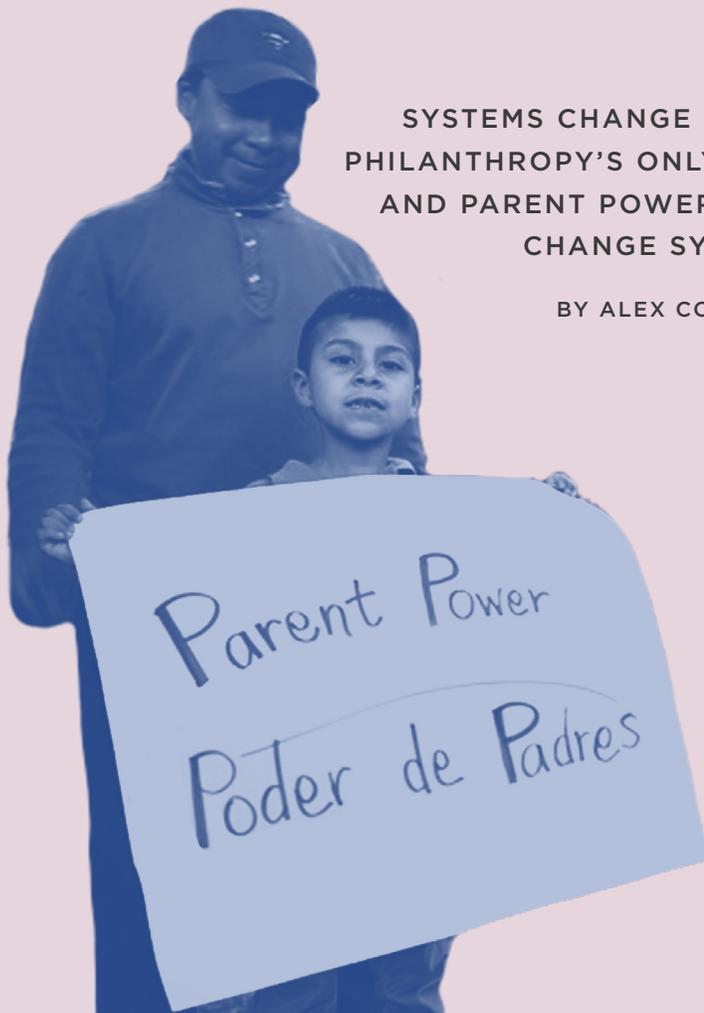# Systems Change & Parent Power

SYSTEMS CHANGE IS EDUCATION PHILANTHROPY'S ONLY EXIT STRATEGY: AND PARENT POWER IS WHAT WILL CHANGE SYSTEMS

BY ALEX CORTEZ

Parent Power

Poder de Padres

NEWPR**O**FIT

"Systems Change is Education Philanthropy's Only Exit Strategy: And Parent Power is What Will Change Systems"

– Alex Cortez, New Profit

Introduction

Philanthropy will never transform education systems until it transforms its own relationships with parents[1] and communities, and then supports them in exercising their innate power to change policies, practices and resource flows in education. This will require us conquering our own biases, acknowledging the limits of our power, and giving up control of the agenda for change. If we are willing to listen to them, parents and communities will teach us how to do this.

Philanthropy has been a potent engine of change in America. Philanthropic dollars have been crucial in catalyzing aspirations into actual innovations, and successful innovations into more scalable practices.

However, education philanthropy has often operated under a fundamentally flawed premise. Specifically, much of education philanthropy pursues a theory of change grounded in a Field of Dreams, paraphrasing the movie's iconic line, *"if you build it, they will come."*

This theory presumes that if education reformers and philanthropists are righteous in their intent about addressing inequity and they are getting promising results, then that's all it takes for others to broadly follow them into the field.

Unfortunately, this theory keeps falling short of creating systems-level change because it has two flaws:

1. First, education systems are political systems. Education systems represent a complex web of interests and power, hundreds of billions of dollars in annual spending and millions of jobs, and often competing values about the role of public education in society and democracy. Simply being righteous and achieving strong results does not create widespread change if that change requires disrupting a system's status quo of power, interests and underlying beliefs. Systems are very good at organizing to preserve their status quo.

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1. I am using 'parent' as a shorthand for any family or community member taking responsibility for the education and future of a child.

2. Second, efforts to change education systems often neglect to be representative of and responsive to the parents and communities they are trying to serve. The agendas for these efforts are often set by and reflect the value of people with privilege – often white people like me – in positions of power. In contrast, these efforts often marginalize and alienate the very communities – predominantly Black and Latinx communities – that these efforts are intended to benefit by imposing an agenda on them, essentially disenfranchising them in the same way existing underperforming education systems often do.

Education philanthropy will never create the level of change it aspires to and successfully exit (i.e. achieve change that endures past its involvement) without significantly investing in efforts that first disrupt the existing power structures in education systems and then also build an infrastructure of parent and community power in its place.

However, to succeed in overcoming flaw #1, education philanthropy must first address our own racist/classist biases towards communities – and in particular parents – in flaw #2.

Success is not about how we in philanthropy invite parents to OUR table. Rather, it is the investment and effort we need to make in order to earn trust and credibility so that parents invite us to sit at THEIR table and contribute to a locally-driven agenda for change in their community. Further, earning that trust means also acknowledging where we have done harm and broken trust with past well-intentioned efforts.

The COVID-19 crisis and the most recent public acts of systemic oppression are raising public awareness of the long-existing structural racism and inequities in not just America's education systems but also our broader social systems. The transition to distance learning is changing relationships – and power – between parents and schools and shaking old assumptions about school systems.

Education systems WILL inevitably change as a result of these crises – but how do we ensure these changes are for the better, are widespread, and are lasting? Education philanthropy can best support effective, equitable, and enduring transformation in education systems if it can shift its mental model about the role parents and communities play in driving change. Philanthropy must then support them in exercising their power to set the agenda for change, lead the change, and then remain as owners and stewards of that change long after philanthropy exits the stage.

This shift in education philanthropy begins with three steps:

> **Step A: Acknowledge and understand the two flaws inherent in a Field of Dreams as a theory of change.**

> **Step B: Cede power to parents and communities to control the agenda in driving change.**

> **Step C: Ask for, receive, and listen to the wisdom of parents who will set the 'terms and conditions' under which we earn a trusted role at their table in serving their communities and their agendas.**

This has never been more important to do. This is a scary and uncertain time. We in philanthropy want to be helpful and create impact in the face of so much systemic pain and harm. These good intentions make it really easy for us to fall back on our old philanthropic habits – our muscle memory of action. But unfortunately, our most common philanthropic habit tends to be saviorism – and often white saviorism – towards inequitably served communities of color. If we act this way, we not only will repeat our old mistakes, but because of the stakes involved, we're likely to magnify them.

Some might respond that the, *"fierce urgency of now,"* does not afford us the time and luxury of slowing down to engage with parents and communities. I would maintain that **it actually takes philanthropy relatively little time to ask communities what they value and need. It's just usually really hard for us to listen.**

Listening takes a lot of work and constant practice because it requires putting aside the presumption that our agenda is the right one for communities. It's not easy to exit this Field of Dreams – especially if you can't see you're in it. I know because I've spent a lot of time standing in it. Some days I still am.

Step A: Acknowledge and understand the two flaws inherent in a Field of Dreams as a theory of change. As noted in the introduction, much of education philanthropy and education reform has operated under a Field of Dreams as our theory of change, which has consistently fallen short of its ambitions because of **two intrinsic flaws.**

Theory of Change Flaw #1: Education systems are political systems. Right now, a passionate education philanthropist might fund the creation of two new (hopefully) high-performing schools per year. If they are lucky, the political and policy conditions might allow this to happen for a decade (and that is by no means a sure thing in many communities).

At the end of 10 years, that philanthropist will have created 20 schools serving thousands of students – hopefully very well – which is an incredible act of social benefit both for the students served and the examples these schools set.

But then what happens if that philanthropist exits? What if they switch strategies?[2] What if they reach the limits of their funds? Experience shows that it is often unlikely that the innovations embedded in those 20 high-performing schools continue to scale into more schools on their own without continued philanthropic support.

More likely, there is well-organized and well-resourced opposition to further growth of those schools within the existing system, and that opposition may even organize to weaken those first 20 schools. There can be exceptions to this across the ~13,600[3] school districts in the country, but they are just that: exceptions. Results for students that are achieved by disrupting a system's status quo of power, interests and values are often effectively prevented from reaching scale because those in control of systems are very good at acting to preserve their status quo.

Finally, even if that philanthropist does recommit to funding the creation of another 20 schools, they might find that the political and policy conditions are so effectively stacked against them that it has become impossible to grow more schools for them to fund.

It is tempting to counter this by turning to examples of education innovations that rely more on a 'consumer market' at the teacher or school level for widespread adoption – and these value-creating innovations definitely exist. But none to my knowledge have achieved significant adoption across more than a small fraction of the approximately ~98,000[4] public schools in the U.S. And again, even those types of education innovations – whether focused on curriculum, professional development, use of data/assessments, etc. – can run into opposition from the status quo that ultimately controls the vast majority of system decisions and will make those decisions not solely based on the results these innovations can point to.

This in no way discounts the importance of philanthropic support for new education innovations or in scaling existing ones. Rather, I'm arguing that this alone isn't going to achieve the scale of change that philanthropy seeks.

2. 'Strategic refreshing' in philanthropy usually happens every 3–5 years. 10 years is optimistic.
3. National Center For Education Statistics, nces.ed.gov, Table 214.10, School Year 2015/16
4. National Center For Education Statistics, nces.ed.gov, Table 216.20, School Year 2016/17

At New Profit, we have spent over 20 years funding exceptional social entrepreneurs in education, and we are on our own journey of learning how to better support systems change as philanthropists, building on the pioneering work of FSG and the Six Conditions of Systems Change[5] that hold social problems in place (see below). At the top of this inverted pyramid are structural conditions – policies, practices and resource flows.

In terms of resource flows, in 2016/17 America invested $739 billion dollars in public K-12 education[6] to serve 50.7 million students[7] in developing the knowledge and skills to succeed in life. This does not include spending on private and parochial schools, but is inclusive of charter schools (which are public schools).

Six Conditions of Systems Change

In addition, philanthropy spends an estimated $1.8 billion annually on K-12 education.[8] It's a pretty impressive number. But it's still only 0.24% of total public K-12 spending, and it won't lead to systems-level change if the vast majority of it is focused on funding the supply of education innovations and not changing mindsets nor building the relationships and power within communities to successfully demand changes in policies, practices and resource flows.

As John King, the former Secretary of Education and current President and CEO of Education Trust has observed in previous writings[9], "We are investing something like 98% of our national philanthropy in supply, and at best 2% in demand, and we're not seeing equity-focused systems change happen quickly enough."
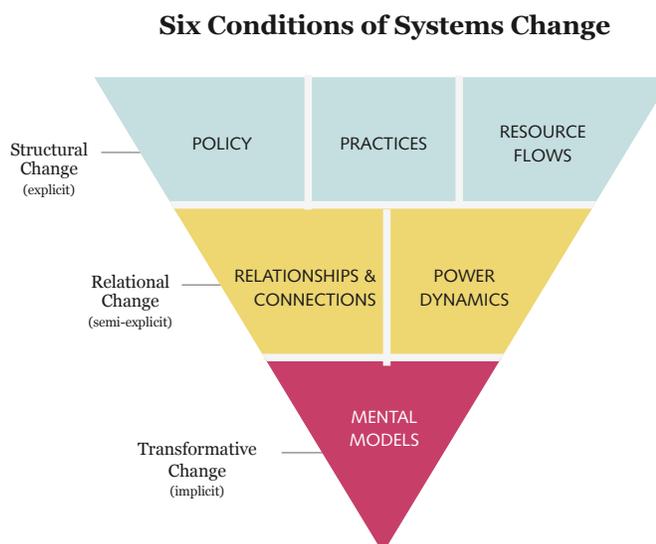
"We are investing something like 98% of our national philanthropy in supply, and at best 2% in demand, and we're not seeing equity-focused systems change happen quickly enough."
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5. FSG.org, Waters of Systems Change, John Kania, Mark Kramer, Peter Senge. June, 2018
6. National Center For Education Statistics, nces.ed.gov, Fastfacts/Expenditures, School Year 2016/17
7. National Center For Education Statistics, nces.ed.gov, The Condition of Education / Public School Enrollment, School Year 2016/17
8. 2012 Data. Bellwether Education Partners, https://thelearninglandscape.org/philanthropy-in-k-12-education/9
9. www.the74million.org, Notes From the Field: If You Want Great Schools, First Work With Parents to Create 'Actionable Demand,' May, 2017

I do not mean to imply that money alone solves education inequity, either philanthropic dollars or public funds. However, how we deploy money on school models, staffing, curriculum, services, programming, etc. – and the underlying values guiding these decisions – makes all the difference between a high-performing, equitable education system and a failing one.

Those who have power in education systems make decisions about the policies and practices that determine those resource flows. Yet very little philanthropy focuses on shifting power within education systems.[10] First, it's really complicated work. It's murky and stigmatizing and mystifying. It requires being overtly political and power oriented. Funding systems change work doesn't have the relative purity and simplicity of funding an education innovation and seeing teachers teaching and students learning. It requires 'funder fortitude' both in willingness to weather this hard work and the timeframe for doing this work. It's not a marathon nor a sprint, but more a commitment to walk 10,000 steps every day for a long time.

Philanthropy spends even less money supporting parents and communities – those most proximate to education inequity – to build and exercise their innate power to ensure their values determine policy and practice. Right now, parents are not usually welcomed *"in the room where it happens"* to drive decisions. Frequently they aren't even invited into the building.

COVID-19 only compounds this challenge as those buildings are literally closed, and yet people in positions of authority are still making momentous decisions about education. As Dawn Foye, a leader with Citizen Schools in Boston, observes: *"My mother says if you're not part of the huddle, you're not in the game. Parents are not in the game. We're on the sidelines and we want to know how to get in."*

Theory of Change Flaw #2: Efforts to change education systems often neglect to be representative of and responsive to the parents and communities they are trying to serve. Education philanthropy – and education reform more broadly – will not succeed at overcoming the political and power barriers to systems change without first recognizing that it needs to confront and address its own biases (implicit and explicit) around parents and communities.

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10. While political giving or formally indorsing a candidate or piece of legislation are outside the realm of 501(c)3 work, there is still a significant amount nonprofits and philanthropies can do within the structure of a 501(c)3. Further, nonprofits and philanthropies CAN choose to run and/or fund 501(c)4 organizations.

Or to be more blunt: **much of education reform manifests as well-intentioned white outside missionary work.** Communities of color will caveat that you don't have to be white to be a well-intentioned outside missionary, but then they will also remind us that many education reformers are.

Education initiatives often dismiss parents, assuming that if parents were part of the solution, they would have already solved the problem. Education initiatives often also exclude parents because they assume parents lack educational expertise relative to philanthropists and practitioners.

Yet the simple reality is that parents have mountains of expertise because they, more than anyone else, know their community. They ARE the community. We aren't.

Parents know the ample assets inherent in their community, and they also know the challenges faced by their communities (they also neither need us to remind them of those challenges nor need us to define them based on those challenges). Parents have the lived experience of where prior education efforts have made progress, stalled, and/or failed. Parents know better than anyone the context in which they live and educate their children.

Most importantly, parents know their children better than anyone. They know their dreams, their fears, their strengths, and their needs.

Education reforms that exclude parents are not only trying to solve a puzzle without seeing all the pieces; they are also excluding the very people who should be defining the picture on the puzzle.

Matt Hammer, Founder and CEO of <u>Innovate Public Schools</u>, has long called out: *"We have this uncompromising belief in the infinite capacity of every child to learn, grow, create, be brilliant and lead. We must have the same belief in their parents."*

The question education philanthropists and also their education grantees should ask themselves, before thinking about any perceived education problem or proposed education solution, is: *"What role do we think parents and communities play in driving change?"*

Most organizations don't ask this question – which is itself an answer.

When organizations do try to deliberately answer the question, it frequently makes uncomfortably explicit their strongly held beliefs – usually lingering just below the surface – about inequitably served communities or communities of color that reflect biases about race and class that underpin the education sector's struggles around equity, diversity and inclusion.

No matter how hard it is to do, every organization should ask this question and wrestle with its answer – especially if the answer does not include parents as at least equal partners, and ideally the leading partners, in setting the agenda and driving change.

We should approach our work from the old organizing proverb: "*Nothing about us, without us, is for us,*" and be a support – not an obstacle – to parents and communities exercising their power. This requires us to wrestle not just with our biases, but with our relationship towards power.

Step B: Cede power to parents and communities to control the agenda in driving change.

I define power as, *"the ability to decide an agenda and make action happen to advance that agenda."*

Education philanthropists and practitioners get very nervous about what it means for parents and communities to truly exercise their power. Does this mean that these philanthropists and practitioners need to give up power? Or share power? Or transfer power?

For a long time, I tried to contort my way around this question. It can't be about us giving up power because we need every erg of power that we can muster to overcome immense social challenges! Also, surely I was only using my power for good and therefore should maximize it? And who wants to give up the self-validation and personal identity that comes with having power?

But I was kidding myself.

The answer is YES – we as education philanthropists and reformers will need to step back and relinquish some of our power. But ceding some of our power doesn't mean we are then powerless and passive. As one organizing leader counsels, *"you need to step back but you still need to step up."*

Power does not have to be a fixed pie – and in fact it becomes a real impediment to social change when we think of power as a zero-sum game. When we as education philanthropists and practitioners cede some power and invest in parent/community power, I believe we will ultimately see a net increase in power. Then we have an opportunity to combine our collective power to drive systemic change.

"We as philanthropists or education reformers will need to step back and relinquish some of our power. But ceding some of our power doesn't mean we are then powerless and passive. However we will definitely need to give up exercising our power to control the agenda."

However, we will DEFINITELY need to give up exercising our power to control the agenda.

This is perhaps the most important thing we as philanthropists can do, because when we exercise our power to set an agenda, what we are really doing is imposing our agenda on others – and **imposing an agenda is a form of oppression.**

Giving up control over setting an agenda is not easy.

It is not uncommon in education reform to hear the refrain, *"we need parents to exercise their power on education to achieve 'X'!"* (X being the agenda that the speaker has set). However, if we truly believe that systems change will only happen when parents exercise their power, then we need to trust that they will exercise their power to define and drive the agenda that reflects what they value for their families and their community.

This does not mean that as education reformers we have to abdicate having an agenda. It is completely legitimate for us to also have an agenda grounded in our values about what great learning and education systems look like. But if we are sincere about parents being agents of change in their communities, then we can't just assume our agenda is their agenda – and that's what we frequently do.

As well-intentioned outsiders with resources who care about education, we usually do not even ask what a community's agenda is and what they value. We decide what their agenda is based on our values.

This idea of giving up control of the agenda can make some uncomfortable. But it's worth reflecting: How does it feel any different to the communities we are committed to serving when they feel excluded from setting the agenda? **No successful, enduring relationship is one-sided – but right now, plenty of education reform still is.**

Maya Martin Cadogan, Founder and Executive Director of DC-based Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE), has long counselled me that, *"if education funders can just relax and let go of controlling the agenda, they'll find that what parents and communities want often aligns with what they want in creating educational equity over the long-term; and parents and communities often have the most innovative solutions for how to get there."*

But what if what parents and communities want is different from the agenda philanthropists have for them? That should be a pretty big warning sign for us about our agenda! At the very least, it means we've failed to understand a community's agenda and failed in our advocacy to them. At worst, it means we're inflicting our values on the people we say we want to serve.

It also doesn't matter if what we want and what parents/communities want happens to be the same thing if we are imposing that agenda on them without first getting their agreement that this is an agenda that they want our support on. The pace and priorities of a change agenda have to be parent/community led and philanthropically followed.

Stepping back from exercising our control over the agenda also means stepping back from controlling what we measure. This is not meant to diminish the importance of measurement. Rather this is about shifting who gets to decide what gets measured as the basis for defining and assessing the success of change.

As the author and Mexican political leader Laura Esquivel wrote, *"whoever controls information, whoever controls meaning, acquires power."* Measurement is an act of power. We measure what we value, and so what we measure reflects our values. If we are imposing measures of success on communities, we are essentially also then imposing our values and agenda on them.

Communities have been burned and harmed by the ways that measurement has been weaponized in past education reform efforts without their involvement.

As part of ceding control of the agenda, education philanthropy also has to cede control over how progress and success is measured. Again, this is not abandoning the importance of rigorous measurement. It simply acknowledges that parents and communities should be integral in defining what is measured to assess the success of efforts in their community – and also how those measures are then used.

Last, if we want to truly honor a community's power in defining their agenda, then we in education have to be willing to respond to the agendas set by communities on issues adjacent to our convenient philanthropic definition of an 'education system.'

In education reform, we have the privilege of creating our own siloed definition of systems – school systems. But that is not how communities experience systems. They experience an ecosystem of multiple – and often failing and oppressive – systems that overlap and impact each other.

If we want to be in service of social justice, then we also have to be responsive to that reality and respond to a community's agenda outside of just our narrow definition of education – be it safety, food security, housing, healthcare, immigration rights and protections, economic opportunity, and/or taking on systemic racism and oppression in our social policies and civic structures.

COVID-19 has never made it clearer how these systems have to work in concert (including to enable effective education), and what it looks like when they so often fail to work at all. It is convenient for us to want to simplify, but in as the words of Lauryn Hill, sometimes *"everything is everything."* Parents will always care about education – but it isn't the only thing they care about for the survival and health of their community, so it can't be the only thing we care about, even if that complicates our work.

As I noted in the beginning of this essay, the journey for philanthropy is not about how we invite parents to our table. Rather, it is the work we need to do to build trusted, credible relationships so that parents and communities invite us to sit at THEIR table and contribute to their agenda for change in their community.

How do we do that? We start, as always, by listening to them.

Step C: Ask for, receive, and listen to the wisdom of parents who will set the 'terms and conditions' under which we earn a trusted role at their table in serving their communities and their agenda.

So, what do we – well-intentioned outsiders with resources who care about education – need to do to earn a trusted, credible seat at a community's table?

In late 2019 and early 2020, I had the fortune to listen to and learn from local parent leaders in Washington, DC and San Francisco, San Jose, and Redwood City, California. Even pre-COVID-19, there had been growing excitement in education philanthropy about whole-child and social-emotional programming. I was worried that those of us funding this work were at risk of replicating the Field of Dreams as theory of change cycle again. Several other funders shared that concern and ask, *"how do we approach this differently?"* The answer to this started by asking parents in the communities we hoped to serve for their wisdom and guidance.

These amazing parent leaders, actively fighting for their community, shared their experiences with education reform, their perspectives on whole-child programming, and – for the purposes of this essay – their answers to the question, *"what are the 'terms and conditions' well-intentioned outsiders with resources need to be willing to abide by to earn a trusted role at your table?"*

These are the key lessons – and in some cases the hard lessons – these parents blessed us with:

1. This all starts with building trusted relationships. We need to be willing to invest our time, energy, and effort to build relationships with communities. **Building relationships can't be seen as a cost of doing business in supporting systems change – this IS the business.**

Our starting point is digging out of some big holes. The communities we seek to serve have a multi-generational history of being disenfranchised, marginalized, lied to, and let down. Recent decades of education reform efforts have sometimes felt like laps around the same track. It's important we understand that this is how outsiders are likely viewed.

Therefore, the burden is on us to build credibility. And we need to keep in mind that, as one parent cautioned, *"we [the community] don't owe you anything."*

As mentioned earlier, we will never be invited into a community as a credible partner if we come imposing an agenda (even if it is similar to a community's agenda). Community organizing teaches that the first step in building credible relationships is putting aside an agenda and listening in order to learn.

Truly listening will require hearing some hard truths. As one parent leader said of so many well-intentioned outside efforts:

> *"You don't know who we are;*
> *You don't understand our history;*
> *You don't understand what's important to us;*
> *You don't understand what makes us different;*
> *You don't ask us what we want;*
> *So why should we trust you?"*

As another parent advised, *"be prepared to learn and not teach."*

Another parent added, *"realize that you are a guest."*

Yet another parent directed, *"check your privilege at the door."*

Ultimately, as one parent counseled, "You can't really partner with someone who you don't see as equal partners."

Building relationships requires being vulnerable and sharing our personal *'why'* – why are we here, why are we doing this work, and why does this community matter to us? I found that in my initial discussions I wanted to share who I was and what I wanted to do…. but that alone doesn't build trust. What began to build trust was when I shared why I was coming to their table and my motivations for this work.

Be prepared to acknowledge pain and life circumstances, but do NOT make it about our own life circumstances or try to draw equivalencies. This is not about us. Most of us have not walked a mile in the shoes of the communities we serve. However, if we invest in building trusted relationships, they might invite us to follow in their footsteps and even walk beside them.

This is also about changing our mindsets about communities before we can ask them to change their mindsets about us. As parents observed, well-intentioned outsiders:

- Continually insult communities by describing them based on what outsiders view as their deficits and not describing communities based on their assets.

- Need to understand that any community they seek to serve has, *"a sense of pride in itself and home."*

- Must learn what a community *"loves about itself,"* before they can be of service.

I think we need to go further and not just understand those parts of a community that it loves about itself – we have to invest the time to be in a community and understand a community so that we come to love those things ourselves.

And it takes time. As one parent requested, *"take the time to know me and my family."*

But parents will respond to sincerity. One parent promised the following: *"give me honesty, commitment and best interest – give me these and I can meet you on everything else."*

It is only with this investment of ourselves, and this humility, that we can hope to earn a seat at a community's table to be a part of supporting their education agenda.

2. Share what we know, acknowledge what we need to learn from parents, and use our information to be accountable to communities. As one parent reminded me, *"Nobody knows our children better than we do... but if there are some things you know about education that we should know it's on you to tell us."* Parents are hungry for information, and most education systems fail to provide clear, timely, and actionable information on their children, school, and school system. As one parent asked, *"show us the truth, even if it is hard."* It is incumbent on us to share what we know with parents – and it is also incumbent for us to ASK THEM what they want to know.

When we share information with parents, they will then reciprocate. And parents know many things that we can't know without them because they are the ultimate experts on their communities, their families and their children. Further, while parents value quantitative information, **parents also want outsiders to recognize that parent/community stories are powerful, stories matter, and stories are ultimately also a form of critical information.**

Parents counselled that just as grantees – be it school districts or nonprofits – have to report their results to their philanthropic funders, those funders should also require that grantees report their results publicly to the communities they serve as a condition of funding. Parents also advocated that **philanthropy should directly report the results of its funding to communities in order to be accountable to them.**

3. Remove any and every barrier to building parent participation in education reform efforts with philanthropists, with grantees, and with people in positions of formal authority in education systems. Parents know what feeling welcome and valued looks like, though more often they experience what feeling unwelcome and unvalued looks like. It manifests in where an event is held, when it is held, and when (or if) they are notified.

Doing this work successfully means acknowledging and respecting the existing commitments and constraints on parents – and then addressing them. It means: (a) having events in places accessible to parents – knowing this may require multiple events to be inclusive of parents in

different places; (b) having events at times accessible to working parents – knowing this also may require multiple events to be inclusive of when parents are available; (c) holding events near public transportation and providing free parking; (d) providing child care; (e) providing food (sourced from local community vendors); (f) hiring translators or organizing multiple meetings to be multilingual; and (g) where there is a significant ask of parents, compensating them for their time and wisdom.

4. Support parents and communities in building their own infrastructure of power so that they can drive education policies, practices and resource flows in their community.

We need to support parents in taking on positions of [formal authority](#)[11] in setting agendas and leading initiatives in their communities. Representation matters. Leadership matters. Being in the room where it happens matters – and ideally being seated at the head of the table.

As one parent requested, *"Invest in us so we can lead."*

This also means funding parent organizing groups who have earned the trust of and credibility with parents and communities, and can serve as a bridge for well-intentioned outsiders with resources in learning what a parent-led education agenda is and how we can earn a role as allies in supporting it.

Parents in all of these discussions reported the trust they have in their community organizers, and the way their involvement as parents with these organizations has enabled them to grow their power as individuals, as a community, and as leaders of their community.

Conclusion

This is a lot (also, thank you for reading to this point).

In principle, it feels like a straightforward premise: to transform education systems, we have to be willing to shift our mindsets about parents and communities. Yet in practice, shifting mindsets can be difficult. It requires reflecting on where we've gone wrong in the past and why. It requires interrogating our own biases. Only once we understand how we build relationships with and support parents and communities in building their own infrastructure of power can we then hope to see systemic changes in policies, practices and resource flows to create the effective, equitable education systems we dream of.

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11. [www.the74million.org](#), 'In the Room Where It Happens' — Parents Assuming Formal Authority to Drive Change, May, 2019

It's hard, necessary work – or perhaps I should say it's, *"hard, necessary working,"* as we have to continually keep at it in our service to communities.

In addition, every time we want to serve a new community and build relationships with them, we can't rely solely on the list above. We still must begin by asking any new community the question about their terms and conditions and then receive and listen to the wisdom and guidance that is specific to them.

If we can receive it, it is a gift from them to us. It's an opportunity for us to achieve the transformation we want because the transformation we want is defined by the transformation communities want.

The good news is that when philanthropy successfully acts in service of helping parents and communities build their [infrastructure of power](#)[12] – which then shapes policies, practices and resource flows – it can lead to a [significant educational Return on Investment](#)[13] (and ultimately an economic ROI).

At New Profit we are trying to push ourselves further by enlisting a set of parents for the first time to have a formal, compensated role in selecting our next round of education grantees. We approach this with excitement and trepidation. We know this is a starting point but not an ending point as we grow better at inclusive impact, wrestle with giving up our habits of power even as we honor our mission, and ultimately explore how we grow more radically disruptive in democratizing our philanthropic work with the communities we aspire to serve. We know that we can't succeed in this vision and also preserve our historic control.

If education philanthropy continues to ignore the power and agency of the parents and communities that we say we want to serve, we will fall short of our ambitions. We will perpetuate underperforming and inequitable systems and continue to find ourselves with no exit or off-ramp. We will plant another Field of Dreams, but we will not harvest a new reality.

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12. www.the74million.org, An Infrastructure of Parent Power — The Magnificent 7, May 201f
13. www.the74million.org, Case Study: An 'Education Return on Investment' in Funding Parent Power (or When Spending $1 Drives $44 in Proficiency), December 2017

Or we can shift our mindsets and redefine the purpose of philanthropy. We can decide that philanthropy is not about how we deploy resources to advance our vision and values for change. Rather, we can decide to create a philanthropic sector whose purpose is to deploy resources in service of a community's vision and values for change, a sector that supports communities as agents of their own change, and a sector that recognizes that a community's power will be what sustains change for the long run.

We can continue to invest in the Field of Dreams, or we can change who the most valuable players are on the field.

I WELCOME YOUR THOUGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES.

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