

Social Justice Funders SPOTLIGHT:

Communities for Just Schools • Washington, DC

Beginning in the late 1990s, more community groups began speaking out against disciplinary policies that pushed disproportionate shares of Black and Latinx students out of public schools, often for minor misbehavior. Observing the growth of this resistance movement, led by students of color and their parents, concerned grantmakers began to challenge national philanthropy to support hyper-local grassroots organizers that big-dollar foundations had long overlooked.

has broadened in recent years as the Fund's partners are focused on powerful base-building and political education grounded in a variety of efforts that seek to ensure schools are holistically safe places where students are affirmed.

Their partners' efforts include everything from campaigns that aim to make schools more welcoming for LGBTQ youth, to hire more school counselors and raise awareness about the way surveillance technology could harm black and brown youth.

what non-profit leaders, staff and constituents view as most necessary. This contrasts markedly with the more typical practice in which funders provide time-bound grants to fund a discrete particular project proposed by an organization.

"Organizing is a long game," Koppel says. "The work is not just about the policy win, or the practice change, or whatever the thing is that folks are building political power around changing, but ensuring "that the implementation of those changes are deeply rooted in community leadership and accountability."



Activists hold signs at a protest. Signs read "Alton Sterling," "We Die Daily," and "Black Lives Matter." Photo: courtesy of rethink New Orleans

In response, Atlantic Philanthropies stepped up in 2010 with a grant to form the Just and Fair Schools Fund. The Fund grew steadily over the years, building trusted partnerships with grassroots organizers across the nation. In 2015, Allison R. Brown, a seasoned grantmaker and civil rights attorney, stepped into leadership and led the visioning for what is now Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF). (Allison Brown passed away in August, 2020). In 2021, CJSF moved a record \$5.1 million in general operating support to their network of 64 grassroots organizing partners across the United States, in Washington, DC, Puerto Rico and Ontario, Canada. People of color and youth lead many of these youth-benefitting nonprofits where organizing is a central activity. As of 2022, there are 23 funders — CJSF calls them its "members table" — that contribute to the collaborative fund. CJSF continues to support efforts to reduce punitive school cultures and promote fair and reparative school discipline practice. But its work

CJSF stands out in the education funding ecosystem for this support of grassroots organizing, which is still rare among education funders. But it stands apart as well, for ensuring that its policies, practices and public engagement be shaped by the wisdom and experience of its grantee partners.

"We are constantly listening, dedicated to being in conversation...understanding their challenges...Our decisions around what to fund, how to fund, and what and who to center in our public conversations, are absolutely always shaped by what they tell us," says Jaime Koppel, who was appointed CJSF's co-director in 2019. This kind of "deep listening," and reflection, Koppel explains, led CJSF to provide funding to support the health and wellness of staff and volunteers at the organizations CJSF funds. Listening to organizers on the ground, Koppel says, also led CJSF to create a sizable emergency fund to respond to crises and uncertainties quickly, as defined by "folks on the ground, working in community, whom we know and trust to tell us what they need." Deep listening and a "trust-based" ethos also led to CJSF's long commitment to provide mostly general operating support grants to organizations to use for

In recent years, CJSF has made grant applications more straightforward, motivating CJSF staff to, Koppel says, "think really carefully about what it is we need to know and then ask nothing more." At CJSF grant reporting does not require nonprofit leaders to produce reams of paperwork, pain-staking documentation of every activity and quantitative proof of strictly measured outcomes, as is still the norm for many funders. Rather, Koppel says, "we are truly committed to a trust-based" system that assumes community based grantee partners are the best people to determine how to best use funds.

Related to this, at CJSF, a partner's annual report may mean "getting on the phone and having a really honest and supportive conversation not just about the successes but about the frustrations, the challenging contexts" in which grantee partners work, explains Cierra Kaler Jones, CJSF's first director of storytelling.

Kaler Jones' title itself, she says, is a manifestation of CJSF's values. Her role includes traditional communications-related responsibilities but, she adds, "I'm not the official public representative here. I'm as much a listener as a communicator. I listen to what our partners think the stories are, what they feel needs to be told, what they think is being missed in our public conversations and then to be in collaboration with them in how to tell those stories, how to best share their perspective when we might be in conversation with other grantmakers, other folks of influence."

Communities for Just Schools Fund PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:

rethink (New Orleans, 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. So, 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."

Some sixteen years later, in 2022, the organization, rethink, is still "going," engaging and serving young people from 10 to about 25 years old, educators and other community members in New Orleans. Rethinkers

hosts "core" groups of students who meet during the school year to build connections, relationships and critical thinking skills and participate in an intensive summer program. Older students build consensus around advocacy strategies to help realize their collective goals, which have ranged from more equitable school funding, less punitive discipline and curricular changes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the young rethinkers shifted attention, Marshall says, "to those workers and families most in need." This led to food distribution projects and creation of a community refrigerator for members of the 9th Ward neighborhood. The names of the younger rethinkers cohort—the Roots Crew (aged 10-14) and the older cohort, The Branch Division, (ages 15-25) were inspired by the poem, "Message in the Water" by Climbing PoeTree. Part of the poem reads: "...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, called Participatory Defense. They also use youth-led media outlets to create and disseminate positive stories about black youth. The organization also hosts

teachers and community based educators for workshops over the summer.

Rethink is funded almost exclusively through grants. Marshall explains that CJSF "is one of the few foundations that really respects and understands our work. Very few foundations pay attention to organizing and CJSF has been...a trusted ally in the work."

Marshall also credits CJSF with helping rethinkers to collaborate and strategize with other organizations

with similar goals. When some of the older group of Rethinkers traveled to Baton Rouge to protest police brutality, CJS "reached out to us to see if they could help...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. . ."

The revised version of this Spotlight was compiled by Susan Eaton, Brian Stanley and Johanna Wald. The original version was published in 2016.



Two black women stand side by side smiling. One wears a white t-shirt. The other wears white and black t-shirt spelling "respect." Photo: courtesy of rethink New Orleans

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