



Roadmaps to Power

**How Education Justice Organizers
are Building Co-Governing Power,
Affecting Community Safety Nets,
and Transforming Systems.**

Research by:

**USC
Dornsife**

*Equity Research
Institute*

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Opening Invitation

Reflections on Paving the Road to Collaborative Community Power

Grantmakers for Education notes that philanthropic support for K-12 education has more than tripled over the past 20 years, from \$11B to \$37B. The majority of investment has been market-driven educational reform, including charter schools, school choice, and teacher training programs.¹ Annual philanthropic and government funding for community organizing explicitly focused on education is estimated at roughly \$35 million to \$50 million nationally. This is a tiny fraction of the billions spent on general public education. Investments have been in Transformation & Equity System Redesign, Holistic Wraparound Supports, Teacher Development, and, more recently, Educational Technology (including AI readiness) and Career and Technical Pathways, like post-secondary vocational and workforce training. Although philanthropic and federal funding has supported efforts to elevate community schools, which incorporate transformative aspects of community organizing, philanthropy has privileged investments that do not address the unequal distribution of power nor position youth, caregivers, and teachers in collaboration as the seminal architects of system transformation to make durable equity and justice possible.² Our nation's recent NAEP report card report shows a nationwide drop in reading and math scores, with significant disparities between Black and Hispanic children and their white and Asian peers. All of this is happening in the context of federal rollbacks of the social safety net, creating conditions of less resourced communities with decreased access to food, healthcare, and affordable housing, while withstanding the rollbacks of decades-long civil rights protections that were meant to redress centuries of systemic racism and divestment.





For communities of color, low income communities, and certain identity groups (immigrant, disabled, Trans/Queer/2 Spirit), ensuring access to quality, safe, and life-affirming public education is still a centuries old struggle. School suspensions and expulsions data still tell a story of disproportionality. The gaps and disparities continue to persist and recent federal actions have made the promise of equity—for distinct populations—even further away in the horizon.

As a field of diverse stakeholders and actors (funders, community organizers, public policy advocates, direct service providers, educators and education system leaders, labor unions, public officials, narrative producers, etc...) we anchor in a fundamental belief that **collaboration across funding strategies** will help us push for transformative change in public education.

However, the effort to unite such diversity across philanthropic approaches, while also bridging the efforts across policy, service, organizing, and government—is no easy feat. Often, due to its breadth and scale, both widespread as a national system comprised of more than 13,000+ school districts serving 50 million students nationwide—to its depth at the hyperlocal level—in neighborhoods and communities—can often leave many funders either narrowly focused on their unique strategic intervention, or engaging in ways that do not privilege the direct input and design of those most directly impacted by education injustice—youth of color, low income households, and



other underserved communities. When communities don't design the transformation, they will not be positioned to fight for its implementation and will not be able to stay the course for the long haul change often requires.

The power of philanthropic partnership with the grassroots organizing field is rooted in a promise—that free quality public **education is a fundamental human right** and that all children deserve a high quality public education. But further—that **people directly impacted by a problem are best positioned to offer the solutions** to that problem and will fight to actualize the transformation. Facilitating a process whereby youth, caregivers, and educators—who are also impacted directly by what happens in a school building and are rooted in local communities—can work together in partnership with those entrusted to fund, design and run schools—exponentially expands the potential for lasting change.

Schools are microcosms of society and essential local community infrastructure—they connect families to resources, provide mental health, food, education, belonging, and care. But what happens when instead of care and collaborative ownership of schools, we see a decline in youth/caregiver and educator voice, participation, agency, ownership and design power? What happens when a school building directly mirrors the accelerated defunding, miseducation, disenfranchisement, and stripping of ownership and civil rights happening in our society?

Over the last year—we have seen significant rollbacks on the protection of such human rights, and a massive dismantling of regulatory and oversight governmental bodies meant to ensure this right exists. The broken promise is that ***schools are the first containers for civic and social life for children***. It is where they learn whether the world is loving, safe, and abides by humanistic values. Schools should be places where everyone is treated with love, dignity, and deep investment—instead of being met with punishment, control, divestment, or misery. When schools no longer reflect our idyllic political and social construction as a nation—public education, equity and democracy will still remain an unfulfilled promise to many of the communities that CJSF supports.

Now more than ever, ***community organizing***—the process via which people identify collective needs and unite to solve them together—is essential ***because it is the embodiment of democracy in action***. It galvanizes agency, ownership, and local control. Organizing reactivates the belief that collective power and action can fundamentally make our schools and local institutions deliver equity and justice for all. Our public systems are supposed to deliver protection and care. But as they are being systematically gutted we see more and more community groups filling the gap being left by government. Organizations—to activate sufficient power to redress—are building the leadership and skilling up youth, caregivers and educators to ensure that the demise of public systems do not leave communities barren deserts devoid of joyful and equitable futures for youth.

This report is meant to illuminate our understanding of how we—funders, organizers, system leaders—can all work together to ensure the delivery of equity and justice for all young people in schools and communities.

So what is ***co-governance***, and how can funders fund and partner to increase it?



“Co-governance, or collaborative governance, is a model where government entities and community residents or stakeholders share decision-making power to design, implement, and oversee policies and programs. It moves beyond traditional participation by formally engaging those most affected—such as local residents and marginalized groups—in direct, consensus-oriented, and equitable power-sharing with authorities.” - Race Forward

How do we as funders, organizers, advocates and system leaders work in coordinated ways, together, to support and strengthen grassroots leaders and organizations? What does it look like to partner well with young people to accelerate change?

It starts with **deep listening** and learning about the power of organizing, and about the efforts and dreams of youth, caregivers and educators on the ground. It also requires **shedding any fear** about whether this is a time to anchor in strategies of organizing and collective power building. If not now, when? How much more must we see before we invest in the courageous and transformative work that actually delivers change?

This research report tells the story of **over 10+ years of partnership, collaboration, and collective power** between youth, adults, families, educators, system leaders, and funders. Like all collective efforts, it does not come without struggle and requires decades long investment, but the rewards of justice for young people and the safeguarding of their right to feel loved, safe, and able to learn are truly sweet for us all.



We want to thank the visionary leadership and investment of Dr. Gisele C. Shorter from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation for the foundation's support to produce this critical report for the field.

Funders, advocates, and system leaders: we hope you will find your way to the next best step to move as a flock with organizers and other stakeholders. Communities seeking to self-govern are steering us all back into the promise of a democracy and public systems which deliver on our duty to all children. They are asking us to fund boldly, invest abundantly, and coordinate amongst ourselves and in deep partnership with them. Woven together, we will not be broken.

For organizers: we hope you will see and celebrate how far you all have come as a partner network and community. In gratitude to our last 10+ years as a movement together.

Onwards,

Manuela Arciniegas

Executive Director

CJSF



Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF) supports a network of 67 frontline organizing partners across the country, all committed to educational justice.



Foreword:

Contextualizing Community Care

By Nico Bernardo, Communications and Development Manager, CJSF

Civic discourse of late is often tethered to the idea of democracy, with calls ranging from preservation to diversification or even transformation. Democracy of any kind, however, is and has always been vitally intertwined with grassroots community organizing. The relationship between the two is one of accountability that works to keep systems in right relationship with people. Take the Navajo organizers who founded Diné College in 1968, a demonstration of self-determination responding to generations of school-based violence and cultural erasure. Their counter-institution not only provided an immediate service to the Navajo community, but also led to the nation's first congressional appropriation for tribally-controlled universities. Or perhaps the community-led movement in late-1980s Chicago that brought about the Chicago School Reform Act which addressed education inequities not by increasing top-down control, but by putting school governance in the hands of families, community members, and educators for the first time in American history. In these ways, the extent to which government systems have been able to genuinely care for everyone exists in direct relationship to the people's opportunity to help shape and execute them.

These wins also matter because they remind us that a just democracy is more than a system of government—the institutions, their elected leaders, and the rules they execute—but a collaborative system of governance that extends beyond voting to share leadership, voice, decision-making, and ownership of public systems with the people and communities that they impact most. Co-governance embraces a distinctly active view of democratic engagement in which people are not only afforded power in semi-annual election cycles, but in schools and communities every single day.

Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF) supports a network of 67 frontline organizing partners across the country, all committed to educational justice. Our two Youth Better Off Measures are:

1) Increase the holistic safety of youth in schools and communities, and 2) Increase the self-determination and governing power of the education justice organizing field. The wisdom they share in this report is a reflection of the ways co-governance has lived and breathed in generations past, the lessons those carry into their organizing today, and the resources it takes for communities to build that power from the ground up. As they share, winning funding, protections, or seats at the table are often products of decades-long strategies that center community care as a core provision for building community power. Today, our network partners are delivering food and water to keep neighbors fed, organizing walking school buses to keep students safe, collecting rent relief to keep people housed, and running leadership institutes that help communities step into their full power. They do so not because it directly influences policy change, but because it cultivates the conditions for it. Helping people to meet their material needs not only builds trust, but also the belief that another way is possible and the spaciousness necessary to pursue it together. This is deep relational work that spans months, years, even across generations.

Ta-Nehisi Coates spoke to this in a recent interview, voicing, “I am descended from people who in their lifetime fought with all their might for the destruction of chattel slavery in this country, and they never saw it. The honor that I draw out of this is not that things will necessarily be better in my lifetime,” he shared, “but that I will make the contribution that I am supposed to make.” Indeed, each of us has a role to play and an impact to make. Donors, educators, healers, storytellers, disruptors, and dreamers all share in the opportunity to strengthen the infrastructure surrounding organizers such that it matches their resolve. That is what this report represents—an invitation to explore pathways to community power, identify a point of intervention, and embrace the unique opportunity that exists there for each of us, the communities we belong to, and the world we can choose to heal together.

A key power building tool and practice of community organizers is creating space for short- and long-term alliances...





Acknowledgements

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Photo Credit: Mikey Cordero





Executive Summary

The United States is at a crossroads. The multiple crises and emergencies that have rocked the country since 2020—the COVID-19 pandemic, the national reckoning with structural racism and racialized police violence triggered by the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, economic shocks, the induced weakening of the social services and safety net programs, threats to public education and marginalized youth, racialized immigration enforcement, and natural disasters—have shed light on social precarity and vulnerability.

This report suggests that the secret sauce for the small and large change we need is community power. Specifically, the type of community power that is nurtured and developed in grassroots community organizations who have a record of forcing us, including the state, to pay attention to our most pressing needs and challenges. As such, we understand community organizing as a set of grassroots methods, practices, and strategies that strengthen people's capacity to work together, exercise power, and improve community life.

The focus of community organizations is often a geographical one, such as a town, neighborhood, city, or county. Increasingly, community organizing has taken a national, and at times, international approach. Regardless of the approach, community organizations are made of teams that work together to develop campaigns and strategies that build people's engagement over time. Through this report, we use "community organizer" as a broad umbrella term that encompasses youth, caregivers, educators, community members, and other staff in community organizations as movement leaders. In so doing, we ask the following questions: What role do community organizations and their organizers play in their communities? What practices, programming, and tools help build power? What role can funders, policymakers, advocates and leaders from other sectors play to support their efforts?

Supported by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, we answered these questions by interviewing 20 CJSF network partners, including focus groups and workshops with other partners. The resulting report is structured by what we learned about power building and cross and intra-sectoral collaboration from CJSF network partners around two areas titled: (1) "What Do Community Organizers Mean by Building



Photo Credit: Movimiento Poder

Power?;" and (2) "Cross-Sectoral Collaborations: Strategic Alliances, Coalitions, and the Making of a National Movement Ecosystem." From there we introduce the idea of the "community safety net" to discuss how community organizers also tend to the personal well-being of the community members they engage as a key part of their power building approach. This section is titled "How Community Organizers Have Become a Community Safety Net."

What Do Community Organizers Mean by Building Power?

The community organizers who make up CJSF's network partners agree that power building begins in the community, on "the ground." Community organizers are aware of current and historical power imbalances that exclude low-income racialized communities from participating in governance, policy making, and other decision-making processes. As such, community organizers have developed extensive and robust programming that equips children, youth, and adults with the civic skills needed to engage the multilevel systems that shape their lives. Several key findings also emerged from our conversations with CJSF network partners: (1) community organizers are building power for the long haul, (2) community organizers are training and developing local leaders through cohort models and internship-like programs, and (3) community organizers are developing power-building programming that shapes the lives and trajectories of individuals.



Strategic Alliances, Coalitions, and the Making of a National Movement Ecosystem

A key power building tool and practice of community organizers is creating space for short- and long-term alliances that take various forms, from coalitions to networks to partnerships with elected officials. We find two primary pathways to strategic partnerships, coalitions, alliances, and networks at the local, regional, and national level among CJSF network partners. One is through short-term joint action focused on an issue, campaign, or simply building the leadership of other organizers and community members. The second pathway, in which CJSF network partners have a strong record in, includes the intentional creation of space for sharing resources, ideas, strategies, relationships, and an understanding of issues across space. Community organizers, regardless of the pathway, mobilize intra-sectoral and cross-sectoral collaborations at various levels and depths. In addition, community organizers train and equip community members with the organizational practices, language, and institutional access required to engage elected officials, policymakers, and governing processes.

How Community Organizers Have Become a Community Safety Net

As part of their community organizing, CJSF network partners are also providing direct access to social services and leveraging their resources and networks to support individuals looking for financial assistance. Community organizers provide programming and services that help individuals and families in times of economic hardship and emotional distress. Aligned with the organizing principles of CJSF, network partners are providing safety and care in their communities (e.g. food banks, mutual aid, shelter, access to health care, vaccinations, child care centers, etc.). Moreover, CJSF's network partners recognize that central to building governing power and transforming systems is meeting the needs of the individuals and groups with whom they work.

Lessons for Those Looking to Support and Invest in Community Organizing

Several suggestions and lessons emerged from the in-depth interviews and the writing of this report:

1. **Cultivate the capacities of community organizers.** When community organizations are adequately supported, they develop organizational infrastructure to foster coalitions, alliances, and relationships at the local, regional, state, and national level. Sustained funding models also strengthen the mutual aid and governing power in rural and urban communities.
2. **Building and sustaining relationships requires time.** Building power and relationships in communities takes time and commitment. Timelines that honor this are essential to community organizers.
3. **Prioritize long-term movement building.** Having access to philanthropic organizations with sustained funding can bolster community campaigns, political education, analysis, and visions of holistic safety and community well-being.
4. **Strategic collaborators are needed.** Philanthropy has an opportunity to leverage resources, networks, and existing relationships to orient other agencies and groups to invest and support local, regional, and national community organizations.
5. **Scaling Up to Scale Out.** Seeding the existing tools, programming, and visions of community organizers are opportunities to scale up and scale out holistic safety and community well-being.
6. **Implementation also requires community organizing.** As we have learned from the CJSF network partners, the implementation of policy change and campaign wins comes with unique challenges and requires ongoing engagement with elected officials and systems. In some cases, it requires learning new skills and tools to participate in implementation and ensure communities are consulted and included.
7. **Capacious sector collaborations are valuable.** Building power can and should also include lawyers, media leaders, researchers, practitioners, small-business owners, and local vendors.



Project Purpose and Methods

This project was supported by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation with the aim of facilitating new discussions and thinking among funders, philanthropists, and educational justice organizers about the transformative systems change impact of community organizing. The project is specifically geared towards thinking about power, change, and community well-being in the United States, including Puerto Rico. In this report, Communities for Just Schools Fund and the USC Equity Research Institute (ERI) present the results of research conducted with CJSF's network of grassroots movement partners, offering language, tools, and recommendations to spark discussion and investment in community organizing.

CJSF is a national collaborative of community organizers and funders working to advance education justice. CJSF believes in the brilliance of young people—irrespective of their race, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, zip code, or documentation status—and in their right to be free, safe, and to have equitable opportunities and outcomes in public education. In 2025 alone, CJSF supported 67 community organizations throughout the United States, including Puerto Rico. At various scales, and in different capacities, CJSF network partners work at the intersections of education, immigration, economic, disability, safety, and youth justice. Some partners also work on related issues, such as gender justice, housing justice, environmental justice, and reproductive justice³. Regardless of the intersections in which they work, they are all driven by a mission to protect young people's holistic safety and equip them with the tools necessary to shape the systems that impact them.

ERI is a research unit at the University of Southern California that brings together current and former community organizers, faculty, graduate students, postdocs, and data scientists to conduct research and collaborate to power social change. To date, ERI has contributed reliable data on economic inclusion, climate equity, immigrant inclusion, governing power, and social movement building that is both academically rigorous and relevant to policy debates and community organizers.

Drawing on the expertise of CJSF and ERI, this report highlights how community organizers are working towards positive social transformation, building power, and patching the country's safety net. Our analysis builds on previous strands of work on community organizing and power building to pose the following questions: What role do community organizations and their organizers play in their communities? What practices, programming, and tools help build power? What role can funders, policy makers, advocates and leaders from other sectors play to support their efforts?

→ Building power starts on the ground, in communities, with folks that are organizing in communities. For me, power is the ability of people, organized people, to shift the conditions.

-Kesi F., Partners for Dignity & Rights

(recently joined Mayor Zohran Mamdani's administration as the Director of Co-Governance for the newly established Office of Mass Engagement)

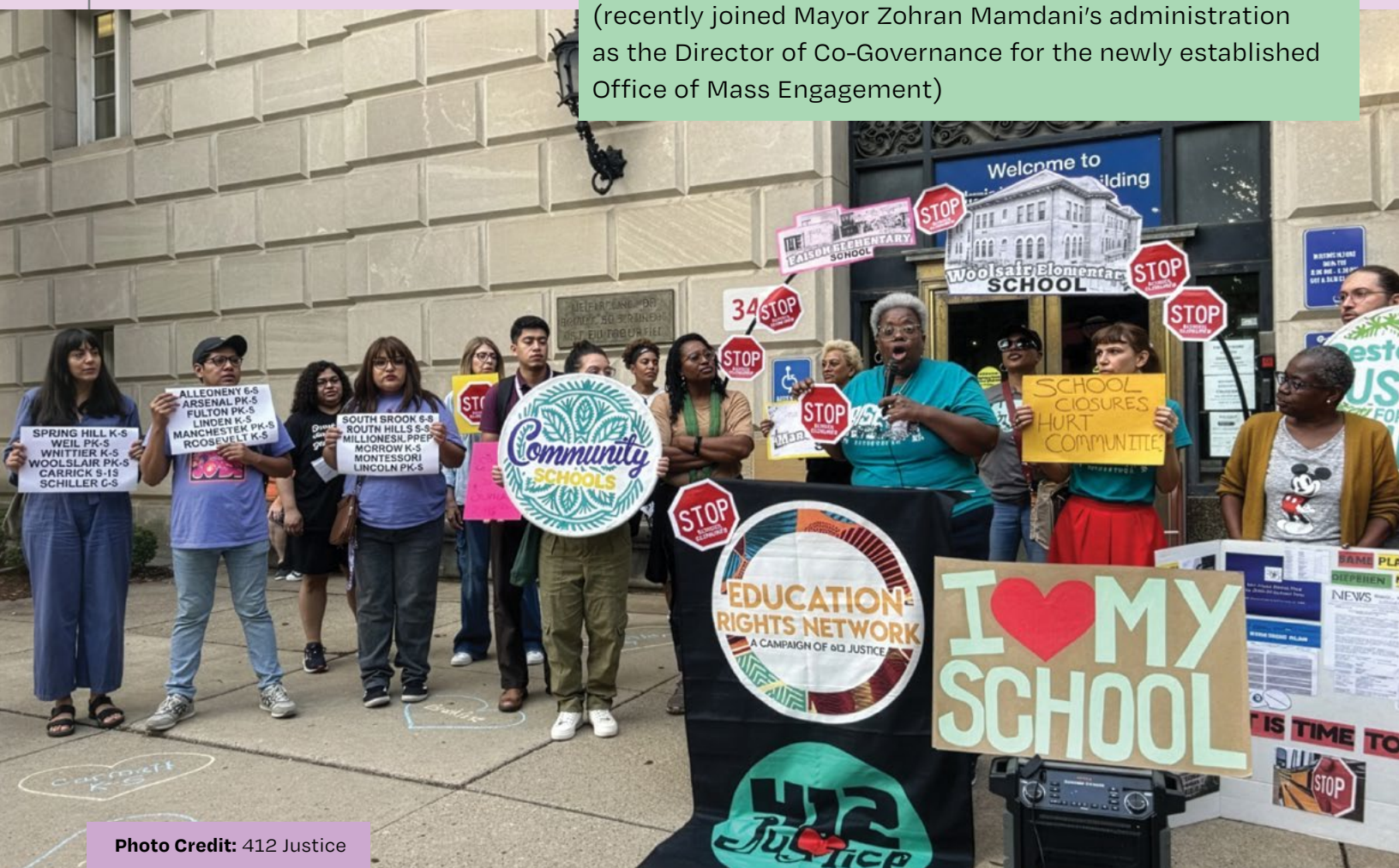


Photo Credit: 412 Justice

To answer these questions, we interviewed 20 CJSF network partners and conducted focus groups with other partners. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in 2025 and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. In addition, preliminary findings were shared at various convenings and conferences where CJSF network partners provided feedback and validation of key findings. Much of our analysis was refined and adapted through reflections and discussions among the CJSF and ERI teams. These discussions and workshops were our attempt to channel the insights and wisdom of community organizers we interviewed. The resulting report presents themes that derive from a systematic coding and analysis of the conversations we had with our partners. To guide our analysis, we used the USC Equity Research Institute's changing states framework (Pastor, Ito, and Wander, 2016).

Figure 1:



Conditions for Change



Demography



Economy



Politics



Geography



Arenas of Change



Electoral



Legislative



Judicial



Administrative



Communications



Corporate



Capacities for Change



Robust Organizational Landscape



Alliances and Networks



Leadership Ladders and Lattices



Resource Base

The changing states framework moves beyond documenting single wins or strategies deployed in one context to also examining how community organizers build, sustain, and wield power for long periods.⁴ In other words, how community organizers implement and sustain long-term change amidst changing and contentious landscapes. Key to the changing states framework is being attuned to the conditions, context, arenas, and capacities that community organizers employ and navigate. That is, understanding the conditions and context (i.e. political, geographic, administrative, judicial, etc.) that make visionary educational justice and power building possible or hinder it; documenting in what arenas (i.e. school boards, electoral, administrative, legislative, federal, etc.) community organizers wage, implement, or lose power; and capturing the capacities (i.e. organizational breadth and depth, networks, alliances, coalitions, resources, narratives, etc.) mobilized to build and sustain that power, cross-sectoral and intergenerational movements, and ability to participate in governance. (See Figure 1) In adapting the changing states framework in our analysis, our aim is to produce frameworks and tools for those invested in supporting the powerful, multi-generational, and collective work of organizers in the educational justice field. By “those invested,” we mean funders, organizers, educators, and a wide range of practitioners and stakeholders.

What makes power possible—or blocks it

The underlying environment shaping whether visionary educational justice can take root.

EXAMPLES

Political climate · Geographic terrain · Administrative posture · Judicial landscape

Where power is waged, won, or lost

The decision-making sites where organizers contest and implement change.

EXAMPLES

School boards · Electoral · Administrative · Legislative · Federal

What organizers mobilize to sustain power

The infrastructure that powers cross-sectoral and intergenerational movements.

EXAMPLES

Organizational breadth & depth · Networks · Alliances · Coalitions
Resources · Narratives

The terrain organizers must read

The interlocking systems and histories that shape strategy in any given moment.

SHAPED BY

- » Local history
- » Demographic change
- » Economic forces
- » Cultural moment

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Report Roadmap

We first define what community organizing is and explain who is involved and who participates. Here, we also provide a brief introduction to prior research detailing the benefits of participating in community organizing, including the role community organizers have historically played in the educational justice field. We then structure what we learned about power building and cross and intra-sectoral collaboration from CJSF network partners around two areas titled: (1) “What Do Community Organizers Mean by Building Power?” and (2) “Sectoral Collaborations: Strategic Alliances, Coalitions, and the Making of a National Movement Ecosystem.” From there we introduce the idea of the “community safety net” to discuss how community organizers also tend to the personal well-being of the community members they engage. This section is titled “How Community Organizers Have Become a Community Safety Net.”

As readers move through each section, we encourage them to consider how the findings address power-building at multilevels. In addition, we ask readers to pay attention to how the lives of children and youth are improved when educators, parents, community members, politicians, and students feel mutually accountable and responsible for increasing the holistic safety of youth and improving public education and the lives of young people. We also note for readers that while the insights from the CJSF network partners are presented in sections, the practices in each are not mutually exclusive but instead deeply intertwined. That is to say that building power at the local level, for example, is tied to building networks and coalitions at the regional and national level. Each section offers recommendations.

Who are Community Organizers?

From Movimiento Poder in Colorado to Black Girls for Gender Equity in New York, collectives are engaging in direct action to respond to our country's deeply polarized political landscape and the deepening of existing inequities. From millions struggling to pay rent and medical bills, to communities experiencing intensified surveillance and deportations, to a shifting schooling landscape that prioritizes market driven values and attacks on curriculum, people are responding to the precariousness of everyday life in the United States. Among those thousands of protestors are community organizers, dedicated to building power and lifting the voices of their communities' members.

Community organizing refers to a set of grassroots methods, practices, and strategies that strengthen people's capacity to work together, exercise power, improve community life, and, as this report later shows, provide a safety net for communities. In that sense, community organizing differs from activism, labor organizing, and protest. Yet, those lines can be easily blurred in practice. For instance, a union member can also be part of a community organization, or, conversely, a community organization can partner with union members. The focus, as "community organizing" might suggest, is often a geographical one, such as a town, neighborhood, city, or county. However, increasingly, community organizing has taken a national, and at times, international approach.



An activist is somebody who lifts their voice up around what they care about. But an organizer finds out what the people care about and helps them build strategy and power to win. I think understanding that difference, then building the different skills that an organizer needs like the ability to mobilize, the ability to strategize is important.

-Brother Jitu Brown, Journey for Justice Alliance

While community organizations have blossomed in the last few decades, community organizers have a long history in our nation. In the United States, the history of public education is also a remarkable tale of community organizers expanding access to resources and opportunities. For example, community organizers have long supported parents and students as they work to improve schooling conditions and curriculum. As such, community organizers have a deep commitment to long-term learning, networking, and power-building in the communities they serve.⁵ They are often deeply embedded in the community and develop programming that aims to constantly build leadership among others. Community organizers focus on campaigns and strategies that build people's engagement over time. As such, they distribute the responsibilities of community organizing to others with an emphasis on collectivity and relationship building.⁶

Community organizers often develop campaigns and programming that are more time-intensive, with some campaigns taking years to complete. In fact, most campaigns are multi-year efforts aimed at addressing the root causes of unjust systems. As such, community organizers are likely to engage their members to participate in extensive training, coaching, and reflection. The community organizers of interest to this report are, or have been, youth workers in various capacities. Youth workers, who are commonly employed in community organizations, mentor, guide, and teach youth in settings such as afterschool programs, youth detention centers, and other youth serving organizations.⁷ In many examples across the country, youth workers take the methods, practices, and strategies of community organizing to children and youth.⁸ They do so by developing and prioritizing political education, trauma and healing-informed programming, and encouraging civic participation and political action.⁹



We are really focused on changing unjust systems. But what we heard through hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of narratives of youth and families and ourselves involved in the work is just this really transformative personal and collective healing that occurred through the part of building positive identity, creating a sense of community and taking action on things that we care so deeply about.

-Jenny A., Communities United



Photo Credit: Philadelphia Student Union

Studies have shown that young people who participate in community organizing experience affirming practices that promote their emotional well-being, capacity for civic participation, and educational outcomes.¹⁰ This is in part due to the fact that the community organizers often reflect the demographics of the community and develop a curriculum that fosters positive relationships, collective and critical consciousness, and a recognition of difference.¹¹ For example, a longitudinal study conducted by ERI partner, Veronica Terriquez, found that the youth-serving community organizations in California have developed a comprehensive approach to building young people's capacity to make a positive difference in their communities, including improving their own educational outcomes and emotional and mental health.¹² These findings come from surveys, interviews, and participant observations conducted with over 90 youth-serving community organizations in California, including nearly 1400 surveys with youth. In short, they equip young people with the tools and capacity to promote social change, improve their lives, and learn that they are powerful. Through this report, we use "community organizer" as a broad umbrella term that encompasses youth, caregivers, educators, and community members as movement leaders. With that in mind, we now shift to discussing how CJSF network partners define and understand power.

What Do Community Organizers Mean by “Building Power?”

The community organizers who make up CJSF’s network partners agree that power building begins in the community. Building power among youth and adults starts with a recognition that there are current and historical power imbalances that often exclude low-income racialized communities from participating in governance, policy making, and other decision making processes. As such, community organizers often state that power building starts on the ground. But what does that look like?

→ By creating mechanisms and pathways for communities most affected by systems to address solutions in those systems, we are creating both pathways for systemic change, but also empowering a community to understand its own power as people power.

-Geoffrey W., Coleman Advocates



Photo Credit: Southern Movement Committee

Figure 2:

Nollie Jenkins' Model of Organizing

INVESTIGATE

We begin by gathering information. This means digging deep—listening to the community, identifying the root causes of issues, analyzing power dynamics, and documenting lived experiences. Investigation lays the foundation for strategic action by ensuring we know who is affected, what's happening, and why.

EDUCATE

Knowledge is power. We believe in educating ourselves and others—about the issues, the systems at play, and the possibilities for change. Through workshops, meetings, and conversations, we build a shared understanding so that the entire community is equipped to lead.

NEGOTIATE

Once we are informed and united, we move to negotiation. This step is about leveraging our power to advocate for real solutions. We engage decision-makers—from school boards to elected officials—to demand what our communities need. Negotiation means using strategy and pressure to win concrete change.

DEMONSTRATE

When negotiations fall short—or when it's time to amplify our demands—we take action. Demonstration is the visible expression of our power. Through marches, rallies, press conferences, or peaceful protest, we bring the issue to the public and show we are serious about justice.

Building Power in the Community. Building power “on the ground” begins and continues with building the leadership and civic capacities of the community. To do so, CJSF network partners have developed programming that varies in length—from a day long workshop to multi-month fellowships—that equip youth and adults with the ability to speak in public, learn about issues impacting their community, develop an understanding of how government decisions are made, and how those decisions impact them and others. While models of community organizing vary in scope and programming, many follow a similar model to that of the Nollie Jenkins Family Center in Mississippi. Since 1994, the Nollie Jenkins Family Center has been engaging Mississippi residents through their four-part model: Investigate, Educate, Negotiate, and Demonstrate (See Figure 2). The programming of the CJSF network partners includes workshops and activities that access local, regional, and national conditions, including understanding the terrain and context in which positive social change can be achieved. As such, to varying capacities, programming develops skills that allow community members to participate in shaping local, state, and national policies and decisions.



Youth power is young people being able to be part of the process to cast their vote because we believe they're autonomous beings. So, cast their vote in a way that actually contributes to the process that determines their futures.

**-Gia L., Gender & Sexualities
Alliance Network**

Building Power for the Long Haul. The CJSF network partners are building power on the backdrop of decades of organized abandonment in the nation's most vulnerable communities—communities that are most impacted by criminalization, deportation, incarceration, unemployment, houselessness, and the aftermath of decisions made by multi-million dollar companies. That means that the work of community organizers often has to start with equipping communities with the tools and language to make sense of these dynamics. From there, community organizers are building individuals that can engage and transform the conditions that bring harm to them and their loved ones.

While most community organizers find themselves responding to immediate community needs, CJSF network partners have a strong orientation towards engaging the long-haul. Take for example the recent campaign victories in Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). For most of the 1900s and the early 2000s, LAUSD has heavily invested resources in policing and technologies of surveillance that have led to the disproportionate criminalization of Black youth.¹³ CJSF network partners Students Deserve, Labor Community Strategy Center, Youth Justice Coalition, and CADRE have successfully organized for a significant reduction of the Los Angeles School Police Department budget. This coalition of community organizers, led primarily by Black youth, advocated for the creation of a Black Student Achievement Plan using the newly available funds. To date, the Black Student Achievement Plan has seen over \$175 million and has expanded its vision of community and school safety to include resources and programming for undocumented and LGBTQ+ youth. In addition, they have secured an investment in providing more mental health services, restorative justice staff, and affirming spaces throughout the school district.

Photo Credit: CJSF Staff



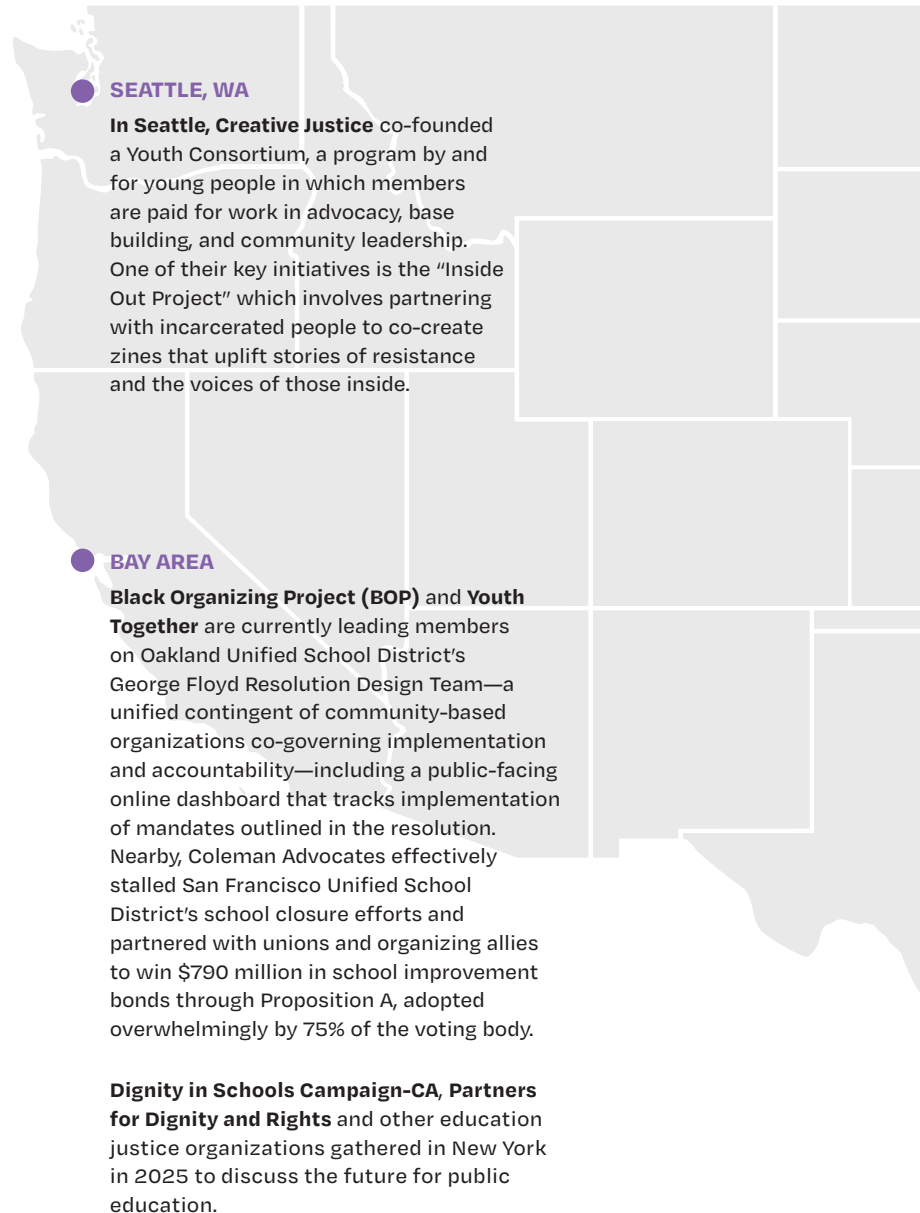
On the surface, the victory of Students Deserve and its organizational partners might appear as wins directly associated with the widespread protests that took place during the early 2020s. Far from spontaneous victories, these campaign wins are the culmination of broader, more sustained campaigns against school policing and negative campus racial climates, intentionally designed for escalating and consolidating more community power across time. In cities across the country, CJSF network partners used the momentum of the 2020 protests to catalyze the power and demands they had been building and winning in the years and decades prior. For example, in Los Angeles, the Black Student Achievement Plan builds on a legacy of campaigns that addressed random searches, arrests and suspensions, A-G requirements (for the California higher education system admissions), and campus climate. The sections to follow delve deeper into how our CJSF network partners are building adult and youth leaders and the lessons learned from participating in community organizing.

Photo Credit: Students Deserve





Partner Wins



MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Twin Cities Innovation Alliance (TCIA) hosted their sixth annual Data 4 Public Good (D4PG) Conference, which convened more than 80 organizing leaders to unpack the ways in which Artificial Intelligence and other technologies are being deployed for biometric surveillance, predictive policing, and geolocation tracking by schools, police, and immigration enforcement.

CHICAGO, IL

Brighton Park Neighborhood Council partnered with Collaborative for Community Wellness to reopen local public mental health centers and establish city-wide civilian crisis response teams. Local ally, **Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)**, is also defending access to holistic healthcare through the Mental Health Equity and Justice campaign, and **Communities United** has engaged 800 students, teachers, and administrators to build a healing-centered co-governance model for learning communities throughout the city.

NEW ORLEANS, LA

In New Orleans, **Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)** and the **Liberty and Dignity Coalition** led the successful "No on 3" campaign through which voters resoundingly rejected a constitutional amendment that would have made it easier to try young people as adults in the state's criminal legal system.

PROVIDENCE, RI

ARISE, Providence Student Union, PrYSM and the **OurSchoolsPVD coalition** crafted H.5836 with Representative David Morales, a bill that would create a yearlong Ethnic Studies course requirement and student-led oversight structure for students throughout the State of Rhode Island. The bill received formal endorsements from the Providence School Board and Providence City Council recommending passage by the State House of Representatives.

NEW YORK, NY

Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) and **Dignity in Schools Campaign** led advocacy campaigns that successfully landed more than \$6 million in the city's budget for restorative justice programs.

Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari from **Alliance for Quality Education (AQE)**, Fahd Ahmed from **Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM)**, and Kesi Foster from **Partners for Dignity and Rights** were appointed to NYC Mayor Zohran Mamdani's transition committees for education, community safety, immigrant justice, social services, and worker justice, which will play pivotal roles in shaping the administration's policies and approach to co-governance.

WASHINGTON, DC

Black Swan Academy, Advancement Project, and local D.C. groups trained youth organizers in staying safe and caring for one another during deployment of the National Guard and Immigration Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) throughout the District. Trainings highlighted ways to prioritize physical safety, document interactions, and assert legal rights. These were also authored into a zine that has been shared widely.

Building Organizational and Local Adult and Youth Leaders. Essential to building power in communities is creating youth and adult leadership. CJSF network partners do that in various ways. From creating internal roles in their organizations, to facilitating workshops, retreats, fellowships, and internships, community organizers equip their base with language, skills, and education that cover a broad spectrum of theories, practical civic skills (e.g. informed voting, communicating with officials, leading public meetings, public speaking) to more advanced organizing strategies (e.g. developing and implementing campaigns, political action, narrative work, policy formation, etc.). Evident in the day-to-day programming and activities of the CJSF network partners is that participation extends beyond involvement in campaigns and/or policy formation.





The following are brief overviews of fellowships and internships offered by CJSF network partners that employ a cohort model to power building.⁵⁴ Many of these programs provide youth with stipends, transportation, and the materials needed to participate. They vary in scale and length, with some lasting several weeks and others spanning throughout several months, including a full year of participation. Several of the network partners featured below also offer programming for parents and adults. While many of the CJSF network partners also offer opportunities for national power building, here we provide insight on local level efforts.

- » In Tennessee, the Southern Movement Committee trains youth leaders (14-25 years) to organize and build power through their annual Youth Assembly internship. The internship includes monthly community organizing and civic engagement training, participating in community outreach and civic engagement opportunities, and direct involvement with the Varsity Spending Plan Campaign. Developed by Nashville community members and proposed by the Southern Movement Committee, the Varsity Spending Plan is a \$10 million investment in young people, families, and neighborhoods in Nashville. As such, Youth Assembly interns have opportunities to build safe communities in Nashville by addressing the causes of gun violence, implementing restorative justice in schools, developing community centered programming, and having direct involvement with the Office of Youth Safety.
- » The Light House | Black Girl Projects offers various programs including its Young Women's Policy and Advocacy Council. The council brings together Black girls and young women from across Mississippi to participate in yearlong leadership building workshops and to learn how to impact policy and the local landscape.

- » Freedom, Inc., located in Wisconsin, provides a wide array of culturally relevant programming for youth and adult members, including its Freedom Youth Squad. The Freedom Youth Squad is dedicated to engaging youth in ending violence against Southeast Asian and Black communities. Participants—many of whom are Black, Hmong, and Khmer—of the Freedom Youth Squad attend and facilitate tech ins and leadership programs. A similar program, the Wisdom Project, engages Hmong women elders as leaders in anti-violence programming. Similarly, Leaders Igniting Transformation (LIT) offers the Black Hogwarts summer institute, which brings together learning about intersecting issues, civic engagement, and political education and history to train young people as community organizers and leaders in and out of the organization.
- » Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) believes that parents give life to their mission and sit at the center of the organization. As such, COFI facilitates local and national training and opportunities for parents that allow them to take action in their local schools and communities. Parents participate in programming that engages them in identifying local issues, needs, campaigns, and resources needed to improve local life in dozens of Chicago neighborhoods. To date, COFI parents have canvassed over 360,000 homes, provided over 25,000 meals through their Summer Meal program, and facilitated various early childhood programs. Among many other things, COFI parents also provide transportation and safe passages to and from schools.
- » Black Organizing Project in Oakland, CA builds power in the local community, among Black youth, parents, and educators. In addition, however, they are also building the power and capacities of community organizers and youth workers through their Black Leadership Institute (BLI). BLI is an annual program where community organizers participate in training aimed at developing political analysis, running campaigns, and expanding the capacities of their respective organizations. It is an incubator of ideas and opportunities for community organizers to be mentored and provided opportunities for growth.

- » PrYSM, located in Rhode Island, offers programs that build the power of its members, including empowering Southeast Asian refugees facing deportation orders. In addition, their Organizing Circle (OC) program builds the power-building capacities of Southeast Asian youth and other youth of color through participation in leadership development, mentorship models, and leading local campaigns. Youth ages 13-19 have the opportunity to participate in creative strategy workshops, community care and jail support training, to name a few. In encouraging youth to dedicate themselves for a minimum of 30 hours, PrYSM exposes young people to a broad range of topics and workshops that also include partnerships with local organizations and artists. PrYSM programming merges movement and power building with creativity and engages youth in creative skills including but not limited to: storytelling, drawing, acting, design, filmmaking, film editing, audio production, song writing, rapping, and social media content creation.

Building power among youth and adults requires an inclusive approach that invites people where they are. These internships, cohorts, and fellowships work towards a shared analysis and vision and are anchored in relationships and building trust and power in the community. In addition, they show how intersectionality is not just a theory or framework, but a powerful strategy to build power. During these programs, participants are often learning to move beyond treating intersectionality as an identity framework and instead learning about difference to understand the interconnected forces shaping the issues they face. This allows different groups to understand how their struggles are intertwined or how issues they focus on connect to the movement work of other sectors and groups.

Photo Credit: Southern Echo





The Spill Over of Participation in Community Organizing. Community organizers have developed comprehensive programming and activities that spillover beyond a person's time in their organization. For example, youth members carry the lessons learned in community organizations into the professional and academic adult lives. The power of community organizing was most evident in interviews where invited leaders were joined by others with a long trajectory in the organization. It is all too common to hear the CJSF network partners share stories of youth members now working full-time in the organization, as is the case with Mississippi-based Nollie Jenkins Family Center, whose Youth Coordinator is the daughter of a former Nollie Jenkins Family Center youth member. Across the country, CJSF network partners are building intergenerational power by working with entire generations of families.



I have been a part of the organization since, I guess, my inception when it was at the childcare facility. That was specifically opened for teen moms, and my mom had me around 16 or 17, and I stayed in the space. I grew up to know and understand, at a deeper level, what social justice, equity, equality, system racism, policy, what all of that meant, 'cause I was around the conversation and I grew up around the conversation. And I was a young voice inside of the conversation.

**-Kameisha S., Nollie Jenkins
Family Center**

Understanding Power Building Within the Context it Emerges. It is important for readers to understand that the power building practices described above can be scaled or decreased during changing political landscapes. That is to say, that existing local, regional, and national conditions matter and should be factored into strategic investment decisions (for philanthropy and foundations) and programming (for community organizers). In times of crisis, like the current political climate, community organizations and organizers can be depleted of organizational resources as they run from one fire to the next (figuratively and literally in a place like Los Angeles). On the other hand, some regions, like Mississippi and the broader Deep South, have been historically underfunded and outside the philanthropic purview. In regions where the presence of community organizations is less scarce, like Oakland and Philadelphia, the philanthropic funding of youth-serving community organizations and community organizing has declined. Even during good economic times, grassroots community organizing and educational justice work has been under-resourced.

When philanthropy and other organizations (e.g. universities, research centers, foundations, extended learning) support community organizing (from the basics to more targeted programming), they are supporting the leadership and civic development of communities. And as the next section details, they are helping build power, foster co-governance, and build a community safety net through relationships, long-term trust, and the capacity for community leaders to identify and implement solutions that durably meet the material and psychological needs of the community. Moreover, when philanthropy supports community organizations, they send a clear message that they are committed to elevating the wisdom of community leaders and those most impacted by unjust systems.



Cross-Sectoral Collaborations:

Strategic Alliances, Coalitions, and the Making of a National Movement Ecosystem

Building power also includes creating space for short- and long-term alliances that take various forms to create multi-level organizational structure. For example, by engaging youth and adults in programming that develops an understanding of arenas for civic leadership, CJSF's network partners expand community engagement with elected officials and other stakeholders. That said, power building also happens when organizers develop strategies that include sustained relationships and coalitions over time, institutions, and geographic location. CJSF's network partners have diligently supported convenings that are aimed at building collaborations and fostering deep engagement.¹⁵ Three examples include:

- » The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, Journey for Justice, NEA, and NYU Metro Law Center's Labor and Community Convening brought together 50 labor and education justice organizers across more than 25 organizations nationwide.
- » Dignity in Schools Campaign California, Partners for Dignity and Rights and other education justice organizations gathered in New York in 2025 to discuss the future for public education. Both organizations intentionally and strategically deepen relationships and campaigns among community organizations addressing issues of safety and criminalization in schools. In addition, Dignity in Schools Campaign California organizes an annual week of action where organizations across the state of California have an opportunity to address school pushout and other issues related to schools and policing.
- » The Twin Cities Innovation Alliance hosts the "Data 4 Public Good" meeting. The goal of the convening is to foster a collective space where the collective power of community-based leaders is mobilized to offer insights, learning, and conversations on issues related to digital justice, data and data privacy, and much more. The convening brings together community organizers, educators, parents, students, artists, attorneys, and many more.

In general, there are two primary pathways to strategic partnerships, coalitions, alliances, and networks at the local, regional, and national level among CJSF network partners. One is through short-term joint action focused on an issue, campaign, or simply building the leadership of other organizers and community members. The second pathway, in which CJSF network partners have a strong record, includes the intentional creation of space for sharing resources, ideas, strategies, relationships, and an understanding of issues across space. The second pathway also involves laying the groundwork for long-term engagement and collective work, including the implementation of successful campaign wins and policy changes. Both pathways, however, mobilize intra-sectoral and cross-sectoral collaborations at various levels and depths.



From the building of our toolkits to building out facilitation agendas, folks have taken it. They're taking it and running with it, especially in this moment where folks are feeling under attack.

-Keno W., Alliance for Educational Justice



Intra-sectoral Collaborations. The Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ), for example, brings together community organizers, primarily those with a strong youth focus, to build and sustain the organizational capacity needed to promote alternatives to punitive practices and policing. As an organizational anchor, AEJ fosters alliances that build power at local, regional, and national scales among organizers and youth in California, Illinois, Wisconsin, Colorado, and Arizona, to name a few. One way they do so is through the creation of tool kits, reports, fact sheets, interactive maps, and letters that build the capacity of community organizers working on youth-related issues. These resources are available in English and Spanish.



Our national partners, the GSA Network, have developed resources that encourage young people to leverage coalitions as a tool to address unjust systems.¹⁶ For example, they offer guiding questions to think through when building coalitions with other organizations (e.g. what would your unifying issue(s) be?; What resources could come from this organization?; What obstacles might you encounter?). In addition, the resources offer guidelines and prompts that help young organizers formalize coalitions rooted in shared governance models.

Our partners have also collaborated across sectors to develop models and tools for power-building and co-governance. Such is the case with Partners for Dignity and Rights, who co-authored a series of reports and tools that leveraged intra- and cross-sectoral relationships to reimagine the relationship between government and communities.¹⁷

Cross-Sectoral Collaborations. In Chicago, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC), and Communities United (CU) have strategically partnered with hospitals, mental health centers, and other local institutions to advance their visions of safety, equity, and justice. Their approach has included fostering relationships and dialogues with elected officials who might disagree or express hesitation to community-based models of safety and care. Recognizing that diverse stakeholders are not always easily persuaded, these organizations and their organizers have committed to long-term relationships building that includes meeting, negotiations, public events, and when needed, direct action. The cross-sectoral collaborations that COFI, BPNC, and CU fostered deepened when various stakeholders and elected officials embraced community organizing as made up of community informed strategies and visions of co-governance. In other words, cross-sectoral partners recognized the collective wisdom and insight that our Chicago-based CJSF network partners hold.

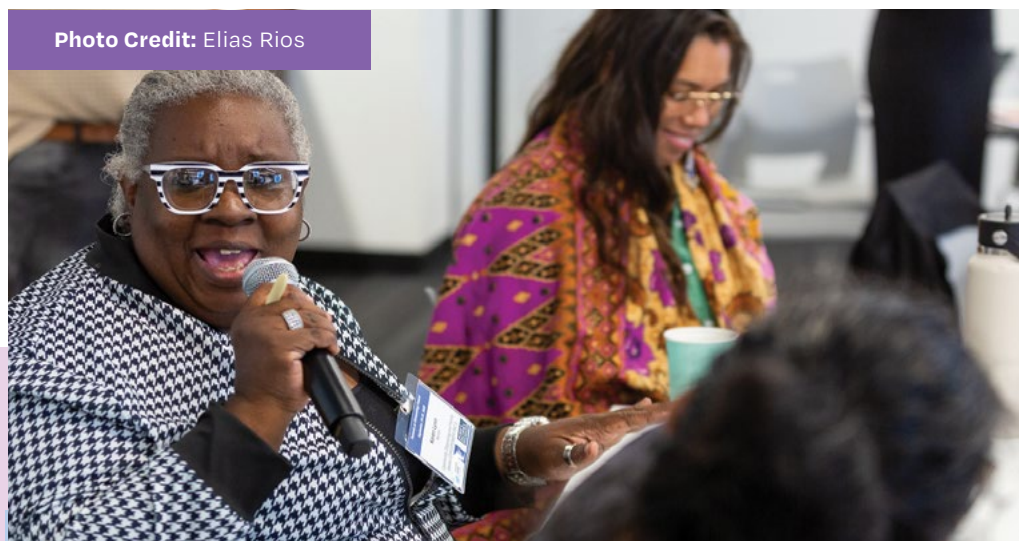


She [elderly community member] showed up to a ton of his district events throughout the year, and she was just there. Come May when we were working on the school ticketing bill, she called him [elected official], and she was calling, calling persistently. He didn't give us a meeting that time, but at some point, she had called him so many times that, close to the vote for that bill, she finally told his office, "I've been trying to reach him. Please tell him that I am an 80-year-old grandmother. He should not be afraid to talk to me." Like, five minutes later he calls her back and he's, like, "Miss Russell, why are you calling my staff telling them that I'm afraid to talk to you?" So they have this hour-long conversation on the phone...the guy signed up as cosponsor of the bill in support of ending student ticketing from the SROs in schools.

-Aida C., COFI

In 2024, for example, the Chicago Board of Education approved a Whole School Safety Framework that roots school climate and culture building in physical safety, emotional safety, and relational trust. This policy and framework builds on multiple years of previous resolutions, campaign wins, policy changes, and direct action COFI and CU—among others—have led to reducing an over reliance on school police. To develop an alternative model of safety, one that recognizes that the physical and emotional needs of students are interconnected, key collaborations had to take place. These include, but are not limited too, a steering committee that intentionally included and valued the diverse perspectives of district staff, community organizations, students, families, educators, and others in shaping policy.¹⁸ Harnessing the power and insights of multiple collaborators, the resulting Whole School Safety framework is lauded as a replicable approach to policy making that is informed by community driven values and ideas of safety. Community organizers, for example, brought their healing and restorative justice principles, including relationship building, trust, and mutual respect and accountability, to this collaboration.

Across the country, CJSF network partners have implemented approaches like advisory boards, steering committees, and elected community members onto school boards as strategic places for collaboration with elected officials and community organizing. In Tennessee, The Southern Movement Committee has supported Black youth as they organized for and now participate in the Office of Youth Safety (founded in 2023). This win resulted in a direct collaboration with Mayor Freddie O'Connell and the creation of a youth advisory board who are now responsible for the implementing and managing of community-based restorative justice programs across schools and community centers.



Scaling Sites of Collaboration. For CJSF network partners, resources are needed to create spaces where collaborators can come together, participate in workshops, and exchange ideas, strategies, and resources. When there are financial resources available, community organizers can purchase materials, provide food, rent space for events, cover transportation and lodging when needed, and allocate staff time. While no two alliances, networks, relationships, or coalitions are alike, the relationships CJSF network partners harness to build power do have some commonalities.

- » **First**, they bring together the multiple skills, capacities, and visions of community organizers and community members.
- » **Second**, they connect and collectively uplist issues of key concern, including the bridging of issues or campaigns. In so doing, they also cement and build connections, trust, and share visions.
- » **Third**, they scale the reach and impact of community-based processes and structures and grassroots solutions.

Supporting these power-building structures and practices provides opportunities for local visions to converge with statewide and nationwide visions of safety, educational equity, and youth justice.

→ We are a coalition and we are member led. So what that looks like structurally is that we have a staff of four, which is not a lot for doing national work. And pretty much, the job of the staff is to support them [other community organizations and organizers] in implementing policies, campaigns, and support.

-Ruth I., Dignity in Schools Campaign

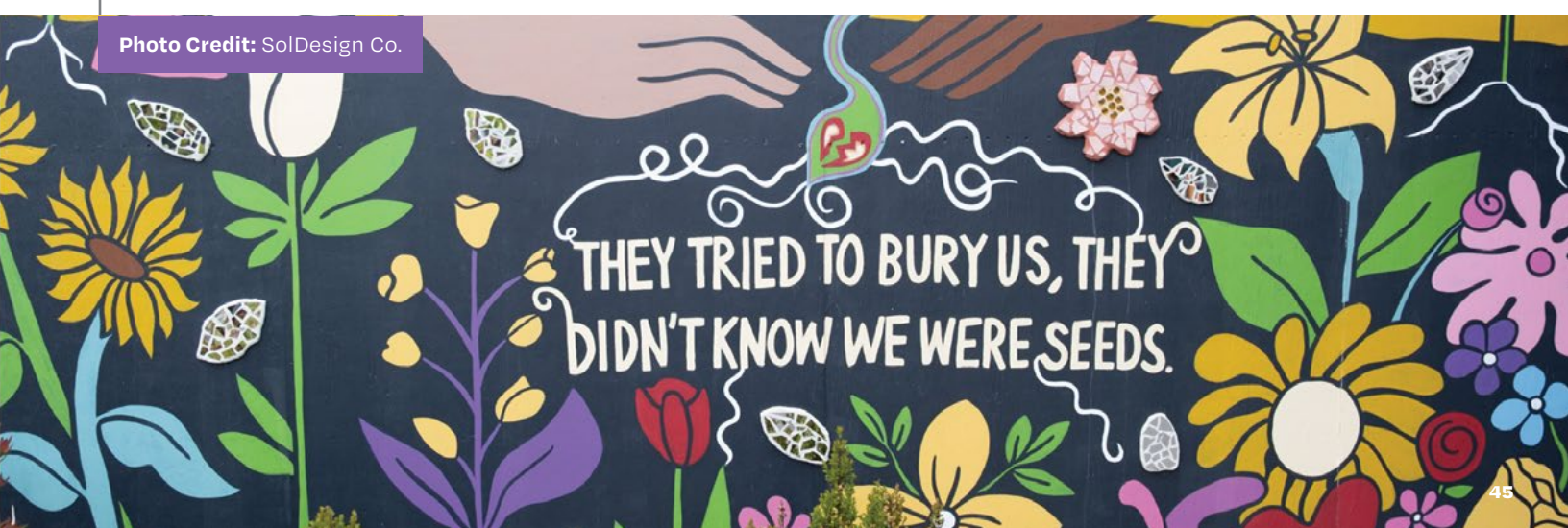
The need for long-term operational funds to build the depth and breadth of cross-sectoral alliances and coalitions. While community organizers are eager to foster coalitions with other community organizers and alliances with government and philanthropic decision makers, building any kind of relationship takes time and financial investment. A simple trip to the state capital or a philanthropy sponsored convening takes money and resources, including preparing community members to engage with elected officials or attend workshops. In addition, some organizations find themselves working with limited infrastructure, including lack of office space and paid staffing structures equipped for the long-term engagement that is core to their work. When philanthropy actively supports the depth and breadth of convening across sectors, they make a big difference. Community organizers are able to engage and convene with diverse stakeholders to make sense of important issues, develop ideas, create solutions, and build power among communities. Alternatively, when the availability of financial resources is scarce, so are progressive alliances, coalitions, and networks. More attention and investment in these areas is needed to move the political needle. It is important to note that this attention and investment should be patient and long-term since change can be slow but cumulative. The payoff for those who commit to long-term commitments are many: the building of trusting relationships with elected officials, multiple campaigns, influence over time, implementation, witnessing the benefits of investment (which often occur long after short grant cycles). The cementing and scaling of organizing processes and outcomes has the potential to deepen overall collaborations between systems and the community they serve.

From Fragmentation to Collective Visions of Change. One of the challenges to promoting positive social change is that community organizers often work in campaign or issue silos. For example, organizers working on health care policy and reform may not work with organizers working on education and youth justice. Similarly, different sectors, including philanthropy and government entities, tend to convene amongst themselves. CJSF network partners, however, recognize the threads connecting these and other issues and have worked diligently to foster strategic partnerships, coalitions, alliances, and networks at the local, regional, and national level.

The philanthropic sector has an opportunity to support community organizers by investing organizational resources that will help cement and anchor these networks, alliances, and coalitions, which create an added value to local efforts aimed at bringing individuals to think and act collectively. Building relationships that can endure takes time, resources, and comprehensive and intentional programming. However, as the CJSF network partners show, collaborations must be co-designed across sectors to harness collective and external power from aligned stakeholders. There is power in partnerships and each sector brings relationships and knowledge that communities need to build power.

Supporting Community Organizing and Implementation. The community organizing of the California-based CJSF network partners offers an instructive opportunity to strategically collaborate with community organizers: being in it for the long-haul is both sustained investment in movement and power building, but also, an attention to implementation. CJSF network partners have shared in interviews and convenings that funding restricted to short time frames (e.g. one year or two years) or rigid metrics (e.g. measuring success based on campaign wins) comes with challenges. While investments are needed to support the power-building strategies, campaigns, and programming of community organizations, it cannot come at the expense of implementation-related activities. That is to say, many of the activities and programming described in the sections above are also community organizing tools that are leveraged to involve communities in the implementation of the services, policy changes, and system transformation that comes from successful campaigns. As we have seen across the country, the positive social changes of the past are under attack and thus investing in building power for implementation and protection of community drive changes is absolutely necessary. Strengthening the implementation capacities of community organizations is a promising arena for collaborations among community organizers, philanthropy, and other stakeholders.

Photo Credit: SolDesign Co.



THEY TRIED TO BURY US, THEY
DIDN'T KNOW WE WERE SEEDS.



I think in the imagining of what is possible, we also have to imagine that we will win, and if we move in the space that winning is something that will happen, then we have to imagine, "what does implementation look like?"

-Malaika P., Black Organizing Project

How Funders, Allies, and System Leaders Can Help. Alliances, networks, and coalitions make CJSF network partners stronger and expand their capacities and reach. Potential strategies and ways to partner with community organizers can also include supporting power analysis, community surveying, training, evaluations, cross-sector convenings, and providing space for meetings. Supporting such activities opens possibilities for partnerships with a broad range of institutions, including but not limited to, universities, foundations, and other organizations. Philanthropic foundations, for example, can convene community organizers—at varying scales and frequencies—to come together, learn, share best practices, and deepen relationships with other sectors. These convenings are also opportunities for other sectors to learn from community organizers, understand their needs, and develop strategies that deepen and invest in building power and strengthening the community safety net. The CJSF network partners have laid out practices and models that can be replicated, modified, and built on. Moreover, community organizations have organizational and community knowledge that can be used by local governments as they experience growth, transitions, or developmental changes. When philanthropy continually invests, funds, and supports community organizing, they are scaling, expanding, and improving the resources, programming, and knowledge of community organizers and the groups they serve.

Figure 3:



1 TWO PATHWAYS TO PARTNERSHIP

SHORT-TERM JOINT ACTION

Issue- or campaign-driven collaboration that builds leadership in the moment—turning organizers and community members into co-strategists around a shared, time-bound win.

LONG-TERM ECOSYSTEM BUILDING

Intentional spaces for sharing resources, ideas, strategies, and relationships across geography and sector—laying the groundwork for implementation, protection, and policy wins that compound over time.

INTRA-SECTORAL — WITHIN THE MOVEMENT

- **ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE (AEJ):** Bilingual toolkits, fact sheets, reports, and interactive maps that build organizer capacity in CA, IL, WI, CO, AZ & beyond—alternatives to punitive policing.
- **GSA NETWORK:** Coalition-building guides for young organizers, with shared-governance prompts & unifying-issue frameworks.
- **PARTNERS FOR DIGNITY & RIGHTS:** Co-authored reports & tools for reimagining the relationship between government and community.

CROSS-SECTORAL — ACROSS SYSTEMS

- **COFI, BPNC & COMMUNITIES UNITED (CHICAGO):** Built durable ties with hospitals, mental health centers, and elected officials.
- **SOUTHERN MOVEMENT COMMITTEE (TN):** Creation of Youth Advisory Board
- **DIGNITY IN SCHOOLS—CA:** Annual statewide Week of Action confronting school pushout and policing.

2 SPOTLIGHT: CONVENINGS THAT BUILD THE ECOSYSTEM

LABOR × EDUCATION

Labor & Community Convening

The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, Journey for Justice, NEA, and NYU Metro Law Center brought together **50+ organizers from 25+ organizations** nationwide.

NEW YORK · 2025

Future of Public Education

Dignity in Schools Campaign and Partners for Dignity & Rights deepened campaigns confronting safety and criminalization in schools across the country.

TWIN CITIES

Data 4 Public Good

The Twin Cities Innovation Alliance mobilizes organizers, educators, parents, students, artists, and attorneys around digital justice and data privacy.

3 WHAT POWERFUL ALLIANCES HAVE IN COMMON

01

BRING SKILLS TOGETHER

They combine the multiple capacities, lived experience, and visions of organizers and community members—nobody alone.

02

BRIDGE THE ISSUES

They connect siloed campaigns—health, education, youth justice—building trust and shared vision across them.

03

SCALE LOCAL WISDOM

They scale grassroots solutions so local visions converge with statewide and national agendas for safety and equity.

HOW FUNDERS, ALLIES & SYSTEM LEADERS CAN HELP

FUND THE LONG HAUL

Patient, multi-year operational funding—not just 1- or 2-year campaign metrics.

RESOURCE CONVENINGS

Food, space, travel, lodging, staff time. Relationships have line items.

INVEST IN IMPLEMENTATION

Wins need protection. Fund the work that turns policy into reality.

CONVENE ACROSS SECTORS

Bring organizers, philanthropy & government into shared rooms to learn, not just transact.

(See Figure 4 for details)



Funder Roadmap

How can funders embrace approaches to grantmaking that support community agency, co-governance models, and system transformation?

1

ASSESS THE TERRAIN.

- ☐ Listen to organizers and communities about the ecosystems in which they operate—including historical/current funding patterns, political conditions, arenas of change, and capacities for change.
- ☐ Audit internal patterns of giving, support, and impact. Who is being funded? For how long? On what terms? Who is being left out?
- ☐ Examine regional funding patterns, and prioritize areas that have been historically underfunded.

2

FUND TRANSFORMATIONAL CONDITIONS, NOT JUST CAMPAIGNS.

- ☐ Commit to multi-year funding that supports long-term organizing strategy and the work of building a sustained base of leaders developing skills and making decisions.
- ☐ Prioritize flexible, unrestricted funding that supports organizations' ability to tend to communities, navigate crises, and build conditions for system transformation.

Photo Credit: SolDesign Co.



3

SUPPORT BUILDING A CROSS-SECTORAL ECOSYSTEM.

- ☐ Invest in trainings and fellowship opportunities that strengthen organizers' leadership, capacity, and skills to partner effectively with policy, advocacy, research, system leaders, healers, artists, cultural workers and narrative producers.
- ☐ Act as dot connectors, making strategic introductions and sharing relational capital, and offering access to institutional resources that support conditions for greater collective power.
- ☐ Invest in convenings that allow changemakers to build trust, strategy, alignment, narratives, and the power to win.
- ☐ Fund the cross-sectoral relationships and established partnerships—e.g. health clinics and community-based health workers, legal practitioners, researchers, and direct service providers—that make greater community care possible.

4

PROTECT HARD-WON PROGRESS.

- ☐ Invest in more than policy wins. Policy-changing campaigns require support to reach full-scale implementation and withstand predictable backlash
- ☐ Reorient to organizing “losses” and the strategic wisdom within them as progress towards building long-term power.
- ☐ Recognize that protecting wins is essential to long-term power building, and ensure that base building organizers are sustainably resourced as accountability stewards of any effort.

5

EMBRACE A FULLER DEFINITION OF IMPACT.

- ☐ Adopt flexible reporting practices that minimize grantee partners' time talking about their work and maximize their time doing it.
- ☐ Embrace broader sets of qualitative and quantitative data that reflect the catalytic nature of organizing and the investment it makes in people, communities, and public serving systems.



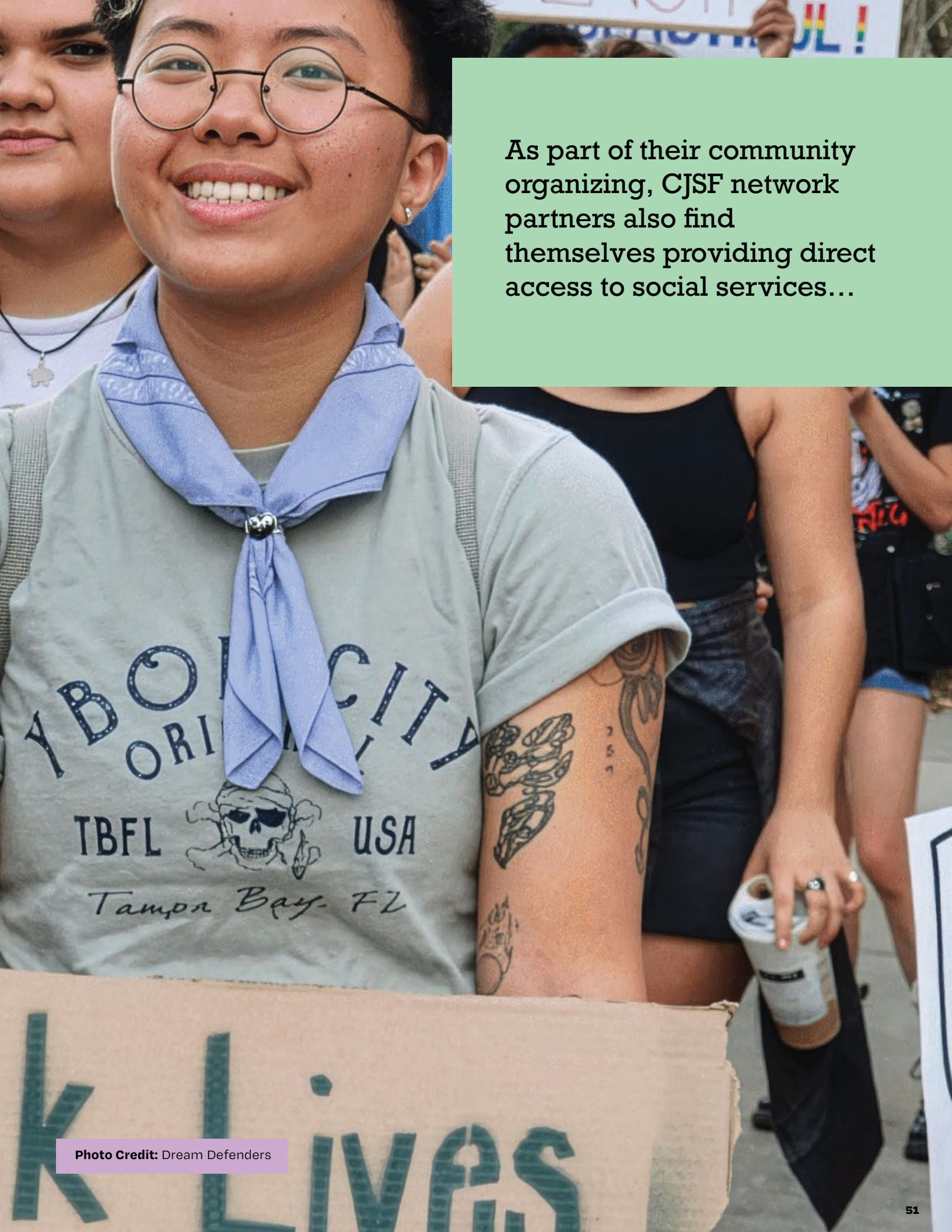
Some Key Takeaways From The Previous Two Sections

Community organizers are building power among youth and adults in the communities they serve. Building power from the ground up includes intersectional, intergenerational, and intentional programming that community organizers use to equip others with civic skills, including how to engage effectively with political and city bureaucracy.

Community organizers work strategically across sectors at the city, county, state and national level. Community organizers value collaborations across sectors and among other community organizations. Community organizers hold local expertise and have built trusting relationships with the community. CJSF network partners strategically use coalitions and alliances to elect new representatives, reshape education, shape policy, and effectively care for their community members. Moreover, community organizers establish accountability and clearer communication with elected officials and government agencies.



Photo Credit: Teaching for Change



As part of their community organizing, CJSF network partners also find themselves providing direct access to social services...

Photo Credit: Dream Defenders



How Community Organizers Have Become a Community Safety Net

When we invest in community organizing, we are investing in the building of the community safety net. The social safety net traditionally refers to government-funded programs designed to support those in economic hardship, experiencing natural disasters, or disability. This support often comes in financial assistance to individuals and their families to meet their food, housing, healthcare, and other basic needs. Dating back to President Lyndon B. Johnson's "war on poverty," major U.S. safety net programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Yet, studies have shown that our country lacks a widely accessible and supportive social safety net.¹⁹

The Social Safety Net. The country's current social safety net is a work-conditioned one. What that means is that there is currently an emphasis on promoting work, which might be helpful in times of unemployment. Important to note, however, is that not all unemployed workers reap the benefits of the social safety net, including undocumented individuals, those with disabilities, or those with a criminal record. In times of economic downturns or natural disasters, our current social safety net provides uneven and incomplete protection.

Photo Credit: SolDesign Co.





What I appreciate about this space is that we recognize the totality of how our people show up and really struggle—and I mean, struggling that is hard. We are committed to having a vision of what it means to make sure that our solutions get to address the totality of what it means to be Black, queer, trans, experiencing houselessness, and have some type of contact with the criminal legal system. And for all of that to exist in one space, I think it's really beautiful. And we get that from how we think about—how we learn and train around the Black radical tradition. And I think it also enforces us to go deeper with our solutions.

-Erica Perry, Southern Movement Committee

The Community Safety Net. CJSF network partners are filling that gap in the communities they serve. As part of their community organizing, CJSF network partners also find themselves providing direct access to social services or leveraging their resources and networks to support individuals looking for financial support. They provide programming and services that help individuals and families in times of economic hardship and emotional distress. For example, CJSF's network partners lead food bank distributions, provide mutual aid, offer protection to children and youth to and from schools, provide access to care, and in some cases, shelter. As such, community organizers also tend to the personal well-being of the community members they engage, including children, youth, and adults. We describe this critical aspect of community organizing as the community safety net.

Figure 5:



What Community Organizing Groups Provide

 CONNECTION TO SERVICES	 ACADEMIC SUPPORT	 THERAPUTIC SUPPORT	 WORKSHOPS	 FIELD TRIPS
» Legal Support » Jobs » Summer Opportunities » Individual/Family Support Needs and more	» Academic Coaching » Mentoring » Learning Centers and more	» Social Emotional Wellness for Youth and Families » Problem Solving Skills and more	» Know Your Rights » Wellness and Nutrition » Youth Voice in Action » Goal Setting and more	» Sports Events » Ropes Courses » Jazz » Heather Farms » Museums and more

CJSF's network partners recognize that central to building governing power is meeting the needs of the individuals and groups they work with (See Figure 5 for an example of community safety net provided by Coleman Advocates Youth Justice Initiative). As such, the community safety net they have built while attempting to transform systems and change policy includes providing services, care (e.g. child care centers, temporary room and board), and protection that treats people with dignity in moments of crises (e.g. COVID-19, police brutality, housing issues, mental health issues, unequal treatment in schools, traumatic events, and so much more). This community safety net operates separately from government provided social services that have been known to criminalize immigrants, Black families, and others.²⁰ This might not come as a surprise to many given the fact that many community organizations, including the CJSF network partners, are born out of a desire to create safe spaces for children and youth.

Photo Credit: Voyce



- » The RYSE Center in the Bay Area offers robust programming that promotes health and well-being. For example, their “Tune In Tuesday” programming offers an open and safe space for young people to learn various Health and Wellness skills that will increase mindfulness, understanding breath work, and self-care practices to grow our personal thresholds for stress management. Some activities will include, mindful eating, yoga/mindful movements, and sound bowl meditations. Other programming and services include case management (for individuals who have experienced violence) and counseling services.
- » With a strong focus on building power and offering care and defense, Desis Rising Up and Moving in New York City (DRUM NYC), offers legal representation around issues of immigration and labor. In addition, DRUM NYC offers their members monthly legal clinics that provide free advice and casework around deportation proceedings, asylum claims, green-card and citizenship processes, wage claims, wage and hour issues, and employment discrimination. These clinics and services are made possible through cross-sectoral collaborations.
- » Youth Justice Coalition (YJC), a CJSF network partner dedicated to building the power of system-impacted youth and their families, functions as a community safety net hub in South Central Los Angeles. From their F.R.E.E. LA High School to their free legal clinic, YJC has dedicated itself to meeting the most pressing needs of the communities they serve. Other great examples of this include their STREET C.R.E.D Health program, which offers mental and physical health programs, and their Rebel Garden, a green space dedicated to harvesting food for the community. The Rebel Garden is also used as a green space for programming that encourages confidence, self-determination, and well-being among youth.
- » The multiracial, intergenerational, and intersectional 412 Justice organization in Pittsburgh offers a variety of services so that their Black, brown, and disabled communities can thrive. From Know Your Rights Workshops that help parents navigate Individualized Education Programs and 504 plans, to providing free lunch and child care during community organizing training, 412 Justice is equipping community members, including parents and students, with the tools to advocate for their families. Other services and programming they provide include a parent support hotline.



The COVID-19 pandemic and other major events have left a giant hole in what little safety net the US had. During these times of need, however, community organizers have stepped in to provide food, shelter, access to resources, trauma and healing informed programming, and holistic support.²¹ In moments of need, CJSF's network partners have also supported students with disabilities, students whose race, gender, and sexual orientation has made them vulnerable to criminalization and harm, and students whose family members are struggling to survive or are faced with the impacts of incarceration and deportation.

Committing the Community Safety Net. A robust community-driven safety net is another measure of success, and CJSF network partners have become that much needed community safety net. Part of what makes this community safety net a viable source of services and programming is the ethic of care that community organizers follow. Key to the vision of CJSF is supporting community organizers who are developing programming, services, and environments that feel holistically safe, which include approaches that prioritize healing and care over criminalization. Other sectors and practitioners have an opportunity to enhance the capacity of CJSF network partners, and other community organizations, in protecting a community safety net in urban and rural communities. Both short- and long-term capacity building strategies are needed to continue to foster and strengthen the community safety net.



Key to the vision of CJSF is supporting community organizers who are developing programming, services, and environments that feel holistically safe...



The Road Ahead

As CJSF's [2025 annual report](#) states, one of their goals is to activate the “greater power and possibilities for an education justice movement committed to defending the dignity and dreams of all learners.”²² This report highlights how community organizers are building power to enable students, parents, and community members to advance equity and address educational issues. When there is a broad acknowledgement of the shortcomings of current policies and practices—through strategic partnerships, campaigns, or other organizing strategies—equity, safety, and well-being in schools and communities have the potential to become a reality.

Using the lessons learned from CJSF network partners, we concluded with lessons and promising opportunities for cross and intra-sectoral collaboration.

- » ***Cultivate the capacities of community organizers*** that provide the infrastructure and bandwidth needed to foster coalitions, alliances, and relationships at the local, regional, state, and national level. Sustained funding allows community organizers to leverage crucial alliances, materials, and rollout programming and civic training. It also provides the infrastructure for community organizers and policymakers, including the various constituents needed to inform policy, to come together.
- » ***Building and sustaining relationships requires time*** and is critical to developing cross- and intra-sectoral collaborations. It may take many meetings, listening sessions, convenings, and events to build and sustain trust with youth, adults, community organizers, and across sectors. Trust is a powerful tool and key to developing models of co-governance.
- » ***Prioritize long-term movement building, not just immediate policy change.*** Having access to philanthropic organizations with sustained funding can bolster community campaigns, political education, analysis, and visions of holistic safety in schools and local communities that can be replicated elsewhere.

- » ***Developing sustained funding models strengthens the community safety network*** of community organizers in rural and urban communities by bolstering capacities for mutual aid and the governing power necessary for system transformation.
- » ***Philanthropy has an opportunity to be strategic collaborators***, which entails leveraging resources, networks, and existing relationships to orient other agencies and groups to invest and support local, regional, and national community organizations.
- » ***Seeding the existing tools, programming, and visions of community organizers*** are opportunities to scale up and scale out holistic safety and community well-being.
- » ***Policy victories and campaign wins also require sustained investment.*** As we have learned from the CJSF network partners, the implementation of policy changes comes with unique challenges and requires ongoing engagement with elected officials and systems. In some cases, it requires learning new skills and tools to participate in implementation and ensure communities are consulted and included.

But community organizing does not start or end with campaigns, direct action, and civic participation. It also includes strengthening and transforming community safety nets. Informed by theories of change that include love, care, and the abolition of harmful practices and ideologies, CJSF network partners are providing access to resources, care, housing, food, support, and healing. The late bell hooks described “homeplaces” as sites where Black women turned to for “renewal and self-recovery, where [they] can heal [their] wounds and become whole.” Similarly, CJSF network partners function as a sort of homeplace for communities where community organizing is not simply a matter of protest or campaign building, but also about the construction of a safe place, programming, and services that affirms communities and collectively heals the many wounds of inequality.

Photo Credit: Girls for Gender Equity





Resources

CJSF network partners have extensively researched, often in collaborations with other organizations and higher education institutions, the issues impacting their local communities. In addition, they have developed tools to support movement and power building and actively engage the media. Several reports, briefs, and other related resources can be found here:

- » National Black Women's Justice Institute. "Resources."
<https://www.nbwji.org/resources>
- » 412 Justice. "Air Report."
<https://412justice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Air-Mon-Valley-EJ-Report-Final.pdf>
- » 412 Justice. "Water Report."
<https://412justice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Water-Mon-Valley-EJ-Report-Final.pdf>
- » Nonprofit Quarterly. "How to Build Multiracial Democracy at the Local Level."
<https://nonprofitquarterly.org/how-to-build-multiracial-democracy-at-the-local-level/>
- » Advancement Project. "Resource Library."
<https://advancementproject.org/resource-library/?ap-query=&ap-type%5B%5D=67>
- » Partners for Dignity & Rights. "Resources."
https://dignityandrights.org/resources/?_sft_classification=reports
- » Twin Cities Innovation Alliance. "Resource Library."
<https://www.tciamn.org/resource-library>
- » Dream Defenders. "The Freedom Papers."
<https://dreamdefenders.org/the-freedom-papers/>
- » Dignity in Schools. "Building Narrative Power."
<https://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Dignity-in-Schools-Building-Narrative-Power-.pdf>

- » Dignity in Schools. "Check It Out: Pushout Assessment Checklist & Campaign Development Guide."
<https://dignityinschools.org/check-it-out-pushout-assessment-checklist-campaign-development-guide/>
- » GSA Network. "Resource Library."
<https://www.gsanetwork.org/resources>
- » COFI. "Publications."
<https://cofionline.org/news-and-publications/publications/>
- » The Light House | Black Girl Projects. "Black Girl Times."
<https://www.loveblackgirls.org/bgx>
- » The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools. "AROS News."
<https://reclaimourschools.org/news>
- » Communities United. "Our Work."
<https://www.communitiesunited.org/our-work>
- » Coleman Advocates. "Publications."
<https://colemanadvocates.org/publications>
- » Education Justice Alliance. "Too Young to Be Suspended."
<https://ejanc.org/community-report-too-young-to-suspend/>
- » Education Justice Alliance. "Education Justice Toolkit."
<https://ejanc.org/education-justice-toolkit/>
- » Black Organizing Project. "Black Sanctuary, Not Pushout."
<https://blackorganizingproject.org/our-impact>





Endnotes

¹ <https://www.edfunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/All-Education-Funding-by-Education-Level.pdf> ↑

² <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/federal-funding-sources-community-schools-report> ↑

³ For a full overview of the mission and impact of CJSF, please reference their 2025 annual report: <https://www.cjsfund.org/resource/2025-annual-report/> ↑

⁴ <https://dornsife.usc.edu/eri/publications/changing-states-framework-progressive-governance/> ↑

⁵ <https://scholars.org/contribution/how-civic-organizations-can-develop-effective> ↑

⁶ Han, H. (2014). How organizations develop activists: Civic associations and leadership in the 21st century. Oxford University Press. ↑

⁷ Baldridge, B. J. (2019). Reclaiming community: Race and the uncertain future of youth work. Stanford University Press. ↑

⁸ Terriquez, V., & Serrano, U. (2018). A beloved community: Promoting the healing, well-being, and leadership capacities of boys and young men of color. Los Angeles, CA: USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity; Kirshner, B. (2015). Youth activism in an era of education inequality. NYU Press; Serrano, U. (2025). Intersectional Learning: How Black and Latinx Boys Learn About Power and Difference. Youth & Society. ↑

⁹ Lin, M., & Patraporn, R. V. (2023). The invest in youth long beach coalition: Youth of color at the forefront of anti-racist governance and planning. Journal of the American Planning Association, 89(4), 540-553; ↑

¹⁰ <https://dornsife.usc.edu/eri/publications/bhc-youth-leadership-organizing/> ↑

¹¹ Salas Pujols, J. (2022). 'It's about the way I'm treated': Afro-Latina Black identity development in the third space. Youth & Society, 54(4), 593-610. ↑

¹² Terriquez, Veronica. 2026. Learning to Lead: Youth Organizing in Immigrant Communities. Russell Sage Foundation. ↑

¹³ Youth Justice Coalition. 2012. "Tracked and Trapped: Youth of Color, Gang Databases, and Gang Injunctions in Los Angeles." Youth Justice Coalition's REALSearch Action Research Center, Inglewood, CA; Sojoyner, D. M. (2022). Joy and pain: A story of black life and liberation in five albums. University of California Press; Turner III, D. C. (2024). "To Me, it Kind of Felt Normal"-Defining the Normalcy of Carcerality with Black Men, Boys, and Youth Workers. Journal of Community Practice, 32(4), 557-578; Felker-Kantor, M. (2018). Policing Los Angeles: Race, resistance, and the rise of the LAPD. UNC Press Books ↑



Photo Credit: SolDesign Co.

¹⁴ This is not an exhaustive list and includes programs facilitated and created by network partners that participated in the interviews conducted in 2025. [↑](#)

¹⁵ <https://www.cjsfund.org/resource/2025-annual-report/> [↑](#)

¹⁶ <https://www.gsannetwork.org/resource-library/coalition-building> [↑](#)

¹⁷ <https://www.raceforward.org/reports/governing-racial-equity/co-governing-toward-multiracial-democracy> [↑](#)

¹⁸ Johnson, D.W. (2026). Co-designing new approaches to school safety: District and community perspectives on Chicago's Whole School Safety Framework. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. [↑](#)

¹⁹ Calarco, J. (2024). Holding it together: How women became America's safety net. Penguin. [↑](#)

²⁰ Gustafson, K. (2008). The criminalization of poverty. *J. Crim. I. & CrimiNoloGy*, 99, 643; Harvey, B., Gupta-Kagan, J., & Church, C. (2021). Reimagining Schools' Role Outside the Family Regulation System. *Colum. J. Race & L.*, 11, 575; Gillespie Ph D, M. D. (2012). The Criminalization of Welfare: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Social Control for the Crime of Poverty. *Dimensions of Crime as a Social Problem*, 75; [↑](#)

²¹ https://www.nbwji.org/_files/ugd/Oc71ee_b5ccbd10a48f472181484a21ec6231d3.pdf [↑](#)

²² <https://www.cjsfund.org/resource/2025-annual-report/> [↑](#)



Roadmaps to Power

How Education Justice Organizers are Building Co-Governing Power, Affecting Community Safety Nets, and Transforming Systems.

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