

COMMUNITIES FOR JUST SCHOOLS FUND PRESENTS:

FROM CONNECTIONS

↓
POWER

↓
LIBERATION

Strategic for CJSF
Partners Network
Imperatives



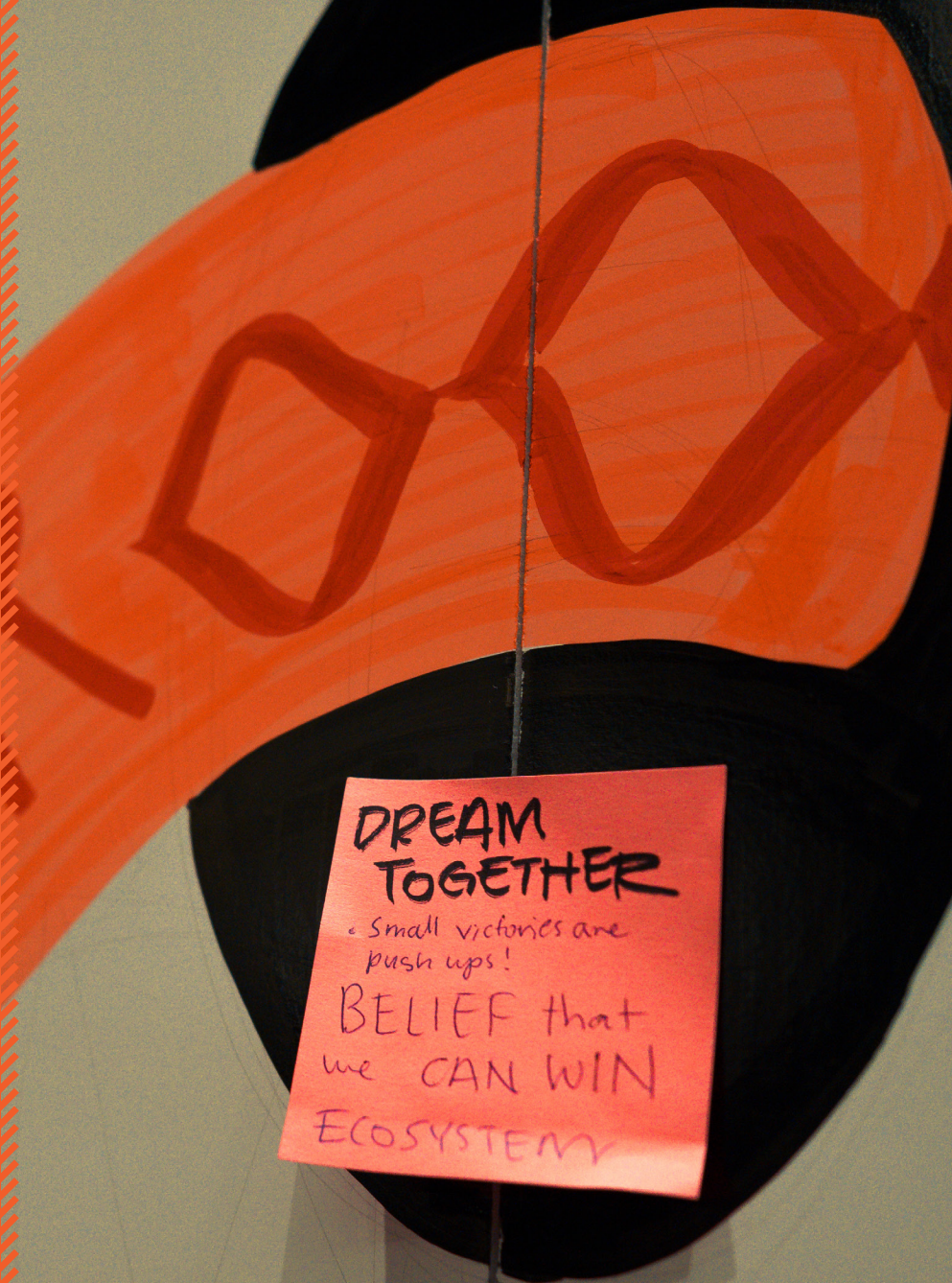
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DREAM
TOGETHER
• Small victories are
push ups!
BELIEF that
we CAN WIN
ECOSYSTEM

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

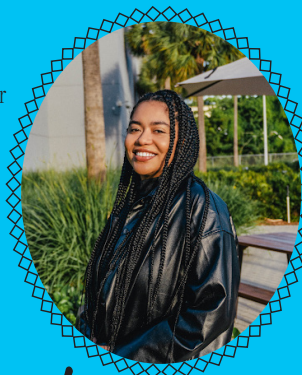
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FOREWORD

Dear Partners in Liberatory Education,

On behalf of the Communities for Just Schools Fund, our donor members, and our movement partners, we are delighted to present to you *From Connections to Power to Liberation*. This report presents a nuanced, compelling invitation for funders and resource organizers to explore more impactful and deeper partnerships with the community organizing field advancing education justice. Our recommendations are woven from the wisdom and aspirations of a diverse cross-section of our partner network and movement leaders who facilitated CJSF's deep listening of our field. Together, we can resource the power of those who are most directly impacted and best positioned to transform the system of education.

It is clear that our democracy is currently being undermined by those working to abolish public education and erode hard-fought battles towards racial and social justice in our public institutions. Education justice hangs in the balance as forces of exclusion and erasure target People of Color and Trans, Queer and Two Spirit youth through discriminatory legislation, practices, and mindsets. While there is an overabundance of reasons to lose hope, our communities and base-building organizations do not see this as an option. And neither should we.

The frontline organizing and intentional political consciousness building led by education justice groups are alchemizing racist and harmful political forces and transforming how directly impacted youth, caregivers, and teachers see themselves as agents of social change. As the "last public good," public education is where community members exercise self-governance by leading on school boards, holding public officials accountable, and informing policy and budget decisions that have a significant and tangible impact on our everyday lives. In order to realize a participatory multi-racial democracy, we must understand that base-building organizations are locally rooted anchors and most effectively positioned to engage the mass participation and leadership of marginalized people who are often left out of public systems.

Over the course of 2023, CJSF engaged our partners—comprised of more than 78 base-building organizing groups across 22 states and territories—to collect their invaluable perspectives which have coalesced as critical lessons for funders reading this report. Our commitment to listen, value, and fund the expertise of our partners is the driving force behind the year-long process of convening our partner network to answer this core question:

"WHAT DO YOU NEED
TO BUILD BIGGER
POWER,
AND HOW CAN
PHILANTHROPY
SUPPORT* YOU?"



Their reflections were both inspiring and sobering. As you read this report, we encourage you to:

*** 1. > Listen deeply** with your full minds and hearts, decentering yourself and your own foundation strategies—and follow closely what partners on the ground are saying. This will reveal the gems from the frontlines and crystallize what organizing groups have been telling philanthropy for years: if we are to tip the scales of power between community, corporations and the elite, philanthropy, and government, then resourcing base-building work is an imperative because this vital work yields the most systemic transformation. To truly ensure that everyday people can advance a transformative racial and education justice agenda, we must superpower grassroots groups in abundant and nuanced ways because the work they are doing is complex, demanding, and requires dynamic responses. We must suspend our practices as usual and align with bold and visionary approaches like the ones we ask our partners to step into every day.

*** 2. > Embrace nimbleness and the spirit of experimentation:** The field is signaling where they are prepared to evolve and pivot, while philanthropy simultaneously signals it will pull back from funding base-building organizing, racial, and social justice. As partners on the ground brave the storm and test evolving strategies, how do we stay the course in funding and accompanying them on their infrastructure-building efforts and praxis experiments? The fight for education justice will continue in frontline communities whether philanthropy funds it or not, however, the scale at which organizers realize transformation is in direct proportion to our commitment to funding them for the long haul. To expect impactful innovations within education justice, we, too, have to trust, resource and pivot with them.

*** 3. > Fund their vision to build a long-term power-building infrastructure** that has the capacity to manifest transformation. This means the power to shift public budgets, roll back forces of criminalization, build bases of organized people on the ground, and drive influence from both within and outside public systems and governmental offices. It means shaping the overall narratives that shift public understandings at a mass scale to make change possible. It means overcoming fear, and the confluence of attacks across all identity vectors, while resisting institutionalized generational racism, disenfranchisement, poverty, and white supremacy. Our partner network has named the places where interventions are necessary for structural and social change in education: People power, Governing power, Narrative power, Resource power and Sustainability Power. As our movement partners elevate their call to action for philanthropy to invest in building these five powers within their organizations and communities, they light the path toward change—a path tried and tested through setbacks, victories, and changing political forces.

This is an invitation to invest not just in individual organizations, but also in the collective power of a movement infrastructure with an explicitly named North Star. Whereas philanthropy funds organizations and coalitions, investing in the power of this network unlocks a catalytic generational opportunity to transform public education and root people's power across all levels and forms of education.

This is their time. These are our partners' strategic imperatives to each other, to education justice and to philanthropy.

ONWARD TOWARDS JUSTICE,

Executive Director, Communities for Just Schools Fund



that part!





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY + RECOMMENDATIONS

In Fall 2023, Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF) and our partners embarked upon a process of deep engagement to co-create a strategy for strengthening the education justice movement. Through one-on-one conversations and virtual community assemblies, partners shared their assessment of the political and historical moment and the strategies required to collectively and individually scale power as base-building community organizing groups.

We are witnessing the consolidation of power as corporations, Christian Nationalists, and white supremacists target our public schools as proxy sites for their cultural wars. Waves of well-funded attacks designed to weaken public education, roll back gains for transgender youth, expand carceral policies, and eliminate culturally relevant practices that are washing over local districts as part of a long game strategy that has been unfolding for decades. State fights to defund public schools and privatize school districts have gained traction in state houses throughout the country.

These conditions have forced many partners into a defensive posture to save the progress made and protect our most vulnerable students and families from this onslaught without additional or

sufficient resources to move offensively and defensively. The engagement this report details was in service of better understanding what our partners need as well as the strategies they are driving to build power and advance an affirmative vision for liberatory learning. It was important for our analysis to be rooted in the perspectives of our local grassroots partners because of their position on the frontline of fights in rural and urban settings across the U.S. and the Caribbean.

We have identified five strategic imperatives as critical to building effective and sustainable local organizations and infrastructure embedded within a re-energized education justice movement ecosystem: Base-Building, Political Education, Strategic Alignment, Narrative Power, and Healing Justice. These strategic imperatives provide a foundation for our local, national, and transnational partners to gain more traction and create the conditions to shift from defending schools to liberating public education. We will explore and flesh out these imperatives below in this report.

Once we identified the strategic imperatives, partners and consultants explored the barriers and opportunities to effectively improve the use of these strategies in and across their organizations and communities. It became clear that our partners see each other as underutilized resources and knowledge bearers for enhancing the execution of these strategies. Throughout this process, we highlighted examples of success where, under similar conditions, other partners had struggled and vice versa. So, in turn, partners are especially interested in connecting with other local organizations to analyze challenges and explore best practices, lessons learned, as well as to share insights and intel across the movement ecosystem.

CORE LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO PHILANTHROPY:

BASE-BUILDING ORGANIZING

"WHERE DO ORGANIZATIONS PUT LABOR IN THEIR POWER-BUILDING STRATEGIES?"

Partner organizations have strong base-building practices that have persisted through challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. **Funders should make deeper and longer-term investments to convene people to share best practices and strategies, reinvigorate their organizing, train new leaders who were activated during the 2020 racial justice uprising, and share innovations that emerged from this political moment.**

POLITICAL EDUCATION

"WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TEACHING SPACES, SO THERE IS A LACK OF POLITICAL ANALYSIS AND IDEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT IN OUR MOVEMENT. SPACES FOR MORE LONG-TERM THINKING."

Partners are effectively evaluating the impact of their political education, and exploring how to revise their offerings to account for changing political conditions reflecting the confluence of forces and attacks on multiple fronts, including:

- A. Exploring the intersections between the financing of political campaigns and agendas by police unions or other actors against racial, immigrant, or gender justice;
- B. The ways ideologies from Christian Nationalists or white supremacists are permeating the mainstream and capturing the perspectives of Latinx communities or deepening wedges between Black and other Brown communities;
- C. Exploring the role of a few corporate leaders in attempting to privatize public education.

Partners are ready to do this work together. **Funders should invest in organizations evolving their political education curricula and offerings to both reflect the political currents and develop their bases' political acumen. More extensive research should be done on the threats named above to better equip community organizations with the tools to identify and assess the reach of certain actors and to deepen their impact.**

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

"We have to be clear about what power we hold to move other organizations to hold a political line."

Partners are looking toward building capacity by building stronger relationships and community with each other across the network. Many partners are already building local and regional hubs and coalitions where they are leaning on each other to share resources and align strategies. The desire to deepen trust and collaboration by organizations in coalition and across sectors is part of a proven strategy that has allowed the achievement of hard-fought campaign demands like ending School Resource Officer contracts in schools, or calling upon alliances of community organizers, labor unions composed of educators, and other stakeholders to win major new investments in Black student achievement. This trust, collaboration, and alignment is also crucial to the work of sustaining these wins over the long-term.

Funders should create dedicated funding for intentional collaborations, particularly regional and state coalitions and networks, across the ecosystem of the education justice movement to expand the potential for collective wins and the movement required to sustain, defend, and implement them.

NARRATIVE POWER

"NARRATIVE SHIFT
TOWARD YOUNG PEOPLE
BEING THE THREAT
NATIONALLY—CAN BE
HARD TO COMBAT AT A
LOCAL LEVEL?"

A number of CJSF partners expressed limitations and challenges to building narrative power, naming that they are in a direct ideological war against an opposition controlling the major mediums for reaching people. In addition, some partners thought of their communications capacity or lack thereof as directly affecting their ability to build narrative power. Many of CJSF's partners do not have the funding sufficient to hire a dedicated communications staff person. Despite these real and growing challenges, some CJSF partners have developed and implemented long term strategies for building and wielding narrative power to shift the consciousness of communities from punitive responses to trauma informed approaches. These successes required them to create spaces to envision different possibilities, build and test their models for alternatives to policing in schools and communities, and secure funding. Partners named the need for resources to strengthen the role culture and arts play in advancing narratives that resonate with communities and deepen their engagement.

Funders should dedicate resources for grassroots partner organizations to build and wield their narrative and cultural power to advance education justice. This will require increasing grants to partners to ensure they have at least one dedicated communications person on staff, and additional capacity to partner with artists and other communicators who can help design and build narrative and cultural power in local contexts with the capacity to influence mainstream narratives.

HEALING JUSTICE

"I THINK IT CAN BE
IMPORTANT TO
PROTECT OUR
CAPACITY BY NOT
WEARING ALL THE HATS
WHEN WE ONLY NEED
TO WEAR ONE?"

Sustaining individual organizers in their long term work, and resourcing healing justice approaches in the daily work of base building organizers has served to strengthen models and amplify alternatives not just at the level of organizational development, but as examples for community wide public systems—modeling community rooted healing and care for all community members. Grounding in healing justice also offers a way forward as our partners and our schools contend with the pendulum swing back to punitive approaches to discipline instead of accurately diagnosing the challenges at the level of mental health crises or systemic underinvestment in schools and communities.

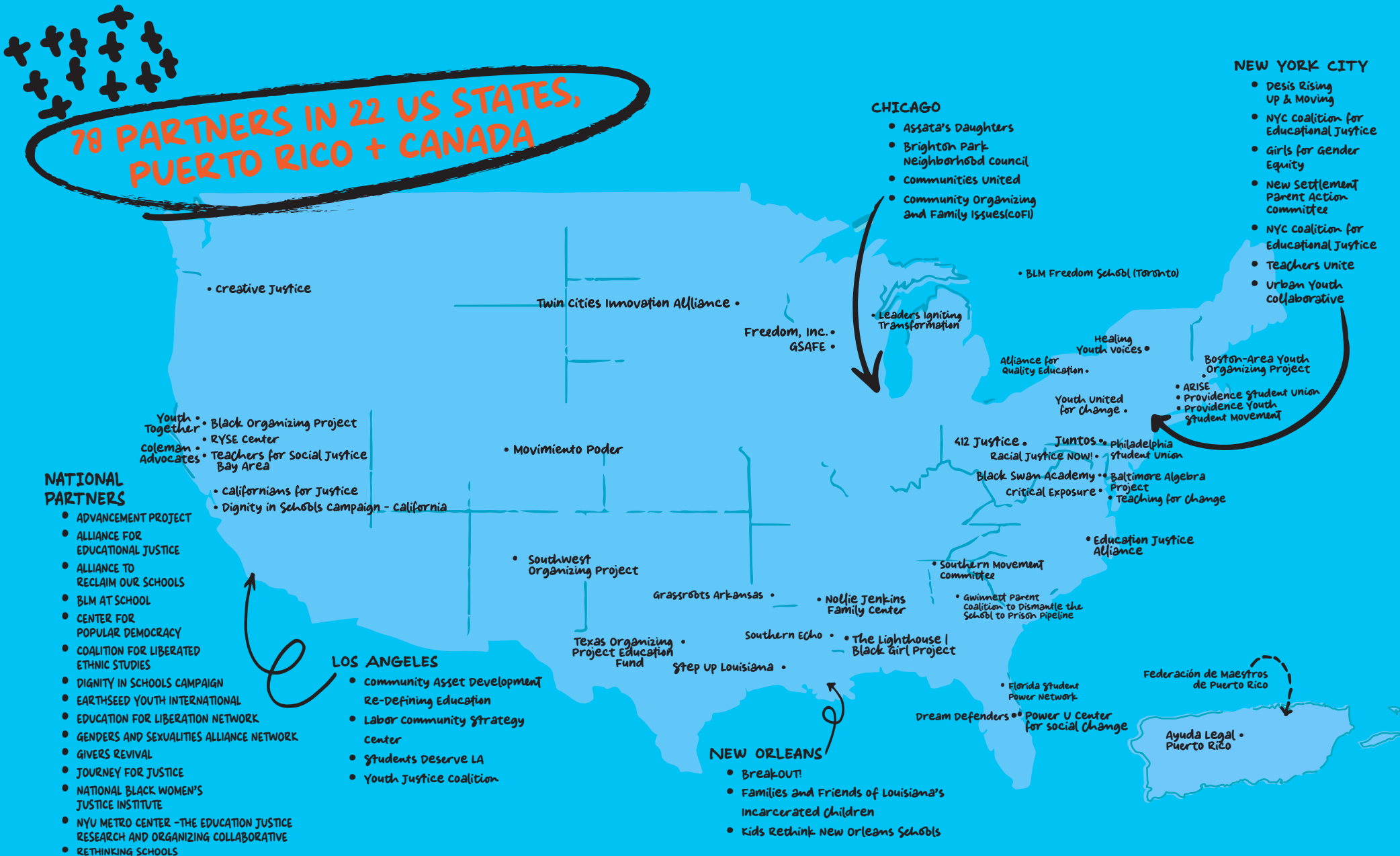
Funders need to acknowledge that communities are still contending with the long term challenges to economic, physical and mental wellbeing resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. **Communities will require dedicated resources toward meeting the wellness and healing needs of young people in schools as well as educators and other seasoned staff, many of whom were pushed out from the profession in recent years. It will also require increased investment at the level of community based organizations so they can embed healing justice frameworks and approaches everywhere from internal organizational development to their external campaign strategy and demands.** This investment in strengthening organizing to account for wellness and healing in the places where local systems have failed ensures that community organizing is supportive to the real material conditions and needs of youth, caregivers, and community members. Resources for healing justice ensure that long term organizing is sustainable and rooted in care.

METHODOLOGY ON NETWORK + MOVEMENT BUILDING

Partners want to deepen relationships with each other to help sharpen their individual and collective understanding of how to build more governing power together (which would allow the community to exercise the power to shape the institution of public education—everything from budgets to school discipline codes, culture, curriculum and instruction, leadership development, etc.) To this end, cohort like community building among values aligned leaders is infinitely more generative than independent offerings by a capacity provider serving one organization at a time as leaders can advance shared understandings of how to contend and capture power together while considering the unique forces impacting a particular place.

Philanthropy should double down on cohort structured learnings to further education justice movement building, and ensure partners have the resources to fund additional staff to take the time away from base building to build network and coalition. CJSF can serve as one container for such collaborative movement building activities, but it can also serve as one of many resource organizers helping connect partners to each other.

Philanthropy is being invited to support CJSF national partner organizations' efforts to strategically coalesce and align in their own support for grassroots partners in the field. This work of alignment will require more robust investments in individual organizations to support local organizing as well as investments in their growing collaborative projects that strengthen shared analysis, skills and capacity, while facilitating communities of practice which deepen trust and foster generative relationships.



I. BACKGROUND + PROCESS

In September 2023, CJSF convened the full grantee partner network for *Charting Our Course* in Baltimore, building on a legacy of meaningful convenings that have historically generated important connections and possibilities. *Charting Our Course* was CJSF's first full network in-person gathering in more than three years. Leaders and staff from across the country spent two days together rekindling relationships, forging new connections, healing, and discussing the current state of the education justice movement. Discussions at the convening focused on assessing the current shape and infrastructure of the movement, noting the impact of changes in social, economic, and political conditions on partners' work, and identifying strategic imperatives for the network.

Building off the assessments developed at the convening, CJSF decided that explorations needed to go deeper. Thus, CJSF embarked on a process with partners Earthseed International and Partners for Dignity and Rights, to engage the field via a movement scan that identified and sharpened a collective understanding of what is needed to build more durable power to change the material conditions in people's lives and achieve the transformations they seek in the public education system and communities.

Through a series of one-on-one interviews, community assemblies, and surveys, our network identified five strategic imperatives that need ongoing support and attention in order to advance the education justice movement: 1) Strengthening Base-Building Organizing; 2) Deepening Strategic Political Education; 3) Building Shared Vision and Strategic Alignment; 4) Amplifying Narrative Power; 5) Growing Healing Justice.



A. PARTNER ECOSYSTEM

CJSF's partner network uses the primary strategy of community organizing that centers relationship building to engage directly impacted people and build grassroots power to advance a vision for liberatory education.

"ALSO REFERRED TO AS "BASE-BUILDING," IT [COMMUNITY ORGANIZING] INVOLVES COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS WORKING TO BUILD GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP TO CREATE AND ADVOCATE FOR POLICY SOLUTIONS AND CHANGES TO SYSTEMS THAT PRODUCE INEQUITIES. ORGANIZERS BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND DEVELOP LEADERS TO ENGAGE IN CAMPAIGNS THAT ADVOCATE FOR CHANGES THAT WILL IMPROVE THEIR COMMUNITIES."

The CJSF partners network includes a diverse range of partners in the education justice movement who embrace education as a foundational organizational purpose, yet they may also be advancing education justice at the intersection of other issue areas, like youth justice, immigration justice, gender justice, climate justice, and more. There are organizations working with various constituencies that include young people, and/or intergenerational formations with caregivers, parenting community members, and/or teachers. Some organizations are exclusively youth-focused and led, and others are multi-issue or intergenerational. The majority are focused on base-building community organizing, and others also focus on advocacy, political education, and narrative-building. Some organizations also deploy legal or direct service strategies to accompany their organizing.

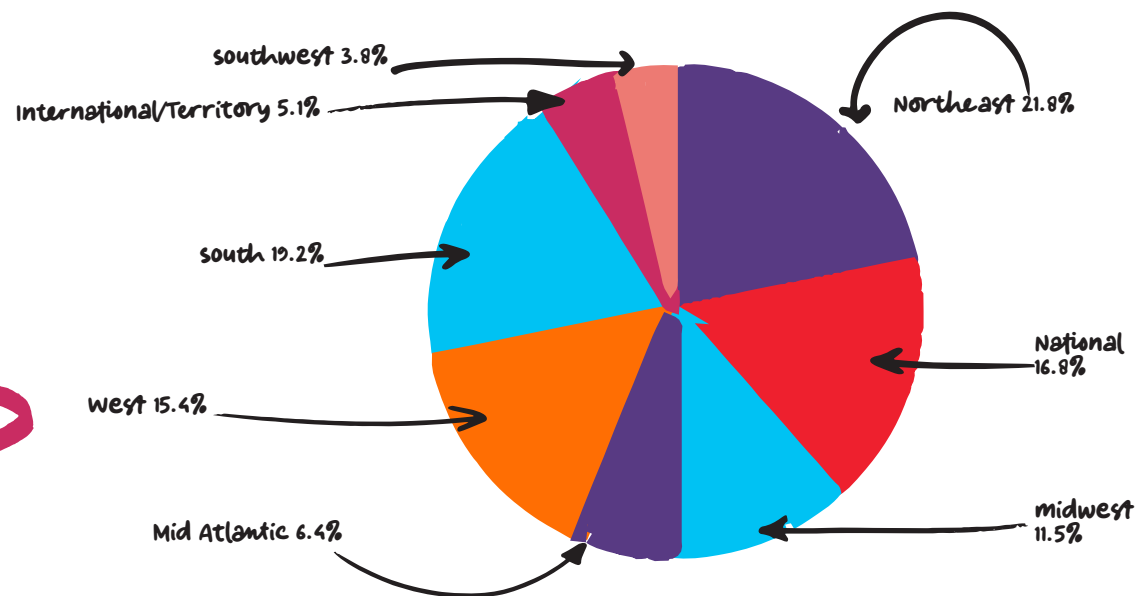
PARTNERS BY REGION

B. RANGE OF ANALYSES

There is a significant degree of alignment in analysis and understanding of "what education justice means" or what the education justice movement is and its goals. We should also acknowledge that there exists a range of different analyses of these same questions within the network. While some partners believe education justice or liberatory education will come by transferring control to the community, others see it coming through improving the public education system.

C. ROLE OF FUNDERS

Process facilitators aimed to balance "what the field needs"—as discerned through engagement with the partners—and "what is possible and appropriate for funders to help support." Put differently, we explored the best way for funders to support this work recognizing that CJSF seeks to follow the lead of the movement as represented within our partner network while acknowledging that the network is not representative of the entire movement. Furthermore, we are clear that questions of movement strategy are best developed and initiated by the primary movement actors and organizations doing frontline organizing work. Funder-supported convenings are important and can be useful in facilitating these, and the best processes are those where such strategies are initiated, shaped, and driven by the organizations themselves. This informs our recommendations regarding cross-learning within the network and the ways that funders can support such convenings and communities of practice.



II. STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES!!!

BASE-BUILDING



POLITICAL STRATEGIC EDUCATION

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT



HEALING
JUSTICE

NARRATIVE POWER



A. BASE-BUILDING @

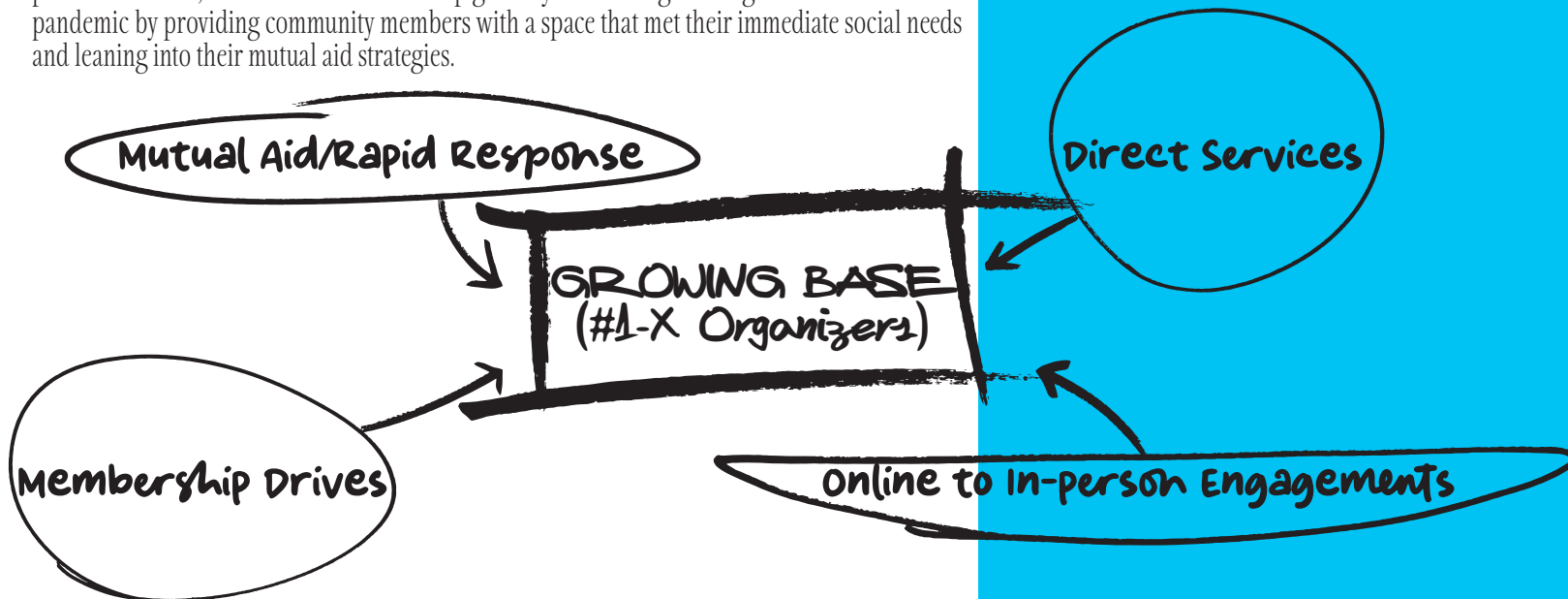
Base-building is foundational to build the needed power to shift power imbalances and improve material conditions for communities, especially for marginalized groups, across a broad set of issues. Building strong bases of people who are directly impacted by harmful structures allows organizations to secure and sustain wins that move communities closer toward collective liberation.

HIGHLIGHTS

Faced with a multitude of challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the concerted whitelash following the 2020 protests, and the increasingly organized attacks designed to dismantle public education, many CJSF partners were still successful at growing their base or membership of directly impacted leaders. Organizations led by educators, queer and trans youth, and intergenerational members, all saw growth during a difficult period. In Puerto Rico, a partner was able to utilize a grant designed to increase their membership to hire five new organizers as part of a member drive effort that brought 1,000 new members. In Wisconsin, our partner Freedom, Inc. saw their membership grow by 20% during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic by providing community members with a space that met their immediate social needs and leaning into their mutual aid strategies.

“Base building is a deep work. The way that we base build is important. We’re really building deep relationships with folks. It takes time.”

- Jessica Black,
Black Organizing Project (BOP)





THERE WERE SOME COMMON THEMES IN THE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY PARTNERS WHO INDICATED THEY WERE ABLE TO MAINTAIN OR EVEN GROW THEIR BASE DESPITE THE CHALLENGING CONDITIONS DESCRIBED ABOVE. WE OUTLINE A FEW OF THEM BELOW:

1) MUTUAL AID

A number of these partners either pivoted to adopting more “community services” or mutual aid and solidarity aid strategies and activities—or always had those as a core part of their organizing model. CJSF embraces Dean Spade’s definition of mutual aid:

“MUTUAL AID IS THE RADICAL ACT OF CARING FOR EACH OTHER WHILE WORKING TO CHANGE THE WORLD...SURVIVAL WORK, WHEN DONE ALONGSIDE SOCIAL MOVEMENT DEMANDS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE, IS CALLED MUTUAL AID.”

CJSF partners that leaned into mutual aid programs and activities effectively brought more members to their organizations and helped to address individual needs by building community capacity to provide aid. They were clear-eyed about always leading with their long-term mission and vision. Some partners see their mutual aid work as community care offerings that set the stage for building alternative systems that move us closer to long-term liberatory possibilities.

2) MEMBERSHIP ENTRY POINTS BEYOND CAMPAIGNS

Some partners that were in partnerships or coalitions with allied base-building groups created spaces to assess, reassess, and sharpen their recruitment, retention, and leadership development practices. We also noted that, for at least some organizations, having multiple entryways into the organization—rather than solely mobilizations around campaigns—helped to grow and maintain their base. For example, in New Orleans, Rethink distributed food to community members abandoned during the pandemic. Setting up an alternative system of mutual aid for Rethink is grounded in a political framework to move members to understand their social conditions will not be transformed through services, but through collective organizing.

CHALLENGES

Base-building Under Duress

Not all partners were able to build their membership through these challenging conditions. Some partners reported that these challenges impacted their ability to gather in person, sustain leader involvement, and support them, as they actively faced monumental health and financial challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Base building was derailed due to the devastating impact of the pandemic on schools, families, and communities. Specifically, low-income communities of color were often most acutely impacted by the digital divide and had a tougher time transitioning to online engagements. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many partners into new strategies to meet changing conditions, often stretching their resources and capacity. People reported feeling abandoned by the state and public systems, yet traditional social institutions were expected to hold together a weakened social fabric. **Whereas many partners that focused on mobilizing people through or into campaigns as their primary (or sometimes their only) point of entry, often experienced challenges in growing or maintaining their base over the past few years.**

Many partners have still not recovered from stretching their people and organizations at the seams—a situation reflected at other organizations across the broader movement ecosystem. Even before the pandemic, many organizations suffered high levels of organizer, executive leader, and member burnout. Organizations experienced **high leadership turnover**, and many organizations have struggled to hire new staff and support them with the nuts and bolts training and skills needed to deploy traditional base-building organizing methods. The CJSF partner network has reported close to 1/3 of partners facing a senior leadership transition. Whereas the racial justice uprisings and the pandemic conditions activated scores of previously unengaged community members who felt the pressure of injustice more than ever, they also unlocked swaths of activists, including rapidly politicized youth, without the training to engage in base-building organizing. The shift from ‘virtual organizing’ to in-person base-building strategies has proved difficult for a multitude of groups. **Groups acknowledged a need to ‘return to the basics’ of base-building, simultaneously naming that they need accompaniment, cohort-style communities of practice, and additional resources to build out organizing staff while expanding their skills and supportive accompaniment.** A number partners spoke of a need to re-energize their organizers and their members, and they all expressed a desire to continue recommitting to the strategy as still the most effective at building power and advancing change.

“Learning needs to happen—leaders & organizers—learning exchanges. Folks need to go and see how other people organize & be out in [their] community.”

Immediate Needs + Safety Concerns

Not only were partner organizations’ staff and infrastructure suffering the consequences of the significant pressures caused by the pandemic and political conditions, but so were their members and their communities.

Many organizations responded to pandemic conditions by redirecting their attention and capacity almost solely to providing supportive services to staff, members, and their communities. The pandemic exacerbated inequities that already hindered mass participation from directly impacted communities. In addition, safety was another challenge partners highlighted. **During the first community assembly, some partners shared their experiences with having ‘infiltrators’ disrupt their meetings (virtual and in-person), and the threat of attacks, both physical and technological.**

Recommendations for Further Exploration

- **Partners can draw on and learn from the examples of successful base-building strategies and models across the network.** A number of partners were keen on learning exchanges, peer-to-peer workshop ping, and other opportunities for cross-learning.
- **Base-building requires increased staffing capacity and more organizational infrastructure.** A few mentioned staff having to fulfill multiple roles, leading them to be stretched thin, burned out, and simply lacking the capacity to pause, assess, and adapt.
- **Philanthropy still has a long way to go towards abundantly resourcing community organizing groups,** and in this time of resiliency and rebuilding, it is more essential than ever to move even more resources to organizations.

“WITHOUT POLITICAL EDUCATION, I FEEL LIKE WE’RE JUST GETTING READY TO SPIN OUR WHEELS ABOUT THE SAME THING AGAIN AND AGAIN. THE PURPOSE THEN IS ABOUT INDIVIDUAL FULFILLMENT. POLITICAL EDUCATION HELPS YOU SEE THAT’S ACTUALLY NOT ENOUGH AND WE HAVE TO BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND THESE ARE SYSTEMIC ISSUES WE’RE DEALING WITH. ASSESS CONDITIONS. [DEFINE] OUR STRATEGY.”

-DMITRI HOLTZMAN,
EARTHSEED INTERNATIONAL



B. POLITICAL STRATEGIC EDUCATION

To meaningfully develop leaders with the skills and refined analysis about what it takes to build more power, community organizers must engage in ongoing political and strategic education with their developing leaders. Grassroots Power Project defines strategic education as the process of integrating rigorous systems analysis with strategy to achieve transformational change.

HIGHLIGHTS

Effective Existing Models of Political Education

Some CJSF partners within the network are confident that their political education work, both models and programs, has the desired depth and impact. These are mostly organizations that traditionally prioritize delivering deep political education consisting of regular and frequent engagement of staff and members through reading groups, workshops and training, regular participation, and proactive development of the organization’s political education materials. Exploration into the political education arena revealed that a number of CJSF partners are accessing support for their members for this work from national organizations and networks both inside and outside of CJSF’s partner network.

Throughout their more than 20 years fighting the racism, misogyny, and anti-Blackness of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), Labor Community Strategy Center—an organization that has trained generations of movement leaders—has focused on police-driven abuse and punishment. Their political education work has supported the development of coalition campaigns that have ended the ticketing of students for being late, passing the school climate bill of rights, ending “willful defiance,” forcing the LAUSD to return 1 tank, 3 grenade launchers, and 61 M-16 killer rifles to the Department of Defense, and cutting the Los Angeles School Police Budget by 35%, and allocating \$100 million for the Black Student Achievement Plan. Their political education work seeks to address, through an in depth study, the layers of structural issues that exist that perpetually fail Black students. They have named how this work requires more resources as they continue to build networks of parents, students and educators.

Leaders Igniting Transformation in Wisconsin holds Black Hogwarts, a summer institute focused on training young activists and organizers in Wisconsin to be the next leaders in their organization and in the community. The program provides critical skill-building and leadership development around four pillars of learning including political education, intersecting anti-oppression work, civic engagement and community organizing. Young people are invited to explore the history of political movements, understand current political debates, and analyze the historical contexts of today’s political climate.

CHALLENGES

Notwithstanding the number of partners who have established and maintained effective political education programs, there was a strong sentiment across the network around the need to strengthen political education work both within the network and across the broader movement. Political education is the foundation of collective leadership development, core to individual and social transformation. Many partners simply do not have the capacity (staffing and resources) to develop deep, consistent, political education programs with their members and their member leaders, particularly in a method that informs tactical and strategic decisions in real-time around campaigns, broader organizational direction, or coalition and strategic alliances. We believe this may be related to the pressure organizations feel to constantly launch and win campaigns in order to sustain philanthropic funding. Some partners need support for broadening the scope of their political education curricula and models—at least a few partners seem to be grappling with finding the “right” models for taking their members through political education and development. Additionally, a number of partners expressed serious interest in including more transnational and international connections in their political education and training programs, but again, would need support to do so.

Partners would benefit from support and opportunities to refresh their political education programs to update their methods or content while foregrounding it in the slower but more impactful explorations around analyzing historical and current conditions accelerating the decline in public education. Additionally, leveraging these very learning spaces towards iterative processes to refine political strategy and strengthen tactical and strategic alliances would yield longer-term durable power. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Good models exist as a starting place but resources are needed to support partners to refresh these resources, develop spaces to share these good models, and to support organizations to adjust them to their local conditions and base-building models.

Recommendations for Further Exploration:

Groups named that in addition to refining their current political education materials and offerings, **they also need support to engage in political strategic education to strengthen strategic alignment and alliances across the field.** This will include designing spaces for cross-learning towards coordinated action—and can include sharing models, strategy, and even content of Political Education programs—across the network. Resourcing partners to go deep within their organizations and across other organizations will require more investment that can accelerate analysis, strategy, experiments, and tactical wins.



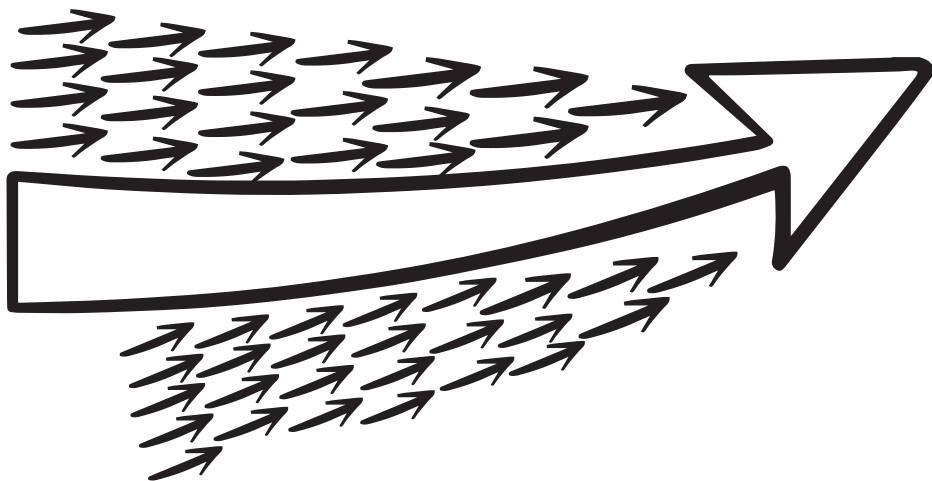
C. STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Partners were interested in the potential to generate and exercise more power together as an aligned body of 78 organizations across 22 states and nationally. They named that there are still untapped opportunities to do this alignment work; at a state and national scale across such a broad and diverse movement that includes 20 national level efforts and represents youth, parent/caregiver, educator, labor, narrative producers, healers, scholars and researchers, and others.

HIGHLIGHTS

Strategic Alignment Across Geography

Partners shared a growing focus on building strategic alignment across multiple geographies – local, regional, state, and national – in order to build the power necessary to ensure that the public education system nurtures every child.



"THERE IS A PUSH FOR MORE COALITION BUILDING OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS. IN NATIONAL SPACES, CONVERSATIONS ARE FOCUSING MORE ON SUPPORTING LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS AND HAVE MOVED AWAY FROM PRIMARILY FOCUSING ON NATIONAL POLICY. IT FEELS MORE LIKE BUILDING FROM THE GROUND UP."
– RUTH IDAKULA, DIGNITY IN SCHOOLS

CHI-TOWN

In Chicago, a parent/caregiver organizing partner, COFI, and youth organizing partner, Communities United | VOYCE, have built strategic alignment grounded in a shared vision to transform the city of Chicago into a community of care. They recently convened 400 people across multiple different organizations and communities to build the power to move the new mayoral administration to adopt core elements of their agenda for trauma informed communities and schools.

NATIONAL

Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), a national partner that convenes labor and community groups, used the recent attacks on public education to strengthen community and labor unity at the municipal level, aligning educators with community to effectively defend against book bans, restricting curriculum and privatization efforts.

Attacks on Critical Race Theory and LGBTQ2S+ rights in schools have pushed groups to deepen the trust needed for strategic alignment in states across the South and Southwest and deepen an intersectional analysis and strategy between education justice and gender justice organizations. National partners, Advancement Project and Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ), are supporting base-building partners Education Justice Alliance, Southern Movement Committee and other local organizations to **build a multipronged southern strategy that includes coalition building, political education, and movement lawyering** to dismantle the presence of policing and policing tactics in southern school districts.

CALI LOVE

In California, Dignity in Schools Campaign California is building statewide power by supporting and seeding regional hubs that aim to strengthen individual organizations through a statewide coalition where parents are convened and trained regularly across place.

Coordinated Ecosystem + Capacity Strengthening

On the national level, we are seeing organizations begin to advance connected efforts through their coordinated provision of support and capacity strengthening. A number of local partners belong to the same national coalitions and networks. In addition, many partners named that they receive support from the same core capacity-building organizations—Advancement Project, Alliance for Education Justice (AEJ) and Center for Popular Democracy—helping strengthen their base-building, communication, and strategic research needs. Many partners actively participate in and help to anchor the National Campaign for Police Free Schools, Opportunity to Learn Network, Journey for Justice Alliance, Dignity in Schools Campaign National (DSC), the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ), the Alliance to Reclaim our Schools (AROS), and Heal Together.

A few groups also highlighted leadership roles in the Movement for Black Lives and the In Our Names Network. **Local partners all look to these formations as critical to lifting up their priorities on the national level, centering their constituencies in struggle, and in some instances providing strategic support for their local campaigns.** The opportunity to coordinate offerings across key national networks and capacity providers could lessen the burden on time as locally based partners seek out support from multiple places. CJSF can play a role coordinating connections between these providers to lessen the burden on partners.

CHALLENGES

Mapping Roles + Coordinating Alignment

Partners across all geographies reported facing challenges as they sought to build strategic alignment. On the local level, members acknowledged that strategic alignment through the life cycle of a campaign was often tenuous. Alignment often holds together long enough to win a policy, such as removing police from schools. However, when the life cycle moves to the implementation of a new policy or budget allocation, and the terrain of the struggle shifts, differences between organizations emerge, and local partners are often too stretched to move bureaucratic processes in coordination with each other—especially without resources for this critical work. **In order to build strategic alignment, there has to be an intention to move at the speed of trust. Partners named that they feel challenged finding the balance across building a membership, developing leaders, driving campaigns, and nurturing political and strategic alignment across different formations.**

Partners shared that even with the existence of national networks, coalitions, and campaigns helping to elevate priorities, a shared strategy across multiple fronts still seems elusive. CJSF's national partners are moving toward coordination, but there remains the challenge of naming and sussing out roles in alignment: What roles can local organizations embody in order to lead from the frontlines? Who will convene the various formations? Who is coordinating communication? Who is mapping the multitude of spaces and efforts to assess the different formations and interconnected efforts? Lastly, local partners shared that they lack consistent sightlines into the unique strengths and organizational strategies in use across the ecosystem. CJSF can continue to play a network weaving role by sharing field updates, supporting partners in mapping efforts moving across the ecosystem, and resourcing opportunities for coordination across organizations.

Recommendations For Further Exploration

- A strong foundation of local, regional, state, and national formations already exists across the network. **More resources are needed to support existing organizations to navigate capacity challenges and expand and strengthen emerging spaces that foster strategic alignment.**
- There are places where organizing groups and supportive infrastructure is lacking, particularly in certain rural areas or in regions where philanthropic giving to organizing is particularly low. These places are often left out of processes of national or regional processes of strategic alignment. **Recognizing that processes of strategic alignment should emerge from the bottom up, and flow from locally rooted efforts up to national level initiatives, there is a need to map where these gaps in organizations, infrastructure, and alignment exist so that national level organizations can account for partners from the bottom up and be responsive to following local efforts.**
- Philanthropy must make concerted efforts to partner with regional and local foundations serving rural areas to drive more investment to these organizations and to ensure these regions are not left out of national strategic alignment processes.

“Fifty-one percent of activists who feel burnt out, stressed, etc. don’t just take a sabbatical go on break, [or] take a vacation. They actually leave the movement altogether. That’s a problem. If burnout is causing our people to leave the movement altogether then what’s going to happen to the movement?”

- Wakumi Douglas, Givers Revival



D. HEALING JUSTICE



CJSF embraces a definition of healing justice as articulated by the Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective:

“Healing Justice is a framework that seeks to *intervene and respond to collective trauma*, burnout, and violence in our lives and our movements. Healing Justice develops *mechanisms to transform* the traumas that are uncovered as movements evaluate the contexts in which they are operating. Healing Justice seeks to *address the ways in which events or conditions impact entire communities*, and envision ways for us to *hold each other together*.”

HIGHLIGHTS

An Embedded Healing Justice Praxis

Conversations with partners revealed that even amidst challenges, they are weaving healing justice practices into their organization as a means to expand their base-building capacity, increase morale, and prevent burnout. Many partners are looking for organizational allies and “outside expertise” from healers, cultural workers, and artists to develop strategies for integrating healing offerings to aid the wellness and sustainability of their organizers and members and to carve out new cultures and organizational models rooted in care.



In Puerto Rico, Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR) has formed a partnership with CEPA- a healing justice formation that provides acupuncture, reiki, chakra alignment, and yoga for members. This work was not seen as additional work nor disconnected; it was woven into their political education programming and base-building activities. In Los Angeles, the Labor Community Strategy Center (LCSC) has created a communal space with political, cultural, and therapeutic offerings designed to grow and heal the community through an intentional political education process. In the previous section, we discussed base-building strategies that employ mutual aid as a strategy for connecting with the community and creating conditions for members to organize. **In a number of ways, mutual aid, or meeting people's social needs was identified as a prerequisite for creating the conditions where people can heal.**

CHALLENGES

Throughout the partner assemblies, groups identified challenges in addressing burnout and organizer and staff turnover, which in turn impacts relationship building with members and disrupts campaigns and longer-term goals. People reported being in a constant 'survival mode'. While the conditions our communities are navigating may not be new, **we should not underestimate the impact on the resilience of staff and members caused by the convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd uprisings.**

Recommendations for Further Exploration:

- There are partners demonstrating the ability to organize and grow their base while experimenting with embedding healing justice offerings and approaches into their day to day work. As social crises and communities' material conditions continue to worsen, and as healing justice is still a developing philanthropic field of giving, partners believe sharing models and approaches across the network can continue to support the sustainability of organizations. We need to build spaces where partners can explore and navigate the seeming contradictions between organizing and healing. **To unpack the conditions and worldviews that organizations are shaped and impacted by will require investment for dreaming new ways of advancing justice and of constructing base-building organizations who heal and restore members as they organize people.**
- Healing justice needs to be resourced as an essential complement to all base building, organizational development and broader movement building. **Without centering the generational healing organizers and members desperately need, philanthropic underinvestment only replicates the harms communities face in the hands of unjust and generationally harmful public systems.**



E. NARRATIVE POWER

CJSF and its partners recognize that the narratives, mental models, and cultural frames that have made the overcriminalization of and underinvestment in public schools possible are part of broader narrative frames that undergird racial and gender inequality across the US. It is against this backdrop that our partners are contending for the hearts and minds of millions of people.

CHALLENGES

Most partners do not have a shared definition of narrative power. Many partners, when discussing their strategies to build narrative power, reference their communications capacity or lack thereof. This reveals a serious need to increase resources for staffing capacity embedded in organizations to ensure the facilitation of training, exposure, and accompaniment to aid building narrative power. Partners evinced a wide spectrum of diverse understanding about what Healing Justice and Narrative Power could look like at their organization. There were some inspiring examples of partners shifting mass consciousness and governing policies through narrative strategies (see Chicago p.16). However, of all the strategic imperatives this need raises the challenge of supporting diverse organizations all with differing levels of understanding of what these two strategies mean and how they could be implemented at their organizations and communities. Partners were able to name their limitations when it comes to their ability to build narrative power, feeling as if they are in a direct ideological war with those holding what feels like exponentially more power to reach the masses.

Recommendations For Further Exploration:

- We need to establish more shared language and understanding of Narrative Power among education justice groups. Sharing resources, training, and tools that deepen partners' understanding of approaches to building Narrative Power could be helpful.
- Partners could benefit from convening with allied organizations who already have developed practices for sharpening narrative strategies and assessing their impact and progress. To leverage this existing narrative power building infrastructure towards the education justice ecosystem presents opportunities for growing our movement's capacity and for organizational learning.
- Philanthropy has historically under-resourced community organizing. When these organizations are determining whether to deploy general operating support grants towards hiring more organizers versus communications directors, many organizations understandably opt for more organizers. More research and resources are needed to map what communications staffing currently exists within the partner network, as well as what investments can be made to accelerate collaborative infrastructure for building narrative infrastructure that trains staff and members of a base to understand and wield their narrative power within the education justice movement and in coordination with other interconnected movements.



" (IT) FEELS LIKE WE ARE LOSING THE NARRATIVE BATTLE, WHICH IS HARD. (IT'S) HARD TO BE PROACTIVE AS A CONSEQUENCE. NATIONALLY, IT FEELS LIKE THE NARRATIVE HAS SHIFTED AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE ONCE AGAIN BEING PAINTED AS THREATS. IT CAN BE HARD TO COMBAT AT A LOCAL LEVEL."

CONCLUSION

In the United States, schools have historically been sites of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination. Examples of this include kidnapping and forcing indigenous youth into assimilation boarding ‘schools’, denying Black people access to formal education and later segregating them into intentionally underfunded schools, repressing the cultural and political expression of Chicano youth, and marginalizing queer and transgender youth and isolating youth with disabilities. Rather than providing the foundation for a multiracial democracy, schools have been used to exclude and erase oppressed people from our democracy. **But, in response, schools have also been—and indeed, continue to be—critical sites of resistance** where the development of a consciousness embracing justice and a thriving multi-racial democracy is possible.

Every gain that we have made comes from prolonged struggles fueled by people power. **For more than two decades, CJSF community partners have been leading on the frontlines of these struggles. They have made tremendous progress creating the conditions for our public school system to expand our democracy.** Liberatory wins include eliminating school policing, multi-million dollar divestment from school policing and investments of those resources into other supportive services, extension of voting rights to undocumented community members, and winning back democratically elected school board power. These are just some of the transformational victories delivered by our partners while navigating a tumultuous political landscape and precarious funding. Across the network our partners are developing the leaders, parents and caregivers, youth, and educators committed to transforming public schools into liberatory sites of social progress. **Together, we must commit to unlocking this potential by robustly resourcing this broad movement—this “people power”— across local, regional, national, and even transnational levels.**

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