



CASE STUDY

The Center for Popular Democracy's Education Justice Campaign

Can a national network, with leaders and members based in low-income communities of color, build a coalition that bridges the interests of young people, parents, and teachers' unions? Can a coalition hold together when its goal becomes politically risky?

Dmitri Holtzman
Ben Kirshner
Tafadzwa Tivaringe

December 2020



JOHNS HOPKINS
STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION
SNF AGORA INSTITUTE

SNF Agora Case Studies

The SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University offers a series of case studies that show how civic and political actors navigated real-life challenges related to democracy. Practitioners, teachers, organizational leaders, and trainers working with civic and political leaders, students, and trainees can use our case studies to deepen their skills, to develop insights about how to approach strategic choices and dilemmas, and to get to know each other better and work more effectively.

How to Use the Case

Unlike many case studies, ours do not focus on individual leaders or other decision-makers. Instead, the SNF Agora case studies are about choices that groups make collectively. Therefore, these cases work well as prompts for group discussions. The basic question in each case is: “What would we do?”

After reading a case, some groups role-play the people who were actually involved in the situation, treating the discussion as a simulation. In other groups, the participants speak as themselves, discussing the strategies that they would advocate for the group described in the case. The person who assigns or organizes your discussion may want you to use the case in one of those ways.

When studying and discussing the choices made by real-life decision-makers (often under intense pressure), it is appropriate to exhibit some humility. You do not know as much about their communities and circumstances as they did, and you do not face the same risks. If you had the opportunity to meet these individuals, it might not be your place to give them advice. We are not asking you to second-guess their actual decisions as if you were wiser than they were.

However, you can exhibit appropriate respect for these decision-makers while also thinking hard about the possible choices that they could have made, weighing the pros and cons of each option, and seriously considering whether they made the best choices or should have acted differently. That is a powerful way of learning from their experience. Often the people described in our cases had reflected on previous examples, just as you can do by thinking about their situation.

This case study is appropriate for:

- College students
- Community and youth organizers
- Civil society leaders

Keywords: base-building, campaigns, community schools, education privatization and market-based reforms, school-to-prison pipeline, social movements, youth organizing

Copyright Johns Hopkins University 2020. This case study is provided to the public for academic and educational use only, and may not be used as part of commercial activity. Johns Hopkins University hereby disclaims any and all representations and warranties regarding the case study, including accuracy, non-infringement of third party intellectual property rights, and fitness for use.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1** Introduction
- 2** Learning Objectives for this Case Study
- 2** Case Narrative
 - 2 The Center for Popular Democracy: A National Network of Organizers
 - 3 The Education Justice Campaigns Program and Community Schools Action Plan
 - 4 A Turning Point
 - 5 CPD Youth Organize
- 7** What Would You Do?
- 8** How It Turned Out
- 9** Notes
- 10** Teacher's Guide

About the Authors

Dmitri Holtzman is the director of Education Justice Campaigns at the Center for Popular Democracy (CPD). Before joining CPD, he was the founding executive director of the Equal Education Law Centre (EELC) in South Africa and a former organizer with the youth-led social movement Equal Education (EE). Holtzman is an adjunct lecturer in law at the University of Columbia Law School. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Cape Town and a Bachelor of Laws from the University of the Western Cape.

Ben Kirshner is a professor of learning sciences and human development at the University of Colorado Boulder. In his work with the Research Hub for Youth Organizing, he co-designs educational tools and research studies in partnership with youth organizing groups and networks that build young people's capacity and power. With the Critical Civic Inquiry research group he co-develops research-practice partnerships that increase the capacity of public schools to support justice-centered student voice and action civics.

Tafadzwa Tivaringe is a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder and a graduate researcher for the Research Hub for Youth Organizing. He leads research projects with community partners, such as Equal Education in South Africa and the Center for Popular Democracy in the U.S., that are geared toward creating equitable education systems.

Introduction

THIS CASE STUDY EXPLORES dilemmas that arise for a network aiming to **build a multigenerational movement for education justice.** How can a national network, with leaders and members based in low-income communities of color, build a coalition that bridges the interests of young people, parents, and teachers' unions? Should movements like this prioritize the interests of young people even if doing so is politically risky?

We explore one aspect of this dilemma through the story of the Center for Popular Democracy (CPD) and the evolution of its Education Justice Campaigns program.

The Education Justice Campaigns program started with the goal of promoting “community schools” across the country. The community schools model uses culturally responsive curricula and gives a strong voice to students and parents instead of relying on standardized curricula, tests, and punitive discipline.¹ The community schools movement positions a school as an integral part of community cohesion and development rather than merely an institution of academic learning.² This model had the support of parent organizers, teachers' unions, researchers, and philanthropy.

However, CPD organizers saw that many of the young people of color in their network were not inspired by that effort. Instead, they wanted, first and foremost, to end the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Wald and Losen explain that the “pipeline” metaphor describes:

a journey through school that becomes increasingly punitive and isolating for its travelers. Many will be taught by unqualified teachers, tested on material they never reviewed, held back in grade, placed in restrictive special education programs, repeatedly suspended, and banished to alternative outplacements before dropping or getting pushed out of school altogether. Without a safety net, the likelihood that these same youths will wind up arrested and incarcerated increases sharply.³

Young people and their families who interacted with CPD organizers were calling for a direct campaign to end this school-to-prison pipeline. Such an effort would require changing policies in criminal justice, education, and perhaps other areas of policy, affecting all students and not just those enrolled in community schools.

Shifting to that type of campaign posed strategic risks for CPD, a network committed and accountable to its grassroots membership, which includes young people. Would it lead to a powerful and cohesive membership-driven campaign, or would it lead to fragmentation and, ultimately, less power? In particular, would it be possible to build a campaign anchored to the everyday experiences and aspirations of youth of color, while still holding on to alliances with national teachers' unions, major funders, and other adult stakeholders?

This case summarizes the history leading up to this key decision and shares information that underscores the complexity of the dilemma. Readers will be asked to weigh the various considerations and decide together which campaign strategy they would adopt.

Learning Objectives for this Case Study

By the end of this case study, you should be able to:

1. Gain an understanding of the organizational dynamics that exist in broad-based, multigenerational advocacy campaigns.
2. See one way in which new goals are identified and elevated to leadership within social movements.
3. Gain an appreciation for the role of youth voices in shaping the direction of social movements.
4. Learn about the complex role of philanthropy in organizing campaigns.
5. Analyze and discuss the tradeoffs that confront many organizations and campaigns when they decide that a more radical goal is warranted but know they could lose some support if they adopt it.

Case Narrative

The Center for Popular Democracy: A National Network of Organizers

The Center for Popular Democracy, founded in 2012, is a national network of 53 affiliated grassroots community organizations spanning 131 cities in 34 states and Puerto Rico. The network is dedicated to

The network is dedicated to building a country that embodies CPD's vision of an inclusive, equitable society, where diverse communities thrive.

building a country that embodies CPD's vision of an inclusive, equitable society, where diverse communities thrive together, supported by a resilient economy and political institutions that reflect their priorities. CPD serves grassroots organizations with membership from communities of color, working-class communities, immigrants, the LGBTQIA+ community, people of all genders, all ages, all abilities, in primarily English- and Spanish-speaking communities. (Seventy percent of CPD affiliates are led by people of color and 70

percent are led by women.) The organization works to understand the root causes of the challenges facing these diverse constituents, to build consensus around transformative solutions, and to create sustained work plans to accomplish shared goals and change policy.

As an organization and network, CPD is committed to ensuring that its strategic priorities are set by its affiliate groups: Its boards include, and are chaired by, executive directors of network affiliates. Affiliates help set CPD's strategic vision and federal advocacy agenda, and they comprise issue-specific cohorts that focus on topics such as immigrant justice or education justice. Because affiliate groups work directly with and in communities, their voice in CPD's work helps to advance the interests of marginalized communities and ensures leadership from those most affected by issues of inequality and structural racism.

For its part, CPD provides resources and amplifies the power of affiliate groups. For example, CPD provides technical and strategic assistance to local campaigns led by affiliates and connects them to national coalitions. CPD’s base-building team also helps affiliates grow their membership and support base to build grassroots power.

Overall, CPD supports six campaign programs. This case study focuses on the evolution of one program—Education Justice Campaigns—from 2014 to its arrival at a turning point in 2017.

The Education Justice Campaigns Program and Community Schools Action Plan

Beginning in 2014, the Education Justice Campaigns (EJC) program developed a substantial national project to address systemic challenges in the U.S. public education system brought about by the divestment from and privatization of public schools. The goal of this program was to reclaim the mantle of “education reform” by lifting up community schools as the strategy to achieve sustainable and equitable outcomes for children in school districts that have been disproportionately impacted by disinvestment. The community schools platform forwarded a transformative and visionary demand to strengthen neighborhood public schools and counter efforts to privatize schools through charters and voucher programs. CPD’s goal—described in its Community Schools Action Plan⁴—was to establish new community schools in all CPD communities, which was at that time 28 states.

The community schools model was not new; there had already been community school initiatives throughout the United States, and these had begun to spread over the previous 20 years. CPD sought to inject a new and powerful force behind this model by engaging its affiliates in local and statewide campaigns for community schools—to put the force of grassroots organizing and national alliances behind this vision for public education. Affiliate organizations, with the support of CPD, developed campaigns that called for public hearings, promoted model legislation, educated parents and community leaders, developed leaders, convened town halls, developed broad coalitions, and partnered with organizations successfully implementing community schools.

At the national office, CPD produced research reports and online toolkits to provide education coalitions with resources to start community schools in their cities and states. CPD also helped establish the Community Schools Institute, where school administrators, education justice organizers, school board members, and other stakeholders were trained on the community schools model. Perhaps most important for its efforts to build political power, CPD and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), one of the main national teachers’ unions, co-founded the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), consisting of national education justice community organizations and the two

CPD sought to put the force of grassroots organizing and national alliances behind this vision for public education.

largest teachers' unions—the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA). This became an important vehicle through which the Community Schools Action Plan became popularized in the national education justice sector. CPD's Community Schools Action Plan received significant financial support from private philanthropy and the National Education Association during the first few years of its implementation.

A Turning Point

In 2017, the director of CPD's Education Justice Campaigns program left the organization to take a position with the NEA to continue working on building the community schools strategy from within the national union. He was replaced at CPD by a new director (a co-author of this case study), who came with a strong background in youth organizing for education justice. The new director launched an assessment of the community schools strategy in consultation with the Education Justice Campaigns team, other leadership within CPD, and affiliates who had been involved in the Community Schools Action Plan. They identified the plan's successes and limitations.

Successes

The Community Schools Action Plan had provided a new energy behind a transformative vision for public education and a national rallying point around the community schools model. One of the core goals of this action plan was to counter media narratives about the supposed failure of public

Although challenging to measure, during this period CPD had observed a positive shift in polls regarding attitudes toward public schools.

schools and public education. Although challenging to measure, during this period CPD had observed a positive shift in polls regarding attitudes toward public schools. It had also helped develop and deepen relationships between two sectors that are sometimes at odds: education justice organizers and teachers' unions. Specifically, it had deepened alignment between CPD and the teachers' unions at the national level, and local campaigns for community schools had enabled CPD affiliates and teachers' union locals to

collaborate. These alliances had helped to win the expansion of community schools in a number of places, including New York City.

The community schools model was moving public education in a promising direction—one that values local democratic participation, holistic approaches to children's learning and development, teacher leadership, and culturally responsive approaches to teaching. There is a widespread consensus among progressive political groups and education researchers that community schools offer the most promising, evidence-based way forward for public schools, one that encourages innovation and creativity while sustaining neighborhood cohesion and community participation.⁵

Limits and Challenges

Despite its importance as an education justice strategy and the successes of the campaign, CPD campaign staff also saw gaps in the program. Although the CPD campaigns for community schools were favored by key members of the education justice sector, including teachers' unions, philanthropy, and some affiliates, they had lacked robust participation from a critical CPD constituency: young people. For this reason, this campaign strategy appeared to fall short of the CPD's commitment to ensure that its priorities are shaped by affected affiliates. Further, in assessing the rest of the youth organizing sector in the country, and in the education justice movement in particular, the new director learned that youth organizers and youth-led campaigns for education justice were focused on a related but distinct goal: ending the school-to-prison pipeline. These issues are related because the community schools model has as one of its core pillars a rejection of punitive school discipline policies and adoption of restorative justice as part of its approach to school discipline. But they were distinct in terms of addressing core priorities facing youth and the kinds of policy changes they sought. It was unclear how exciting or compelling the community schools goals were for CPD's youth affiliates.

The new director learned that youth organizers and youth-led campaigns for education justice were focused on ending the school-to-prison pipeline.

A second, related concern was that philanthropy appeared to have been playing an outsized role in shaping the work of affiliates. Education justice organizing, as distinct from advocacy, calls for long-term relationship-building with constituents and democratic decision-making by members; funding for this kind of work had been consistently diminishing. In some instances, campaigns had been adopted because of the incentive created by the availability of funding. With the prompting of CPD, affiliates were often placed in coalition partnerships with local teachers' unions. Although in some places these collaborations had worked, in others they had not been able to overcome longstanding tensions between local teachers' unions and community organizing groups.

Further, community schools campaigns had not been easy to win. They would often take at least two years to win policy that would establish new community schools. It would then often take additional years of campaigning to get policymakers to allocate sufficient funding for operating those schools.

CPD Youth Organize

In the summer of 2017, CPD had held its first national convening of youth members from the network. This was in response to a call from some youth members (at the affiliates level) the year before that they had felt left out of other network gatherings, specifically that there had not been dedicated space created for youth members. At this first gathering, youth organizers and

youth members from a dozen CPD affiliates came together for a weekend of relationship building, base-building training, and discussion around their roles in the broader CPD network. They identified the two most important issues facing them—the school-to-prison pipeline and immigration

Although the call from young people provided a compelling reason for CPD to shift strategy, such a shift would not come without risk or threats.

justice—and asked for a commitment from CPD to support a national youth network to connect with each other across different geographies.

Although the call from young people provided a compelling reason for CPD to shift strategy, such a shift would not come without risks or threats. The first and most clear risk was around questions of funding, a key resource to any sustainable campaign-building and organizing work.

As mentioned above, diminishing funding for education justice organizing created ongoing stresses for affiliates. Moreover, there had already been a serious lack of funding for youth organizing to end the school-to-prison pipeline—most of which was only being allocated directly to local youth groups. It seemed unlikely that there would be ample funding for youth organizing work to end the school-to-prison pipeline, especially for a big organization like CPD (with an already big budget) in a severely underfunded field.

Second, it quickly became clear that a shift in focus from community schools to ending the school-to-prison pipeline could create challenges for the relationship between CPD and the national teachers' unions. Teachers' unions have historically not been friendly toward, or aligned with, youth-led organizations or calls to end the school-to-prison pipeline.ⁱ Yet the unions had been close partners of CPD, and indeed significant funders of the Education Justice Campaigns program for community schools.

Third, CPD campaign staff were mindful that other organizations had already been organizing effectively to end the school-to-prison pipeline. In a scarcely funded field, where CPD was already a big and still growing organization, such a move was likely to be seen by many of those organizations as a threat to their role and funding and would thus create challenges in building relationships and alliances with those groups.

i. The reasons for these historic tensions are complex and vary based on region and union. But broadly speaking, in some cases, teachers' unions have been aligned with the police unions and/or zero tolerance policies for complex reasons, including racism among some members. In other cases, teachers' unions have felt attacked or criticized by youth organizers and have been reluctant to see them as partners in education change. These patterns, however, have been changing in the past five to 10 years. (See Mark Warren, "Transforming Public Education: The Need for an Educational Justice Movement," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 26, no.1, <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol26/iss1/11>.)

What Would You Do?

CPD faced a decision. It could continue to build on its relationships and achievements related to community schools, or it could pivot to a new strategy that was centered on the experiences and aspirations of its young members and base.

Consider the following questions as you discuss this case:

- Do you think it is a good idea for the leadership of CPD's Education Justice Campaigns program to shift the core focus of its campaign strategy to ending the school-to-prison pipeline, and why?
- If you *decided not to shift* the focus of the program vision and goals, what would your next steps be as part of the new leadership team? How would you deal with the calls made by the youth organizers and members during the national youth retreat?
- If you *decided to shift* the focus of the program to include building a new youth organizing program aimed at supporting youth-led campaigns to end the school-to-prison pipeline, what would your next steps be? What would be the key considerations in making this shift, understanding the challenges and dilemmas outlined above? What might you do to try to sustain the coalition you developed with other organizations through the community schools campaigns?

How it Turned Out

After weighing the pros and cons of the issue, the CPD EJC team decided to shift its central focus to working with youth organizers to end the school-to-prison pipeline. The EJC team had already (since 2016) been supporting the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) in New York, in its fight to dismantle the NYC school-to-prison pipeline. It also began supporting a new youth organizing group (Leaders Igniting Transformation, or LIT) in Milwaukee to do the same. Over the next two years, the EJC team continued expanding its support to youth organizing affiliates in Detroit, Pittsburgh, and eventually also to Oregon, Nevada, Florida, and New Jersey.

This was not just a shift in campaigns but also a decision to invest in supporting a new national network of youth organizing affiliates who would support each other, develop shared policy platforms, and engage in collective learning about core organizing strategies such as base-building and political education. The move fundamentally represents a focus on long-term movement building rooted in relational organizing and base-building. This new network, called Youth Everywhere Rising and Resisting (YERR), consists of 15 youth organizing groups in the CPD network and from across the country. YERR has held annual national in-person convenings (including one of more than 200 youth members in 2019) but since COVID-19 has been doing its work virtually. Most recently, YERR developed a “Youth Mandate for Presidential Candidates: Permanently Dismantle the School-to-prison-and-deportation Pipeline”⁶ in coalition with other youth organizing groups and networks. The Youth Mandate was endorsed by more than 160 youth organizing groups and allies across the country, including teachers’ unions, and was used to push candidates in the presidential primaries to commit to its policy demands. Mindful of the work that non-affiliated youth organizing groups have been doing to end the school-to-prison pipeline, CPD has acted with intention to build coalitions, work collaboratively, and not fight over scarce funding, all while trying to expand the resources that go into this work.

With regard to the push for community schools, CPD continues to support that work and sees strong alignment between community schools principles and approaches to discipline and school climate championed by youth organizers. Community schools are designed to be spaces that rely on practices such as developmental discipline, restorative justice, and community mentors to replace carceral approaches to school safety. So there is room for strengthening connections between youth organizers and adult-led organizations that join the police-free schools agenda and community schools.

But, for now, the urgent priority of affiliate groups has been to pressure local governments to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, a movement that gained new urgency during the racial reckoning of 2020, when the push to shift resources away from police and toward social services

There is room for strengthening connections between youth organizers and adult-led organizations that join the police-free schools agenda.

gained popular support in actions across the country in the wake of the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. CPD affiliates are now working on police-free-schools campaigns in multiple cities and arguing for an investment of those funds in policies that promote development and learning, including counselors, social workers, and restorative justice programs.

At the same time, in partnership with other national community organizing groups and teachers' unions, CPD still supports the push for more community schools at the local, state, and federal level. The initial shift in the CPD EJC meant that it no longer worked as closely with the NEA, and it did initially suffer a loss of funding, but it nonetheless maintained good relationships with the teachers' unions. Since the largest uprising and movement in the history of the United States erupted in the summer of 2020 (which was specifically demanding police-free schools and defunding the police) the tides have begun shifting—both in philanthropy and with the teachers' unions—toward increased funding and support for ending the school-to-prison pipeline. As such, there are likely further opportunities ahead to create new forms of alignment between the youth-led calls for police-free schools and the plan to expand community schools.

Notes

- ¹ Kyle Serrette, Marty Blank, and Kent McGuire, *Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools* (The Center for Popular Democracy, The Coalition for Community Schools, and the Southern Education Foundation, 2016), <https://populardemocracy.org/news/publications/community-schools-transforming-struggling-schools-thriving-schools>.
- ² Anna Maier, Julia Daniel, Jeannie Oakes, and Livia Lam, *Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2017).
- ³ Johanna Wald and Daniel J. Losen, "Defining and Redirecting a School-to-Prison Pipeline." *New Directions for Youth Development* 2003, no. 99 (2003): 9-15.
- ⁴ Serrette, Blank, and McGuire, *Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools*.
- ⁵ Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, "Executive Summary," *A Broader, Bolder Education Policy Framework* (2016), https://www.boldapproach.org/app/uploads/2016/02/bba_statement_bulletpoints_final.pdf; Milbrey McLaughlin, Kendra Fehrer, and Jacob Leos-Urbel, *The Way We Do School* (Harvard Education Press, 2020); Jeannie Oakes, Anna Maier, and Julia Daniel, *Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement* (Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 2017), <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/equitable-community-schools>.
- ⁶ See <https://cpd.shorthandstories.com/youth-demand/index.html> for information about the Youth Mandate.

Teacher's Guide

This case is intended for community organizers and/or college students who are interested in digging into dilemmas that emerge when building a national movement.

Key terms include:

- Youth organizing
- Base-building
- Social movements
- Education privatization and market-based reforms
- School-to-prison pipeline
- Community schools

General dilemmas raised:

- How should organizing groups balance the priority of being in coalition with established organizations with the priority of being responsive to their base?
- How should movement leaders balance funding considerations, including alignment with big philanthropy, with being responsive to their base?

Specific youth organizing dilemmas raised:

- How can youth organizers stay accountable to the generational interests of minoritized youth while leveraging power that comes from national coalitions?
- How do you create systems of organizational decision-making that ensure members are shaping political strategy, while at the same time remain nimble enough to participate in coalitions?

For background reading on youth organizing, and its emergence in the US, consider:

- Jerusha Conner and Sonia M. Rosen, eds, *Contemporary Youth Activism: Advancing Social Justice in the United States* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016), especially the chapter by Eric Braxton providing a recent history of youth organizing.
- Ben Kirshner and Shawn Ginwright, "Youth Organizing as a Developmental Context for Latino and African American Youth," *Child Development Perspectives* 6, no 3 (2012): 288-294.
- Veronica Terriquez, "Training Young Activists: Grassroots Organizing and Youths' Civic and Political Trajectories," *Sociological Perspectives* 58, no. 2 (2015): 223-242, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121414556473>.

For background reading on youth organizing to end the school-to-prison pipeline:

- Jesica Siham Fernández, Ben Kirshner, and Deana G. Lewis, "Strategies for Systemic Change: Youth Community Organizing to Disrupt the School-to-Prison Nexus," in *Contemporary Youth Activism: Advancing Social Justice in the United States*, eds. Jerusha Conner and Sonia M. Rosen (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016), 93-112.

- Mark R. Warren and David Goodman, eds., *Lift Us Up, Don't Push Us Out! Voices from the Front Lines of the Educational Justice Movement* (Beacon Press, 2018).

For background reading on the risks associated with the “non-profit industrial complex,” consider:

Chapters from Soo Ah Kwon’s *Uncivil Youth* or INCITE’s *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*:

- Soo Ah Kwon, *Uncivil Youth: Race, Activism, and Affirmative Governmentality* (Duke University Press, 2013), <https://www.dukeupress.edu/uncivil-youth>.
- INCITE: Women of Color Against Violence, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (Duke University Press, 2017).