Our Movement Building Approach to Ending the School to Prison Pipeline

History tells us that social justice movements that stand the test of time for more than a prolonged moment all have one thing in common: they are not caused by just a spark, there is always a vanguard -- however, known or visible -- of critical strategists and practitioners of building bottom-up people power who have predicted the spark before broader society sees it. There might emerge an anointed spokesperson or two, but they owe their platform to what was built over time through persistent trial and error and labors of love in political resistance and organizing, in community with those most impacted by injustice.

Once the spark is recognized, there is often already a plan in place to educate, mobilize, and agitate the status quo to struggle towards a co-created alternative vision that addresses the injustice. This has nothing to do with who’s in charge or who “started” a movement, because the spark is often grassroots community level prediction coming true, after years of observing, organizing against, learning, and making sense of the forces of oppression and injustice that structure our current society. And there are always more people behind the work than the spokespeople.

The seeds of the school to prison pipeline, as well as the strategies to disrupt and dismantle it, were sowed decades ago, long before any of this work became palatable for nonprofits and their funders. Constructing a world where the school to prison pipeline does not exist will require a decades-long political vision that courageously and consistently pushes the boundaries of our current debates and menus of palatable solutions. All of us who have inherited this intergenerational work, especially in the form of opportunities to leverage nonprofit organizational capacity to organize grassroots people power, are in turn obligated to work towards a radical North Star — one that guides our work to repair the historical harms of genocide, slavery, and colonization, to ensure that we do not repeat past harms.

What we are - A statewide coalition reflective of the pushout and concentration of the most impacted families and the disparities that follow them
We are intentionally building solidarity between California’s progressive-leaning and conservative regions, seeking to address the disparities in movement building resources available to address the school to prison pipeline between the Bay Area and Los Angeles County on one hand, and the Inland Valley, Central Valley, and Central Coast regions on the other. For years and many reasons, black, indigenous, brown, and LGBTQ families have voluntarily or involuntarily migrated and settled between these regions. Race and gender-based disparities and injustices rooted in anti-indigenous anti-Blackness and/or transphobia often follow them wherever they go, and can even be more entrenched in our semi-urban and rural regions in which there is a dearth of social justice organizing. California must not rest on its laurels based on the Bay Area or LA - the school to prison pipeline is dehumanizing communities across the state and must be addressed as a statewide system.

Why we are - Ending the school to prison pipeline requires political vision beyond campaigns
We firmly believe that our eyes must be on the prize of not just disrupting the school to prison pipeline by merely replicating policy campaigns that reduce suspensions and bring about programmatic supports, but on dismantling the forces, systems, policies, and practices that uphold our society’s default response to poverty, non-whiteness, and gender nonconformity: criminalize, punish, suppress, detain, incarcerate, and permanently exclude from participating in society. We must align our social systems to a set of liberatory values and principles. Nothing short of transforming schools, transforming society.
Who we are - Visionary movement strategists borne from grassroots organizing
It matters who is leading the work. Who is leading, from where, and with whom can literally mean the difference between repeating past harms and being transformative. We have honed our strategy from decades of community organizing, through real-life stories, collective analysis, shared vision, intergenerational ownership of the work, and mutual accountability. This genesis of experience makes us fundamentally distinct from coalition strategy derived from research review, lack of proximity to injustice, and bottom-lines that preserve the top-down nature of most solutions which often lack any accountability to impacted families.

What we do - We convene ourselves to co-create local and statewide strategy that repositions parents, students, families, and communities as movement leaders
We unapologetically assert that this work requires study, critical reflection, self-critique, humility, and above all accountability to the most marginalized so that strategies do not repeat past harms and mistakes caused by well-intentioned yet elitist changemaking designed far away from the communities most impacted. This fundamentally requires an understanding of the underlying forces upholding the school to prison pipeline in order to put data into a well-informed context for strategy and action. The capacity we build goes well beyond technical assistance - it is capacity to lead, challenge, and design radical solutions from and on the ground. Statewide is local, and local is statewide.

Where we act - Public schools embody and hold both our histories of oppression and our most radical political possibilities
It is widely understood that public schools and the political systems that manage them are critical spaces and hallowed ground upon which to fight for racial and social justice. What is less understood are the historical contradictions inherent in our current system of public education that can often undermine whatever progress we feel we are making towards educational equity or the more elusive vision of educational justice.

Our value - We step into the gap between short-term campaigns and transformative systemic change
We are confident that the contradictions and limitations of our current debates and solutions to the school to prison pipeline will become painfully evident in a matter of years - it is a common cycle when addressing disparities rooted in anti-indigeneity, anti-Blackness, and/or transphobia. For this reason, we at DSC CA deliberately choose to pick up the mantle and responsibility of not settling for campaign victories, but instead using them to propel our movement forward to the next high ground, in persistent pursuit of long-term, permanent change that is not dependent on personalities and temporary goodwill of institutional or elected leaders. In short, the practices we are developing now as DSC CA are what many will be seeking to utilize a few years from now. As strategists behind campaigns to eliminate school pushout and police from schools that were waged well before public debate and narratives caught up to speed, we have lived this pattern. This is not about competition for credit. We are harnessing this predictable pattern by fearlessly looking, planning, and strategizing ahead of the curve.