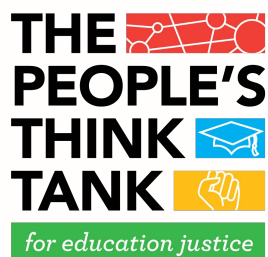


From  
**Transactional**  
to  
**Transformational**  
**Solidarity**

Intersectional Organizing for  
Movement Building across  
California

Mark R. Warren and Geoffrey K. Winder  
Intersectional Organizing Research Series | Apr 2026



*This case study examines the Dignity in Schools Campaign-California (DSC-CA) and its role in building a statewide grassroots movement to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. DSC-CA developed a model of transformational solidarity rooted in intersectional organizing, political education, and trust-based collaboration among Black, Brown, Indigenous, and queer communities. Through participatory action research, the study highlights how organizers replaced short-term policy advocacy with long-term movement building, centering Black-led leadership and inclusive regional organizing. DSC-CA's experience offers vital lessons for sustainable, multiracial, and intergenerational movement power.*

## **Table of Contents**

<i>From Common Sense Discipline to the School-to-Prison Pipeline .....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Deep Listening and Relationships.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>The 2020 Peak.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Lessons Learned.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>What DSC-California's Story Offers to Other Movements.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Essential Elements of Transformational Solidarity.....</i>	<i>25</i>

SEPTEMBER 2012  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA



In the re-election year of the first Black president, a rare opportunity emerged to advance the movement to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline: Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Russlyn Ali convened field hearings on the status of boys and men of color across the U.S., marking a federal shift from a focus on personal failure to systemic inequities. For California's grassroots organizations already fighting school pushout, criminalization, and the school-to-prison pipeline, this was a chance to expose the deeper racialized structures at play. At the Western Regional Office hearing in Los Angeles, testimonies from queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and API youth, their parents, and their advocates wove a powerful and painful narrative: these weren't isolated stories but interconnected patterns revealing the ongoing legacy of racism and anti-Blackness in public education, pointing to the need for systemic transformation. Over the twelve years that followed this opening, youth, parents, and organizers across California took up that challenge and built an ecosystem for radical systemic change in the most diverse state in the country.

The People's Think Tank has sought to document significant solidarity building processes and identify their lessons for our urgent times. We work in partnership with people and groups interested in having their story told and sharing the lessons learned. In this case study, we tell the story of the California chapter of the Dignity in Schools

Campaign (DSC). DSC-California built solidarity among communities and groups across the state of California to challenge the school-to-prison pipeline. As a network founded by organizations that were led by Black leaders or centered Black communities, it stands out for its principled and strategic organizing grounded in abolition. We believe this case study offers critical lessons for understanding how to build the kind of solidarity that supports long-term movement building, what we call transformational solidarity, and speaks to the power of intersectional organizing as a strategy for systemic change.

In the winter of 2024, the People's Think Tank launched a case study by Mark Warren, an academic researcher who leads the think tank's research on intersectional organizing, and Geoffrey Winder, a community organizer who helped found DSC-California. This project was an intentional effort to produce knowledge capable of informing movement building through participatory action research conducted in deep partnership between academic scholars like Mark and movement organizers like Geoffrey. This study included in-person interviews with the founders and key leaders of DSC-California. Mark and Geoffrey traveled to New Mexico and California to capture the origins of DSC-California and the processes these leaders created to form an effective grassroots movement that challenged the school-to-prison pipeline. They worked together to analyze the data and write this case study, sharing it with participants from DSC-California for their review, feedback and approval. The authors and the People's Think Tank hope that the knowledge shared and documented will help other organizers and movement builders understand the kind of deep solidarity and intersectional approach needed for multiracial and intergenerational grassroots power building.

# From Common Sense Discipline to the School-to-Prison Pipeline: *Centering Organizing and Systemic Analysis*



**After many years of organizing in the trenches, by 2012, the grassroots movement to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline had begun to turn the tide against zero tolerance school discipline.**

Working with allies in legal advocacy and policy fields, local organizing efforts across the country were challenging exclusionary school discipline and winning victories in an increasing number of districts. State policy was also changing, and the federal government was preparing to issue new guidance warning districts against racially discriminatory exclusionary discipline practices.

In California, organizing groups in Los Angeles and the Bay Area had built local alliances as chapters of the Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) and won important victories. In fact, CADRE, a Black and Brown parent organizing group in South LA, had led the first victory in the country against zero tolerance when it provided the community base to pressure

LA Unified School District to adopt school wide positive behavioral supports in 2007. The local fights in California all pointed to similar school policies and practices, but there was no unifying story or statewide movement.

Inspired by information shared in the field hearings, The California Endowment (TCE), a foundation with a mission to promote public and community health, saw an opportunity to advocate for policy change to reduce exclusionary discipline at the state level in California. TCE had been funding grassroots organizing groups under its “Building Healthy Communities” initiative. Through working with grassroots organizations, TCE had come to see exclusionary discipline as an important factor impacting children’s health and well-being. The foundation convened a statewide policy coalition, eventually called Fix School Discipline, to seize the momentum and push for policy changes at the state



level that would reduce suspensions and expulsions in districts across the state. Following a typical “big tent” approach, TCE convened a large coalition consisting mostly of advocates. But there was a fly in the ointment: TCE tapped a police-backed alliance called Fight Crime, Invest in Kids, as co-facilitator of the group.

Castle Redmond, a new program officer at TCE, had a background supporting students of color and their families facing disciplinary action in schools and involved in the juvenile justice system. He understood exclusionary discipline as part of a larger system - the school-to-prison pipeline criminalizing Black, Brown and Indigenous youth, and he had seen alternatives like restorative justice work in places like Cole Middle School in Oakland. He wanted to support the groups that were “winning” on the issue and to do what he could at TCE to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.



**Community organizing groups like CADRE and the Labor Community Strategy Center in LA had won important victories.** So Castle reached out to Manuel Criollo, who had led the Strategy Center’s Community Rights Campaign that ended the practice of police ticketing of students for being tardy to school. Castle saw the issue as a complex and systemic one and believed that organizers like Manuel had a deeper analysis and understanding of its connection to systemic oppression. Castle saw these organizers as more connected and accountable to people on the ground, which he viewed as critical to real change in the system. He knew that policy change alone wasn’t going to make a

difference. Meanwhile, TCE already supported organizing through its healthy communities program and had come to understand that community power was part of the solution to addressing health inequities.

Castle asked Manuel to help lead the new statewide coalition. Manuel agreed to do it if someone he deeply respected and already knew - Maisie Chin, the cofounder and executive director of CADRE - would join him in a coordinator role. Manuel and Maisie were seasoned grassroots and movement strategists with strong credibility in the movement to fight criminalization of Black and Brown students

and families; and they had worked together in the DSC Los Angeles chapter.

Right from the start, the organizers worried about the coalition co-opting the movement to end the school-to-prison pipeline. From CADRE’s early pioneering work, Maisie knew how much low-income Black and Brown

parents risked by telling their stories of racist school discipline experienced by their children and the abuse they faced from school officials when they stood up for their children and challenged these practices. The policy advocates in the coalition were calling for “common sense discipline,” which the organizers saw as a superficial message-tested approach that could work against and undermine the deeper change they knew was needed.

Maisie and Manuel understood school discipline as part of a larger system criminalizing Black and Brown that state policy alone was not going to change. Through their years of experience these organizers found the school-to-prison pipeline



deeply entrenched in school culture and practice in Black, Brown and Indigenous communities and very difficult to dismantle. In their view discipline policy fights opened up the larger struggle but were not the end in itself. According to Maisie:

*We use school discipline as a launching pad to talk about criminalization and mass incarceration. For those of us who first started working on this issue, it was not about "common sense." It was about ending mass incarceration. It was about racial justice. It was about challenging dehumanization by race. It was historical.*

**The case of California Assembly Bill AB420 symbolized the limitations of lowest common denominator politics.** Capitalizing on the win in Los Angeles by a grassroots organizing coalition that ended suspensions for "willful defiance," a subjective term that pushed tens of thousands of students out of school for minor, behavioral issues, the Fix School Discipline coalition sought to pass this ban at the state level. Facing opposition, the policy coalition settled for a ban limited to students in kindergarten to third grade, when the vast

majority of these suspensions occurred in secondary school. While positive, the organizers believed the policy would do little to end the school-to-prison pipeline, and it made the need for an organizing approach accountable to students and families directly impacted by injustice all the more critical.

So began a four-year long process to center organizing in the policy coalition and build a deeper analysis of the school-to-prison pipeline, naming it as a system of racist punishment and criminalization. According to Maisie, "We had to dethrone the policy advocates." For Maisie and other organizers, the centering of policy advocacy inevitably placed policy advocates and attorneys in the lead of defining the bottom lines of campaigns that usually began with years of grassroots organizing, community voice, and community-led analysis. In principle, an organizing approach with the people most impacted needed to be at the center of these efforts.

Maisie and Manuel began first by strategizing how to create a statewide organizing space within the constraints of a funder-driven coalition. They started to bring other organizers who shared their systemic analysis into an action team that would serve to coordinate the larger coalition. Over the next year or so, they brought in Jackie Byers, the founder and executive director of the Black Organizing Project in Oakland that had launched a bold campaign to remove all police from schools in Oakland by 2020; Neva Walker, a longtime community organizer and executive director of Coleman Advocates in San Francisco which had just won a Memorandum of Understanding limiting the role of police in schools; Geoffrey Winder who had led work that transformed the larger national LGBTQ2S+ youth (GSA) movement from a white suburban movement focused on equality to a youth of color movement focused on justice, bringing a deep intersectional analysis of the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline on trans and queer youth; and Carl Pinkston, a Black radical and veteran movement organizer who was the founder of the Black Parallel School Board in Sacramento. Tia Martinez, a researcher with ties to TCE and the funding and advocacy world, shared the organizers' systemic analysis and priority on organizing and joined the

action team as well. According to Maisie, "We all came from different journeys to the same clear-eyed analysis," which included the centering of Black organizing accountable to Black people. After all, the vision for "police free schools" that would transform the focus of school-to-prison pipeline activists in California came from BOP's leadership of the first campaign to dismantle school police that started in 2010 in Oakland. So even in a state with a widely dispersed Black population, these organizers centered Black organizing as the way to lead transformation for all impacted communities.

**The action team, including Castle Redmond, met weekly on Thursday mornings while the larger coalition met once a month.** These regular meetings, coordinated and led primarily by Maisie, began to consolidate the nascent group around an analysis and a vision which included but went far beyond "school discipline" to an abolitionist perspective to end policing and criminalization of Black and Brown youth. From that point of view, there was a problem, the "fly in the ointment" mentioned earlier: the police group Fight Crime, Invest in Kids was still the co-facilitator of the coalition. Maisie and her colleagues saw the presence of a police chief's group as antithetical to their mission and a block to their more systemic



transformational goals of ending criminalization. So Maisie led the effort to move them out. She felt she needed to push back against what she saw as TCE's transactional and compromised model. Although Castle was in the position of having to navigate relationships and expectations in TCE, he was committed to following the lead of organizers and acted to remove the police group.

The episode was important because typically, funders get treated with kid gloves. Maisie was pushing to assert that organizers accountable to a base of parents and young people should set the direction of the coalition. It was also an intentional effort to resist the pressures of the nonprofit industrial complex with its big tent approach and its focus on short term, winnable outcomes. This period was key to the other organizers deciding to commit. It demonstrated that the action team was going to be a core of ideologically aligned groups and not going to be another coalition with lowest common denominator politics and a typical funder-driven entity. Therefore it was worthy of their time and effort, even as they had more than full time jobs running their own organizations. Beyond that, Neva talks about the excitement that this new unique formation brought. "Too often, nonprofits and funders confine our capacity to dream, limiting what we can imagine to reform or reaction. What we need are spaces where both our imagination and our capacity are free to move beyond those limits toward transformation."

For his part, despite the tensions and the challenges he faced, Castle supported that space in the strategy team. According to Castle:

*There was no other place wrestling with big ideas that were fundamentally about the truth, not about getting to where we can, not what would work well in a communications campaign. Not about what would win an election or what would win a policy change, but big*

*ideas about what we're fundamentally about and up against.*

**With the police group out and Castle still engaged, the action team began to gel as a cohesive group and discuss what a statewide movement building strategy could look like.** The virtual weekly meetings, and socializing after in-person monthly meetings, strengthened relationships and built trust within the group. Meanwhile, the team deepened its nascent political alignment through extensive discussions of political analysis and strategy. The members took time to fully interrogate issues, had deep conversations, and surfaced and analyzed contradictions rather than avoid them. In other words, the group embraced principled struggle and generative conflict as core parts of their emerging movement building strategy. They sought the kind of deep alignment they thought was necessary for movement building, rather than quick and superficial unity for short term policy goals. According to Manuel, "We weren't just trying to build a coalition; we were trying to build a political home where people could actually struggle together. That means confronting tensions, not avoiding them." Jackie also emphasized, "There was no fear of tension." Geoffrey describes the extensive process they created.

*We met every Thursday morning from nine until 11, and then at some point it became closer to four hours every week. We would rarely ever solve anything in one meeting. It would usually be a three or four meeting process to get to a resolution. So we weren't fast. The process was people disagreeing, thinking about it, coming back the next week, having the conversation again, figuring out if things have changed, where things are at, if they had new ideas. There was just respect for the intellectual rigor that people were bringing and a belief that we would get to the solution together somehow.*

**Eventually the group settled on a vision to build a statewide organizing and movement building network.** This meant that the organizers from the Bay Area and LA would support organizing in other



Tia believed that “having deeply experienced folks around a table with active campaigns on the ground—those who could take their organization hat off and put on a movement hat—was hugely important.”

time, the action team became a valued support space for the organizers, a special place for them beyond their own organizations. According to Neva, “The action team was powerful because it gave me space to stop, breathe, and reflect with people I trusted - an impactful space where I could lead with



**Unusually for a funder, Castle gave the group time to gel into a collective and develop a strategic vision and plan for the regional strategy.** Internally at TCE, Castle pushed for funding that supported organizing infrastructure rather than simply funding “deliverables.” TCE was satisfied that so much was happening at the ground level during this time, and the state policy coalition was moving policy changes too. As a result, the action team had an unusual amount of space and time, which proved critical for statewide movement-building.

Without the pressure to “deliver” the action team could focus on building a long-term strategy and a plan to build a statewide movement. At the same

my heart while we sharpened each other and stretched our collective imagination.” Ultimately, the action team reflected more than the coming together of groups behind a shared political analysis and strategy. It built an intersectional political home where busy organizers and leaders were willing to stay, invest, and do the hard work of creating deep political alignment, because it was personally meaningful to them. In the end, the organizers recognized that the type of solidarity cultivated and practiced by DSC-California would be essential for any of their groups to build the power necessary for systemic change at both local and statewide levels.

# Deep Listening and Relationships

## *Building a Movement across California*



**The action team believed that building the movement in conservative regions would be a challenge, but as veteran community organizers, they were excited to try.** In Maisie's view, "We were going to deliberately be in solidarity with a conservative region where all of our victories and strategies would be put to the test. We were organizers but also strategists." They decided to start with a regional tour, a road show that would feature deep listening and start to build relationships. The team reached out to local groups in each region that were doing work connected to discipline and policing issues in schools. Many of these groups were being funded by TCE through their healthy communities program, providing an initial connection.

Led by Maisie, who did most of the agenda-setting and coordination, the action team set out in the Summer of 2014 to hold regional meetings lasting through the Spring of 2015. The meetings brought groups together in each region, helping to build their connections. Action team members and groups from outside the region attended too, to listen to and learn about the conditions and concerns of folks in that region. The organizers were careful to center the voices of parents and young people directly impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline at these sessions.

The action team wanted to use these sessions to help determine ways groups in the regions could work together and identify ways the statewide team could support organizing in the regions. It turned out, however, that many of the local groups did

conduct what the action team considered organizing. They were close to the ground and worked with families and young people most impacted, but often focused on providing services or supporting healing and wellness, rather than building collective action for policy and institutional change. For example, the MILPA Collective in the Central Coast emphasized cultural healing for formerly incarcerated persons, as part of a program of leadership development and personal empowerment.

Organizing was not well supported in these conservative regions, so it was a somewhat new idea to these groups. These small communities were often closed ones, where elected officials were not used to being challenged by Black and Brown families. Meanwhile, many Latinx families had members working in the prisons that dotted the Central Valley, making the challenge to systems of criminalization a bold and potentially divisive one. According to Carl, "We may have common history, but we also have different histories. And when it intersects in the community, it sometimes clashes." Building Black/Brown unity across the network was essential and exciting, but these challenges had to be addressed

**The action team decided to take an inclusive approach.** They wanted to work with groups who had an authentic base of people most impacted by criminalization. These people and groups did not have to be organizing at the moment, as long as they were interested in engaging and open to an organizing and movement building approach along

the way. Moreover, they didn't have to embrace a full analysis of the school-to-prison pipeline as a system of racial punishment and control, as long as they were open to the discussion. Finally, they didn't have to advocate for the removal of police from schools. The action team was interested in the potential for organizing with a deeper analysis and eventually with bolder abolitionist demands, but the team understood it would take time to get there. According to Manuel, "We were really interested in whether you are building with people, not just whether you are taking on the issue." Similarly for Geoffrey, who came to the school to prison pipeline work in part supporting the capacity of education justice groups to address issues related to trans and queer youth pushout "I wasn't concerned with organizations in DSC-California maintaining some sort of ideological purity on queer theory or to know all the acronyms and terminology of contemporary LGBTQ2S+ youth issues, as long as they demonstrate support trans and queer youth and staff."

and return enslaved people who had escaped. He tied policing and discipline practices in schools to the system of mass incarceration, which arose to reverse the gains of the civil rights movement. Tia analyzed discipline data to show its extent and harmful impact on young people in each community and region, tying racial disparities to systems of racist criminalization and dehumanization. Meanwhile, the team offered training in the kind of organizing skills and capacities necessary to challenge and dismantle these deep-seated systems. According to Manuel:

*Many groups initially framed school discipline as a broad issue of unfair punishment. However, deep political education helped shift the analysis to anti-Black racism as a central driver of school policing.*

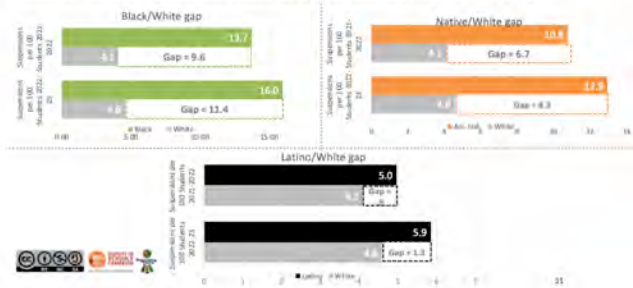
At the first stop on the tour, Carl suggested it would be helpful to write a blueprint statement that offered the action team's analysis of the school-to-prison pipeline and the need for movement building to confront it. Tia joined Carl in late 2014 to craft what became the "Movement Building Blueprint" that explicitly stated the mission to bring communities together across regions to build a statewide movement whose goals went beyond policy change in Sacramento (see box). The Blueprint describes itself as outlining

*a process that is helping to re-think and re-tool our reform efforts, and ultimately build/transform a statewide grassroots movement to reform school discipline policies and practices that is connected to long-term systemic and transformative change, ending mass incarceration, eliminating structural racial disparities, redefining public safety, and breaking the intergenerational cycle of economic, mental, and spiritual poverty. In short, it provides a road map for how we can take the school discipline reform "moment" and transform it into a movement for long-term systemic change that produces health success in all of our communities across race/ethnicity, gender, class, and LGBTQ identities.*

By early 2015 the Blueprint was completed and described how the action team would engage with groups in the region, helping to build capacity but

**Racial disparities in suspension rates increased sharply for the first time since we began collecting data**

Number of In School and Out of School Suspensions per 100 Students by Race: 21-22 vs. 22-23



**The regional meetings developed into spaces for deep engagement.**

Action team members would listen to the challenges families and students faced, identifying opportunities for connection. At the same time, they would advance their systemic analysis through sessions featuring political education. Drawing upon a deep knowledge of movement history, Manuel developed a police-free schools timeline that identified policing as a system of racial control from its onset - designed to capture



respecting the autonomy of groups to make decisions appropriate to their local context. It also described how the emerging statewide formation would work with the Fix School Discipline policy coalition - ensuring that statewide efforts were accountable to families and communities most impacted by injustice. In the end, the action team articulated a guiding principle that the formation would “do no harm” to any group.. That meant not competing for resources or taking credit for the work of others, or engaging in statewide practices like incremental policy change that might undermine local organizing efforts for bolder demands. By the end of the tour in 2015, the regional groups were ready to sign on to the Blueprint and that led to the first statewide convening in 2016.

**Now that the formation was emerging as a coherent movement building space, the action team felt the need to clarify its role.** Some suspicion lingered in the regions about groups coming from the Bay Area and LA trying to tell the regions what to do. The experience necessitated the need to draft Principles of Engagement to clarify the role of the action team. Drafted and completed in

2015, the principles reiterated in a more concise form the framework outlined in the Blueprint. It also emphasized that

*There has to be mutual interest in working together. There is no hidden agenda but a strong belief that in order to make a real impact in California, we need strong local organizing and a statewide vision that is rooted in real relationships across our regions and districts. We are committed to working together in a way that does not create dependence on expertise outside the regions but helps build connections to people, information, and resources that will build the capacity of leadership within the region.*

The document, while important, only mattered to the extent that the action team actually followed it, facilitating the regional work, respecting local autonomy, keeping its leadership role accountable to the emerging membership. According to Jackie, “Trust building with the regions took a lot of time.” Following the practice it developed originally for itself, the action team was willing to take time to engage fully, thoroughly discuss concerns and issues, and not rush to create a potentially weak or false unity. The goal was to integrate local autonomy with a shared statewide vision, and to balance the leadership and resources that the action team could

offer with respect and autonomy for local decision making. According to Jackie, this wasn't easy, but it was also exciting to try.

*We (the action team) were really trying to figure out what it looks like to build like we're peers, while recognizing that we do have some things that we could offer for support. We're not here to come in and fix your stuff or tell you what to do. We're organizers too. I loved that we were struggling around that, and I loved that we were dealing with concrete examples and tensions and trying to figure it out.*

Carl, speaking of the Central Valley Movement Building organization, describes how the network became a center for sharing strategy and lessons. "We wanted to take our experiences and bring it up to DSC-California so they can share it to all the other regions, and then we want to learn from all the other regions as to how you work through different contradictions and challenges and then be tested and apply it ourselves."

In the view of the action team, drafting the Blueprint and Principles of Engagement fundamentally shifted the formation from a loose network into a cohesive movement with operating guidelines and a structure. The Principles ensured that funding, strategy, and coalition-building were rooted in grassroots organizing, rather than policy-first advocacy. These documents became a key tool in maintaining accountability and resisting external pressure from funders or policy organizations.

**The network held another statewide convening in 2017 with groups now committed to organizing in their regions.** During that year, the network adopted its North Star statement that went beyond school discipline reform and succinctly encapsulated a shared understanding of the historical mission to challenge the dehumanization

of the educational system and to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. A powerful North Star was important to organizers like Neva who believed "The North Star is the light that will lead our young people and their families to freedom."

At the same time, the network decided to formally adopt the name Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC)-California, becoming a chapter of the national DSC, the largest coalition working to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. DSC-California got its first grant from TCE in 2017 and began to use the funds to hire regional connectors, who would help link local groups together in a region and support connections across regions. DSC-California hired its first staff member, Noemi Soto, in 2018, and the action team was renamed the strategy team.

By then, the network had moved from a loose collection of local campaigns to regional organizing hubs and a statewide movement building formation. It worked hard to avoid the typical competitive dynamics of nonprofits. Instead, the strategy team tried to foster a culture where groups collaborated rather than competed for visibility, resources, and recognition. DSC-California was also part of a larger school discipline ecosystem with lawyers, data experts, advocates, and funders still operating as the Fix School Discipline coalition. But it centered organizing and operated with a systemic analysis. It would spend the next three years building the capacity of the regions and preparing to support the Black Organizing Project in its path-breaking campaign to remove police from Oakland Schools in 2020, a campaign seen as pushing the movement forward across the entire state.

# The 2020 Peak

## *A Narrative of Convergence and Clarity*



*There was alignment that the conditions of Black people and Black-led organizing were central to liberation, and BOP was the clearest representation of that. - Jackie Byers*

In the spring of 2020, the video recorded murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers ignited new nationwide uprisings in the long march towards a place where #BlackLivesMatter in American life. Floyd's death brought a fierce national outcry for justice that reverberated through every street, screen, and school. For years, DSC-California had been building the ideological scaffolding, strengthening inter-regional relationships, and crafting policy blueprints that imagined schools without police, punishment, or pushout. When 2020 arrived, so too did the conditions they had prepared for—a peak moment of political will, public awareness, and collective rage.

**The Black Organizing Project's ten year campaign to remove Oakland School Police was on track to culminate in the Spring of 2020**, and DSC-California was preparing for a movement-wide effort to send organizers and leaders to Oakland for a "paint the town" push where they would wear T-shirts, hold banners, and go door-to-door to build support for the final drive to the school board vote. The week before DSC-California was to send its forces, however, the pandemic hit and shut everything down. Instead of physical presence, support moved to virtual. People in the regions of DSC-California sent videos of themselves offering messages of support, and they helped pack the Oakland School Board's newly instituted public zoom meetings. After years of feeling isolated with

its radical abolitionist demands, Jackie, the executive director of BOP on the strategy team, said, "I literally cried when I saw the video of movement icon Dolores Huerta declaring her support from the Central Valley. I showed the rest of the staff the little video, because finally, it felt like we weren't alone."

During the final stages of BOP's push for police removal, the statewide policy coalition tried to capitalize on the new political environment by proposing a series of bills in Sacramento. The governor followed suit. These bills, however, focused mainly on curbing police excesses and, as such, were much more modest than BOP's demands for removal of police. The strategy team feared that the passage of these statewide policies would limit local initiatives and, in particular, would water down or undermine BOP's campaign for full removal of police and the dismantling of the school district police force. So the team moved to pressure the policy coalition to postpone their initiatives until BOP could win full removal. Instead of a weak top-down statewide mandate, they released a statewide policy framework, offering tools, strategies, and support for BOP and for local campaigns to grow organically, with integrity and community ownership, which they believed created the basis for real transformation.

While the political moment and national context applied additional pressure, the years of BOP's local grassroots organizing, supported by DSC-California and other key allies, crystalized into a historic policy victory: the passage on June 24th of BOP's George Floyd Resolution, which dismantled the Oakland



School Police Department. It was a resounding declaration—not just for Oakland, but for the state and country. It became an aspirational beacon that once lit, illuminated the possibilities of abolitionist school organizing - the full dismantling of school police infrastructure, culture, and policies. With the support of DSC-California, member organizations also began to win victories in their localities. Those victories were celebrated, but the groups were always careful to credit BOP's leadership, as a reflection of recognition and respect for the reality of the central role of Black-led organizing to the movement. Maisie reflected DSC-California's collective sentiment when she said, "When BOP wins, we all win."

*We all upheld a narrative that centered Black organizing and BOP and we never touted our own victories without mentioning BOP or Black led organizing. We mentioned ourselves as a collective, rather than individual competition. We won. We won. We won. And as subtle as that may be, it makes all the difference in the world.*

**At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic cracked open the fragile infrastructure of California's public education system.** Parents, particularly in Black and Brown communities, were suddenly navigating a crisis of survival: suffering disproportionately with illness and death due to COVID, lacking access to medical care, and facing food shortages. Meanwhile their children were home, experiencing the trauma of the pandemic and struggling to access internet service, with no clear answers from schools. In some places, police were being deployed by local schools to intimidate students for not logging remotely. Monthly parent meetings organized by DSC-California organizations quickly became weekly triage calls. The groups moved in tandem, working together to create local strategies to hold local schools and districts accountable to provide internet services and food and to decrease criminalization and police harassment of students

DSC-California organized powerful parent

sessions held virtually for parents across the state. Holding the school affirmed that this moment wasn't just reactive. It was generative. Parents from Sacramento to the Inland Valley stood in unity, weaving their local struggles into a shared fabric of solidarity in understanding the current collective social political reality. It turned out that their experiences of California's crisis education response were not isolated incidents of individual schools being unresponsive and unprepared—they were systemic. DSC-California gave parents the language, the space, and the framework to see their shared plight and to act, resulting in the 2020 "Parent Racial Justice Demands for Emergency Schooling During COVID19," a sweeping declaration of the complete inadequacy of what the state was providing.

The peak represented more than the headlines and wins that removed and dismantled school to police collaboration. It was the successful test of relational infrastructure: the trust in movement building as the strategy for collective victory as demonstrated in the camaraderie among strategy team members, the belief in shared leadership, and the deep solidarity that crossed geographies, racial groups, and identities. Organizations that had once been siloed now moved like a constellation—interdependent, shining brighter together.

Reflecting on the role of DSC-California during the peak of the movement, Noemi notes that "We did pretty amazing things during that time."

*We had a level of coordination that was really powerful, that was based on trust. We saw a clear, incredible clarity about the purpose of organizations like ours being a backbone to folks who are trying to do this work. All of our regions had important breakthroughs, and the majority of them still hold their campaigns, still hold their wins, and that's not happening for the rest of the nation.*

After the energy and the mass mobilizations of 2020 receded, DSC-California faced full-on the trauma and disruptions of the pandemic; and the

formation's members entered a period of mutual aid and reflection. The pandemic conditions had laid bare the clear inadequacies of the state's public education system beyond its complicity in criminalizing young people. But, despite the new energy and connections among parents, member organizations struggled with the limitations of rapid response and gaps in deeper, sustained organizing. Meanwhile, the organizations' members were isolated in their homes, struggling to survive, with face-to-face organizing shut down. Virtual connections were often weak.

**Groups that had won policy victories began to struggle with their implementation.** The backlash was swift, and the reckoning wasn't just external—it was internal. For DSC-California's leaders, maneuvering the challenges of 2020 created unique challenges that affected leaders across sectors. The uncertainty and instability brought by the Covid 19 pandemic, coupled with election year politics, economics, and cumulative stress spent sustaining local organizations and leading the statewide movement took their toll collectively. Having reached the same individual conclusions, slowly over the course of 2020 and 2021 the strategy team founders of DSC-California announced their intentions to step away from their organizations. In recognition that the movement is made up of organizations and their memberships, not individuals, they decided to create a transition plan and eventually all step back from leading DSC-California as well.

Since that time, DSC-California has worked to rebuild itself in several ways. DSC-California had already been building key structures that became important formations to sustain and expand its work. It formed three tables to gather members across the state and rebuild capacity: an activated parent table that continued to build parent leadership through political education and organizing skills training; a

Black love and liberation table; and a healing and culture table. Meanwhile, Ursula DeWitt, a parent leader from the Black Parallel School Board in Sacramento who had been hired as a staff person, became co-executive director with Noemi.

The parent table became a key site to continue to build solidarity among Black and Brown communities. According to Ursula,

*In that space we were able to collectively come together and struggle through some of those tensions together. When you talk about intersections, we were all parents, and we all have children, so that was something that could definitely connect us. But by being present with one another, we got to learn about each other, about our cultures. We get to say straight up to one another, "I support you. I got your back." And we learned how, as a Black parent and as a Latinx parent, you can stand up for Black families in schools.*

Together, Noemi and Ursula, with support from the founders as an advisory group, worked to reconstruct a statewide leadership body through a strategic action academy. In reality, despite the strengths of DSC-California the unforeseen retirement of virtually the entire strategy team revealed a weakness: the ties that were built the strongest relied upon personal connections among members of the strategy team and did not reach as deeply down into the member groups. Regional leaders were not prepared to step into the vacuum of leadership at the top. Now more staff-led than before, DSC-California continues to work to cultivate

a statewide leadership body with the equivalents of the strategic vision, commitment to the statewide movement, and strength of personal ties that made the founding strategy team so effective.

Meanwhile, at the time of this writing, the statewide Co-Directors along with leaders from the region are revisiting the North Star statement, reaffirming DSC-California's commitment to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline as a system of racist criminalization, but reconsidering its role and strategy in the new political environment. More broadly, as Geoffrey reflected, "Ultimately the goal of DSC-California's work is to transform and reimagine the education system so, yes, the work continues."

Despite the challenges and reorganization of the post-pandemic period, the 2020 peak stands as a testament to what is possible when theory, trust, and timing align. In California the police-free schools movement was not an accidental wave—it was an orchestrated swell. Years of preparation in building political alignment, organizational capacity, relationships and trust met an open window in history. Despite the setbacks and struggles that followed the peak, it remains a north star for what is achievable through deep and sustained solidarity-building.



# Lessons Learned

## *Leadership, Solidarity and Power*



### **How do you build a statewide movement for systemic change in a state as vast as California?**

The founders of DSC-California took up this challenge. While many coalitions focus on achieving policy wins through short-term issue-based coalitions, these organizational leaders took a different approach to solidarity, prioritizing long-term movement-building centering organizing groups working with people most impacted by injustice. To build this kind of solidarity, DSC-California founders worked to build trust among members, a shared political analysis and vision, and an organizational structure that allowed groups to pursue campaigns appropriate to their local area while supporting each other and the larger statewide formation. By doing so, they proved able to take the seemingly distant and disparate struggles of Black and Brown parents and youth scattered like seeds around the state and gather and cultivate them into a movement with the ecosystem needed for advancing social transformations and systemic change. Their efforts offer powerful lessons for building deep, intersectional, and grassroots-led movements that build people power in the twenty-first century.

The conditions that led to the formation of DSC-California may not arise everywhere. DSC-California had a funder willing to be patient and invest in long-term movement building. Its founding came during a wave of growth and success in the school-to-prison pipeline movement. It had a core of seasoned organizers who were leading organizations and who shared political analysis and alignment almost from the beginning. Nevertheless,

we believe that the case offers a number of important lessons for organizers and movement leaders seeking to challenge entrenched systems of oppression and build sustainable, transformative movements.

### **Transformational versus Transactional Solidarity**

**Many coalitions come together for tactical reasons, around a policy fight or threats to shared interests, and dissolve once that fight is over.** We call this transactional solidarity. Coalitions can achieve short term policy goals with this strategy but fail to create the kind of movements capable of transforming our institutions towards equity and justice. DSC-California leaders too often saw these policy campaigns dominated by professional advocates and leading to compromised wins that failed to dismantle deep-seated systems of oppression.

DSC-California sought to create a deeper form of solidarity capable of creating longer term movements with people most impacted at their center, employing organizing strategies to challenge oppressive systems with often bolder demands, like the full removal of police in schools. We call this transformational solidarity. Through this process, groups and communities build a shared movement beyond their own groups. To create this kind of solidarity, however, itself requires a long term strategy of building relationships, uniting around a shared political analysis and vision, and an organizational structure balancing local autonomy

with unified strategies to advance the larger, shared movement.

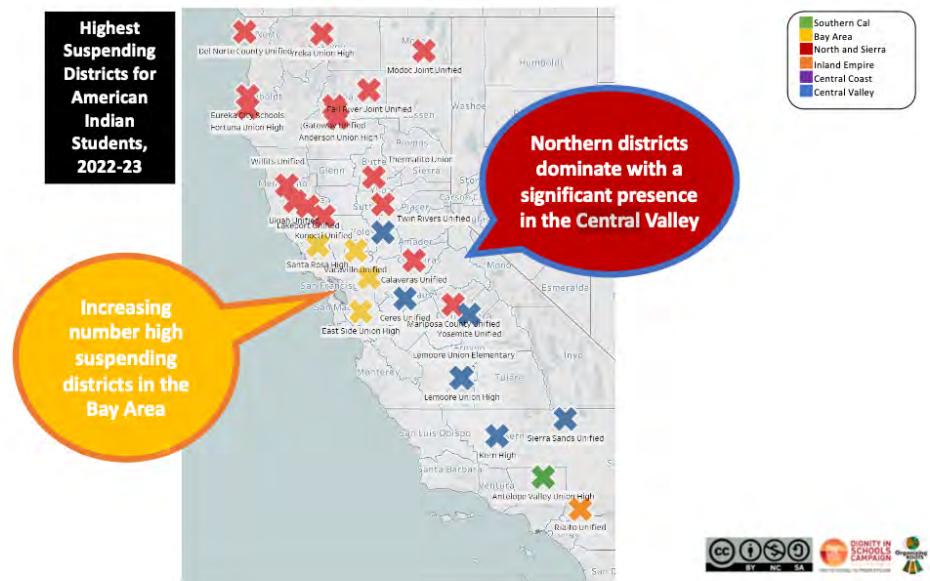
## Inclusive Approaches to Solidarity Building

**Building this kind of solidarity requires an inclusive approach that invites groups and people in where they are at, but works towards shared analysis and vision.** Transactional solidarity

typically rests upon lowest common denominator unity. In the case of Fix School Discipline, this unity rested upon policy changes that reduced exclusionary discipline. However, DSC-California organizers had a deeper analysis of the school-to-prison pipeline as a system of racist criminalization. They also understood that centering the experience and leadership of Black communities in the movement would be critical to achieving deeper and more systemic change. Therefore, the movement could not rest upon lowest common denominator and shallow policy agreement. Eventually, there had to be deeper unity around a shared analysis and vision for change.

On the other hand, intersectional approaches to movements can also make the opposite mistake, that is, demanding full agreement with a systemic analysis from the beginning. That narrows movements to those who already agree, the “true believers” and undercuts the possibilities for building the broad-based power necessary for transformative change. DSC-California took an inclusive approach, engaging with groups in more conservative regions who had a base of people most impacted but who may not have initially had a systemic analysis or appreciated the centrality of

Black organizing, but were open to the discussion. In other words, rather than expecting groups to arrive with identical perspectives, DSC-California created space for political growth.



## Relationship-building for Trust

**Taking this inclusive approach and working towards deeper unity then involved several processes.** First was relationship building. Too often communities are isolated or divided by geography, race, generation, and gender or other salient identities. The dominant system, moreover, works to pit communities against each other, while stereotypes are perpetuated by the media and other societal institutions. The communities and groups in this case included people experiencing very different local contexts, Black and Brown communities historically divided, parents and students, and people who identify as straight as well as queer, trans and two-spirit. In this context, DSC-California created multiple, ongoing opportunities for staff and members of local groups to meet each other and share their stories and experiences. These venues created opportunities for people to learn about and appreciate intersectional experiences

and views different from their own while also finding common ground and shared experiences in the face of a larger system of racist criminalization.

## **Political Education and Principled Struggle**

**Second was placing a priority on political education.** DSC-California created intentional spaces for study, discussion, and ideological alignment. Leadership development workshops, structured political education sessions, and facilitated conversations ensured that local members did not just agree on immediate demands but also understood the historical and systemic forces they were up against. This foundation of shared knowledge allowed DSC-California to remain strong even when difficult decisions arose.

The political education process, however, was not simply informative but rather designed to shift perspectives. In other words, DSC-California practiced principled struggle or what Manuel called “struggle with love.” For example, when some regional groups hesitated to support police-free schools, the coalition did not resort to exclusion or coercion. Instead, organizers engaged in a long-term process of political education, helping groups examine the historical and systemic reasons why school policing was incompatible with racial justice. The network created spaces for open conversation. Over time, these conversations facilitated greater alignment, strengthening the movement rather than dividing it.

The experience of DSC-California demonstrates that political education is not an optional supplement to movement organizing—it is an essential foundation of movement stability. Rushing into action without ensuring a shared political framework can lead to fragmentation. Investing in continuous education helps movements remain aligned and adaptive, even as they grow and evolve.

This kind of political alignment was essential to organizers coming to the understanding that no one organization could win anything beyond short-term, narrow campaigns on their own: it would take a united movement to challenge the school-to-prison pipeline. Building this movement formation would therefore serve their own organization’s interests as well as shared ones. This understanding and commitment to a shared movement tempered the competition between organizations promoted by the nonprofit industrial complex. As a result, leaders who felt the pressure to promote and elevate their own organizations found the time and space to invest in movement building.

## **Trans-local, Multi-Level Structure and Strategy – Balancing Local Autonomy with a United Front**

**In addition to these processes of relationship-building and political education, DSC-California also created an organizational structure** that balanced decentralized, local organizing with a unified statewide strategy and unified front. Many statewide and national movements struggle with this dynamic, either centralizing too much power at the top or allowing so much decentralization that the movement loses cohesion. DSC-California managed to walk this fine line by allowing local groups to maintain control over their own campaigns while remaining connected to a broader movement vision. In the end, though, the main priority remained supporting local organizing, understanding that successful movements were constituted by a connected series of local bases that informed, inspired, and supported each other. Maisie described this approach as ensuring that DSC-California was never bigger than the local organizing itself.

The strategy team’s role was not to dictate strategy from the top down but to provide a framework that



supported and amplified local struggles. Regional groups had the flexibility to shape their campaigns according to their own conditions, but they remained anchored in shared political principles and strategic goals. Nevertheless, at times, DSC-California did push for state policy change when appropriate or to make critical interventions; but that was not its primary purpose. The approach reflected a shared analysis that dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline could only come from the work of organized communities on the ground who knew their conditions best and could develop their own appropriate strategies. State policy changes could assist local organizing but not be a replacement for it.

This model ensured that DSC-California did not become another statewide intermediary imposing an external agenda on local communities or simply mobilizing local communities behind its own predetermined agenda. Instead, it strengthened local movements while building collective power across the state. Avoiding top-down structures does not mean abandoning coordination. Rather, successful movements create accountability mechanisms that keep different groups aligned while allowing for necessary adaptation to local conditions.

### **Solidarity through Intersectionality as a Strategy for Power**

**A final lesson from DSC-California is that intersectionality is not just a framework for inclusion**—it is a strategic tool for building power. Rather than treating intersectionality as identity boxes to be checked, DSC-California integrated it into their systemic analysis of education, becoming a shared framework through which they developed their organizing strategy. Although it recognized that the school-to-prison pipeline impacted people at various intersections of identity and social location differently, it refused to see these as separate struggles. Rather, DSC-California recognized that anti-Black racism, economic injustice, immigration status, gender identity, and disability justice were not separate issues but interconnected forces shaping the school-to-prison pipeline. DSC-California rejected a siloed approach to organizing and instead built cross-community solidarity between Black, Latinx, immigrant, and LGBTQ+ communities. This allowed different groups to understand how their struggles were intertwined in the education system, strengthening solidarity and the movement's ability to push for transformative change.



# DSC-CA STATE POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR ABOLISHING POLICE IN SCHOOLS

## ABOLISH 4 D's

### DISBAND

No school police in any shape or form—no hybrids, no substitutions, no armed security or actors, no law enforcement contracts or agency collaborations, no compromises.

### DISARM

Demilitarize school campuses and environments. End the normalization of a police state in schools. Zero tolerance for white "safety" at the expense of Black, Brown and Indigenous lives.

### DECRIMINALIZE

Uproot school cultures and practices of punishing, suppressing and criminalizing Black, Brown, Indigenous and Queer youth. They are expressions of white supremacy.

### DOCUMENT

Cumulative analysis of the educational, psychological and monetary impacts on families and students from decades of racially discriminatory school-based policing, criminalization and exclusionary discipline. Mandated detailed data reporting and monitoring of racial harms of school policing and school-based criminalization going forward.

## ENVISION 4 R's

### REIMAGINE

Courageous political vision of community care, well-being and safety. There is no limit to what and how we can redesign, reinvest and repair when we are police free in body and mind.

### REDESIGN

Schools that are only free of police presence are not enough. We must define what is liberatory education and then walk the path of implementation from our current institutions to reach it.

### REINVEST

Defund sources of criminalization and racial harms and reinvest those funds only in the services and supports our communities need to thrive. No collusion with law enforcement, juvenile probation and child welfare.

### REPAIR

Reparatory justice fund for the most impacted school communities to redress the cumulative harms of over policing, high criminalization, exclusionary discipline disparities and over-investment in policing. Healing not through apologies or symbolic gestures but through self-determination: community co-governance and participatory budgeting.

**DEFUNDING WITHOUT DISBANDING SCHOOL POLICE COULD UNDERMINE AND POTENTIALLY HARM OUR MOMENTUM IN THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

success. This intentional commitment to challenging anti-Blackness anchored the movement's ideological clarity and commitment to racial justice as central to education justice.

## Personal Relationships as the Glue

**In many ways the success of DSC-California relied also upon the strength of the personal ties built among its leaders on the strategy team.** As noted earlier, organizers from local groups built a political home together on the team, where they came to support each other and deeply trust one another. It's one thing to understand movement building as essential to the success of one's own organization. It's another thing to feel a commitment to and camaraderie with a group of people who are working to build a movement together.

This poses a dilemma, however. As we learned, the tight personal ties on the strategy team did not and perhaps

At the same time, DSC-CA engaged directly with anti-Blackness within multiracial spaces, rather than avoiding it. Some local groups and members had initial resistance to fully embracing abolitionist demands like police-free schools advocated by Black-led movements. DSC-California engaged in deep political education and facilitated conversations to ensure that Black liberation was understood as central to the movement's overall

could not reach widely and deeply into all the member organizations. We are left, then, with an open question of scale and sustainability: how can movements create deep solidarity across organizations if that solidarity relies upon the kind of ties that perhaps can be built only among a smaller group of people?

# What DSC-California's Story Offers to Other Movements



DSC-California's work stands as a powerful alternative to traditional policy-driven, funder-controlled coalitions. Rather than chasing incremental wins, DSC-California and its members built a movement grounded in deep solidarity, political clarity, and long-term investment in grassroots leadership. Their approach—prioritizing political education over short-term unity, trust-building over expedience, and intersectional power over symbolic representation—ensured that their work extended beyond any single campaign, individual, or moment in history.

At its core, DSC-California was and is an experiment in whether deep movement solidarity could be built across regions, racial identities, and organizing traditions to challenge a deeply entrenched system of racial violence in schools in an intersectional way

that did no harm to any group at the expense of others. Their success shows that when movements prioritize trust, integrity, authentic solidarity and long-term vision, they can win transformative change that lasts beyond a single moment or leader.

For organizers today, DSC-California's work is more than a story about how a small group of leaders build a coalition. It constitutes a challenge to build the kind of solidarity that anchors movements that are principled, built on trust, intersectional and strategic, and capable of long-term struggle to dismantle deep-seated systems of racial oppression. Questions of sustainability remain but we consider them an invitation to build upon the lessons of DSC-California and imagine even stronger, wider, and deeper forms of solidarity capable of meeting the challenges of today.



*Across the country organizers in the education justice and allied social movements have an urgent need to build deeper forms of solidarity. For many years, we have known that the issues facing low-income children of color were interconnected and could not be addressed within the educational system alone. We also knew that organizing efforts and movements that are siloed would be weaker and less capable of winning urgently needed changes within any one institution, let alone across them. Meanwhile, to the extent that communities organized separately by identity, they would also be weaker and subject to the system's divide and conquer strategy. With the new attacks on public education, racial justice efforts, the trans and queer community, and democracy more broadly, the need for solidarity building is even more urgent and critically present. If we do not learn how to build solidarity together, we will all lose separately. We hope readers of this case study will learn some important lessons that can inform the urgent resistance and transformative struggles of today.*

# Lessons from DSC-California

Essential Elements of Transformational Solidarity



PRIORITIZE **long term** movement building over short term policy change



CENTER organizing approaches with **people most impacted**



TAKE **inclusive yet strategic** approaches to membership



BUILD **relationships** to develop trust and deepen shared commitments



FEATURE **political education** to build shared political analysis, strategy and vision



ENGAGE in **principled struggle** to shift perspectives and build deeper unity



BALANCE local **autonomy** with unified strategy



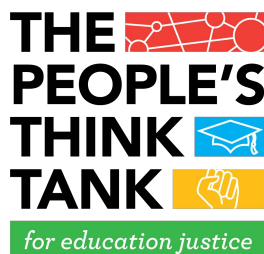
FOSTER personal relationships as glue while continually **refreshing new leadership**

## About this Project

This case study was produced by the People’s Think Tank, a network of thought leaders from over forty community, parent and youth organizing groups, national alliances, and allied organizations committed to building knowledge to support movements for racial equity, educational and social justice, and community liberation. PTT is fiscally sponsored by the Schott Foundation for Public Education. For more information on other projects, check out [@peopletthinktank](#) (Instagram)

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