

Social Justice Funders SPOTLIGHT:

Communities for Just Schools Fund • Washington, DC

by Johanna Wald

In the late 1990s, community groups across the country began speaking out against disciplinary policies that pushed disproportionate shares of students of color out of public schools, often for minor misbehaviors. In response, the donor collaborative, Just and Fair Schools Fund formed to support the growing number of grassroots efforts combating harsh disciplinary practices.

The Fund, initially made possible through a grant from Atlantic Philanthropies, grew steadily over the years. By 2016, with contributions from 14 funders, it made grants to 43 groups in 19 states and the District of Columbia. About 85 percent of the Fund's community-based grantees are led by and for young people.

"We couldn't even get to the larger question about educational equity until young people were sitting in their seats at school and being educated," explains Allison Brown, Executive Director of what is now called the Communities for Just Schools Fund. Brown sees local groups working on the ground as providers of the "oxygen" for work on state and federal policy and for research in academia related to school discipline and improving school climate.

In 2015, the Fund underwent a major transition and expansion. It re-launched under its new name and relocated from New York City to Washington DC, entered into a fiscal sponsorship with The New Venture Fund, and hired Brown as its new executive director. Brown, a civil rights attorney, had also previously worked at George Soros' Open Society Foundations.

The timing of these changes, Brown says, coincided with growth within the field. The Fund's grantees, she notes, had raised awareness of the harm caused by exclusionary and overly-punitive school

disciplinary policies. Media reports, policy proposals in state legislatures and federal policy grew from this new awareness and advocacy. The Fund's move to Washington DC allowed it to strengthen connections with new allies in the Justice Department and the Department of Education. The Fund also decided to provide two year operating support to grantees instead of making grants for

importance of recognizing innovations by educators that "do not necessarily yet have a name." As an example, Brown mentions a principal who disbanded the school security program in order to pay for a new arts and music program for students.

Another key challenge for the Fund's work is to ensure it keeps pace with the broader social and racial justice move-

ments. Brown and the Fund's board are thinking critically about how to make sure, for example, that the Fund's work is "not separate and apart from Black Lives Matter, but aligned and part of it." The "sad truth," Brown says, is in spite of progress toward equity, "some children are still not viewed as human beings and not seen as equals." That is why, she says, the Fund will continue to provide

youth-led organizations with the "microphone, platform and podium" to "share their brilliance as much as possible."

A donor collaborative supporting constituency-led organizations that promote fair and equitable school cultures.



Photo: courtesy of Kids Rethink New Orleans

specific projects because, as Brown explains, "we need them to be flexible, nimble and able to pivot" when necessary.

In building the next phase of its work, the Fund is making some pivots of its own. It is expanding outreach to include teacher and parent groups that have joined the movement. In addition to advocating against harmful disciplinary policies and practices, the Fund is increasing its support of interventions that create more welcoming and equitable school environments. Brown cites three efforts as particularly promising: (1) training for educators to help them understand how unconscious stereotyping of children of color can lead to unfair treatment; (2) trauma-informed practices in the classroom designed to make children feel safe and supported, and (3) restorative justice practices that allow students to make amends for offenses they commit while staying engaged with the school community. In addition to these, she notes the

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Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools (Louisiana)

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, educator and community organizer Karen Marshall sensed that teens who had been evacuated and then returned to New Orleans needed a space to share their experiences with trauma and displacement. In the summer of 2006, Marshall began meeting regularly with 14 teenagers and talking with them about how to create positive change in their schools. The students compiled a list of 10 recommendations. These included providing healthy foods in school cafeterias, repairing dilapidated bathrooms, and reforming harsh disciplinary policies. When September rolled around, the students didn't want to disband their summer program.

"So," Marshall says, "We just kept going from there."

Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools in 2016 has 120 core young people, called

"Rethinkers" ages 10-25, who meet at least once a week in community centers during the school year and participate in summer leadership programs. The younger cohort—the Roots Crew (aged 10-14)—focus on building connections and developing leadership and critical thinking skills. The Branch Division, (ages 15-25) push for systemic changes in their schools and communities. These names were inspired by the poem, "Message in the Water" by Climbing PoeTree.

"...powerful oak trees survived the storm on the gulf coast.... by spreading their roots far and wide, interlocking with other oak trees...you cannot bring down a thousand oak trees bound beneath the soil," the poem reads.

The Rethinkers point to several achievements. They successfully campaigned for fresh food in school cafeterias. Their demands for clean and safe bathrooms pushed the district to revamp more than 300 facilities in

public schools across the city. Rethinkers also worked with the New Orleans' Health Department to publish a guide on restorative justice practices that educators in the public schools use. The older cohort, branching out into communities, uses an innovative organizing model for challenging mass incarceration, with is called Participatory Defense. They also use youth-led media outlets to create and disseminate positive stories about black youth.

Kids Rethink New Orleans is funded almost exclusively through grants. The organization's relationship with Communities for Just Schools is fairly new. Marshall explains that CJS "is one of the few foundations that I feel like really tries to understand the youth organizing movement.... CJS seeks to understand and use a justice framework, which I love and appreciate."

Marshall also credits CJS with helping Rethinkers

to collaborate and strategize with other organizations with similar goals. When some of the older group recently traveled to Baton Rouge to protest police brutality, CJS "reached out to us to see if they could help...that is not normal....I get the sense that they are serious about school reform and equity and make sure that equity efforts are led by communities of color that actually experience the marginalization. . ."



Photo: courtesy of Kids Rethink New Orleans

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