COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PARTNERS

FROM TOKENISM TO PARTNERSHIP

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About CEP

We believe that the change necessary to ensure that every child has access to a high-quality school is only possible and sustainable when those most impacted by educational inequity are partners in the work and decision making. Community Engagement Partners (CEP) supports education organizations and leaders across the nation, as they partner with and learn from their local communities to create and sustain great schools.

About this Paper

This paper explores common community engagement approaches that grasstops education reform organizations take to advance education systems change. The creation of this paper was greatly influenced by the career experiences of Community Engagement Partners' Founder, Charles McDonald, during his time spent as a grassroots educational justice organizer and current leader within grasstops education reform circles. For the past three years, Community Engagement Partners has conducted field and desk research on community engagement, advised and coached education organizations on developing and strengthening their approaches to community engagement, and thought-partnered with expert practitioners in the field of community engagement, community organizing, policy advocacy, and electoral politics to inform the definitions, tools, and frameworks found within the paper.

Our primary audience is leaders at local and national education foundations, school district and CMO leaders, and policy advocacy organizations, who are committed to transforming local and state education systems to better serve poor and BIPOC students.
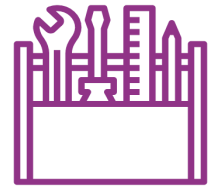
This paper has three primary objectives:

Provide a starting point for leaders to reflect on how their organizational practices, strategies, and policies may serve as avenues or roadblocks to support successful civic-change efforts
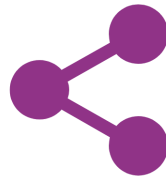
Share three common approaches, and likely outcomes, to community engagement led by grasstops education reform organizations

Offer a tool- The Tokenism to Partnership Spectrum- to help leaders and organizations reflect on their organizational approach to building partnerships with the intended beneficiaries of their work, now and in the future

From Tokenism to Partnership

As we enter 2020, our nation is in the midst of unprecedented political, economic, social, technological, and environmental turmoil and change.[1] The confluence of which presents enormous challenges for the future of our country, and especially for the growing number of young Americans living in poverty, and BIPOC and immigrant youth. Preparing our youth to take on and overcome these challenges must be a top priority for anyone concerned about the future of our nation. For local and state education leaders, this will most certainly require building popular support for ideas and policies that will create and scale innovative school options to meet the needs of current and future generations of students.

The past thirty years of education reform, primarily initiated by grasstop elites, brought much-needed attention to the disparities in our education system,[i] advanced policies that created the conditions to grow the supply of high-quality schools, and attracted diverse, talented teachers, school leaders, system leaders, and entrepreneurs to the education sector via innovative programs and alternative pathways. Today, students in cities like Indianapolis and New Orleans are experiencing accelerated academic growth, and more poor families, and BIPOCr in cities across the country have greater access to high-quality school options than ever before.[ii] Despite these successes, and overwhelming support from a majority of Black and Latino voters,[iii] there are too few cities we can point to as examples of where this type of grasstops education reform has worked at scale.

Building the popular support required to transform American public education systems designed to produce racial and economic inequity is no small undertaking. Historically, there has always been resistance to popular demands for educational equity advanced by poor people, BIPOC, and their allies. [iv] Furthermore, powerful cultural frames[v] have aided the American public's acceptance for gaps in student achievement between poor students and their wealthier peers, which have remained consistent for 50 years.[vi] Currently, our country's political climate serves as a potential barrier to education innovation from a policy perspective. Political polarization in the United States is at an all-time high across party, race, and gender lines, as well as between urban and rural communities,[vii] and recent polling indicates that this trend is expected to continue.[viii] Indeed, we are a far cry from the 2000s when two presidential administrations crossed party lines to make education reform a priority and big city mayors had the political will to usher in sweeping reforms.

[1] See Appendix A for a list of trends.

There will always be staunch opposition and resistance, by protectors of the status quo, to ideas and policies that seek to transform systems to produce equitable outcomes for poor and BIPOC students. But what if the current challenges education reformers face in advancing educational equity are as much a result of past unforced errors as they are an organized opposition?[ix] What if early leaders weren't serious enough about co-creating diverse school options aligned to community needs and values,[x] underestimated how fiercely opponents would resist change, undervalued the expertise of families and students in developing solutions, alienated potential allies through their "decide, announce, and defend" approach to change, and under-utilized and underfunded community engagement and grassroots organizing to capture hearts, minds, and advance supportive policies?[xi]

The past thirty years of top-down education reform as a viable approach to systems change has run its course. The team at the Center for Innovation in Education have succinctly summarized some of the challenges from the past era of education reform and its present-day implications.

…dissatisfaction with outcomes, resistance to standardized approaches, testing opt out movements among parents, and rising voices from communities feeling that systems have been doing things to them more than with them. The result was a shift in federal policy direction reflected in greater overall flexibility in ESSA…Subsequent change in administration (federal) brought greater regulatory flexibility. This has left state system leaders with significantly less federal direction and federal cover and greater opportunities to advance their own vision.[i]

In its wake, there lies fresh opportunities for grasstop education reformers, who historically struggled to strike a balance between the efficiency of technical policy change and the strategic patience of amassing popular support for ideas, to build powerful local partnerships with the intended beneficiaries of their work. Partnerships that will co-create and co-produce localized visions and strategies for educational equity that address broader social justice issues and advance technical policy changes. This is by no means easy, and as with all change work, there are no guarantees or shortcuts. It will require disciplined commitment to the fundamentals of civic-change strategies, a deep belief that we can win when we act together on common interests, and an unwavering commitment to innovation that centers equity and creates greater opportunities and life outcomes for future generations of Americans.

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Tokenism to Partnership Spectrum

The Tokenism to Partnership Spectrum is a resource CEP created to highlight three common community engagement purposes, *Tokenism, Inclusion, and Partnership* , we've observed among grasstops education reform organizations. We define each purpose in figure 1. The Spectrum highlights the key actions, ideas, and policies across the spectrum, as well as the likely outcomes. Since 2018, we have used a few different versions of this tool with dozens of organizations and hundreds of education leaders. We consider this tool to be a living, breathing document that will likely continue to evolve as new lessons emerge from our work with partners. .

We recommend the following process for using the Tokenism to Partnership Spectrum tool:

- Read the *Key Terms and Definitions* on pages 12-13
- Review the *Tokenism to Partnership Spectrum* (page 7) and *Examples from the Field* (page 8)
- Reflecting on the work of your organization, consider where it typically falls along each row of the spectrum. Given your assessment within each category, determine the organization's overall community engagement approach. Consider what examples or evidence you can point to that illustrates your assessment- make notes on the template on page 9. *Note- it is rare that an organization cleanly aligns with one approach across all categories, and it is common for leaders to plot their organization between an approach on each category, as well as the outcome*.

Figure 1: Definitions

TOKENISM	INCLUSION	PARTNERSHIP
The episodic mobilization of grassroots stakeholders for public cover and/or support for previously determined technical policy reforms	Ongoing relationship building with key community stakeholders with the intent of gaining input and public support for an organization's plan, ideas, programs, and/or policy reforms	Co-creating, co-producing and co-leading a common vision and strategy with key community stakeholders in order to address broader social-justice issues and advance technical policy reforms
1	2	3

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Tokenism to Partnership Spectrum

INEQUITABLE & NOT INCLUSIVE ←→ EQUITABLE, INCLUSIVE, & ANTI-RACIST

	TOKENISM	INCLUSION	PARTNERSHIP
Organizational Support for Racial & Economic Justice	• Racist and elitist ideas and policies are avoided or dealt with superficially • No support for political education to develop critical consciousness of staff and board	• Racist and elitist ideas and polices are occasionally addressed, often in the aftermath of a crisis • Organization is publicly committed to DEI Staff are encouraged to "drive their own" political education development	• Organization is publicly committed to advancing ideas and policies that support racial and economic justice • Organization provides ongoing political education resources and support for staff & board • Organization hosts events, activities, and programs to support the political education of community stakeholders
Organizational Support for Community Engagement	Organization lacks the following: • Staff with credibility across diverse community stakeholder groups • Staff with civic-change expertise • Dedicated budget and resources for community engagement • A long-term community engagement plan	• Community engagement is viewed as a "lever" or "workstream" • Well-credentialed person of color is likely hired to lead stakeholder engagement who may not have prior civic-change expertise • Limited budget and resources for community engagement, relative to other workstream budgets	• Community engagement is viewed as an organization-wide priority, and central to the organizational strategy • Organization has multiple leaders with civic-change expertise on staff and board, and a well-developed community engagement plan • Organization has the capacity and resources to deploy multiple civic change strategies • Organization hosts civic change capacity building opportunities for community stakeholders
Civic Change Vision and Strategy Creation	• Organization generates a vision & strategy for change that prioritizes the short-term self-interest of grasstop elites • Organization may create space to publicly share their vision and strategy • No opportunities created for intended beneficiaries to provide input or feedback on the vision and strategy	• Organization generates a vision and strategy to advance technical policy reforms • Organization creates occasional space for diverse stakeholder groups to participate in generating ideas that may influence the direction of the organizational vision and strategy • Organization publicly shares their vision and strategy, and are transparent on how input was used	• Vision and strategy are grounded in an engagement process that includes root cause, landscape, and power analysis • Strategy includes base-building, leadership development, communications, technical policy changes, electoral politics, and voter mobilization • Clear roles for stakeholders and transparency on how decisions are made
OUTCOMES	• Transactional relationships with grassroots stakeholders • Patronizing relationships with credible community organizations and leaders • May advance technical policy reforms, but change will likely be viewed as illegitimate • Reform is more susceptible to be rolled back over time	• Long-term relationships with key community stakeholders • Consent from supporters and organizational allies on technical policy reforms • Likely to advance reforms, but less likely to build community power, leverage, and stamina to ensure proper implementation of reforms in the face of resistance	• Healthy, mutually beneficial relationships grounded in trust and transparency • Policy change that addresses broader social-justice issues and technical system change • Emergence of new leaders, organizations, and institutions that prioritize the values and needs of BIPOC, immigrants, and the poor • Coalitions with the power, leverage, and stamina to overcome resistance from opponents

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Examples from the Field

TOKENISM

A wealthy, white education donor with limited relationships within the communities most impacted by inequity, believes the local school district is not moving fast enough to bring "New Orleans-style" reform to the district. He has influence with the Superintendent and the majority of School Board members who need public cover to advance policies to close low-performing schools and give school leaders and teachers greater autonomy on personnel and curriculum decisions. As a result, the funder partners with a national education advocacy organization to launch a "parent-empowerment" initiative targeting low-income black families. Neither the donor nor the national organization have experience in grassroots engagement. Within a matter of months, they hire staff with no ties to the community, who create a mission, vision, and choose the programming and campaigns the parents will run. They recruit parents to participate in paid activities like campaign events, school board meetings, and rallies. Within a year, there is constant staff turnover and dissatisfaction among parents about the value of their voice in the organization's efforts. Regardless, members of the school board approach the donor with a plan to pass a controversial set of reform policies if his organization can mobilize parents for a show of support at the next school board meeting. A group of organization's parents are paid to attend. Some speak during public comment. Others hold up signs, and they all wear matching t-shirts. The board narrowly votes to pass the policy.

INCLUSION

A long-standing, local education reform organization with tremendous financial and political power, has successfully transformed the school district over the course of a decade by influencing state and local politics. Their vision and strategy for education change are not without vocal opposition, mostly from the local teacher association and their community allies, but the organization has been able to neutralize their opponents by winning public support of some of the most well-respected Black and Latino led institutions in the city. They were able to do so with the support of a talented, well-regarded leader of their community engagement team. The leader, who came with deep ties to the communities served, was able to build and repair the organization's reputation among the city's most influential leaders of color by including them in work of the organization, making introductions to the organization's wealthy, white donors, and creating opportunities to co-host community events that centered the needs and interests of professional leaders of color. Overtime, the leader influenced and motivated the leadership team and board to prioritize internal DEI work, which led to the hiring of more talented leaders of color with ties to communities served. Eventually, the school incubation work of the organization made community engagement a required component of their application process and program curriculum. The organization also evolved to make micro-grants to organizations that served students and families when they weren't in school.

PARTNERSHIP

A local funding aggregate was created to transform the city and education system in order to create a high-quality school for all children. The board and founder align on the organizational core values of Community, Equity, Integrity, Excellence and Sustainability. The founder intentionally stewards a board that is majority women of color who have deep ties to the city. The board and staff agree to take part in an ongoing race, equity, and inclusion learning journey to build an anti-racist organization. Recognizing that transformation change requires building grassroots power, over a third of the funder's investments are directed to grantees leading parent organizing, advocacy, and school board candidate work. The funder is currently in the process of building a coalition of diverse stakeholders to explore broad social justice issues with the intention of taking collective action on a common strategy that will advance policies leading to more equitable outcomes for families and children.

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Tokenism to Partnership Spectrum

	TOKENISM	INCLUSION	PARTNERSHIP
Organizational Support for Racial & Economic Justice			
Organizational Support for Community Engagement			
Civic Change Vision and Strategy Creation			
OUTCOMES			

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Conclusion

Of course, transforming organizations and education systems does not happen by following a tool and hiring a community engagement team. Civic-change work is filled with uncertainty: there is no guarantee of success, the impact may be difficult to define, and results are unlikely to happen quickly, according to plan. Leaders can face entrenched social, culture, and political factors at any given time, forcing them to adapt strategies. This is difficult work that requires courageous leaders taking disciplined action in the face of uncertainty in order to build the power, leverage and stamina required to win. Winning will also require deeper resource investments for community engagement and organizing, including philanthropic commitment to research, scaling and replicating best practices, entrepreneurship (especially leaders of color with deep ties to the communities that reform efforts seek to serve), developing talent pipelines, and leadership development.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A: Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental Trends

The under 18 age population of the United States is a majority people of color, the foreign-born share of the total population is 13% up from 6% in 1970, but schools are increasingly racially and economically segregated[i]

Despite a more racially and ethnically diverse student population, the teaching profession remains mostly white and female. There is a growing acknowledgement that teachers of color as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts impact student achievement, but these efforts are under-utilized[ii]

Since the 2008 recession, young people continue to be impacted by rising economic inequality and are projected to experience historically low-levels of economic mobility in their lifetime[iii]

Social media and isolation are leading to a rise in mental health problems, and poor relationship and communication skills[iv]

State and local funding for schools in economically disadvantaged locations remains insufficient to meet the growing learning, social and emotional needs of students[v]

Environmental degradation is creating more natural disasters that may increase family mobility and impact funding available for education[vi]

Appendix B: Terms and Definitions

TERMS	DEFINITIONS
COMMUNITY	The key individuals, groups, and institutions that participate in and share a city or region. In the context of education, "community" includes, but is not limited to: students, educators, families, administrative leaders, educator associations, neighborhood associations, nonprofit service providers, policy and think tank organizations, faith-based institutions, elected and appointed government officials, corporations, business leaders, funders, voters, and media outlets
EDUCATION REFORM	Education policies and ideas that seek to improve the quality of public education for students of color and poor students in large, urban school districts and cities. Ideas and policies include, but are not limited to:· -Accountability systems primarily based on student academic achievement· -Alternate pathways to school and district leadership· -Entrepreneurship· -Greater autonomy for school leaders and educators· -Providing low-income families more high-quality schools options in order to meet the needs of their students. Quality standards largely based on student academic outcomes· -Setting high academic standards and expectations for academic for all students
KEY GRASSROOTS STAKEHOLDERS	Key grassroots stakeholders are the individuals and groups within a city most impacted by educational inequity, the public education system, and education reform efforts. These individuals and groups are families and parents, students, and educators
GRASSROOTS EDUCATION ORGANIZATION	An organization traditionally led or founded by community members historically excluded from influencing the ideas, policies, and politics that impact their lives. Historically, these organizations are created to build the collective power of ordinary people to influence and shift culture, policies, and politics to support common self-interest
GRASSTOPS STAKEHOLDERS	The individuals and groups within a city that have formal decision-making power or greatly influence the final decision makers. Examples include, school board members, superintendents, mayors, state legislators, funders, district and school leaders, and reporters
GRASSTOPS EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS	Organizations whose mission is to advance ideas and policies that create the conditions to reform traditional public education systems. The organizations are commonly critiqued for their top-down, behind the scenes approach to education systems change
POLITICAL EDUCATION	Trainings, workshops, coaching, programs, activities, and events designed to build the critical consciousness of individuals and organizations

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Appendix C: Terms and Definitions

TERMS	DEFINITIONS
CIVIC-CHANGE CAPACITY BUILDING	Trainings, workshops, coaching, programs, activities, and events designed to enhance the civic-change knowledge, skills, and abilities of individuals and organizations (including but not limited to: community organizing and mobilization, strategic storytelling, community engagement, policy advocacy, and electoral politics)
ORGANIZING	The process by which a group of community members build the individual leadership and collective power necessary to improve their community This process includes: -Organizing relationships through listening and building community, trust, and respect -Identifying issues and solutions -Mobilizing communities around those issues to win improvement in their quality of life, develop leaders, and build power -Build and maintain an enduring organization
POLICY ADVOCACY	The process of influencing public policy toward a desired outcome
ELECTORAL POLITICS	The process of electing leaders to political office through the creation of 501c4, 527, or Political Action Committees (PACs)

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