



## ***Lessons in Building a Cross-Racial & Intergenerational Advocacy Movement to Advance Equity in Educational Access and Outcomes***

**OneAmerica** is the largest immigrant and refugee advocacy organization in Washington State. Founded directly after the 9/11 attacks to stand up to the backlash facing immigrant communities, our mission has evolved to working across diverse communities in our state, leading with the power of community voice to advance immigrant rights, educational equity, economic and environmental justice, voting rights, and immigrant integration. **We believe that building broad-based movements led by people of color and our allies – grounded in grassroots community organizing – will create a more just, democratic, healthful, and compassionate society.** Our overarching goal is to build the collective power of our grassroots leaders to set the agenda at different levels of government and institutions, and to gain the political power and social capital to drive decision making. Instead of fighting for a seat at the table, we want to set the table and fill it with our community leaders.

Below, we provide an analysis of our process in the implementation of an organizing effort to build the advocacy power of communities of color within South King County and launch campaigns focused on closing the educational opportunity gap. The explicit goal of this effort was to strengthen collective education advocacy power across Native American, African American, and immigrant and refugee communities in this region.

### **OVERVIEW OF OUR PROCESS**

In the summer of 2016, OneAmerica convened families and youth from immigrant and refugee, African American and Native American communities together to co-develop an advocacy agency centered on the issues identified directly by communities of color. Historically, education priorities have been set by people in power and not by those directly impacted by inequities. We believe this is a root cause of educational disparities. The group of leaders we convened, called the Grassroots Steering Committee, proudly claimed that for children to succeed, thrive and grow there can be "nothing about us without us." Over the course of three months the Grassroots Steering Committee engaged in a series of meetings which resulted in agreeing on a set of the most pressing issues in the education system. The agenda included: shifting discipline practices and policies, and promoting culturally relevant curriculum, bilingual classrooms and increasing teacher diversity. The priorities were then converted into local and state campaigns that the community now leads and drives collectively.

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*"We know those closest to the problem are also closest to the solution. That's why there should be nothing about us, without us. For too long we've been left out of decision making, but we're changing that through grassroots organizing to build our power!"*

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### **CONTEXT & STRATEGIC DESIGN: HOW WE APPROACH AND HAVE SUCCESS IN THIS WORK**

**Educational attainment is a key social determinant of health**, and family and parental advocacy in education is a critical component of OneAmerica's education strategy to advance educational equity. This work begins with a recognition that those who are furthest from opportunity do not have representative power within education decision-making systems. OneAmerica's mission is centered on dismantling these traditional power structures and giving that power back to our communities through leadership development, civic engagement and collective advocacy.



As institutional racism has often sought to pit communities of color against one another, **we began this work with a deep commitment to cross-racial organizing**, with an emphasis on building a pipeline of grassroots leaders poised to drive systemic change and break down barriers that for too long have existed between our communities. We centered this because we fundamentally believe that unless we heal the divides that have intentionally been created between our communities we cannot work towards justice. In addition, our work within immigrant communities, particularly more recent immigrant groups, has taught us the **power and effectiveness of inter-generational approaches to advocacy** which strengthen families, schools, and systems. This cross-racial and intergenerational organizing approach is intended to:

- shift power to coalitions of communities of color in pursuit of advancing equity;
- break down divisions that actively decrease power within and across these communities; and
- provide access to networks and individuals with power to influence change.

Below, we share more about how we engage, convene, and strengthen relationships with this work, our approach to co-designing these efforts, and how we acknowledge and respond to the ways that individuals and groups hold and use power.

### **RELATIONSHIPS FIRST — PROCESS BEFORE PRODUCT**

We believe all effective advocacy and organizing work is built on trust, which is formed through authentic relationships. OneAmerica has strong grassroots networks of immigrant and refugee community members who are engaged in our work, but we do not bring the same legitimacy in working with Native American and African American communities. We began by identifying existing leaders within these communities and **hired individual consultants who were known as bridgebuilders and deeply respected members of the community, with the sole purpose of strengthening relationships**. Building upon these relationships, we moved forward with our approach to organizing:

1. Build deep, authentic relationships and invest in 1:1 conversations to understand how an individual's personal story intersects with our movement for change.
2. Continue to listen for the self-interest of these community members, and how this self-interest changes over time or in different contexts.
3. Consistently follow up and invite community members to build advocacy muscle and power together by actively working toward an outcome that is aligned with our communities' overlapping self-interests.
4. Build the capacity of community members to invite others to join them in building power.

In our outreach and ongoing communication, **we emphasized a desire to lead with inquiry and curiosity – not a proposed solution**. Our communities do not just influence and drive change, they are co-governing with us.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOGNIZING POWER**

Ultimately, we are accountable to our communities and their ability to build power. Often, the nature of our relationships with funders and accountability to grant outcomes can create tension in our ability to strengthen long-term relationships. We address this tension in the following ways:



1. **Offer transparency to communities** about where we have received funding, the goals of the funder, and what opportunity led us to be willing to accept the funding. We build trust by being able to frame our work as: “There are institutions with power and money that are making important decisions that impact our communities. This is our opportunity to help share in that power and help shape that work.”
2. **Hold our funders accountable to our commitment to shared leadership**, ensuring that we are equipped to lead authentic relationship-building in a way where our partners can trust that we are not agents of a funder’s large agenda. This often involves some challenging conversations about the “outcomes” of our grant work. We know that funder priorities shift and change often, but our approach to power building is rooted in long-term relationships.

Many of our leaders were critical of the source of our funding for this work. These leaders rightfully understood that money is power – and in a collective effort, whoever has proximity to power has the upper hand. **We committed to remain open to a different process** if that is what community leaders desired. We acknowledged and validated their concerns. We owned our proximity to power. And we kept engaging.

A critical, albeit exhausting, element of this work is a **constant analysis of how power is playing out in every setting**. Building collective power means recognizing who in the room has not yet been heard and ensuring that they are invited in. We understand that while traditional power structures access power through money and systems, we have power through the collective stories of our communities. Every point of pain that is shared by our members – those are tiny units of power. When those units come together, we build broad movements of power. We support the transformation of our communities’ pain and hardship into power and influence, and this institutional power is the only way we are able to stand up to power structures within dominant culture.



**Example:** During this past legislative session, we gathered over a hundred of our members at the capital for our annual lobby day as we were on the cusp of passing the Washington State Voting Rights Act. We invited the Governor to speak to our members, but then struggled with the logistics of adhering to his schedule and walking our members to his office. We realized that we were operating under an assumption that we needed the validation of the Governor, instead of recognizing

what he had to gain in associating with our work. Instead, we selected a time that worked for us, and invited the Governor to travel to us. This small decision was a pivotal experience in understanding the power that our members hold and our unique position in yielding power in the organization of people.

## **DESIGN FOR RACIAL EQUITY**

Building upon the primacy of relationships and our commitment to analyzing power, we also committed to approaching this work from a “design thinking” perspective. We know that communities of color are adversely impacted by systems that were intentionally designed to benefit dominant white culture. Undoing racism means not only dismantling systems that promote racism, but also rebuilding systems and structures that promote equity. We are grateful for the support and partnership of EquityMatters, a Seattle-based equity consulting firm that has established a series of norms that we often apply, entitled “Color Brave Space.” One of



the suggested norms reads: “Individual actions are important, and systems are what is left after all the people in this room leave.”

**Cross-racial organizing requires careful design** to balance the needs of communities to first have time to heal within their communities, and then establish connection across communities. The first step in racial equity design-thinking is to build empathy and understanding across communities, but even this initial step can be re-traumatizing and expose the way that racism has sought to pit marginalized communities against each other. Another key element of designing for racial equity is in the stages of ideation and testing solutions. We believe effective leadership development recognizes the capacity and strengths of every community member. Ultimately this requires letting go of control of the outcomes and trusting the expertise and efficacy of those who were at the table to shape the process.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY AND ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP**

In our approach to building power within communities, we are often challenged with **how to share power in authentic ways, without abdicating our responsibility in the work**. This is admittedly, a difficult tightrope to sometimes walk. We communicate to our partners, and internally to our team, that **we own responsibility for the experience and for keeping trust** in our relationships with communities. This does not mean that we need to control the process or the solutions, but we are required to adapt the process as we get feedback. We have a responsibility to act as a bridgebuilder – to hear people, and then translate their experiences within the systems we touch.

**This work requires a constant posture of adaptive leadership.** We bring participants into the planning process from day one. We ask questions and we listen for self-interest. We begin with an initial process design and ask, “This is what we think we heard. How does this sit with you?” We clarify, refine, and unpack our process, and strive to remain flexible in our approach. We resist our attachment to a particular end product.

**Example:** As we began our planning, we invited a handful of participants into the process early. Building on the enthusiasm of this group, we pre-planned the agenda for all four meetings, as well as a final product of an advocacy agenda and a series of racial equity principles. During our first meeting we heard clear pushback and frustration from participants, who shared: “It seems like you just want us to agree to what you want to create.” In response to this, we abandoned our original design and allowed the process to be built by our participant leaders. This included integrating indigenous practices, multiple forms of caucusing, and ensuring that youth were given greater autonomy in facilitating discussion with adults.



### **RECOGNIZE AND WORK TO REDUCE BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT**

We know, from experience in grassroots advocacy, and from the direct feedback of participants, that there are a handful of key supports we can offer that significantly decrease barriers for participation and engagement. Specifically, these include:





- On-site **childcare** in an age-appropriate space, with culturally competent caregivers and a well-planned and related activity (if possible) for children/youth.
- Providing **diverse and abundant food options** that accommodate for cultural and religious preferences and requirements. We strive to live our values in selecting restaurants or caterers who are immigrant-or-POC-owned businesses.
- **Direct financial support for transportation**, parking, and related travel costs. We had success when we offered this in the form of cash stipends based on a transparent agreement around participation.
- Providing both **written translation** for paper and electronic materials in every language represented, and access to **live interpretation**.
- **Use of spaces that are already familiar to some participants**, and that they may view as their “turf.” We find that the more we ask groups to “come to us” the less successful we are in broadening our engagement, and the less comfortable participants feel.
- The use of **expert facilitators** with the ability to facilitate conversations that create spaces where identity groups can engage in community-specific issues and come together around shared experiences.
- **Clearly articulated agreements with participants** that spell out goals, responsibilities, and expectations for their engagement.

#### **COMMITMENT TO CONTINUALLY EXAMINE OUR OWN BIAS**

As an immigrant rights organization, we are often in spaces with funders or service providers where we are seen as the “experts” in how to address issues around equity. This dynamic has the risk of unintentionally releasing us from our responsibilities in naming and recognizing our bias, both internally and externally. We must continually challenge ourselves individually, and as a staff, to examine how we uphold dominant power structures in our work. Our work in communities also propels us to do work internally on racial equity and ensure those with the least access to power have a say in decision-making within the structure of OneAmerica.

#### **CHALLENGES, OBSTACLES, AND MISTEPS**

##### **CHALLENGES & OBSTACLES**

1. **Building and identifying norms that don’t center white identity.** Multi-racial and multi-ethnic community gatherings without the presence of members of dominant culture are extremely rare. People of color need time and space to heal the rifts that have intentionality been established to keep our struggles and movements separated. This healing is often painful because people of color have very limited space in which white power structures are not the dominant force. We must learn how to be with one another, recognize that we have more in common than what separates us, and then have honest conversations about where we have felt hurt or abandoned by other communities. It’s only through this process that we can then turn our attention to how we build solidarity among our communities and movements.
2. **Need for balance and space for communities to lead their own healing before, and in addition to, working cross-racially.** Different participants had different levels of comfort and experience unpacking their own experiences of trauma and privilege and were therefore varied in their comfort with pursuing solidarity with other communities.
3. **Finding a common language to discuss race, ethnicity, racism and oppression continues to be difficult.** Community leaders have different ways of understanding and speaking about race, ethnicity, racism and oppression, and this can create confusion and challenges when working together.



- 4. Identifying how to embed meaningful evaluation practices that support strengthened relationships.** The very act of “measuring” is a factor in the power dynamics in the room, as it establishes the concept of participants being “subjects” of an inquiry, which has roots in the historic and current posture of a culture led by white supremacy. We strive to weave meaningful opportunities for feedback into the refinement of our approach, with the understanding that evaluation is a form of continuous learning.
- 5. A tendency of communities of color to “opt into whiteness” to gain power and develop trust when organizing together.** To combat this tendency, we partner with reputable equity consultants to establish a strong understanding of reinforced racial hierarchies, and the tendency of many multi-cultural organizing efforts to exclude Black communities.

**The constant challenge of legitimacy.** As the anchor organization for this work, we had to hold the trauma and mistrust of the community who, for very good reasons, had suspicion of our motives and were concerned about how we (or our funders) might speak for them. This dynamic is prevalent among many of our partners and is a constant challenge to navigate.

#### MISSTEPS IN OUR APPROACH

While we had many missteps in our approach, we have addressed most in the text above. As a summary we would highlight:

1. Our tendency to sometimes prioritize the **outcomes we’d like to see over the long-term strength of our relationships.**
2. **Unintentionally leading with dominant-culture meeting approaches** that made some participants feel disconnected or unwelcome.
3. **Rushing in our assumption of the credibility that certain leaders held** within larger communities, particularly those for which we are outsiders. Traditional dominant culture emphasizes the desire for quick and easy solutions, and to assume that individuals hold identity for an entire community. Cross-racial work requires thoughtful and careful vetting of partners before diving into the work.

#### WHAT GIVES US HOPE

We are inspired and energized by the outcomes of this work: Parents and youth of color coming together from different backgrounds and building relationships with communities with whom they may not normally interact. These relationships are key to establishing empathy that will build solidarity in the framework of undoing institutional racism.

The youth, in particular, give us a lot of hope. It is fascinating to witness how they are often not tethered to the same inter-racial challenges that many adults have experienced. Their concepts around race and identity are shifting rapidly, and they know that they have the agency to change the world around them. We believe our communities have the answers to the problems that they have identified. The relationships between people is what drives movements for change, and our investment in their capacity will fuel the world we want to build together.

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*“..how powerful it was for me to hear that while different races are separated, in the end, we all want the same outcomes for our children.”*

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*“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” – Lilla Watson*