Community-Powered Efforts Aim to Transform Systems to Advance Black Student Success

by Rafael Otto

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1. To provide members with an informal and balanced environment for collaborating, discussing and acting on important issues in public education.

2. To help members identify and prepare for what's next. With our finger on the pulse of our diverse network and eye on the broader horizon, we keep members informed of relevant and pressing issues, and equip members with the tools and knowledge required to shape the future.

Grantmakers for Education developed its series of case studies on effective education grantmaking as reflection and discussion tools. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data or illustrations of successful or unsuccessful grantmaking. In addition, to help make the case a more effective learning tool, it is deliberately written from one foundation's point of view, even though other foundations may have been involved in similar activities or supported the same grantees.

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Introduction

The story of the Black Student Success Initiative at the Oregon Community Foundation began with a committed group of Black leaders and advocates who had been working diligently to change the outcomes and life trajectories for Black students in the state. Those efforts would eventually pave the way for historic investments in Black students by the Oregon legislature in 2015 with the passage of House Bill 2016[1], which directed the Oregon Department of Education to develop and implement an education plan for Black children and students from birth through postsecondary education. These advancements would also help create the conditions for new philanthropic investments for Black students and Black-led organizations in Oregon, beginning with the Black Student Success Initiative that launched in 2018.

Developing the African American/Black Student Success Plan (HB 2016)[2] meant that the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) would need to establish an advisory group composed of key community members. From late 2015 to spring of 2016, that advisory group developed the plan, which consisted of detailed objectives and strategies to support Black students. It then set the criteria for the Oregon Department of Education to distribute nearly $3 million in grant funds to eligible organizations.

The effort was grounded in understanding that disparities in achievement and opportunity for Black students were persistent, chronic and stemmed from long standing historical inequities. The Oregon Department of Education had relied on its own data to better understand those educational disparities, but it also relied on in depth work from local partners in the comprehensive report from the Urban League of Portland called the *State of Black Oregon 2015.*[3] The report examined a constellation of factors impacting Black people and communities and called to dismantle the systems that perpetuate inequality with efforts grounded in social and racial justice and Black empowerment.

Kali Thorne Ladd, executive director at KairosPDX at the time, a nonprofit organization and elementary school focused on closing opportunity and achievement gaps for Black students, said that advocating for the African American/Black Student Success Plan included securing funding for programs focused on Black students. "We had support from legislative leadership, and we had the data to help us make the case," Thorne Ladd said. "When House Bill 2016 passed it was the first of its kind to have resources attached to it."

With the African American/Black Student Success Plan in place, the state issued grants to several nonprofit organizations. By 2017, an initial round of evaluation had been completed and funding for the next biennium was in place. But many of the same leaders that advocated for its passage felt the need to take further action. The leadership within the Oregon Department of Education at the time was

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in transition and some questioned the state's commitment to educational equity. The state's process for distributing the funds was seen by some as cumbersome, and the investment itself was seen as insufficient to correct a failing education system when it came to the needs of Black students. ODE's initial grantees also primarily served students in the Portland metro area, and many advocated for a broader distribution of funds, both to a broader range of organizations in terms of size and focus, but also to organizations working in communities across the state.

Max Williams, president and chief executive officer at the Oregon Community Foundation, said that the passage of House Bill 2016 positioned the state as a grantmaker engaging with many of the same people and organizations connected to the foundation. But there were concerns that the state wasn't well positioned to be

the convener holding responsibility for how organizations should work together.

Many of the leaders who had advocated for the passage of the state plan started having conversations with the Oregon Community Foundation in 2017. "We felt like we needed to find a way to preserve what we'd begun and expand involvement to deepen public-private partnership while also holding the state accountable," Thorne Ladd said.

"Several of our grantees approached us and we started having very organic conversations to better understand what they were seeing and what they were looking for," Williams said. "We heard a desire to be intentional about shaping how the network of grantees might work together relative to the state money. The state process had also started to create an environment of competition among organizations and our partners were looking for a more constructive approach."

Over the course of nearly a year, those conversations led to the idea of having an initiative with dedicated capacity housed inside the foundation, an effort that could align with the state efforts but create new strategies for supporting Black students and communities. "We could envision a multiyear grant to get things started," Williams said. "But I wanted to make sure we were the right fit and explore if other foundations or organizations in the community were better positioned to launch this kind of project."

"I don't think the Black Student Success Initiative would have gotten off the ground if it hadn't been conceived of and proposed by the community," Williams said. "We had strong relationships with these leaders and understood their commitment to Black student success, and that made a huge difference."

Looking back, the Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) ultimately made sense for a range of reasons. The foundation had a broad range of relationships with organizations across Oregon and credibility with policymakers and the business and philanthropic communities. They had the ability to provide leverage to key issues with political positioning. They had the capacity to build a new initiative from an operational and financial standpoint. And they offered the potential to access additional donor

funds to support the initiative and help sustain it.

In parallel with what was happening at the Oregon Department of Education, OCF launched the Black Student Success Initiative in 2018 with an initial $200,000 annual investment for three years to begin to create a framework for investing in Black leaders, students and organizations. "Beyond that initial three year commitment, we didn't have a clear definition of how this would look." Williams said. "There was clearly some risk involved — not that much in terms of a financial risk, but definitely some risk if we didn't get it right."

For the OCF board, there was no hesitation, no dissenting point of view about putting the foundation's assets into play for this effort. Williams said: "We made the commitment to launch and then cocreate."

Marcy Bradley joined OCF in October 2018 as the first program officer for the

> "I was excited by the opportunity to help philanthropy share power, to increase representation, to build a coalition and then to use these tactics to help our education system change."

Black Student Success Initiative. Mary Louise McClintock, the senior education strategy and policy advisor at the Oregon Community Foundation said a key piece of the puzzle was bringing in the right person to lead the work. "I can't stress enough how important that is. Our first attempt resulted in a failed search, but during the second round we thought Marcy would be great in that role. Marcy's listening skills, many years of experience with organizations serving Black students and deep relationships in the Black community made her an excellent choice for leading the initiative."

"I had spent more than 25 years in the community working to improve the educational experience of Black students," Bradley said, "and more than 20 years at Self Enhancement, Inc." Self Enhancement, Inc. is a multi-service organization focused on serving primarily Black or low-income youth, families and adults with a variety of education and social services.

"My orientation has always been about the community and the kids and families," Bradley said. "When Mary Louise reached out to me, it was clear that I could build the initiative from the ground up. I was excited by the opportunity to help philanthropy share power, to increase representation, to build a coalition and then to use these tactics to help our education system change."

Looking ahead, Bradley continued: "Philanthropy has been so far behind in funding the Black community that we might benefit by avoiding incremental approaches and increasing the appetite to take risks in our work."

Black Student Achievement: Data Highlight Inequality

Black leaders in Oregon understood that efforts to support Black student success aren't likely to succeed if they aren't grounded in historical and social context and in the data that details what opportunity and achievement gaps look like. When used together, the context and data help paint a more complete picture depicting the social conditions impacting the lives of Black students and the extent of the disparities rooted in systemic deficiencies.

In Oregon, that context includes a history that mirrors societal events from across the country, but also has unique features. Prior to statehood in 1859, a series of exclusion laws[4] worked to prevent Blacks from entering the Oregon territory which

Key Dates

2015: HB 2016 passes and directs the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) to create the African American/Black Student Success Plan with $2.7 million for the biennium.

2015-2016: ODE forms an advisory group and creates the African American/ Black Student Success Plan.

2016: First grants issued by ODE.

2017: State allocates $5.23 million for the African American/Black Student Success Plan.

2018: The Oregon Community Foundation launches the Black Student Success Initiative with $600,000.

2019: State allocates $12 million for the African American/Black Student Success Plan.

2019: Philanthropic partners add $525,000 for community grants through the Black Student Success Initiative at OCF.

2020: Justice Oregon for Black Lives launches at Meyer Memorial Trust with $25 million.

2021: State allocates $14.4 million for the African American/Black Student Success Plan.

2021: The Black Equity Movement launches at The Collins Foundation with $3 million.

2021: The Oregon Community Foundation dedicates $5 million to the Black Student Success Initiative.

encompassed the entire Pacific Northwest and British Columbia. Oregon was the only state admitted to the Union with a race-based exclusion law in its constitution. Once statehood was established, the state banned Black people from owning property, signing contracts or voting. Oregon's exclusion law was not repealed until 1926 and racist language banning Blacks from entering the state or owning real estate was not removed from the constitution until 2002, and not without a fight. These efforts have continually reinforced a whites-only mentality coupled with intentionally structured systems that have sustained white supremacy, the impacts of which still reverberate today and underpin social conditions impacting contemporary Black lives.

In recent decades, significant attempts have been made to better understand that historical context as something that underpins the present state of Black Oregon. In 2009, the Urban League of Portland released its *State of Black Oregon*[5] report that examined a host of key issues including education, economic development, housing, criminal justice and much more. And it established policy recommendations for each area to stimulate action.

In that report, the data about Black student achievement clearly indicated that race shaped educational disparities, and achievement gaps for Black students were entrenched across grade levels and by subject. Data from 2007-08 indicated that the number of Black students not meeting math and reading benchmarks by grade was painfully high. Some 25% of third graders did not meet reading standards and 37% did not meet math standards. Even more striking was the fact that those numbers worsened over time. By 10th grade, 60% did not meet reading standards, 75% did not meet mathematics standards and 63% did not meet writing standards. Additionally, Black students were being expelled or suspended at twice the rate of white students and the Black graduation rate trailed the white graduation rate by 17% age points.

In making a call to eliminate disparities in achievement, the report pointed to education as the "key to resolving all other issues that African Americans face." Looking back to achievement data from

1997, the state had made no progress in addressing Black student achievement and closing achievement gaps. In math, the achievement gap between Black and white students worsened from 1997 to 2008.

Policy recommendations included expanded investments in early childhood, recognizing that the achievement gap between Black and white students was entrenched by the time third grade testing occurred. Given the data above, it was clear that the K-12 system had been unable to close achievement gaps, which suggested the need for a comprehensive strategy spanning birth to 12th grade in order to change outcomes. Additional recommendations included developing a culturally competent workforce, connecting the best teachers with students who needed their skills the most, creating school district equity plans, proactively helping schools retain students, making classes more relevant and engaging and connected to careers, then focusing on what worked for Black students and expanding those efforts.

By 2015, the *State of Black Oregon* report, published about every five years, had become even more expansive and its focus

on education had varied little in its urgent call for change. One writer asked, "What conditions and dynamics lead to these persistent patterns of inequities between Blacks and other Oregonians?" A subtle theme presented itself in the Urban League report, the desire and need for Black people and communities to protect themselves from the impact of the state's systems: protecting Black communities from public policy that fractures and harms them, protecting Black mothers with strong anti-poverty strategies that support child and maternal health outcomes, protecting the first 1,000 days of a child's life to ensure positive health outcomes and protecting Black students in the state's education system from things like unfair discipline practices and a lack of culturally specific supports.[6]

Thorne Ladd, writing as the executive director at KairosPDX, focused on embracing new narratives that could help liberate Black children from the statistics and negative imagery that so often define them. In that context, she said that change included "recognizing that the achievement gap is in fact a symptom of structural and systemic barriers that need to be fixed, not children who need to be fixed. This can't

be done by maintaining the status quo. It takes radical change in how schools and classrooms are envisioned and organized."[7]

The education data remained stark: the gaps between Black and white students for all grade levels (based on 2012-13 data) remained unmoved over time and continued to worsen in math as children got older. Suspension and expulsion rates for Black students were more than twice the rate for white students. And the poverty rate for Black students was 34% higher than for their white peers.[8]

In 2017, KairosPDX commissioned another report called *Black Students in Oregon*[9], recognizing that "the goal of closing the achievement gap continues to elude Oregon schools." The report took the step of capturing where Black students were located across the state by school district. It found that half of the state's Black students were concentrated in five school districts, four of which were in the Portland metro area. It honed in on the rate of chronic absenteeism which was 6% higher for Black students compared to white students. It also found that only 1% of teachers in Oregon were Black while 5% of the state's K-12 students were Black. And

the achievement gap between Black and white students remained in place and was statistically equal to gaps nationwide.

Nationally, data trends for Black student achievement and discipline proved equally disheartening, beginning in preschool. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, for school districts with children in preschool, 6% reported suspending out of school at least one preschool child, though the lack of available data for preschool age children suggests this number is low.[10] For preschool students with multiple school suspensions, 48% were Black and 26% were white (based on 2014 data).[11] In the K-12 system, Black boys and girls had higher rates of suspension than any of their peers, 20% for boys and 12% for girls.[12]

Meanwhile, the Nation's Report Card results from 2017 showed that the achievement gap for Black students compared to white peers was the largest of all racial groups in math and reading and in grades 4 and 8.[13]

The story the data told about education disparities for Black students was clear and had changed very little in recent decades. But a significant question remained
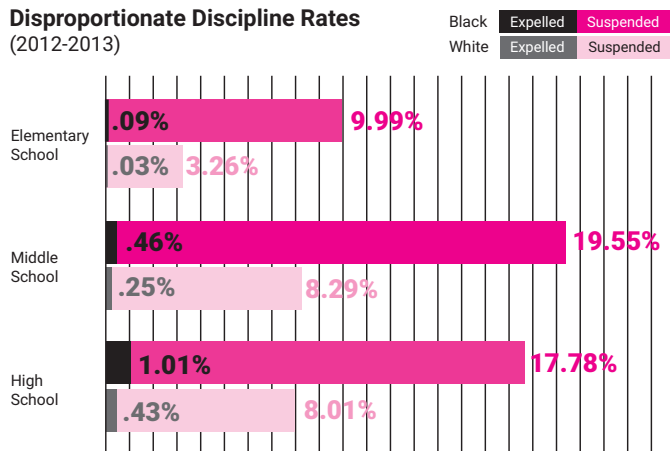
for philanthropy, particularly for white, dominant culture institutions: What would the education system need to do to truly help Black students succeed? And many others wondered: Why was it taking so long and so much effort to develop a strategy to fix a failing education system that left Black students living and learning in a state of crisis?

At the same time, nonprofit organizations and community-based schools like KairosPDX and Self Enhancement, Inc. were seeing strong results for Black students. Math achievement scores for Black students at KairosPDX were twice as high as the state average[14] and the high school graduation rate for students served by programs through Self Enhancement, Inc. approached 100% year over year.[15]
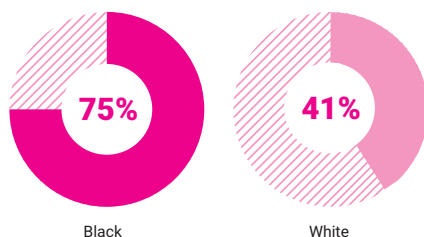
By the fall of 2017, the funding attached to the African American/Black Student Success Plan at the Oregon Department of Education had been distributed to several nonprofit organizations over a two year period. An evaluation of that initial work had been completed, and concerns about the Oregon Department of Education's ability to adapt its support for Black students remained. Conversations between

Data Describe Disparities

Disproportionate Discipline Rates
(2012-2013)

Black: Expelled / Suspended
White: Expelled / Suspended

Elementary School: .09% | 9.99% — .03% | 3.26%

Middle School: .46% | 19.55% — .25% | 8.29%

High School: 1.01% | 17.78% — .43% | 8.01%

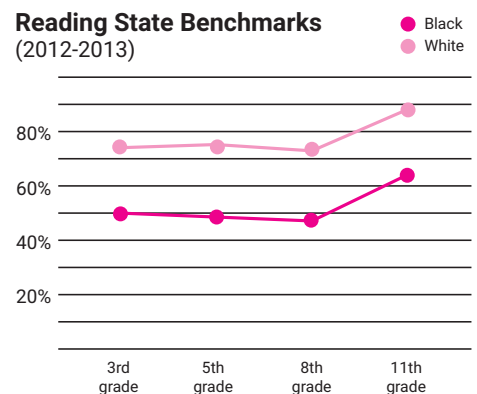### Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch
(2013-2014)

75% Black
41% White

Eliminating poverty before a student enters school is one of the best ways to improve graduation rates.

Math State Benchmarks
(2012-2013)

Black / White

3rd grade | 5th grade | 8th grade | 11th grade
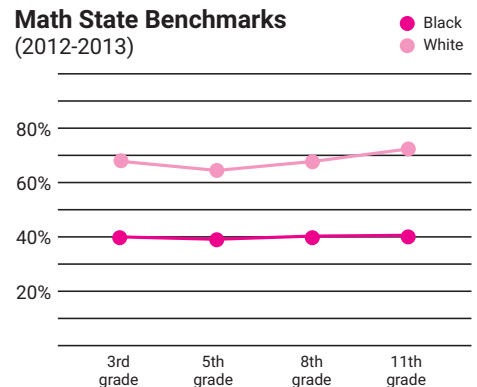
Reading State Benchmarks
(2012-2013)

Black / White

3rd grade | 5th grade | 8th grade | 11th grade

Source: Urban League of Portland, State of Black Oregon 2015

community leaders and Max Williams at the Oregon Community Foundation had been underway and the foundation was moving toward launching the Black Student Success Initiative.

When OCF launched the initiative in 2018 with Marcy Bradley on board as a program officer, the data picture was not yet complete. Bradley knew, at minimum, that community input would need to be a key driver for the work ahead. "When I joined OCF I had no history in philanthropy," Bradley said. "I was tired of our issues being ignored because I understood that we held solutions in our community that were working for Black students."

Bradley also set out to improve how philanthropy thought about the interconnected nature of issues facing Black students. She understood, and the [research supported the concept](#), that race is "the single most important factor in understanding societal structures and the resulting disparities."[16] American society has been largely unable to address poverty and the nation's school systems have been unable to address disparities in achievement and opportunity for Black students. Because racial and economic inequality are so closely intertwined, Bradley felt that a philanthropic strategy would need to consider that intersectionality to be successful.

"Funders sometimes have difficulty seeing how different issues are connected," Bradley said. "But I believe that if we decide to center children, to center communities, and if we start by centering Black children specifically, then we can adequately develop a successful ecosystem of support."

The Black Student Success Initiative was structured to align with the state's African American/Black Student Success Plan, which set out to increase investments in education, close opportunity gaps and stimulate community-led problem solving. The initiative launched with three goals:

- Increase visibility and engagement in efforts to address Black Student Success.

- Initiate and support dissemination of best practices to help eliminate disparities for Black Students in Oregon.

- Forge partnerships that increase support for Black Student Success statewide.

Funder Task Force Commits to a Posture of Learning

Soon after the Black Student Success Initiative launched, Bradley began to build relationships within Oregon's philanthropic community. She came to the work ready to help philanthropy establish a learning mindset, one she hoped would stimulate partnerships, strengthen relationships between philanthropy and the nonprofit sector and improve strategies for supporting Black students. Early partners in that work were Meyer Memorial Trust, the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation, and The Collins Foundation, and they

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formed a funders task force to stimulate collaboration and begin to develop a charter to guide their work. Bradley found agreement among philanthropic leadership, most of whom had, like Bradley, deep experience working in the nonprofit arena, to work on bringing philanthropy into equal partnership with organizations working in the community.

"My goal was to help get philanthropy into a posture of learning," Bradley said, "to get them to stop and listen and consider a different way of making decisions." She continued: "I also understood that philanthropy's typical way of working might rely on a literature review and then measuring success by how many dollars were flowing to Black students. But dollars going to kids just isn't enough to change the way our systems are operating and harming young people.

Bradley launched the Black Student Success Funders Task Force in 2019 to help funders "learn while doing" and, based

on many conversations and efforts to bring partners to the table, the group created a set of three guiding values:

- **Equity:** To address the historic and present-day obstacles to equal outcomes, change requires interventions that target community needs so all people can flourish.

- **Honoring Community Knowledge:** The experiences, wisdom and recommendations of those leaders who work most closely on the issues of Black Student Success will create an informed process that will yield stronger outcomes.

- **Shared Future:** Focusing on the Black community is important for those community members, and equally so, to all people, because we are all part of the same social fabric and call this place Oregon, home.

The purpose of the Black Student Success Funders Task Force evolved over the course of 2019 to the following:

- Create a home for philanthropy to prioritize resources, to explore partnership, and take action to address inequitable educational outcomes for Black students.

- Convene and support a network of culturally based practitioners to identify needs, gaps and scale required to address the goal.

- Facilitate a learning community for philanthropy to develop complementary approaches to funding the work for Black Student Success into the future.

- Provide pooled resources to fund the work of the Black Student Success Community Network.

- Use state and national reports and data relevant to Black Student Success to further inform our work.

- Through these activities and objectives, project what is needed to address the scale and scope for Black Student Success, and how philanthropy can be a strong partner.

The Funders Task Force and funding partner investments grew quickly. During the first year, the Gray Family Foundation

and the PGE Foundation joined Meyer Memorial Trust, the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation, and The Collins Foundation, agreeing to pool funds to support the Black Student Success Initiative. By the end of 2019, a total of $725,000 was committed by OCF and partners, $525,000 of which was available for grantmaking to community partners through the pooled fund, including OCF investments and contributions from an individual donor.

Matt Morton, the Equitable Education portfolio director at Meyer Memorial Trust, said that Bradley's experience with the community really came through when launching the Black Student Success Initiative and the funders task force. "She had strong community credibility that she put to use to bring people together," Morton said. "She was able to capture more resources for grants and staffing, and she needed to because she didn't truly have the resources in place to launch an initiative."

Morton knew Bradley during his years as the executive director at the Native American Youth and Family Center in Portland, prior to his role at Meyer Memorial Trust. Because they both came from community serving organizations, they understood that creating better connections to philanthropy would be an important aspect of the initiative and help ensure its success. Morton recognized that it has not historically been philanthropy's strength to tune in to the community voice and let that voice influence grantmaking strategies. In recent years, however, in Oregon and elsewhere, a gradual shift has started to take place, one that has begun to center community needs, experience, expertise and perspective.

"That kind of shift comes when philanthropic organizations are intentional about hiring people from the field, from their network of grantees and community organizations," Morton said. "My experience working in the nonprofit sector taught me that what I wanted to do in philanthropy would need to be vetted by the community to be successful. That's the mentality I brought to the work, and I know Marcy did, too."

Morton continued: "I believe the experts are those in the community itself. In the Native community, that's always the case. And

when you hire from the community it raises the value of the community process and makes it more recognizable."

Bradley pointed to the fact that underfunding Black and Native communities in philanthropy has not been a new phenomenon and it wasn't unique to OCF. "The root cause of that stems from historical injustices," she said, "and improving representation of marginalized communities by hiring nontraditional candidates will help."

Kimberly Howard, chair of the State Board of Education and a program officer at the PGE Foundation and, talked about the impact of the Black Student Success Initiative and the funders task force on her

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work and her organization's grantmaking strategies. "PGE's equity journey began several years ago, and our progress has been deliberate," Howard said. "OCF's presence in the space with Black Student Success has been really influential, and it's given us something rest on, to help us think about what it really takes to change outcomes. The evidence shows that culturally specific organizations know how to do that. And if that's the case then let's invest in the people and organizations to change those outcomes. That's the story line we have relied on when talking about this work with outside partners and internally."

The community centric approach developing in the funders task force also reflected recommendations made by the Portland-based Coalition of Communities of Color in a 2010 report called *Philanthropy and Communities of Color in Oregon: From Strategic Investments to Assessable Impacts Amidst Growing Racial and Ethnic Diversity*.[17] In that report, the coalition

called for improved partnerships between philanthropy and communities of color to effect change and address disparities. With a commitment to racial equity and intentional partnerships between philanthropy and community-serving organizations, the coalition felt grantmaking could be truly responsive to communities of color while including them in the decision making process. In other words, the community itself had been calling for a shift in grantmaking strategies for many years. With leaders like Bradley and Morton working inside philanthropy on key education focused initiatives, that shift appeared increasingly likely.

A key aspect of understanding how to move the work forward included spending time on capturing the right data at the right time. The coalition had called for the adoption of "standardized culturally-sensitive data and research practices" to maximize the impact of investments. But Bradley pushed that thinking even further, knowing that the philanthropic sector is often data driven, and honed in on the concept of data justice.

Data justice focuses on understanding who controls the narrative. It made sense to ask if control of the narrative was held by philanthropy or by the community. And if both weren't involved, then how could good data-informed decisions be made? An article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* pointed to key variables on the path toward data justice: understanding who decides what data is collected and why, how data collection is governed, who interprets the data and gives it meaning and the role of lived experience for communities being researched.[18] But how would those decisions get made and who would have a role in making them?

From Bradley's perspective, the concept of data justice was well known in the community; for the funders task force it was an area of growth. The principles of data justice include taking advantage of what already exists in the community, experimenting with a range of data collection methods, setting the stage for transparency and more open communication, and learning by doing, an important approach for Bradley when she set out to establish guidelines for how the funders task force would operate. "Learning by doing" would set the stage for partnership, collaboration, reflection and inquiry.

"The expectation within OCF is that we work with the community and have decision making processes led by the community," Bradley said. "The initiative itself is a learning tool."

Jackie Murphy, a program officer at The Collins Foundation with a long history working for community-serving organizations, was one of the original members of the funders task force. She described the work as essential for helping philanthropy really unpack and understand the issues faced by Black students, and all students of color, in Oregon. "For the first time in a foundation setting, I was able to create space to dig into the educational disparities for students of color," Murphy said. "It has helped improve my awareness of the issues and the barriers, as well as the opportunities. I have a better understanding of historical issues impacting Black students, systemic issues and the state policy landscape."

D'Artagnan Caliman, director of an initiative at Meyer Memorial Trust called Justice Oregon for Black Lives that launched in 2020, described the funders task force as an opportunity to improve collaboration partnership. "As a newer member, it's helped me understand how to leverage our resources collaboratively, but also understand where there's room to do things differently. As we develop Justice Oregon for Black Lives at Meyer it helps tremendously to know what lane OCF is in compared to Collins or other foundations."

As Bradley worked to give structure to the task force and bring in additional partners, she had a transformative experience when she participated in a seminar hosted by the Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE). She had the opportunity to learn about a network of direct service organizations operated by the Southern Education Foundation and brought the idea back to colleagues and community leaders in Oregon. "Everybody loved the idea of building a network that would strengthen our grantees and how they connected with philanthropy," Bradley said. "So, we thought that might be a starting point to help us meet the goals of the initiative."

Over the course of a year, the funders task force quickly became a source of philanthropic collaboration and learning, exploring everything from nonprofit needs to updates in education policy at the state level. Through these conversations, the development of a grantee network that would inform grantmaking started to take shape.

Background on the "Culturally Specific" Approach

Ann Curry-Stevens, a full professor at Wilfrid Laurier University and longtime research partner for the Coalition of Communities of Color (CCC) based in Portland, Oregon, said the concept of "culturally specific" had been around for many years. The work itself had been taking place in specific communities for a long time, and the concept had roots in women's health care and LGBTQ services. It stemmed from the idea that a one-size-fits-all approach to services or programs was rarely effective, and the dominant discourse did not typically reflect the needs of communities of color. Earlier terms included "ethnic agencies" (U.S.) and "ethnocultural organizations" (Canada), but the term "culturally specific" appears to have originated in the work and research conducted by the CCC in the early to mid-2000s.

"The way a culturally specific organization is structured is unique," Curry-Stevens said, "and it's important to define it at the organizational level versus at the program level. A culturally specific organization will have origins in the community. The leadership and board will be from the community. There will be a sense of reciprocity with the community and obligations to the community. These will be different from mainstream, dominant culture organizations or programs within them."

She continued: "The community will recognize the organization as their own and the organization itself will have some long-term staying power in terms of effectively serving their communities."

The definition from the Coalition of Communities of Color for a culturally specific organization includes the following:

- The majority of members and/or clients must be from a particular community of color.

- The organizational environment is culturally focused, and the community being served recognizes it as a culturally-specific organization.

- The majority of staff must be from the community being served, and the majority of leadership (defined to collectively include Board members and management positions) must be from the community being served.

- The organization has a track record of successful community engagement and involvement with the community being served.

- The community being served recognizes the organization as advancing the best interests of the community and engaging in policy advocacy on behalf of the community being served.

Resources

- Policies to Eliminate Racial Disparities in Education: A Literature Review (2013)[19]

- In Defense of Culturally-Specific Organizations: Understanding the Rationale and the Evidence (2016)[20]

- Building the Case for Culturally Specific P-3 Strategies in Oregon (2019)[21]

- Rethinking Services with Communities of Color: Why Culturally Specific Organizations Are the Preferred Service Delivery Model (2019)[22]

- Emerging Evidence of the Value of Culturally Specific Organizations: Results of a Delphi and Consumer Voice Study (2021)[23]

Ongoing discussions inside the funders task force built on the idea of the network Bradley learned about at ABFE and brought clarity to its purpose. Bradley and her peers wanted to strengthen the capacity of the network grantees while recognizing the burden often placed on leaders at community serving organizations. "It's not uncommon for leaders of color who are already under-resourced," Bradley said, "to get asked to come to the table and teach people about issues and perspectives with no additional resources to support their time while they are simultaneously running businesses. So, one of the first big decisions we made was to make grants to organizations to give them the capacity to participate in this network."

Additionally, given the focus on strengthening Black leadership in the initiative, it was important to understand that people of color working outside the institution of philanthropy often faced an uphill battle when trying to meaningfully engage with it. It was also clear that funders weren't entirely sure how to get the right leaders and organizations to the table to move the work forward. The network, soon to be called the Oregon Black Student Success Community Network, would prove to be a powerful tool to ensure that happened.

Black Student Success Community Network Drives Learning and Collaboration

While funder collaboration for the initiative had been growing through 2019, the funders task force launched officially in January 2020 with 10 member organizations. By June 2020, the Oregon Black Student Success Community Network launched formally with $20,000 capacity building grants to 20 participating organizations.[24]

The foundation described it as an "advisory think tank" designed to "bring grassroots educational leaders together to provide direction to funders" focused on Black children from early childhood through college.

The purpose of the Oregon Black Student Success Community Network includes:

- Bringing together leaders in the field for Black Student Success to be in

relationship with one another because trusted relationships are a key ingredient to systems change work.

- Creating opportunities for community organizations to identify the additional factors to be addressed for Black Student Success.

- Considering and advocating for ways to grow the field of organizations in the state that include Black leadership and attention to Black Student Success.

- Identifying ways for Black students, their parents and guardians to have a voice in defining success for the students, community and state.

- Making recommendations about the scale and scope of actions required to shift to sustained educational equity for the Black community.

- Considering the value of the network and making recommendations about its continued purpose, function and outcomes.

The initial grants were designed to support participation in the community network. Network members joined with the understanding that participation meant helping philanthropic partners on the funders task force learn about issues impeding Black students in the state, opening a dialogue for creating effective funding strategies, providing input on communications and narrative change and co-creating policy agendas that would effectively support Black students.

Eligibility requirements for nonprofit organizations applying for these capacity building grants, which focused on supporting Black-led organizations, included the following:

- The staff and leadership reflect the Black community (or communities) that is served.

- A significant number of clients, children and families served are from Black communities.

- The organizational environment is culturally focused and identified as such by participants.

- The organization or leadership has a track record of successful community engagement and involvement with Black communities being served.

The selection process would factor in the "organization's relationship with and reflection of Black communities, experience with education programs focused on Black students, creation of a dynamic group that spans educational approaches, age range of students and geographies in Oregon."

Bradley said that "the challenges that marginalize Black children in Oregon's education system are far too great for individual organizations to address alone. This network will utilize strategic collaboration, create meaningful partnerships and spearhead coalitions designed to attack root causes of educational inequity in Oregon."

For much of 2019, Bradley had been working to bring the network together by meeting with leaders, visiting organizations in different parts of the state and conceptualizing what the work ahead would look like. By the time the community network launched formally in 2020, much of the groundwork had been laid for collaboration and partnership between network grantees and funders.

Among the initial round of 20 network grantees, 17 were in the Portland metro area in the northern part of the state, two were in Lane County in the Southern Willamette Valley, and one was located in Southern Oregon. With two-thirds of the state's Black K-12 students located in the four counties of the Portland metro area, it made sense that most grants were

made in that region. But Bradley sought to build a statewide perspective as well and would actively seek to engage leaders and organizations operating in different regions in Oregon. Soon after the launch she added three more organizations from Central Oregon, the central Oregon coast and Southern Oregon.

"We wanted to make sure we understood the work happening in different areas of the state and have the network serve to strengthen those efforts and ultimately inform grantmaking decisions through the funders task force," Bradley said. "The needs of Black students in Medford would likely be different than the needs of Black students in Portland, or the needs of Somali immigrant students in remote parts of the state like Eastern Oregon."

In 2020, community network members wanted a deeper understanding of the number of Black students in the state and where they lived. They worked with a regional economic consulting firm called ECONorthwest to address the longstanding problem of undercounting Black students in the state's K-12 system. But the effort wasn't simply about getting a better handle on the data. It was clear to Bradley and community network

members that the history of anti-Black policies and practices in the state was at play in how the Oregon Department of Education tracked and counted Black youth. Undercounting Black students was another example of discriminatory practices that led to underfunding programs and the development of harmful policies for Black youth, families and communities.

Martha Richards, executive director at the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation described the undercount issue as a longstanding problem that had been commonly known but never examined in enough detail. The network's drive to dig deep on the issue changed that. "We heard about the undercount at every meeting we had with community serving organizations," Richards said. "The undercount has been an issue for all students of color. The Oregon Department of Education has few standards for collecting that kind of data, no way to add nuance or incorporate multicultural identities."

In 2018, the Oregon Department of Education reported that 2.3% of K-12 students identified as Black. The analysis from ECONorthwest identified more than twice as many students in the system who identified as Black: 5.4%. Additionally, over

the ten year period of (2009-2019), Oregon Department of Education reported a 14% decline in K-12 Black student enrollment. In contrast, analysis from ECONorthwest showed Black student enrollment steadily increasing over the same period, by a total of almost 30%. Data has also shown that children under the age of five in Oregon are increasingly diverse, meaning the Black student population is expected to continue growing, and the K-12 educational system must prepare for a more diverse student body.

This undercount, according to OCF, "contributed to a disinvestment in culturally appropriate resources from school boards and superintendents and perpetrated an underrepresentation of Black teachers and administrators in Oregon schools."

It didn't take long for the community network and the funders task force to begin the process of shared learning, influencing each other's work while keeping the needs of students, communities and organizations top of mind. Grantees were getting an inside look at how philanthropy operated and made decisions. Funders were learning directly from Black leaders and organizations about how to strengthen the state ecosystem for Black students. A sense of camaraderie was building, and the collaborative effort was shaping decisions and strategies.

Kimberly Howard, from the PGE Foundation, said that participating in the community network helped her foundation get to know more organizations engaged in the work of serving Black students, many of which were smaller and lesser known, and others located outside of the Portland metro area.

"We were influenced enough by the experience of engaging with the network to change our metrics," Howard said. "We now have a metric that says 30% of our dollars will go to culturally specific nonprofits across all cycles. In education, that also means that larger grants would now go to culturally specific organizations and more traditional organizations would receive smaller grants."

Marcus LeGrand, a board member with The Father's Group in Central Oregon and school board member with the Bend-La Pine district, described the community

Oregon Statewide K-12 Black Student Count Comparison

Black bars indicate data from ECONorthwest and show a growing Black student population. Pink bars show a declining Black student population per data from the Oregon Department of Education.
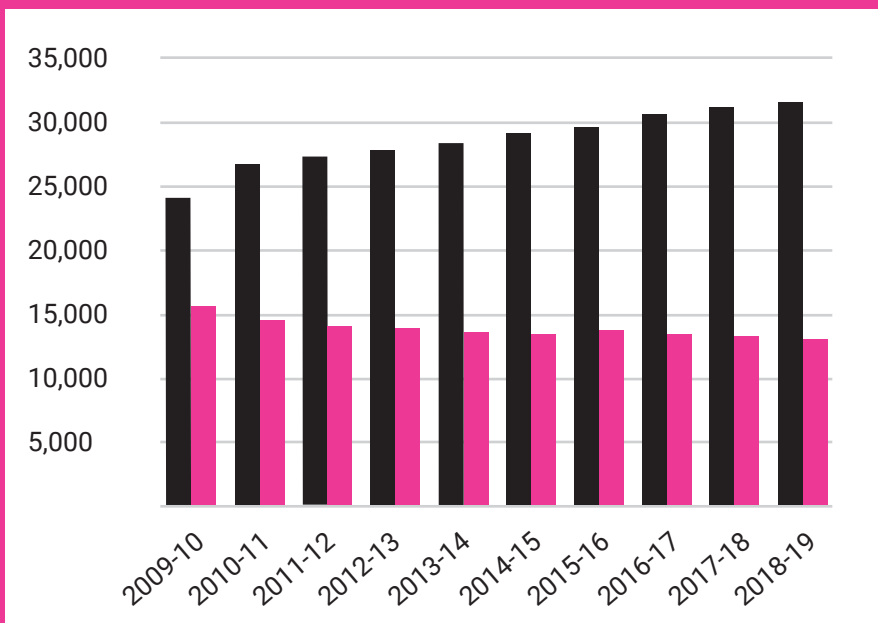
Source: ECONorthwest analysis of Oregon Department of Education data, 2020

network, and his relationship with OCF and Bradley as a tremendous resource, from the logistics of writing better grants to tapping into a committed network of leaders. "I've been to many Black Student Success network meetings just to listen and learn," LeGrand said. "It's really been a place for us to tap into knowledge and resources, especially because we don't always have a strong network of partners to work with here in Bend who are committed to the cause."

For LeGrand, the impact of history on Black America has been a driver for the work he has been doing with The Father's Group. "It's really hard to function sometimes if you don't know if the system is for you or against you," he said. "The decisions and policies we have been subjected to have consistently undermined our ability to build and access resources over time. Historically, we have always been fighting uphill for some kind of normalcy. That history has separated us and isolated us. Because of that we have to work locally to get things done. And while we work with our students to understand the world they live in and help them succeed we also have to have an eye on policy at all levels."

LeGrand sees the work as inherently connected to building a more inclusive society and more inclusive communities. And while he knows that the focus of this initiative is Black students, it is also clear to him that the work is about building power and building a stronger, more self-sufficient Black community that will be well-resourced and sustainable. "I would love to see the network evolve and grow stronger locally so we can pool resources and break away from the larger funders over time," he said. "That's what we need to rebuild our schools, our churches and our community."

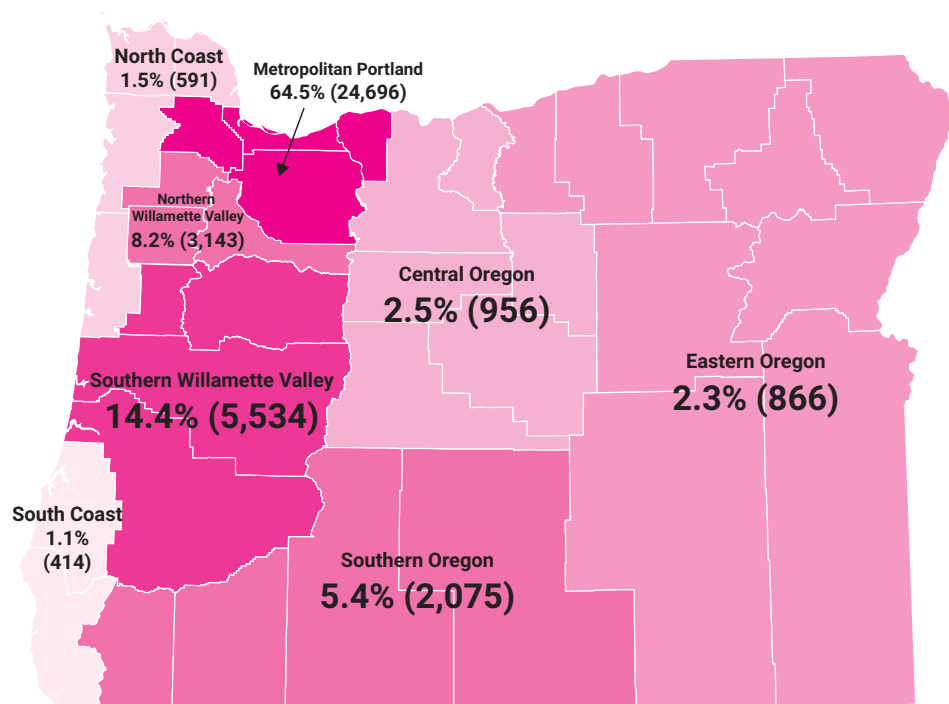D.L. Richardson, cofounder of the Black Southern Oregon Alliance saw two

parallel efforts happening inspired by the community network. "The network of organizations is there to build community and share expertise and serve Black students across the state," he said. "But we are also trying to build a network for the students themselves so they can feel connected to each other and to something powerful."

Expanding on the theme of protecting Black students and communities as seen in the 2015 *State of Black Oregon* from the Urban League of Portland[25], Richardson said the Black Southern Oregon Alliance was there to help students feel safe in their schools, to address complaints and concerns from students and families, including things like verbal attacks, and serve as an advocate for students and

parents as it deals with equity issues and racial bias. "We work with teachers and administrators on understanding implicit bias, microaggressions, and the perspective of Black immigrants and anyone from the Black diaspora," he said. "Our job is to help people understand that things are changing, that just because you've done something a certain way for 20 years doesn't mean it isn't time to do things differently."

The community network has helped fortify those efforts and strengthened the resolve of those participating in the work. McClintock, from OCF, reflected on the direction and purpose of the network and felt the stage was being set for something powerful: "I hope it becomes a voice to be reckoned with."

Black K-12 and Postsecondary Students in Oregon by Region, 2018-2019 School Year

North Coast
1.5% (591)

Metropolitan Portland
64.5% (24,696)

Northern Willamette Valley
8.2% (3,143)

Central Oregon
2.5% (956)

Southern Willamette Valley
14.4% (5,534)

Eastern Oregon
2.3% (866)

South Coast
1.1% (414)

Southern Oregon
5.4% (2,075)

Source: ECONorthwest

Grantee Perspectives on Participating in the Oregon Black Student Success Community Network:

"It has challenged the way we frame ourselves as Black-led and Black-serving organizations."

"It has helped me replenish my spirit by creating healing and affirming spaces."

"It makes me feel that I am not alone in the fight."

"The BSS Network has created an incredible think tank."

"It has increased our visibility and credibility."

Funder Perspectives on Engaging with the Oregon Black Student Success Community Network:

"I've gained so many things, but particularly just how important it is to fund healing, connecting, learning and relationships."

"I have a lot that I can take back to my team and executive team to support making a real shift to trust-based philanthropy."

"I've learned that capacity building often includes expectations that organizations adopt white dominant culture values and structures. I just had never thought about that before."

"A few of my big takeaways were around building trust which also means that we, as philanthropy, need to trust that the community knows best. In addition, we need to engage them in the solutions, not just in defining the problems."

Students, educators and parents share perspectives on the state of public education for the Black community network

A lot of what is taught in the public school system is repetitive and it gets boring and it's easy to get sidetracked. At Rosemary Anderson High School, we learn about things we haven't learned before, like the successes of African-Americans. And that keeps you in focus, in tune and really wanting to know more.

Student

Kids need teachers who look like them. There was a time when we used to have a program to recruit Black and Native teachers. It's gone now but it needs to come back.

Educator

I was the first Black teacher at a Portland elementary school, and I didn't understand the significance of that at the time. It was a constant uphill battle, because I had to teach Black history all the time, to my students, to my colleagues. It really burned me out.

Educator

It feels like we are ignored in the school system. There is a lack of opportunities for people of color, a lack of opportunities in the STEM field. Our school has a Black student union and that helps a bit. One of the best opportunities I had was an internship that helped me prepare for college and organize my finances.

Student

We need more Black history all year long, more than just what's taught in February. We need to learn more than Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks.

Parent

Low expectations are a problem in the school system. Parents have to be aware of what is being put on the table for our kids to aspire to. It's more than sports.

Parent

There are more kids that go through these hardships than we know. We need more people to support them, more mentors. And students need to see people in those roles who look like them. That's the best route.

Mentor

There are always classes that talk about slavery and Black history, but they don't talk much about Black success, the good things we've contributed. Talking about dropout rates and poor graduation rates for Black students makes me feel bad, it brings me down. I know they are trying to push us to do better, but it feels backhanded. Working with the African Youth & Community Organization has helped me through that.

Student

Strong expectations for students comes from how comfortable you are around people of color. You have to have a level of comfort to talk with your students, so they know you expect something from them. If you aren't comfortable with people of color, you will just fall back on what society has taught you about us.

Educator

I definitely want to be a part of helping my community and seeing things change.

Student

Black leaders in the school system used to have higher expectations for Black students. Leadership is important. We need leaders that believe all kids can learn.

Student

As a parent it's like having a second job monitoring what's happening in school. Kids get information that isn't accurate about Black history and if you don't step in your child will continue to be at a disadvantage. Culturally-specific programs are better at this, but we have to invest in teachers of color if we want things to change.

We need families and youth involved in how dollars coming to the district get spent. Very few of those decisions are informed by Black students, families and people.

Parents

In my high school now, I can talk to my teachers in ways I have never been able to before. I think that's because it's a very diverse school in a diverse area with more people of color. Our principle supported us during the Black Lives Matter marches. She knew lots of kids were in distress and wanted the community to get better.

Student

Evolving Strategies in "a Window of Time"

Bradley described the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 as a pivotal moment for the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors, one that ultimately helped center the humanity of Black people in the eyes of those holding power.

"For most people in the Black community, an event like that wasn't new news, it's pretty much always top of mind," Bradley said. "But Floyd's murder drew attention to a lot of issues in our systems that impact Black lives, and because those who held power were listening, a window of time had opened, and it created an opportunity to do something transformational."

Suddenly, the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, had greater potency. In the midst of a broader societal awakening about racial justice combined with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Student Success Initiative was well positioned for catalytic impact.

From the beginning, Bradley conceived the initiative as a mechanism to help Oregon's Black communities build power and transform traditional mental models about what success looks like. She also understood that the philanthropic sector bore the greatest burden for changing the way it operated, in part because philanthropy lacked mechanisms for impact outside of creating conditions for their grantees to be effective.

At this moment in time, the foundation and its partners paused and listened more intently than they ever had before. The reality was simple: the message from the Black community in Oregon about the urgent need for interventions and solutions for Black students — and the Black community more broadly — had changed very little in the past three decades. Could this be a moment for that message to finally be heard and understood? If so, how could the body of work from the Black community and communities of color in the state be leveraged now for action?

Alliances had also been forming among funders since 2018 when Bradley joined the Oregon Community Foundation, and they became stronger through the funders task force and the community network. But the social unrest following George Floyd's murder and prominence of Black Lives Matter, combined with the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, sparked a desire to do more than make commitments and issue grants. Grantmaking strategies had to evolve with a focus on Black leaders, Black students and families and communities that included power sharing, building trust and listening.

D'Artagnan Caliman, director of Justice Oregon for Black Lives at Meyer Memorial Trust, said the staff and board was devastated by the murder of George Floyd and the decision to do something happened quickly. "It took about five days

> "... because those who held power were listening, a window of time had opened, and it created an opportunity to do something transformational."

Black Student Success Initiative Aligns with Principles of Trust-Based Philanthropy

The six principles of the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project have served as a guide for Bradley and the Black Student Success Initiative at OCF, and have started to shape how funding decisions get made and how the foundation engages with its grantees.[26] The project focuses on redistributing power between nonprofits and foundations and creating a more equitable sector. Max Williams from the Oregon Community Foundation said that trust-based philanthropy is good community philanthropy. "It doesn't always look the same for every situation, and it shouldn't, particularly for a foundation that is a 'community foundation' with our model. Sometimes a grant for a project is just a grant. Sometimes the need requires deeper partnership like the Black Student Success Initiative. Both exhibit 'trust' on the part of the foundation."

The six principles are:

1. Give Multi-Year, Unrestricted Funding: Multi-year, unrestricted funding gives grantees the flexibility to assess and determine where grant dollars are most needed, and allows for innovation, emergent action and sustainability.

2. Do the Homework: Trust-based philanthropy makes it the funder's responsibility to get to know prospective grantees, saving nonprofits time in the early stages of the vetting process.

3. Simplify and Streamline Paperwork: Nonprofits spend an inordinate amount of time on funder-imposed paperwork. Streamlined approaches free up staff time and pave the way for deeper relationships and mutual accountability.

4. Be Transparent and Responsive: Open communication helps build relationships rooted in trust and mutual accountability. When funders model transparency, power awareness and vulnerability, it signals to grantees that they can show up more fully.

5. Solicit and Act on Feedback: A foundation's work will be inherently more successful if it is informed by the expertise and lived experience of grantee partners.

6. Offer Support Beyond the Check: Responsive, adaptive, non-monetary support bolsters leadership, capacity and organizational health.

in total to come up with a strategic frame to support Black resilience and liberation backed by a $25 million investment," he said. "But even though that decision came quickly, it stemmed from nearly seven years' worth of work for the foundation wrestling with what investing in racial justice and equity would mean."

By the second quarter of 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many foundations had shifted their grantmaking to unrestricted dollars, alleviating the acute pressure of meeting grant deliverables amid unprecedented societal stress. This approach resonated with Bradley because it aligned with the initiative's focus on building the capacity of Black-led organizations which was connected to the principles outlined in the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project *(see sidebar on page 14)* Those principles encourage funders to build relationships, serve in a responsive, supportive way for grantees and take on more responsibility for improving transparency and simplifying grantmaking processes.

The act of building and strengthening relationships continued to be a core feature of Bradley's approach, and those efforts set the network and the funders task force on the path toward greater success and collaboration.

Richardson, from the Black Southern Oregon Alliance talked about the pandemic as an opportunity to join forces. "It helped us come together stronger in ways we hadn't done before," he said. "Even when our ability to sit down together and meet and talk with each other was taken away, we found ways to keep our relationships moving forward. Meeting by video has also helped keep people from different parts of the state connected."

He continued: "Even with something as terrible as COVID, we were able to find and build on something positive."

In the summer of 2020, Bradley sent a survey to the community network members to improve responsiveness to immediate needs. Among the most important needs identified were services to offset learning loss, support for mental health services broadly and depression and anxiety specifically, help with basic needs like

"Where there are trusting relationships, between organizations and families, students and schools, funders and the private and public sectors, that's when change can happen."

utilities and food and connections to employment. And while the survey was focused on identifying the needs and challenges in the community, several members identified strengths to draw from. One respondent replied, "Black folks need to have space and intention to celebrate the legacy of our ancestors: hope, joy, resilience and self-love. Families also need socio-cultural connection, bonding, community connection and cultural learning."

Richards, from the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation, emphasized the importance of strong relationships: "Where there are trusting relationships, between organizations and families, students and schools, funders and the private and public sectors, that's when change can happen."

But what would the path forward look like? McClintock said, "In terms of an approach to investing in education, the Black Student Success initiative is a first, a whole new way of doing things."

Richards pointed to the fact that there

were mature models in the state to build from, organizations like Black Parent Initiative, KairosPDX, POIC (Portland Opportunities and Industrialization Center), and Self Enhancement, Inc. — some of the same organizations that had a long-standing relationship with OCF and had leaders who served as advocates in that state for the African-American/Black Student Success Plan.

With known approaches to improving Black student achievement, examples that originated in the community and were designed for the community, alongside a growing network of Black leaders and collaborators with deep knowledge about their local needs, the Black Student Success Initiative appeared poised to help philanthropy evolve.

"Oregon is progressive in its ideas but not always in its actions," Bradley said. "The events of 2020 provided an opportunity for local and state leaders, and for the philanthropic sector, to take action and bring their commitments to life."

Community Network Member Perspective on the Pressure to Conform

"Oftentimes, funders want to see their version or ideas of 'success' for Black people (as it mirrors white culture). This means many organizations find themselves shrinking to fit into the box marked 'almost white' or 'let's be POC' so we can receive funding. I would like funders to understand that there are many ways to educate and show up Black, African-American or bi-racial etc. in our communities that are valuable, meaningful and have importance to the positive development in our youth and those different ways of being Black deserve to be funded."

What's Ahead for Justice, Equity and Success for Black Students

As 2021 arrived, momentum was building around the Black Student Success Initiative due to persistent, every day efforts that appeared to be leading toward transformational, systemic change. But a significant question seemed to linger: What would it really take to achieve justice, equity and success for Black students in every part of the state?

For philanthropy, it would mean digging deep on how the consequences of history manifest in the present and building grantmaking strategies informed by that history. It would also mean taking steps into the unknown, trying things that had never been done and striving for a future where every Black student had exactly what they needed to thrive.

Two new philanthropic initiatives launched at foundations connected to the Black Student Success Initiative, amplifying the focus on Black students, leaders and communities and leveraging existing funder relationships to make strategic investments. Justice Oregon for Black Lives launched in 2020 at Meyer Memorial Trust with $25 million over five years and the Black Equity Movement launched in 2021 at The Collins Foundation with $2 million for three years.

Jackie Murphy from The Collins Foundation said the work was exciting, in part because of how intentionally the three foundations were working together to focus specifically on supporting the Black community in Oregon. "We are in touch nearly every day, making sure we don't duplicate efforts or get stuck working in silos," Murphy said. "We try to identify the gaps, figure out which organization can take on specific tasks and share information. I hope we are a model for foundations on how to do this work."

All three foundations are working to embed the principles of trust-based philanthropy into their work, not just in their specific initiatives, but for funding areas across the board. "The Black Equity Movement is a pilot to show our trustees that we can do philanthropy better with a truly equitable approach," Murphy said. "That involves doing things differently and taking a risk."

> "…yes, we are trying something new, but philanthropy doesn't have to recreate the wheel when so much work has been done by the Black community to lead the way."

Caliman reiterated that Black Oregonians have been calling out what they would like to see change for years. "We've tried to build on the community plans that already exist within these spaces," he said. "The Portland African American Leadership Forum (now known as Imagine Black) had their People's Plan. We had the Albina Community Plan going back to 1991 and the more recent Albina Vision Trust. We had the State of Black Oregon reports from the Urban League and today we have Reimagine Oregon. What's been lacking is a way to hold leaders and legislators accountable to do something meaningful. So, yes, we are trying something new, but philanthropy doesn't have to recreate the wheel when so much work has been done by the Black community to lead the way."

Caliman continued: "We can't lose sight of the fact that Oregon wasn't set up for Black people to be successful here. The historical context is essential to our work as it relates to all people of color in the state. We have to dismantle white supremacy, and we have to understand the impact of history on our systems today. That has to inform the way we make decisions and shape our strategies."

Richards, from the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation, emphasized that the state's education system itself was complicit in the problems facing Black students: "It is absolutely stunning to me that the system itself does not take more responsibility for those that it is not educating."

Designated education dollars from partners in the funders task force currently flow to the Oregon Community Foundation's Black Student Success Initiative, including from The Collins Foundation and Meyer Memorial Trust. Those funds have been used for capacity building grants for organizations participating in the community network. In 2021, the foundation increased its commitment to the Black Student Success Initiative to $5 million over five years and the pooled funds through the funders task force and community network are also increasing.

Morton, from Meyer Memorial Trust, warned that when distributing funds, it can be easy to confuse fairness with equity. "Sometimes I hear people say it would be more fair to spread the resources out evenly, as much as we can," he said. "But equity is about investing in spaces where disparities can be eliminated. That takes more resources and more targeted investments."

"Looking at the future," Morton said, "I believe we can obliterate disparities for Black students in Oregon. We could achieve 100% graduation rates, or close to it, for Black students. That's within our grasp. The political will appears to be there. The state is expanding its investments and there's no reason philanthropy can't do the same. We shouldn't be satisfied with incremental change."

In 2021, the legislature approved $14 million for the African-American/Black Student Success Plan for the upcoming biennium. Those dollars will be going to community-serving organizations, school districts, education service districts and universities to strengthen the educational experience for Black students.

Deborah Lange, the assistant superintendent at the Oregon Department of Education, said that the state's work is closely aligned with the efforts happening through the Black Student Success Initiative and that Bradley's efforts are essential for success. "The funding we have now is still a small pot of money, and the students we are trying to reach have already been injured in so many ways," she said. "We need a lot more money, a lot more advocacy and an understanding that what Black students need reaches far beyond their experience in school. We have to dismantle the structural racism they face, and the network and relationships Bradley is building will help us do that."

Whitney Grubbs, the executive director at Foundations for a Better Oregon, a nonprofit organization co-founded by five Oregon foundations to advance shared long-term vision and systems change for children, pointed to multiple opportunities to strengthen advocacy efforts in support of Black students. "When we look across the state, particularly in rural areas, it is youth who are at the leading edge of a movement for a more just education system," she said. "There is tremendous power in mobilizing and connecting youth to shape their own future. We're also seeing lots of resources flowing into education in the state. Whether it be through the Student Success Act of 2019 (a once-in-a-generation education package projected to raise $1 billion annually for education in Oregon) or the American Rescue Plan, school boards and local districts are making choices now that will impact children and youth for years. Across Oregon, the Black Student Success Community Network could play a vital role in influencing how these dollars get spent."

Bradley emphasized that the community was the source of the efforts leading to the progress being made: "We are at this moment because of community leadership that has laid the groundwork for the path we are on."

McClintock acknowledged that change would take time. "I'm unsure if we'll see changes in outcomes by 2025," she said. "But I hope we see changes in practice, and changes in how the state's African American/Black Student Success Plan is used by districts."

"All of this work is moving forward, but we have yet to see if it's transformational this time," Bradley said. "But as a Black community in Oregon we are much more prepared, and we have never seen such strong leadership in the community. I think the leaders in Oregon are national level leaders and we have many of them, and that might be the reason we could truly see something transformational this time."

Lessons Learned

The Black Student Success Initiative was built on the idea that Black communities and Black leaders are best positioned to create solutions for Black students. When the initiative launched in 2018, momentum

had been building for increasing investments in Black students and Black leaders in the state, thanks primarily to the efforts of Black leaders with deep roots in their communities. Their relentless efforts had improved the awareness of issues facing the Black community over time and their advocacy resulted in new state investments and strategies to

support Black students and improve the educational experience for children from birth to college.

The Oregon Community Foundation was well positioned to respond to community concerns about the state's role in taking responsibility for how education investments are made and for convening

"I believe we can obliterate disparities for Black students in Oregon. We could achieve 100% graduation rates, or close to it, for Black students. That's within our grasp."

The Role of Culturally Responsive Evaluation

Through the work of the Black Student Success Initiative, Oregon Community Foundation has the opportunity to model what culturally responsive evaluation can look like and how it can be used to understand the impact of the initiative's investments.

Dr. Markisha Webster, formerly with the Oregon Department of Education and now the director of the Office of Equity and Human Rights at the City of Portland, said culturally responsive evaluation will include things that might not typically appear in traditional evaluation methods. "The organizations in the Black Student Success Initiative are all Black-led, so there has to be a real effort to understand these leaders and their organizations and how they do their work," she said. "Cultural responsiveness means that information will have to be collected through conversations and relationships, through human connection. And there will have to be intentional efforts to understand the challenges Black leaders face, particularly in white dominated spaces. The qualitative aspects will be important, sometimes more so than the quantitative research."

Webster added: "This means the evaluation will also have to be adequately funded to ensure the culturally responsive approach gets the time and resources it needs to be effective."

Andres Lopez, the research director at the Coalition of Communities of Color, said that for culturally responsive evaluation to be effective, the process needs to be collaborative, and communities need to co-construct what the evaluation looks like. "Black leaders and parents need to be defining what's important and what is meaningful," he said. "Dominant institutions almost always have questions and concerns that are not in alignment with our communities. So, to correct that, you have to defer to the leaders in the community, you have to provide compensation, you have to share power in decision making and you need evaluators trained in what cultural responsiveness means."

Kim Leonard, a senior research officer at the Oregon Community Foundation, acknowledged that past evaluation efforts have not always been culturally responsive. "We're just starting to think through what evaluation of the initiative should look like and how it relates to the state plan for Black students. We want to be really intentional in learning alongside community members. The evaluation needs to be in service to Black leaders, the community-based organizations, and Black students themselves, not just the foundations who want to document learning and track progress."

> ## "Black folks need to be at the center of our organizing work, our re-envisioning of the future, because they have the framework to create societies that benefit all of us."

Black leaders in that process. The community saw a role for philanthropy to be a convener, to strengthen community voice, to help strengthen policy advocacy efforts and deepen the commitment in investing in Black lives. In response to this community perspective, Oregon Community Foundation launched an initiative with the desire to shape its purpose and scope of work in collaboration with the community, to co-create built on trust and a desire to transform the education system in support of Black students. For an education initiative at the foundation, it was the first of its kind.

When Bradley joined the foundation as the program officer for the Black Student Success Initiative, she knew success would require investments in Black leaders, in Black-led organizations working with Black students across the state, and that the community itself would play a role in leading the way for philanthropy. With more and more community leaders taking on leadership roles in Oregon's philanthropic institutions, the belief that the community held answers that could improve grantmaking strategies had started to take hold. This idea has helped establish the conditions for community-led philanthropy through the Black Student Success Initiative. And it has informed two key efforts led by Bradley: the funders task force and the community network. Funders participating in the task force work in collaboration and seek to make their grantmaking efforts aligned and efficient. Black leaders participating in the community network are strengthening statewide efforts to support Black students and shaping the future of grantmaking through the Black Student Success Initiative — all while focused on influencing state policy and long term sustainability.

Among the most important things to understand about these efforts, is that a philanthropic strategy that aims to transform the educational opportunity for Black children must be grounded in the historical context that has shaped the

Black experience for those children, and for the families and communities in which they live. It must be grounded in working to achieve racial justice. And it must be grounded in the fact that Black lives today remain subjected to the cumulative effects of racist and discriminatory policy and actions embedded in society and its systems. This includes public education, health care, housing, economic opportunity, criminal justice and more.

That said, it's also important to recognize the power and history of Black resilience, as Portland-based writer, educator and scholar, Walidah Imarisha, reminds: "Every instance of repression has bred folks resisting, creating community and engaging

> ## "But what's also important is that comfortable or not, everybody needs to jump into this effort for us to succeed."

in some of the most creative and innovative ways of survival and growth," she said.[27] "It's incredibly important to recognize the agency of Black folks, because otherwise we fall into this idea that Black people need to be saved. Black folks need to be at the center of our organizing work, our re-envisioning of the future, because they have the framework to create societies that benefit all of us."

The Black Student Success Initiative is bringing these ideas to life. Bradley, in her role as the first program officer, is the right leader at the right time. The initiative, and the foundation more broadly, is poised to engage deeply with community partners with a posture of humility and a commitment to "learn while doing," an approach that is likely to yield a more grounded approach to grantmaking, more engaged grantees and more effective

outcomes for Black students. Strong cross sector relationships are at the heart of the work, among funders and among Black-led organizations across the state. These efforts are likely to strengthen collaboration, streamline grantmaking, amplify the Black perspective and experience and elevate the role of community in decision making.

Richards, from the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation, said success in school systems will require engaged families and communities. "When I see educators and decision makers talking with families and listening to their community, using empathy data and really working to create solutions," she said, "then I know they're on the right track."

To support this, philanthropy will have to work intentionally to open the door for community-informed decision making, look to community-based leaders for guidance and ask whether it can match the persistence shown by community leaders and organizations in the Black community. If it can do that, transformational change appears within reach.

Bradley sees potential building through collaborative efforts. Across the sector, strong relationships are leading to alignment efforts, among funders, with the state's efforts to invest in Black students and within increasingly engaged communities. Additionally, funders and leaders connected to the initiative hold a commitment to learning, reflection and analysis to ensure the work is moving forward with the right leaders at the table. The ecosystem of support is growing with Black children at the center.

"Working on issues of equity and justice can be difficult, and it can be uncomfortable for people to better understand their role in how our systems operate," Bradley said. "Leaders need to be asking whether they really have the expertise or knowledge they need to be effective, and if there are others already doing the work. But what's also important is that comfortable or not, everybody needs to jump into this effort for us to succeed."

Study Questions

1. What is the relationship between recent state investments in Black students and the Black Student Success Initiative at the Oregon Community Foundation, and why is it important to the narrative?

2. What is the importance of historical context in understanding the conditions that impact students in the present? How might that context play a role in shaping grantmaking strategies?

3. The data about achievement and opportunity gaps for Black students depicts entrenched disparities. How can data be used to inspire action and create the conditions for systemic change?

4. In what ways might understanding how multiple issues intersect to impact learners of color and student achievement help shift grantmaking strategies?

5. How would centering the experiences of learners of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds benefit education reform? Grantmaking strategy? Broader society?

6. What is the significance of understanding how culturally specific organizations operate? How might culturally specific organizations serve as a notable resource for funders?

7. How could "learning by doing" set the stage for partnership, collaboration, reflection and inquiry for those connected to the Black Student Success Initiative? What opportunities might that create for members of the funders task force and community network?

8. How would you describe the relationship between the community network and the funders task force? How well positioned are members of the community network to influence philanthropic decision making?

9. In what ways does the community hold solutions for Black students and the Black community more broadly? How does the community serve as a resource for the philanthropic sector?

10. How might the principles of trust-based philanthropy shape grantmaking strategies going forward? What kinds of changes or impact could be seen?

11. How would you go about setting up a community network similar to that at the Oregon Community Foundation, and what impact do you think it might have on student outcomes in your community?

12. From your point of view, what might transformation look like for Black students, families and communities in your region?

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Teachers and parents from Portland and Beaverton school districts

Students served by members of the Oregon Black Student Success Community Network

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