



PARTNERSHIP
FOR THE
**FUTURE of
LEARNING**

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POWERING A BREAKTHROUGH FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

A REPORT ON FIELD NEEDS AND
OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIP
ACTION

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Note: This report has been edited from its original form to expand the analysis of race and school vouchers.

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ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP

The Partnership for the Future of Learning protects, strengthens, and advances education equity and meaningful learning—and supports the policies and practices that get us there. Launched in 2015, the Partnership has grown into a generative social impact network of more than 700 education and social justice leaders from over 250 organizations and 20 foundations that share a deep commitment to an equitable, high-quality public education system. The network includes organizers, advocates, policy analysts, communicators, researchers, students, educators, funders, system and union leaders.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This report was written for the Partnership for the Future of Learning by Kavitha Mediratta, PhD. An independent strategist, writer, researcher and coach, Kavitha specializes in advancing racial justice and educational equity through multi-sectoral campaigns and programs. Drawing on decades of experience in education, grassroots organizing and philanthropy, she helps organizations and foundations to plan and assess their strategies; develop and implement large-scale initiatives; reflect on and strengthen leadership and organizational practices; and distill lessons and share their stories for greater impact.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people generously shared their experience and insights to make sure this report does justice to the urgency of this moment for public education in the United States. We are deeply indebted to the 179 partners who responded to the Partnership’s survey between May and September 2023 and the more than three dozen field leaders who took time from the pressing demands of their days to discuss their work with us.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past three years, public schools in the United States have faced increasing pressures from ‘parent rights’ campaigns, politicization of school boards, book bans, policies to marginalize LGBTQ+ students, and attacks on social and emotional learning, alongside divisive and anti-Black rhetoric and policy on race. These pressures are mounting in a broader context of the dramatic expansion in school voucher programs nationally that, by privatizing public resources, aim to dismantle public education in its entirety. In May 2023, the Partnership for the Future of Learning initiated a network and field-wide study to gather information on how organizations are responding to these threats and what might be done to enhance their effectiveness. The purpose was to inform a new national strategy in support of public education while advancing an affirmative vision of the future of learning as a counterforce to these attacks.

Between May and September 2023, the Partnership surveyed 179 members of its network and held interviews with 39 leaders working in educational advocacy, grassroots organizing, research and policy formulation as well as in labor and other sectors. Interviewees included longtime partners and people outside of the network based in urban, rural and suburban communities. The results offer a timely national look at the breadth and depth of activity related to protecting, strengthening and reimagining public schools in the US.

Our data suggests a robust and growing response across the country from parents, educators, young people and community members who believe deeply in their public schools. A wide array of groups has mobilized to challenge the rise of exclusionary measures in their communities. While many of these organizations are new to public education, leading education groups also are involved, including the Campaign for Our Shared Future, H.E.A.L. Together, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association. Advocacy and civic groups with histories of work in health care, housing, reproductive rights and other issues are now organizing in the education arena, aiming to reach and educate white people, women, working class communities and communities of color, immigrants, and parents of trans and LGBTQ+ children, particularly in the South and Midwest. Prominent leaders in the African American Policy Forum as well as professional associations of historians and librarians, elected officials, and national civil rights and anti-hate groups are actively engaged. Donors also have mobilized, independently and through the Education Forward Fund, to support this work.

Our analysis surfaced eight areas of support that would help this work reach its goals, both in countering the attacks on public education and in building a stronger coalition for a future-facing vision of public schools. These are to:

1. Link the growing array of groups entering the public education arena for learning, exchange and strategy development.
2. Connect the dots behind the efforts to dismantle public schools so that groups understand the larger agenda and forces at play.
3. Develop a more powerful activating vision of the future of public education that will energize widespread public and political support.
4. Articulate a multi-level policy agenda to advance this vision through state and federal action.
5. Strengthen message consistency, cohesion and discipline and improve message accessibility to reach the people most affected by the exclusionary measures and voucher initiatives.
6. Address longstanding divisions on issues such as public charter schools and police-free schools that undermine more powerful collective action and diminish the power of the coalition for public education.
7. Help educators and protect democratic governance and the opportunities for public participation in the face of ongoing turmoil and violence in local communities.
8. Increase funding flows to the field to enable broad-based mobilization, analysis, monitoring and communications in key states and nationally.

Informed by these needs, the Partnership has developed a three-part strategy for network activation:

1. Connect the growing array of players into a coherent ecosystem.
2. Align vision, policy and communications.
3. Produce new collaborations that leverage the diverse forms of power in this expanding network to advance community and educator-led efforts in frontline states.

In deep collaboration with its partners, the Partnership will work to enhance the effectiveness and impact of the organizations working to protect, strengthen and reimagine public education by helping them to connect for shared learning and exchange and to align their visions, policy and communications, and by supporting them to access and utilize the expertise, influence and resources that exist within the network and allied organizations. The Partnership will hew closely to its demonstrated capacities, assets, strengths and role in the field, rather than creating something new. This strategy builds on the Partnership's policy expertise, facilitation and communication skills, and wide-ranging relationships developed over the past near decade.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2022, on the heels of a nine-month network strategy regeneration process and amid ongoing turmoil in US public schools, the Partnership’s Strategy Council called for broad network activation to address the intensifying threat to public education.* At the time, many partners were already deeply involved in fighting the expansion of school voucher programs across the country as well as the attacks on critical race theory (CRT) and LGBTQ+ rights in schools, with active support from Partnership staff. The question posed by the Strategy Council was how, having built a uniquely diverse and interlinked community, the Partnership might set in motion a more widespread and coordinated response by partners in ways that honor the network’s deeply democratic and collaborative ethos.

Initiated in 2015, the Partnership was created for exactly such a moment, based on the belief that building relationships across sectors, geographies and issues would lead to a shared vision and purpose that makes possible greater alignment in strategy and action. The goal in facilitating such alignment was to catalyze a more powerful “offense—that is, a positive and future-facing vision of public education that supports students and staff, strengthens our democracy, and leads us to a more inclusive, equitable and just society.”¹

With this charge—and goal—in mind, in March 2023 Partnership staff set out to develop an initiative to address the urgency of the moment more fully while advancing an affirmative vision in policy, practice and public discourse. To inform the design of the effort, the team gathered perspectives from partners and other leaders about current activities, needs and the types of support that would help them achieve greater impact. This paper presents findings from that scan and offers a strategy for network-wide activation.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

The United States is now in its fourth decade of large-scale school voucher initiatives. Originally conceived as a means of subsidizing private education with public funds, the idea of school vouchers first emerged in conjunction with religious schooling and white flight from integrating public schools in the 1950s. Early programs were developed to evade desegregation following the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision and to shift responsibility and resources for public education from government to individual families.² By the late 1980s, however, the alliance for vouchers had broadened to include members of the Black community

* *Note:* This report focuses on US public schools. Going forward, the Partnership will seek to learn about and incorporate the perspective of Native, Indigenous and Tribal communities in this analysis. Additionally, although the assault on public schools is often described as “culture wars,” the Partnership refrains from using this terminology from the belief that it risks trivializing the real-life consequences for people directly affected by the proposed exclusionary measures and sets up a false equivalence by implying that the current set of fights are a battle between two equally legitimate perspectives.

who sought private school subsidies for very different reasons. These activists were responding to desegregation as well, but they were motivated by frustration that busing had not delivered better educational options for their children. Through vouchers, they hoped to empower Black families to opt out of unresponsive public systems in favor of community-controlled independent schools, while forcing greater accountability of school districts to Black communities. Thus, the first large-scale voucher initiative, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (1990), framed vouchers as a mechanism for low-income children of color to gain access to higher quality schooling by increasing parental choice that would, through the resulting competition for students, also exert pressure on recalcitrant districts to improve.³ Although the Milwaukee program and subsequent school voucher initiatives failed to produce positive results in terms of educational outcomes, successive presidential administrations, both Democrat and Republican, helped to spread this strategy.⁴

Now, thirty-four years later, school vouchers are spreading widely across the US but as a strategy, it remains deeply inflected by the struggles around race and equity. The expansion today is driven by a confluence of interests between white Christian nationalists, market fundamentalists and politicians on the center and far-right, who are exploiting the fears and frustration of parents in this pandemic period to move their agenda to reshape public schools in striking ways. Since 2021, roughly 100 large-scale voucher bills have been proposed in 29 states, and many of these same states are restricting curricula on race, racism and gender identity.⁵ 193 “educational gag” orders have been introduced across the US to limit discussions of these topics in public schools and there are now 122 million people in 19 states where some form of exclusionary measure is in effect.⁶

While the forces seeking a voucher-based system are distinct from those attacking inclusion in public schools, they share an interest in undermining public education through tactics that sow division among communities, reduce trust in public institutions and siphon off public resources for private ends. The relentlessness of this agenda speaks to the political and economic project at its core. Identity differences, anti-Black racism, homophobia and transphobic bigotry and fearmongering are being used, as in the past, to animate a backlash to advances in democratic inclusion through calls for ‘parents’ rights,’ book-bans, anti-transgender bills and targeting of ‘social and emotional learning.’ Concurrently, voucher proponents are tapping into deeply held beliefs about the primacy of individual freedom over the common good in order to win sweeping legislation and ballot measures that, in their scale, would diminish if not eviscerate the infrastructure of public schooling. These same tactics of polarization and disinvestment are increasingly being deployed to build electoral power for right-leaning politicians, especially in suburban communities that are now highly contested electoral terrain.

The end-goals of the combined assaults on public education go far beyond the reduction of government involvement in the administration of public schools, as Milton Friedman put it

almost 70 years ago.⁷ The forces at play, if successful, will in time bring an end to public education that, despite its challenges in delivering on the promise of opportunity for all children, remains uniquely positioned to advance a healthy, inclusive multi-racial democracy and equity of all forms. Indeed, public schools are a central space where children and families form their identity as Americans and learn what it means to participate in a democratic society through the curriculum and interactions with diverse communities and points of view. Yet the depth and breadth of the ideological attacks are already eroding general confidence in public education and helping to fuel an exodus of educators. In this context, confronting the threat to public schools is not only about protecting our fundamental rights to learn the truth about systemic racism in the US and to express our gender identity and sexual orientation with safety and dignity. It is also about protecting and strengthening one of the last remaining universal-access public institutions in the US and upholding and furthering the essential advances in multi-racial democratic participation and social justice of recent decades.

A Growing Counter-Movement

The assault on public schools is finding deep and growing resistance, from rural communities and small towns to suburbs, cities and states. In our conversations, we learned of organizations that are challenging anti-CRT/anti-transgender measures and mobilizing to defeat problematic school board candidates and recruit values-aligned people to run for local and state-level office. Many of these groups are new to the public education arena, activated by concerns about the racist and exclusionary nature of the attacks on public schools and the Right's use of these measures as a voter mobilization strategy. Advocacy and civic groups working in healthcare, housing and reproductive rights, such as Red Wine and Blue, Galvanize USA, SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice) and others, are mobilizing to reach and educate white people, women, working class communities and communities of color, immigrants and parents of transgender children, particularly in the South and Midwest. Prominent leaders in the African American Policy Forum as well as professional associations of historians and librarians, elected officials, and national civil rights and anti-hate groups are actively engaged. Donors also have mobilized, independently and through the Education Forward Fund that has launched a national, multi-constituency grantmaking strategy.

Notably, much of the early response centered on countering the attacks on race, gender and sexuality, rather than voucher-expansion, and was led by organizations that are not part of the traditional public

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education advocacy community. Conversely, although education organizations as a field have long been concerned about the structural impacts of large-scale voucher programs, many were initially reluctant to take on these fights because of their focus on improving educational opportunities in urban school districts that, until recently, were not the target of the anti-CRT and transgender backlash.⁸

Following early indicators across the network in spring 2021, the Partnership convened partners in the development of messaging guidance on critical race theory that proved instrumental to field communications. That same year, leading racial justice, organizing and education groups also stepped into these battles and built initiatives to address the mismatch of educational advocacy strength to where the ideological incursions have been taking place. Race Forward, NYU Metro Center’s EJ-ROC and the Schott Foundation joined together to launch H.E.A.L. Together to reach and help rural and suburban groups build power and influence at the local and state levels through resources, tools and training. The Campaign for Our Shared Future also formed as a common ground effort to build a diverse ideological coalition to fight the attacks on education. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) are leading advocacy, litigation, and narrative development efforts, individually and in partnership with H.E.A.L. Together and other advocacy groups. More recently, the Dignity in Schools campaign and Communities for Just Schools Fund began providing member response funds to their networks of youth and parent-led organizing groups.

These efforts are gaining ground against the spread of exclusionary and voucher measures across the country. For example:

- The Georgia Youth Justice Coalition organized young people and allies in statewide campaigns to stop ‘Don’t Say Gay’ legislation, confront local book bans, and most recently to prevent passage of a voucher expansion initiative by demonstrating to rural legislators how vouchers would disproportionately hurt their schools.
- Reclaim Idaho, a group with roots in healthcare advocacy, mobilized to defeat a universal education savings account program by showing how most Idaho residents oppose school vouchers.
- In Ottawa County, Michigan, incumbent school board members defeated a slate of pro-voucher candidates running on a book ban/anti-transgender agenda through a door-to-door effort to inform their neighbors about what was at stake.
- Oregon—the state with the highest rate of domestic extremism in the US and with intense levels of attack against educators and public employees— passed the first-of-its-kind Every Student Belongs rule with bipartisan support to increase student inclusion and safety and prohibit hate symbols in schools, with guidance for bias incident response.⁹

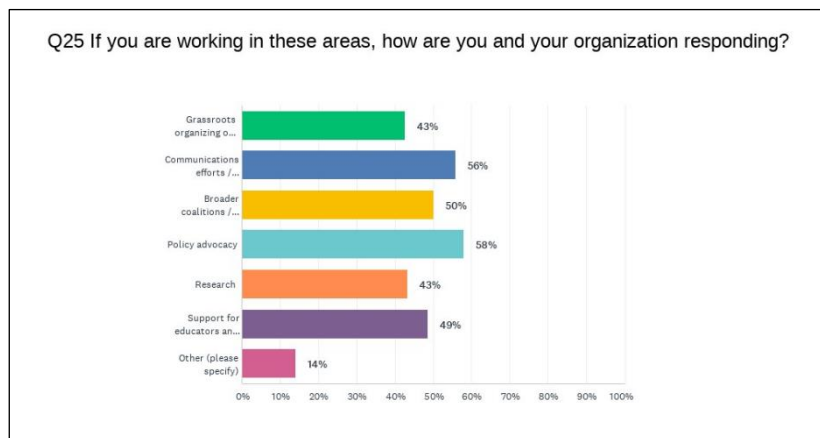
Such gains are a welcome sign, as they indicate a deep public investment in the institution of public schools and shared alarm at the erosion of rights and inclusion in local communities.¹⁰ Crucially, they also demonstrate how organizations are seizing the opportunities this moment provides to build new coalitions across geography and sector, develop new reform strategies that include electoral as well as policy and practice action, and engage new constituencies for their visions for public schools. Examples include efforts by the California Partnership, NEA and others to advance transformative, racially just, relationship-centered community schools, Remake Learning’s ecosystem approach in Pittsburgh, and work by the national Dignity in Schools Campaign and other youth-led coalitions to advocate for police-free public schools, anchored in community voice and nurturing and restorative cultures.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR NETWORK SUPPORT

Between May and September 2023, the Partnership surveyed partners (n=179) about their activities and needs related to countering the attacks on public education (Appendix A). Eighty-five percent of respondents reported that these issues are coming up in their work, and of these people, 9 out of 10 were actively involved in response activities that included: policy advocacy (58 percent), communications (56 percent), coalition-building (50 percent), educator support (49 percent), research (44 percent) or grassroots organizing (43 percent).

Respondents spanned both new and longtime partners, including significant actors in the education field such as the Alliance for Excellent

Education, Education Law Center, Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center alongside grassroots organizers, educators, communications specialists, funders, and system and union leaders.



When asked about network actions that would be most helpful to their work, field convenings rose to the top, with strong interest in national and regional gatherings to meet others working in this space (68 and 61 percent respectively), and a national strategy table for cross-organizational sharing, alignment and planning (62 percent). Smaller but sizable numbers of partners were interested in narrative strategy (57 percent), learning sessions (55 percent) and local and state-level gatherings (53 percent). Federal policy drew the least interest, with under a third (27 percent) identifying it as a need.

To gain more insight into these responses and the broader activity across the country, the Partnership team interviewed 39 individuals working in educational advocacy, grassroots organizing, research and policy formulation as well as in labor and other sectors. These included partners and others who are not part of the network, with a focus nationally as well as on rural, suburban and urban communities (Appendix B). What we heard as the top-line needs and opportunities for support are summarized below.

#1. Link the growing array of groups entering the public education arena.

Interviews indicate widespread activation to challenge vouchers and anti-CRT/transgender measures, but many groups are working in silos. Gaps are particularly acute between longstanding education advocates and new entrants, which range widely from electoral groups to racial justice, transgender rights and civic engagement organizations. A recurring theme was the need to bring together the diversity of organizations for reciprocal learning and tactical alignment, especially on messaging. Fighting Across the States, convened by Save Our Schools Arizona, In the Public Interest, and a nascent collaboration between H.E.A.L. Together and the Campaign for a Shared Future were identified as important connectors. Even so, interviewees noted the need for platforms that support exchange beyond the sharing of state-level advocacy and communications strategies. They cautioned against creating something new that would compete for time and funding with existing formations. Rather, they felt better use of existing neutral spaces for gathering would reduce isolation and improve the effectiveness of efforts underway by helping people to see the intersections across their various positions and issues, and by creating opportunities for co-leveraging each other's activities. Some noted the potential of such a cross-cutting effort to build relationships that could support a broader and more durable pro-public education coalition to emerge. Others expressed hope that interaction would help to draw more allies and support for their work.

#2. Connect the dots behind the efforts to dismantle public schools.

During the interviews, we heard requests for information and tools to assist organizational staff and constituencies in drawing connections between the ideological attacks, the expansion of school vouchers and the end-goals of disinvesting from public education (and public institutions more generally) and rolling back the gains in democratic participation of Black, transgender and other communities. Rural communities are a key audience for these materials because of the disproportionately negative impact of vouchers on their schools.¹¹ Yet rural and suburban groups mobilizing to counter these ideological attacks tend to have less experience working on public schools and generally are not connected to education advocacy, policy and research organizations that could

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help them to see the larger agenda at play. As one rural partner explained, “There is a real capacity challenge. Lots of folks [are] coming into public education but don’t really understand it.” Advocates, funders and government insiders observed similar challenges in the public discourse, where the issues often are framed as about identity rather than dismantling public systems, obscuring the underlying systemic racism at play. Reflecting on this disconnect, a national funder partner described privatization as the “silent but deadly killer that people are not paying attention to and is chipping away at public school infrastructure.”

#3. Develop a more powerful activating vision of the future of public education.

Even when the relationship between curriculum/book-bans, anti-transgender initiatives, universal voucher expansion and institutional disinvestment is clearly understood, there was less clarity about what ought to be promoted instead among the many new entrants to the public education arena. They and educators uniformly voiced the need for an updated and more forward-looking vision of public education systems that could energize a broader public conversation about what we are fighting for. Virtual learning, technology innovations (and AI), educator shortages and declining student attendance and enrollment from the pandemic are transforming schools in ways we are only just beginning to understand. Given these dramatic changes, a state administrator asked, “What is the big, beautiful vision of the *future* of public education? The voucher/identity activists have an animating vision of individual rights, what is the throughline that powerfully unites our side?”

Our conversations surfaced many aspects to this future vision, perhaps most importantly that it leans into how schooling is evolving (rather than harking to the past), is grounded deeply in the realities and concerns of local communities, and that it embraces the task of preparing young people to engage in a just, diverse and inclusive democratic society through historically accurate, culturally relevant, equitable settings. Partners noted that examples of this vision already exist within the network —such as in the California Partnership’s community schools— that could be amplified for a wider public. Reflecting on this task, the administrator suggested, “We need to [bring the conversation] back to ‘first principles’ about what we are aiming for. We are not going to put the diversity of schooling contexts back into the box. What’s important are the values, quality of student experience, public commitment and who is included in the story of what is public.”

A state administrator asked, “What is the big, beautiful vision of the *future* of public education? The voucher/identity activists have an animating vision of individual rights, what is the throughline that powerfully unites our side?”

#4. Articulate a multi-level policy agenda to advance this vision.

Flowing from this future-facing vision, policy experts observed the window this moment presents to develop and disseminate a proactive policy agenda for state and federal action. In

contrast with previous eras of education reform activity, organizing and advocacy groups are focused almost exclusively on states and localities rather than on federal legislative or administrative action.¹² Yet, as one Congressional staffer emphasized, federal reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act is likely to resurface in the next few years, making this a crucial time to develop a cohesive agenda and a coalition in support. Assessment and accountability, education technology and mental health access were flagged as immediate entry points for policy articulation on equity and quality in conditions for learning. A state-level funder shared, “We know what we hate, we know what’s harmful, and we have no idea what a shared vision [looks like] that helps us define and meet our promises to children and families.”

#5. Strengthen message accessibility, consistency and alignment for narrative shift.

Much has been done on narrative strategy in recent years, including by the Partnership. Building on this work, interviewees called for language that acknowledges the concerns of a public that believes in public schools but also is worried about what some call “learning loss” to school systems that are not meeting their children’s needs. We heard the anguish of parents who are fighting voucher expansion efforts while simultaneously working to build their own alternative schools out of desperation about the poor quality of education their children receive. They pointed to how voucher discussions often center white, middle-class perspectives and do not give enough grace to families compelled to use vouchers for their children. We need to be more thoughtful and less judgmental in drawing connections and asking who benefits, a national organizer said. As he and others noted, both realities can be true: the circumstances that lead families to make these choices and the harmful impact of vouchers at a systemic level.

Straightforward, jargon-free language also would help build understanding of how the different streams of attack on public education all connect to the end-goals of dismantling the institution and undermining racial justice and multi-racial democracy in the US. Reflecting on the multiplicity of narrative efforts underway, one partner observed that the field would benefit from more cohesive, consistent messaging across advocates and better guidance for communicating about these issues to different audiences.

Others cautioned against a tendency towards negative messaging that reinforces a sense that our public schools are beyond help and feeds parental fear about their children’s futures. Instead, they said, we need more stories about how communities are engaging in their schools and messaging, generated from the ground up, on the role of schools as hubs of learning, employment and community life. Groups working directly with students, parents and educators speaking out on behalf of local public schools asked for help with aligned message preparation, digital privacy coaching, and connecting to national media outlets.

We need more stories about how communities are engaging in their schools and messaging, generated from the ground up, on the role of schools as hubs of learning, employment and community life.

#6. Address longstanding divisions that undermine more powerful collective action.

A repeated theme was a desire to address persistent divisions among proponents of public education that not only impede joint action, but also may be reducing the funding available for the pro-public education response. While there are likely several fault line issues, the four that surfaced most often in our conversations are: (1) public charter schools, (2) police-free schools; (3) assessment, and (4) more recently, the emergence of ‘learn anywhere’ programs. Each brings considerable nuance and constituencies for and against.

Difficulties in navigating these fault lines and addressing the underlying dynamics of systemic racism and exclusion have led both national and local entities to sidestep issues (including the Partnership in relation to charters) from fear of further fracturing the field. But the result, as two longtime partners noted, is a scattered response at a time when the future of public education depends on cohesive, full-throated engagement. What they proposed instead was an effort to lean into the complexity of these fault-lines from a data-driven perspective, grappling with, for example, what guardrails might be necessary for ensuring equity and access in districts with high percentages of charter school enrollment, or how we might build a new conversation about how to achieve safety in the US with police-free schools at the center. The goal of these “deep dialogue” conversations would not be to reach agreement but rather a shared power analysis and deeper understanding across perspectives and experiences that makes joint work more possible.

A repeated theme was a desire to address persistent divisions among proponents of public education that not only impede joint action, but also may be reducing the funding available for the pro-public education response.

#7. Support educators and protect democratic governance.

Educators, and interviewees working directly with them, spoke to how much the context of schools has changed during the pandemic and how stressful their positions are in an environment of ongoing turmoil. Teacher shortages and superintendent turnover are increasingly pressing concerns, as are physical and psychological safety (for themselves, school board members and the parents who are mobilizing in defense) from harassment and doxing for their positions. Against this backdrop, interviewees called for more spaces for sharing, learning and mutual support in responding effectively to the moment.

With respect to school boards, questions surfaced about the impact of the ideological attacks on the space for and practice of democratic governance. There is not enough infrastructure to help school board members and district/state administrators navigate the current political moment, despite the collective efforts of prominent professional associations to assist people in these positions. Fear of pushback is discouraging state and local education leaders from speaking out, from the realization that even one misstep can be the end of their careers. In the absence of training in coalition-building, communications and digital safety, emerging ‘survival’ strategies

have veered towards limiting the opportunities for public input, which in the long-run may be harmful to democratic engagement. Nascent efforts have been developing to support school board members and administrators by Foundations for a Better Oregon, H.E.A.L. Together (with support from the Partnership team), Local Progress, People’s Action, the Pipeline Fund, SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice), among others, and need support to grow.

#8. Increase funding flows to the field.

Finally —and most critically— access to funding was universally flagged as the primary factor hampering efforts to protect, strengthen and reimagine public schools. The current work to push back on voucher expansion and anti-CRT/transgender measures has relied on grants from a small number of foundations in the democracy and education fields. Organizers voiced concern about the prospects of finding resources at a time when their work is so urgently needed, and when they are just returning to door-knocking after a long period of social media reliance and pandemic-related challenges. Administrators warned of the funding cliff facing school districts next year when the American Rescue Plan Act funding runs out. “This issue will impact every parent, child, and educator in our school systems. There will be school closings and hostility at the local level about that, furthering the cycle of attacks in privatization,” a national advocate said.

When asked what accounted for the funding gaps, a national organizer surmised: “Some think this issue is a distraction that will soon blow over...others think the progressive education movement has gone too far and needs to be reined in anyway....and they don't appreciate the extent of damage being done.” A funder observed a view among colleagues of the ideological attacks as fringe fights rather than as central to democracy, and a historical over-bias among education donors on federal policy versus local action. Others note a sectoral contraction in philanthropic giving, not just in public education.¹³

Interviewees stressed the urgency of donors stepping in and stepping up. They noted the high stakes of remaining on the sidelines in the face of the assault on public education and the ever-changing tactics by voucher proponents to sway public opinion, evade legal challenges and find new ways to shift funds that make tracking difficult.

With sensitivity to the diverse reasons for donor hesitance, interviewees stressed the urgency of donors stepping in and stepping up. They noted the high stakes of remaining on the sidelines in the face of the assault on public education and the ever-changing tactics by voucher proponents to sway public opinion, evade legal challenges and find new ways to shift funds that make tracking difficult. An organizer in Arizona recounted how in 2017, grassroots pressure succeeded in defeating a state-wide universal voucher program and since then, they have had to mobilize repeatedly to fight expansion attempts. Even so, Arizona has one of the most sweeping voucher programs in the country and is among the states with the lowest per pupil funding and highest teacher turnover,

with large numbers of uncertified teachers. Reflecting on conditions for learning in her state, she said, “We are on the edge of the endgame” for the institution of public education.

A FRAMEWORK FOR NETWORK-WIDE ACTIVATION

Much has been written in recent years about the sweeping threat of ideological attacks in local communities and the wave of voucher measures moving in their wake to dismantle public education. But as our scan makes clear, a robust and passionate countermovement has arisen, from rural towns to suburbs and big cities. This countermovement is revealing a reality that we know but have yet to tap into fully: most people support their public schools and want them to be strong, effective and affirming.

How can the Partnership best contribute to collaborative efforts in this crucial moment? Where can it add most value as a network committed to a strong, equitable, and racially just system of public education that, as a public institution, serves to anchor community life and invigorate a vibrant, just multi-racial democracy?

Potential Intervention Points for the Partnership

Interviews and survey data offer a wide range of suggestions for how the Partnership might make best use of its bank of policy expertise, facilitation and communication skills and wide-ranging relationships. These fall into five areas of potential intervention support, as follows.

1. Connecting, Convening and Coordination
2. Vision and Policy Agenda Development
3. Tools and Technical Assistance
4. Narrative, Storytelling and Communications
5. Resource Development

In approaching the task of network activation, interviewees emphasized the importance of field-direction to maximize value-add and avoid competition for funding, time and partner energies that could undermine network goals. Partnership actions should follow the lead of partners, be informed by young people, educators and parents, and promote community-building, wellness and network durability. Most importantly, the Partnership should hew closely to its demonstrated capacities, assets, strengths and role in the field, rather than creating something new. Longtime partners saw the Partnership as uniquely positioned to bring a wide range of voices to the table in ways that open pathways of communication and sharing. They noted the potential of such exchange to lead to new

Partnership actions should follow the lead of partners, be informed by young people, educators and parents, and promote community-building, wellness and the durability of the network.

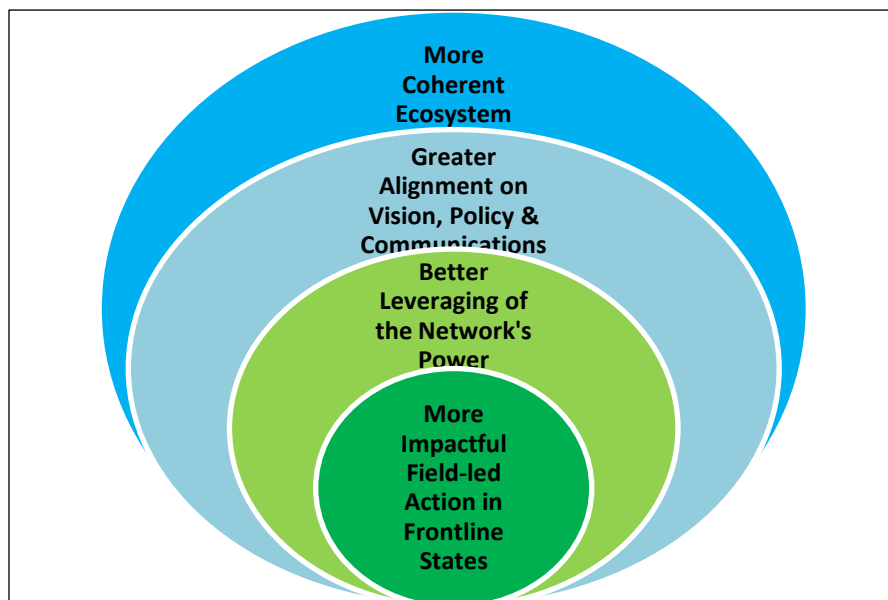
relationships and understandings, even breakthroughs in areas of challenge and disagreement. Many believe the Partnership is well capacitated to elevate the visibility of organizations and initiatives for cross-learning and can help improve the information flow among public education proponents. And finally, as a central hub and neutral space, the Partnership is trusted to foster and support collective action by helping network members to work together on projects of common concern.

Theory of Action

Given this, how can the Partnership respond in ways that better position the ecosystem of actors working to protect, strengthen and reimagine public education for long run success? The Partnership’s role is not on the frontlines but as a supporter of those who are, and its actions should lean directly into the core network functions of *connecting*, *aligning* and *producing* with and in support of partners.¹⁴

Figure 1 presents the guiding theory of action for network activation flowing from this “CAP” framework. By connecting the diversity of groups in the public education arena, aligning them through a reset of the shared vision for the future of public education, and leveraging their collective power to support community and educator-led efforts on the frontlines of the school voucher expansion and ideological battles, the Partnership can help to counter the assault on public education and expand the coalition for a future-facing vision of public schools. That is, the Partnership could increase the effectiveness and impact of work underway by supporting greater cohesion and alignment among organizations and helping them to make better use of the considerable expertise, influence and resources that exist within the network and its allied organizations.

Figure 1: Theory of Action for Network Activation



CAP Strategies and Actions

Three strategies ground this theory of action, each with a set of core activities that respond directly to the needs and gaps in connection, knowledge and resources identified in our scan. These are:

Strategy 1: Connect the diverse array of players into a coherent ecosystem.

The Partnership could use the Network Assembly to lay the groundwork for building a broader coalition for public education by supporting relationship-building among partners and new values-aligned entities to the field. It could develop its existing network directory into a Clearinghouse that helps partners to learn about what is happening in the field, access tools and analysis and connect with each other directly. And, building on the foundation of trust and relationships developed over the past decade, it could convene deep dialogues on issues that have long divided the education advocacy community and support partners to be more explicit about the root issues behind the threats in their analyses, strategies, actions and messages. These ‘breakthrough’ conversations would provide a venue for airing and grappling with the diversity of experiences and perspectives in the network, and for sharpening the network’s value proposition and shared commitments as well as its approach to bridging differences in reform strategy and approach.

The Partnership could increase the effectiveness and impact of work underway by supporting greater cohesion and alignment among organizations and helping them to make better use of the considerable expertise, influence and resources that exist within the network.

Strategy 2: Align vision, policy and communications.

The Partnership could support strategy coordination across groups, including more centrist allies, by co-developing and facilitating quarterly meetings for cross-organizational sharing, alignment and planning in collaboration with prominent organizations identified in this report and others. Partnership Work Groups could be engaged in rapidly updating the Partnership’s vision and policy agendas to be more accessible and speak to a greater diversity of school and district contexts. These and existing Partnership Playbooks could be distilled and disseminated for lay audiences, especially to assist new organizations entering the field of public education to understand the connections between ideological attacks, vouchers and institutional disinvestment, and how they can respond effectively. The Partnership’s powerful existing narrative and strategic communications functions could be tapped and expanded to help in translating national narrative work into more

The Partnership’s powerful existing narrative and strategic communications functions could be tapped and expanded to help in translating national narrative work into more actionable messages.

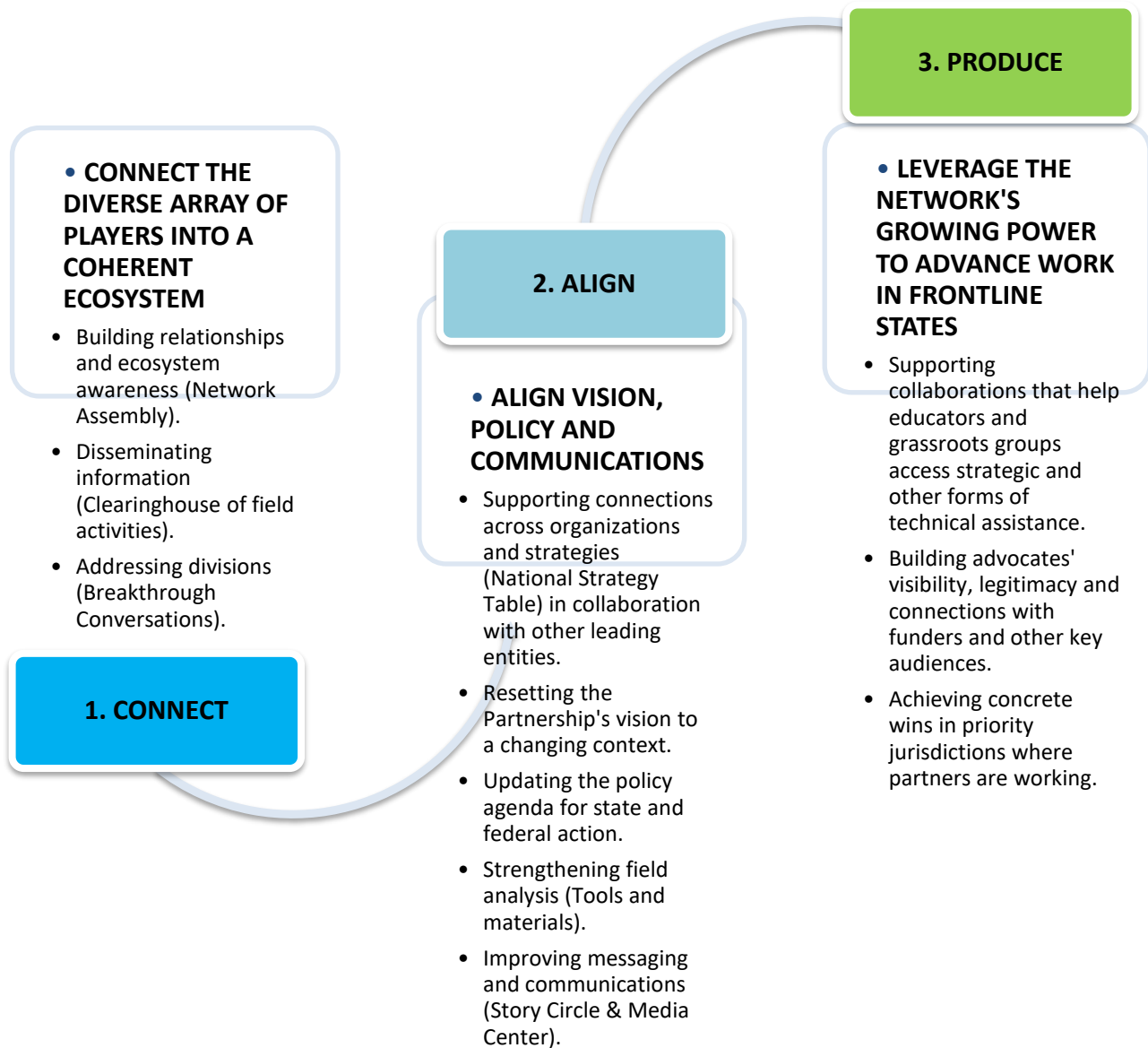
actionable messages that educators and local communities can use via the network's emerging Media Center.

Strategy 3: Produce new collaborations that leverage the diverse forms of power in this expanding network to advance community and educator-led efforts in frontline states.

Finally, the Partnership could bring expertise and added legitimacy and power to grassroots and educator-led coalitions in states facing largescale voucher expansion and identity attacks by brokering and encouraging the development of high-trust collaborations between network partners and entities such as H.E.A.L. Together and Fighting Across the States. This is a particular strength of the network. The Partnership has strong, long-standing relationships with local and state level groups in a wide range of places, and a significant number of partners with expertise in educational policy, systems change and model development. It could foster joint efforts to expand the public visibility of these entities through media relations, ad-hoc technical assistance and network communications. And it could exercise its own convening power to meet and engage influential constituencies (e.g., local chambers of commerce) to see the relationship of these issues to their reform goals. Most crucially, the Partnership could bring these assets to help the emerging collaborations across network to achieve concrete wins in the jurisdictions where partners are working.

A summary of these strategies and supporting actions for network-wide activation is provided in Figure 2 (next page).

Figure 2: CAP Strategies and Actions for Network-wide Activation



CONCLUSION

Without doubt, there is no single answer to this moment. We are witnessing the maturation of longstanding movements to roll back social, economic and political inclusion, constrain democratic participation, and eliminate public institutions and the constraints they pose on the market. Responding to this challenge effectively and winning a different vision of our schools — and our democracy — requires an equally far-reaching approach, one that none of us can achieve on our own. The framework provided in this report is a beginning proposal for how the Partnership might activate such a widescale response, in close collaboration with partners and

others engaged in supporting public education. It will be important to vet these ideas within the network and more broadly.

The Partnership's focus on network activation is timely because while there is growing activity across the country, it is yet to be organized and coherent. But ten years from now, we would not want to be in the same place. By stepping in more fully to connect, align and empower partners and others on the frontlines of the struggles today, the Partnership can build a more forceful response to this moment while tilling the soil for a more just and inclusive future to emerge.

Appendix A: Data Collection Instruments

Survey Protocol

1. What issues related to the attacks on public education are you encountering in your work?
 - Anti-Critical Race Theory, including book bans
 - Exclusionary actions against LGBTQ+ students and communities
 - Voucher measures including mechanisms like Education Savings Accounts
 - School board-related issues (e.g., takeover attempts)
 - Threats against educator safety
 - Other (please specify)
 - None of the above
2. If you are working in these areas, how are you responding?
 - Grassroots organizing of families, educators, and/or young people
 - Communications efforts/campaigns
 - Broader coalitions/campaign activities
 - Policy advocacy
 - Research
 - Support for educators and systems leaders
 - Other (please specify)
3. Is your strategy primarily responding to attacks and defending current approaches/policies? (i.e., a defensive strategy) AND/OR, is your strategy primarily trying to set the terms of the debate and advance proactive measures (e.g., policies, models) to advance an affirmative vision? (i.e., an offensive strategy)
4. If your strategies are concentrated in any specific locales or states, please share them here.
5. If you have an “offense” strategy, what is the longer-term vision you are advancing?
6. Are you connected to any other groups, coalitions, or broader cross-sector efforts in this area? If so, please share with whom you’re working.
7. Which of the following options for partner/network action would be helpful to you?
 - Local and/or state level gatherings to meet others working in this space
 - Regional level gatherings to meet others working in this space
 - National level gatherings to meet others working in this space
 - Learning sessions
 - Connections to constituencies facilitated by partners and/or Partnership support team

- National strategy table for cross-organizational sharing, alignment, and planning
- Narrative strategy table
- Federal policy
- Other (please specify)

8. If you selected “learning sessions” above, about what are you interested in learning?

Interview Protocol

A. Context: What are you doing and seeing related to the issues of privatization and the ongoing backlash to critical race theory and LGBTQ+ rights in school districts?

- Are you working to address privatization and the backlash to critical race theory and LGBTQ+ rights? What are you doing?
- Who else is working on these issues?
- Who should we be talking with to learn more about what’s going on in the field, especially in rural and suburban communities?
- Are there people or organizations in other sectors that we should connect with/bring to the table?

B. Field Needs: What is needed for an effective response and to advance an affirmative vision? What would be helpful to you and others?

- Looking forward, what are your plans (or others’ plans)?
- What would help you and the folks you are working with to advance efforts in this area?
- Looking at the field, what is needed for an effective response and to advance an affirmative vision? What gaps and needs do you see in the short and long term?

C. Network Action: How can the network best contribute to support these efforts?

- For Partners:
 - From where you are, how can the Partnership best contribute? What do you see as our unique value add to the field?
 - What would success in this initiative look like for you? What would a win look like?
- For Non-Partners:
 - Where do you think the Partnership should focus for most impact?
 - Are there any issues that we should keep in mind as we formulate our strategy and plans?
- Is there anything else we should know?

Appendix B: List of Interviewees

1. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
2. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
3. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
4. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
5. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
6. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
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29. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
30. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
31. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
32. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
33. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]

34. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
 35. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
 36. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
 37. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
 38. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
 39. [Partner Name/Organization Redacted]
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END NOTES

¹ *Progress and Lessons from the First Five Years*. Prepared for the Partnership for the Future of Learning by ORS Impact-Equal Measure. September 2020.

² Nancy MacLean. “How Milton Friedman Exploited White Supremacy to Privatize Education” *New Economic Thinking*. September 2021.

³ For a brief review of how and why vouchers gained support as a means of gaining educational access for Black communities, see: <https://www.the74million.org/article/for-maverick-polly-williams-the-mother-of-school-choice-the-point-was-always-to-empower-parents-and-improve-education-for-black-children/> and <https://hechingerreport.org/segregated-schools-are-still-the-norm-howard-fuller-is-fine-with-that/>. This history is also touched on in Cara Fitzpatrick (2023), *The Death of Public School: How conservatives won the war in public education*. Basic Books.

⁴ For a brief review of the contradictory findings on school voucher effectiveness, see commentary by Joshua Cowen: “How School Voucher Programs Hurt Students.” *Time Magazine*. April 19, 2023. <https://time.com/6272666/school-voucher-programs-hurt-students/>

⁵ See Public Funds for Public Schools, *Bill Tracker*. Includes conventional private school voucher programs as well as other forms of privatization that put resources in individual hands via Education Savings Account (ESA) voucher programs, tax credit voucher programs, individual tax credits or benefits for private school tuition, other private education expenses, or homeschooling, and the use of 529 savings accounts for K-12 private school tuition or expenses; and bills to roll back, eliminate, increase restrictions on, or increase accountability for voucher programs.

⁶ Analysis courtesy of H.E.A.L. Together, based on data from PEN America – <https://pen.org/issue/educational-censorship/>. These efforts include bans on teaching about race and racism as well as policies that marginalize LGBTQ+ students and eliminate social and emotional learning programs.

⁷ Friedman, Milton (1955). “The Role of Government in Education.” *Economics and the Public Interest*, ed. Robert A. Solo. Trustees of Rutgers College in New Jersey.

⁸ Even when geographies coincided, education groups tended to view the book bans et al as a distraction from the larger agenda of dismantling public education, and the role of voucher expansion initiatives therein. An Arizona partner explained: “These are dog whistle issues... what is really going to hurt public education is [the] siphon[ing of] public funds away.”

⁹ Additional guidance was subsequently provided to support gender expansive students, supported by the Region 16 Comprehensive Center with funding from the US Department of Education.

¹⁰ Fred Backus, Anthony Salvanto, *Big Majorities Oppose Book Bans* - CBS News Poll, 2/22/22; <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/book-bans-opinion-poll-2022-02-22/>.

¹¹ For a discussion of the disproportionate impact of vouchers on rural communities, see National Coalition for Public Education at:

<https://www.ncpecoalition.org/ruralvouchers#:~:text=And%2C%20vouchers%20are%20especial%20harmful,over%20a%20smaller%20revenue%20stream.>

¹² Although federal pressure has historically been a key lever for reform progress, this lever moved to the states with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2015 and the intensifying electoral battles of recent years.

¹³ A recent survey by Candid found that foundation leaders anticipate a fieldwide decline in philanthropic giving for 2023 and beyond. See “More foundations expect giving to decrease in 2023, survey finds.” *Philanthropy News Digest*, July 5, 2023.

¹⁴ See Taylor, Madeleine (2014) *From Connecting to Change the World*. Pp 104-5. In the connecting phase of network growth, members exchange information and build trust. In the alignment phase, members capitalize on their connections to discover, explore, and define goals, strategies, and opportunities that they share. As they do this, connections deepen, and their appetite grows for taking collective action related to what they align around. In the production phase, members organize to take joint action. Organizing production adds new dimensions to members’ relationships, since they must go through the process of agreeing on, designing, and implementing projects. This requires members to make decisions and commitments that are far more demanding and consequential than connecting and aligning.