

WE REFUSE TO LOSE

REPORT TO

PHILANTHROPY



werefusetolose.org

 **WE REFUSE
TO LOSE**



**TRUTH IS ESSENTIAL.
TRUTH IS POWER.
TRUTH IS HEALING.
TRUTH IS COURAGE.
TRUTH IS URGENT.
TRUTH IS JUSTICE.
TRUTH IS YOURS.
TRUTH IS NOW.**

This is not the final publication we thought we were going to write when we began supporting the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s P-16 Community Investment Initiative in 2018. As times have changed, so have the lessons learned.

A cross-strategy team of foundation staff (called the Community Investment Team or CIT) designed the P-16 initiative as a short-term learning experience to deepen understanding about the characteristics of strong cradle-to-career, equity-focused, cross-sector, place-based partnerships and to inform the foundation’s distinct grantmaking strategies in early learning, K-12 and postsecondary education. The team also sought to share what it learned working alongside communities over the course of the grants. Underlying both objectives was a hypothesis that local “backbone organizations” that bring community partners together and deliberately address the full experience and needs of students throughout their learning journey could showcase ways of achieving more equitable outcomes, particularly for students of color and those experiencing poverty.

Five communities that have built promising cradle-to-career pathways received two-year grants: Buffalo, Chattanooga, Dallas, the Rio Grande Valley and Tacoma. During this time, Education First’s role has been to develop and support a learning community comprised of the five grantees and their partners. As the initiative approached its conclusion, the foundation also asked us to write a series of publications documenting what we learned about the unique practices of successful community cradle-to-career efforts, including a publication with advice especially for other funders.

With the sustained closures of schools and disruption to learning caused by COVID-19 and a new, sustained national spotlight and reckoning on racism during the course of this initiative, our team at Education First decided the most important contribution we could make was to write a series of publications—the We Refuse to Lose series—that included a focus on ways the five grantee communities advance racial justice as part of their work to improve education systems.

This report is the capstone publication in the series, designed to help funders reflect on their own practices that advance or set back racial justice. It is not a report on how funders can best support cradle-to-career initiatives, the elements of systems change, or how to assess “good P-16 work.” The field has produced many reports in these areas, and the foundation’s learning partners for the P-16 initiative, Mathematica and Equal Measure, have contributed additional helpful resources.

Instead, building on the community-by-community insights we shared in the We Refuse to Lose series, this final publication is about power and privilege and how and when funders wield them with those they want to help. It challenges funders committed to confronting racial inequities to take stock of how their intrinsic power and privilege—over resources, ideas, practices and civic discourse—impact progress to improve communities, and it synthesizes concrete ideas and actions that grantmakers can take to act differently, thereby achieving different results.

One primary lesson on the following pages is obvious but elusive in practice: **Funders cannot build more equitable outcomes on a foundation of inequitable relationships.** Achieving better outcomes for students—and changes in systems—requires

decision-making to be shared and shifted. Those most proximate to the challenges that funders seek to address—usually communities of color and other marginalized populations—are best situated to know what will and won’t work in their communities and should have say in both identifying the problems being tackled and designing the solutions being pursued. This shift will require hard and uncomfortable work for many foundations.

A corollary lesson in this report is that **funders cannot successfully advance education equity unless they acknowledge systemic inequities outside of education.** Employment discrimination, housing-and-loan discrimination, voter suppression, police behavior and other racist policies and practices throughout U.S. society have made it more difficult for students from marginalized populations to thrive. The We Refuse to Lose series underscores this reality, detailing the ways many of the five communities engaged community partners and designed solutions inside and outside of traditional schooling systems. We are not suggesting that focused attention and resources to better prepare all students for success in college, career and life are not essential work—they are, and they constitute a mission that Education First (as our name suggests) remains committed to pursue. But the work in five communities to create more seamless pathways for students—and the choices funders have about how to nurture these efforts—is a reminder that many problems in education ultimately cannot be solved myopically.

Our report tackles a final, difficult lesson: **Funders need to do better at finding their own voices, especially when communities are struggling to identify ways of talking openly about the realities of race and racism.** In writing the We Refuse to Lose series, we were painfully reminded that publicly advocating for and working to improve racial justice can exact a price. Organizations often have difficulty talking about racial justice; sometimes they even fear losing the support of donors and powerful community and political leaders at state and local levels. The current divisive debates in many states about how history—and whose history—is taught in schools and how voting rights are encouraged or repressed, especially for people of color, suggest these fears are justified. Thus, our report challenges funders—a sector that likes to think of itself as “above the fray”—

to reflect on the consequences of not taking sides and of not speaking up.

In crafting this report and articulating these lessons, we are grateful for the insights shared by the leaders, partners and funders interviewed over the course of producing We Refuse to Lose; by the program officers of national foundations working on equity in different ways who met with us and detailed what they are learning; and by the extensive literature written on grantmaking effectiveness. We have detailed these contributors and sources in the acknowledgments section.

Calling out unhealthy power dynamics in grantmaking is not new; what we hope is new—and what our report reinforces—is that it is time for funders to thoughtfully consider how not attending to power and privilege undermines their work to advance racial equity and better student outcomes. We also hope what is new are the concrete practices funders might adapt, as suggested by those on the front lines of community change and addressing racial inequities. What communities share in this report—and what we recommend—is not easy; changes will be awkward and uneven for many funders. Some actions can be readily adopted by program staff, and others will require foundation boards and CEOs to change expectations and endorse new approaches.

With our community partners, we chose the title We Refuse to Lose to capture the unrelenting commitment to racial justice—despite explicit and implicit obstacles—found in all five of the communities we worked with. After the past two years, we are more optimistic than ever that change can come and that philanthropy is learning to play a more constructive role in accelerating progress.

Kelly Kovacic Duran
Education First

William Porter
Education First

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Many individuals and organizations have played important roles in Education First's production of the *We Refuse to Lose* series. In particular, we are grateful to the nonprofits leading cradle-to-career partnerships that the series profiles: the Foundation for Tacoma Students, Say Yes Buffalo, Chattanooga's Public Education Foundation and Chattanooga 2.0, RGV FOCUS and the Commit Partnership in Dallas. For this final publication of the series, we express our gratitude to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and specifically to members of its Community Investment Team (CIT) and the leadership of the U.S. Programs division for the funding that allowed us to produce the series and for their thought partnership. In particular, we want to thank Allan Golston, president of the U.S. Program; Jean-Claude Brizard, who led the CIT until March 2021; Sara Allan, who steered it to its conclusion; Christine Marson for her leadership throughout; and Este Griffith, with whom we worked closely on publication development.

The ideas voiced in this report to philanthropy are those of the authors and not those of our funders.

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2020, Grantmakers for Education released *The Big Vision for the Next Stage of Education Philanthropy*.¹ The report identifies racial justice as the top priority in a survey of its members, a mix of national and regional/local funders. Now more than ever, grantmakers recognize more clearly the connection between addressing causes of racial disparities and creating more equitable education outcomes, and they are eager to engage.

Prioritizing equity of outcomes is one matter. Achieving it has been far more difficult. Sagar Desai, a founding staff member at The Commit Partnership in Dallas and now at StriveTogether, reflects on the challenge: “Equity is not just an outcome, not just narrowing the achievement gap. It’s a process. It’s how you staff your organization, how decisions get made within it, how you shift power into communities.” Indeed, research and interviews conducted for this publication reveal that grantmakers and grantees agree that to achieve equitable outcomes, much more attention needs to be paid to equitable processes within grantmaking organizations themselves and in how they work with grantees and other foundations. These processes must address the power differential that exists between national and local/regional foundations and between foundations operating from any vantage point and communities.

First, the difference in power between national foundations—typically armed with substantially more unrestricted financial assets than local/regional foundations—and the local/regional philanthropies themselves is great. Money matters. The result of this power differential is that national foundations influence (or change altogether) the priorities of local foundations on the promise of dollars—frequently accompanied by match requirements. Often, in particular in the case of community foundations, preexisting priorities were developed through community engagement processes informed by local wisdom and knowledge. Shifts or modifications in priorities driven by national foundation initiatives not

only undercut that local knowledge and engagement but also result in more limited resources—in terms of dollars, staff time and fundraising capacity—for these preexisting priorities and strategies. In short, national philanthropies’ exertion of power at times dictates the priorities of local communities.

Second, the power differential between foundations of any type and local communities manifests itself in how current systems that produce inequitable results are designed: top-down by leaders from the highest levels of established organizations—including philanthropy—who are largely white and do not come from or live in the communities they are trying to transform. Seduced by the promise of large investments from national foundations—but with the condition that organizations follow the strategy the national funder has articulated for change—local organizations sometimes contort their priorities and move away from existing efforts based on the wisdom within their own communities. Instead, redesigned systems ought to be either co-created with foundations by those most impacted by the problems systems have not successfully solved or designed entirely by communities themselves with the support of research and technical assistance foundations make available to them.

The exploration of both the power dynamic that exists in philanthropy and cuts against equity and a set of suggestions for a more equitable way of doing grantmaking presented in this publication are based on insights from white papers and research; Education First’s work with the five grantee communities over the past two years; Education First’s production of the *We Refuse to Lose* series; and interviews with 29 people, most of them working in and around community-based, cradle-to-career, cross-sector, education partnerships. Education First also interviewed representatives from national foundations not directly involved in cradle-to-career efforts but who have sought to rethink their grantmaking to better elevate racial justice and equity.



CREDIT: GRADUATE TACOMA

The leaders of the cradle-to-career backbone organizations² we learned from over the course of the foundation’s two-year initiative and interviewed for this publication have a unique vantage point: They have found ways to elevate issues of racial justice and systemic inequities. With some emerging from processes led by traditional power brokers and other leaders far less proximate to the community, the organizations have had to explore new ways to better engage and listen to those closest to the community. And they continue to find ways to balance competing interests, engage community leaders and established organizations as well as people more proximate to the problem, and help determine who makes decisions and how they get made. They also have substantial experience working with local and national philanthropies and bridging the priorities and approaches of each since they receive funding

from both. For a complete list of interviewees and a list of publications that informed this report, see the acknowledgments on pages 4 and 5 and the references on page 30.

In the following pages, we first explore how both funders and communities experience the power of foundations and/or observe it in action. We then move to actions that interviewees suggest foundations can take to address power imbalances in philanthropy, develop more equitable relationships across foundations and between foundations and communities, and acknowledge and speak out about systemic inequities outside of education that make improving schools and learning more difficult.

A man with a beard and a plaid shirt is speaking into a microphone at an outdoor event. He is wearing a black face mask that is pulled down under his chin. The background is a blurred green, suggesting an outdoor setting with trees. The image is overlaid with a dark grey background on the right side, which contains five numbered suggestions in colored boxes.

Five suggestions for what grantmakers can do to share power and adopt collaborative approaches to achieve social change and a more equitable society:

1. Listen to people on the ground who will be most directly impacted by your work.

2. Trust communities and cede power.

3. Establish role clarity in a local-national philanthropic partnership; decide who does what best.

4. Don't expect that short-term grants will bring about greater racial justice and equity; commit to the long-haul.

5. Speak out publicly against racial injustice.

In American philanthropy, an imbalance in power exists between national and local/regional philanthropies and between philanthropies of all types and communities. That power imbalance makes it difficult to change systems and lives across generations.

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Local and regional philanthropic leaders interviewed for this publication believe that national/local funder collaborations have great potential and have been successfully executed to the benefit of communities. “None of us have the firepower to do racial equity work alone,” says Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, who leads the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, which has made achieving racial equity one of its four primary community goals. “None of what we have accomplished in Buffalo would have happened without robust partnerships with national foundations that incentivize local partnerships,” she says.

Less effective and less welcome partnerships, however, have at their core exertions of power by national foundations that put local foundations in a position of being the weaker partner. Wynn Rosser knows this dynamic well, led both state-based and regional philanthropies. He is currently president and CEO of the T.L.L. Temple Foundation in East Texas and formerly the head of the Greater Texas Foundation, where he supported the start-up of RGV FOCUS, the backbone organization for the Rio Grande Valley’s cradle-to-career education partnership. “One of the characteristics of some national foundations is that they tend to come in and expect us to run their prescriptive play,” Rosser says.



Maeghan Jones, who leads the Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga, believes that national foundations often set the agenda for local philanthropy and that the consequence is not always good for communities, particularly communities of color. “The ideas around education reform are always changing. They come in and out of favor,” she says. “National foundations identify priorities, and

those priorities trickle down to local foundations and grantees. Generally speaking, these strategies prioritize academic research over community wisdom and lived experience. They’re imposed on communities on the promise of dollars. Ten years later the priorities change. That erodes trust, particularly in communities of color, who are usually the objects of the reforms.”

Backbone organizations and their partners are also keenly aware of the power differential between themselves and foundations, national foundations in particular. Frustration with (and to a certain degree, fear of) national foundations was present in some of the interviews conducted for this publication. “There are funders out there whom I would like to tell that they need to blow up their whole approach,” says a staffer of one of the backbone organizations. “But because they are billionaires and I’m not, I’m afraid of what would happen to me.” What needs to get blown up, the staffer and others interviewed believe, is an approach to philanthropy that does not acknowledge local wisdom, knowledge and expertise, whether it is at a local nonprofit or foundation. The staffer continues, “I think ideally, funders would come to organizations that are deeply rooted and invested in communities and say, ‘Help us understand what we need to do to help you serve these communities,’ instead of establishing an agenda suited to what they have identified as our needs. So often they are very far removed from the realities of communities. They’ll say, ‘It looks like you need this missing piece. Now you go make it work.’ But they don’t understand the intricacies of what has really caused and continues to cause racial disparities in our communities.”

Both Rosser and Jones, however, suggest that local and regional foundations are also guilty of expressing power—though they often try to disguise it—in ways that strip communities of their own. Jones says they often foster inequitable relationships under the guise of false stakeholder engagement. “Although there is growing awareness in the sector and movement toward community-informed decision-making, local philanthropy is not immune to these practices,” Jones observes. “A typical practice that has eroded trust in community is for foundations to decide what we want to do. Then we have a few focus groups to prove that what we want to do is a good idea. Then we go ahead and do it and provide ourselves cover by saying we had community engagement.”

The power differential between foundations of any type and targeted communities—and its impact—has been a topic of discussion with a literature devoted to it for many years.

A 2006 Grantmakers for Education publication, *Principles for Effective Education Grantmaking*,³ names “engaged partners” as one of the principles and suggests that foundations should “provide the means for stakeholders to help define the problem, identify viable solutions, participate in the design of the intervention” and “resist the temptation to think that funders have the answers.”

“[Power] hides in foundations’ bank accounts and boardrooms, in every meeting with a grant applicant or grant partner, in every community meeting or city council meeting.”

Lisa Rangelilli, [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#)



CREDIT: COMMIT

Recent critiques have been pointed and explain why foundation grantees are often frustrated. In an article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Dorian Burton of the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust and Brian Barnes, formerly of the Tennessee Achievement School District and now co-founder and CEO of TandemEd, argue that “nowhere is [the] gap of authentic empathy and justice more pronounced than in the American philanthropic sector, where often well-intentioned people make decisions for communities they do not come from, may not understand, rarely interact with, and almost never step foot into.”⁴ Corianne Payton Scally of the Urban Institute observes that “those who hold power may take on racial equity efforts in name only, without engaging in personal and organizational change; meanwhile, they may impose expectations that exact an emotional toll on people and communities of color who fight from positions of lesser power for transformational change.”⁵ And the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy observes that “as a grantmaker, you cannot truly strive for and advance equity until you understand your own power and privilege in society in relation to your grantees. Then you can make conscious choices about how to use that power to be more effective and

have lasting positive impact, in ways that align with the goals, needs and strategies in communities you seek to benefit.”⁶

Much of the literature suggests getting that alignment right means shifting power to communities. Kathleen Enright, now president and CEO of the Council on Foundations, wrote in 2018 as president and CEO of Grantmakers for Effective Organizations that “power and privilege are inherent to philanthropy; our history and resources make it unavoidable. Rather than trying to eradicate power and privilege from philanthropy, or wielding them clumsily under the mistaken belief that we somehow have the answers, we need to find more ways to share power with communities and give power to coalitions of nonprofits. Only then can we change systems and improve lives in ways that last for generations.”⁷

For philanthropy, then, the question becomes one that Charmaine Mercer of the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation asks: “Once you name [power] as a challenge to equity work, what else do you do? How do you power ‘with’ versus power ‘over?’ ”

A Foundation Changes Course to Better Pursue Racial Equity

Gislaine Ngounou is the interim president and CEO of New England’s Nellie Mae Education Foundation. In 2018, Ngounou says the foundation realized that its investments in student-centered learning were falling short because “there was a disconnect between our approach and this big, bold goal of equity.” As a result, the foundation listened to those closest to the work, Ngounou reports, and staff and board prioritized learning more about “racism, whiteness and white supremacy cultures and inequities” to understand the importance of centering grantmaking on racial equity. A new foundation mission emerged: “To champion efforts that prioritize community goals that challenge racial inequities and advance excellent, student-centered public education for all New England Youth.”

Work to advance the mission has been “phenomenal,” Ngounou says, but also “painful because it’s forced us to really think about what it means to shift and share power.” For Nellie Mae, sharing power meant creating a community advisory structure. The foundation recruited educators, young people in high schools, parents and leaders of community-based organizations to develop jointly with staff funds that reflect the

new mission. Today, the advisory group reviews proposals alongside program officers and helps shape communications efforts and reimagine evaluation, including how the foundation thinks about success and impact. “[The advisory group] forced us to really think about how to reconcile differences of perspectives between folks who are grounded in communities and our staff and our board,” Ngounou says.

Nellie Mae’s collection of portfolios now target support to organizations led by people of color and doing work to tackle racial inequities in education. Key to the work, she says, is providing multiyear funding and general operating support. “It’s taken us hundreds of years to get into the mess that we are in. Three-year funding, let alone one-year funding, is not enough,” Ngounou says. “It’s been really great to see organizations have the flexibility to allocate resources where they find they need them to meet their organizational goals, and that is the power of general operating support.”

Source: <https://vimeo.com/555389976> NewSchools Venture Fund Presentation, May 2021.



Foundation staff and the grantees interviewed for this publication have suggestions about how foundations can “power ‘with’ versus power ‘over.’ ”



Though notions that foundations need to share power with communities have been with us for a long time, they have been difficult to act on. Power, after all, is tough to relinquish. It also manifests itself in subtle, often unconscious ways—for those who wield power, that is. When individuals and institutions have held power for so long, it is at best difficult to recognize or even invisible to them, like the oxygen they breathe. At worst, Enright writes, even when it is recognized, “too few leaders in philanthropy are willing to confront privilege directly or use their unearned privilege to achieve racial equity. ... When a commitment to equity threatens the benefits of our privilege, many people are unwilling to make the sacrifice.” She adds, “Conversely, grantmakers who consciously share power with and leverage privilege for nonprofits and communities are learning that a collaborative

approach is pivotal to achieving social change and a more equitable society.”⁸

Five suggestions emerged from a review of research and interviews conducted for this report and other publications from the [We Refuse to Lose series](#). These suggestions focus on what grantmakers can do to share more power and adopt collaborative approaches to achieve social change and a more equitable society.

SUGGESTION ONE: Spend substantial time meeting with and listening to people on the ground who will be most directly impacted by foundation work in the community, in addition to examining data, research and other information related to the locale.

Joe Scantlebury, former vice president of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and now president and CEO of Living Cities, says that before foundations “start crafting solutions, [they] need to talk to and learn from the people who are going to be affected by them—and who have different experiences from those most foundation officials have had.”

Jean-Claude Brizard, who was a deputy director at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation before departing to lead Digital Promise in early 2021, says that foundation employees need to “get proximate” to the communities they fund and understand the history and context of race within them. “It’s not about coming in and saving people. It’s coming in to work alongside them,” he says.

For national foundations, the Ford Foundation’s Sanjiv Rao suggests, “It’s important they work alongside local foundations to learn with humility.” He adds, “It shouldn’t be a Ford or another national foundation’s site visit—which could easily become performative and is a huge burden on grantees—but rather national funders accompanying local funders as they do their daily work—sort of as humble sidekicks who are present for learning, understanding and sensemaking. That doesn’t mean we don’t have a point of view, but our stance matters.”



Increasing the Number of BIPOC Staff and Board Members Helps Foundations Get More Proximate to Communities

“An essential way for foundations to get more proximate to the communities whose goals and priorities they are trying to support is to become more inclusive of people with lived experience in those communities and that means inclusion with respect to philanthropic staff, leadership and boards of trustees. That’s a huge need, as is setting up better conditions and supports for them to succeed once they are in philanthropy. Given that foundation leadership and boards often don’t come from the communities most impacted, it’s easy for them to remain removed and sheltered, and so inclusion in multiple ways at all levels is essential. Philanthropy needs to better reflect communities of color [and] diversity with respect to disability, gender and age.”

Sanjiv Rao, Ford Foundation

Whatever the gateway into a community is for a nonlocal foundation, a community conversation with local leaders hosted by a foundation will not be enough. Tommy McClam of Say Yes Buffalo, the backbone organization for the city’s cradle-to-career education initiative, says frankly, “Funders are far removed from the ground. They need to fund themselves to spend substantially more time [in communities] to see what’s going on.”

This is precisely, he says, what Open Society Foundations did as it prepared to make a major investment in Buffalo.⁹ “Sure, many of the conversations that the two foundation staff members sent to Buffalo had were with people at the top, including the mayor,” McClam says. “But many of their conversations were unplanned.” He notes that over the course of the three days, foundation officials spent a good portion of time walking the city’s streets. “They talked to people randomly, mothers, fathers, just regular people in communities. As a result, they got a good feel for the city and discovered which leaders and nonprofits were trusted by regular people. What they learned factored into how they wound up working

in the Buffalo community.”

This approach to getting more proximate to communities is one that local and regional philanthropies working in rural areas—which receive far fewer philanthropic dollars per capita than urban communities—wish that more national foundations would take (see sidebar on grantmaking in rural communities and how foundations also exercise power by determining what not to do). Visiting with and learning from rural communities—in which more than 20 percent of the American population of color resides—is essential to American philanthropic efforts to bring greater racial equity to the country, according to Wynn Rosser of East Texas’s T.L.L. Temple Foundation. For those who can but are not funding rural America, Rosser has a suggestion: “Drive sixty miles from your offices. Get on the two-lane highways and visit a small town. Commit to driving around and having substantive conversation about what’s important to people and the quality of life they’re leading.” Rosser is certain that if foundation officials do this, they’ll find their interests and priority areas line up with those of communities of color in rural America, just as they do in urban America.

CREDIT:
RGV FOCUS



SUGGESTION TWO: Trust communities and cede power.

Barnes and Burton, writing in the Stanford Social Innovation Review in 2020, argue that foundations “should begin every initiative with the assumption that there is competent leadership within communities we aim to serve—people already on the ground, building and changing lives. While some may be under-resourced or untapped, leaders exist in every community.”¹⁰ Perez-Bode Dedecker says that it’s important for foundations to “let go” and trust communities as they work for greater racial equity. “Our efforts shouldn’t be prescriptive because we don’t have the answers. People in our community know better than us. The work should be about philanthropy providing support and getting out of the way.”

“Getting out of the way” does not mean that foundations should simply write checks. They can and should share knowledge and expertise from their vantage point of working with multiple grantees and communities across the country and the research and evaluations they commissioned. For instance, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s P-16 grantees frequently asked program officers to share knowledge about best practices they’ve seen in other locales. Furthermore, they were part of a community of practice the foundation funded and Education First facilitated

that provided a space to share knowledge and access additional expertise.

Foundations can construct processes to share their own and other’s expertise. Maeghan Jones of the Greater Chattanooga Community Foundation suggests that foundations can create opportunities for community members to engage with research, data and experts and trust communities to use what they learn to make strong decisions. “Let the community engage with these resources and bring their lived experience to discussions about them,” she says. “It’s important to have people impacted by systems participate in solution development. People disadvantaged by a system understand that system better than anyone, including a foundation staff member who may have grown up with privilege. We need to ask them how to dismantle systems of oppression.”

Perez-Bode Dedecker’s foundation does not tell one of its major racial equity partners—the Greater Buffalo Racial Equity Roundtable—what to do. It makes an annual commitment of approximately \$500,000 to the Roundtable and provides it with resources in addition to grant funds—such as consultants and vendors—to support 10 initiatives led by committees made up of people representative of Greater Buffalo communities. Both the foundation and the Roundtable give the



committees complete autonomy to make decisions about strategy and allocation of their share of grant funds. “It’s truly a model of distributed power,” Perez-Bode Dedecker says. “Why did we do it? It’s because there’s no way to create systems change if you’re being prescriptive.”

Trusting communities and ceding power to them does not mean there is no accountability. The Community Development Investment Center suggests that one way for funders to demonstrate trust is to “share power while embracing mutual accountability (i.e., an agreement to be held equally responsible for making appropriate commitments needed to leverage/ provide resources to meet goals and achieve desired results) with initiative sites.”¹¹ In fact, research suggests that this approach can avoid some of the pitfalls of traditional measures of organizational effectiveness and corresponding evaluation systems that are often defined by white-dominant culture norms.¹² While white-dominant culture norms are not inherently bad, traditional success metrics in philanthropy reflective of these norms often value data that can easily be quantified. However, many leaders and organizations proximate to their communities also value other forms of rigorous data analysis—such as qualitative interviews or program observation—that can better capture the nuanced impact of their organization on the community and are more culturally relevant and inclusive to the community.¹³

“Foundations have an outsized impact on nonprofits who do the work of strategy implementation. In fact, many struggle to maintain their north star—if they even have one. Nonprofits react to funding and sometimes wax and wane because of the power of a single program officer. That’s untenable. Program officers and foundations must discover and heed the wisdom of communities instead.”

Jean-Claude Brizard, Digital Promise

“The ability to assess and achieve results does not mean an organization is inherently effective ... if the results are not those most desired by the people and communities being served ... Nonprofits deemed ‘effective’ are often those most skilled at navigating the thicket of hurdles, requirements and processes put in place by philanthropy.”

Kathleen Enright, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations

Source: [We Need a New Definition of Effectiveness](#), December 4, 2017



CREDIT: SAY YES BUFFALO

SUGGESTION THREE: In a local-national philanthropic partnership, establish role clarity by agreeing on what the local foundation and national foundation are best suited to do.

Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo offers insight into what constitutes a strong national-local relationship. She says that “in any good partnership—whether a marriage or between foundations—you need role clarity and honest dialogue and shared goals grounded in shared values,” something she says she has enjoyed with national partners. National partners have the resources and connections for research and technical assistance in addition to access to large pools of unrestricted funds, she adds. “But we are the experts on our community. We are connected to the nonprofit sector, the private sector and to local and state government. We are experts in terms of local culture as well—and culture eats strategy for lunch every day. To the degree we can partner with national philanthropy to inform and help with work that we are prepared to guide in our community, we’re really ready to start cooking.”

Denver’s Rose Community Foundation (Rose) and the Ford Foundation operationalized the role of which Perez-Bode Dedecker speaks in a five-year collaborative partnership focused on using expanded learning opportunities to produce greater equity for students of color. The Ford Foundation’s Sanjiv Rao

says that for this place-based strategy, the foundation decided to partner with “locally based anchor institutions where we could provide resources to put wind in the sails of a local agenda that was aligned with the ideas we were trying to advance and where we could step in to fund work in local communities that local funders may not be able to.” While Rao co-developed strategic priorities and buckets of funding with his Rose partner, Janet Lopez (Lopez formalized them in annual proposals she submitted to Ford), he turned the helm over to Lopez and the local foundation’s internal grantmaking committee afterward. “While I would go on site visits with Janet and participate in phone calls with grantees, Ford gave Rose complete autonomy over how to spend the money. I did not weigh in on or participate in Rose’s due diligence process,” says Rao. Lopez adds that “Rose and Ford had an equitable relationship based on an understanding of our appropriate roles and the value each of us added to each other.” Of particular value to Lopez was a role Ford played that Rose could not: delivering funding for research needs and for Rose grantees to travel to Washington, D.C., to participate with other Ford grantees in a weeklong process to develop indicators of progress for the initiative. Lopez concludes that the “stay power” of this philanthropic partnership “was that Sanjiv as a national funder always showed humility and respect for what our local leaders bring to the table and our unique local context.”

SUGGESTION FOUR: Get serious about how long it takes to bring about greater racial justice and equity; do not expect that desired outcomes will be achieved with short-term grants.

Tommy McClam of CIT grantee Say Yes Buffalo is three generations removed from slavery, two generations from sharecropping, and one generation from a father who lied about his age to join the military so he could escape Klan violence in South Carolina (see [Buffalo We Refuse to Lose profile](#)). He understands what communities of color are up against. “You can’t look at an outcome today for kids of color and not tie it to what has occurred in the past. While funders don’t have to be history majors, they have to understand why things are occurring now. If it took hundreds of years to get where we are, a one- or even three-year grant cycle isn’t going to change much.” McClam’s colleagues in other cities funded by the CIT share McClam’s perspective. Stacy Lightfoot, former vice president of Chattanooga’s Public Education Foundation, says that “racial disparities and injustices are rooted in a dark past that dates back hundreds and hundreds of years. The path to true healing, reconciliation and change,” she argues, “will take more than two, three, four or five years to resolve.”

Maeghan Jones believes that the “relatively brief grant cycles are likely rooted in the fact that the sector has prioritized speed and results over process and deep engagement.” That makes it difficult to make a dent in the nation’s bulwark against racial justice.

As racial-justice activist Tema Okun notes, this sense of urgency that is often a norm in white-dominant culture can make it “difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making.”¹⁴ Jones explains, “National philanthropy is built for speed. Building for speed cuts against equity because when foundation leaders are going fast, they have conversations with their typical default groups, and many times that does not include people from the community. It takes time to have conversations with community and design work based on their real needs and expertise. That doesn’t lend itself to being speedy.” Jones suggests a counter approach: Philanthropy could adopt a mindset similar to those who conceived and started building Europe’s great cathedrals, some of which were 200 years in the making. “They knew they would never see the end result, that the work would be generational. We need to adopt the same approach. Perhaps philanthropy should plan for its racial equity work to unfold over a couple of generations and develop with community indicators that will show along the way how things are changing.”

Grantmaking across generations will not be possible for many foundations; nonetheless, as Tommy McClam suggests, funders must acknowledge that “short-term grant cycles give short shrift to change-oriented work meant to attack racism and systemic inequities in a way that has real impact.”



SUGGESTION FIVE: Recognizing that the shadow of racism is long and continues to obstruct opportunities in communities in which foundations are working to improve life outcomes, grantmakers should find more ways to speak out publicly about racial injustice.

A major lesson of the [We Refuse to Lose series](#) is that America's history of racism—as evidenced by inequities in housing, health and criminal justice, among other systems—has had a devastating impact on the communities the series profiles. One of the most profound systemic inequities detailed in the [We Refuse to Lose series](#) is housing. Racist housing and lending policies in the 20th century go a long way toward explaining why residential segregation haunts American cities and why the majority of the nation's BIPOC students attend segregated—and as the Supreme Court ruled in 1954—inherently unequal schools. In fact, 70 years after the court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, 30 percent of American public school students attend schools with combined enrollment of students of color of at least 75 percent; 60 percent of all Latino, 58 percent of all Black and 53 percent of all Pacific Islander students attend them.¹⁵ Historic racist housing and lending practices—including redlining and restrictive covenants, state and federally funded infrastructure that encouraged and facilitated white flight to the suburbs and urban renewal efforts that bulldozed neighborhoods of color to make way for highways and city amenities—segregated Black families in particular in communities that remain under-resourced and often blighted. These practices also severely restricted opportunities



to build wealth through home ownership (the average Black family in America has nearly 10 times less wealth than the average white family).¹⁶

[The Buffalo We Refuse to Lose profile](#) explains how these racist housing policies resulted in segregating 85 percent of the city's Black residents on the east side of Main Street. There, opportunities to access quality employment, schools, food, clean air and water are diminished, life expectancy is five years less and hospital admissions three times higher than in predominantly white communities to the west of Main Street.¹⁷ [The Tacoma profile](#) documents how in city council districts encompassing formerly redlined neighborhoods (which also have the highest

percentages of BIPOC residents in the city), high school graduation, degree attainment and test proficiency rates are substantially lower than in neighborhoods where redlining never occurred. On top of the historic inequities that communities of color have had to fight against, new efforts are afoot in several state legislatures to limit the ability of schools to teach about the pervasive impact of slavery and racism¹⁸ and to limit access to voting for people of color.

Michael McAfee, president and CEO of PolicyLink and a member of a committee of experts the CIT convened to help advise its P-16 initiative, says that people in positions of power need acknowledge and publicly name these historic injustices. But, he says,

“the most powerful people in civil society, including those in philanthropy—choose, unfortunately, to be silent” about the root causes of racial inequity that have been piling up on each other for centuries. McAfee argues that powerful people must not only “use their privilege to speak out” but also be far more conscious when designing initiatives of what communities are really up against. “If people can't vote, if senior citizens in certain communities have to stand in line for several hours to cast a vote, how can foundations really accomplish what they want to? They need to account for other systemic inequities in their initiatives while using their privilege to speak out.”

Joe Scantlebury believes that because issues of racial inequity are so connected across different social systems, funders need to speak up in debates about race and racial impact, even when these debates are not about the education system alone. He observes that recent state efforts to undermine voting rights should catalyze American philanthropy. “Standing by in contemplation and study while communities twist in despair is not worthy of our field’s potential and promise. American philanthropy must do more to call out this exercise of white privilege and structural racism by over-communicating the well-studied facts, elevating the history of exclusion and inequity hidden from generations of Americans.”

The consequence of not elevating the history of exclusion, not taking a side, not staking out a public position may be that the racial-justice improvements foundations seek—including those in education—are never achieved. It’s hard to change a system such as P-16 education or address the inequitable outcomes it produces if you can’t talk openly about the interdependence between it and other inequitable systems, such as housing discrimination and limits on voting access.

Of course, funders (especially living, wealthy donors) lending their own voices and perspective to contentious and sometimes political local debates don’t always help or may further inflame tensions; they can be seen, somewhat correctly, as having no standing to tell a community what choices to make.

Moreover, when an issue is connected specifically to pending legislation, speaking out publicly and lobbying is not an option for private foundations.

State, local and regional foundations that are already part of the fabric of a community may be better positioned to engage, take positions and share their opinions—and they should. But national funders are not off the hook: They need to regularly consider how they can deploy their authority, leadership and resources to best advance racial justice, whether it’s by raising issues or asking questions about race that wouldn’t otherwise be surfaced, speaking out about and framing policy choices (but not specific policy proposals), contributing research that examines existing inequities or dissects different policy proposals, and empowering advocacy organizations. They also can look to local community foundations as partners for a variety of reasons, only one of which is that these foundations have flexibility to engage in lobbying in ways that private foundations do not.

Issues of racial justice are controversial and complicated and often swept under the table or raised only by the same, few organizations again and again. That’s why foundations need to take responsibility for wrestling with if and how to weigh in on a habitual basis. Simply asking the organizations it funds in a community what help, added resources or public statements are most needed would be a good place to start.



Under-Investment in Rural America: Philanthropic Power Sometimes Shows Up in What Foundations Choose Not To Do

“So many funders equate rural to ‘white’ when nothing is further from the truth,” says Felecia Lucky of Alabama’s Black Belt Community Foundation. “Most people think that all rural America is like Appalachia: white and poor or that it’s backwards, monolithic and happy with the status quo.” Lucky’s foundation gets its name from a large, crescent-shaped piece of land that stretches from Texas all the way to the Carolinas. The land, in turn, got its name, Lucky says, from the region’s dark fertile soil as well as the skin tone of most of the people who live there.

Rural regions such as the Black Belt are growing more diverse, especially in 10 states in the South where people of color constitute 20 percent of the rural population.¹⁹ Childhood poverty is most persistent in counties in five regions of the country, including in the colonias of the Rio Grande Valley and in the old plantation South, where there are substantial child populations of color.²⁰ Yet according to most recent data available, per capita grantmaking from private grantmakers from 2011–2015 was \$111.00 for California and \$194.00 for New York but only \$30.00 for Alabama, \$39.00 for South Carolina and Kentucky, \$41.00 for Mississippi, \$70.00 for Texas and \$60.00 for the American South as a collective.²¹

“If you’re a national, statewide or regional philanthropy and care about bringing greater racial equity to the United States, you should consider funding rural communities,” says Wynn Rosser bluntly. Rosser is

president and CEO of the T.L.L. Temple Foundation, a philanthropy that funds rural communities in deep East Texas. “What would really make the difference is if national foundations simply invest the time in getting to know rural communities. That’s it. That’s the starting point.”

But foundation officials have frequently demonstrated they are not willing to do so. Lucky and Rosser report experiences with foundation representatives who are unwilling to take two flights and then drive 60 or 90 minutes to get to a destination or who are reluctant to stay in a name-brand budget hotel, which is often all that is available.

“Over the years, we have been ever so thankful for those funders willing to spend some very real, on-the-ground learning time with us,” says Lucky. “They have engaged firsthand a wonderful tapestry of experiences in ways that aren’t possible across a desktop thousands of miles away. Rural hospitality properties may seem lacking against the Ritz Carltons and Four Seasons of the world. For those willing to rough it in a Hampton Inn or Holiday Inn Express, next-day awards await: hot, homemade pound cake, punch served lovingly, gospel hymns sung over every stitch going into a world-famous Gee’s Bend quilt, or the ability to take a morning walk in Martin Luther King’s footsteps across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.”



That racial justice was identified by Grantmakers for Education as education funders' top priority hopefully suggests growing and more serious interest in working to change inequitable systems.



CREDIT: THE PUBLIC EDUCATION FOUNDATION (PEF)

After George Floyd's murder, foundations from coast to coast issued powerful statements about racial injustice, historical inequities and the need for change. The jury, for some, is still out on whether foundations will follow through. One of the nonprofit leaders of color interviewed for this publication says she fears that foundations "want the glitz and glamor of this moment but don't want to do the work" and that "they still want to put us through the exact same processes they would have put us through anyway." Another adds, "Black leaders are tired. We have been having the same conversations about race, inequities and oppressive systems for years. And it's a slap in the face at times for people to say, 'I think we get it now' but still do very little. It's time for real change. And real

change calls for a shift in power and resources that follow."

Jean-Claude Brizard is hopeful, however. As the leader of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's P-16 initiative, he kicked off the [We Refuse to Lose series](#) by recounting in an introductory blog how he was discriminated against in school, spat upon, blocked from taking advanced courses and bullied because he is Black and an immigrant. Today, he believes that philanthropy may finally be at an inflection point and up to the challenge of more boldly tackling systemic racism than it has in the past, ceding power to communities of color and finding a voice that is in public opposition to racism.

Brizard's vantage point is unique, having led the Chicago and Rochester school systems, served as grantmaker and now as a nonprofit leader working to close the digital divide. "I am really hopeful that things are changing in the philanthropic world," he says. "There is escalating interest and understanding that history, context and place matter. Proximity to those most affected by the issues matter, and there is a new understanding that local leadership is critical to our success. In recent gatherings by a funder collaborative led by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the need to lean on BIPOC leaders and to co-create solutions with communities dominated the conversations. In building the P-16 Community Investment Initiative at the Bill & Melinda Gates

Foundation in 2017, we leaned greatly on learning from five highly effective community efforts. I believe that we effectively left our weight and hubris at the door and leaned on different DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) approaches."

He ends, "I am hopeful, but we can't let up."



CREDIT: ALLISON SHELLEY FOR EDUIMAGES

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