DIGNITY IN
SCHOOLS
CAMPAIGN

Building Narrative Power:
Lessons on Storytelling for Education Justice

May 2025

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Introduction

In the fall of 2020, the Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) obtained slides from a presentation directed at parents that was warning against Critical Race Theory in schools. Most baffling was a list of terms that people should see as a "[trojan horse](#)" for CRT in schools, including "equity," "social and emotional learning" and "restorative justice." It was truly ridiculous, but we knew it was a sign of things to come: meaning had been stripped from so many of the words that we held dear to describe our work and our vision, replaced by distortion, lies and manipulation. After a series of major successes in our movement including the removal of police in schools in multiple cities and districts, and several years of major policy wins against exclusionary discipline practices on the state and local level, there was an abrupt and destructive backlash. Members reported that nearly every aspect of education policy on the local level was being tainted by this harmful discourse and they couldn't keep up with the constant need to combat the harmful narratives.

As we were assessing our next steps as an organization in this volatile political climate, we realized that after nearly 20 years of work, we have the data on the extreme racial disparities in schools discipline, we have the research to show the harms of criminalizing young people in schools, we have drafted the model policies for what schools can be doing differently. What we really need right now is to build up the power we have with our members to define the problem of school pushout, map out a path to transform schools, and to have our way of looking at it lead to real change. Essentially, we needed to build up our narrative power.

As DSC is beginning our transition to focus on narrative power-building as our main strategy, one of the first steps we wanted to take was to reflect on how we have engaged in this work up until this point, and share our lessons learned. This document features case examples from three member organizations who were successful in shifting narratives in their local work, as well as a brief summary of some of the biggest narrative changes we have been a part of in our history. We also lay out some of the new challenges we are facing in the current climate, as well as examples of some of the most pressing issues for us to tackle in the coming years.

Origins of the Dignity in Schools Campaign

Grassroot organizations and community leaders came together organically and founded the Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) in the mid-2000s in response to a rising tide of punitive discipline that resulted in the criminalization of children. As they came together to share stories and strategies for transforming their schools, organizers realized they were battling similar conditions in their communities. In particular, the founders of DSC identified a consistent pattern across the country: the "tough on crime" political culture that was so dominant in the 1990s was being mirrored in the education system, impacting even the youngest students and drastically changing the climate students, parents and school staff faced each day walking through the school doors.

In addition to the serious consequences many students faced, including suspensions, expulsions and arrests, organizers also kept hearing the same thing from the people most impacted by these policies: a fundamental indignity that ran through so many of the interactions students and families had with their local schools and education systems. Students are required to attend school, and parents and guardians will be penalized for not sending their children to school - and yet these environments were outright hostile to many communities, especially Black and Latino families who were being actively dehumanized and criminalized in both mass media and the larger culture. This creates a criminalizing trap - forced by law into an environment that treats you like they didn't want you there and would find any excuse to push you out - sometimes right into the criminal justice system.

Changing the Narrative to School Pushout

Framing the narrative

Framing the narrative has been a reflexive instinct for DSC from the very beginning. The coalition was founded in part to take people's local struggles and pull them together into a cohesive story about what was happening in schools, why it was important, and what solutions would actually work to address the root causes of these problems. Some of these foundational concepts were:

School Pushout

Instead of referring to a dropout problem, or calling students "dropouts," DSC flipped the narrative to talk about students who were pushed out of school by a system that failed them.

The-School-to-Prison Pipeline

Instead of focusing only on individual policy issues like harsh school discipline, or police in schools, or the lack of quality educational services, referring to a School-to-Prison pipeline paints a clear picture of an interlocking system with many moving parts that can push students off track from meeting their full potential, and on to a pipeline that can end in the criminal justice system.

Education as a Human Right

By talking about the denial of education as a denial of human rights, it elevated the urgency of responding to these issues, united the fight for educational justice with other movements for human rights, and opened up the opportunity to talk about the intersecting systems that deny people human rights to things like water, food, housing and medical care.

These powerful images and concepts embraced by the coalition have helped to define the issue, both for convincing decision makers and the general public of addressing our demands, and also to communicate to impacted families that what was happening to them was not their fault and that they could be a part of the movement to stop it.

Evolution of Our Narrative Power-Building Work

In the following years, DSC fleshed out its vision with three foundational documents. In 2009, DSC drafted the National Resolution Against School Pushout, and in 2012 we released both our *Model School Code on Education and Dignity*, and launched our *Solutions Not Suspensions Campaign* calling for a moratorium on out-of-school suspensions. Each document was drafted collaboratively with our members from across the country. They were able to weigh in on how the national patterns were playing out in their local contexts, and catch any instances where our proposed solutions might have unintended negative consequences for any communities, or where our language might be interpreted differently due to local conditions. This was slow work that required intentional conversations and featured many conflicts, but it meant that by the time our work was out in the world, it had already been pressure-tested internally.

This was especially true in the roughly two-year process of developing our next campaign platform calling for the full removal of police from schools, Counselors Not Cops (now more holistically named *Community Not Cops* - a narrative shift in and of itself). We had to have many conversations about any reservations our member organizations might have to us calling for an end to police in schools at the national level, and what needed to be in place to address those reservations. For example, some people just wanted to make sure there would be someone at the door ensuring everyone who came into the school was supposed to be there. They did not need this person to be a police officer, but in so many schools this role was filled by law enforcement of some kind so when they imagined removing police, they assumed that would mean there would be no one there to ensure student safety. This example shows how even in our development of policy platforms, connecting a person who knows there is a problem with a solution that resonates for them on a deep level is narrative shifting work. In order to succeed, we had to listen and engage with all the different meanings a word, colloquialism or concept may hold for people, both individually and collectively.

We decided to focus on our narrative work

while we were drafting our next strategic plan in 2024. As the rhetoric around the national presidential election raged around us, and we assessed what some of the greatest needs were in the movement to end school pushout and defend the right to education for all students, we recognized that DSC members had a particular talent for narrative shifting work that could make a long-term difference. Following the summer of 2020 we had already begun to do more narrative work under the project of "DSC Decodes," a term one of our members came up with as we struggled to respond to the anti-CRT backlash that was impacting education work in nearly every part of the US. When groups like Moms for Liberty distorted terms like "equity" to mean the opposite, we had to "decode" together so we and our members could adequately respond. Concern grew about Project 2025, a presidential transition memo by a right-wing think tank that was calling for the dismantling of the Department of Education, among other destructive and hateful policies. We identified a major issue that wasn't being discussed in the media or in the movement conversations we were a part of: some people on our side were unlikely to defend it because the system had failed so many people. While we could never uncritically defend the institution, we had to think through what would be more damaging towards the students and families we work with. In response, we released **DSC Decodes: Project 2025** as one of our first public resources that was part of our shift to narrative work, and with the goal of helping members and allies navigate the noise of the campaign season and then the new presidential administration as it enacts proposals from Project 2025 one-by-one.

Our Definition of Narrative Power Building

We are still figuring out together exactly what we mean by "building narrative power." We have drafted this case study in part to figure that out.

ReFrame director hermelinda cortés describes narrative power as "an invisible yet powerful force shaping people's beliefs, ideas, and behaviors." For DSC, our strategy of narrative power-building is not just about ideas or words, but is grounded in real-world campaigns and movements. *The types of narrative power we want to be building with our members include:*

1   **The autonomy to create your own narrative about yourself, your community and you work, painting the full picture, rather than having some other story imposed onto you.**

2   **The tools and vision to be able to identify what is really happening and to declare that you want something different.**

3   **The insight to create effective counter narratives that don't rely on the limited terms and framing that has previously dominated the conversation.**

4   **The ability to define what the "common sense" is about an issue.**

5   **The power to see those ideas reflected in the decision-making around an issue, either because you have successfully convinced a decision-maker, you have become the decision-maker, or you have built up enough influence that whether or not a decision-maker agrees with you they have to respond to you.**

Case Examples

In this section we will go deeper into some of the narratives we have been a part of shifting as a coalition on the national level. After that, we will give some examples of our members who have flexed their narrative power in their local work. In most of these cases, there has been a feedback loop, with the local experiences shaping how we frame the problems and solutions, and the national narrative bolstering local demands.

School Pushout

Referring to a person as a "dropout" has been an established term since as early as the 1920s in the United States. Different generations have had different approaches to the not uncommon scenario of someone not completing their education, from looking at it as a tragic product of dysfunctional families or communities, or even a necessary economic reality for those advocating for students to be allowed to leave school early to support their families. A 2008 review of the literature on the school dropout problem over the previous 25 years showed a focus on weighing the importance of different characteristics of the students, with only a few looking at the factors present in the schools themselves. By calling a student a dropout, whether it be in a patronizing or pathologizing way, the image conjured is of a student choosing to stop their education rather than the factors that may have led to that decision that were out of their control, and/or were happening to other students like them in large numbers. Focusing on the individual without looking for example at the impacts that institutional racism has on students of color, the huge racial disparities in suspensions, expulsions and arrests can be used to fuel racist stereotypes rather than pointing to racist policies that create the disparities. For organizers and community leaders seeing this pattern play out over and over, it was clear that if this problem was going to be addressed, the narrative would have to be completely reframed to put the emphasis rightfully on the systematic factors that were pushing students out.

The concept of pushout needed to be introduced to the larger public as a rebuttal to the standard narrative of the dropout. In describing the problem, we often said, "there is not a dropout crisis, there is a pushout crisis," attempting to transfer whatever concerns the listener had about students dropping out of school to a new term that was more accurate. We then filled in the definition of pushout to include all the various ways marginalized students, in particular Black and Latino students, students of color, students with disabilities, LGBTQ students and immigrant students, were both being targeted for harsh punishment and exclusion, as well as being concentrated in schools with less academic resources. We use school pushout as a broader and sometimes more accurate description of what we see in schools than the school-to-prison pipeline, because many students are pushed out of school but don't end up in the criminal justice system, however they have still been denied their right to an education and likely dealt a lifelong blow to their potential economic stability. The first logo for DSC was a single hand representing the forces of pushout, and one of our most enduring slogans has been "push back against school pushout." The term has gained traction as we have seen it go from something we always had to explain, at first always contrasting it with "dropout" and then on it's own, to now a term embraced by many in the education field and education justice world (and even an Ending PUSHOUT bill introduced in Congress). We still have additional work to do to have it fully break through as a commonly known expression, but we and others have laid a strong foundation.

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School-to-Prison Pipeline, School-to-Jail Track, Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track

This example illustrates the complexity of doing this work on a national level when there are local cultures and contexts where certain words don't read the same as they do in others. Since DSC came together because of existing organizing work that was happening in some degree of isolation for many years (decades in some cases) the same narrative was articulated in slightly different ways in different places. Many of our members were already defining the problem by stating that there was a systemic problem that allowed some students to follow a path that led them to reach their full potential, while other students were put on a separate path that led to economic precarity and the criminal justice system. What to call these divergent paths mattered less than ensuring that people clearly understood how the system functioned. For DSC we have tended to use the School-to-Prison Pipeline in our general work, but have tried to ensure that there was space for regional differences not to be erased.

In the South, many organizations and community leaders use the term Schoolhouse-to-Jailhouse Track, which has an effective rhythm and symmetry to it. In other parts of the country, the terms schoolhouse and jailhouse are not used as often so it wouldn't be as effective in those places. In places where there were already debates and conversations happening about putting students on different tracks based on perceived ability, there was a baseline understanding of that phenomenon. Adding another example of a track that sends students on a trajectory to jail utilized imagery that many people were already familiar with, and so some of our members have used School-to-Jail Track effectively, for example in California. The benefits of using the term School-to-Prison Pipeline were that it conjured the image of an industrial system that students had to navigate, with strong forces pushing targeted students down the pipeline, like water rushing through a pipe.

Each of these options have strengths, and this example shows how this type of narrative work is different from a strategic communications model that focuses on branding and marketing as if our campaign work is a product to be sold. If we were to follow that type of strategy, it would never be advisable to have three slightly different "brands." Perhaps we would be advised by experts to strictly enforce using one single term and advise our members to do the same. But our work is not a product to be sold, and we have learned in this example and many others that complexity is inherent in our work and it will not benefit us or the larger movement to try to control the way people speak about the issues that impact them. Ideally, as we expand our narrative-focused work, we will find new ways to thread together multiple ideas generated by different communities into a cohesive story.

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Zero-Tolerance

[Zero-tolerance laws](#) in the adult criminal justice system meant harsh prison sentences and most importantly that there would be no second-chances for anyone committing these types of crimes. This rigid standard was then applied to children and adolescents, for whom the punishments were automatic suspensions, expulsions, and even the criminal justice system. School systems touted their zero-tolerance approach to discipline as a positive step to combat the extremely racialized wars on drugs, crime, and gangs that were being splashed on newspaper headlines and evening news broadcasts constantly. Some of the dominant narratives that were pushing this forward and creating a perceived crisis were the ideas in so-called [Broken Windows Policing](#) models that called for more incarceration for smaller crimes (like breaking windows) to lead to less violent crimes, and the racist caricature of the "[superpredator](#)" youth, promoted breathlessly by [politicians](#) and [high-profile figures](#). In this context, school officials felt emboldened to implement harsher and harsher punishment for students as a solution to these manufactured fear tactics.

DSC set out to unpack the concept of zero-tolerance and lift up examples of the damaging impact of these policies on real students and their families. We asked why young people should not be given second chances, especially for things that in previous generations were considered normal or understandable student behavior. We asked how denying students an education en masse was going to help them become successful adults or improve society. We asked why adult criminal justice approaches would ever be considered appropriate to apply to kids in schools in the first place.

We lifted up stories to help make our point, both examples of students who made real mistakes that were given no compassion whatsoever and their lives were irreparably thrown off track, and stories that were beginning to show up in the media of students being expelled for making a [gun shape](#) with their fingers (or a [pastry](#)). It was important to give examples that included students who had been involved in serious incidents to show that even in these circumstances zero-tolerance did more harm than good. Rather than conveying a strong approach to addressing serious incidents, these examples showed the ridiculousness of applying a rigid standard to all situations, even when common sense showed that it was the wrong call. Some of the stories of students being expelled for nonsensical reasons featured white students in middle class or affluent areas, and that likely also influenced the change in perception. People who didn't see themselves or their families as being targeted by zero-tolerance discipline realized that, if applied correctly, it meant zero-tolerance for their mistakes too.

Slowly the term zero-tolerance started to have a negative connotation, including on the federal level, with the Department of Education discouraging these practices and promoting alternatives. The momentum continued with school discipline [reform laws and policies](#) enacted between especially between 2012 and 2020 across the country, specifically succeeding and at the state and local level because they put policies in place that would end zero-tolerance discipline practices.

The story does not end here though, unfortunately. More recently there has been an increase in calls specifically for a [return to zero-tolerance discipline,](#) relying on updated versions of the debunked tropes that caused these policies to spread in the 1990s. Even more retro was the Trump presidential campaign's stunning call for a return to "sending thugs to reform schools." We have continued to fight this backsliding, but the adoption of the term seems to be spreading again, and in many ways the landscape of narrative change work is more challenging than ever.

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DSC Member Case Study: Chicago and Whole School Safety

Lynn Morton of COFI/POWERPAC and Woman of God's Design was in a meeting of the Whole School Safety Steering Committee in 2024 when the news started breaking that her decades of work was about to see a major success. Chicago Public Schools would be adopting the new Whole School Safety Model, officially expanding their definition of safety to include physical, emotional and relational safety, and would be ending the School Resource Officer (SRO) program that stationed police in schools. This would be a remarkable feat anywhere, but it was especially powerful in a city like Chicago that has been used as a political pawn for conservative politicians and news outlets that painted it as a scary and violent place that needed more police (and even military intervention).

This victory was a political and a narrative success. This was a huge policy change that would reduce the amount of police contact for the over 300,000 Chicago Public School Students, and increase the number of supportive school staff they could turn to. At the same time, organizers were able to completely shift the way that the Board of Education talked about safety to students, staff, parents, and the broader community. COFI/POWERPAC had talked about educating the "whole child" since their first campaign, setting the stage over many years for thinking in a more holistic way about what students need.

The narrative had also shifted in the community. Organizers recognized that they had to meet people where they were at and understand the real concerns they might have about removing police. How a person experiences safety is very personal. Organizers often used the term "imagine" when asking people what schools could look like that were actually safe for all students. This prompt did not tell anyone they were wrong to have questions, or talk down to them; rather it encouraged their own imaginations of what was possible, opening them up to new ideas they might not have seen in action before like Restorative Justice. Parents were able to "Taste it and See" as Lynn puts it, with listening sessions held in circles using Restorative Practices to show the kinds of proactive safety practices that would be put in place in schools. The momentum to get this policy passed was pushed over the edge by the mass uprisings following the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd by police, but just a few years earlier in Chicago was the police killing and cover-up of Laquan McDonald. There was an understanding of the threat that the police posed especially to Black and Latino men, and a growing resistance to exposing schoolkids to those risks every day.

The victory may not have been possible without the strong support of the Chicago Teachers Union, which saw the Whole School Safety Model as a positive for their members who were in these school buildings every day. CTU is one of the most progressive teachers unions in the US, and have historically joined with parents and students in many fights where they had a shared interest. Other DSC members have faced challenges for their local unions on the issue of removing police from schools, and that can be a major roadblock in seeing any change.

In order for models similar to the Whole School Safety model to spread widely across the country, there is a need to shift the narrative for many teachers towards a vision of safety that does not rely on police. Similar to the work that was done in Chicago providing parents and students with real experiences with Restorative Justice, the more we are able to successfully implement these practices on large and small scales, the more supporters we will build up. As Lynn says, "It's indisputable - When it's done right, it works."

Al White at the ACER office in Duck Hill, MS

DSC Member Case Study: Duck Hill, Mississippi and Desegregation

Some current narratives have roots stretching back decades. Perhaps the most important story in the history of education in the United States is that of the movement to end the racial segregation of schools over the last 70 years. Schools were racially segregated by law in many places when in 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court decided in Brown v. Board that it was unconstitutional. Some of the most enduring legal concepts from this case was the finding that separate facilities will always be unequal, and that states and districts had to proactively desegregate schools with "all deliberate speed." What followed were indelible scenes in American history, as Black children and their families faced intense racist violence and harassment to attend previously all white schools.

It is important to note that many communities did have strong Black schools that educated their students despite the gross differences in resources, a part of the segregation narrative that is often left out. In some cases Black schools were burned down, and "segregation academies" were founded as a privately operated whites only school system (many remain open to this day).

Despite the call for school districts to desegregate schools at "all deliberate speed," in 2025 public schools remain segregated by both race and income-level all over the country. In Mississippi in particular, the federal government has open desegregation orders in dozens of school districts (30 in 2024), meaning that though the state was again ordered in 1969 to fully integrate their schools, they have not met the conditions of Brown v. Board in creating a school system that is not racially segregated. Part of how present-day school segregation is maintained is through undemocratic local government structures that have historically favored white residents, as was the case for Montgomery County, Mississippi. The majority-white town of Winona has a disproportionate decision-making power over the entire county, despite having their own school district that was governed by the town themselves. They were able to control the school district boundaries and the distribution of resources to their own benefit, denying the residents of majority Black towns within the county voting power and community autonomy. They were able to control the narrative power in the county to such an extent that they didn't have to give any reasoning as to why they should continue to hold this disproportionate power, it simply was the way it was.

DSC member Al White of Action Communication Education Reform (ACER) is based out of Duck Hill, Mississippi, and has been involved in the fight for equitable, quality schools that are accountable to the local community since at least the 1990s. ACER worked for change on several levels: connecting the Department of Justice with community members to detail how segregation was still alive and well in the county's schools; strategizing with the original attorneys who argued for the desegregation order decades before; and building up their organization's influence in the larger community. They saw the desegregation order from the federal government as an insurance policy, as they worked to build up political power in other ways. Though the issues they were facing in schools were broader than just their racial make-up, by utilizing a desegregation framework that everyone was familiar with, they were able to make their case about unequal distribution of resources and racist treatment of students. Over many years, they were successful both in getting a legal change to the school board that shifted the balance of power between Winona and the rest of Montgomery County, as well as helping elect additional candidates so that the board is now majority Black, and actually representative of the demographics of the student body and the county. ACER continues to work with those board members to help ensure they understand how school pushout is still a major issue in their schools, and uses DSC materials like our Model Code on Education and Dignity to give examples of how they implement positive solutions in the schools. This is an example of how narrative power looks in different contexts: in a smaller community like this it is necessary to build relationships directly with decision-makers to help shift their perspectives, rather than looking to local media or other types of influence.

These battles for the right to a quality public education must be placed in historical context that extends back to the chattel enslavement of African people, of which Mississippi had the largest population in the United States. Duck Hill was also the site of a lynching of two Black men in 1937, Robert McDaniels and Roosevelt Townes who were transported to

the site of their murder by school bus, suggesting involvement by school officials. The horrific photos of the men after they were murdered were some of the first images of lynching that were shared widely, including in newspapers across the country, and Time and Life magazines. These images were credited with helping urge along the passage of the first anti-lynching laws. Famously, they were also utilized in Nazi Germany propaganda, as Hitler claimed their Nazi racial code was more "humane" than the treatment of Black people in the United States. A photograph is a single moment in time, but can have any number of interpretations, uses and consequences. Depending on what lens you are using, you can focus on the act of terrorism itself, the savagery of the individual white actors who committed the lynching, the complicit spectators, the grieving family and community, the white supremacist ideology, or the comparisons between two genocidal governments. There are the facts of what happened and then there are the narratives, in this case the story of what happened was so extreme that it was embraced both by those working to address injustice and those who used it to justify the mass extermination of millions of people. Decades later the people of Duck Hill tell their own story about that history, including a powerful monument to the victims of the lynching, a red flower sculpture for Roosevelt Red Townes and a brown flower sculpture for Robert Bootjack McDaniels.

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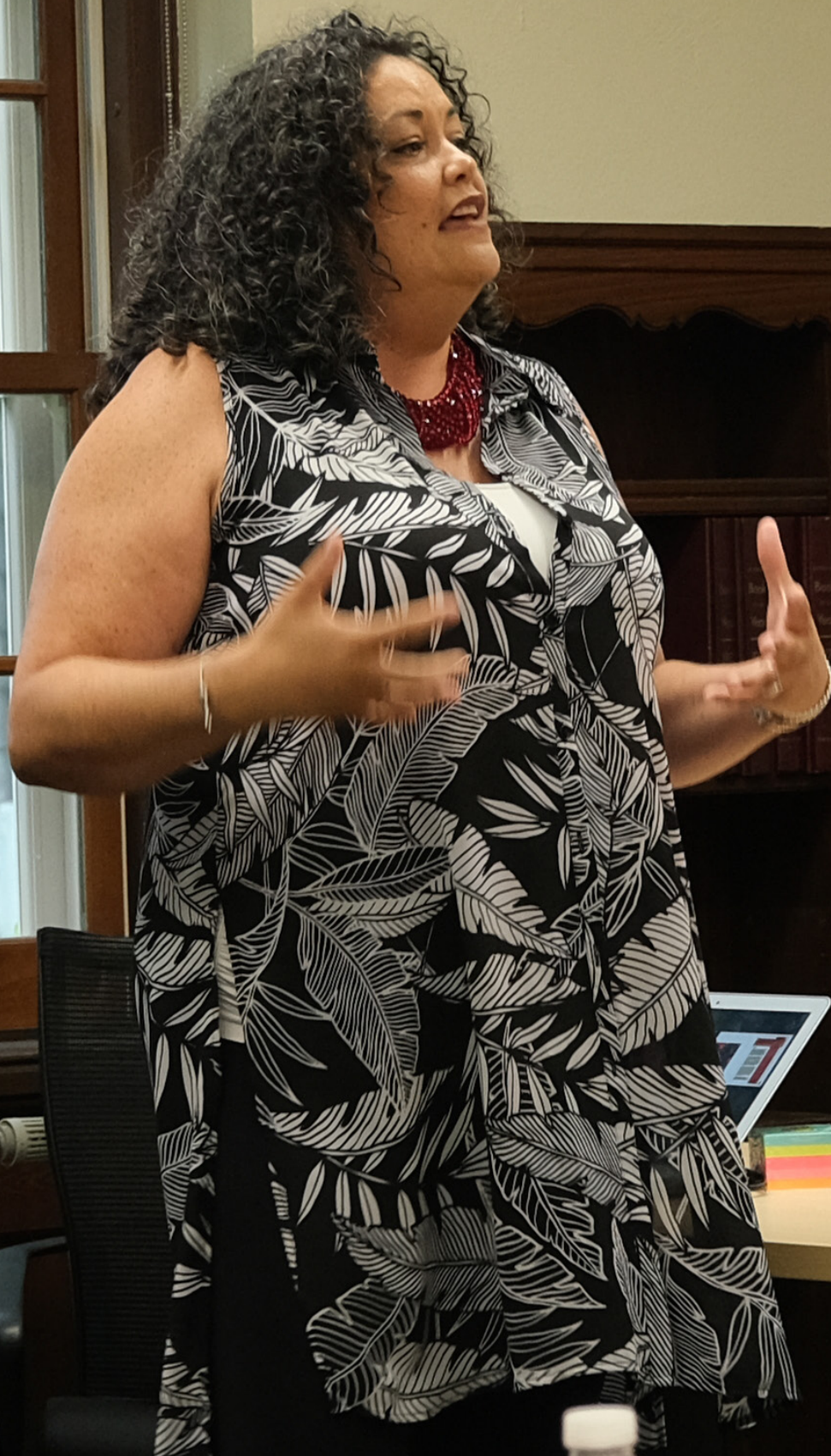
DSC Member Case Study: Twin Cities and The Cradle-to-Prison Algorithm

In 2023, the Minneapolis Public School System experienced one of the worst data breaches of a government institution in US history. Hackers demanded a ransom of 1 million dollars and when the school system refused to pay, incredibly sensitive and wide-ranging data about students was leaked onto the dark web and posted widely on sites like Facebook and Youtube. This data included medical records and Social Security numbers, detailed information about complaints of discrimination, student sexual assault and abuse, psychiatric hospitalizations, and other highly confidential information. For Marika Pfefferkorn of The Midwest Center for School Transformation and the Twin Cities Innovation Alliance (MCST/TCIA), this incident highlighted an urgent and often misunderstood issue in the education world: school systems are increasingly hosting massive amounts of data on students that they often don't have the ability to keep secure.

Furthermore, in this case the data was released due to a security breach, however MCST/TCIA had been raising the alarm about agreements between schools and law enforcement that required the sharing of this kind of sensitive information with no guardrails in place. As schools and districts move to gather (and monetize) more and more data on their students using various forms of criminalizing technology, the risks to young people multiply.

Marika has been at the forefront of bringing this issue to wider attention, shaping the narrative and importantly framing it as a question of racial justice. There had always been groups opposing the expansion of various forms of surveillance, including privacy advocates and academics that struggled to communicate effectively to the general public. By looking specifically at how these technologies were proliferating in schools and engaging impacted communities to fight back, MCT/TCIA had the opportunity to create a movement based on a new narrative about what was happening. There was some trial and error in finding the terminology that connected most with communities and was easiest to understand. Using the metaphor of a recipe to explain what an algorithm is has been very successful in simplifying the concept and highlighting the idea that the result comes from what you put into it. In computer science, an algorithm is the instructions that the computer must take given different inputs. A recipe for cookies includes flour and sugar, and the algorithm for determining a facial recognition match on a surveillance camera includes billions of pieces of data about individuals' facial structures. "Predictive Policing" was an early term used but it didn't highlight the technological aspect enough, and wasn't easily understood. "The cradle-to-prison algorithm" works well for audiences that have a familiarity with the term "school-to-prison pipeline" and they could see how these technologies tracked people from birth before they even enter a school building. "Criminalizing technology" seems to be the simplest shorthand, but this is an evolving movement so we may see additional descriptors become popular. her than looking to local media or other types of influence.

In 2018, MCST/TCIA joined with other local organizations and activists to oppose a joint powers agreement in St. Paul Public schools that sought to use unproven technologies to target students they felt were most at-risk for future criminal behavior. A narrative shift that was essential to their success in getting that agreement terminated was to show people that these algorithms are not neutral. They hold the biases of the data that is put into them. Since there are existing racial disparities in the school discipline and arrest data, the algorithm will always be biased against students of color and see them as more likely to commit a future crime.

As recently as a few years ago there was a larger barrier to understanding concerns about these forms of technology. However, at this point there are many more ways that the average person interacts with artificial intelligence like ChatGPT, or is expected to share personal data on an app or website, as well as high profile failures of these systems like the Minneapolis data breach that most people have some familiarity and skepticism. Marika and MCST/TCIA utilized techniques from improv to help community members prepare for meetings and events, practicing how they were going to talk about the issue, and helping build authentic responses based on their own experiences. Asking the school district and law enforcement agencies basic questions helped community members not to be intimidated as well, since officials often didn't understand how the technologies worked themselves.

In Minnesota and around the country, communities are fighting against the proliferation of all different kinds of similar technologies popping up in schools, including vape detectors, aggression detectors, and apps like Gaggle that was flagging students for using words like "gay" or "lesbian." There is a need to crack the veneer of infallibility that these technologies and the companies that sell them have. In reality, most of this technology is still prone to error, and by placing it in schools during this phase, the students become the test-subjects without consent. There is a pattern of school districts starting with new technology that is often free or low-cost to school districts for some period of time (something that consumers experience as well). They may be sold on the idea that a new intervention can save them money by allowing them to cut staff that were previously monitoring buses in exchange for cameras and an aggression detector, for example. Then, if the company requires them to upgrade to a new higher price, they no longer have the infrastructure to function without the technology. Often, the companies will also sell related products that work together, and continue to upsell to schools and districts already strapped for funds and looking for easy solutions to complex problems.

The appetite for integrating more forms of criminalizing technology, and especially AI, into schools does not seem to be slowing down, and the companies selling it seem to be more and more influential over politics and decision-makers. However, work like Marika's and the Midwest Center for School Transformation and the Twin Cities Innovation Alliance is helping to set the stage for more opportunities to push back. At the same time, there are more and more failures of these practices in schools to point to, for example Los Angeles Public Schools abruptly shut down their new AI chatbot at the same time they were facing their own unrelated data breach. These moments create openings for organizers and advocates to highlight these patterns and continue chipping away at the belief that the answer to the complex problems that schools and communities are facing is the latest tech fad - and open up the space for real dialogue between human beings about what kind of future we want for our schools and young people.

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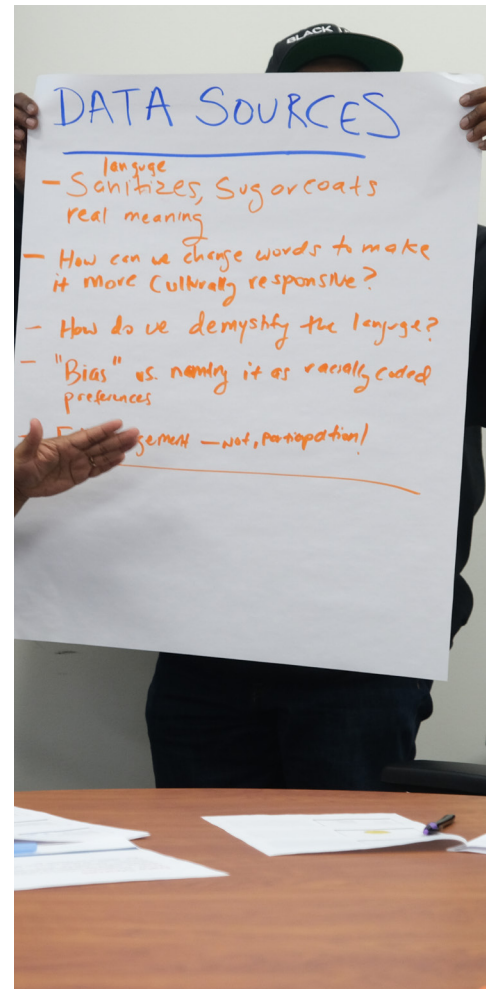
Looking Forward: our Approach to Future Narrative Shifting

Lessons Learned from Our History and Case Studies

After reflecting on the shifts we have seen since the beginning of DSC, in the larger world, within our organization, and in our members' work, we wanted to share some lessons learned. These reflect our particular approach to narrative work which might be a little bit different from "the right way" to do narrative work, but it is what has developed organically and has worked in our context as a coalition of many organizations. Our future work will be grounded in some of the key lessons we have learned:

1

Our approach to narrative powerbuilding is grounded in anti-racist practice. The ability for a people to tell their own story, and have that story taken seriously is something that has been denied Black, Indigenous and other people of color oppressed by systems of white supremacy and domination.

2

There is inherent power in building narratives. The more we have the opportunity to learn, teach and share our stories, the stronger we become as a coalition and individuals.

3

We must avoid rigidity and perfectionism. Narrative work cannot be mainly about telling people to use or not use specific words or language.

Dignity in Schools Campaign

4 Clear, simple communication that is delivered in a variety of different styles is going to have the greatest chance of connecting with a wide audience, there is no need to try to make people all sound the same.

5 Relationship building and real dialogue are an essential part of crafting new narratives and helping them spread.

6 Real, personal experiences can help people strongly connect with new narratives, allowing people to have an embodied relationship with the topic or idea.

7 It's hard to tell ahead of time what will stick and what will be read in a way you didn't intend. Don't be afraid to shift if something isn't working and try different things.

8 It is most important to craft a narrative that connects to people most impacted by a problem or issue. If the general public doesn't understand it yet, that is okay.
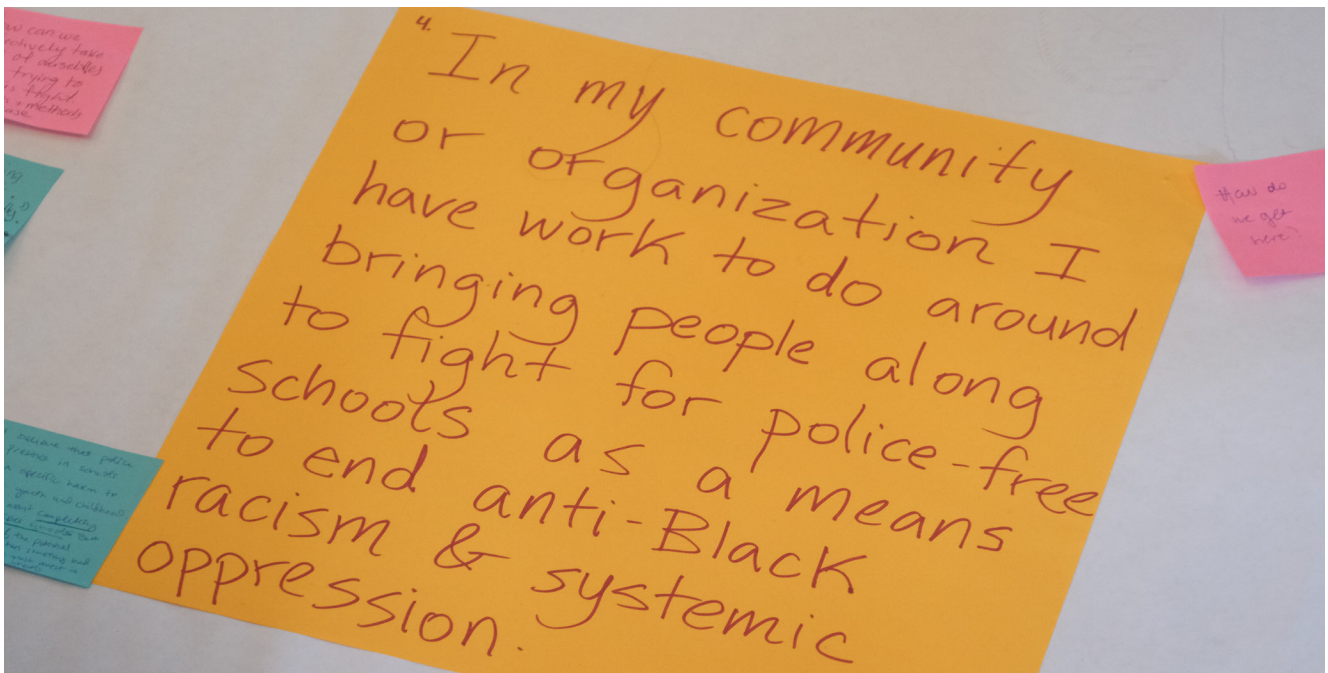
Urgent Areas for Narrative Shifting We Plan to Take On

New Visions for Safety that Are Not Dependent on Police

This is not a new arena for us, as we have been questioning the role of police in schools since our inception, and have been directly calling for their full removal since at least 2016. We saw some major gains in the summer and fall of 2020 when the #DefundthePolice movement helped propel local campaigns for removal of law enforcement forward. There was a moment when it seemed possible for a major shift in the narrative about police and their function in society, and about systemic racism in the U.S. and the role that police have played historically to uphold that racial hierarchy. Many of these victories would turn out to be short-lived, as the huge backlash to the gains caused many cities and districts to go back on their promises, and in some places to double-down on funding for police. As students returned to school after experiencing the complex trauma that the COVID pandemic and the isolation of lockdowns caused, many were warning that the students would need extra mental health services and additional support, though in many cases students were coming back to fewer staff and resources. Since that time, we have seen an increase in sensationalist narratives painting schools as lawless and violent, and a whole generation of young people as irredeemably broken.

Given all this context, we are going to have to find more ways to chip away at the perception that police are the only way to keep people safe and share compelling stories about what alternatives that work look like. This has been made much more difficult by the recent progress and immediate backlash – there seems to be even more virulent resistance to alternatives to policing in many places, and for some a sense that alternatives were tried and they failed. For the most part, initiatives like community response teams and restorative justice practices have been implemented on a smaller scale with little resources, and yet we need to shift the prevalent narrative that these initiatives have already been tried and failed. We will be working to find new ways to move this work forward and shift current perceptions.

Clear and Effective Communication about Racial Discrimination and Civil Rights

We have already struggled to communicate effectively about what is happening right now throughout the new federal administration, and especially the Department of Education, in regards to civil rights enforcement. There is an intentional confusion being created about what civil rights are, and what would be considered a violation. For example, they have stated it is a violation of their new anti-DEI policies to intentionally assess how a law or policy is impacting racial groups differently, citing civil rights law. This is absolutely the opposite of the intention of the civil rights movement and the people who fought for these laws to be passed. Worse still, it allows them to frame their work as fighting for civil rights while they ensure that racism is not discussed or addressed. Even though that is mind-numbingly illogical, we are still faced with the challenge of communicating the reality in a simple way to counter it.

In essence, it should be a simple concept: civil rights laws were enacted decades ago to address the previously legal discrimination of people based on race, sex, disability and other protected communities of people. They made it illegal to refuse to rent to Black people, or not hire someone because they are a woman, or segregate schools based on race. These laws have required enforcement from day one, due to individuals and governments who remain determined to continue to discriminate. However, simply ending the discriminatory practices is not enough – the legacy of harms must also be addressed. The Office for Civil Rights at the Department of Education is an example of a federal agency in charge of enforcing civil rights laws as they pertain to education, including gathering detailed data on racial disparities in school discipline and investigating civil rights complaints. There has been an unacceptable distortion of the purpose of the office and of civil rights law in general, though in part because of all the confusion that has been created it is not getting the attention it deserves. We will be working on figuring out how to communicate about this work in a way that helps people see through the lies and distortions.

Urgent Areas for Narrative Shifts

Promoting Positive Narratives About Community Involvement and Participation

All truly democratic structures require active participation from stakeholders at all levels. Gathering detailed data is a necessity for making informed decisions that aren't based on biases or outdated information. Many laws and policies were instituted because of serious harms taking place, and they require changes to the way people do their jobs. However, all of these things have been unfairly branded as bureaucratic red tape, or worse. In the fight for education justice, and any fight for public goods that are accountable to communities, there must be an analysis that understands and acknowledges why people are frustrated by these kinds of things, but also has a vision for how we can rebuild structures of participation that do promote innovation and solve real problems. DSC will be exploring how to rebrand forms of community participation and oversight from something that people see as time-wasters to inspiring examples of democracy in action that actually serves the people.

Expansion of Privatization

DSC has been fighting for a strong public school system from the beginning, and have stood against the forces of privatization that threaten to drain public resources into privately managed schools. In the last few years, and especially after the pandemic, we have seen a growth in multiple forms of privatization that have been scaled up throughout the country. Here are some of the forms of privatization that we will researching and alerting communities to their negative impacts:

Subcontractors taking on more school roles

Many school functions such as lunch service and bussing have been private in some places for decades, but there are additional services like attendance that are being filled by private companies paid by the district. These companies are privately run with no community oversight, with profit as a central goal. Additionally, in many places school staff are unionized, but that is not the case at these private companies.

Vouchers expanding and potential for a federal voucher program

Vouchers have expanded in several states and the Trump Administration is threatening a universal voucher program on a federal level. Vouchers pay for students to attend private schools that often have little to no accountability or transparency. Vouchers exploit the experiences of parents that have been let down by public schools to drain the system of more resources, rather than improve the problems.

Virtual and hybrid schools

There are more and more fully virtual charter schools, sometimes the only options for students that have been expelled from other schools. In some of these schools the academics are limited, and students with disabilities are not getting their legally required services. Hybrid models are also happening, including where students in person are learning from a teacher that is teaching remotely on a screen.

The role of corporate power including private equity

We will also be exploring the funding side of these forms of privatization, including the entities that benefit the most, and the financial systems tharequired services. Hybrid models are also happening, including where students in person are learning from a teacher that is teaching remotely on a screen.

DSC has been fighting for educational justice for twenty years. We were founded using a human rights framework – the right to a quality education – and that fight continues today. Working with local communities, we built a powerful narrative around school pushout and the need to end the school-to-prison pipeline. We have since expanded our work towards building safe schools that are free of police; strengthening our commitment to civil rights in education; pushing for real and effective community engagement in our schools; and fighting the ongoing onslaught of privatization in our educational system. Building powerful narratives is part of our core mission, as we insist that every child deserves a safe, engaging and outstanding education that will empower them to reach their full potential.

Acknowledgements