



THE PROMISE OF TOMORROW

KIPP SoCal
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

KEEP OUR SOUTH LA
COMMUNITY SAFE



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IN SEPTEMBER 2022, A COALITION OF FAMILIES, EDUCATORS AND COMMUNITY GROUPS ACHIEVED WHAT FOR YEARS HAD SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE: PUTTING AN END TO THE CHRONIC VIOLENCE AND CRIME AT A DANGEROUS MOTEL IN SOUTH LOS ANGELES. THEIR SUCCESS IS A CASE STUDY ON HOW COMMUNITIES CAN UNITE TO TACKLE SHARED CHALLENGES, LEVERAGING EACH OTHER'S EXPERTISE AND SHARING RESOURCES TO DO TOGETHER WHAT COULD NEVER HAVE BEEN ACCOMPLISHED ALONE.

The Palms Motel for decades was a hub of sex trafficking, prostitution and drugs – one of a number of blighted and dangerous properties on Figueroa Street. Situated between a KIPP SoCal elementary school and a middle school, the motel frequently exposed children as young as four to illegal and hazardous activity, while disrupting safety and quality of life in the surrounding community.

Finally, a group of families at KIPP SoCal decided they'd had enough. Working with school leadership, they formed the Keep Our South LA Community Safe coalition, which included organizations that fight human trafficking, empower local residents, advocate for children and represent neighborhood interests.

Keep Our South LA Community Safe embarked on an aggressive campaign to engage public officials, law enforcement and local media. Sharing their personal experiences and demanding action from the systems that are supposed to keep them and their children safe, the coalition exerted increasing pressure on the motel owners until those owners relented, agreeing to sell the property to KIPP SoCal.

KIPP SoCal is now busy incorporating community input as it develops a plan for the site, with the goal of creating more school space as well as green space, with opportunities for community access on evenings and weekends. The coalition has issued a series of recommendations for public officials to further advance safety and quality of life in troubled spots within South LA. These include creating more green space, cracking down on hourly motels and vigilantly protecting children from sex trafficking.



THE BREAKING POINT

In September 2021, yellow police caution tape greeted nearly 500 middle schoolers at [KIPP Academy of Opportunity](#) on the corner of South Figueroa Street and Manchester Avenue in South LA. Once again, criminal activity at the Palms Motel – this time in the form of an officer-involved shooting – disrupted the academic day. A second KIPP campus on the same block, [KIPP Empower Academy](#), had to shield its roughly 500 preschool through fourth grade students from the scene.

After two hours of waiting for clearance to return to the building, KIPP Academy of Opportunity had to send its middle schoolers home for the day. In hindsight, this moment was the breaking point. KIPP SoCal families had had enough. For years, the Palms Motel – one of numerous hourly motels dotting South Figueroa that are primarily used for sex trafficking and prostitution – had created untenable safety situations. A 2021 Los Angeles Times [editorial](#) called Figueroa Street in South LA one of the city's "most notorious 'prostitution tracks,'" noting that it "attracts related crime such as drug dealing and robbery, driving down nearby property values and deterring legitimate business."

The Palms Motel had long embodied the dangers of South Figueroa. After many attempts at sharing their frustrations, families finally demanded action on this eyesore, safety hazard and public nuisance. Their concern was not just about students and schools; it was an issue of vital importance to the entire community.

"One of the questions that people ask us a lot is: 'Why build an elementary school and a middle school on Figueroa, knowing that historically it's a place of sex trafficking, prostitution and crime?'" says Chinedu Udeh, the school leader at KIPP Empower. "I truly believe that's the wrong question. I think the right question is: 'Why haven't we moved more urgently to ensure this area is no longer known as an area of sex trafficking, prostitution and crime?'"

SOUTH LA: A VIBRANT COMMUNITY IMPACTED BY BLIGHTED PROPERTIES



140 Historic-Cultural Monuments recognized by the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission



160,000 residents

South LA is one of Los Angeles' most vibrant and diverse communities. With over 140 Historic-Cultural Monuments recognized by the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission - including the world-famous Watts Towers - South LA is home to nearly 160,000 residents whose intellectual, economic, artistic and political contributions to LA cannot be overstated. However, a legacy of disenfranchisement continues to interfere with quality of life in certain sections of South LA. Such disenfranchisement often

shows up in the form of blighted properties - like the Palms Motel - that endanger residents and threaten the safety and socio-emotional development of local children.

Sex trafficking and prostitution, in particular, are escalating in the region's low-income communities. Although comprehensive data is scarce, the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking LA (CAST LA) [estimates](#) that sex trafficking in Los Angeles increased by 185% during the pandemic. An effort in early 2020 to crack down on the sex trade in Southern California [resulted](#) in nearly 500 prostitution-related arrests and the rescue of dozens of

human trafficking victims - in just a few weeks' time. One local news report in 2020 found that sex trafficking had "exploded" in South LA, with girls "as young as 11 years old" on the streets.

In addition to the direct impact on victims, this violence has insidious consequences for the children who witness it. Countless [studies](#) have documented the harm caused to kids by repeated exposure to violence and crime. Adolescents' exposure to community violence is [correlated](#) with lower high school grade point averages and decreased enjoyment and interest in school. Studies also show that children in low-income communities, such as South LA, are [far more likely](#) to be exposed to these harmful activities.

It is no wonder that organizations dedicated to South LA families and children - from community groups providing healthcare to high-performing public schools - are consistently frustrated by the negative impacts of blighted properties. Advocates recognize that many neighborhoods in South LA would be safer, stronger and more prosperous if not for indifferent or malicious landlords who allow their properties to become sites of dangerous activity that is especially damaging to children.

KIPP: A LONGTIME SOUTH LA PRESENCE AND COMMUNITY PARTNER

KIPP SoCal Public Schools is a public charter school network that works with families and communities to create joyful, academically excellent schools that prepare students with the skills and confidence to pursue the paths they choose - college, career and beyond - so they can lead fulfilling lives and create a more just world. KIPP SoCal envisions education as a practice of seeking, sharing and applying knowledge that contributes to liberating both individuals and our society towards a more just and equitable world.

KIPP SoCal operates 24 tuition-free, open-enrollment charter public schools, grades TK-8 throughout Southern California. Its award-winning schools educate over 10,000 students - nearly 90% of whom come from low-income families - with a whole child approach to learning and offer support to over 6,800 alumni to and through college and career. Its schools have won three National Blue Ribbon Awards and nine California Distinguished School Awards. In 2020, the network won 11 Top LA County Public School Awards.

KIPP SoCal has been an active presence and committed community partner in South LA since 2003, when it opened KIPP Academy of Opportunity - the first of six schools in the area that KIPP SoCal has launched. In addition to providing thousands of South LA kids with a high-quality, free, public education, KIPP SoCal has provided resources to and partnered with local groups to strengthen quality of life and tackle local

challenges. KIPP SoCal created meal distribution sites at schools that provide meals for students, their families, and the community at large. During the pandemic, KIPP SoCal teamed with healthcare organizations to offer free Covid clinics in South LA that vaccinated thousands of residents. KIPP SoCal's voter engagement efforts have helped South LA residents engage as active participants in local, state and national elections. Through these programs, and through partnerships with organizations ranging from the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights to the Southeast Community Development Corporation to the L.A. County Department of Mental Health, KIPP SoCal strives to deepen its impact outside the classroom and meet a breadth of community needs.



As a community, we have to take responsibility for all of our children. No matter where they live, their socioeconomic status or their racial identity.

- Chinedu Udeh,
KIPP SoCal school leader

THRIVING CAMPUSES BORDERED BY CRIME AND VIOLENCE

Between two of KIPP SoCal’s South LA campuses, KIPP Empower (grades TK-4) and KIPP Academy of Opportunity (grades 5-8), sat the Palms Motel. It shared a property line with both schools and is approximately one hundred feet from the main entrances of each campus.

Activity at the hourly motel had interfered with KIPP SoCal’s commitment to create a safe, healthy, joyful and academically excellent environment for its kids for years. Families dropping off kindergarteners at 7:30 a.m. would navigate their small children through barely clothed women. Sexual solicitation was visible throughout all hours of the day.

“You stand in line in the morning because you want your child to get an education – only to see half naked women,” said Alexis Evans, whose six-year-old attends KIPP Empower. “And they’re here all the time.”

Motel patrons would fling sex toys and drugs over its walls and into elementary students’ community garden or middle schoolers’ basketball court. Disputes and shootings stemming from the motel caused numerous school lockdowns. School principals spent time breaking up fights or navigating conflicts to protect the school. In one incident, a pimp set a sex worker’s hair on fire. A KIPP SoCal parent intervened to try to help and then was chased with a knife back to the door of the school.

KIPP SoCal students complained to their families and teachers about the activity they were witnessing at the motel and the frequent lockdowns stemming from incidents at the motel. KIPP SoCal educators and administrators were similarly upset, recognizing that repeated exposure to sex crimes and drug abuse could have both immediate and unseen, long-term consequences.

“Our families came to us, particularly this year, and said ‘enough is enough,’” said Udeh. “As a community, we have to take responsibility for all of our children, no matter where they live, their socioeconomic status or their racial identity.”

Everyone agreed the motel was exposing children to harmful activity that threatened their well-being, safety and development, but attempts to purchase the motel and collaborate with safety officials did not yield meaningful results. Yet on that day in September 2021, when their children returned home because of an officer-involved shooting at the motel, KIPP SoCal families finally decided enough was enough and demanded action.

The demolition of three blighted properties results in a neighborhood reduction in crime of almost 1 percent



STRONGER TOGETHER: COMMUNITY PARTNERS FORM COALITION TO TACKLE CRIME AT PALMS MOTEL

When KIPP SoCal families demanded action, school leadership helped channel their energy toward an effort that might be able to succeed where past efforts had failed. KIPP School Leaders Chinedu Udeh (KIPP Empower) and John Coleman (KIPP Academy of Opportunity), along with KIPP Empower Academy Community Advocate Alvaro Mendoza, began conducting an outreach campaign that brought together diverse constituents who wanted to confront the problems caused by the Palms Motel. The coalition, which dubbed itself Keep Our South LA Community Safe, included:



Coalition for Responsible Community Development, which empowers the historically disadvantaged youth and residents of South LA



Restoration Diversion Services, a Compton nonprofit that fights human trafficking



Volunteers of America Los Angeles, which serves people in need



Children's Law Center of California, which represents abused, abandoned and neglected children



Cool Ass Black Woman, which provides safe spaces and innovative support for Black women



Southeast Area Neighborhood Council



CANNDU Neighborhood Council



United We Stand

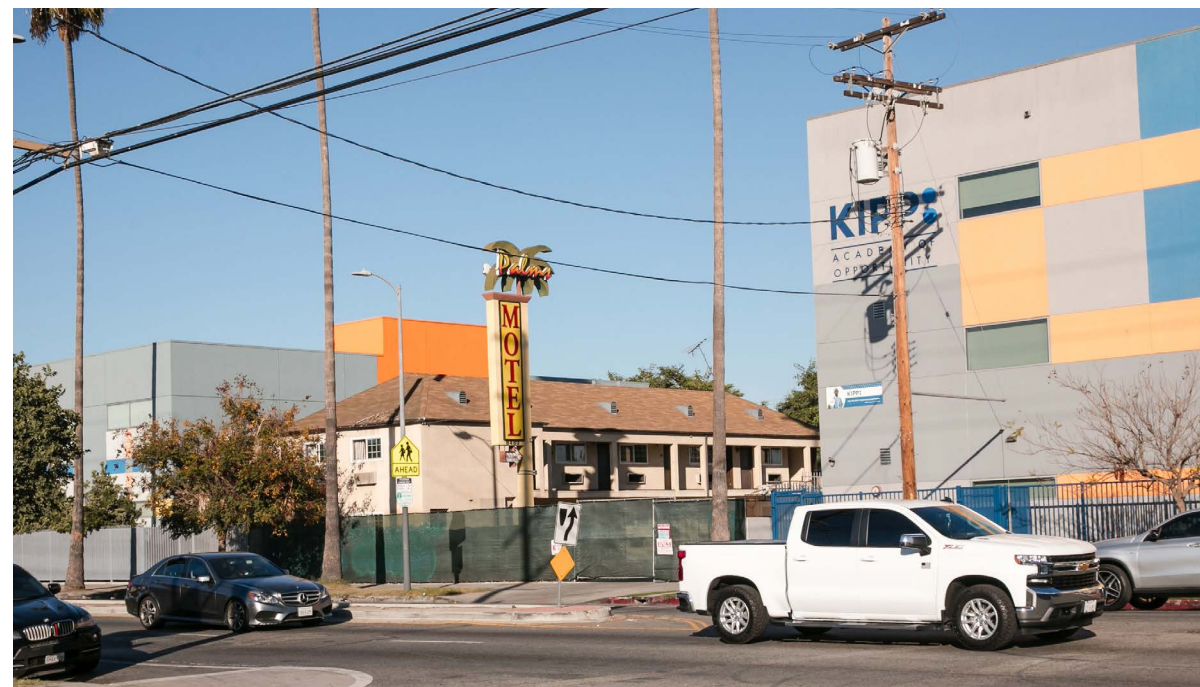
These groups and individuals united around the goal of ending the violence and crime at the property. While they knew they would need to pursue multiple paths to rid the community of the Palms Motel, they agreed to work together, build trust, share resources, leverage each other’s expertise, learn from successes and struggles and keep advancing toward their common goal.

Each member of the coalition played a unique role and had its own assets to contribute. Advocacy organizations like Coalition for Responsible Community Development and Restoration Diversion Services are experts in human trafficking. These organizations, along with Cool Ass Black Woman, co-hosted a panel on sex trafficking featuring the testimonials of survivors and helped lead a service project creating toiletry kits for survivors of sex trafficking. By centering the experience of women who have experienced trafficking, these groups helped expand the community's understanding of who was being victimized by the motel owners' negligence. They helped to illuminate the broader challenges facing all of those impacted by trafficking and gang activity.

One of the survivors of human trafficking who joined the coalition was Kia Dupclay, who also happens to be a graduate of a KIPP middle and high school in Northern California. Dupclay, a former program director at Restoration Diversion Services who is now a trainer for CAST LA, drew on her own experience when assessing the hazard of the schools' proximity to the Palms Motel.

"I know for a fact that a hotel used for trafficking is not only dangerous for kids, it's creating a place for recruitment to happen," said Dupclay. "I know what it's like to be recruited from a vulnerable place. It just puts our kiddos in such a danger."

The coalition also benefited from the grassroots support of leaders and members of the Southeast and CANNDU Neighborhood Councils. They shared letters of support with Councilman Harris-Dawson's office. The Southeast Neighborhood Council participated in a community clean-up co-hosted with United We Stand and joined a protest at the L.A. City Hall to take action on the motel.



POLITICAL PRESSURE: COALITION ENGAGES LOCAL LEADERS, DEMANDS ACTION ON MOTEL

Recognizing that previous efforts to combat crime at the motel had faltered, the coalition realized that it needed to engage political leaders. In May 2022, as part of its effort to petition the L.A. City Council to declare the property a nuisance, the group held a demonstration outside L.A. City Hall. That demonstration helped secure the support of [City Councilmember Marqueece Harris-Dawson](#), who represents most of South LA and who has a long history of advocating for the area in his previous role as Executive Director of influential nonprofit [Community Coalition](#). Councilmember Harris-Dawson, along with his staff members Isaias Benavides and Laura García, took up the cause. In June 2022, the councilmember agreed to demand a city council hearing on the motel.

"The Palms Motel has been there almost my whole life," Councilmember Harris-Dawson told the coalition. "I grew up seeing prostitution on Figueroa. And the city has never done the job to rid Figueroa – not just at that corner, but all up and down – of prostitution. Our office is already supporting filing a formal nuisance complaint against the Palms Motel."

The coalition also engaged local law enforcement, including Deputy City Attorneys Michelle West and Maria Aguillon, Senior Lead Officer Ruben Cardenas, and Vice Detective Dana Harris – each of whom spent countless hours working to investigate safety issues related to the motel. These attorneys, officers and detectives provided the motel owners with a list of safety remediations they wanted to see implemented and held a mediation between KIPP SoCal and the motel owners to continue working through safety issues.

These combined efforts, along with two videos created by KIPP SoCal – [Keep Our South LA Community Safe](#) and [Protest at City Hall](#) – put accumulating pressure on the motel owners. Still, the owners dragged their feet. But then the campaign scored a pivotal win: Councilmember Harris-Dawson's declaration that the motel would be put forth as a public nuisance and the interest of local broadcast news reporter Taylor Torregano of Spectrum News One, who covered the issue with heart by documenting the struggles of students and families. The council member's declaration and [Torregano's news report](#) helped spread the injustice to the broader Los Angeles community.

VICTORY: MOTEL OWNERS ALLOW KIPP TO PURCHASE THE PROPERTY

Finally, bowing to mounting public scrutiny, a decline in business and pressure from a growing number of community leaders, the owners of the Palms Motel reached out to KIPP SoCal, agreeing to sell the property for \$4.7 million in September 2022 – one year after KIPP SoCal’s families activated their power and build a network of local advocates.

“Now that the motel is gone, we can have peace of mind as families,” said KIPP parent Claudia Murillo. “Every day I say, ‘Dios te bendiga’ for our teachers.”

“The power of families is extraordinary,” said KIPP parent Carolyn Johnson.

“Look at what we got. Recently is when we started fighting the hardest – and we got it, finally, after all these years.”

“This victory would never have been possible without the united efforts of this grassroots coalition,” said KIPP SoCal Community Advocate Alvaro Mendoza.

“Each organization brought unique assets to the table. We built trust and leveraged each other’s expertise to achieve our shared goal. It’s a lesson in the power of community.”

“When a community comes together and channels their resources and hearts to do something that would echo into eternity, it resounds through the community that hope and love will not stand for darkness and evil one more minute,” said Leonard Rivas, supervisor at Volunteers of America. “Not on our watch!”

“**NOT ON OUR WATCH**”

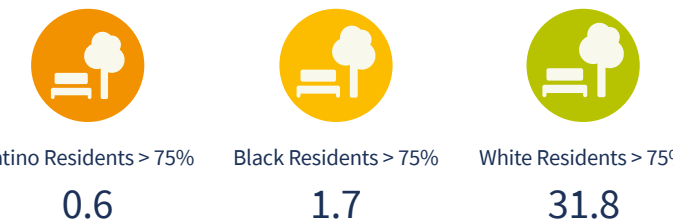
– Leonard Rivas,
Volunteers of America

GREEN SPACE FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY: A SHARED VISION FOR THE PROPERTY

KIPP SoCal is engaging the coalition and other community groups and residents to develop a vision for the property. In the short-term, the motel will be demolished and turned into a parking lot to be used by KIPP SoCal educators. But the long-term vision, which will incorporate input from a wide range of constituents, is to create additional classroom space as well as green space that will be shared among the school and the entire community.

Green space is unevenly distributed in Los Angeles. Communities of color have far less access.

Acres of green space per 1,000 residents



RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW PUBLIC OFFICIALS CAN IMPROVE SAFETY AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN SOUTH LA

The Keep Our South LA Community Safe coalition continues to explore ways that public officials can work to increase safety in dangerous neighborhoods. Based on its research and firsthand experiences, the group proposes the following recommendations:

CREATE MORE GREEN SPACE

The dearth of green space in South LA, compared to more affluent neighboring communities, has long been a source of frustration and injustice. Even the green space that does exist in South LA does not measure up to other communities. Half of South LA's parks scored a failing grade and not a single one received an A on a [2018 assessment](#) by the National Health Foundation and the BUILD Health LA Initiative. Officials should prioritize the creation of new green space in South LA, in part by incorporating best practices from experts in green space into local planning and the design of public facilities.

School campuses in South LA are also deprived of green space. LAUSD's Greening Index, which ranks more than 600 campuses in order of the most asphalt and least amount of green space, [shows](#) that most of the 150 schools in "very high need" are in South LA or East LA. To help address these inequities, California should be vigilant about ensuring that South LA gets a fair share of the new state funding to help schools create green space – \$150 million was set aside this year – to transform its concrete schoolyards into healthier, safer and more sustainable environments.

VIGILANTLY PROHIBIT CRIME AT HOURLY MOTELS

The laws governing hourly motels leave room for abuse and criminal activity. Other cities across the country strictly prohibit motels from renting rooms by the hour. Nashville's city council, for example, [adopted such a law in 2017](#) to crack down on prostitution and illegal drug use. Closer to home, the city of Pomona in Los Angeles County, in 2020 [banned hourly motels to combat human trafficking](#). L.A.'s city council should do the same.

When it shuts down a motel, the city should issue an RFP inviting nonprofits and community groups to propose fresh ideas to repurpose the property as green space or another favorable function that benefits local residents.

TREAT SEX TRAFFICKING AS THE CRISIS THAT IT IS

Besides cracking down on hourly motels, there are additional steps that public officials should take in response to the humanitarian crisis that sex trafficking constitutes. One is to provide more resources to victims. A second is to invest in prevention and awareness campaigns. A third is to protect children from being exposed, which starts with creating "safe zones" around schools where prostitution is strictly prohibited and enforced.

“
THE POWER OF FAMILIES
IS EXTRAORDINARY.”

– Carolyn Johnson,
KIPP SoCal parent

The Promise of Tomorrow Initiative is a commitment by the Keep Our South LA Community Safe coalition to continue advocating for our community along South Figueroa to address the myriad safety and quality of life concerns posed by similar motels. Part of this effort will involve repurposing the former Palms Motel site into a development of peace, safety, and beauty for the children and community of South LA.



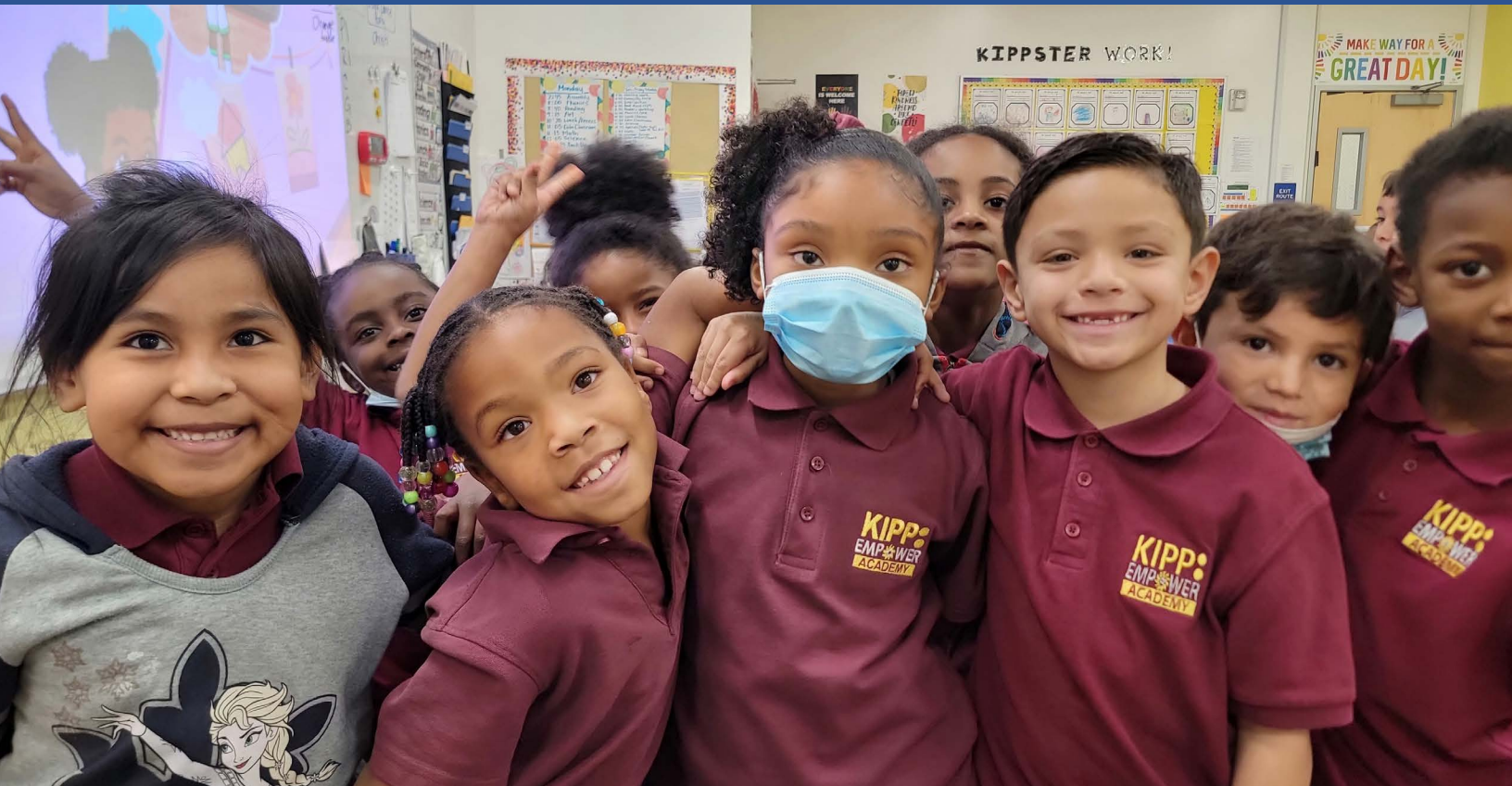
TO ACT NOW:

Join us and share your hopes for this community space via our online form.



Donate to help develop this space into a haven for our South LA community.





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