



FROM THE ROOTS:

Building the Power of Communities of Color to Challenge Structural Racism



AKONADI
FOUNDATION



FOREWORD

As we enter our tenth year of grantmaking, we at Akonadi Foundation felt it was a good time to reflect on what we have been doing. We present to you *From the Roots*, our first report documenting the progress we've made as an institution and the progress we see unfolding toward the goal of racial justice.

Now, more than ever, we see the need for philanthropy to look at the impact of centuries of systemic racism on our communities, our country and ourselves. Although we can all celebrate the breakthrough represented by the election of the first African-American President of the United States, we remain surrounded by stark racial disparities in health, education and prosperity. The profound inequality that we witness throughout our society lays bare the folly of the term "post-racial".

We believe philanthropy has a unique role in addressing structural racism. Philanthropy has the ability and agility to articulate a framework focused on ending the inequities found in our society and to work in partnership with organizations operating at every level to address both the effects and the underlying causes of ongoing racism. Working through strategic partnerships, philanthropy can endeavor to create structural reforms that positively impact communities of color and all communities.

This has been the work of Akonadi Foundation. We offer this report as witness to our efforts, our successes and our challenges. We hope you will learn from our lessons and celebrate the successes of our partners. We appreciate and honor the hard work of the many dedicated community members and people working at nonprofit organizations throughout the country focused on making substantial improvements in the lives of people of color.

Quinn Delaney, President
Akonadi Foundation
January 2010

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From The Roots:

Building the Power of Communities of Color to Challenge Structural Racism

I. AN EXCITING MOMENT

Real and lasting progress – in jobs, education, housing, immigration, and health care – requires the rooting out of racism that is structured into every facet of American life. Without a conscious and sustained focus on structural racism, the impact of social justice will always be limited and short-lived.

This is the core assertion of Akonadi Foundation. But it is an assertion that begs many questions: What is structural racism? How do we put a structural racism analysis into practice? How do we make progress on something so big?

It is also a hard-fought assertion, and one that must be continuously put forth, amplified, defended. While the belief that we have achieved a post-racial society enjoys remarkable popularity, conservative forces direct thinly veiled racist comments at President Obama and manipulate fear of dark-skinned immigrants and African American youth to warp policy discussions from immigration to health care to voting rights.

In this moment, creating a thoughtful, informed, safe space to consider and address structural racism is both challenging and invigorating. “For me and the people of my generation the reality of an African American president is incredible,” says Akonadi co-founder Quinn Delaney. “It creates an opening, a place of strength from which to continue our work.”

“It’s an exciting moment,” observes Akonadi Program Associate, Melanie Cervantes.

Looking across the country we’re seeing unprecedented conversations between organizers doing work on the ground and observers and theorists who can help identify themes and directions. A movement requires different roles. We need people with ideas from the base and people with ideas from theory. There’s momentum around this right now. After years of supporting local groups we’re seeing a lot more regional alliances. The work feels like it’s going to scale.

Today, local-to-national and regional alliances -- building on a structural understanding of racism – are emerging in important new ways. How these efforts evolve, at this crucial time in our nation’s racial history, will matter intensely for every sector of social change.

Within this complex context, Akonadi offers *From the Roots* with several specific aims:

- First, to contribute to grant makers’ evolving understanding of structural racism;
- Second, to share how Akonadi is thinking and acting to address structural racism; and
- Third, to highlight the leadership of grassroots communities of color in shaping local and national thought and action on racism.

Akonadi Foundation offers *From the Roots* because we are committed to ending structural racism and putting resources toward that effort in practical and strategic ways. Through this document we seek to engage other foundations in thinking about structural racism and how to support efforts to end it.



“ Akonadi Foundation believes that the elimination of structural racism requires the presence of powerful social justice movements of people and organizations that explicitly think, act, and talk about racial justice. ”

From The Roots:
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II. RACIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT BUILDING AT AKONADI FOUNDATION

Akonadi Foundation was founded with the belief that racism lies at the core of social inequity in US society. Through a strategic planning process and the experience in our first 5 years of grant making for racial justice, our thinking evolved from the idea of “dismantling institutional and systemic racism” to a deeper understanding of structural racism and the large-scale social movements needed to build a racially just society.

Akonadi Foundation believes that the elimination of structural racism requires the presence of powerful social justice movements of people and organizations that explicitly think, act, and talk about racial justice. These movements must involve leadership from communities of color that move a large base of people to action united by shared strategy, vision, and goals. Because structural racism permeates all aspects of our society, this movement must focus simultaneously on creating a culture of racial justice, building power in communities of color, and making policy.

In 2007 we refined our mission to reflect this understanding of structural racism and movement building: **Akonadi Foundation’s mission is to support the development of powerful social change movements to eliminate structural racism and create a racially just society.**

Within this mission, the role of the foundation reflects our institutional values:

- **Leadership of communities of color, those most impacted by structural racism;**
- **Intersectionality, using an inclusive, not exclusive, focus on race; and**
- **Leadership from the field through which foundations find shared learning and partnerships.**

These values are grounded in a rich legacy of successful social movement building.

What Does Structural Racism Look Like?

Structural racism is so pervasive that it has become commonplace. For most White Americans, it is largely invisible; it's just "the way things are." For many of us, structural racism is hidden by history, "race neutral" policies, and a culture that values assimilation.

When we think about who owns home in this country, we often forget that there is a history of race structured into the present. Only a generation ago housing covenants and redlining were legal and prevented families of color from buying homes or limited the potential value of what they could buy. At the same time, the Federal Housing Administration gave loans to families to purchase new homes; in practice, however, Blacks were often excluded from this opportunity. Today we see the impact of racial history in lower rates of home ownership among families of color, lower values of homes owned by families of color, and less access to homeowner-based privileges such as credit and well-resourced school.

- This is how Akonadi Foundation understands "cumulative impact" – how the current situation of race/ethnic groups is the direct result of generations of race-based distribution of resources, power, status, and wealth.

When we think about public schools, we often forget that public policies continue to distribute education resources and opportunities along race lines. Current public policy makes home values a primary source of public school funding. Whether or not this public policy was designed to produce different outcomes for different racial groups, it does, with fewer resources available to schools attended by children of color. This lack of resources, financial and human, leads to a second tier education system that, for example, punishes students of color more harshly than White students for the same transgressions, reinforcing and perpetuating poor outcomes for youth of color.

- This is how Akonadi Foundation understands "compounded impacts" and "racialized outcomes" – how public policies and institutional practices weave to-

gether to contribute to inequitable racial outcomes for groups, whether or not an individual or institution is being intentionally or overtly racist.

When we look at a billboard or watch television we may forget that the images we see reflect the conscious and unconscious views on race of the people who created them. One far from rare example was the media coverage after Hurricane Katrina in which newspaper photograph captions described Black people as "looters", evoking anger and disgust toward Black Hurricane survivors. Whites were described as "finding supplies," evoking empathy and concern toward White Hurricane survivors. Public tolerance of practices of mistreatment and policies of neglect were bolstered by this disturbing, but familiar, portrayal of the situation.

- This is how Akonadi Foundation understands "racialized dominant culture": words, images, and patterns of thinking that reflect and strengthen assumptions and stereotypes based on race. This constant stream shapes how people of color see themselves and their communities. It also reinforces White privilege and a society-wide ability to ignore inequities and outcomes that are based on race.

WHAT IS MOVEMENT BUILDING?

From Movement Strategy Center

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS are collective action in which the population is educated and mobilized to challenge power-holders and the whole society, in order to redress social problems or grievances, restore critical social values, and implement a new vision or solution. They occur when a large group of people and organizations share a broad vision, analysis and goals and they have the collaborative structures to align their work. Social movements are the only process powerful enough to transform society in a fundamental way. Addressing a large-scale power imbalance requires collective action by many, many people. Social movements may span a period of years or decades.

MOVEMENT BUILDING is the effort of social change agents to engage power-holders and the broader society in addressing a systemic problem or injustice while promoting an alternative vision or solution. Movement building requires a range of intersecting approaches through a set of distinct stages over a long-term period of time.

Through movement building organizers can:

- Propose solutions to the root causes of social problems.
- Enable people to exercise their collective power.
- Humanize groups that have been denied basic human rights and improve conditions for the groups affected.
- Create structural change through building something larger than a particular organization or campaign.
- Promote visions and values for society based on fairness, justice, and democracy.



How Has Akonadi Sought to Apply a Structural Racism Lens?

Akonadi Foundation is one institution in the larger constellation of organizations seeking to contribute to the elimination of structural racism. As one piece of the puzzle, the more directly and transparently we explain what we are doing, the more we can find ways to fit together with other essential pieces. In that spirit, we offer this description of our progress as a foundation in seeking to increase our contribution to racial justice.

- **We completed a strategic planning process through which we sharpened our strategic questions and direction.** For example, we agreed that we are seeking to support the infusion of racial justice into every area of social justice in a powerful intersectional way, not seeking to create one distinct “racial justice movement.” This leads us to support solid racial justice work in numerous sectors and to support the strengthening of racial justice relationships across sectors.
- **As part of this strategic planning process, we articulated a new mission statement that reflects a shift from an institutional racism framework to a structural racism framework, and toward a more explicit commitment to movement building.** As a result we have been able to be more explicit and articulate about our understanding and commitment to structural racism. This greater explicitness has created new dialogues with organizations, allowed us to better identify organizations with which we share similar ideas and values, and helped us to target social justice funders and donors in developing our philanthropic allies.
- **We created new funding criteria.** With our sharpened focus, we developed “threshold” funding criteria that establish a basic level of structural racism analysis (i.e., not a diversity analysis nor a narrow focus on particular institutions) and racial justice movement building practice (i.e., addressing a large-scale power imbalance through collective action by many people) for all grantees. Beyond this threshold capacity that defines organizations with which we share ideas and values, we recognize that there is a range of capacity we would define as racial justice movement building and that organizations (including our own) fall at many points along that spectrum.

- **We defined three spheres of work that are crucial to eliminating structural racism: building power, changing policy, and nurturing culture.** Understanding the importance of these three spheres, we then analyzed our grant making to see what each organization would identify as its primary sphere, even though many are engaged in more than one. Looking at the distribution of grants by sphere, we decided to increase the size and length of grants to key cultural organizations. We also sought to better understand and document the cultural work taking place in the other spheres. Lastly, we launched the Racial Justice Poster Project to promote cultural insights regarding racial justice in Oakland. (For more discussion of Akonadi's commitment to culture, please see "Nurturing a Culture of Justice and Equity" on page 8.)

- **We piloted new programs.** In 2008 we launched three pilot programs through which we could generate grants for crucial work while continuing to fine tune our strategy and program in new areas. These three pilot programs were:

- **The SOS (Strategic Opportunity Support) Fund** provides small one-time grants (with rapid turnaround) for strategic opportunities and innovation in racial justice

movement building. In its first year, the SOS supported timely emerging work and provided us with insight into the trends and opportunities in the field of racial justice.

- **The RAP (Race and Place) Capacity Building program** was a pilot that provided grants and collective discussion opportunities to a group of Oakland grantees to enhance their ability to think, act, and talk in ways that build social change movements capacity of eliminating structural racism. So far, through this pilot program, we have gained better understanding of the racial justice capacity building needs of Oakland organizations, such as the need for popular education tools that "build up" to a structural analysis, rather than "top down" presentation of theory and statistics, the need for better documentation of how structural racism operates in communities of color. We are also exploring how a capacity building program can focus more on collective goals and strategies as incremental steps toward elimination of structural racism.

- **The Oscar Grant Fund** supported urgent local organizing and coalition building after the killing of Oscar Grant and, perhaps most importantly, called greater philanthropic and public attention to the racial justice issues the case illustrated.



INSIDE THE FOUNDATION

An interview with Akonadi Foundation co-founder and Board President Quinn Delaney and staff members Leticia Alcantar (former Executive Director), Melanie Cervantes (Program Officer), and Delena Scott (Grants and Office Manager).

How did Akonadi come to focus on structural racism?

Melanie: “Akonadi grew out of a need to intentionally support youth of color organizing that was using a race lens in powerful and innovative ways. This was in 2000, when young people were leading the fight against Proposition 21 in California, which was seeking to criminalize youth of color. The message of Proposition 21 was that young men of color were ‘superpredators.’ This message was shaping how funders were thinking about youth organizing. It was very hard to get funders to make grants to young people organizing against Proposition 21.

Quinn and Wayne’s (Akonadi’s founders) support was bold and made a real difference. They supported a campaign that was putting out an explicit race analysis of a policy that was supposedly just about “law and order” but that would strengthen the structures of racism in concrete ways. Proposition 21 proponents were using coded language to make this racist policy seem like “common sense” and to build support for it and other future policies. Akonadi was founded shortly after Proposition 21, in response to that experience.”¹

Quinn: “Back then we weren’t using the term “structural racism” but we were explicit that race was about institutions, policies, power, culture. As a foundation and a field we’ve come to a deeper understanding of the particulars of racism in its 21st century manifestation.”

Melanie: “I had a ‘light bulb’ moment hearing John Powell talk about embedded and interlocking systems of structural racism. It helped me think about people as a whole rather than people segmented in relationship to various systems, which is often how foundations operate. I want to push funders to think about making people’s whole lives better. For me, Akonadi is about how you use an analysis on the ground to make change, to use systems thinking for real outcomes.”

Leticia: “For me it’s felt like the theory around structural racism has been catching up to the reality. In my life, people have had a structural racism analysis. They’ve understood their situation in relation to multiple systems.”



What’s it like to be a racial justice funder in philanthropy today?

Delena: “We’re working against ideologies that suggest we are now living in a post racism era. We have the responsibility to educate others and expose truths about modern forms of oppression, such as structural racism.”

Quinn: “There are a lot of bright spots. We’re in good discussions with larger foundations that, like Akonadi, are trying to grapple with structural racism. It feels like more and more people in philanthropy are thinking about race and racism.”

Melanie: “For a long time I kept looking for a foundation that had done this before. Then I realized we’re really at the forefront of support for this kind of work and thinking. Sometimes it’s hard to embrace our own leadership, to believe it’s okay to break ground, to experiment.”

Leticia: “It’s exciting to see the center of gravity in philanthropy move beyond diversity. There’s a different conversation emerging in philanthropy and we’re invigorated to be part of that. We’re discovering allies interested in a racial justice movement building perspective.”

Melanie: “I was at a meeting where people were talking about the push for greater diversity in staffing and funding in California. They were seeing that push as ‘preferential treatment.’ I shifted the conversation from a focus on individual staff or organizations to a bigger context. I asked, “Who is ‘the public’ in California where people of color are the majority of the population? Isn’t philanthropy about serving the public? The question is why isn’t that happening?” Then we had a very different conversation. The dominant story on race shapes philanthropy, so as funders we have to keep trying for those breakthroughs.”

¹California Proposition 21 was a proposition proposed and passed in 2000 that increased a variety of criminal penalties for crimes committed by youth and incorporated many youth offenders into the adult criminal justice system.

“As we thought more about structural racism, we wanted to think about culture as more centrally embedded in building power and changing policy.”

NURTURING A CULTURE OF JUSTICE AND EQUITY

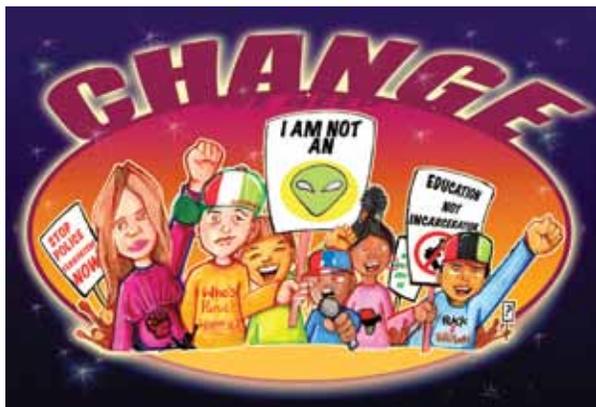
Picture a crowd of people. Now picture a crowd of people holding colorful hand-made signs, wearing powerful words and images on their t-shirts, and collectively belting out songs and chants.

The difference between these two pictures, asserts Melanie Cervantes, Akonadi Foundation Program Officer, is that the second picture reflects cohesive cultural elements – art, music, spoken word – “that are the glue that holds racial justice movement building together.”

Moreover, says Cervantes, the difference is not just in that moment, “but in what it took to create that moment.” Maintaining that “glue” and creating those moments are crucial to shaping and reshaping the world.

Cervantes, herself a dedicated artist, has helped inform Akonadi’s thinking and actions around culture and its relationship to structural racism.

“Akonadi has always supported cultural work like community jazz festivals and indigenous language preservation programs,” explains Cervantes. “But as we thought more about structural racism, we wanted to think about culture as centrally embedded in building power and changing policy.”



Guided by their strategic plan, Akonadi took some important steps to turn their thinking into grant making. “First we had to say, ‘This is something we value.’ Then we had to put that value into action.” Akonadi began by identifying key cultural organizations they were funding and increasing their grants and making them multi-year. “We needed to put excellent cultural organizations on par with excellent base building organizations,” observes Cervantes.

Cervantes is quick to point out that cultural work often takes place outside of organizations with a core art or cultural mission. She offers the example of an organizing/service group that developed a poster to capture how immigrant community members describe the experience and feelings of hearing a knock upon their door. “They went through a process of asking questions of community members, which was important for identifying issues and leaders,” explains Cervantes. “But, the cultural work was interwoven with the base building, so the door-knocking image became an expression of collective power through a cultural medium.” “By naming culture as an explicit value,” says Cervantes, “we’re learning more about how organizing is being integrated with cultural work and how that relates to change Akonadi is seeking to bring about.”

Akonadi has even launched its own direct cultural program, sponsoring the first-ever Racial Justice Poster Project in which artists are invited to submit work responding to the question “What does racial justice look like to you?” “It was a very exciting pilot year,” says Cervantes. “The submissions were all very different takes on the question. And in the process of creating the project we built relationships with people who think about communications and about the mass power of posters.” Most importantly, she adds, “the artwork that we reviewed generated insights for us and stimulated our thinking and imagination about what a society free of structural racism would really mean.”



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III. STORIES FROM THE FIELD OF RACIAL JUSTICE

Stories of outstanding racial justice efforts come from all areas of Akonadi's grant making and beyond. In the pages that follow we offer a few stories that illustrate the range of work taking place and the creative tension generated from cultivating deep grassroots engagement while building broader strategies and alliances. All the stories tell of work that seeks both short-term and long-term impact. These stories describe attempts to:

- **Challenge multiple/interlocking institutions;**
- **Explicitly communicate issues with a structural racism analysis;**
- **Build collective leadership and power in communities of color directly impacted by structural racism;**

- **Demonstrate structural racism connections across issues and constituencies;**
- **Focus on structural conditions and accountability for inequity;**
- **Establish racial justice ideas and tools that can be applied across issues and sectors.**

Collectively, these stories inspire and also instruct. In them we find “raw material” that can help to develop definitions of progress and impact that are both accurate and transformational.

Challenge:

The “subprime crisis” is widely understood as an economic issue, not an issue of structural racism. Absent a race analysis, policy debates and proposals are likely to reinforce and worsen already-existing racial inequities.

Opportunity:

People of color-led organizations in cities across the country began building a shared analysis and vision years ago, putting them in a position to respond in a local-to-national way with the issues of structural racism at the forefront.

Fighting Foreclosures with Racial Justice Values & Structural Racism Analysis

In May 2009 the City of Oakland, California made the remarkable decision to divest from Bank of America, ending its contract with the bank and citing BofA’s role in the subprime lending and foreclosure crisis. While BofA’s mortgage practices were not the only factor in the decision, the city council’s vote demonstrates how local groups can begin to tackle the structures of racism facing communities around the country.

Two years ago, before the majority of the country saw itself falling into economic crisis, a nationwide network of local organizations began working together against urban gentrification which they saw as the “hollowing out of the cities, the destruction of public participation, privatization, job loss, structural racism, and the loss of the very soul of the city.”² This network, called Right to the City, includes groups involved in housing, workers rights, environmental justice, and multi-issue community organizing from Boston to Miami to New York to Los Angeles to Oakland, all grounded in urban communities of color that live at the forefront of struggles against global economic exploitation. According to RTTC, the role of “service workers, the underground economy, and the growing marginally employed” is crucial in this struggle and “is about building an understanding of how racism, economic exploitation and gender oppression work in our society.”

Today, the time these groups have spent together analyzing issues and sharing strategy is paying off at a crucial moment. For example, Oakland has one of the top ten foreclosure rates in the country – with foreclosures concentrated in African American and Latino communities. In just one month in 2009, Oakland experienced 847 foreclosures. Bank evictions – displacement of tenants living in a foreclosed property – compound the impact of these foreclosures.

In response to this economic upheaval, Just Cause Oakland – a Right to the City member organization -- is not only helping residents fight foreclosures, but also challenging the financial structures that have targeted communities of color. Just Cause is an organization of residents fighting “for housing as a human right and against the racism of gentrification and displacement.” “We saw that foreclosures were concentrated in Black and Latino neighborhoods,” explains Just Cause organizer Robbie Clark. “These neighborhoods reflect the history of housing discrimination which has kept people of color in certain areas, and past redlining which meant the value of their homes stayed low over time.”

But it’s not just history, insists Clark. “Today there’s still a lack of financial resources and jobs in these areas. So, lenders knew they could find a market in these areas, and they did. Subprime loans are the latest tool of disinvestment through which people of color end up losing their homes and getting pushed out.”

²Gihan Perera and the Urban Strategies Group, *Winning the Right to the City In a Neo-Liberal World*, Miami, June 21-22, 2007.

Through their on-going work with low income tenants and homeowners in Oakland, as well as the information and insights they gained through the Right to the City network, Just Cause discovered that many of the families facing foreclosures in Oakland were living in properties mortgaged with Countrywide Financial, a mortgage lender facing numerous lawsuits for its alleged predatory lending practices. When Bank of America bought Countrywide in 2009, Just Cause and organizations around the country saw an opportunity to call attention to the lending that had spawned the foreclosure crisis.

“We went to the City Council,” says Robbie Clark, “and spoke to the impact of predatory lending on Oakland communities. We emphasized the need for Oakland to have an official bank that would be accountable to some kind of standard for homeowners and tenants.” Although BofA did not offer up data on its record and that of Countrywide, Just Cause helped make sure the City Council knew what questions to ask and what information to look for.

Oakland’s decision to divest from Bank of America marks a small but important victory in the fight against corporate negligence and discrimination in communities of color. “A structural racism analysis has been core to our understanding and approach,” asserts Clark. “We see this moment as a continuation of what’s been happening to working class neighborhoods of color since the 1950s. We’re seeking long-term solutions that address these long-term patterns.”

Starting from the immediate reality of foreclosure for families of color in their community, Just Cause and other RTTC groups are striking at the structural racism deeply imbedded in the foreclosure crisis. A report by The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity agrees, “The persistent, disparate racial impacts of the subprime lending crisis actually offer an unfortunately excellent example of how structural racism operates.” Contrary to the perspectives of those who focus on searching for discriminatory intent, “subprime lending was touted as making homeownership available to African-Americans and Latinos who had been denied home mortgages due to the pernicious policy of bank (and insurance) redlining.”³ As the national organizer for RTTC, Marisa Franco, explains, “Economic recovery must speak to racial inequality. Through our local efforts and national alignment, we must highlight the economic crisis in our communities and push alternatives that build the power of communities of color to take this on.”

As Just Cause continues to push for bank accountability with Oakland’s new bank, Wells Fargo, they’ve found themselves in a strategic position. “Banks really don’t want to be embarrassed so it’s possible for local groups to display power,” observes Clark. Through the local-to-national network of Right to the City, this local power is part of a nationwide movement to stop foreclosures and bank evictions and to demand banking policies and practices that support communities of color.

³Rick Cohen, *A Structural Racism Lens on Subprime Foreclosures and Vacant Properties*, presented at Kirwan Institute national convening on Subprime Lending, Foreclosure, and Race, October 2008.

Challenge:

State violence against people of color is often framed and understood, at best, as isolated incidents and at worst, as evidence of criminality in communities of color. Discussion of racial justice has relied heavily on statistics and disparity data that do not describe the severe real-life obstacles the numbers reflect.

Opportunity:

There is growing communications skill and strategy in the field of racial justice, with increasing capacity to tell stories about structural racism, not just about intentional discrimination. Stories with the power to mobilize communities of color are being captured and retold as part of new narrative that shapes ideas and policies.

Oscar Grant Killing Leads to Structural Implications

In Oakland, on the first day of 2009, a White transit police officer shot and killed Oscar Grant, 22, as the young African American man lay on his stomach with his hands cuffed behind his back. While the officer was ultimately charged with murder, his arrest took place a full two weeks after the killing, following massive public outcry and an intervention by the California state Attorney General.

Communications with a structural racism lens played a crucial role in the progress of this profoundly disturbing case. One week after the shooting, a coalition of local organizations, the Coalition to Abolish Police Executions (CAPE), was planning the first public rally. “It was a critical moment,” recalls Mervyn Mercado of Center for Media Justice, the organization called to assist with communications. “The coalition told us, ‘People are coming; what should we say?’”

Defining goals was an important first step, believes Mercado. “We organized the demands into immediate, near-term, and long-term. That way, we could focus on a particular officer and a particular institu-

tion, but also begin a more structural conversation about citizen participation in the governance of policing and about alternative forms of policing.”

On the day of the rally, the media presence was huge. “We counted 15 media satellites there,” says Mercado. “That was our first indication this story was going national.” Fortunately, because the coalition had spent time on goal setting, they were ready. “In brutality cases the media usually focuses on only two sides: the police/government and the victim’s family,” observes Mercado. “In this case, the people of Oakland became part of the conversation. We saw a more structural thread even in the very mainstream coverage, with questions like ‘How often does this happen?’”

Mercado concedes that the media gave enormous attention to the property damage caused when some people from the rally headed to downtown Oakland, smashing storefront windows along the way. “We were clear that what happened was really unfortunate and that the mostly people of color shopkeepers should not be targeted for what happened. At the same time, we wanted to focus attention on the conditions that sparked the property damage and to use the opportunity to challenge the media on how it portrays such incidents.”



With their phones ringing off the hook from reporters, the coalition made the unusual decision to hold a media briefing conference call, rather than a standard press conference. “The reporters were calling us with all kinds of narrow questions,” explains Mercado. “Calling them all back wasn’t a good vehicle for getting at the structural issues.” Instead, the coalition organized a media conference call where they could not only communicate their messages, but also engage in a dialogue with the media about their coverage.

“We posed the question, ‘When is a riot a riot?’, says Mercado. “We talked about how a White woman in the Oakland hills has different perceptions than a Black man in West Oakland. We asked reporters how they viewed their role in presenting information.” Mercado admits that the reporters “got a little defensive”, but that it was “ultimately a very rich dialogue on accountability and spin.” Most remarkably, this dialogue took place with two dozen reporters from all across the country, including representatives from the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*.

The impact of the Oscar Grant communications work is tangible. The coalition had 6,000 media hits globally, which Mercado describes as “beyond the craziest expectations you could have for a local story.” The transit authority (Bay Area Rapid Transit) is assembling a civilian review board that could fundamentally alter the oversight of the transit police.

“Oscar Grant could have just been another Black guy killed,” believes Mercado. “But, instead his shooting spawned a discussion of how people are treated differently by their government based on their race,” observes Mercado.

Mercado also emphasizes the importance of communications strategy in trying to address structural racism. “It’s important that we take the individual local stories of brutality and oppression and weave them into a new narrative on race and citizenship in this country. We need to take on stories like Oscar Grant when they come along,” he believes, “so legislators have some ability to sort through issues of race in public policy.”

While it’s challenging, Mercado believes that a communications strategy can help align incremental work with a larger racial justice vision. “It takes a lot of vision and dedication to see communications outcomes, so we often mobilize really hard around legislation because it has an obvious outcome built in.” Even more challenging, he argues, is that organizations – including his own -- are rarely organized to take on fast-breaking incidents like this. “But we realized this was an opportunity to get people to vote against racist legislation in the future, at the local, state, and national level.” “Strategic communications” he maintains, “is part of how we can win big.”



“Economic recovery must speak to racial inequality.”



Challenge:

At national level, talking about racism is considered taboo and even politically dangerous. With conservatives proclaiming our society “post racial” and free of discrimination, organizations may be tempted to shy away from direct discussions of race. This silence, however, only perpetuates the myth that the need for race conscious policy no longer exists.

Opportunity:

In communities around the country, the impact of racism and the need to address it in new multiracial ways, is deeply felt. As grassroots organizations come together across issues and set their sights on federal policy, their demands are often explicit about the need to challenge the structures of racism. As a result, new solutions are being tested out in national policy debates.

Mass Power of Communities of Color Changing the National Political Landscape

When the Campaign for Community Values began, a multiracial cross-section of organizations from all around the country came together to define a set of values and principles – not just *issues* – that would unite them in action. Among the important questions for them was how they would define their values and principles regarding racism. “Many, but not all, of the groups were explicit about racial justice,” explains Deepak Bhargava, director of the Center for Community Change that is home to the Campaign. “There was a lot of discussion. Ultimately we agreed that we that we would not naively pursue a national policy campaign without acknowledging that communities of color are most vulnerable and that without an explicit focus on them, their needs would fall off the table.” Campaign members therefore drafted a principle which now stands as the second on its list: “Patterns of racism and inequality can only be addressed by making sure that America works for those communities it’s worked against in the past.”

Making an explicit commitment marked the beginning, not the end, of the Campaign’s work on racism. The Campaign put the principle into practice in its organizing efforts around the country, as well as its policy advocacy in Washington, DC. For example, when the campaign was planning its Heartland Forum for presidential candidates in December 2007, member organizations worked hard to make sure the event was deeply multiracial. This meant ensuring that community members had participated in multiracial events and had had opportunities to think about the connections between issues faced by different racial groups. This new level of understanding and relationship building was apparent during the Heartland Forum, when a White farmer stood up to question candidate Hillary Clinton about the economy. The farmer spoke of his own struggles to keep his farm, but drew parallels with the situation of new immigrants in Iowa who had been driven off their farmlands as a result of global economic policies. As Bhargava sees it, “Multiracial coalition building is not just showing up for each other but having real understanding of connections across issues. It’s not just solidarity for the sake of being nice.”

“We would not naively pursue a national policy campaign without acknowledging that communities of color are most vulnerable and that without an explicit focus on them their needs would fall off the table.”

The Campaign for Community Value’s policy advocacy has also reflected its racial justice principle, bringing an explicit racial justice analysis and demands to issues of jobs, health care, and immigration. For example, the Campaign contributed to a major legislative victory on low-income children’s health insurance, not only helping to win reauthorization of the bill but insisting that the program cover immigrant children. Often, explains Bhargava, advocates may be inclined to minimize their objectives in order to win something, which can lead to less powerful constituencies being left behind. In the case of low-income children’s health insurance, some advocates felt that they would need to drop their call for inclusion of immigrant children in order to get the bill passed. For the Campaign, however, the exclusion of immigrant children would have reflected exactly the patterns of racism that had vowed to disrupt.

“The Campaign for Community Values is grounded in an analysis of structural racism,” asserts Bhargava. “We apply it using the idea of targeted universalism. That means we need to craft policies that benefit everyone, but also pay real attention to different realities of different communities.” The Campaign fought for the economic stimulus bill, for example, as a crucial piece of legislation for the country. They also fought for “targeted jobs” measures to ensure that communities of color – those hardest hit by the economic downturn – would actually benefit from the job creation. “We lost the legislative battle for targeted jobs,” admits Bhargava, “but in the process we figured out what the measures should look like and who our allies are, and we continue to push for targeted jobs in the rules that govern implementation of the economic stimulus.”

In the future, Bhargava hopes to see more policy efforts that build bridges across the Campaign’s multiracial constituency. For example, he asks, “Can we use civil rights protections in situations where employers refuse to hire African American workers? We know that immigrants are not responsible for employment conditions, but we also know that employers use immigrant workers to divide and conquer. Greater connection between immigration and civil rights would be one area to think about.”

Challenge:

Structural racism has played a role in dividing African American and Black immigrant communities in the U.S., fostering competition and a focus on short term gains. Narrow definitions of civil rights fail to encompass issues of race and immigration.

Opportunity:

Interest and action is growing around how to surface the interconnections between racial justice and immigration. Discussions of structural racism are expanding to encompass these dynamics. New issues are surfacing as entry points for fresh policy discussions.



Immigration Policy Lifts Up Structural Racism

In August 2008, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers raided a poultry plant in Laurel, Mississippi, detaining hundreds of mostly Guatemalan immigrant workers and ultimately deporting many of them. Hearing of the raids, which left children without parents and wives without husbands, Barbara Lansing, an African American civil rights activist, became outraged. Even though she couldn't communicate with the families who spoke either Spanish or indigenous languages, Lansing opened her door to them, helping them find housing, demand back-owed wages, and protest ICE itself. Lansing's story, along with many others like it, were central to the shaping of the national "Which Way Forward" gathering in April 2009, where more than 50 Black leaders – both African American and immigrant – came together to better understand the debate on immigration and migration through the lens of race.

From the 14th amendment's granting of citizenship and protection of civil liberties to recently freed slaves to the 1965 elimination of immigration quotas for African and Asian countries, race has played a major role in shaping the definition of citizenship and legality in the United States. According to Eric Ward of the Center for New Community, one of the organizers of the gathering, "Understanding immigration policy helps us understand how structural racism works. We see how the history of immigration legislation is grounded in race, in everything from the Chinese Exclusion Act to the treatment of Haitian refugees. We see the xenophobic attitudes that reflect and reinforce these policies. And we see how the serious disadvantages facing African American communities – like ongoing racial discrimination in the labor market, mass incarceration, and substandard education – are overshadowed by the blame placed on immigrants."

Looking at immigration through a race lens, the Black leaders at Which Way Forward identified a range of often-overlooked issues that, according to Ward, "need to be addressed as steps toward challenging structural racism." These issues included:

- How state-level anti-immigrant efforts to require proof of citizenship in voting have resulted in 5% decreases in the African American vote;
- How race shapes the distribution of refugee resettlement resources, with virtually no funds going to Black churches in Black communities.
- The impact of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for African and Caribbean Blacks who live with the ongoing uncertainty of renewals every two years.

These issues demonstrate that "anti-immigrant policy is a disaster for African American communities," concludes Ward.

Which Way Forward marks a next generation of efforts to build unity between African American and Black, Latino, and Asian immigrants. Organizations such as Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) helped bring about the Which Way Forward gathering, alongside organizations newer to the issues.

Which Way Forward presents an opportunity and a challenge to long-standing civil rights ideas and institutions, argues Ward. "Civil rights is often understood as a static concept, but it is and has been ever-expanding with regard to citizenship and national identity."

The first Which Way Forward gathering met important goals around relationship building and identifying shared policy concerns. In the future these new allies may help bring fresh ideas – like Congressional monitoring of racial profiling by immigration officials – into the national debate.

"Immigration policy is a vehicle for lifting up how structural racism works in this country," maintains Ward. "I think immigration is one of the defining structural racism issues of our time."

Challenge:

Challenging the structures of racism in public education is an enormous undertaking that spans from individual schools to the multi-institutional “school to prison” pipeline.

Opportunity:

California offers one example of how incremental – but paradigm-shifting – steps can lead toward larger change. There, a major victory a decade ago continues to serve as the foundation for efforts to increase quality and equity in public education.

Education: Equal Access Policies Begin Revealing, Addressing Underlying Structures

In May 2000, on the anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, an African American middle school student joined with students all across California to file a lawsuit in response to the terrible conditions in their public schools. This case, *Williams v. California*, marks a key milestone at the intersection of racial justice and education organizing. *Williams* argued that the state of California does not give millions of students — mostly students of color from low income and immigrant families --- the basic tools of a decent education, such as textbooks, trained teachers, and safe school facilities. Four years later, after relentless organizing and media work by young people, educators, and outraged community members, the state agreed to a settlement in the case and, most importantly, formally acknowledged its responsibility for ensuring quality and equal education to all California’s students.

Today, more and more organizations are recognizing and seeking to address the ways that racism is structured in education. For example, in June 2009, Oakland joined a growing number of California school districts in adopting new curriculum requirements that ensure students’ access to the courses they need for college. The vote by the Oakland school board reflected widespread concern about the lack of educational opportunities provided to students of color. Currently, only 17 percent of California’s school districts provide students with the series of high school courses (known as the “A-G curriculum”) that four year colleges require. As a result, less than a quarter of the African American, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Native American students who graduate from high school in California are also qualified for college in the California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) systems.



The victory in Oakland and in school districts across California directly reflects the momentum spawned by the *Williams* lawsuit, brought about with intense community involvement, that demonstrated the real and on-going obstacles students of color face.

Youth Together was one of the driving forces behind the Oakland A-G victory. Prishni Murillo, director of Youth Together in Oakland, CA, is one organizer building on this momentum. Youth Together is "working at the school site level in ways that highlight unequal access and build toward larger structural changes." "We also need to be part of a multi-tiered strategy," observes Murillo, pointing to the Campaign for Quality Education through which local groups can engage in state-level demands for educational equity.

This growing "educational justice" movement captures the idea that educational systems are responsible for racially distributed outcomes and must take action to change the outcomes. Educational justice also captures the role of students and parents of color in rejecting substandard education and in defining and demanding what quality education must mean. In the words of John Beam, director of the National Center for Schools and Communities (NCIS) at Fordham

University, educational justice is the idea that "every child deserves a high-quality public education, regardless of her or his color, language, or income." According to a recent NCIS study, 53 percent of community groups across the country that are working on education are "organizing around issues that dealt with race and racism."

Jeremy Lahoud, director of Californians for Justice, sees educational justice moving forward in three key areas: basic opportunities to learn (e.g., the *Williams* argument), college readiness and tracking, and school discipline. Local wins in California and across the country add up to a larger movement brewing, and one that rejects a "colorblind" approach to improving educational outcomes.

In the big picture, believes Murillo, education organizing is up against "a 20 to 30 year history of defunding schools of color." Education policy hasn't been looking at that, she argues, "but is instead penalizing students of color for government's failure to provide them with high-quality education." By keeping the focus on the failings of the educational system rather than the "underachievement" of youth of color, education justice organizers continue to work toward long-term structural change.

Challenge:

While the need for a comprehensive national racial justice agenda may be urgent, little thought and much less energy, has been dedicated to such an effort. During the 2008 presidential election, when national attention focused on the racial identity of Barack Obama, the policy priorities of communities of color received far less coverage.

Opportunity:

One groundbreaking effort to forge a national agenda on racial justice and garner support from organizations and individuals around the country emerged in 2008.

National “Compact” Makes Race Central in Federal Policy

“Residents of the United States are experiencing an unprecedented, inspiring and transformational moment in our nation’s history,” reads the preamble of the *Compact for Racial Justice* released by the Applied Research Center in the spring of 2008. In response to that moment, the *Compact* lays out a series of essays on key racial justice issues and policy opportunities across a wide range of areas, such as civil rights, biotechnology, criminal justice, green economies, health care, education, the economy, and immigration. The *Compact* includes recommendations such as strengthening the role of the Office of Civil Rights and implementing racial impact statements in all areas of policy.

Most importantly, the *Compact* offers a “Strategic Framework for Advancing Racial Justice” that can serve as a guide for years to come. This strategic framework advises that we:

1. Focus on *structural racism* and *systemic inequality* rather than simply *personal prejudice*.
2. Focus on impacts rather than intentions.
3. Address racial inequality explicitly but not necessarily exclusively.

4. Propose solutions that emphasize equity and inclusion rather than diversity.
5. Develop strategies to empower stakeholders and target institutional power holders.
6. Make racial justice a high priority in all social justice efforts.

According to Applied Research Center director Rinku Sen, the *Compact* “was designed to help the racial justice movement make sense of the political moment.” Over 500 organizations and individuals signed on the *Compact*, including the AFL-CIO, The Sentencing Project, and The Drum Major Institute for Public Policy. ARC also sponsored a series of interactive calls which engaged over 1,600 people participated in policy and strategy discussion on topics such as race and the recession, race and immigration, and race and health.

While the direct impact of the *Compact* on the new presidential administration can never be known, the Compact has succeeded in creating a vibrant intersection of organizations and ideas around the post-election political moment, boldly interjecting explicit racial justice language into the national discourse, and providing the field of racial justice with a “map” of upcoming federal decisions on which they could have influence.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

Reflecting on these stories and others from the field of racial justice, Akonadi Foundation sees some opportunities for the field to strengthen and grow.

- **Good work is taking place that provides a structural racism analysis for understanding urgent issues like the economic crisis and immigration.** More resources need to go to policy efforts that bring a structural racism analysis into issues of broad national concern (not just those deemed “civil rights” or “minority issues”).
- **Calling attention to the existence and power of race-based outcomes (regardless of intent) is crucial to progress on structural racism.** More resources need to go to policy efforts that are based on an explicit racial equity analysis.
- **Current policy development and advocacy continue to be limited by lack of connection to strong grassroots movements demanding real change.** We need to continue to support both the growth and expansion of grassroots racial justice organizing and its capacity to address structural racism.
- **Research and thinking on structural racism is often detached and uninformed by locally grounded racial justice work.** Locally grounded racial justice work continues to struggle with connecting individual and community-level experiences with their structural racism context. More resources need to go to connecting structural racism research and thinking with locally grounded racial justice work. More resources need to go to local racial justice organizations to develop creative and effective political education and leadership development around structural racism.
- **Cultural work serves as an important vehicle for analysis and action on structural racism.** More resources need to go to cultural organizations with strong connections to racial justice organizing, as well as to cultural work undertaken by racial justice organizing groups.
- **Current policy development and advocacy continues to be limited by lack of mass communications strategies that shape the policy debate.** At the same time there is growing communications skill and strategy in the field of racial justice, with increasing capacity to tell stories in terms of structural racism, not just intentional individual or institutional discrimination. More resources need to go to support communications with a structural racism lens.
- **Racial justice work at the local and state level is being woven together nationally in ways that elevate the structural racism implications and build power to move future policy.** More resources need to go to local-to-national work using an explicit structural racism analysis.

APPENDIX

Current List of Organizations Receiving Akonadi Support

All of Us or None
Applied Research Center
Arab Resource Organizing Center
Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice
Asian Immigrant Women Advocates
Asian Pacific Environmental Network
Asian/Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy
and Leadership
Black Alliance for Just Immigration
Black Men and Boys Initiative
California Newsreel
Californians for Justice Education Fund
Center for Community Change
Center for Media Justice
Center for New Community
Center for Third World Organizing
Center for Young Women's Development
Communities for a Better Environment
Critical Resistance
East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy
EastSide Arts Alliance
Ella Baker Center for Human Rights
Equal Justice Society
Generations Ahead
Intertribal Friendship House
Just Cause Oakland
Justice Matters Institute
Justice Now
Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights
Leadership Excellence
Mobilize the Immigrant Vote California Collaborative
Movement Generation
Movement Strategy Center
Mujeres Unidas y Activas
National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
Oakland ACORN
Oakland Kids First
Partnership for Immigrant Leadership Action
People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER)
People's Grocery
People's Institute West
Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity
PODER - People Organizing To Demand Environmental
and Economic Rights
Poverty & Race Research Action Council
Public Advocates
Right to the City
School of Unity and Liberation
Speak Out - Institute for Democratic Education
and Culture
St. Peter's Housing Committee
UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education
Urban Habitat
Urban Strategies Council
Wildflowers Institute
Women of Color Resource Center
World Trust Educational Services
Youth Movement Records
Youth Together

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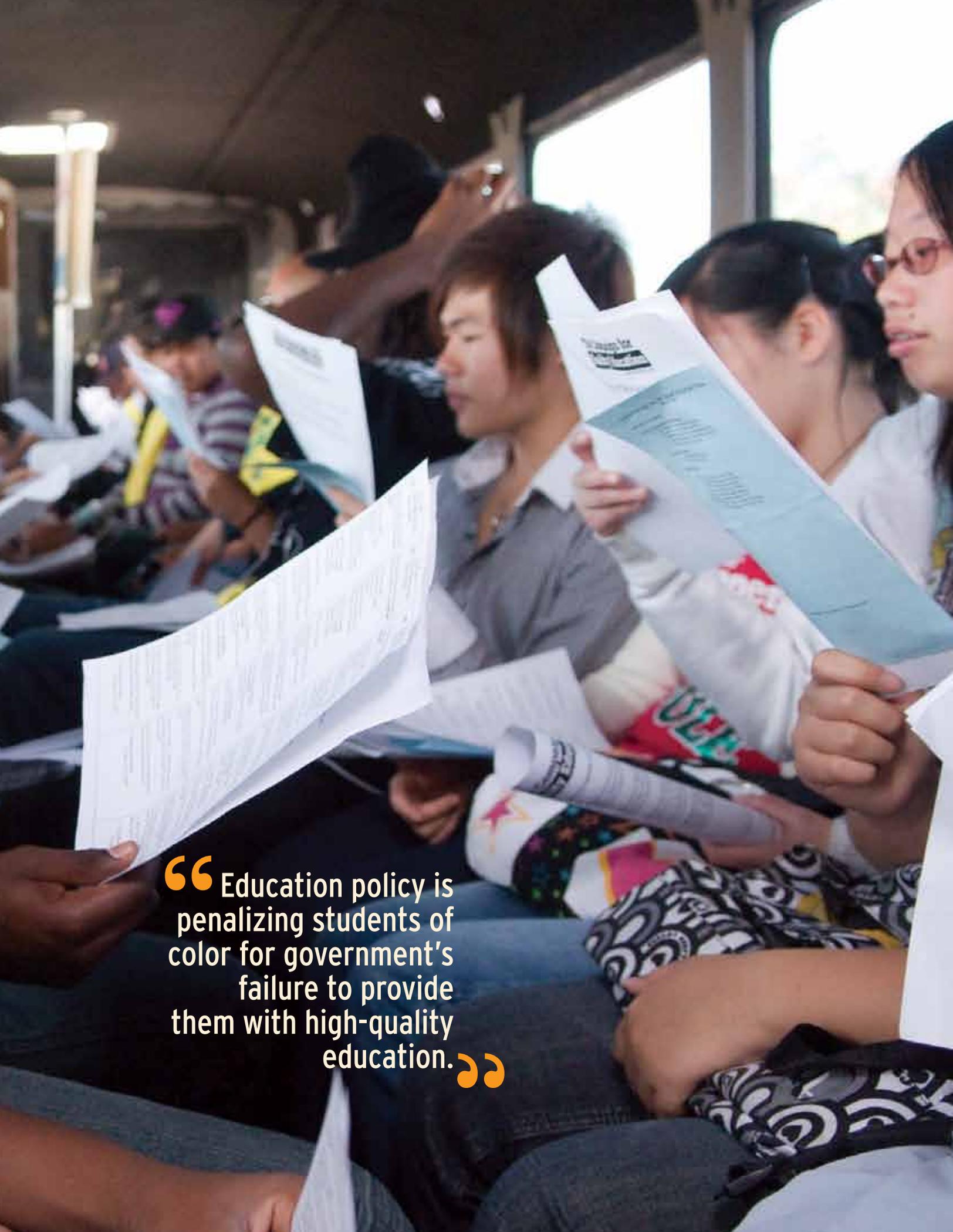
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“ Education policy is penalizing students of color for government’s failure to provide them with high-quality education. ”



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