

# PADRES & JÓVENES UNIDOS

In 2014, The Colorado Trust launched the **Health Equity Advocacy (HEA) Strategy**, a multi-phased investment in building a strong and diverse field of health equity advocates to ensure equitable health outcomes for Colorado’s most vulnerable. A centerpiece of the second phase of this strategy (2015-2016) included providing financial and capacity-building support to a cohort of direct service, community organizing, and policy advocacy organizations across the state. This support was designed to strengthen individual and collective capacity to “seed” an emerging health equity advocacy field in Colorado.

The following is part of a “**Seeds of the Field**” series of profiles of each of the 17 cohort members funded in the second phase of the HEA Strategy.

## Seeding a Health Equity Advocacy Field: The Story of Padres & Jóvenes Unidos

With roots in the struggle for educational justice, [Padres & Jóvenes Unidos](#) (PJU) is a multi-issue organization led by people of color who work for educational excellence, racial justice, immigrant rights, and quality healthcare for all. PJU builds power to challenge the root cause of discrimination, racism and inequity by exposing the economic, social, and institutional bases for injustice as well as developing effective strategies to realize meaningful change. It has served as a critical partner to others working to build power and harness community voice to advance health equity goals in the state.

Entering into Phase 2, PJU had just come to a new realization about how their overarching body of work in Denver schools and throughout the state could connect with

and amplify health equity advocacy efforts. PJU's network of parents and youth, and its experience in integrating organizing with state-level policy advocacy, research, grasstops support, and mobilization were seen as strengths that could be leveraged in an emerging field.

## Padres & Jóvenes Unidos' Phase 2 Work

In considering their role in an emerging health equity advocacy field, PJU staff recognized that they needed to invest in building their own capacity to scale up their model to inspire other organizations to engage in grassroots-driven change, as well as to sit at the table with grasstops organizations as equal partners in setting policy change agendas. One key area of Phase 2 investment, therefore, had been to build PJU's internal capacity to be more strategic in its organizing. Phase 2 resources supported the purchase of database software and the hiring of a dedicated data specialist to gather and analyze data on PJU's activities in each of its issue areas. Co-Executive Directors Elsa Oliva Rocha and Ricardo Martinez

emphasized how valuable it was for them to be able to map and prioritize where students and parents live, and then locate where barriers to participation are so that PJU could be more data-driven in its organizing. The data was also used to run an earned media campaign highlighting health equity issues facing low-income children of color in Colorado schools, including hunger, healthy nutrition, and the need for physical education.

A second area of strategic organizational investment was in the hiring of a dedicated communications manager who conducted an organizational assessment of PJU's communications assets, approaches, practices and strategies, and who supported PJU in expanding its capacity for social media outreach and branding efforts. This investment, in combination with an emphasis on sustained community outreach, appears to be translating into increased visibility in PJU's community and in the larger field. According to Martinez, "People recognize us, and know us. When we have parents or students walking down the street with t-shirts that say 'Padres & Jóvenes Unidos,' [the community] knows who we are...an organization that they can join that is fighting for their rights."



**[Use of data] has become more intentional. It's a very methodical and scientific approach to organizing. You can learn and see better what are more effective tools to get people out."**

– Ricardo Martinez,  
Co-Executive Director


In addition to building its organizational capacity, PJU's Phase 2 efforts have focused on actively advancing a health justice agenda in partnership with emerging community leaders. Building upon its successful organizing efforts around inequities in school lunch quality (documented in PJU's 2016 report [A Community Analysis of Food, Race, and Class in Denver Public Schools](#)), PJU worked to further deepen parent advocacy capacity and tackle the issue of physical education. In the summer of 2016, six parent leaders participated in a PJU Health Justice Campaign leadership institute, where they participated in sessions focused on America's history of racism, oppression, and voter disenfranchisement, as well as an orientation to the "Padres Approach" to identifying issues and organizing. From there, parents conducted visits to two Denver Public Schools to explore implementation of their physical education programs. Accompanied by school board members and Denver Public School staff, these visits provided an opportunity to have a discussion about the role of physical education in Denver schools during a time when community members were concerned about the potential elimination of the physical education requirement in their schools. Since then, PJU and community leaders have continued to work with partners to pass local and statewide policies to promote physical activity for all students in Colorado.

### **Laying the Groundwork for an Emerging Field**

As a result of strong partnership efforts over the course of Phase 2, PJU parent and student leaders became stronger, more vocal advocates for the school system to take a stronger stance on the elimination of suspensions and expulsions from pre-K to 2nd grade, ensuring resources for healthy before- and in-school food access for all students, and pressuring the system to address inequitable discipline and suspension practices that reinforce Colorado's school-to-prison pipeline.

In addition to the wins associated with these individual campaigns, where PJU efforts have laid important groundwork for an emerging health equity advocacy field has been leveraging where they sit at the intersection of these issues. While the foundation of PJU is focused on advancement of educational equity, it consistently engages parents and students to see how academic achievement is interrelated with a full range of issues that include safe learning environments, suspension policies, physical education, and food access, among others. Martinez shared that at two elementary schools, they are now seeing parents "really involved in creating a healthy school environment, a restorative environment and a strong academic environment. All those have to go hand-in-hand... they understand that. Not just the concepts but the implementation of what a good school should be."

PJU is pushing this interconnected approach to educational and health equity at the field level as well. Over Phase 2, they intentionally connected with mental and behavioral



health providers, restorative justice practitioners, and juvenile justice advocates by attending each other's conferences and meetings, and advocating together on shared issues of concern. The next stage of work is envisioned to advance this interconnected approach at the policy level, so that school districts and state policymakers can holistically consider all the factors that impact student learning, achievement, and the overall well-being of Colorado's most vulnerable students.

## Looking Forward

Beginning in 2017, the 17 HEA cohort members, including PJU, are launching a new phase of work focused on further cultivating the seeds collectively planted across the state in Phase 2. Ultimately, guided by common values and empowered communities, cohort members will be aligning their change efforts to dismantle structural and racial inequities and build equitable health systems so that all Coloradans can thrive. PJU is poised to serve as a leader in this collective endeavor.

### Highlights: Padres & Jóvenes Unidos' Seeds of the Field

- Greater organizational capacity for data-driven organizing and strategic decision-making
- More visibility of PJU as an organization that is fighting for the rights of parents and students
- Better community understanding about the links between academic success and healthy learning environments
- Links between mental health, juvenile justice, and educational equity partners around a shared agenda for health equity

