



FROM TOKENISM TO PARTNERSHIP

Written by Charles McDonald
Senior Fellow, Advocacy and Engagement
Education Cities

TABLE OF CONTENTS

From Tokenism to Partnership	3
Tokenism to Partnership Spectrum	4
An Intentional Shift Toward Grassroots Partnership - The Mind Trust	5
Effective Community Empowerment and Engagement Strategies	5
Conclusion	7
Acknowledgements	7
Appendix: Definitions of Commonly Used Terms	8
References	11

“As currently configured, education reform’s roots may be shallow, because it has been propelled too frequently not from the bottom but from the top, often leaving parents and community members with the feeling captured by this report’s title, that education reform has been done not with them, but to them...No such movement can succeed without the support and engagement of its intended beneficiaries.”

-Dr. Michael L. Lomax, President and CEO, UNCF

(Excerpted from *“Done to Us, Not with Us: African American Parent Perceptions of K-12 Education”*.)

For the last two decades, education reformers have successfully launched high-quality public charter schools, online news sites, think tanks, advocacy organizations, and developed pipelines of talented education leaders in an effort to increase educational opportunities for poor students and students of color. As a result of these collective efforts, we are now witnessing accelerated academic growth in cities like Indianapolis, New Orleans, and Chicago.¹ Despite the successes, education reform has yet to receive the type of popular support among families, parents, educators and grassroots civic leaders that one would expect²; in some cities, reform is experiencing serious resistance which threatens to derail progress altogether.

While organized opposition to education reform certainly contributes to these challenges, it is worth considering how the actions of education reformers factor into a lack of popular grassroots stakeholder³ support. Our preference for swift and transactional grassroots change combined with an underutilization of inclusive and relational community engagement has limited our ability to build the critical base of grassroots leaders necessary to accelerate and sustain the demand for, and growth of, high quality schools.

For example, as reported in a 2017 CREDO study on the Charter Restart Model (CRM), launched in New Orleans and replicated in Memphis and Nashville, the theory of action to increase the number of high-quality seats through investments in proven charter management organizations was explicitly hindered by a lack of follow-through on community engagement: “The most publicly visible shortcoming...concerned community engagement. None of the program partners, NSNO, RSD, or ASD, ever successfully managed stakeholder engagement as a core commitment, as per the original CRM Theory of Action.”⁴ Even reform efforts with every intention of engaging communities have fallen short; the prevailing narratives of reform in these cities are a story of reform done to, not with, the community.

Reformers have always struggled with this balance between technocratic efficiency and relational grassroots community engagement. It is not uncommon for organizations to develop and drive a city-wide high quality schools plan without a community engagement strategy. This approach has limited the effectiveness of our problem solving and eroded trust with the very communities affected by the deeply flawed traditional public school system and who have for years recognized the need for change.

1. Barnum, Matt. Advocates of the portfolio model for improving schools say it works. Are they right? *Chalkbeat*. (8 Dec 2017). Retrieved from: <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2017/12/08/advocates-of-the-portfolio-model-for-improving-schools-say-it-works-are-they-right/>

2. The 2017 EdNext poll on School Reform. *Education Next*. Retrieved from: <http://educationnext.org/2017-ednext-poll-school-reform-public-opinion-school-choice-common-core-higher-ed/>

3. See Appendix A at the bottom of this paper for a table of commonly used terms and definitions such as “grassroots stakeholder”

4. CREDO. *Executive Summary: An Evaluation of the i3 Validation Grant: Scaling the New Orleans Charter Restart Model*. December 2017. Retrieved from: <http://nolai3eval.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/downloads/CRM%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>. p.7.

Furthermore, white education reformers who led such change efforts in communities of color, and failed to do so with key community stakeholders, have often reinforced harmful race, class, and power dynamics.

In recent years, a growing number of education reform organizations have confronted these challenges head-on and taken steps to reconcile community engagement gaps by hiring leaders who are responsible for developing and leading community engagement efforts that seek to partner with key grassroots stakeholders on a shared vision for high quality schools. Despite this positive development, education reformers must resist the tendency to use “community engagement” as a means for getting stakeholders to rubber-stamp a predetermined agenda. In other words, the tokenism of key grassroots stakeholders and the field of community engagement must be avoided at all costs. To do so, leaders and their institutions must continually reflect on how they include grassroots stakeholders in their decision-making process, become familiar with the community engagement field and the most effective strategies for partnering with grassroots stakeholders, and commit the necessary time and resources to be successful.

Below are two tools to help strengthen an organization’s approach to partnering with grassroots stakeholders, *The Tokenism to Partnership Spectrum* and *Effective Community Engagement and Empowerment Strategies*.

FROM TOKENISM TO PARTNERSHIP

Organizational leaders must be aware that they likely have the power to influence decisions that will impact the lives of community members who have historically been excluded from the education decision-making process within their city. As a result, leaders should commit to partnering with grassroots stakeholders on the major decisions their organization will make. Doing so requires a careful examination of the organization’s current commitment to equity and inclusion, as well as a concrete plan that moves the organization closer to partnership with key grassroots stakeholders. On page 4 is the *Tokenism to Partnership Spectrum* which provides a framework for leaders to reflect on how they take into account the values and needs of grassroots stakeholders in their decision making.

The spectrum highlights key areas of an organization’s work, assigns concrete actions to those key areas of work, and places those actions along a spectrum from tokenism to partnership of grassroots stakeholders. For example, if an organization’s actions mostly align to Tokenism, then it’s likely that key grassroots stakeholders are not seriously taken into account by the organization on key decisions that are made. We view this tool as a living document, and by sharing with a broader audience we hope it will spark meaningful reflection, action, and feedback on how it can be strengthened.

We suggest leaders consider the following process for using this tool:

1. Individual reflection time to assess where leaders believe their organization falls along the spectrum
2. Whole team time to share out and align on what is working and areas of growth
3. Action planning which includes ongoing individual and team reflection to measure progress toward viewing key grassroots stakeholders as active partners in decision making

INEQUITABLE & NOT INCLUSIVE → EQUITABLE & INCLUSIVE

TOKENISM TO PARTNERSHIP SPECTRUM

TOKENISM

ENGAGEMENT

PARTNERSHIP

ENGAGEMENT PURPOSE

Organization engages stakeholders to get buy-in on their previously defined decisions or goals + public cover
No ongoing community engagement plan or staff leading engagement

Organization engages stakeholders to build legitimacy and seek input on decisions
Short-term community engagement plan. Staff person hired to lead engagement efforts

Organization engages stakeholders to identify community concerns, share & build power of key stakeholders, and create a vision aligned to the values and needs of key stakeholders
Long-term community engagement plan. Leadership development plan for stakeholders. Likely has an engagement team

ROLE OF KEY GRASSROOTS STAKEHOLDERS IN YOUR INSTITUTION

Small, select group of stakeholders invited to represent community in organization-led activities.

Diverse set of stakeholders, reflective of the community, are encouraged by organization to participate in engagement activities

Diverse set of stakeholders, reflective of the community, are paid staff/leaders, committee/council/board members, and/or volunteers

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR RACIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Racism and power are dealt with superficially, often in the aftermath of a crisis

Organization's leadership foster occasional discussion on racism and power, but does not view its mission as directly advancing racial equity and inclusion

Organization provides ongoing anti-racism and power training and support for staff, and views its mission as advancing racial equity and inclusion

AGENDA GENERATION

Organization generates an agenda they think stakeholders will support without any stakeholder involvement

Organization occasionally holds space for stakeholders to participate in generating ideas that will influence their agenda

Organization creates an ongoing space to support stakeholders in generating their own ideas and seeks opportunities for those ideas to shape their agenda.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH KEY GRASSROOTS STAKEHOLDERS

Transactional, and often limited to the most visible stakeholders

Organization demonstrates a willingness to build relationships with stakeholders

Organization views relationships as foundational, mutually beneficial, and long-term
Listening sessions, 1:1 meetings, and community celebrations

OUTCOMES

Key stakeholders are not seriously taken into account by the organization

OUTCOMES

Key stakeholders are taken into account by the organization

OUTCOMES

Key stakeholders are seen as active partners in organization's decision making

AN INTENTIONAL SHIFT TOWARD GRASSROOTS PARTNERSHIP - THE MIND TRUST

After nearly a decade of catalyzing and implementing nationally-recognized education reforms, The Mind Trust made an intentional shift from solely focusing on grassroots-driven reform efforts to recognizing the need to partner with key grassroots stakeholders and civic leaders with deep ties to the communities most impacted by educational inequity. In 2013, the organization hired Indianapolis native Kameelah Shaheed-Diallo to help lead efforts to better align The Mind Trust's strategy to the needs and values of the community and build a base of community support for educational equity.

Shaheed-Diallo and her team quickly seized opportunities to strengthen The Mind Trust's relationships with key stakeholders by partnering with the UNCF (United Negro College Fund) to hold listening sessions for The Mind Trust, to hear from faith leaders, educators, and parents to generate ideas, suggestions and feedback about education innovation in Indianapolis. The Mind Trust also launched an education bus tour series to showcase high-quality schools in Indianapolis. The tours, which are co-sponsored by Indianapolis Public Schools and community-based organizations (100 Black Men of Indianapolis, La Plaza, UNCF and The Expectations Project) get community members inside schools to see the great work being led by educators. Shaheed-Diallo also saw an opportunity to build staff capacity at The Mind Trust in support of equity and inclusion, and developed and leads a monthly staff learning series on race, power, and privilege.

In the four years since The Mind Trust made their strategic shift, they have witnessed significant community momentum to improve Indianapolis schools, and staff are more credible on issues of inequity within the community. In 2016, Shaheed-Diallo brought on additional capacity by hiring Marquisha

Bridgeman and Holly Merchant to expand The Mind Trust's community engagement reach and execute on the organization's robust community engagement priorities. The Mind Trust community engagement team now supports school leader fellows in the creation of community engagement strategies, will support parent and community organizing efforts across eight schools (three single-site schools and two networks), and will provide year-long training and support opportunities for the organizers. The Mind Trust hopes their investments will help build a bench of parent and family leaders prepared to organize for school specific changes as well as broader issues that impact educational inequity throughout Indianapolis.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Taking root within education reform are four effective and innovative community engagement and empowerment strategies. In the table below, we offer a brief overview of the intended impact and challenges of these strategies, and a proof point organization that successfully employs each one. But before digging into strategies, it's important to agree on common definitions for community engagement and empowerment.⁵ We believe doing so helps create a common starting point for moving from commitment to action. We define community engagement as the process initiated by leaders with formal decision-making authority to build and share power with community stakeholders historically excluded from decisions that may impact their lives. Community empowerment is a process initiated by grassroots stakeholders to build and spend their collective power in order to influence decision-makers to make changes aligned with their needs and values. In the table below, we also specify whether the strategy is a means toward community engagement, community empowerment, or both.

5. See Appendix A for Definitions of Commonly Used Terms. Our definitions were developed with support from long-time education and economic justice leader, Laurel Dumont from her resource: *Authentic Community Engagement- Tools and Tips for School Board Members*. Leadership for Educational Equity. 2016.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES⁶

	PARENT AND FAMILY EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE ORGANIZING	MULTI-ISSUE ORGANIZING	MULTI-STAKEHOLDER EDUCATION COALITIONS	NEW SCHOOL EXPANSION ORGANIZING	FAMILY & COMMUNITY ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS
OVERVIEW	Parents and families of color and low-income parents and families organize to explicitly address the root causes of education inequity and transform their public education system	Grassroots stakeholders organize using a school, district, and/or charter network as a mediating institution to address a range of issues impacting families and students within a community	A community organization is created to align and organize grassroots and grassroots leaders to advocate for local education change	Parents/families, educators, and community leaders in existing schools or within a community, organize to create new high-quality schools	District/CMO/School intentionally partner with families & parents to enhance their involvement in their child's school and classroom, leading to stronger academic outcomes for students.
ENGAGEMENT OR EMPOWERMENT	Empowerment	Empowerment	Both	Empowerment	Engagement
INTENDED IMPACT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds a permanent parent and family led organization for educational justice Builds a base of parent and family political power Explicitly addresses issues such as systemic racism and classism that lead to educational inequity Develops strong grassroots relationships and networks across school communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds a permanent grassroots organization Builds a base of political power (voter reg and mobilization) Broad enough to tackle non-education issues Develops strong grassroots relationships and networks Opportunity to impact systems-level change and build a movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds coalitions with power and legitimacy to address an array of local education issues Family and educator leadership development and organizing Policy research, analysis, and advocacy Opportunity to create a c4 to influence electoral politics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds grassroots stakeholder power Creates new high-quality schools aligned to the values and needs of communities Places pressure on decision makers to address struggling schools Opportunity for leaders to give input to the school design process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds strong relationships between schools/districts/networks and community Trainings covers root cause analysis and uncovering bias Opportunity to improve academic outcomes
CHALLENGES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional education reform funders have yet to make significant investments in this organizing model Evaluation must allow for an adaptable and flexible set of outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May not or may not address struggling schools Requires funder comfort with supporting issues outside of education Evaluation must allow for an adaptable and flexible set of outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balancing multiple stakeholder needs and values Strategy may be difficult to articulate due to the intersection of multiple workstreams and stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May not lead to the creation of a lasting grassroots-led organization Somewhat scripted campaigns Few examples and currently limited to charter school expansion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May not change underlying school quality issues May not lead to broader systems-level change Requires an effective, committed school leader
PROOF-POINT EXAMPLES	RISE Colorado	United Parents and Students	GO Public Schools	Innovate Public Schools	Flamboyan Foundation

6. Created with support from Mark Fraley and adapted from his School Organizing Framework

CONCLUSION

Of course, dramatic change of education systems does not happen by following a few frameworks. Community-facing work is complex: there is no guarantee of success, and progress is difficult to measure and unlikely to happen quickly or according to plan. Leaders are certain to face entrenched historical, social, and political factors that unexpectedly surface along the way. Regardless, there is great potential for education reform leaders to accelerate and sustain the creation of high-quality schools in partnership with the communities that need them the most, if the necessary resources are invested in community engagement and community empowerment. This will require greater philanthropic commitment to research, scaling and replicating best practices, entrepreneurship (especially leaders of color with deep ties to the communities that reform efforts seek to serve), developing talent pipelines, and leadership development. This resource offers a starting point for education reform organizations to begin the process of reflecting on their values, making organizational commitments to making their work more equitable and inclusive, and ultimately pursuing community engagement and empowerment strategies in their communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was authored by Charles McDonald during his time as Education Cities' Senior Fellow, Advocacy and Engagement. Thank you to the leaders at Donnell-Kay Foundation, Leadership For Educational Equity, Memphis Education Fund, MN Comeback, The Mind Trust, SchoolSmartKC, and United Parents and Students for their assistance and cooperation. Thank you to Education Cities staff for their help in developing this paper including Dan Tesfay, Ethan Gray, and Rebecca Weinberg Jones for review and feedback.



APPENDIX

DEFINITIONS OF COMMONLY USED TERMS⁷

TERM	DEFINITION
COMMUNITY	The key individuals, groups, and institutions that participate in and share a city or region. In the context of Education Cities network members, the community includes, but is not limited to: students, educators, families, administrative leaders, educator associations, neighborhood associations, nonprofit organizations, faith communities and churches, elected and appointed government officials, corporations, business leaders, funders voters, and local media
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	Community Engagement is the process initiated by leaders with formal decision-making authority to build and share power with community stakeholders historically excluded from decisions that may impact their lives
COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT	Community empowerment is a process initiated by grassroots stakeholders to build and spend their collective power in order to influence decision-makers to make changes aligned with their needs and values
KEY GRASSROOTS STAKEHOLDERS	Key grassroots stakeholders are the individuals and groups within a city most impacted by educational inequity, the public education system, and education reform efforts. These individuals and groups are families and parents, students, and educators
GRASSTOPS STAKEHOLDERS	The individuals and groups within a city that have formal decision-making power or greatly influence the final decision makers. These individuals and groups are School Board members, Superintendents, Mayors, State Legislators, Funders, District and School leaders, and Quarterback organizations

7. The following definitions were developed in 2017 as an attempt to codify common language related to community engagement work happening in cities across the country. The definitions are seen as foundational and iterative and should be revisited and updated periodically.

DEFINITIONS OF COMMONLY USED TERMS CONTINUED

TERM	DEFINITION	CHARACTERISTICS
ORGANIZING	<p>The process by which a group of community members build the individual leadership and collective power necessary to improve their community This process includes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organizing relationships through listening and building community, trust, and respect 2. Identifying issues and solutions 3. Mobilizing communities around those issues to win improvements, develop leaders, and build power 4. Building and maintaining an enduring organization 	<p>Initiated by key stakeholders or Organizers Key stakeholders select the issues Permanent/Ongoing change</p>
MOBILIZING	<p>Moving people to act publicly in an effort to demonstrate collective power and influence decision makers to take action on an issue or cause.</p>	<p>Initiated by grassroots leaders or key stakeholders</p>
POLICY ADVOCACY	<p>The process of influencing public policy toward a desired outcome.</p>	
ELECTORAL POLITICS	<p>The process of electing leaders to political office or position through the creation of 501c4, 527, or Political Action Committees (PACs).</p>	<p>Top down change Episodic</p>

REFERENCES

- Aldeman, L. (2003) Race: The Power of An Illusion. California Newsreel
- Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change. (2004) Structural Racism and Community Building. The Aspen Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/aspeninst3.pdf>
- Barnes, B.C.B. & Burton, D.O. (2017, January 3) Shifting Philanthropy from Charity to Justice. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/shifting_philanthropy_from_charity_to_justice
- Beabout, B.R. & Boselovic, J.L. (2016). "Community engagement as a central activity in new charter schools" Charlotte, N.C. The power of community engagement for educational change. Retrieved from <http://works.bepress.com/beabout/15/>
- Building the Field of Community Engagement and Babler, T. (2014) Impacts of Community Engagement. Retrieved from <http://static1.squarespace.com/static/54317469e4b056843fc6796c/t/545673dce4b09ec5edfe3937/1414951900645/BTF-ImpactsofCE.pdf>
- Dumont, L. (2016) Authentic Community Engagement-Tools and Tips for School Board Members. Leadership For Educational Equity
- Fraley, M. (2016) History Matter: Building towards an educational justice movement. Leadership For Educational Equity
- Gray, E. (2014) Building Education Cities. Education Cities. Retrieved from <http://www.educationcities.org/wp-content/uploads/Building-Education-Cities-Report-FINAL.pdf>
- Kisner, R. (2013) The Parent Engagement Continuum in High-Performing Charter Schools. A Guide for Schools. Retrieved from <http://dkfoundation.org/assets/files/2013-Parent-Engagement-Continuum.pdf>
- Perry, A. (2014, June 2). The education-reform movement is too white to do any good. The Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/02/the-education-reform-movement-is-too-white-to-do-any-good/?utm_term=.8b3c94066c3c
- Phenicie, C. (2017, January 25). In the Shadow of Trump, Education Reformers Gather in D.C. to Talk, Unity, Division, How to Help Kids. The74. Retrieved from <https://www.the74million.org/article/experts-debate-education-at-aei-panel>
- White, B. (2009) Navigating the Power Dynamics Between Institutions and Their Communities. The Kettering Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.kettering.org/wp-content/uploads/Navigating_Power_Dynamics.pdf
- Voices for Racial Justice. (2014) Pathway Educational Equity, Key Terms, Equity Measures. Retrieved from <http://voicesforracialjustice.org/our-work/education-equity-organizing-collaborative/>

