



Taking Stock: Lessons From Labor-Community Coalitions in the Fight For Educational Justice

A Joint Project of Midwest Academy, National Education Association, and the LIFT Fund

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Executive Summary

Since the November 2024 election, the fight for educational justice has assumed a new urgency and intensity. Efforts to expand school privatization, deport millions of undocumented immigrants, and rollback protections for LGBTQ students are anticipated to increase. The most vulnerable students and communities that our public schools serve will be the target of continued attacks and are at risk of being left behind. Our ability to defend our rights and fight for justice in this moment is dependent on our ability to create communities that support and fight for one another. The necessary battles for engagement will be on our doorsteps, at the local level – fighting for our students, our schools, and our communities.

In order to generate the power needed to rise to the occasion, labor unions and community organizations will need to come together in partnership. The union movement is one of the few forces capable of mobilizing working families en masse to prevent the US from succumbing to MAGA authoritarianism. Education unions are uniquely positioned because they already have a workplace presence in most neighborhoods across the country. Organized communities have ears to the ground on how to build power at the local level and mobilize communities across different

neighborhoods. Together they can build power to not only protect, but to strengthen our democracy for future generations.

Midwest Academy, National Education Association, and The LIFT Fund have been acutely aware of the threats to our democracy and the need to ignite more labor-community partnerships and initiatives to fight back. With that in mind, we reviewed and synthesized lessons from the past 10-15 years of educational justice work that included coalitions of education unions along with grassroots community organizations. There are a variety of distinctions between community organizations and unions which can present a challenge in coalition spaces if not recognized or discussed. If understood, however, the differences overall are exactly where-in the power of a coalition lies. Coalitions find success when they use and learn from varying approaches, acknowledge the multiple sources of power, and understand how they can be used to build their collective strength.

At this moment, there is clear consensus regarding the need to form working class, multi-racial coalitions to build the power necessary to advance a progressive agenda. We confirmed what many organizing practitioners have experienced on the ground – that successful labor-community coalition work includes the following key elements:

- Committed leadership that dedicates resources, time, and energy into building authentic relationships with member organizations to make partnerships work.
- Shared vision and power analysis among partners that is grounded in racial, social, and economic justice.
- Strategic campaign work that focuses on common issues, and shared values and ideas.
- Disciplined practice of base building and commitment to ongoing organizing.
- Shared coalition power and joint strategic planning that recognizes and builds on each organization's strengths and sources of power.
- Clear coalition structure, decision making processes, and expectations of each coalition member.
- Coalition coordinators and bridge builders that can bring partners together and help them navigate their coordinated efforts.
- Most importantly, long-term and dedicated funding to help all partners build deep levels of capacity that are needed to win.

In order to achieve these elements, organizations need the resources to build greater capacity and organizing discipline. Therefore, based on our in-depth analysis and the urgent need to expand on this work, we offer the following recommendations to develop, strengthen, and sustain future coalition work in the fight for justice.

- **Long-term, Flexible Funding from the Philanthropic Community:** Unrestricted, multi-year grantmaking to community organizations and coalitions that are ready to work with labor, so that organizers on the ground can move quickly.

- **A Renewed Commitment by Labor to Organizing with the Community:** From 2012-2016, the Service Employee International Union made a bold decision to invest tens of millions of dollars in the “Fight For 15” campaign and as a result won \$150 billion in raises for 26 million workers. The moment we are in, calls for similarly bold and large investments into organizing from labor unions. Large national and state unions can provide crucial funding through unrestricted, multi-year funding for local labor-community coalitions.
- **Movement Building Center:** Establish a Movement Building Center that brings labor and community organizations together and offers the following types of training and support to organizations, with the goal of joining UAW’s call for a general strike and large scale actions in May 2028:
 - **Coalition development:** Guidance to emerging coalitions on implementing key coalition elements and recommendations for setting up positive coalition dynamics.
 - **Organizing training:** Helping organizers on the ground develop quality organizing skills and practices needed to combat misinformation and apathy.
 - **Political education:** Inspiring and helping organizations in coalition bring their memberships together to engage in political education and learn from one another.
 - **Conflict resolution and restorative justice practices:** Supporting groups to build strong, trusting, inter-organizational relationships.
 - **Mentorship network:** Teaching new labor and community leaders who are transforming their unions and organizations to take on the tough challenges in front of us.
 - **Research and communications:** Support for coalitions running strategic campaigns.

If labor unions and community organizations come together in struggle, they will emerge as a powerful force that can take on bigger, larger scale battles to reclaim the promise of our country to create a more just and equitable society. Together we can support the revitalization of our labor movement and community organizing culture. Building the power we need to reverse the trend of continued growth of economic inequalities and meet the needs of working class people. Most importantly, we can provide a renewed sense of community and hope for generations to come.

About

This report was a collaborative effort of Midwest Academy, National Education Association, and The LIFT Fund.

Midwest Academy

The Midwest Academy is one of the nation's premier training institutes for organizers committed to the struggle for racial, economic and social justice. The Academy has played an important role in preparing several generations of organizers over the last 50 years, many of whom are now in leadership positions in community and labor organizations. Our training focuses on key organizing skills, including base-building, leadership development and strategic campaigns, as well as the importance of organizers developing a political vision for the world they are hoping to help create and strategies to lead a balanced life and avoid burnout. Our work is intended to support the development of self-determined, democratically governed organizations that win real improvements in people's lives and help build the broader movement for justice.

National Education Association

The National Education Association (NEA) is more than 3 million people—educators, students, activists, workers, parents, neighbors, friends—who believe in opportunity for all students and in the power of public education to transform lives and create a more just and inclusive society.

The LIFT Fund

The LIFT Fund connects labor unions and philanthropy to coordinate resources, strategies and funding that support worker organizing and power building. We provide wraparound support, multi-year funding and a low-barrier approach for grantees. We center Black and Brown workers because they are leading powerful, innovative movement building that will raise standards for everyone and transform our economy and democracy. The LIFT Fund has invested more than \$20 million in operating support grants to nonprofits, worker centers and other worker organizations across the country, mostly in the South. By 2034, we will invest more than \$50 million into worker movement building. We invest in people and organizations on the frontlines of building worker power because their collective action can create a world where we all thrive together.





Acknowledgements

We like to express our appreciation to the many individuals who were interviewed and contributed their time and expertise to the development of this report. A full list of participants can be found on page 54.

Thank you to the Hewlett Foundation for their support and funding for this report.

Eric Zachary from Midwest Academy, Kyle Serrette from the National Education Association, and Jennifer Epps from The LIFT Fund conceived of this project and contributed invaluable insight into the final document. Thank you to Leah Lindeman who conducted the interviews and research and crafted the report. Leah has been a union organizer for over twenty years, including twelve years with the St. Paul Federation of Educators.

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Preface

Since the November 2024 election, the fight for educational justice has assumed a new urgency and intensity. Efforts to expand school privatization, deport millions of undocumented immigrants, and rollback protections for LGBTQ students are anticipated to increase. The most vulnerable students and communities that our public schools serve will be the target of continued attacks and are at risk of being left behind. Our ability to defend our rights and fight for justice in this moment is dependent on our ability to create communities that support and fight for one another. The necessary battles for engagement will be on our doorsteps, at the local level – fighting for our students, our schools, and our communities.

Labor-community partnerships have been an effective tool to advance progressive agendas and ideas for decades. Different structures and formats have been tried, research has been done, and organizers have experienced powerful partnerships as well as ineffective ones. One thing that rings true through time, however, is the

necessity for labor and community organizations to pool their power to make change. This is true now, more than ever. The union movement is one of the few forces capable of mobilizing working families en masse to prevent the US from succumbing to MAGA authoritarianism. Education unions are uniquely positioned because they already have a workplace presence in most neighborhoods across the country. Organized communities have ears to the ground on how to build power at the local level and mobilize communities across different neighborhoods. Together they can build power to not only protect, but to strengthen our democracy for future generations.

With this in mind, The LIFT Fund, National Education Association, and Midwest Academy came together to better understand how to ignite more labor-community partnerships and initiatives. We reviewed and synthesized lessons from the past 10-15 years of educational justice coalition work done by education unions and grassroots community organizations, to better understand the elements that lead to coalition success, to identify challenges, and to make recommendations to inform future coalition work.

More than 50 union and community leaders and organizers from over a dozen cities who have been involved in educational justice coalitions or labor-community coalitions were interviewed for the project (a list of individuals interviewed can be found on page 54). The spectrum of coalitions discussed range from loose networks that came together around a specific campaign to coalitions of organizations that formalized their own nonprofit and staff. The coalitions in this project that did not focus on educational justice worked on intersecting issues such as workers rights, affordable housing, and retiree rights. Everyone interviewed had experienced some degree of success and believed there was value in working together – either in coalition spaces or in organizations that align their individual work to increase their strength. They shared their expertise in how the organizing community can work to improve coalition or alignment dynamics and support more collaborative work to build power to win on social justice issues. Throughout this report, the word “coalition” is used to describe a wide range of working relationships of labor-community organizations that took on various structures, including “alignments”, to run a campaign or series of campaigns together.

Additionally, a review of articles and research on the general topic of labor and community coalitions was reviewed to inform our synthesis. Recommendations outlined at the end of this report were offered by those interviewed and were further discussed and crafted by a committee of coalition practitioners who were interviewed to ensure that the recommendations are a reflection of their experiences and ideas for improving and shaping future coalitions.

Introduction

For decades there have been efforts to dismantle our public education system by privatizers, corporate reformers, and right-wing ideologues. Urban public school districts have been the main target of many of these attacks, especially attempts to privatize public schools through charter schools and vouchers. Over the past 10-15 years, communities that believe in the promise of fully funded public education to serve as the gateway to racial and economic justice have formed labor-community coalitions to fight back and advance their own vision. These coalitions primarily came together to address issues within the scope of a school district or city, with some expanding or joining a state-wide coalition to address issues at a broader level.

When seeking out labor-community coalition practitioners to interview for this project, we focused on coalitions that had organized a base, taken action, and had success. Each coalition consolidated their power to make positive change. Most focused on changes in public education policy at the local or state level, other coalitions won local or state policy changes for tenants, workers, and retirees.

“Unions cannot do big structural change on their own; and at the end of the day when we are talking about public goods, the workers and people receiving the services have a common interest.”

One critical thread that emerged was that building power through labor-community coalition work is key to making structural changes to our public institutions. Norma Martinez HoSang, Director from Connecticut for All, talked about how, “unions cannot do big structural change on their own and at the end of the day when we are talking about public goods, the workers and people receiving the services have a common interest.” Research supports this assertion, showing that coalitions are important for achieving broader, longer term goals.

Labor-community coalitions deliver credibility, both to the organizations involved, and to the issue they support. Immediately they demonstrate that multiple organizations, who may be representing different perspectives and voices, are already in agreement on the issues and long-term solutions. For unions, this also translates to more influence in bargaining and politics, because, as research shows, community support boosts the legitimacy of their issues.¹

In addition to building power, community organizations involved in coalitions can also reap benefits. Studies have demonstrated that they benefit from being in coalition with labor unions because there is typically an increase in funding, capacity, and access to other resources such as communications support or political relationships that they might not otherwise have.²

For a labor movement in decline, the benefits of forming labor community coalitions are significant. Unions have an opportunity to build relationships with communities

that may be skeptical of them or lack understanding about how unions work. Amanda Tattersall, Associate Professor in urban geography and community methods at the University of Sydney, argues that coalitions can also help revitalize union participation among members, “Union power is increased if and when unions connect their coalition engagement to deeply engaging union members, and if and when they establish reciprocal interdependent interconnection with community organizations.”³

DIVERSITY OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Another theme that emerged when considering how coalitions can maximize their impact, was the differences between labor and community organizations. There are a variety of distinctions between community organizations and unions which can present a challenge in coalition spaces if not recognized or discussed. If understood, however, the differences overall are exactly where-in the power of a coalition lies. Coalitions find success when they utilize and learn from varying approaches, acknowledge the multiple sources of power, and understand how they can build collective strength.

In describing her coalition experiences, Aquilina Soriano Versoza from Pilipino Workers Center of Southern California talked about how the organizations in coalition compliment one another and how they can support one another. “There is so much experience and organizing in unions but that is a very particular structure that doesn’t work in all spaces; understand the differences and figure out what applies and what doesn’t apply,” she explained.

A union’s distinct legal status under State and Federal labor law, for example, differentiates them but is also a source of power for a coalition. If the union has a collective bargaining agreement that is open for negotiations, a “Bargaining for the Common Good” strategy for negotiations can be a path to address community-wide issues. This was evident in the educational justice coalitions in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Oakland.

Differences in the source of organizational strengths also present an opportunity for coalition partners to learn from one another. For instance, to protect and improve their legal status, unions generally have organized their structures and resources to include a focus on policy campaigns at the state and national level. This, coupled with their experience with regularly negotiating contracts, gives them more experience with internal strategy and compromise (in some cases, they may become too reliant on internal strategies to their detriment). Community organizations, on the other hand, typically don’t have the same type of status and are more likely to focus on organizing direct actions on local targets with their membership base. This can often give community organizations a better understanding of regular base building and grassroots organizing. Because unions have a captive membership with their collective bargaining agreements, some have become more complacent with base building over time and have instead focused on servicing.

Community organizations working with unions have opportunities to learn more about negotiations and manage internal strategy to get demands met. Unions focused on servicing versus organizing can learn from community organizations collective action tactics. Unions will find that community groups are willing to take more risks and can drive organizing efforts that help them advance a narrative in the eyes of the public; community organizations will develop more internal strategies to win their policy agenda. If a labor and community coalition has capacity to successfully merge both inside and outside strategies, they can increase their likelihood of winning campaigns.

It is worth noting that many unions and community organizations alike can learn from unions that have adopted a social justice union organizing model. These unions are engaged in ongoing organizing, regularly recruit new workers into the union, and have defined structures that they use to deeply engage workers in their campaigns. The teachers unions highlighted in this report, in particular, have successfully made this shift. Their transformation and base building practices can teach us a lot about the potential power of the labor movement. Community organizations can learn from these locals on how to do structure-based organizing and how to organize for majorities within defined universes.

DECISION MAKING STRUCTURES

It is also important to understand each organization's decision making structure in order to gain insight into how everyone may engage in a coalition and how quickly decisions can be made. Unions have multiple layers of elected leaders, this is an important part of how they operate. Community organizations, on the other hand, may not have as many layers of democracy. Local unions are structured to engage thousands, in some cases tens of thousands, of members in their organizing work and campaigns. This democratic structure creates dynamics, and sometimes interesting dilemmas, that community organizations may not be familiar with and that can be challenging to navigate both within the union and a coalition space. For example, certain decisions may need approval by multiple bodies within the organization, slowing down the decision making process. It's necessary for community organizations to understand union democratic processes and their structures so they know how it might intersect with coalition work.

Top down or highly bureaucratic union structures at the state and national levels, for example, can be an obstacle – there may be a high level of risk-aversion in the leadership or union staffing structures may limit capacity for involvement in a campaign, etc. This is particularly a challenge in many educator unions where the threats to public education require radical change. Unions (at state, and national levels), need to break down internal structural barriers in order to create capacity to more deeply engage members in broader fights and develop strong relationships with their local communities. A resistance to doing so could be detrimental to the union's existence. Nonetheless, in these situations, community organizations should seek understanding and continue to try and work with them in order to build the power needed to win change. It is critical that leaders continue to find the intersection of their self-interests.

BUILDING DIVERSE COALITIONS

Perhaps the more critical value of organizing as a labor-community coalition, lies in the relationships that are built across a diverse set of identities focused on a shared vision. Relationships that have the potential to remind us of our collective power and multitude of shared interests. As we build stronger relationships across class, race, and other identities we build more collective power to strengthen our democracy.

Of course, in order to achieve this, bringing together a diverse coalition requires conscious effort to ensure inclusivity. Participants shared challenges with racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of prejudice showing up in coalition spaces, even when folks brought their best intentions. In the interviews conducted for this project, racial dynamics and racism of white participants was the most common issue identified. Community leaders in particular stressed the importance of paying close attention to these dynamics and having open dialogue. “Be conscious of where racial justice plays into the whole situation,” says Billy Easton, formerly the long-time director of the NYS Alliance for Quality Education. “A lot of unions are very white heavy and the community is Black or Brown, so avoid symbolic relationships, [and] avoid tokenism.” Organizations should do the necessary internal work around identifying their racist, sexist, and/or classist practices and past mistakes in order to show up and be respected.

SEEDING MORE LABOR-COMMUNITY COALITION WORK

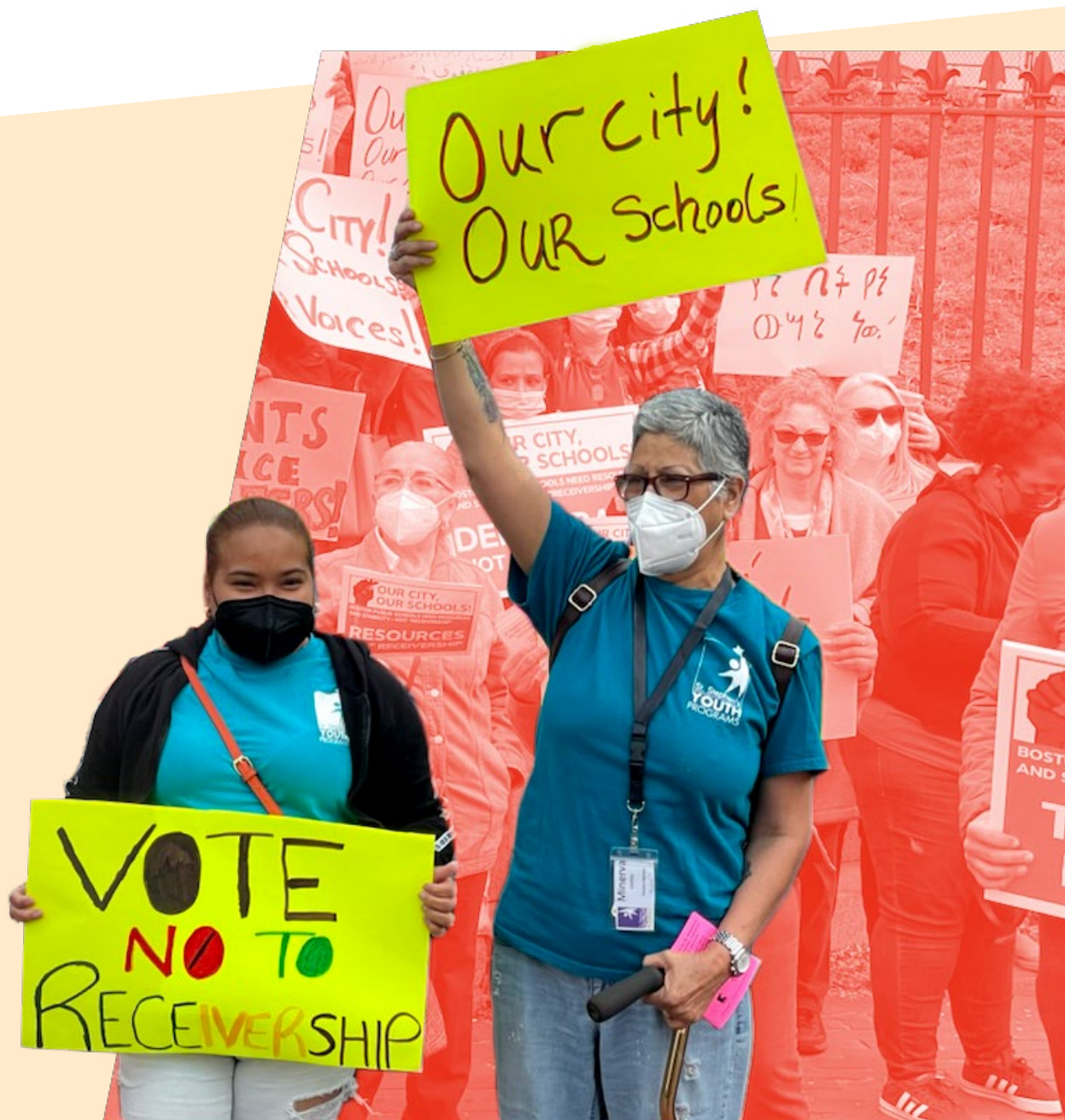


Ultimately, the necessity for more collaborative social justice organizing between labor unions and community organizations to initiate structural changes is greater than the challenges it presents. This report offers a recipe of key coalition elements for any type of labor-community coalition work. These key elements were identified by leaders and organizers engaged deeply in the work. We also asked participants to help identify common challenges that any coalition should prepare themselves for and think about proactively. And after looking at coalition dynamics and practices, we asked:

- What will it take to seed more of this work?
- How can we create organizing models within unions and coalitional spaces that have the capacity to both shut down attacks and proactively spread a narrative and vision for a better future?

In an attempt to answer these questions, we will review examples of education justice coalitions that have already stepped up and responded to the relentless attacks on public schools; sharing how they came together, the issues they have organized around, and how they have evolved.

Then we will offer recommendations for starting down a path to creating, supporting and nurturing such organizing spaces. The most critical and urgent needs identified: financial support and capacity-building so organizations can build unified coalitions that are ready to engage in the fights that are on our doorstep.



Coalitions in the Fight for Educational Justice

Coalitions in the fight for educational justice have taken on extraordinary work to protect public education from neoliberal reforms and privatization efforts. This section highlights some of the achievements of labor-community coalitions that formed over the past 10-15 years in response to privatization attacks on public education and summarizes their work.

Grassroots Education Movement Chicago, Illinois

In the early 2000s, Chicago's Kenwood Oakdale Community Organization (KOCO) had a strong base of youth and parents. According to Jay Travis, KOCO's executive director at the time, they started to hear about school closures from parents—specifically the Mid-South Plan and Renaissance 2010 (a “portfolio district” school reform plan that would close “underperforming” public schools and expand the number of privately managed charter schools). Chicago Public Schools have been under mayoral control since 1995, leaving them particularly vulnerable to politically driven reform measures. According to Travis, the city had used a trumped-up community engagement process and used parents' opinions about schools to make the case to close 20 of 22 area schools. Travis explained that, “If [Black parents] from our communities had not said they were tired and ready to fight...we would not have picked up the fight. We started to figure out that this plan was big, connected to gentrification, and was going to go broader than our community.”

Travis and Jitu Brown, the education organizer at KOCO, started to meet with other potential allies: Action Now—another Chicago organizing arm with a base, SEIU 373—the school service employees union, and Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Back then,

under CTU President Marilyn Stewart, the union was not taking a significant stand against school closures, but KOCO understood the importance of working with the union and made efforts to build a relationship. Parents and teachers at the threatened schools began organizing and fighting back against the closures. Through these fights Travis and Brown met teachers Jesse Sharkey, Jackson Potter, Karen Lewis, and other rank and file educators who were fighting back alongside parents and students.

At the same time, these educators were forming the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) out of frustration with CTU leadership. In

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2010, CORE took over leadership of the union when Karen Lewis was elected the new CTU President. The new union leadership met with KOCO and other community partners and together they formalized the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM) coalition.

Organizers were already working together informally before this moment, but the election of CORE into CTU leadership was an opportunity to specifically coalesce organizing groups that had a base of members that could turnout and mobilize. According to Jackson Potter, CORE Leader and current CTU Vice President, “Having organizations trained in the Alinsky model of organizing helped train CORE leaders on how to build structures and bring together the coalition. It was part of their culture to hold each other accountable and turnout a base to actions. We went beyond the model by building coalitions that built people power not for powers’ sake but for the purpose to advance shared values of defending public education by improving funding and stopping privatization.” CORE benefited from working with community organizations and was able to apply those lessons within CTU, strengthening the union’s power.

Initially, the main focus of GEM was keeping schools open and fighting closures. Brown explained that, “In the beginning we were under attack and fighting back. But you can’t sustain a struggle just about what you are against, you have to get to your vision.

So we started to talk about community schools and getting more Black teachers into the classroom.” Eventually the coalition evolved to address other issues including winning an elected school board with the state legislature. According to Jay Travis, “Locking arms around real struggles to stop privatization in schools in Black and Brown communities was critical. We knew it was a real tangible hit to our neighborhoods. The rhythm of those fights helped ground us in terms of our power analysis and the impact of what was happening. And in terms of how popular support strengthened the union’s power in the city. A core piece of what made the union strong is that it had popular community based support across the city because it supported community-based fights.” The work the coalition did together helped the organizations involved recognize that issue-based campaigns were not enough to move the dial, they had to build political power as well. Eventually they would support Karen Lewis as a Mayoral candidate and Jay Travis as a candidate for the Illinois House of Representatives.

Together, GEM successfully fought back school closures, won contract language for annual funding of sustainable community schools, and eventually evolved to fight for an elected school board. GEM also supported CTU in multiple contract negotiations, including the strikes in 2012 and 2019. Those contracts delivered numerous victories

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to the CPS students and teachers including lower class sizes, more nurses, social workers, and librarians, improvements for teachers serving special education students, and improvements in pay and benefits for teachers.



In 2022, the State of Illinois passed legislation to create an elected school board for Chicago Public Schools. However, the final days and hours of work that went into passing the legislation uncovered a deep disagreement between the union and community organizations. CTU was willing to compromise on splitting the election of the board in half (delaying a fully elected board until 2026). KOCO and other coalition partners believed they had the power to win a fully elected board without compromise. The disagreement ultimately ended the coalition. However, the GEM participants who were interviewed for this project remain hopeful that they can work together again in the future. Relationships have continued and together they have had to navigate a new reality—working with former teacher and CTU organizer, Brandon Johnson, the Chicago Mayor that they helped to elect in 2023.

education. At that meeting, the original eleven coalition groups shared a co-authored document titled, “Principles that Unite Us”; it laid out a vision of what they believed all Boston students deserved. In 2014, the Coalition decided to rename itself the Boston Education Justice Alliance (BEJA).



Jessica Tang, a middle school social studies teacher and Boston Teachers Union (BTU) executive board member at the time, had started planting the seeds for the coalition in the

years prior by putting together a community advisory committee for the union that included parents and non-profit leaders. Along the way, she met Carlos Rojas, a student representative on the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) when he was on a panel at the Boston Area Teacher Social Justice Conference. Rojas played a pivotal role in bringing students into the coalition fold from the beginning, which is a challenge for most coalitions. “At that time, Boston was going through a huge round of budget cuts, everyone was outraged. We saw a strategic opportunity to coalesce and fight together. The students orientation led us to agree to be a part of this. We had very little money but a lot of heart,” explained Rojas.

In the years that followed, BEJA beat back budget cuts and a “unified enrollment” proposal for Boston Public Schools that would have closed schools based on an unproven methodology for determining under-enrollment of students. According to

Bill Schiebler, who was supporting the coalition through his role at the American Federation of Teachers, the group stabilized when they found a way to help fund the other organizations, and when national unions and BTU started to give more money and resources. Funding brought their organizing to a larger public audience through the development of a website and newsletters that broadened the reach of their organizing work, and they started to build out a coalition structure for making internal decisions. The win that solidified their reputation, however, came in 2016 when BEJA and the newly formed Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance (MEJA) worked together to defeat a state ballot measure, “Question 2,” that would have lifted a cap and opened the floodgates for new charter schools.

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MEJA was made up of state and regional groups including AFT-Massachusetts, Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), NAACP Northeast Regional Office, Jobs with Justice, and Citizens for Public Schools who formed the coalition in 2015 to talk about charter schools and high-stakes testing. The following year, MEJA partners included BEJA and similarly organized local tables across the state to unite against the ballot measure. Massachusetts Jobs with Justice (JWJ), an original partner with BEJA, played an integral role in helping build those tables. They had relationships in the Gateway Cities of Massachusetts—economically struggling, mid-sized cities across that state where industry had once “offered residents a good job and a ‘gateway’ to the American Dream.”⁴ “The education reform people were always trying to push their policies in those cities. So with MTA [Massachusetts Teachers Association], we started working together informally on relationships and campaigns. JWJ had the entree into the immigrant and black communities that the union did not have,” explained Russ Davis, former Executive Director of Massachusetts JWJ.

Another critical factor in the formation of MEJA, was electing Barbara Madeloni as President of the Massachusetts Teacher Association (MTA), an affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA) and the largest educators union in the state, in 2014. Running as a rank-and-file candidate, Madeloni upset the tradition of electing the sitting vice-president. At the time, she represented a new voice in the educator union movement, was against neo-liberal reforms and was ready to fight back.

When Question 2 was introduced, the coalitions recognized the urgent need to fight the ballot measure. With funding from the national unions (AFT and NEA), the coalition unified around a campaign to stop it, even though they faced an uphill battle. Polls in March of 2016 showed a 20 point lead to approve the measure. They led a

statewide campaign that deeply involved students and parents. “We had a good basic campaign structure led by people who do that work, but we made room in that campaign structure for lots of flexibility and individuals could pick up the work in the way that they wanted to do it. People were setting up town halls, debates, asking for ground so they could canvas; there was a chaos to the structure that allowed folks to step into the work without having to follow specific rules,” explains Madeloni.

The deep engagement in the campaign gave them the power they needed to defeat the measure. According to Tang, “it made us a family—it was the biggest victory we had and we felt like we saved public education in Massachusetts.” In 2018, Jacobin reported on a leaked report commissioned by Walton Education Coalition regarding the Question 2 defeat:

“...a postelection survey commissioned by Walton ‘showed that just over a third of Massachusetts parents (34%) and just under a third (32%) of No voters spoke with teachers about Question 2.’ Unfortunately, the study reports, ‘voters sided with those they knew, and trusted, best’ — that is, with teachers. The report complains ‘that the MTA took such a hard turn. ... Teachers were fiercely activated ... [they] appeared all over the state to voice their opposition.’ In the past, the report lamented, ‘MTA was amenable in some cases to doing positive things.’ Things were different now: ‘Barbara Madeloni was positioned as a rabble rousing, outsider, activist, leftist. That’s how she ran and how she governed ... She’s a very ideological and uncompromising person. She’s Occupy Wall Street and into claiming that education reform is all about corporatization.’ In addition to heightened member involvement, the Walton report complained: ‘Much to the surprise of the Yes on 2 campaign, the teachers’ union spent an unprecedented amount of money. In previous campaigns the unions spent around \$5 million, but in 2016 the No side spent close to \$15 million.’”⁵

The victory helped solidify BEJA and MEJA as formidable coalitions. In 2019, they also organized to help pass the Students Opportunity Act, which is intended to equitably fund schools over a seven year time period. They have both evolved into autonomous entities with their own staff and organizers, regularly bringing together organizational partners and families to lead on a vision for public schools in their city and state. Since the pandemic, MEJA has worked to develop a strategic plan and establish a more definitive coalition structure, according to their Executive Director, Vatsady Sivongxay. In addition to state-wide campaigns, the coalition provides support to local tables across the state organizing around local issues. BEJA has been organizing around the “BEJA Pledge,” a list of basics that every school should have.⁶ According to BEJA Executive Director Ruby Reyes, “the first win around the BEJA pledge was a full time nurse for each school (right before the pandemic), then a family liaison for every school, and then an increase in counselors and school psychologists.” They also successfully organized for reading specialists and eight restorative justice coaches. In 2022, BEJA fought back an effort to put Boston Public Schools into receivership. Other issues on their agenda include improvements to special education and the continuation of fighting school budget cuts and school closures.

Reclaim Our Schools Los Angeles

Los Angeles, California

In 2014, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) brought groups together to explore what came to be Reclaim Our Schools Los Angeles. Newly elected UTLA leadership had made a commitment to repairing relationships with community organizations that previous leadership had let erode. They hosted a community round table with a number of LA's progressive community organizations to analyze education issues and look for areas of agreement. At the time, Sharon Delugach was helping UTLA through this process as part of her role with the American Federation of Teachers. The report, *Building the Power to Reclaim Our Schools* describes this process:



“Hoping to form a local AROS [Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools] table, Delugach and UTLA leaders convened several meetings with a range of LA’s progressive community and issue-based groups. Representatives from AROS, the NEA, and the AFT helped facilitate these early conversations where a core set of principles were floated as a way to gauge consensus...

“...After months of talking, four organizations formed Reclaim Our Schools LA (ROSLA). The anchor groups included UTLA, The Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), and Students Deserve—a youth-led group that had its roots in the Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ). Together, they agreed to build a movement for broad-based education reform that would engage teachers, students, parents, and community members and build power to force real change in LAUSD. To strengthen the capacity of these partners, UTLA made the decision to give annual programmatic funding to the other three anchor groups, and the NEA, CTA, AFT, and CFT followed suit.”⁷

Once identified, the anchor groups spent over a year meeting and developing the coalition's first campaign. With the help of researchers at LAANE and UTLA, they released their platform in December of 2016 in a document called *A Vision to Support Every Student*. The following year they began to implement their platform by training promising leaders from each of their organizations four focal points: Community Schools, school funding, anti-privatization, and anti-criminalization of youth, all through the lens of racial justice. At the same time, they worked together to win the adoption of a Community Schools Resolution with the Los Angeles Unified School District.

The coalition's power was most evident, however, when the coalition agreed to use a "Bargaining for the Common Good" strategy in the 2017-2019 UTLA negotiations.



The strategy is about bringing "common good" demands or proposals to contract negotiations that will have a wider community benefit and using community leverage in negotiations to win.⁸ With this strategy and significant community pressure on the district during negotiations and the January 2019 strike, they were able to win a more powerful process to implement community schools that included UTLA and ROSLA representation on the steering committee; an Immigrant Defense Office in LAUSD to help families; a Green Space MOU that led to the creation of green space at schools; and the elimination of student searches at an initial set of schools that would eventually grow to be district wide. In the strike, they also won enforceable class size caps, victories against privatization, special education improvements, and salary increases.

In a *Convergence* article in 2023, Alex Caputo-Pearl, former UTLA President describes the power of the coalition during the strike:

"In the lead-up to the strike, Reclaim created "Committee of 100" meetings for parent, youth, and community leaders to develop organizing skills. During the strike, hundreds participated in the Reclaim "La Escuelita," a daily meeting of parents, youth, and community members that engaged political education and planned daily actions—among them mass protests at the houses of School Board members, the LAUSD Superintendent, and billionaire privatizers.

"Trust among the Reclaim anchor organizations grew even firmer when UTLA refused to back away from Common Good demands under the pressures of strike negotiations, and when UTLA members saw daily viral videos of parents, youth, and community leading militant solidarity actions. Many of the parent, youth, and community leaders who developed skills

in the Committee of 100, La Escuelita, and strike actions are now leaders in Reclaim's latest structural evolution — parent/youth/community/educator teams in each of the seven LAUSD board districts."⁹

Today, Georgia Flowers, UTLA NEA Vice President and ROSLA steering committee member, says ROSLA has "built power so we can influence and force concessions in spaces we couldn't before." She explains that Reclaim is about "creating the community that we want to have. It's looking at all the things we see that are maybe wrong with the world and as a coalition doing our part to improve our communities." Housing justice, climate justice, and supporting students against school policing are additional areas where the anchor organizations support each other's organizing.

The Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition San Antonio, Texas

In 2017, when Alejandra Lopez was a rank and file member of the San Antonio Alliance, the school she worked at was slated to be turned into a charter school. Additionally, the Superintendent was pushing partnerships with outside entities—a form of privatization. Lopez traveled with other union leaders to participate in an institute led by the leaders and staff at the St. Paul Federation of Educators focused on “Bargaining for the Common Good” and how to take steps to develop a narrative, local structures, and community relationships. After attending the program, her union local started to craft a narrative and connect with parents and other organizations who felt the same frustrations about school privatization.



It was clear that teachers, parents and school workers were frustrated with school closures and takeovers and eager to work together. The early years of building relationships paid off when the pandemic hit, the coalition really started to coalesce around an organizing campaign to influence the COVID-19 response. The success of their pandemic response organizing reinforced the power of their coalition.

They immediately went to work to write a platform—“The Schools Our Students Deserve.” They launched as an official coalition and ran school board candidates.

“Doing the work together is what builds relationships and capacity,” explains Lopez. The group didn’t take a lot of time to formalize their coalition within a couple of months, early participants identified priorities and then strategically started to identify organizations who were aligned with their platform. They formed The Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition.¹⁰

“Doing the work together is what builds relationships and capacity.”

Together they invested in a field program for the school board elections and won 1 of the 4 races. Sarah Sorensen, from the parent organization Our Schools San Antonio, had organized with the coalition through the pandemic, and with their support ran for and won her seat on the school board. Then they shifted to a fight against school

closures, but after doing an honest assessment of their power, they knew they couldn’t stop the train completely and were only able to save some schools from closure. They leveraged their losses in the fight and used the campaign as an opportunity to make more connections with parents and build momentum.

In 2021, with the support of the National Education Association Strategic Campaigns Institute,¹¹ they started to formalize their structure. The Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition continues to work on policy changes related to their priorities and regularly review the platform to refine it. In a non-collective bargaining state, they have been able to leverage their community organizing power to develop a more responsive relationship with the district Superintendent through the “meet and confer” process—giving them an influential voice in district decision making. According to Lopez, “We have been able to move to a culturally responsive and sustaining framework district wide, the union runs professional development for it and all teachers are expected to teach through this lens. We also pushed apprenticeship programs with our coalition partners, the Laborers Local 1095, who now have a member doing a program at the high school level. Our partner, Move Texas, a civic engagement for youth organization, now has access to high schools to do voter registration for seniors.”

Justice 4 Oakland Students Oakland, California

In 2018, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) elected new leadership from the internal Build Our Power caucus. Keith Brown, the new President, and his leadership team demonstrated that there was a new commitment from OEA towards working for equity in the schools. By electing Brown, a Black man, the union now had leadership that was more reflective of the student body racial demographics. Due to OEA's new commitment to equity, Justice 4 Oakland Students (J4OS), a coalition of community groups, invited the Union to become an official partner.

J4OS had started a few years earlier without union representation and had been campaigning against a Superintendent who was implementing policies that eroded the outcomes of previous advocacy work they had done on behalf of black, immigrant, and indigenous students and families. In 2016, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) also announced that they were going to implement deep budget cuts and close schools. The coalition started to grow and collectively they demanded a community voice in budget decisions, a delay in any cuts, and, when the Superintendent announced he was leaving, a public engagement process for the selection of a new Superintendent. They won a delay in cuts and the school board hired a local candidate to be the new Superintendent, another demand they made as a coalition. Unfortunately, they were not able to completely stop school closures that started in the 2017-18 school year.



According to Pecolia Manigo from Bay Area PLAN, the pivotal turning points for the coalition were having union leadership involved, adopting a plan to use “Bargaining for the Common Good” strategies, and a renewed national conversation at AFT and NEA about being in coalition with community that provided a path to a more trusting and stronger relationship between coalition partners and OEA.

The first year OEA became involved with the coalition, they were also in bargaining with OUSD. The Union kept the coalition up-to-date on their demands and discussions with the district, which was a change in practice from previous leadership who had

chosen not to share details about bargaining. They also organized toward a strike. Manigo credits the 2019 OEA strike for unifying the coalition and showing the partners what was possible. “It helped build the coalition’s awareness of how far we could take the city, it flexed everyone’s power and ability to understand inside and outside strategy (critical for a coalition trying to advance systems change), and it taught us that we didn’t have the power on the [school] board that we needed.”

After the strike, the coalition worked on supporting school board candidates, resulting in the election of four endorsed candidates; they worked with Oakland Youth Coalition to pass Measure QQ giving 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote for the office of the school board director in 2020; they supported the statewide effort on Prop 15–Schools and Community First, which unfortunately failed in 2020; and they worked to stop the closure of majority Black schools by naming Anti-Black racism in the district’s school closure policy. The later work eventually turned into the campaign to pass the Reparations for Black Students Resolution. The resolution set up a multi-million dollar fund and the formation of the Black Students and Families Thriving Task Force, a task force to name priorities and make recommendations for system-wide solutions and monitor progress in eliminating structural anti-Blackness and rebuilding systems within Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) through 2026. This led to winning OEA contract language for reparations for Black students and Teacher on Special Assignment (TSA) positions at school sites that are intended to help improve student outcomes by providing teachers with more time for planning and collaboration. Moving forward, Justice 4 Oakland Students plans on working with the community to develop more demands they can bring to negotiations as part of a “Bargaining for the Common Good” strategy.

H.E.A.L. Together and Tennessee For All Tennessee

Political polarization has expanded the threats to public schools beyond privatization. Communities face book-banning and prohibiting instruction materials in attempts to erase the truth about race and our country's racial history; initially a call to reject "critical race theory." Threats such as restricting bathroom access for transgender students or prohibiting conversations about sexual orientation and gender identity present themselves in the form of legislation and school board policies. Together these threats are often framed as "culture wars" and they're primarily bred in rural and suburban areas, where strong educational justice coalitions do not necessarily exist in the communities.

"As we were bottom-lining the voucher campaign, another arm of the coalition was bottom-lining a campaign on the grocery tax. We were able to say, we have public schools that are literally falling apart, state actors were saying we don't have the money to fund them. At the same time, we have corporations getting tax incentives and not contributing to the local tax base and we have this regressive grocery tax that hits working families. We were able to tie those together in some simple messaging—and we've been able to see that message click."

In response, Race Forward in partnership with NYU Metro Center and the Schott Foundation started the initiative H.E.A.L. Together (Honest Education, Action & Leadership) with the goal of driving support to the field to counteract these attacks. By providing training to volunteer leaders, research and data analysis, communications, coaching and funding, H.E.A.L. supports grassroots campaigns on many issues in school districts across the country. In order to expand their geographic reach with few staff, H.E.A.L. NC developed a distributed organizing model called Public School Strong.

This model of organizing is generally a horizontal network of volunteers that lead autonomous groups that organize toward the same goals. This model works well in situations like these where the threat is clear (banning words, books, and bathrooms), is easy to understand, and triggers a deep sense of urgency that motivates folks to organize to fight back. Public School Strong is a unique education-focused distributed organizing model that trains parents, educators and community leaders to be champions for education equity at their school boards, and connects PSS teams in dozens of districts across a state for joint learning and campaigns.

Tennessee For All is a coalition of seventeen organizations that has partnered with H.E.A.L. to put this model into action with their Public School Strong campaign. They

focused their ongoing campaign to fully fund public schools on defeating a bill that would create a statewide voucher program that the Governor announced in 2023. Across the state they focused on pressuring local school boards to pass resolutions against vouchers by training participants to speak and attend meetings, and were able to pass anti-voucher resolutions in 70 counties. They held statewide and local events to bring parents, educators, and community together to talk about the issue, helped folks understand what was going on and the resource-depleting impact of vouchers, and to connect about the great need for more allocations of funds and resources to the existing public schools. The Governor's plan failed, thanks to their efforts.

Tennessee For All builds power to target bad corporate actors in the state and cast a positive vision for what they want in their public institutions. One of the positives of their coalition, from the perspective of Austin Sauerbrei of Statewide Organizing for Community Empowerment (SOCM), is the structure of having specific organizations lead different parts of the work, playing to the strengths of each member organizations. Sauerbrei explained that their organization (SOCM) spearheads the public school campaign team for Tennessee For All, but the work, like the school board training, happens across the organizations. They have multiple campaign teams working at once: "As we were bottom-lining the voucher campaign, another arm of the coalition was bottom-lining a campaign on the grocery tax. We were able to say, we have public schools that are literally falling apart, state actors were saying we don't have the money to fund them. At the same time, we have corporations getting tax incentives and not contributing to the local tax base and we have this regressive grocery tax that hits working families. We were able to tie those together in some simple messaging—and we've been able to see that message click," said Sauerbrei.



Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools

One overarching connection these coalitions have is their relationship with the national coalition, Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS).¹² For the purposes of this report, we focused on coalitions operating on a local scale. However, individuals doing educational justice organizing valued having a national connection and opportunities to work together on a larger scale through AROS.



Founded in 2013, AROS was created to help build the national movement for educational justice and to be a force to shift the narrative around public education by highlighting success and lifting up community solutions over corporate and legislative mandates. It is a coalition of national unions and community organizations with local and state tables across the country. In an interview with the Schott Foundation, AROS National Coalition Director Moira Kaleida said the following about the coalitions' role:

"AROS' unique role is the ability to bring many different groups into one space. We don't typically have spaces where NEA and AFT organizers can come together — let alone in collaboration with community organizations, faith leaders, parents, and students. We all have differences in perspectives, but what unites us is a goal of protecting and transforming public education. And we do that by looping in labor, community, parents, and students and creating a coalition led by the people on the ground."¹³

AROS participants agree that public schools are the heart of a strong democracy. Fighting to preserve and shape them into equitable institutions requires a multi-faceted effort that involves a deep and diverse base. That can only be created through multiple organizations working together in coalition or alignment in school districts across the country.

Common Coalition Elements that Contributed to Success

Despite having much more in common than separates them, organizations and organized labor do not have a long and deep history of collaboration. Moreover, the Right has worked diligently to demonize teacher unions and to divide them from the communities that they serve. During the course of interviews with participants, we asked them to share what ingredients were most important to the success of coalitions based on their experiences. The following are the key elements most frequently identified.



COMMITTED LEADERSHIP

Organizers and leaders in educational justice and other labor-community coalition spaces agreed that successful coalitions are composed of organizational leaders (both labor and community) who dedicate resources and time to develop relationships with each other.

For community organizations this is usually par for the course; for union leaders, making a commitment to develop relationships with outside organizations requires more intentionality. The 2018 report, “Keeping Students First: Building Community Labor Partnerships for Strong Schools,” acknowledged that in the labor-community partnership cases it reviewed, the relationships that were built started with a “conscious shift on the part of the union.” Union leaders had to be deliberate about welcoming partnerships and indicate their importance to the union’s strategic plans.¹⁴

The educational justice coalitions reviewed for this project are additional examples

“The union has to be committed and have a strategic view as to why it is important [to form coalition] overall, what the key benefits will be, and know there will be external and internal struggle.”

of how union leadership is key to igniting powerful coalitions. The educator unions involved all had recently elected leadership that was committed to social justice unionism. Academic research also supports this, finding an increase in staff and member involvement when union leaders had “an ideological buy-in” to deep coalition building. Absent that mindset, unions were less likely to invest in working collaboratively with community organizations. When “narrowly focused leaders” did engage in coalitions it was from an “opportunistic perspective only, seeing coalitions as merely a tactical device for immediate gain.”¹⁵

Commitment at the top, however, is only a start. Norine Gutekanst from CTU explains, “You need visionary leadership and you need to understand what the other organizations want and fight for that in your work.” Unions have to make an effort to build mutual respect with community organizations and this takes time. In Los Angeles, UTLA leadership spent months reforging relationships with community leaders before forming ROSLA. “The union has to be committed and have a strategic view as to why it is important overall, what the key benefits will be, and know there will be external and internal struggle,” says Alex Caputo Pearl, former President of UTLA.

Furthermore, for long lasting and sustainable relationships to develop, there has to be efforts to go deeper into the membership of all organizations involved. Internal work on developing an understanding of why these relationships exist, how they meet the interests of the organization, and how groups are building power together should be part of the organizational plan. For unions, this should include engaging the executive board, building leaders, rank and file members, and staff in these conversations. Equally, community organization staff, leaders, and members need to engage in a similar process.

Initial coalition work should incorporate these goals of building relationships and

building trust. Easy first steps can include joint education on issues or organizing tactics, small actions, taking time to learn about each other's organizations, or socializing together. This was important for Bridget Murphy from Palenque LSNA in Chicago, "The number one thing was relationship building—different educational organizers in the city were able to build relationships with each other, which might not have happened without GEM [Grassroots Education Movement]. It was a space where an organizer could come in and meet people. Also, it was very valuable to get to know other parts of the city. Jitu [Brown, the education organizer at Kenwood Oakdale Community Organization] led a bus tour with different spots around their neighborhood and we saw where schools were closed. Understanding the city as a whole came out of our work together."

Greg Nammacher from SEIU Local 26 warns that only having the buy-in of, or meetings with top leaders can stall the work. He suggests that organizations identify who will be driving the work in the field and create space for them to plan and work together. In the Twin Cities, Nammacher has specifically led alignment work. An alignment table is bringing different organizations together who have a shared vision for building power to line up their individual campaigns and coordinate instead of collectively planning and engaging in one campaign, distinguishing it from coalition work. Progressive organizations and unions have aligned their campaign calendars, and in some instances targets, to strengthen their visibility and power. The most recent alignment in 2024, brought their bases together for a week of action that included joint training and support for each other's actions which included protests and strikes. Communication and organized planning between the organizers and members who were driving the work at each organization was critical to successful alignment.

"Even when it is uncomfortable, let's learn and be willing to keep the lines of communication open....Even though we had disagreements, we didn't abandon from each other. Those kinds of binding ties are important, they are difficult."

Ideally, and arguably most critical for developing a deep level of commitment, union leaders must also have a serious dedication to building an organizing union. In order for unions to be strong partners in a coalition or an alignment table, committed leadership needs to include a commitment not only to working with the community but to organizing its own members regularly on internal issues as well. Unions that organize around issues members care about can more quickly build a strong base that understands collective action and power building intuitively. Giving member leaders the training to identify organizing issues and the tools to organize against a bad boss or a harmful policy lays the foundation for organizing on a larger scale.

Finally, all leaders should be steadfast on achieving social, racial, and economic justice in their community by thinking about how their members' self-interest is tied to the self-interest of their students' families and/or their community. All organizations

involved should be deliberate about having tough conversations with members about social and racial justice issues. For unions, where the base is born out of a connection to employers or a vocation, rather than a uniting belief, views and perspectives are likely to be more widespread. Past actions by previous leaders could have caused



harm to different communities. In order to move forward, leaders will need to acknowledge such harm and work to repair relationships.

Committed leadership and developing long-lasting relationships can set the stage for accountability between organizations as they work to achieve justice. “Even when it is uncomfortable, let’s learn and be willing to keep the lines of communication open,” says Jay Travis from KOCO and GEM in Chicago, “Even though we had disagreements, we didn’t abandon from each other. Those kinds of binding ties are important, they are difficult.”

SHARED VISION AND POWER ANALYSIS

With leadership committed to achieving racial, social, and economic justice, the next step is creating a shared vision with partners that is grounded in those ideals. A shared vision crafts a broader narrative about coalition identity and goals, and counteracts unproductive conceptions of labor unions being solely focused on their own self-interest. Experienced organizers and leaders suggest cooperative discussion and debate to outline what your group hopes to achieve. In some instances, a core group will develop a clear vision and platform that is politically aligned prior to inviting in other organizations. If other organizations want to be part of the coalition, they have to commit to the platform. Clarity of vision is important for grounding your work, for public facing purposes, and to make sure all parties are on the same page. It is possible that during these discussions, organizations may realize they are not in agreement and some may step aside or adjustments and compromises may need to occur. Being clear up front will hopefully prevent more complicated divisions from emerging in the coalition down the line.

Once a vision is discussed, it can be used to start doing an analysis of local power structures by asking questions like: who has the power to make decisions that will achieve this vision? Who will actively work to prevent this vision and why? What powerful people and/or organizations do we need to convince that our vision is good for our community? And, once you review current power structures and identify allies

and adversaries, what is our path to power to achieve this vision? As Madeline Talbot from Chicago puts it, “Building an organization based on taking power is far more important than anything.” Doing a power analysis of local and/or state structures helps to identify targets, weaknesses in the power structure, tactics, and ultimately sound strategy.

Organizers also advised that each organization figure out its own power analysis and how being part of the alliance builds on that power. Labor and community organizations bring different forms of power to the table, working together can increase that power. Be honest about where the ultimate power lies and what can actually move structures and secure change. In many instances power strategy may include a strike. Withholding labor is the most powerful tool



labor unions have—that any worker has—so take time to consider if your coalition can wield this power or can build toward such an action.

Without a shared vision or agreed upon power analysis, an alliance can quickly drift into uncomfortable territory where disagreements start to become a deterrence to making change. Organizations that were focused on ending the school to prison pipeline who tried to align with teachers unions experienced that first hand. Youth organizer, Jonathan Stith recalls being in the room with leaders from NEA and AFT discussing school discipline with the Obama administration. As the conversation was underway, the students found it difficult to stay aligned because it became clear that the unions didn’t necessarily believe that a school to prison pipeline existed. As mentioned before, racial and social justice topics can sometimes be divisive between union members who come from varying political positions.

In New York, the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) had a positive working relationship with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City and New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). UFT has been part of organizing with AQE since it was created in 2000 to organize for the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. However, when AQE was not willing to compromise on the integrity of the “Solutions Not Suspension” (SNS) bill, the union distanced itself from them. They decreased collaboration and resource sharing.

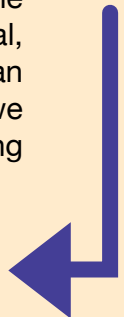
The SNS coalition continued to push forward without UFT’s direct partnership, working to clarify the bill’s needs. Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari, Co-Executive Director of AQE reflects, “When it worked, it worked well. Over the last two years, we’ve had more meaningful conversations with NYSUT, especially under the new leadership of

Melinda Person, and we've re-engaged with UFT. Now, our focus is on what we can do together—fighting for smaller class sizes and pushing back against privatization. With challenges looming in 2025, we all must show up with greater courage, including the unions.”

Indeed, experienced coalition organizers interviewed found that the strongest, longest lasting coalitions came together when there was a shared ideology among coalition partners who had engaged bases of members. Other coalition leaders were clear that managing expectations is critical when working with unions—particularly expectations about the depth of your coalition work and the length of time you may continue to partner. Many folks repeated the phrase, “no permanent enemies, no permanent friends.” However, not everyone agrees with this sentiment. Madeline Talbott, a seriously accomplished community organizer over the course of decades, writes,

“Ultimately, we need to build trust across all levels of organizations in the movement: directors, staff, leaders, members. If you are fighting for racial, economic, and social justice, there are permanent sides. Of course, we can establish a temporary alliance with an enemy for a pragmatic goal, and we can have a terminal falling out with an ally. But there are sides, and knowing who is on which side is critical to our success.”¹⁶

Example Coalition Platforms and Visions Power Mapping Resources



VALUES-FOCUSED and CAMPAIGN-CENTERED

Even when all organizations are on the same side, it is not uncommon to hear about experiences with coalitions that struggled because they remained reactive and failed to lead strategic campaigns when fighting for policies and solutions to problems. Many folks interviewed stressed the importance of avoiding this trap by ensuring all organizations are indeed committed to running issue campaigns and are ready to mobilize their base of members. “Doing the work together builds trust, builds good will, and makes the other things easier to do together,” explains Alejandra Lopez from the San Antonio Alliance and Schools Our Students Deserve San Antonio. Like others, she talks about how draining it can be to spend time on crafting a vision or platform. Folks agree, make sure most of your energy is put into organizing a campaign or series of campaigns that have clear demands and solutions to the problems you're fighting. Muni Citrin from the California Teachers Association put it succinctly: “The only way to build a coalition is to have a campaign in common to start building the coalition. It's hard to imagine building it without a campaign.”

In addition to being campaign focused, successful coalition work is centered around shared values –beliefs and principles of what is important and how you will act

together— and ideas —policies to fight for and solutions to problems— that build your campaign or series of campaigns. Jay Travis emphasized the importance of being values focused, “My mind goes back to the folks who were foundational to the fight, their wisdom around why they were being attacked, wisdom about gentrification—they didn’t need to be in meetings with leaders to know what was happening in their community. We have to honor the perspective that people bring to the table when we are shoulder to shoulder in the fight. When we don’t do that, that’s when we get away from values.” In Chicago and other educational justice coalitions, this meant honoring the experiences of the Black and Brown families and communities that were impacted the most by the privatization efforts.

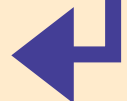


Campaigning means your values need to include a willingness to fight and mobilize a base to engage. “If you are afraid of a fight and you don’t have the capacity to punch, it won’t be a breakthrough experience—it will become a narrative war and it won’t be a base engaging fight,” says Greg Nammacher (SEIU Local 26). And make sure your campaign plans are doable. Molly Sweeny from 482 Forward in Michigan stresses the importance of having clear collective plans, “simplify your plan and don’t try to do too much.”

Furthermore, union contract negotiations can be a good vehicle for coalescing coalitions. Some of the most successful coalitions used a contract campaign, and in some cases a strike, to make shared demands using a “Bargaining for the Common Good” strategy.¹⁷ These coalitions found the contract campaign and strike transformational by increasing everyone’s awareness of the power they had being in coalition together and identifying key work for the future (e.g. electing new school board members). The strikes in Los Angeles and Oakland were definitely key in moving the coalition forward. Strikes were also part of the alignment campaigns in the Twin Cities. As mentioned previously, this is the ultimate tool for building power and getting demands met—it’s important to take the possibility seriously while not shying away.

In situations where a strike is not possible or too risky (such as non-collective bargaining states), make sure the campaign and coalition remains relevant and don’t be afraid to change course if it’s draining your resources. Julio Lopez Varona from the Center for Popular Democracy advises, “when you are in a coalition you need to ask—what is the coalition doing to advance the work? Sometimes [coalitions] become fake validators for fake work and it can be a vicious circle for folks involved.”

Campaign Planning Materials



BASE BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS AS COALITION PARTNERS

Building a coalition of organizations with shared values and the ability to run an escalation campaign requires a solid base of members who are ready to organize and mobilized to engage. Having members who are impacted by the issues, have relationships with others who are impacted, and who want to fight to make change is the heart and soul of a campaign. The power in a coalition lies in having a base that can mobilize to show strength, that can disrupt and show discontent and not just talk about it. Many of the participants in this report would argue that engaged membership is the most critical element of a successful coalition and campaign. They also note that many community organizations have lost some of the discipline and rigor of base building. Instead there has been a shift toward simply mobilizing and/or focusing on advocacy instead of organizing, at the detriment to deeper connections and building power. Coalitions can support the concerted effort to re-engage members within the field.

In the case of the educational justice coalition work, the need to focus on base building has been especially true when fighting well funded school privatizers whose aims are



to syphon public resources toward opening new charter schools or using vouchers to fund private schools with public money. Billionaire neoliberal privatizers and right-wing conservatives have put money into fake parent organizations in order to create a facade of popular support for educational reform efforts; groups such as the National Parents Union, Moms for Liberty, Stand for Children, Educators for Excellence, Teach for America, The 1776 Project, Moms for America, and Parents Defending Education, to name a few. As Diane Ravitch commented on a blog post by Maurice Cunningham about these groups, “When an alleged “grassroots,” “family-led” group of “ordinary moms” begins their existence with a budget of more than \$1 million, you can be certain there were no bake sales.”¹⁸ Calling out organizations that take this dark money and responding with force means that public school advocates have to show up in large numbers to distinguish themselves from astroturf organizations. It has to be obvious

that families strongly support protecting and maintaining their public schools. People power is the strongest defense when there is no question of being outspent by billionaires who aim to privatize and profit from our children’s education.

A coalition’s organized base should have a wide reach within their community or union universe, be engaged in political education that deepens their understanding of

the issues and power analysis, and be ready to act. Unions are historically structured to support a wide base of members through structural roles such as stewards or building representatives that are elected by members at their worksite or in their work area. These structures, when maintained and supported through regular union education and organizing efforts, also allow a union to organize widely and deeply within the membership because there are already leaders communicating and keeping members engaged and up-to-date. Labor power has declined over time because some unions have decided to focus more on servicing and they have not used their internal structures to organize and engage their base. Nonetheless, the structures are often still present to some degree and can be used to jump start organizing efforts.

Community organizations face the challenge of defining and building structures and relationships that enable them to organize both widely across the community and simultaneously deepen engagement in order to build its leadership core. They should strive to have a base of members that are not only willing to be mobilized and show up, but also members who are trained and willing to have tough conversations on issues with their neighbors, friends, and co-workers. For example, the Connecticut For All coalition works to deepen members' understanding by holding a regular Democracy School where rank and file leaders from their partner organizations align and connect across issues and campaigns.¹⁹



In many large urban areas, there are deep roots of community organizing in Black and Brown communities that are models for this work. These are also the communities most impacted by privatization of public goods, like education. Coalitions who are privileged to work with these organizations should honor the values of their members and be open to learning from their organizing experiences. Chicago is an example of a city with these organizing roots, with community organizations like KOCO and Action Now as leaders in education justice.

In locations where there is paucity of such groups, part of the coalition's plan should focus on helping each committed organization develop sound organizing and base building practices. As a union town, Detroit, Michigan residents are deeply familiar with the power of unions and the importance of maintaining public goods. Yet, many of the organizing structures that once existed in a more vibrant Detroit are no longer active. 482 Forward has made it a priority to re-establish sound organizing practices with organizations and start from building new bases that can come together. Across the country, there is a need for more base-building community organizations and unions, but this work requires foundations to fund volunteer groups to hire organizers that will increase their capacity.

Long time successful organizer Steve Kest's advice, "Make sure folks can turn out; that is power in a coalition."

SHARED COALITION POWER AND JOINT PLANNING

Shared power was a key element for anchor organizations coming together to form ROSLA. They agreed to do strategic planning together and they agreed that each organization would get one vote to ensure decisions were made in an equitable way. Joint strategic planning, joint execution of campaign plans, and joint debriefing along the way are key elements of sharing power in a coalition.

For Kampala Taiz-Rancifer, strategy discussions with the Justice 4 Oakland Students coalition were important because they helped draw lines around what each organization was willing to do. Others interviewed stressed that it was equally as important to participate in both campaign execution and action debriefs in order to continue the shared development of a joint analysis that goes into decision making.

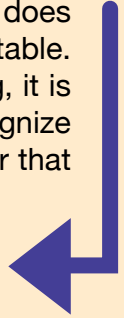
“Recognize that everybody at the table has power, it may look different, but we have power that we bring to the table.”

Sharing power requires deliberate effort. When community organizations and labor unions come together, many community organizations have seen the power dynamics quickly skew toward the unions. It makes sense that this happens, unions are likely to bring more resources and capacity to the table. Some community organizers shared examples of unions who started to make strategic decisions about joint campaigns away from the coalition space simply because they didn’t want

to continue to share power and had resources to do what they wanted. Those actions ended up hurting their relationships with partners. Billy Easton, former executive director of ROSLA explained that their coalition model managed the power dynamics between community-led organizations and UTLA, “Even if there were conflicts, there was an overall sense of moving in the same direction and everyone had an equal voice.” Arelia Valdivia, the current executive director of ROSLA advises coalitions to create an independent decision making process that allows everyone to participate, so the process doesn’t just become an extension of the union.

Coalitions regularly receive the advice: acknowledge power dynamics upfront and discuss what power each group has so you can figure out how to collaborate as equally as possible. Be clear about what contributions each organization can make and what barriers they might have with inside and outside strategies that the coalition may consider. Be deliberate about avoiding skewed dynamics by setting up structures for voting and decision making that are clear and give equal voice as much as possible. Just because a union has more members and resources, does not automatically mean they should have more decision making power at the table. If unions need the community to win the improvements the coalition is seeking, it is important to have equal voice and power at the table. As Jitu Brown said, “Recognize that everybody at the table has power, it may look different, but we have power that we bring to the table.”

Example Coalition Structures and Agreements



IDENTIFIED STRUCTURE

The coalitions analyzed for this project have taken on a range of different structures based on their local capacity, relationships, and context. What is important is that all coalition groups are clear and in agreement on the structure and expectations. Why is clarity around structure and expectations important? Because coalition work is messy. Clarity is a tool for working through the messy challenges of multiple organizations with different cultures and practices trying to work together. Clarity is particularly important around these specific elements: your coalition goals (what do you want to achieve), how each organization is going to participate (what power and resources does each organization contribute), criteria for decision making (who gets a vote, how many votes, or will you operate by consensus), and the structure that you will work within (are there different levels of decision making or anchor organizations making strategic decisions for a larger group). Some coalitions create written agreements to outline their structure and procedures. Others have found that putting together written agreements distracts from the goals and isn't necessary—as long as you do the work to build trusting relationships. One key tip, written agreement or not, is to have clarity around how money will be handled. Whatever the formation, interviewees found some level of success when most of the key elements of coalition work identified in this report existed.

COALITION COORDINATOR and BRIDGE BUILDERS

Coalition work is not easy and takes time and interpersonal capacity to manage. Having a coordinator who can facilitate meetings, bring partners together, and help resolve internal tensions is a huge asset to any coalition that can afford one. “It takes a person who has the tools to build relationships across race and generations—somebody that everyone can respect. It can be difficult to be principled in that way, especially if you have your own biases. [It takes] someone with emotional intelligence, equipped with support and networks,” says Carlos Rojas who was a co-founder of BEJA and MEJA and previously an interim director at BEJA. Other organizers and coalition participants agree. Rudy Gozvalves from ROSLA believes a coordinator is important and that they have to be strong so they don't get eclipsed by the participating organizations. Austin Sauerbrei stressed that “finding the right person to fill the role is essential.” Ruby Reyes from BEJA

“It takes a person who has the tools to build relationships across race and generations—somebody that everyone can respect. It can be difficult to be principled in that way, especially if you have your own biases. [It takes] someone with emotional intelligence, equipped with support and networks.”

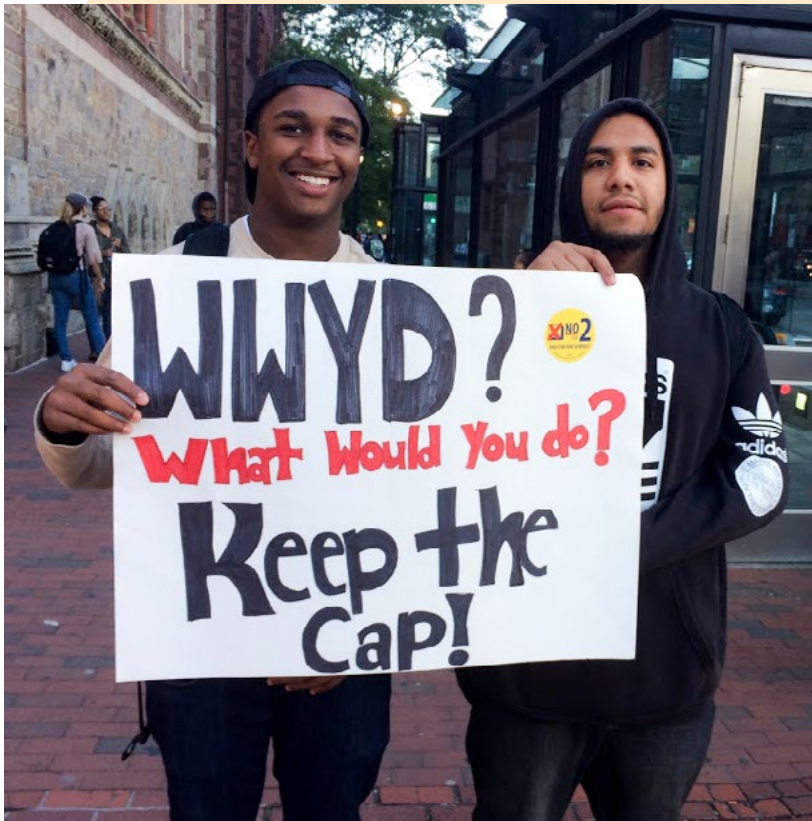
added that coordinator may not be a strong enough role because it doesn't get the respect that the work warrants, instead she advocates for an executive director role to manage power dynamics. She explains that a coordinator is likely to be removed from important decisions about fundraising, budgets, and organization infrastructure or will be doing director level work but not fairly compensated or treated as such.

In addition to the practical coordination and facilitation, it is helpful for the coordinator, or somebody working closely with them, to have a dual understanding of union and community organizing work so they can act as a bridge builder to help participants better understand each other and figure out how to work together. Fred Rose introduces the concept of "Bridge Builders" in his book *Coalitions across the Class Divide: Lessons from the Labor, Peace, and Environmental Movements*. Bridge builders are individuals who have experiences with, or enough understanding of, both labor and progressive movements that help bring organizations together. They are comfortable communicating and "dialoguing across movements", and can easily articulate the common goal everyone is working toward.²⁰ Research shows that they can help translate the different organizational cultures and strategies and help build trust among coalitional partners.²¹ When Bruce Nissen took a closer look at labor-community

coalitions in South Florida, he found that all of the coalitions in that area "...depended heavily on 'bridge builders' who share both labor and community viewpoints, and who actively work to bring labor together with potential non-labor partners."²²

Will Tucker from Jobs to Move America in Alabama explained that they too have key people who span both worlds and who bring those worlds together—they are younger people who have good relationships with local leaders and rank and file union members. Others interviewed saw themselves playing that role for the coalition. Sharon Delugach initially coordinated ROSLA while in her role at AFT—she came into the role with years of experience in both community and labor organizing. She shared stories about ensuring there was a clear process involving the

union, community organizations, and stakeholders before coming to consensus and finalizing common good demands. She acted as a liaison between organizations, running interference and helping to resolve tensions when things got heated. Coalition participants agreed her role was critical to the building of ROSLA.



If a coalition doesn't have the funds for a coordinator, an organization may agree to contribute by taking on this role or a couple organizations might contribute co-coordinators. The Schools Our Students Deserve Coalition in San Antonio is an example of organizations sharing the coordinator responsibility. Sarah Sorensen says, "We would love to have a coordinator for the coalition who could hold the work together for us and that would allow for us to look for ways we could grow and to follow-up on stuff we have started." Some coalitions have tried to rotate the role among organizations, but that can come with additional challenges that might not be worth the effort. In Oakland, Kampala Taiz-Rancifer said they tried rotating, but that didn't work for very long. "There needs to be somebody who can hold it," she said. Having coordination as an assigned and on-going role for one or maybe two people, ensures consistent meeting practices and sharing of information to keep the group moving forward.

DEDICATED FUNDING AND CAPACITY

Coordinators and organizers with organizing expertise lay the groundwork for successful coalition work that moves beyond a reactive and defensive posture to a more long-term and offensive strategy. Long-term organizing requires long-term funding. This is a challenge for a majority of organizations ready to do this work, particularly smaller ones who already run on shoestring staffing and budgets. In some instances, funding for coalition work comes from participating organizations' own budgets or through grants. The biggest challenge to sustained organizing and relationship-building is finding funders who are willing to provide multi-year, sustainable support to make that happen. Many grants are awarded on an annual basis, making long-term planning challenging.

Ideally, comprehensive campaigns will have dedicated organizers from each organization, a dedicated coordinator, research and communications support, and funds for other needed resources. Nissen concluded from his research that paid staff are necessary for success, "Effectiveness of the coalitions depends heavily on their ability to mobilize enough resources to have adequate staffing. All volunteer organizations (or virtually all) never develop beyond a low level of effectiveness."²³

Unfortunately, when we look closer at education justice coalitions, this is a primary challenge to expanding these efforts. Even though public education is one of the last public goods citizens are entitled to and has a highly unionized workforce, funding for these coalitions is nowhere commensurate with the need and threat.

Families and students have a powerful voice in education justice, but they are not always adequately amplified by base building organizations with sustainable funding. When coalitions have struggled to find a strong base of support, organizing or seeking out family and student school groups has been an alternative. For example, when no

one else was organizing parents in their city, St. Paul Federation of Educators started by reaching out to school based parent groups and eventually they formed their own teacher-parent organizing team called the TIGER Team (Teaching and Inquiring about Greed, Equity, and Racism). However, school based groups are typically low on capacity and underfunded to be able to take on the level of organizing required to fully participate in coalitions. Initial funding to develop family and student organizations or additional support for organizing them is needed to ensure they have a spot at coalition tables.



Both the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers have provided some investment in supporting community coalition work over the past 10-15 years, but considering the severity of the threats, it's surprising how little these organizations have dedicated to the work. They have provided training, staff support, and small grants to locals who needed to increase capacity. More recently, however, successful coalitions reported seeing a drop in funding from their national unions. They believe this was due to support being shifted to help or encourage the development of new coalitions. But why not increase the total amount of money budgeted for both established and new coalition work instead of spreading resources thin? In many instances, assistance from state affiliates is barely mentioned, if it exists at all. Some of this could be explained by the varying degrees of how local and state unions are organized or what their relationships to each other look like or even how big the state affiliate is. Regardless, if education unions are serious about building power and partnering with communities, they have to invest beyond small grants and show a long-term commitment to power and base building. If overall spending correlates to gauge an organization's priorities, you might infer that supporting education justice coalitions was of little importance to national and state unions.

As Chris Bohner has reported, US labor unions in general maintain a large amount of cash and investments: “Net assets (assets minus liabilities) grew [by] \$2.6 billion in 2023, from \$32.7 billion in 2022 to \$35.3 billion in 2023. According to data from the Bureau of Economic Affairs, union dues are up \$871 million as of June 2024, likely continuing the trend of asset growth in 2024.”²⁴ According to LM2s, NEA’s net assets in 2022-23 were \$318.7 million. AFT’s net assets are fewer, but both organizations are strong financially and have resources to support this type of organizing. Bohner calls this “finance unionism” where unions spend far less on organizing and strikes than they collect in membership dues and invest the surplus in the financial markets.”²⁵

As one of the largest teachers union locals in the country, UTLA stands out on this front. The union made a strategic decision to support their three coalition partners by providing annual grants of \$75,000 each for the last nine years (which equates to over \$2 million). This has provided long term and sustainable funding for their community partners that has helped to increase the level of successful organizing they are able to do together in protecting their public schools.

On the other hand, in order to manage power dynamics, some argue that community organizations cannot just view their partnerships with unions as a “blank check.” When unions do provide an extensive amount of resources, it can lead to tensions. Former LAANE representative with ROSLA, Rudy Gonzalves explained their experience, “We dealt with the dynamic of UTLA being a funder of the three organizations on a few occasions. While grappling with some controversial issues, such as police free schools, everyone was aware of the power dynamics, but the grantees wanted to be honest and UTLA wanted them to be equal partners. UTLA and all grantees were very principled, and we navigated these dynamics by openly acknowledging them, dedicating time to address tensions, and struggling with the issues at hand.” Other coalition leaders strive to avoid this dynamic. If the union provides a large amount of resources there can be an expectation that they get more control. Vatsady Sivongxay, executive director of MEJA, believes that coalitions need to be committed to finding and diversifying funds for sustainability. Diversifying funds prevents the sole reliance on one organization and allows the work to advance without disruption due to changes in funding reduction or loss, staffing and leadership, or direction of funders.

“Our strategic horizon has to be broad and wide to upend the power structures.”

Diversifying income streams for educational justice coalitions, however, can be challenging. Community organizations dedicated to education justice have experienced a net decline in funding from pro-public education foundations, which has reduced their ability to allocate staff time toward building a local education justice movement. This has created an opportunity for organizations focused on education privatization, which have often succeeded due to the absence of organized resistance. This also means that community organizations participating in educational justice coalitions, who want to maintain principles that align with pro-public education work, are likely turning down potential funding streams that come from organizations that also fund privatization efforts.

In the February 2024 report, “Justice is the Foundation,” commissioned by The Schott Foundation, they examined educational philanthropy through the dual lens of racial equity and racial justice. Racial equity refers to grants aimed at closing the achievement gap between racial groups. Racial justice refers to grants that focus on empowering people to organize in their communities to change systems and structures that reinforce racial inequities. In this review they found:

“K-12 education philanthropy’s already scant investment in racial justice dropped sharply compared to 2018-2020. The \$62 million recorded in 2019-2021—just 0.3% of grantmaking—pales in comparison to the still-meager \$105 million (0.7%) in 2018-2020. Given the monumental task of addressing and solving structural racism in our schools and wider society, this funding inadequacy cannot be overstated.”²⁶

The report offers a number of action steps philanthropic organizations can take to reverse this and other trends outlined in the report, including to “commit to longer-term grant cycles to better accommodate the true pace of systemic change.” As well as: “commit to trust-based philanthropy and sustainable funding practices.” Which is good advice beyond the educational justice world and for any philanthropic funders who want to support labor-community coalition work.

Many organizational leaders shared their frustration with the mentality of funders that is too focused on immediate results (including unions who provide internal grants)—demanding quick results or stories of success that the funder could boast about. They cited that organizing to make systemic change is a longer-term project. When these demands are made by funders, organizations may compromise process and organizing principles—disrupting the path toward that change. As Ben Wilkins stated, “Our strategic horizon has to be broad and wide to upend the power structures.”

ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE FOR COALITIONS

In addition to the above elements for coalition success. Participants offered the following guidance for improving coalition dynamics:

- **Have organizational decision makers and drivers at the table.** Make sure organizational representatives at the table have some authority to take action and can lead the organizing efforts needed to accomplish your goals.
- **Dedicate time to relationship building.** Take time to build relationships with coalition partners and to identify and understand organizational differences up front. Be deliberate about creating opportunities for relationships to be built at all organizational levels, including between rank and file union membership and community members.

- **Manage your expectations.** Expect a spectrum of radicalness from organizations involved and plan accordingly. Manage your expectations of what you can work on together or seek understanding on how far each coalition partner will go in a campaign.
- **Embrace your differences.** To embrace differences and build relationships, community organizations and labor unions should take the time to learn about each other's interests and organizational operations. Community organizations should seek to understand the union's organizational self-interest, what employers they negotiate with and the nature of those relationships, the demographic make-up of the membership and their interests, the leadership of the union (do they come out of a union caucus and what is their caucus platform), and what is the level of risk the union is willing to take and where might they pull back from any organizing a coalition might pursue. Unions should seek to understand the community groups they are in coalition with by learning about the organization's interest in the issue, their organizing philosophy and practices, their membership base (who they are able to mobilize and what their interests are), how they secure funding, and the level of risk they can and are willing to take.
- **Create coalition agreements.** Create agreements that outline your values, goals, decision making procedures, and other specifics for working together as a coalition.
- **Focus your efforts.** Coalitions hoping to form longer term partnerships sometimes start out with too broad of a reach. If the umbrella is wide when identifying partners and issues, you might struggle to get campaigns moving. Broad coalitions are easily fractured and slow because some partners may not be completely aligned or have too many differences, causing a drag in decision making. Scale the scope of your work to your capacity to be successful together.

“We had people who were really good about making sure we weren’t setting people up to fail. You can have a big vision, but scale your campaign so you can have some wins. Design a campaign that is matched to your capacity and power.”

Megan Hester

Former Organizer with New York City Coalition for Educational Justice



Recommendations

In this historical moment, where we see grotesque economic inequality, an upsurge of racism, attacks on public education as the last public good, and real threats of authoritarianism, we simply have to grow our power in order to resist and chart a different direction. We offer the following recommendations to develop, strengthen, and sustain future coalition work in the fight for justice.

DEVELOP A MOVEMENT BUILDING CENTER

Building power for and winning education, economic, environmental, or racial justice, requires a multi-faceted effort that involves a deep and diverse base. This is a base that can only be created by bringing multiple labor and community organizations together to work in coalition or alignment. These fights require focused effort and support for developing key skill sets for organizing and developing campaigns.



The report “Fighting Shape: An Assessment of U.S. Organizing” identifies a “crisis in the organizing talent pipeline.” It discusses a vital lack of training as one contributing factor in this crisis. Organizations too often don’t have robust training, don’t provide mentorship, and don’t integrate training into the day-to-day of organizing. The report recommends:

“...new organizers need more training in the basics of recruitment, leadership identification, leadership development, and campaigns (including power analysis and escalation), advanced organizers need training in strategy and the skills of supervision and leadership. Many interviewees stated that organizers and members alike do not have a robust analysis of root causes, power, or history.”

Interviewees for this project agreed that there is a need for training and mentorship in order to expand capacity for this work. Organizers see a need for not only training to create a pipeline into organizing, but also ongoing mentoring and

support for organized leaders to hone their leadership abilities. As one participant said, having common space for this type of support would not only build capacity but help build tighter alliances.

Furthermore, a lack of historical collaboration and misunderstandings about each other’s goals and structures have sometimes resulted in mistrust and suspicion between labor unions and community organizations. A movement-building center that intentionally brings labor and community organizations together could be designed to ensure strategic support and training between partners. This kind of space would help facilitate clear and direct actions and campaigns in the field that are planned and executed collaboratively by participating organizations. It could offer the following types of support to organizations:

- **Coalition development:** A center could provide guidance on implementing key coalition elements outlined in this report and reinforce the guidance on creating strong coalition dynamics.
- **Organizing training:** There is a need for training that develops quality organizing skills and practices, including training for 1:1s and other basic base building skills.
- **Political education:** Political education deepens understanding and broadens the context for community coalition work. We recommend developing efforts to do political education with union members, community organizations, and potential members or activists, particularly for coalitions who want to build bridges across issue based groups (e.g. educators collaborating with housing activists or worker centers).
- **Conflict resolution and restorative justice supports:** Preparing to work through the inevitability of conflict when working in coalition will make it less disruptive to operations and outcomes in the long run. Coalition leaders expressed a need for external resources of support that help with the establishment of conflict resolution and restorative justice practices and/or guidance and facilitation during times of conflict.
- **Mentorship network for new union leaders:** New union leaders need mentorship as they work toward transforming their union and building a base. A movement building center could create a network of experienced local labor organizers and other local leaders to provide guidance, advice, and insights on navigating internal organizing work as well as coalition work.
- **Support for unions improving internal structures to organize members:** Interviewees for this project were clear that for coalitions to be successful, local unions have to engage in some internal organizing before participating in community coalition work. A movement building center could support union locals in the following:
 - Developing structures and plans for organizing members at the worksite and, if applicable, for contract negotiations;
 - Building up strong commitments of support for community engagement work from the executive/governing board, demonstrated with designated funds in the local budget; and
 - Creating a clear decision making structure and delineation of duties for carrying out internal responsibilities among staff and release-time leadership, including specific designations for who will hold community relationships.
- **Research and communications support for coalitions:** There is not an apparent body of strategic research or communications that is widely available to coalitions in the education justice field. Larger organizations may have these resources built into their infrastructure, but mid to smaller sized organizations don't have automatic access to staff with specific research or analytics expertise. Further exploration on how to support and ensure quality execution of research and communications could be informative and helpful to new coalitions.

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING SOURCES

In order to support the long-term relationship and organizational capacity-building that is needed for successful coalition work, ongoing, sustainable, and flexible funding sources are needed. Philanthropic sources can adopt longer-term grant cycles and commit to an approach that sees grantee relationships as an ongoing partnership rather than a one-time transaction.²⁷ It is time for philanthropic institutions that are committed to economic and racial justice, democracy, job quality, and family and child welfare to see this work as an interconnected pathway toward a better society. Looking at these collective issues in a silo or separate from one another dilutes our outcomes. Working together provides the opportunity to build power and win on multiple fronts.

To show a real commitment to this work, state and national unions must also choose to invest more long-term resources in locals engaging in coalition work and locals that want to transform their practices to social justice unionism. From 2012-2016, the Service Employee International Union made a bold decision to invest tens of millions of dollars in the “Fight For 15” campaign and as a result won \$150 billion in raises for 26 million workers.²⁸ The moment we are in, calls for similarly bold and large investments into organizing from labor unions. Large national and state unions can provide crucial funding through unrestricted, multi-year funding for local labor-community coalitions.





Conclusion

With the threats to our democratic institutions increasing, the importance of labor and community organizations to work together to strengthen our democracy is more critical than ever before. There is an urgent need to pool our power in the form of coalition organizing in order to make change and protect our public schools and institutions. Greater investment of time and resources into labor-community partnerships can effectively advance progressive agendas and ideas for decades by establishing best-practices for communication and collaboration, provide ongoing funding models, and support leadership development and membership growth. If labor unions and community organizations come together in struggle, they will emerge as a powerful force that can take on larger scale battles to reclaim public goods for the public. Together we can combat the culture of misinformation by building bridges of trust and fellowship that can revitalize our labor movement and community organizing culture. Most importantly, we can provide a renewed sense of community and hope for generations to come.

Full List of Participants

We like to express our appreciation to the following individuals for their time and expertise which contributed greatly to the development of this report:

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**Designates that the individual is no longer with the organization*

Endnotes

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Appendix

A collection of tools and materials for coalition leaders and organizers can be found at the links below.

-  [*Checklists and Steps For Creating a Coalition*](#)
-  [*Example Coalition Platforms and Visions*](#)
-  [*Example Coalition Structures and Agreements*](#)
-  [*Campaign Planning Materials*](#)
-  [*Power Mapping Resources*](#)
-  [*Communications Guides and Toolkits*](#)
-  [*Example Surveys*](#)
-  [*Other Miscellaneous Examples and Materials*](#)