Case Study
The Power of Relationships to Transform Systems
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CASE STUDY
An inside look at one organization

The Power of Relationships to Transform Systems

On a broiling May afternoon in a classroom at Lakewood High School in Long Beach, California, 10 people are seated together in a circle. Eight are teachers and two are students. The teachers are asking questions and listening to the students’ responses.

It is not an examination. The topic of their conversation is student-teacher relationships, and the teachers are getting coaching from the students. Most of the teachers are leaning in, but one expresses hesitancy and frustration.

“Listen,” says one of the students, “I know you are afraid, but we are afraid too.” The discussion then moves on to what it means to be honest and open with each other as teachers and students and how to build healthy relationships.

This conversation occurred in 2021 during a workshop orchestrated by Californians for Justice (CFJ), a community-organizing group based in Oakland, California, devoted to building power for marginalized youth within the public education system. In its 25 years of doing organizing work in California, CFJ has significantly increased the representation and voice of young people at decision-making tables in schools and at district and state levels. Along the way, CFJ has moved from fighting the system, to working with the system, to becoming an integral part of the system while still retaining the ability to pressure for change.

Californians for Justice has elevated the power of young people by establishing authentic relationships between them and teachers, educators, and officials. In so doing, it has remade education in the state and crafted a model for broader social change.

By John Kania & Juanita Zerda
On June 3, 2020, students from Millikan High School protest at Heartwell Park in Long Beach, California.
This transformation is a tale of success and humility, a story of continuous evolution in order to better serve Black and brown youth. At the heart of this story is CFJ’s approach to building power and creating social change through relationships, nurtured by a heritage of struggle, setbacks, and victories and a sense of community driven by the capacity to dream, love, and care for each other. Their work demonstrates the radical possibility of systemic transformation by centering Black and brown youth, building relationships between students and school staff, nurturing community, and giving voice to the marginalized.

OppoSing Power

Californians for Justice was founded in San Jose in 1995 by activists Rebecca Gordon and Jan Adams with support from the Center for Third World Organizing to build the political power of traditionally marginalized communities and fight against inequitable and unjust policies. From its inception, CFJ was a multiracial and statewide organization, working with and across multiple mobilizing groups, bringing them together to increase the impact of electoral field campaigns.

CFJ spent its early years pursuing a confrontational relationship with those in traditional seats of power. They sought to check decision makers—primarily through organizing campaigns in local Black and brown communities—from implementing policies that they saw as racist, anti-immigrant, and detrimental to working-class individuals and families. The legislative proposals that CFJ opposed included California’s Proposition 209, introduced to voters in 1996 to end affirmative action at the University of California and state agencies, and Proposition 21, introduced in 2000 to require youth as young as 14 to be tried and sentenced as adults for a host of crimes.

Seven years into its existence, CFJ stuck with this confrontational and reactive strategy and became quite skilled at mobilizing successful campaigns supporting equity and justice. In 2003, for instance, CFJ was instrumental in California voters rejecting Proposition 54—commonly called the “Racial Privacy Initiative” by supporters and the “Information Ban” by opponents—which sought to prohibit the collection and use of data involving race and ethnicity in education and government employment and contracting.

Notwithstanding these triumphs, the organization’s original purpose began to evolve. Staff and leadership became increasingly aware that they needed to move from reacting and opposing enacted policies to becoming more proactive in adopting alternative approaches.

“Many youth organizing groups are one-dimensional, relying on studies from outside organizations and implementing strategies that oftentimes don’t lead to long-term systemic change,” says Omar Cardenas, organizing director at CFJ. “That is how we were in the early years of CFJ. We were constantly bumping our heads with a righteous anger trying to create change and to hold decision makers accountable. We were pushing nonstop to pass more just policies, not realizing that without having the transformation in hearts, minds, and spirit, these policies would be gone tomorrow.”

From Reactionary to ProActive

In the mid-2000s, CFJ began to experience its first critical transformation under the co-leadership of Abdi Soltani, who currently serves as executive director at ACLU of Northern California, and Mimi Ho, who went on to direct important activist organizations such as Asian Pacific Environmental Network. CFJ recognized that most of its volunteer base was composed of young people of color, who demonstrated the most passion and willingness to engage in electoral opposition campaigns during its early years of political contestation. So CFJ’s leadership, staff, and board decided to initiate an immersive process of feedback and reflection with its young stakeholders. These deliberations triggered two critical shifts: CFJ decided to focus specifically on the education sector, of central importance to youth, and to shift from being defensive and oppositional to becoming proactive, collaborative, and pragmatic.

With this new strategic focus, CFJ embarked on a series of what turned out to be successful education-related campaigns that advanced youth interests. For example, in 2002, CFJ launched a “So Fresh and So Clean?” campaign that achieved important facilities improvements in the Long Beach and Oakland Unified School Districts. In 2004, CFJ helped support passage of what became known
as the Williams Settlement, in which the state set aside more than $1 billion to ensure that all students would have access to textbooks, safer and cleaner schools, and better-qualified teachers.

By closely collaborating during these campaigns with important statewide groups, including InnerCity Struggle (ICS) and Public Advocates (PA), CFJ not only continued to expand its network but also saw that in order to strengthen their relational influence, they needed to begin courting new stakeholders—specifically legislators, the state school board, and district leaders. CFJ also realized that they needed to become more adept at weaving students and community leaders into the fabric of decision-making. While the policy wins of the 2000s had created momentum for CFJ, they knew that engaging in piecemeal battles would not be enough to transform the education system.

**SHIFTING CULTURE**

By 2013, CFJ had evolved from a campaign operation into a relationship-building organization, with a broader set of stakeholders. They formed strong coalitions with local and statewide organizations, such as the California State PTA and The Education Trust–West, and invested in building close connections with and direct support from legislative and governmental decision makers at the state level, such as key members from the State Board of Education, and at district levels, such as superintendents and local county education board members.

Yet it wasn’t clear that CFJ had the resources to succeed. When Taryn Ishida became executive director in 2013 following a tenure with the Lucile Packard Foundation and after being a CFJ board member and volunteer for more than a decade, CFJ was running a deficit. The organization stood at 12 full-time and two part-time staff, mostly young people in their 20s, and needed to downsize. Under Ishida’s leadership, the staff and board took a hard look at how to make the most impact with limited resources. They needed to court allies and partners and find ways to turn their relationship-building efforts into capacity building. The reflections that CFJ undertook to weather this crisis helped pave the way for the significant successes they achieved over the next decade.

CFJ’s burgeoning relational approach came to fruition when they joined forces with Public Advocates, a nonprofit legal and advocacy firm, to lead a coalition of civil rights, advocacy, community parent, and student organizations pushing for the passage of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). LCFF moved California away from the traditional approach of allocating resources to schools based on a weighted formula to basing resource allocation on the numbers of low-income students, English-language learners (students learning English as a second language), and youth in foster care, in order to establish a more equitable funding system. The legislation also afforded greater flexibility to localities in how they could use state funding.

Even so, CFJ knew from previous policy wins that the passage of LCFF, though momentous, would not be enough to transform school culture, including its worldviews, power dynamics, and relationships. Thus, CFJ followed this victory with a new initiative called the Student Voice Campaign, which had the support of more than 30 organizations from around the state, such as the ACLU of Northern California (ACLU) and the California Teachers Association (CTA), representing more than 850,000 students in 27 districts. The Student Voice Campaign sought to ensure that LCFF implementation would not leave students and parents out of decision-making. In November 2014, the California State Board of Education issued regulations instructing districts to include the voices of students, parents, and community stakeholders in the development of Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP), which set forth goals, tasks, and expenditure directives to support student outcomes. The Student Voice Campaign succeeded.

LCFF became a significant milestone for CFJ. The policy win ensured more for underresourced communities, and the LCAPs embedded the communities’ values and elevated the importance of local voice in direction setting and decision-making. CFJ was now a major player in the state’s education system. CFJ had gone from focusing primarily on community mobilizing and staging protests to becoming an organization with a wide span of influence, capable of forming powerful coalitions and with a far-reaching view of what deep systemic change entails.

“CFJ became much more like water,” Cardenas says. “We stopped trying to force our way through points of resistance and began focusing on where we could be more effective in a softer way. As a result, we have become much more influential and more powerful within the educational field.”

**LISTENING TO THE YOUTH**

At the end of 2014, CFJ had solidified its reputation as an organization with a strong track record for activist campaigns and well-honed processes for pressuring people in power. Additionally, CFJ’s get-out-the-vote infrastructure was solidly in place, with a strong base of parents and youth who could be mobilized and a set of allied organizations with whom CFJ worked effectively to magnify their collective impact. And yet, at their moment of triumph, the leadership and staff at CFJ also felt depleted.

Despite CFJ’s efforts to achieve equity in schools, most students from underresourced communities had seen little positive change, and youth were still for the most part excluded from

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power and influence. Moreover, CFJ was hearing everywhere they worked how disenfranchised and lost many young people felt in school. The California Healthy Kids Survey of 6.2 million students in the state between 2013 and 2015 brought this point home. The survey, conducted by WestEd under contract by the state, indicated that one in three students (more than 20 million youth) could not identify a caring adult at school. The finding shocked CFJ into deep reflection and reevaluation of their work.

“We won the policy, we got funding from the system, we got governance, and we got voice at the table, but nothing was really changing,” says Taryn Ishida, CFJ’s former executive director. “How do we actually get in there and make sure that the vision becomes reality?”

Without more dramatic shifts in the culture of the educational system, not only at the state level but also at the local district and school levels, the structural changes they were achieving would not substantially improve day-to-day student experience. They were determined to go beyond simply building the voice and agency of students—the ones directly experiencing the problem. They needed to ensure that everyone else in the system genuinely cherished students and their welfare. To do so, they had to shift the perceptions of adults (teachers and administrators) about why they had to center Black and brown students’ voices and invest in their education and their plans and hopes for life success. They also had to teach the adults how to do so.

“We had to trust that youth really knew what the biggest problems were and what the most important solutions would be,” Ishida says. “And we had to trust that they were the ones with the deep expertise here. This was a sea change, particularly for the adults in schools who had positions of authority and great power over students. For them, learning to trust student voice and wisdom was a deeply rooted challenge.”

To better understand how CFJ’s work had affected daily school experience, the organization pursued a 10-month youth-led action research survey in 2015 of more than 2,000 students and 65 school leaders across California. The study confirmed that deep and authentic relationships are essential to student success, particularly for Black and brown students. Specifically, as documented by the American Psychological Association, students who have positive relationships with their teachers perform better and demonstrate better social and emotional skills, motivation, and resilience.

These findings are consistent with other educational studies. For example, education researchers Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider from the University of Chicago found that when students experienced strong “relational trust” with administrators and teachers in their schools, their chances of making significant improvements in academic achievement increased by 50 percent.

RELATIONSHIP CENTERED SCHOOLS

The survey sparked in the CFJ youth leaders, staff, and board a vision for a new educational approach focused on preparing students, teachers, and administrators to be in authentic relationships with each other. They would eventually call this idea Relationship Centered Schools.

Relationship Centered Schools seeks to transform power dynamics in education by creating a system that not only values but also is prepared to honor and support student voice. It creates spaces for relationship building and provides advice and training for school staff so that they can better support and connect with students. This training includes active-listening strategies and anti-bias reflection.

“Power and community are connected. The more communication I have with adults who I am normally intimidated by, the more opportunity for me to feel my power, especially when I feel that they care about what I have to say,” says Melanie Huizar, a CFJ student leader, about Relationship Centered Schools. “Without that feeling, my voice is just noise.”

In districts in which CFJ works, the Relationship Centered Schools model has become integral to how the educational system operates and the values it upholds. In practical terms, districts enter into formal agreements with CFJ to have community organizers work with educators, administrators, and students to help their schools work on their interpersonal relationships. This happens through local education boards adopting formal resolutions or through a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), signed by CFJ leadership and local boards of education, structured with levels of flexibility that also delineate the district’s investment and commitment to change. These resolutions and MOUs not only specify roles and set expectations for capacity building in schools but also spell out expectations and commitments to culture transformation.

For example, MOUs require particular schools to support professional learning networks (PLNs) composed of principals or assistant principals, school administrators, students and parents representing high-need populations, school coaches, administrators and instructional leaders, and parent and family representative leaders. The purpose of PLNs is not only to develop equitable school programs and structures, but also to ensure that different levels of leadership in schools collectively undertake personal and professional transformation and adopt anti-racist principles.

To help shift the power dynamics in schools, CFJ employs a variety of practices such as empathy interviews, student and educator co-led equity audits, co-investigation of equity dilemmas, and storytelling.
In creating the PLNs, CFJ was inspired by educational leaders Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan, who remark in their 2021 book *Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation*, “Equity isn’t a destination but an unwavering commitment to a journey. It can be easy to focus on where we hope to land and lose sight of the deliberate daily actions that constitute the process.” Currently, CFJ has MOUs in four districts to lead the work in 16 schools, directly engaging 150 to 200 educators and 164 students and indirectly benefiting the lives of at least 38,000 youth by creating a stronger sense of belonging and positive culture in these schools.

Transitioning from opposing the system to working with the system has not come without challenges. “The whole shift from the outside to the inside relationship is a very delicate, complex dance,” Ishida says. CFJ saw this difficulty play out right away.

“One of the schools began to engage with us differently because in their mind they were paying us to do a service,” Ishida says. “But we reminded them that we were coming in to make change. We were there because the community had been demanding this change for young people for years. We were there because both we and the school owe it to the community to do our best to change.”

With Relationship Centered Schools, CFJ began to explore a new and deeper approach to power dynamics in education. Many advocacy and mobilizing organizations build power in a way that focuses on placing pressure on decision makers, which can lead to transactional relationships between community groups and the educational system. CFJ, by contrast, is taking an approach to building power that has the potential to be more inclusive, impactful, and transformational. Their practices support the development of shared values among stakeholders principally by improving the quality of their interactions and making the youth that CFJ represents more connected to the educational system that is meant to serve them.

CFJ has worked hard to model for their partners and collaborators what changing the system through better relationships looks like in practice. Valerie Cuevas, director of education at California Community Foundation, has experienced this relational approach both as a supporter and funder and as a CFJ board member. “I have sat on many boards, and I have moved on because they often reflect the hierarchy that the organization is trying to dismantle,” she says. “But every CFJ effort and structure—even in the way it was birthed—speaks to the willingness of the organization to have that deep commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

CFJ’s impact is not only that they show the power of organizing and relationships. They are also able to encapsulate this as an accessible concept with principles and key practices that others can use. The work of Relationship Centered Schools takes many shapes and forms, depending on the context. Some approaches involve co-investigations by students and teachers or administrators into the hidden narratives that perpetuate disparities experienced by marginalized students. They are aimed at disrupting barriers that prevent success, examining personal identity and bias to ensure equitable allocation of resources, and cultivating a strengths-based culture in schools. Storytelling practices to shift power dynamics typically employ art or embodied breath and movement practices to engage the mind, heart, and spirit. They aim to open the space for collective healing.

CFJ’s approach to fostering relational and collective power aims to make transformation everyone’s responsibility. “When we as a system commit to serving those who have not been well served by us, we make the system stronger for everyone, so no one loses,” says Tiffany Brown, assistant superintendent for Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). “The system is not a pie, where if we give more to one, we give less to others. It is...
more like a river that needs to change course and flow depending on where opportunities and challenges are.”

Educators have found in CFJ a trusting and supportive partner who can help them dismantle systemic racism in a way that they know they cannot do alone. CFJ has helped teachers in rewiring the way they connect with students—particularly students of color. This means, for example, breaking down old stereotypes where teachers are perceived as the ones with authority and knowledge to establishing a new viewpoint that teachers are allies and catalysts of the students’ own strengths and knowledge.

**AUTHENTICITY AND BELONGING**

While the work of Relationship Centered Schools supports students in advancing their academic skills, CFJ also believes that the prevailing culture in schools often privileges traditional forms of student success over other ways of student thriving. So CFJ focuses on other ways of cultivating a more just and liberatory education system that enables students to craft their own personal narratives and attend schools that reflect their own experiences. In the words of CFJ, Relationship Centered Schools fosters “a new narrative around race and relationships that humanizes students, families, and educators so that our communities can lead together to create the schools [our] students deserve.”

For example, CFJ organizes activities with students and teachers that help them translate and clarify for each other what they must learn in order to share the burden and the rewards of transformation. This relationship building encourages values such as hope and love. “Organizing as a youth came from a place of anger,” says Jamila Rice, former CFJ capacity-building manager. “My transformation at CFJ was learning to let that go and to live off the idea that we can create our own narratives and our own reality. And that liberation is beautiful!”

Relationship Centered Schools serves not just students but parents, teachers, and administrators in the school system. They are changing how the state of California advances equity in education by teaching how youth and adults can create deeper interpersonal connections so that they can work together to achieve trust and inclusivity regardless of whether they agree or disagree.

This doesn’t mean that everything is negotiable or that every barrier can be overcome. Some values for CFJ must be essential to the work. There have been moments when CFJ has set boundaries to protect their values and identity, displaying strength and conviction even if that meant pushing relationships almost to the breaking point. In these cases, the work CFJ has done over time to build so much trust and respect with all system stakeholders has helped CFJ overcome these tensions.

For example, after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police on May 25, 2020, sparked protests nationwide, CFJ reasserted its anti-racist public stance via social media, protests, rallies, and open letters on violence done to Black and brown communities by closely aligning with Black activist organizations such as Movement for Black Lives and BYP100, helping organize in-school protests, and reinforcing their support for police-free schools. After student Manuela (Mona) Rodriguez was shot and killed by a LBUSD school safety officer on September 27, 2021, in the parking lot of Millikan High School, CFJ leaders signed a letter supporting Black Lives Matter (BLM) that also demanded the elimination of armed officers in schools. But before making the letter public, they honored the relationships they had with the school system by engaging LBUSD administrators in dialogue prior to the letter’s public release, and they expressed empathy for the tensions that the letter would put on their relationship with school leadership. Importantly, they also articulated why it was paramount for CFJ to support BLM demands such as removals of all guns in schools, additional training given to staff to deescalate difficult situations, review and reforms of all punitive punishment, and promotion of restorative practices.

Such commitment to authenticity is a core value of the organization. It emanates not only from CFJ’s community-organizing origins, but also from the way CFJ builds day-to-day relationships to support their work. For instance, no matter the formality or urgency of the occasion, they begin every single meeting with an exercise, such as simple check-in questions about how everyone is doing, aimed at promoting intimacy in conversation and strengthening the relational bonds between people, no matter their roles or positions of authority. “Admittedly, two years ago, I was like, ‘What is this? I don’t do this at any meeting I ever go to,’” says Melanie Brown, LBUSD assistant superintendent. “But now, their meetings are undeniably my very favorite because they insist on prioritizing relation-
“It is beautiful to see that moment when students and teachers finally are able to let their guard down, and they begin to trust each other and see how much they need each other to continue growing.”

ships, and this makes you want to be in relationship with them.”

CFJ’s approach to building deep, sustained authentic interactions may disappoint those who prioritize fast and revolutionary change. The paradox here is that CFJ engages in Relationship Centered Schools, a very slow and incremental approach, to change the system; and once they start training school staff on a larger scale, the challenge to maintain deep and transformative connections will increase. In living this paradox, CFJ expresses faith in slowing down the work so that it can be truly transformative.

Patience can be difficult, especially for those whose desire for change is urgent. Najla Gomez Rodriguez, capacity-building director at CFJ, explains how challenging it has been to encourage patience among youth and staff: “They come into community organizing with a lot of fire and wanting things to move at a certain speed, to fight injustice acting out of urgency because it is urgent!” However, Rodriguez recounts how once youth and staff witness changes truly taking root in schools and outlasting structural and leadership shifts, this initial reluctance begins to dissipate. But of course the truth in bringing about social change, as Rodriguez knows, is that one needs to go slow to go fast.

HEALING, LOVE, AND HOPE

In our world today, many young people, regardless of the community or country they live in, have experienced trauma by the time they reach high school. The young person may be the victim of an abusive parent or other relation, they may have been a witness to violence, or they might have been exposed to a tragic event—for example, witnessing a school shooting or a drug overdose of a friend. Youth of color often have the added burden of experiencing racism from others.

While traumatic events may have occurred in the past, they remain present in the young person’s body and spirit if there are no resources or support made available to help them heal. In underresourced communities, such as many of the communities that CFJ serves, such resources are considerably less available. To compound the problem, trauma that remains unresolved in a person due to lack of attention and care can often be passed on to a child or grandchild, becoming intergenerational trauma.

Many young people whom CFJ serves enter high school with significant unresolved trauma, spending the majority of their day in a school environment that is not well prepared to help youth heal. More specifically, educational approaches mostly don’t include a trauma-informed lens, and caring educators and teachers are often too busy or burned out to create a healing culture.

In its work, CFJ supports students and adults in adopting new narratives and behaviors that begin to help them heal from the trauma they have experienced. Central to this is empowering youth to feel safer and in more control of their own environment, as well as supporting nurturing and trusting relationships between them and adults.

“In order for us to really start to break the cycles of violence, break the cycles of trauma, we have to invest in cycles of healing, empowerment, and love,” Cardenas says. “My hope is that we continue to break cycles of trauma by surrounding young people with loving and caring adults who want to see them thrive and that they’re willing to help them heal.”

CFJ’s approach to relationship building starts and ends with love by grounding students and adults in a connection that nurtures mutual intimacy and opens possibilities for collective purpose. CFJ’s methods remind teachers as well as students that small bridging acts such as making eye contact, deliberately noting emotions, or instituting welcoming rituals like circles or journaling add up to showing how much they care for each other. In experiencing love through authentic relationships with one another and with adults, students can begin to feel hope for the future.

“It is beautiful to see that moment when both students and teachers finally are able to let their guard down, and they begin to trust each other and see how much they need each other to continue growing,” says Jasmine Ramirez, CFJ capacity-building fellow. “Those moments make you feel hope. They make you feel loved. They make you believe that everything is going to be all right.”

CFJ believes that engaging in this spirit of love, particularly with others who see things differently, requires regular investment in personal transformation and resilience. So CFJ also supports restorative work for their own people as they do for youth in schools through somatic practices like breathing exercises, meditation, and yoga; creating collective artwork to express common goals and aspirations; nurturing connection and healing experiences through music and dance; and other modalities.

“Working with people in a system who are almost like mirrors of all the oppression that takes place in our society ... we can’t throw these people away if they are treating us poorly,” Ishida says. “So we need to arm ourselves to stick with the work—the hard transformational work—every day.”

TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER

A core goal for CFJ since its inception has been to shift power toward youth. But exactly how CFJ has engaged with power in pursuit of this goal has evolved over time. As CFJ and many other organizations that are engaged with power building are learning, there is never one locus for power in a system. Power is fluid, collective, relational, and spread over many
nodes. Power need not be a transactional, zero-sum game. However, for power to be transformational, it must be centered on the whole system of relationships, rather than just parts of the system. This orientation toward power places greater attention on the quality of interactions between diverse people and on the values that ground and nurture those interactions.

At the outset, CFJ identified three conditions for achieving success with Relationship Centered Schools, according to former CFJ staff leaders Geordee Mae Corpuz and Saa’u’n Bell: “One, it would require a strategy to shift the culture of adults in the schools. Two, it would require [CFJ] as organizers to practice embodying racial justice. And three, it would require an ‘inside’ strategy to transform relationships and build critical mass within [CFJ-engaged] schools.” In its Relationship Centered Schools work, CFJ recognizes the collective, relational, and interactive quality of power and how it is exercised in a system as a whole.

CFJ has not only transformed the conditions and relationships between students and educators at the school level, but also forged relationships and expanded their influence with legislators and policy makers at district and state levels. In so doing, they have shifted power in ways both large and small.

“CFJ has really changed the culture of state board of education meetings to have the expectation that youth and family are going to be there and they are going to tell stories,” says Angelica Jongco, deputy managing attorney at Public Advocates. “I can remember the day that Skye Lowe, acting at the time as student organizer at CFJ, asked everybody in a state education meeting to close their eyes and relive their experience as a student and what it meant to have a staff member or a teacher really see them and ask how they were doing. And the difference that relationship made in their school experience. This landed with decision makers in such a different way than any of our advocacy letters using words on a page.”

A critical part of supporting a shift in perspective among those in power is working to help educational leaders understand that a different reality is possible by experiencing it for themselves. For example, CFJ has been able to persuade district and school leaders to experiment with having students lead professional development—a step that is highly unusual in most school systems. In CFJ’s experience, when school leaders participate in these student-led workshops, their perspective on the students and their potential is often transformed. Instead of merely talking about student voice and participation, these adults become eager to engage students as equal partners in shaping better schools. For example, having been a part of a student-led workshop, the school leader might more readily see how putting a student on a hiring committee would introduce a whole new perspective in assessing a candidate’s fit for the job.

Of course, moving from working against the system to working within the system can displease some people. Najla Gomez Rodriguez recounts how, when CFJ adopted a relationship-centered approach, others began to say, “That’s not organizing! You’re becoming a part of the system. Organizers do best when they fight the system.” But CFJ has shown through Relationship Centered Schools how the public education system can be transformed from the inside.

“It has been challenging for colleague organizations and even for some of CFJ’s internal staff to make that shift and get the understanding and appreciation of how much further we can get with this approach of doing it together, versus forcing others to do the thing that we want them to do,” Rodriguez says. “But I think folks are starting to see the impact and like the outcomes and so are getting more curious about our ways.”

CFJ now plays an increasingly powerful role at the state level. Just last year, the California State Board of Education selected CFJ to be part of the statewide team—along with the Alameda County Office of Education, the UCLA Center for Community Schooling, and the National Education Association—leading the implementation of the state’s multibillion-dollar commitment to the California Community Schools Partnership Program, a $3 billion initiative that prioritizes racially just, relationship-centered community-school models across the state.

CFJ’s participation confirms the value of its youth leadership and racial equity work over the years. Few people 27 years ago would have thought it possible for that small, hard-core community-mobilizing organization fighting for Black and brown youth in California to lead a large-scale state initiative to transform the state’s educational system.

SOLIDARITY, NOT CHARITY

CFJ is well positioned to continue this work well into the future. In the 10 years since Ishida became executive director, CFJ has moved from a revenue model wholly dependent on philanthropy to a model that combines grants and consulting revenue from CFJ’s relationship-centered capacity-building work in schools. Increased funding, in turn, has enabled CFJ to invest in its own internal capacity building that includes a heavy emphasis on the well-being of its employees and the youth whom CFJ engages. The organization regularly informs and educates staff on self-care strategies. It also means prioritizing time for staff to help each other through group support.

They are focused on redrafting the values and hopes for the system, reorienting minds and hearts, breaking cycles of trauma, and providing the ground for hope and liberation.
CFJ has ramped up, organization-wide, the staff’s ability to tell its story—an important dimension for supporting relational work in schools and also critical to clarifying and illustrating their work to funders. And thanks to its success over the last decade, CFJ is able to show funders a broader vision of its impact. “For me as an executive director, I always felt the pressure of needing to show results for our grants and for our work in general,” Ishida says.

But of course, systems change in the direction of equity and justice is not linear, nor is it predictable along any knowable timeline. And the way that progress is assessed requires a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play. Being able to engage with funders on broader dimensions of systems change—shifting worldviews, power dynamics, and relational influence—is a direct product of CFJ’s evolved way of working in service of Black and brown youth.

A critical dimension of effectively doing youth power-building is recognizing that the work is about process and not just outcomes. How people engage with each other is the work, not merely a means to an end. CFJ is not content with creating incremental change in schools. They are focused on redrafting the values and hopes for the system, reorienting minds and hearts, breaking cycles of trauma, and providing the ground for hope and liberation. This transformation is possible, CFJ has demonstrated, by reducing people’s fear of being seen as vulnerable in the eyes of others and disrupting the habits and inertia that prevent people from working with each other for mutual benefit and a better society. This means creating a space where people can learn to understand and embrace the fact that their individual well-being depends on the well-being of others and also realize that decisions to support others should be based on solidarity rather than on charity.

“CFJ calls for a system that reflects our hearts, souls, and minds and spiritual connection for us to see our connected humanity with equal dignity and respect,” says Valerie Cuevas of the California Community Foundation. “That is what CFJ has been at the forefront of reminding us about.”

Many of the Californians for Justice programs are led by young people, including this May 2023 fundraising event in Oakland, California.