

# **YOUTH MANDATE**

## **THE SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS TOOLKIT**

**FOR 501(C)(4) ORGANIZATIONS**

**HOW YOUNG PEOPLE CAN BUILD POWER  
THROUGH SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS**



**YOUTHMANDATE.COM**





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**The Youth Mandate for Education and Liberation: A Mandate to Guide Us From Crisis to Liberation**, written by youth led groups in the Center For Popular Democracy's network, and endorsed by nearly 200 organizations and thousands of individuals, demands that officials at all levels of government fund education, not incarceration, restore and strengthen young people's civil rights in education, uplift public education and end the private takeover of schools. The demands emanate from years of local fights to dismantle the school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline. At its core, the Youth Mandate calls for police free schools and to build liberatory schools.



**CPD Action** works to create equity, opportunity, and a dynamic democracy in partnership with high-impact base-building organizations, organizing alliances, and progressive unions. We work on campaigns that promote a pro-worker, pro-immigrant, racial and economic justice agenda and win victories to improve people's lives. [www.cpdaction.org](http://www.cpdaction.org)

# INTRODUCTION

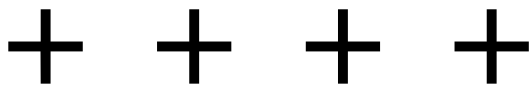
In the era of COVID-19 and following the 2020 wave of nationwide uprisings contesting white supremacy, United States politics have grown increasingly polarized at every level of government.<sup>1</sup> Communities across the country are waging battles along partisan and ideological lines, from debates over public health measures, such as mask-wearing and vaccines, to whether to teach young people the truth about this country's legacy of enduring systemic racism or "critical race theory" and the need for police free schools. While there are limited opportunities for engagement on these issues at the national level, many community members have sought opportunities to engage in local politics. As a result, school boards – the most local and easily accessible form of government – have become sites of intense political and cultural debate.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the country has seen a recent flurry of engagement in school board races and increased scrutiny over election outcomes. A recent analysis by Ballotpedia identified at least 84 attempted school board recalls against 215 board members in 2021 – a significant increase from any other year since at least 2009.<sup>3</sup> However, while school board activity has intensified since 2020, local activism in school board politics is not a new phenomenon. Since the 1950s, school board politics have proven meaningful to Black and Brown communities as they organize to dismantle white supremacy and fight for education justice in their communities.

At this moment, with heightened levels of community engagement in school boards across the country, there are viable opportunities for young people, parents, and community members to influence election outcomes and work with their school board members once in office. The communities already building influence over school board election outcomes are demanding that school board members address how Black and Brown young people face harm in schools (including the racist and punitive school discipline policies and the presence of police and security in schools). They are calling on school board members to align with their bold vision for a liberatory education system based on inclusion, equity, and racial justice principles.



# ***ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT***



This toolkit provides a historical snapshot of how communities have engaged in school board elections, current context on the forces at play in school board elections, and case studies of school board election campaigns run by grassroots organizations.

Finally, this toolkit provides community organizers with resources to successfully influence school board races and hold school board members accountable to young people in their communities, including:

***YOUTH PLATFORM FOR EDUCATION AND LIBERATION***

***CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE***

***CANDIDATE DEBATES OR FORUM AGENDAS AND MATERIALS***

***CANDIDATE EVALUATION TOOLS (FOR COMMUNITY MEMBER USE)***

***CAMPAIGN PLANNING TOOLS***

# BACKGROUND

## **School boards: a historical locus of Black and Brown organizing**

While the country has seen a wave of renewed activity in school board politics in recent years, school boards have been central to Black and Brown-led organizing efforts for racial justice in education since at least the 1950s.

### ***White school boards and resistance to racial desegregation***

In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision deemed racial segregation in schools unconstitutional,<sup>4</sup> spurring a wave of racist backlash.<sup>5</sup> White school board officials in many districts across the country used every available tactic to prevent desegregation and maintain control of schools. A primary strategy many school boards employed to maintain racial segregation was instituting “freedom of choice” plans—used in about 90 percent of southern districts—in which students were automatically re-enrolled in their segregated schools unless they opted to change enrollment.<sup>6</sup> “Freedom of choice” effectively maintained the status quo of racial segregation by putting the onus on individual Black families to enter all-white schools, risking discrimination, harassment, and violence.<sup>7</sup> In addition, white school boards, superintendents, and state elected officials pushed hundreds of Black teachers and administrators out of their jobs in the first decade following the *Brown* decision.<sup>8</sup>

Black educators commonly learned that school boards did not renew their teaching contracts— or they were demoted, pushed into positions outside of their discipline or training, and eventually fired — without merit.<sup>9</sup> Their positions were then filled by white teachers.<sup>10</sup> In addition, when schools integrated, it was primarily Black schools that closed, pushing Black teachers and school principals out of their jobs en masse.<sup>11</sup>

Another tactic that white school boards employed was to construct new Black schools as part of an effort to thwart calls for integration by disputing claims that Black schools were underfunded. When the federal courts forced school districts to develop new desegregation plans, white school boards closed these Black schools, creating massive job loss for Black educators and administrators.<sup>12</sup>

It was not until the 1968 Supreme Court decision, *Green v. New Kent County*, that the federal government required districts to develop more effective desegregation plans.<sup>13</sup> “Freedom of choice” plans and other desegregation efforts which effectively maintained the status quo would no longer suffice.<sup>14</sup>

**Ultimately, the *Brown* decision led to a wave of racist backlash by local school boards.**

**In response, organizing among Black and Brown communities for local control of schools and school boards skyrocketed.**

# ***BLACK AND BROWN ORGANIZING FOR LOCAL CONTROL***

In response to such systemically racist efforts to fight desegregation, Black communities began organizing for local control of school boards. In the 1960s, Kwame Ture (then known as Stokely Carmichael) popularized the call for Black Power and the movement for self-determination,<sup>15</sup> calling for full participation in decision-making processes affecting Black people.<sup>16</sup> **This fight for self-determination included a fight for control at the school district level.**<sup>17</sup>

Beginning in the 1950s and 60s, enrollment in several large city school systems became majority Black. Black voters exercised their political power, winning school board victories over white leaders and political groups. By the 1970s, many of these school districts also had majority Black school boards and superintendents.<sup>18</sup> During this time, public schools were some of the first institutions in which Black people held formal leadership roles, such as principal and superintendent, before moving into political roles, such as mayor. They also served as major centers of Black employment and sites for organizing around social and political issues impacting Black communities.<sup>19</sup>

## **Fighting for representation on Arkansas school boards**

To take control of school boards, Black communities required political power, which necessitated the mobilization of voters and the defense of voting rights. In the early 1960s, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizers gathered in Arkansas to fight for racial desegregation and to build Black voting power.<sup>20</sup> By 1964, mainly due to SNCC's organizing, the percentage of Black citizens registered to vote increased from 34 to 49, despite fervent white intimidation and violence.<sup>21</sup>

Faced with continued resistance to desegregation in districts across Arkansas—including continued segregation via “freedom of choice plans” and violent backlash against those that sought to integrate<sup>22</sup>—SNCC fought to gain more control of the educational process. **In 1965, the same summer that the Voting Rights Act became law, SNCC organizers vied for political power through their support of school board candidates.** They encouraged local women to join the Women Voter's League to prepare for upcoming school elections and supported the campaigns of **30 Black community candidates** running for school board elections.<sup>23</sup>

As a result of harassment and intimidation, 29 out of the 30 Black candidates lost in the 1965 Arkansas elections.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, these efforts raised political consciousness and laid a foundation for organizing in years to come.<sup>25</sup>



# FIGHTING FOR LOCAL CONTROL OF SCHOOLS IN NEW YORK CITY

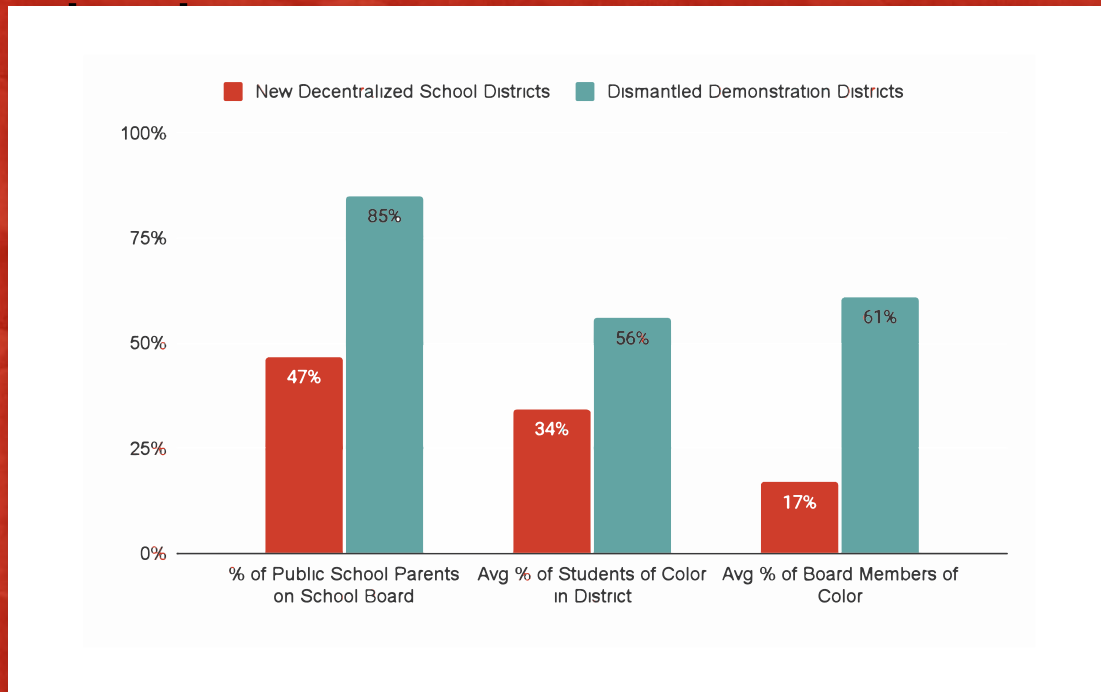
**Black and Brown communities also fought for meaningful desegregation by directly taking control of schools.** In the fall of 1966, Black and Puerto Rican parents in Harlem, New York, boycotted Intermediate School 201 (I.S. 201), demanding that the school be racially integrated or have control handed over to them. This action inspired school boycotts across the city and quickly popularized the idea of community control of schools.<sup>26</sup>

In December 1966, an Ocean Hill-Brownsville school board hearing at the Board of Education's headquarters turned into a sit-in, during which occupiers formed the "People's Board of Education" and began taking testimony on school conditions. The occupation culminated in the passage of a resolution calling for community control of education in New York.<sup>27</sup>

Facing increasing public pressure, in 1967, the NYC Board of Education agreed to experiment with three sites of "demonstration districts," which allowed for greater community control of schools.<sup>28</sup> Three communities in East Harlem, Ocean Hill-Brownsville (Brooklyn), and Two Bridges (near Chinatown and the Lower East Side) won greater power to determine school policy, design curriculum, and choose administrators themselves.<sup>29</sup>

In 1969, following intense backlash to community control that utilized white fear from those who wished to maintain the status quo, New York State passed a new "decentralization" bill, giving the city 30 elected school boards with limited control over their schools.<sup>30</sup> While "decentralization" sounds like it would promote community control, the bill effectively ended community control established in the experimental "demonstration" districts.<sup>31</sup>

**After the end of community control, school board membership showed dramatically less representation among public school parents and people of color.**<sup>32</sup>



The NYC demonstration districts exemplified the profound potential of community-controlled schools.

**In a few years, NYC schools under community control saw increases in Black and Brown supervisor personnel, empowering environments that created innovative programs, better connections between parents and schools, and increased academic success for students.<sup>33</sup>**

The popularity of community control grew and evolved outside of New York, in cities such as Detroit, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C., among others.<sup>34</sup>





## ***RIGHTWING TAKEOVER OF SCHOOL BOARDS***

While Black and Brown communities have sought control of school boards as a way to fight for racial justice in the education system, so too have right-wing religious, corporate, and law enforcement actors to advance their agendas.

In many jurisdictions, school board races are nonpartisan,<sup>35</sup> enabling candidates with right-wing interests to enter school board elections with less detection.<sup>36</sup>

For example, in the 1990s, the religious far-right began battling out “culture war” issues (such as sex education, prayer, creationism, and LGBTQ policies) with unprecedented intensity at the school board level.<sup>37</sup> Conservative Christian parents and political groups began aligning to take control of school boards—fights that were local in geography but reflective of national ideological battles.<sup>38</sup> In 1990, for example, 58 religion-right candidates won school board and municipal elections throughout San Diego county. Meanwhile, in 1992 New York City, the 450,000-member Christian Coalition, in partnership with the Catholic diocese, successfully organized to put dozens of their candidates in school board seats.<sup>39</sup>

In the early 2000s, national networks led by wealthy, conservative billionaires began more systematically influencing school board elections to advance neoliberal causes, such as the privatization of public education.<sup>40</sup> In conjunction with cash-flush political advocacy groups and political action committees,<sup>41</sup> billionaires like

Michael Bloomberg<sup>42</sup> and the Koch brothers<sup>43</sup> have poured money into school board elections to undermine public education in favor of privatization.<sup>44</sup> Charter enrollment increased significantly, from 1.2 million students in 2006–07 to about 3.1 million in 2016–17.<sup>45</sup> Notably, 99.6% of students in New Orleans attend a charter school<sup>46</sup>—a byproduct of decisions made by charter-funded Orleans Public School Board members after Hurricane Katrina.<sup>47</sup>

More recently, far-right organizations have identified school boards as essential to winning ideological battles over Critical Race Theory (CRT) and, thus, how race is understood and discussed in this country. In his podcast in May of 2022, former Trump advisor Steve Bannon blatantly stated, “The path to save the nation is very simple—it’s going to go through the school boards.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, NBC News has documented at least 165 organizations around the country that are mobilizing parents and communities to protest the teaching of CRT<sup>49</sup>—even though CRT is a method of examination taught in higher education and not at the K-12 level.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, legislation banning CRT is often passed at the state level, not at the local level.<sup>51</sup> Many of these organizations have ties to Trump,<sup>52</sup> and many are formed and funded by corporate or political sponsors.<sup>53</sup> For instance, right-wing Citizens Renewing America (a national organization led by former Trump administrator Russ Vought) published a toolkit that became a playbook for many of these groups and includes guidance on how to “win back” school boards.<sup>54</sup>

In the winter of 2021, far-right organizations like the Heritage Foundation and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) held webinars denouncing CRT in schools.<sup>55</sup> Turning Point USA, funded by Trump promoter Charlie Kirk, developed a “School Board Watchlist” that “exposes” school board leadership that supports, among other things, CRT and encourages supporters to get involved in local school board races.<sup>56</sup>

Across the country in 2021, there were candidates in 76 school districts who highlighted race in education or CRT,<sup>57</sup> alongside attempted recalls of many more candidates.<sup>58</sup> Candidates who ran against CRT performed well in their school board races, and many won. For example, about three-fourths of the 58 candidates endorsed by the 1776 Project PAC, which focuses on banning the teaching of CRT, won local school board races.<sup>59</sup>

Besides individual wins, the impacts of CRT debates are significant and widespread.<sup>60</sup> School board seats are often a launching pad for individuals with higher political aspirations,<sup>61</sup> and thus school board races are essential to contest political power in the country. In addition, many predict a “chilling effect” on school board members who may shy away from addressing racism in their schools for fear of being labeled divisive. The issue of race in education will likely continue to be a significant issue in 2022 school board races and beyond.<sup>62</sup>





## LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITY IN SCHOOL BOARD RACES

For decades, communities across the country have demanded that their cities reallocate funding from police to community needs and remove police from schools. These campaigns gained significant national attention in 2020. In many places, police groups have reacted by backing and donating to pro-police candidates – continuing law enforcement’s consistent history of involvement in state and local races to advance a pro-policing agenda. Between 2015 and 2020, law enforcement PACs donated nearly \$15 million to state and local elected officials—both Democrats and Republicans.<sup>63</sup>

A recent example of police influence in school board elections was the 2021 La Crosse (Wisconsin) School Board race. Assistant Police Chief Robert Abraham won a seat on the school board after 30 years in the La Crosse Police Department.<sup>64</sup> Abraham received significant campaign donations from two Republican organizations—in a nonpartisan race<sup>65</sup>—at a moment when the school district and board were debating whether or not to keep police stationed in La Crosse schools.<sup>66</sup> Abraham had previously come out against ending the \$250,000 contract to have police in schools.<sup>67</sup>

In other recent races around the country, police officer associations have backed and donated to pro-police candidates following the 2020 uprisings. For example, in 2021, some candidates backed by the Nassau and Suffolk County (New York) police unions were elected to the Smithtown school board, following calls from a thousand Smithtown school district students and residents demanding more racial diversity in the district’s curriculum.<sup>68</sup> In another 2021 Socorro Independent School District race in El Paso, Texas, a former police officer received campaign contributions from the El Paso Municipal Police Officers Association and the El Paso Sheriff’s Officers Association. The police officers union also donated to a candidate who was formerly a Border Patrol agent.<sup>69</sup>



## THE PRESENT: LOCAL COMMUNITIES FIGHT BACK

As public school segregation and disinvestment have continued and worsened in some areas since the post-*Brown* era,<sup>70</sup> local communities are seeking to take back their school boards from big money and right-wing interests. Youth-led community organizations are calling on school boards to remove police from schools and reinvest in the comprehensive support systems and services students need to be healthy and safe.<sup>71</sup>

These victories are possible with increased voter engagement and mobilization around school board elections. Historically, school board elections have seen strikingly low turnout rates. For example, in 2012, in approximately 240 school board elections in Arkansas, less than one percent of eligible voters turned out to vote.<sup>72</sup> In 2015, “more than half of over 1,528 open school board seats in New Jersey had either one or no candidates on the ballot.”<sup>73</sup> In 2020, the National School Boards Association reported that turnout for school board elections often falls in the five-to-ten percent range.<sup>74</sup>

Voter turnout for school board elections is often lower than for top-of-the-ticket races, such as Presidential elections. In 2020, turnout was only 33% in the school board elections for Clarke County, Nevada, compared to 74% for top-of-the-ticket races. That same year in Orange County, Florida, turnout for school board seats was only 34%, compared to 75% for top-of-the-ticket races. Some of the races in Nevada and Florida were decided by slim margins. For example, the 2020 District C election in Clark County, Nevada, was decided by a six percent margin of victory (or about 4,500 votes). The 2020 District 5 election in Orange County, Florida, was decided by a 6.6% margin of victory (or about 4,000 votes). In these cases, especially, modest increases in voter turnout could have changed the results.<sup>75</sup>

Voter turnout in local elections is also typically skewed in favor of voters who are white, older, and more affluent than the full voting-age population.<sup>76</sup> In a recent study of voters and students in four states, researchers found that school board voters are whiter and more affluent than the public school student body.<sup>77</sup> As a result, school board members are often wealthier and whiter than the districts they represent.<sup>78</sup> **In two-thirds of the sample, primarily white voters determined the school board election outcomes of school districts populated predominantly by students of color.**<sup>79</sup> The study also found that school districts facing the most considerable differences in academic outcomes between white students and students of color are those where voters look least like the public school student body.<sup>80</sup>

**Increasing voter turnout and closing the voting participation gap between older voters and younger voters – who tend to be less white and affluent than older voters<sup>81</sup> – would result in school boards that are more representative and responsive to the needs of young people.**

# WHEN STRATEGIZING ABOUT HOW TO WIN SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS, YOUNG PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HAVE CONSIDERED THE FOLLOWING:

## Base Building:

Growing a base of voters that support young people's agenda for their schools, then returning to those voters closer to the election to request their support for candidates who champion said agenda

## Candidate recruiting and selecting:

Identifying candidates who are not only ideologically aligned, but have roots in the communities they would serve. Candidates must fully support young people's policy demands and own strong personal networks

## Coalition building:

Forging partnerships needed to win, including where possible, with teachers unions and/or other groups with a stake in progressive school governance.

## Understanding the "win" number:

Analyzing comparable elections and aiming for at least 52% of the total number of votes cast in a comparable turnout election (of two candidates).

This analysis should produce a quality projection of majority support, including building in a margin of error for your projections, such as for people who do not vote or increased turnout for the opponent.

## Turnout Strategy:

Making a plan to identify voters who will support young people's candidates and turn out the number of voters needed to win, focusing particular attention on turning out young people and voters of color.

## ***EXAMPLE: STUDENTS IN OAKLAND WINNING VOTING RIGHTS IN SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS***

In 2020, Oakland students organized to hold their representatives accountable after years of budget cuts that were destroying student programs and services -- particularly those that supported vulnerable students (restorative justice programs, foster care case managers, and a support program for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) youth).<sup>82</sup> Although young people had continuously shown up at school board meetings and mobilized to make their demands known, school board members routinely ignored them. It became clear that students needed another lever of power to influence school board members: the power to vote.<sup>83</sup>

A coalition of Oakland students, Oakland Kids First (OKF), and partner organizations testified, wrote letters, drafted legislation, and secured 300 endorsements before garnering enough support from City Council for a resolution to put the youth vote on the ballot.<sup>84</sup> They then won the passage of Measure QQ, a ballot measure granting 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in school board elections.<sup>85</sup> That same year, Oakland community members managed to flip the school board and win three out of the four open seats (despite being outspent by over \$500k).<sup>86</sup>





## ***CASE STUDY: LEADERS IGNITING TRANSFORMATION ACTION FUND (LIT AF) IN MILWAUKEE AND LA CROSSE, WISCONSIN***

Leaders Igniting Transformation Action Fund (LIT AF) is a Black and Brown-led organization that organizes young people in Wisconsin to build independent political power for social, racial, and economic justice. In 2019, a year after it was founded, LIT AF decided to become involved in school board organizing -- based on their assessment of school board members as much more accessible than state and federal elected officials. Additionally, given conservative state politics in Wisconsin, greater wins have been possible at the school board level than at the state level. School board members also directly impact the district budget and policies in schools and possess a significant amount of power that can translate to tangible impacts for LIT AF's communities. Since becoming involved in school board organizing, LIT AF has not endorsed any particular school board candidate because they believe that, regardless of who is in office, all electeds will need to be held accountable.

Typically, LIT AF's election work ramps up in the late fall when candidates announce their intention to run. LIT AF then begins to map out a timeline for when it will hold candidate interviews, identify other organizations that align with their values to partner with, and work with students to develop questionnaires for candidates. Depending on the year and if they deem particular referendums or initiatives as organizational priorities, LIT AF may hire a canvass team to do community outreach. LIT AF also uses creative digital advocacy to reach young people and keep them informed. One year LIT AF created "Tinder" profiles for candidates and asked young people to either swipe right or left on them based on their commitment to young people's issues.

LIT AF first began organizing school board members during the 2019 Milwaukee school board election. That year, LIT AF held public forums and conducted interviews with candidates. Through the Youth Power Agenda, they described the changes LIT AF's members envisioned in Milwaukee Public Schools. Nine candidates expressed their alignment with LIT AF's **agenda**, but only one candidate publicly endorsed the platform when asked. LIT AF then **birddogged** the candidates at a subsequent forum and effectively pressured all nine candidates to endorse their platform. However, during the next budget season, LIT AF suffered a disappointment when none of the newly-elected school board members agreed to decrease the school police budget -- despite this being a core principle of the Youth Power Agenda they had endorsed. LIT AF responded by taking **direct action** at a subsequent board hearing. Afterward, one of the board members introduced an amendment to reduce the policing budget by \$600,000 and reinvest those resources into mental health resources for students.

After this success, LIT AF received significant backlash from the then-board president, who prohibited their organizers from entering Milwaukee Public Schools in the fall when school began. However, LIT AF leveraged relationships developed with other board members through organizing (including the board's vice president, who was close to the board president) to influence non-supportive board members. Due mainly to LIT's relationship with the vice president – cultivated through several meetings, attending school board hearings, and advocacy on a range of important issues – the board president went from blacklisting LIT AF to becoming a strong LIT AF supporter by the end of his term. This relationship-building would not have been possible without LIT's early and consistent organizing of school board members before they had even won their seats on the board.

2020 proved itself as another significant year for LIT's school board organizing -- as voters approved a referendum to infuse \$87 million into Milwaukee Public Schools. LIT AF strongly supported this referendum and hired a canvass team to encourage voters to turn out to vote in its favor.

**That same year, the school board passed a resolution to end their contract with the Milwaukee Police Department.**

Additionally, the resolution directed the superintendent to end all contracts to buy new or maintain old metal detectors, facial recognition software, and social media monitoring software.<sup>87</sup> In the meetings leading up to the resolution's passage, two school board members attempted to weaken provisions around metal detectors. However, the resolution's authors stood their ground, undoubtedly feeling public pressure due to the nearly 900 people that LIT AF helped organize to testify on the topic. Additionally, some members referenced the stories that LIT AF members shared during previous board meetings, and a report LIT AF published detailing the harms of the school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline. The very language in the resolution was thanks to LIT's organizing and partnership with CPD, as each provision originated from the **National Youth Mandate** and LIT's Youth Power Agenda demands, which became a **model resolution** for other cities to use as well.

In 2021, LIT AF continued to organize school board races in Milwaukee and La Crosse. In La Crosse, LIT AF held a successful candidate forum where five out of six candidates attended, canvassed before the day of the election, and made calls to voters – resulting in the election of three progressive school board candidates. In 2022, LIT AF will focus energy on La Crosse, where school board races are now garnering attention. In 2022, LIT AF held its first statewide action in La Crosse and led local get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts in the days leading up to the election.

LIT's successes have been numerous in just a few years since they started organizing school board elections. Their material wins have directed money away from policing and to critical resources that young people need to stay safe, ended a school policing contract, and curtailed metal detectors and surveillance in schools. Just as importantly, LIT AF has built relationships with school board members such that they can influence school board decisions and outcomes directly. **School board members in Milwaukee and La Crosse now recognize that LIT AF is not just present for the election season but will be present before, during, and after to unfailingly pressure whoever is in office to be accountable to the young people in their district.**





## ***CASE STUDY: LATINOS UNIDOS SIEMPRE (LUS) IN SALEM, OREGON***

Latinos Unidos Siempre (LUS) is a Salem-based organization that works towards educational, cultural, and political development for young people. LUS empowers youth through leadership development and grassroots organizing while fighting against institutional oppression.<sup>88</sup>

LUS's school board organizing dates back to 1996, the organization's founding year. In those early years, LUS targeted school board members who were blatantly ignoring students' experiences with the school-to-prison pipeline. School board members often shut down and ignored students, and young people had no allies to support them on the issues impacting them at school. After over a decade of working in the community, LUS began to shift its school board organizing strategy. At this point, young people were fed up and traumatized by repeatedly having to share their harrowing experiences and seeing no results, so they began to more explicitly target and call out individual school board members for their inaction. Many of these members were not only dismissive of young people but had expressed racist views in their personal time and during school board meetings. One particularly egregious example occurred in 2020 when a school board member wore blackface during a school board meeting.

LUS has worked in recent years to shift the public narrative and bring new attention to the racist activities of the school board, where previously very few people were paying attention. To do so, LUS has employed a combination of mobilizing the community in protest, marches, and direct action to target both the school board and school administration. They have used social media to reach community members and bring awareness to their issues, and they have consistently shown up at school board meetings to provide public comments. LUS's strategy is to build long-term community power (regardless of the electoral politics of the moment) and to combat anti-democracy policies that affect people of color, so that community members have the right to vote for people who truly represent them.

In the last few years, LUS has performed substantial work to educate the public about school board activities – shifting the public narrative and winning concrete material gains for students in the district:

- In 2018, the district proposed an office for law enforcement inside Salem-Keizer School District, but LUS successfully mobilized to prevent the proposal from being approved.

- In 2019, LUS uncovered connections between school board members and white supremacist groups and began exposing these connections to the public, shifting the public narrative about the board. That year, Measure 105 would have taken away the sanctuary status of Oregon, making immigrant communities more vulnerable to ICE and police collaboration. The school board refused to endorse no on the measure, which LUS discovered was due to the presence of a white supremacist school board member who affiliated with the white supremacist “3 percenter” group. This news prompted a wave of mobilization in the community, and as a result, two candidates who had expressed racist views ultimately decided not to run for reelection.
- Although as a 501(c)(3) LUS does not make candidate endorsements, much of their organizing, educational, and narrative shifting work has raised awareness in Salem about the importance of school board elections. During the 2021 school board election, LUS educated the community about the significant issues that School Board members decide by hosting a candidate forum. In addition, they ran a massive Get Out the Vote (GOTV) effort. **In part due to LUS’s efforts, the 2021 school board election had a record-high turnout.** In 2021, two progressive candidates ran after being selected by a coalition of community groups—including young people—who ensured that their selected candidates had a track record of direct work in the community and then worked to hold them accountable once in office. This coalition had strong student representation, ensuring that young people would continue to share decision-making power beyond the election cycle. Before these wins, the board was a majority conservative board – but is currently a majority progressive board with its first three Latinx members in the school board’s history. This change is particularly significant as school board members in Salem-Keizer Public Schools are elected “at large,”<sup>89</sup> and the majority of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) voters live in northeast Salem.
- Significantly, in 2021, LUS also won an end to the Student Resource Officer (SRO) contract in Salem-Keizer Public Schools. While this win was necessary, it did not end all school policing in the district. Now that LUS has won the termination of the SRO contract, it is turning its attention to fights concerning funding, as the district has decided to continue funding other forms of policing. From the one million dollars freed from the SRO contract, \$600,000 is now appropriated to fund new security specialists – essentially police by a different name.

LUS’s school board organizing continues regardless of election cycles to ensure that people in power are effectively working on their behalf. In the months and years to come, LUS will relentlessly press school board members to represent the interests of young people in their community.

## CONCLUSION

Heightened activity and attention directed at school board races and election outcomes creates an abundance of opportunities for community members to influence election outcomes, make their demands known, and hold school board members accountable to the young people in their communities. In particular, they demand that school board members end the school-to-deportation-and-prison pipeline by eradicating racist and punitive school discipline policies and removing police and security from schools. They want board members who align with their bold vision for liberatory education rooted in inclusion, equity, and racial justice.

The following tools are designed to help young people, families, and community members assess their alignment with school board candidates, ensure that candidates are considering their demands and being held accountable once in office, and educate the public about the impact of school board elections in their communities.





# TOOLKIT- 501(c)(4)

## **Overview**

This toolkit provides a set of tools and resources for communities to participate in school board races, uplift the issues that matter the most to them, and elect aligned candidates – including:

- \* Youth platform for education and liberation*
- \* Candidate questionnaire*
- \* Candidate debates or forum agendas and materials*
- \* Campaign planning tools*

In addition, each tool includes some guidelines for using them as a 501(c)(4) or 501(c)(3) organization plus some tips from community organizers on how to use them most effectively. **Check out this document for all of the resources listed below and more! We will continue to add to these tools as people continue building power through school board elections.**



# PLATFORMS

## Some guidelines

Platforms can be valuable tools to share your organization's stance on different issues with the public. 501(c)(3) organizations can "educate all of the candidates on public interest issues within the purview of the organization" and can "work with all political parties to get its positions included on the party's platform."<sup>90</sup> However, 501(c)(3) organizations **cannot** ask candidates to pledge to support the organization's platform. **501(c)(4)** organizations can ask that candidates **pledge to support** the organization's platform to distinguish between candidates.

## Tips for using platforms

\*Ask candidates for their positions on investing in the support systems and resources young people are demanding in their schools and creating police-free schools.

\*Publish your platform to educate the public on your issues.

**\*Turn your platform into a sign-on for the public.** This can help you base-build, reaching members of the public aligned with you and showing broad support for the issues your organization advocates.

\*Use this petition as an opportunity to build relationships with voters based on issue agreement before introducing candidates. Build a list of voters who support the issue before introducing candidates.

\*Get thousands of people to sign the petition in support of our policies and ask them to fill out a pledge to vote for candidates who support that policy. Once you've done the work to figure out which candidates align, your organization can tell voters who pledged support which candidates align. Following these steps can help you build relationships with community members beyond supporting candidates and more broadly on the issues that matter to them. These more durable relationships can last far beyond election day.

\*Include specific core demands you have for the school board so you can hold them to it once they are elected.

**\*501(c)(4) organizations should ask candidates to pledge support for their platform.**

\*Candidates may pledge support publicly, so the public sees who is and is not supportive. Doing this also pressures candidates to commit, even if they might want to avoid doing so behind closed doors. Before doing a public event, secure a couple candidate commitments so that the event builds momentum for the platform rather than being deflating.

\*Pay attention to your local conditions. If you are still building support for your agenda and there is significant opposition to the platform, determine with your membership whether publicizing candidate positions would help or hurt. In some areas, where opposition is very organized and strong, it may be useful to ask candidates to pledge support without publicly releasing that to avoid the blowback.

\*501(c)(4) organizations can share the platform with candidates in advance of their public pledge to reduce the likelihood that the candidate can use the excuse of needing to look into the platform as a reason not to sign on in support.

\*501(c)(4) organizations can publish the candidates who signed on (and, as importantly, those who did not).

**National Example: National Platform for federal, state, and local officials (pages 6-7)**

**Local Example: Leaders Igniting Transformation's Platform**

# CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE AND VOTER GUIDES

## Some guidelines

501(c)(3) organizations can distribute and publish the answers to candidate questionnaires for the sole purpose of “educat[ing] the voters impartially on a nonpartisan basis.”<sup>91</sup> There are several guidelines 501(c)(3) organizations should be aware of when using questionnaires.

**See a guide here.**

**501(c)(4)** organizations often use candidate questionnaires as a valuable way to evaluate candidates and make endorsement decisions. Questions in 501(c)(4) questionnaires can also be more pointed than those for 501(c)(3)s. For example, 501(c)(4)s can include “yes/no” questions to clearly distinguish between candidates. They can also request commitments from candidates to pursue different policy positions once in office.

## Tips for using questionnaires:

\*Ask candidates their position on creating police-free schools. It is an excellent organizing tool to uplift the issue through the election. Once candidates are elected, use their questionnaire answers to hold them to these positions.

\*Publish their answers to the questionnaire and tell candidates in advance that you are doing so. In all cases, assess the political conditions to ensure that publishing the answers will gain support for the candidate and your position more than it will encourage blowback.

\*If candidates express support for the platform but are not willing to sign on, work with them to see if you can address their questions and concerns. If they are genuinely aligned, this can help establish a deeper relationship with them. Or, in some cases, working with them more closely will also reveal that they are not aligned with the platform – which is useful knowledge for your organizing.

\*For 501(c)(4)s, you can use the questionnaire to make endorsement decisions and alert the public when a candidate opposes the views of your organization. (501(c)(3) must not do this.)

\*501(c)(4)s may want to create quick visual summaries of their answers so the public can quickly digest the candidates’ responses. One fun example of this is LIT AF’s “Tinder” profiles.

\*Your organization can turn your questionnaire into a voter guide with the full answers published. 501(c)(3) organizations must follow the guidelines of how to do this appropriately. **501(c)(4) organizations can indicate where candidates diverged from the organization’s position on issues.**

## Examples

**Sample Candidate questionnaire**

**LIT AF Candidate Questionnaire (La Crosse)**





# CANDIDATE DEBATES OR FORUMS

**501(c)(4)** organizations can host candidate debates during partisan primaries to distinguish between candidates of the same party and help ensure that the candidates aligned with your positions have a public platform to share their support.

501(c)(3) organizations can host candidate debates, provided they follow specific guidelines. **Here** is a useful guide **on the dos and don'ts of candidate debates**. Candidate forums can also be used to educate the public. (**Here is a useful guide** on other types of appearances by candidates.)

## *Tips for hosting debates and/or forums*

\*Distribute the invitations well in advance. Election season is hectic for candidates! Getting out invitations well in advance will help ensure that those candidates who genuinely want to attend are able to, and reduce the excuses to miss the event for candidates who do not want to participate.

\*Once you have a few RSVPs, start publishing who will attend. Publicizing RSVPs will help lock in the folks who said they would be there and pressure other candidates to join.



\*Work with members to plan and lead the debate! Members can develop the questions for candidates, prioritize among questions submitted, and take on roles throughout the event. These events can be powerful leadership development opportunities.

\*Increase engagement with your base and community by crowdsourcing questions folks want candidates to answer at the debate. A text bank to your list, asking on the doors during canvassing, or requesting ideas through emails and social media are all good ways to get engagement from the community.

\*Keep it short! No one wants to be at a three-hour debate. You can lose your audience and dilute the information folks retain from the event if it goes too long. Think of the most important questions to ask those, and keep candidates to a time limit.

\*Partner with other organizations to cover a range of topics (especially if you are a 501(c)(3)). Collaboration can also increase turnout and awareness of your event.

\*Make watching it fun! Host a watch party. **Here is a toolkit and sample agenda** for hosting a watch party! **Here is a sample agenda.**



# PLAN YOUR CAMPAIGN

## Some guidelines

At the beginning of the campaign, spend time creating a strategic campaign plan. The campaign plan should map the organization's long term, intermediate, and short term goals, the capacities and needs of the organization, ways to build the organization's base and identify potential members, allies and opponents, and finally set some tactics the organization will use.

## Tips for creating strategic campaigns:

**\*Start with the vision.** Having a clear vision of success is motivating, and can help focus the energy and capacity of the organization and members. **Here is a worksheet** from Race Forward and Metro Center to help create a campaign vision and timeline. For even more campaign tools, **check out their full toolkit here.**

**Don't forget the tips shared in this report. Here's a refresher.**

**\*Base building:** Growing a base of voters that support young people's agenda for their schools, then returning to those voters closer to the election to request their support for candidates who champion said agenda.

**\*Candidate recruiting and selecting:** Identifying candidates who are not only ideologically aligned, but have roots in the communities they would serve. Candidates must fully support young people's policy demands and own strong personal networks.



## \*Understanding the "win" number:

Analyzing comparable elections and aiming for at least 52% of the total number of votes cast in a comparable turnout election (of two candidates). This analysis should produce a quality projection of majority support, including building in a margin of error for your projections, such as for people who do not vote or increased turnout for the opponent.

**\*Coalition building:** Forging partnerships needed to win, including where possible, with teachers unions and/or other groups with a stake in progressive school governance.

**\*Turnout strategy:** Making a plan to identify voters who will support young people's candidates and turn out the number of voters needed to win, focusing particular attention on turning out young people and voters of color.





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