high school students to complete a semester course in ethnic studies to earn a high school diploma. The requirement is in effect beginning this 2025-26 school year, impacting the graduating class of 2029–2030.

Research confirms that ethnic studies courses help reduce gaps in student outcomes by increasing academic engagement, achievement, and graduation. It also enhances cross-cultural understanding and personal empowerment.

Logos: [National Association of African American Parents & Youth \(NAAAPY\)](#) and the [Loken Foundation](#)

[Download Report](#)

Key Strategies Used to Engage Parents

- **Affinity Groups:** The project began with Latino and African Americans parents first meeting separately about three times for facilitated dialogue on topics of identity, history, systems of power, ethnic studies, and solidarity before meeting together in a day-long joint session. This helped each group learn and process information about their themselves and also the other group. Additional time and space allowed for meaningful multi-generational exchange among African Americans, who had a broader range of ages than the Latino group.
- **Balanced representation:** The racial composition of the group intentionally included about 60% Latinos and 40% Black parents or community members to create opportunities for broader engagement and dialogue rather than reflect current community or Los Angeles County demographics.

Takeaways

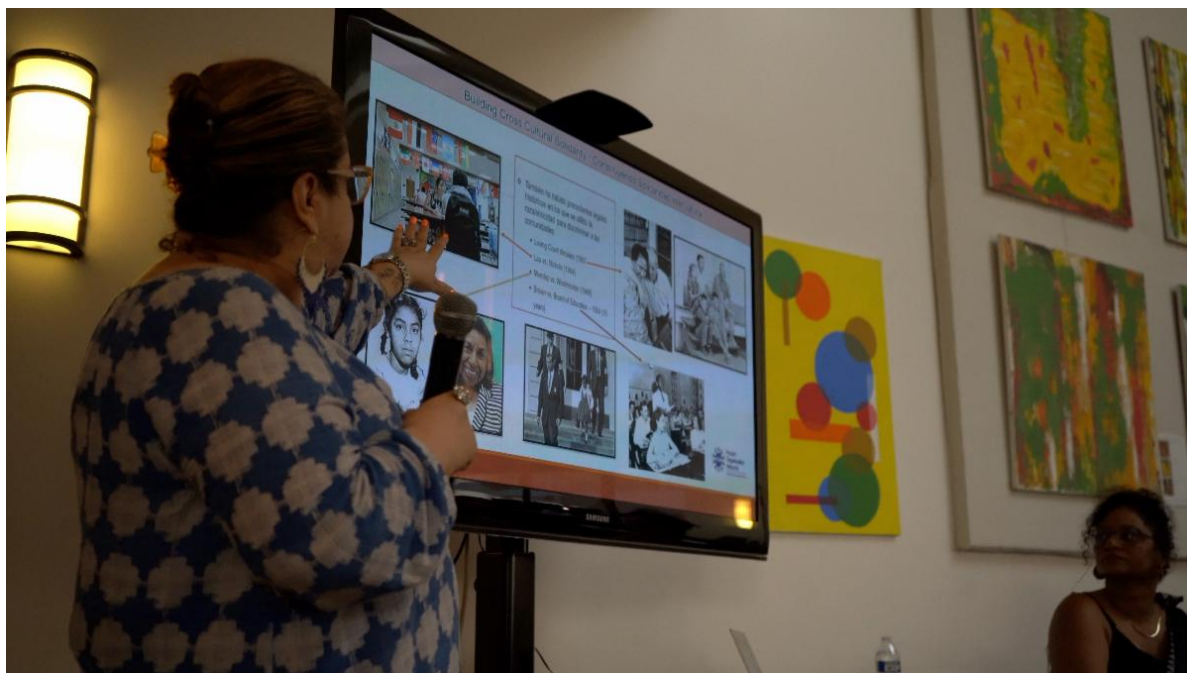
- When parents from both communities have a chance to connect, they learn that they face similar struggles. For example, during the joint sessions parents raised concerns over how school officials mark children with unexcused absences when attending doctor appointments or school-related activities outside of the classroom. They shared it takes consistent monitoring to ensure attendance is accurately reported.
- Participants want to continue learning about each other's histories and history of

solidarity. This includes collecting their own stories and going on field trips together. At the same time, some parents requested probing deeper into their ancestral history before colonization to reveal a more comprehensive view of the past and expose and ground children in the brilliance of their ancestors.

- Other essential expressions of solidarity include Latino parents wanting Black parents to support English learners, while Black parents would like Latinos to support funding and programs that boost Black student achievement. Often these approaches have overlapping features.

Next Steps

With the opposition to educational equity intensifying, PON's commitment to fostering cross-cultural solidarity is all the more crucial to effective advocacy for justice in our schools, and for valuing diversity and inclusion in our homes and communities. Our members will continue to advance this work as a pivotal focus throughout this spring semester and beyond.



Acknowledgements



PON is grateful to its community partners for their collaboration and support of the project:

The National Association of African American Parents & Youth (NAAAPY), the Loken Foundation, and Para Los Niños. Thanks to their efforts almost 70 parents and community members participated and contributed to this effort.

In addition, the project benefited from the contributions of project consultants, Dr. Corina Espinoza and Toni Tinker-Loken, and Dr. Joyce G. Watts in her role as Co-Chair of the Advisory Board.

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For information visit our website at <http://www.parentnetwork-la.org>
*PON is a project of **Community Partners***

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