



#2 IN THE SERIES

Building Parent Power

A Case Study on FaithActs for Education

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Series Overview

Parents' should be a school district's most powerful partners. They know their children deeply and have a profound, personal stake in their children's education. Yet too often in school systems across the country, parents are left out of decision-making. They aren't in the room when decisions are made about policy and funding. Frequently, they aren't even invited into the building.

Efforts termed "parent engagement" often fall short because they dictate an ask to parents, or at best seek parent input on a predetermined agenda. True parent organizingⁱⁱ and movement building starts by acknowledging that parents from all communities have an innate power that they should be able to exercise — individually and collectively — to create and sustain the change they believe is right for their children and their school system. However, many school systems disenfranchise parents — particularly parents who are low income, first-generation immigrants, and/or Black, Latino, or Native American.

Fortunately, there are strong examples of organizations across the country that are working to alter this power dynamic. These groups, which we call "parent power" organizations, inform and organize parents so they can exercise their innate power.

As new parent power organizations emerge in communities across the country, there is an opportunity to support them by sharing lessons — some very hard won — from more established parent power organizations that have a track record of success. What makes these organizations successful? How do they inform and organize parents? How do they structure themselves internally? What have been their biggest successes, and what challenges have they overcome? How have their approaches to building power, internal organization, and fundraising changed as they have grown?

To lift up strong examples and lessons for emerging parent power organizations, and for funders supporting this work, we have researched and written case studies on five parent power organizations from around the country. Each organization is unique in its origin, structure, and impact, but what they all have in common is an unwavering belief in the power of parents and a tireless dedication to helping parents build and unleash that power. A handful of themes emerged across the five case studies:

- Leaders must develop a strong mission and vision that provides clarity about the work and facilitates decision-making.
- Leaders must establish structures to build power among parents and support their success.
- Leaders must approach staffing and organizational structures with a flexible mindset and a willingness to make changes over time.
- Leaders must build strategic relationships with funders and diversify revenue streams.
- Funders must think differently about how to support parent power organizations as strong allies and partners.

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Insights From the Field

FaithActs for Education

GO Public Schools

Innovate Public Schools

Kids First Chicago

Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)

3 i We use the term "parent" to refer to any family or community member taking responsibility for the education and future of a child, including grandparents, foster parents, legal guardians, and other family members.

ii We use "organizing" and "advocacy" interchangeably throughout this document.

Each case study provides a deeper dive into a particular organization's design, structure, and work. This case study highlights a Connecticut-based nonprofit, **FaithActs for Education**. Key lessons include:

- Building relationships with pastors helps center Black churches.
- Staff and clergy organizers lead organizing efforts within and across churches.
- Local campaigns pave the way for state-level advocacy work.
- Monthly training opportunities and the Organizing Institute build parents' power.
- Being intentional when seeking funding safeguards a mission- and member-centric approach, even if that means saying "no" to funders.
- Being strategic in hiring and outsourcing, including leveraging parent and clergy organizers, frees up valuable leadership time.

The lessons and practices highlighted, as well as the themes that surfaced, can be adapted to a variety of contexts and used by leaders and funders of parent power organizations in communities across the country.



"I love that FaithActs doesn't just talk about the problem. FaithActs allows me to be part of the solution and the bigger picture. By myself, I felt powerless and that I couldn't make much of a change. But FaithActs shows the importance of unity and power in numbers. I am on a team that is helping to find solutions."

—FAITHACTS PARENT LEADER

"FaithActs has helped us really identify what true power is, and the power of unity. FaithActs helps us with the action that follows our passion, but they also support us in what action to take, where to get information, and making sure that we are successful."

—FAITHACTS PARENT LEADER

"FaithActs has energized me to move forward. I was always upset with the disparity in education, and I thought it was unfair that there were certain services that were not provided. FaithActs has opened up a wealth of information and has given me the tools so that I can get the information, ask difficult questions, and work towards a solution."

—FAITHACTS PARENT LEADER

Building an Organizing Nonprofit Through Black Churches

While FaithActs for Education (FaithActs) was formally incorporated and launched in February 2015, its story really began four years earlier. In 2011, Jamilah Prince-Stewart, the founding executive director of FaithActs, was doing community engagement work with the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN), with a focus on engaging communities of color (Sidebar 1). A big part of this work involved engaging, building relationships, and finding common ground with Black faith leaders. Prince-Stewart said, “It was a lot of one-on-one relationship-building and small meetings. I wanted to learn where the pastors were and what they cared about, and then figure out where there was synergy [with ConnCAN’s agenda]. I wasn’t going to ask them to do anything that we didn’t agree on.”

In April 2012, Prince-Stewart and Jesse Phillips, a consultant ConnCAN hired to help with the clergy organizing work, hosted a meeting with four powerful pastors in New Haven, Connecticut, to discuss the role that faith leaders could play in improving education in the city. At that meeting, the faith leaders agreed to spend a day at the capitol, which would be organized by ConnCAN staff. The Day at the Capitol took place in late April 2012, when more than a dozen faith leaders from New Haven and Bridgeport met with state legislators on two issues in the governor’s proposed bill that resonated the most with them: state support and intervention in low-performing schools, and expanding the availability of high-quality school models.¹ At that event, Prince-Stewart met William McCullough, senior pastor of Russell Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Bridgeport, who would go on to found FaithActs.

Prince-Stewart continued to foster and develop relationships with local faith leaders throughout the rest of 2012 and into 2013. After an unsuccessful bid for a seat on the Bridgeport School District’s Board of Education in 2013, McCullough decided to start his own organization, one that would advocate for all

SIDEBAR 1

Leader Profile: Jamilah Prince-Stewart

Jamilah Prince-Stewart was born and raised in New Haven and saw firsthand the impact education can have in changing a person’s outcome. Prince-Stewart’s mother was the first person in her family to graduate from college and obtain a master’s degree. “She was the kid in high school who was told she wasn’t college material but ended up making it and making it through. I saw what a huge difference that had on her life, compared to my grandparents and her siblings, and how it literally lifted her out of poverty.”

Her mother’s personal experience had a huge influence on how she raised Prince-Stewart, who recalled that her mother worked seven days a week and two jobs to ensure she could have the best education experience possible. Prince-Stewart attended and graduated from Yale University. However, Prince-Stewart explained that her success came with “deep tension” because she didn’t like being the anomaly: “I didn’t like the narrative that because I worked hard, I was able to achieve what I have. In reality, it’s because I had really good opportunities that helped me reach my fullest potential.”

These disparities made Prince-Stewart passionate about education. She began working with kids through tutoring and summer programs. She knew she didn’t want to teach, but she did want to make sure every child had an education that prepared them to attend college. After graduating from Yale, Prince-Stewart worked for the Hartford Youth Scholars Foundation, which places Hartford students in independent schools, before working for ConnCAN, a state-level advocacy organization. While at ConnCAN, Prince-Stewart started organizing faith leaders. This work led to the creation of FaithActs.

kids to have access to a high-quality education. He shared his vision with Prince-Stewart. She recalls: “In the summer of 2013, I talked with Pastor McCullough, and he told me that God had given him a vision for our own organization. That was the first time I heard him say it out loud. We had already been working on the new school creation, but we were also interested in school turnaround. That was a big thing for the pastors. They weren’t just about new schools, but they also wanted to improve the schools that currently exist because all of the students are ours. We have to do it for all of them.” This vision would ultimately become FaithActs.

Once McCullough “planted that seed,” Prince-Stewart focused on finding resources to explore the possibility. She connected McCullough with Maryellen Butke, an advocacy consultant Prince-Stewart thought could help bring McCullough’s vision to fruition. Butke arranged for Prince-Stewart and a group of six faith leaders to go Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and meet with Howard Fuller who founded the Black Alliance for Educational Options and the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University.

Bishop John Diamond, one of the faith leaders at that meeting, became a founding member of FaithActs and is now a clergy organizer. He spoke about Fuller’s impact on the faith leaders who went on the trip. “[Fuller] told us that Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.] fought for our children to be able to eat at the same restaurants with white kids. Now, they can go to the same restaurants. The problem is that they can’t read the menu. When he said that, it broke me. ... We know our kids are dynamic, but they aren’t given the same opportunities. When they have resources, good teachers, and smaller classrooms, they thrive.”

During the two-day trip, the group clarified its mission and vision for the organization and decided to create a strategic plan. Prince-Stewart explained the impact of that meeting: “Fuller’s main piece of advice was Black folks too often start doing the work without raising the money. So, our mandate after that was to take 2014 to plan. We met with a group of pastors, and we committed to meeting weekly and [starting] to get it all on paper.”



While the strategic planning work for the new organization was happening behind the scenes in late 2013 and early 2014, Prince-Stewart and the faith leaders were preparing to fight for the approval of four new charter schools in Bridgeport, Stamford, and New Haven. They ultimately secured both funding and approval for charters — FaithActs’ first big win (Sidebar 2).

Prince-Stewart said that the charter school win opened a window. “After we won the four new schools, that was the point where I knew that if this [organization] was going to happen, then it had to happen now because we just got this major win. It was unequivocally because of the work that I started and that the pastors had led, and no one else could claim that win.”

Prince-Stewart left her role at ConnCAN in August 2014 to become FaithActs’ founding executive director. FaithActs formally launched in February 2015 with a focus on Bridgeport. After operating solely in Bridgeport for three years, FaithActs expanded into New Haven and Hartford. McCullough explained, “We knew we needed to expand to the communities that have the greatest need. And we saw that New Haven and Hartford were dealing with the same issues that we were [in Bridgeport]. ... It was easy to build the coalition we needed because we had brother and sister churches [in those places], so it was just a matter of bringing them to the table, and then sharing with them our mission and vision.”

“People of faith building power to get our children the education they deserve. We believe that every child deserves the opportunity to graduate from college, take care of their family, and fulfill their God-given potential.”

FAITHACTS MISSION

SIDEBAR 2

Story of Success: Charter School Wins Catalyze Launch of FaithActs

During the 2013 legislative session in Connecticut, then-Gov. Dannel Malloy had approved funding for four charter schools, but the Appropriations Committee removed it. In response, Prince-Stewart (in her role at ConnCAN) and 15 Black and Latino faith leaders from New Haven, Bridgeport, and Hartford met with state policymakers and advocated for the funding to be reinstated.

To sustain the pressure, they and their charter allies organized a multifaceted campaign. They organized a rally of 600 churchgoers, faith leaders, charter parents and students, and other community leaders. They continued to hold meetings with state leaders to press their case and conducted phone banking and email blasts to build and sustain public support. Prince-Stewart and the faith leaders eventually secured the funding, but their fight wasn’t over.

In April 2014, Connecticut’s State Board of Education was going to meet to approve four new charter school proposals. However, ConnCAN got word that the board would approve only two. In the weeks leading up to the vote, local boards of education hosted public meetings for each school. Prince-Stewart and the faith leaders organized members of their congregations to turn out for the meetings to show their support for the charter schools.

While this was happening, McCullough got a call from Malloy, who was running for reelection, asking if he could come to McCullough’s congregation to appeal to voters. McCullough agreed and then immediately started to organize other pastors. “I told them the governor is coming into my church and we can use that to advocate for the charter schools.” When Malloy came to McCullough’s office on Sunday morning, there were six pastors there, all demanding that the governor put the two other charter schools back on the agenda. Otherwise, they said, it would be hard for their congregations to vote for him.

The charter schools were added back to the agenda. The pastors and Prince-Stewart organized so that on the day of the vote, the pastors and their congregations filled the room with stakeholders who were proponents of the charter schools. On April 2, 2014, the state Board of Education unanimously approved all four schools.

Today, FaithActs still operates in and around those three Connecticut cities and extends into other communities across the state. To achieve its mission — “People of faith building power to get our children the education they deserve. We believe that every child deserves the opportunity to graduate from college, take care of their family, and fulfill their God-given potential”² — FaithActs utilizes three strategies:

- **Building relationships with congregants through one-on-one meetings, listening to their stories, and understanding their needs, hopes, and the local issues they care about.**
- **Building leaders in communities who can become their community’s experts on data and policy, and who learn how to structure and lead campaigns to partner with, persuade, or pressure decision-makers, as needed.**
- **Building an enduring infrastructure of local parent and community power to execute on campaigns.**

“Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.] fought for our children to be able to eat at the same restaurants with white kids. Now, they can go to the same restaurants. The problem is that they can’t read the menu. When [Fuller] said that, it broke me. ... We know our kids are dynamic, but they aren’t given the same opportunities. When they have resources, good teachers, and smaller classrooms, they thrive.”

—**BISHOP JOHN DIAMOND**

Founding Member and Clergy Organizer, FaithActs
Senior Pastor, Cathedral of Faith Church of God



Organizing and Agenda Setting With Congregations and Faith Leaders

Black churches are the cornerstone of how FaithActs' organizing works. Bishop Daniel Bland, senior pastor at the Revival Church and a FaithActs clergy organizer, explained why the Black church is the right entry point to the community: "In the African American community, the church is one of the only places that still we own and where our people can come together. It's the one area for us to be able to really share in conversation and get the word out. I don't know if FaithActs would have been as successful if they were doing it outside of the church."

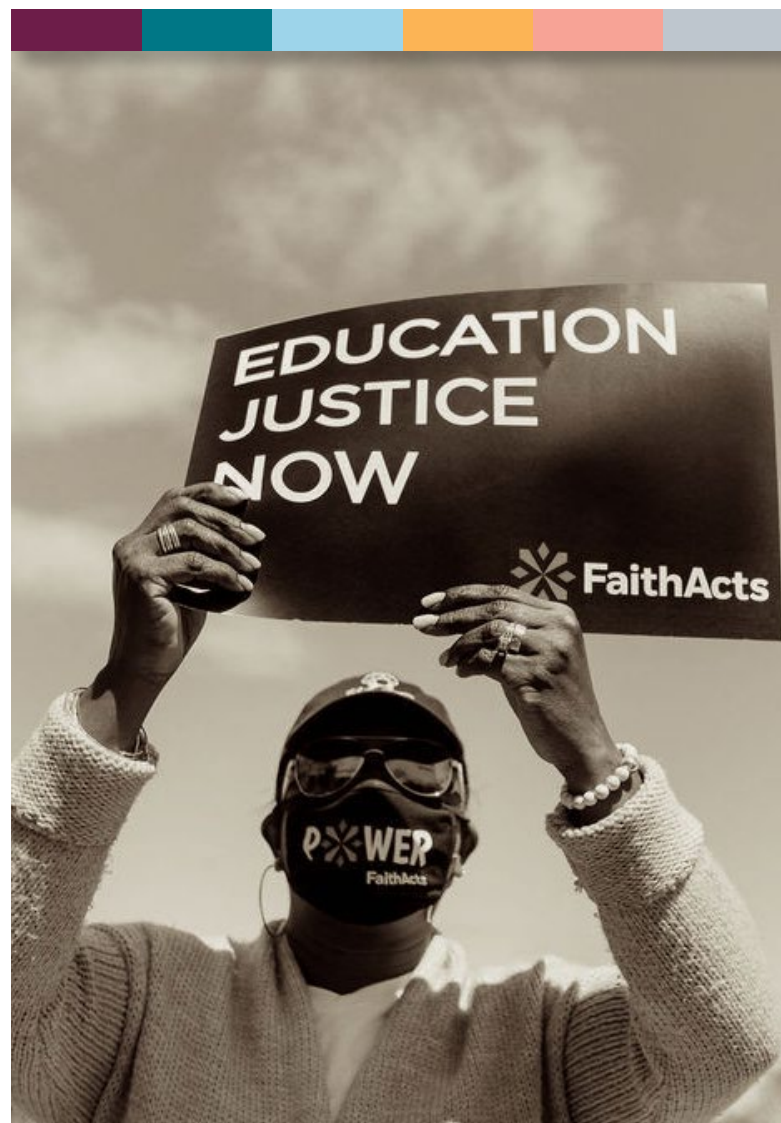
Pastors play a lead role in engaging with FaithActs on education issues that their congregants — many of whom are parents — have identified. FaithActs provides leadership and advocacy training to members of the congregations through meetings at the churches, one-on-ones, and the Organizing Institute, a six-month paid training program. By focusing on training and organizing the parents and community members within Black churches, FaithActs has built a base of more than 500 members across 100 churches in and around Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven.³

Key Lessons Learned

- 1. Building relationships with pastors helps center Black churches.** To access the congregations and parents, FaithActs must first build relationships with Black faith leaders, who serve as gatekeepers to their congregations.
- 2. Staff and clergy organizers lead organizing efforts within and across churches.** FaithActs employs traditional organizers who are responsible for engaging with congregants. Clergy organizers do the work of engaging pastors.

3. Local campaigns pave the way for state-level advocacy work. FaithActs expanded into state-level education funding work largely because it was a constant challenge facing the schools and communities in Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven.

4. Monthly training opportunities and the Organizing Institute build parents' power. Members have a variety of opportunities to engage with FaithActs and learn various skill sets. The recently launched Organizing Institute is a more formalized, cohort-based approach to building members' power and leadership.



Building relationships with pastors helps center Black churches.

While at ConnCAN, Prince-Stewart's work primarily focused on organizing faith leaders around its agenda. When she launched FaithActs, she wanted to go beyond faith leaders and engage, train, and organize members of the congregations. "The parent organizing didn't come until FaithActs was started. That was part of the reason why we wanted to start FaithActs."

To do that, Prince-Stewart began building relationships with pastors. Brittany Coleman, a founding FaithActs staff member and current chief impact officer, said, "We were mostly talking to pastors. We weren't talking with congregations yet because we were building up support and getting buy-in." This approach was deliberate. Bland explained why this relationship-building with pastors was critical: "Pastors serve as a gatekeeper to a community that has been marginalized, used, and lied to. We are very protective of who we allow to come into our churches and who we allow to speak to the people, because it reflects our judgment. I don't allow a lot of people to do that, but we opened our doors to FaithActs. It really is a true partnership, which is unique."

Building trust with pastors enabled FaithActs to gain permission and support to organize within the congregations. However, this trust wasn't built overnight. Bland said: "I was involved with FaithActs for about a year and a half before I introduced them to my congregation. My congregation watched my journey with FaithActs. They saw me go to the [state] Capitol and my level of trust for them, and they also saw how FaithActs was investing in and empowering their pastor. So, when I brought them to our congregation there was a trust that was already there."

Staff and clergy organizers lead organizing efforts within and across churches.

Once FaithActs staff have connected with a church pastor, the next step is engaging with the parents and community members in the congregation.

Prince-Stewart explained the process. "First, we build relationships with the pastor and bring the pastor into the organization. Once we have received their blessing to speak with their congregation, we go to their church, attend service, and fellowship with the members. Then, usually after a service or in lieu of a Bible study, we host FaithActs meetings with their congregation."

FaithActs hosts an initial meeting with congregation members focused on building community and fellowship. One FaithActs member explained the impact of attending that introductory meeting: "I had never heard of FaithActs before, until my pastor had an invitation for our church to join. And then I went to the meetings, and I loved learning what they were all about." From there, FaithActs staff conduct one-on-one follow-up meetings with those who want to get more involved.

The one-on-one meetings are the centerpiece of the process FaithActs uses to develop relationships with members of church congregations. FaithActs has staff organizers responsible for meeting with at least 10 parents each week. The organizers are making new connections with individuals interested in becoming FaithActs members and having recurring meetings with those who have already expressed interest. Congregants who feel invested in FaithActs' work can become members.

In addition to staff organizers, whose primary focus is organizing within congregations, FaithActs has fostered a group of clergy organizers whose role is to build FaithActs' network of faith leaders. Clergy organizers bring together faith leaders in their respective communities and make sure that pastors are informed and connected to each other and to the work that FaithActs is doing. The specifics of their roles vary depending on what pastors and churches need, but clergy organizers may lead trainings, host meetings, or engage in local advocacy work alongside other faith leaders to address needs that have surfaced in their congregations.

Local campaigns pave the way for state-level advocacy work.

In FaithActs' first few years, it focused on local campaigns that would advance change in Bridgeport, and then as it expanded, in Hartford and New Haven. Prince-Stewart said, "We wanted to start with hyperlocal campaigns. So, we were talking with the pastors and the congregations with a blank slate. We had some core things that we believed in, and we talked about what we have worked on before, but we really wanted to hear about where people were at and what they cared about."

The local agenda in each city was set primarily through information gathered in one-on-one meetings with FaithActs members across the church congregations. Coleman explained: "They [FaithActs organizers] talk about issues that are coming up in their one-on-ones and where they are seeing alignment. They also make sure that the team knows if something is bubbling up and if we need to take action or speak out about something, or if our members are really fired up about a particular issue. They bring all of that back to the rest of the team, and then we support each other in executing it."

Three key questions guide the FaithActs staff in determining what issues to address and what campaigns to execute:

- **Is the issue deeply felt and widely held?**
- **Does it have a mass of people who care about it and will sacrifice for it?**
- **Do we have enough power to win?**

Through this process, FaithActs identified school funding as a major issue. According to Prince-Stewart, "We realized that Bridgeport gave less per capita than any other town in the state for its schools, and we were already drastically underfunded at the state level. We didn't have enough power to address the state issue. But at the local level, we could ask for funding." FaithActs' members and faith leaders showed up to

"Pastors serve as a gatekeeper to a community that has been marginalized, used, and lied to. We are very protective of who we allow to come into our churches and who we allow to speak to the people, because it reflects our judgment. I don't allow a lot of people to do that, but we opened our doors to FaithActs. It really is a true partnership, which is unique."

—**BISHOP DANIEL BLAND**
Clergy Organizer, FaithActs
Senior Pastor, Revival Church



City Council meetings and engaged with City Council members and the mayor to ask for an increase in funding to Bridgeport public schools. Between 2018 and 2019, FaithActs' advocacy resulted in the City Council allocating more than \$3.5 million in additional funding for Bridgeport Public Schools.⁴ FaithActs also got the district to publish its per-pupil spending at the school level, which it had not done previously.

The local education funding work that FaithActs led in Bridgeport was an important step that ultimately led to FaithActs' state-level advocacy for equitable funding — an issue that affects all FaithActs communities (Sidebar 3). Prince-Stewart explained: "We started with a hyperlocal issue, but when I look back, those campaigns were necessary. Funding had been bubbling up as a bigger issue to deal with. For the state funding piece, we didn't have enough power at the time. We had to build up to that, and we used other local campaigns to build the power we needed to do the state work."

FaithActs' primary focus is on state-level education funding because that has the largest impact on school funding in the communities it represents. It still addresses local issues affecting local communities, including calling out inequities in the superintendent search in Bridgeport; organizing voters in Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven;⁵ and addressing pandemic-related inequities in these communities.⁶

Monthly training opportunities and the Organizing Institute build parents' power.

There are two primary avenues through which FaithActs builds parents' power: monthly training meetings and the Organizing Institute.

FaithActs holds monthly meetings, which provide opportunities for members to build their leadership, power, and organizing skills to enact positive change in their communities. Bland explained, "These meetings include trainings on skills like how to have a legislative meeting, how to approach senators, how to make demands, and how to mobilize communities. Those conversations are happening on a monthly basis with a series of partners that we consult with." This structure

SIDEBAR 3

Story of Success: Local Education Funding Campaign Leads To Statewide Wins

The success of FaithActs' school funding campaign in Bridgeport was a catalyst for the organization to take its advocacy efforts to the state level. Since 2020, FaithActs has had several important wins in state policy and funding. FaithActs' advocacy efforts have resulted in:

- \$160 million of additional federal COVID-19 relief funding to education.⁷
- An additional \$10 million in funding for a priority school district grant program, which is meant to "assist designated school districts in improving student achievement and enhancing educational opportunities."⁸
- The accelerated phase-in of weighted need-based funds for charter school students, 93% of whom are children of color. This puts all public school funding on the same timeline for achieving full funding, regardless of school type.⁹
- An additional \$2 million in funding and legislation that will create a task force to diversify the educator workforce.¹⁰

Currently, FaithActs is working in coalition with other education and advocacy organizations to call for Connecticut to address education funding disparities in the state's district and charter schools that serve predominantly students of color and low-income students. For the past five years, FaithActs staff, parent leaders, and clergy organizers have participated in press conferences, spoken with several state legislators and the governor, and created and disseminated voter guides.

In a recent meeting with Gov. Edward (Ned) Lamont, McCullough succinctly told him, "The goal of this is to compel you to take action to remedy the significant inequities in educational funding statewide that disproportionately impact Black, Latino, and low-income students."¹¹

also allows FaithActs members to choose at which level they want to engage (e.g., organize congregants or participate in an event). According to one FaithActs parent member: “FaithActs has a dashboard that lets you know what’s going on in the next week and how you can participate. They have different capacities for how you can show up and engage. If you can’t be at an event in person, you can be there virtually. If you can’t do either, you can share information with your congregation, making sure they know how they can show up.”

The Organizing Institute, which FaithActs launched in June 2022, is a more formal approach to building members’ skills in advocacy and leadership. It’s a six-month, paid training program to help address FaithActs’ need for more on-the-ground organizers. Coleman explained: “It’s very hard to hire organizers, and we thought that the organizers we need are probably in our churches. There are over 10,000 people in the churches that we work with, and there are organizers in those churches who don’t know that they’re organizers or they’ve never gotten paid to be organizers. We just needed to look within our people to try and find them, train them, and give them opportunities to work with world-class trainers.”

Twenty-six people graduated from the first cohort of the Organizing Institute. They met every two weeks as a group and had individual check-ins with FaithActs staff between meetings. Throughout the program, the participants learned how to mobilize people, build coalitions, engage with the media, hold one-on-one meetings, and turn out congregants for events and campaigns. The participants also learned about Connecticut’s legislative process and educational landscape. Throughout the program, participants grew in their leadership and had opportunities to testify at state and local board of education meetings and committee hearings and meet with state legislators. One Organizing Institute participant described what the experience meant to them: “I am new to being a community organizer, but the professional development has been unreal. It’s very hands-on, and they are very supportive. They have supported me in growing professionally and in my own leadership.”

Beyond training and organizing more members, the Organizing Institute serves as a pipeline of trained organizers from which FaithActs can hire. But even if the Organizing Institute graduates don’t go on to serve in a paid position with FaithActs, the training they receive is a huge benefit to their congregations because they still utilize the skills they’ve learned from the training. Diamond praised the Organizing Institute and the positive impact it’s already had on churches and their congregants. “The majority of the people who graduated out of the Organizing Institute became voluntary helpers in their local churches. I can tell you that my clergy organizers in the local churches are excited about it, and they keep coming to me about it. I think this is the pathway for us to really be more effective and rally the local churches more powerfully.”

The initial Organizing Institute proved so successful that FaithActs offered graduates the opportunity to continue their training through the Organizing Fellowship. Through this additional paid experience, fellows learn about the election season, get a deeper understanding of organizing, and see the advocacy side of organizing. Fellows may also testify during committee hearings and meet with legislators. Through both of these programs, FaithActs has been able to not only build the knowledge and skills of its members and catalyze the power of parents, but also expand its organizing capacity.

FaithActs is now exploring the design of a longer, 18-month Organizing Institute to expand support for individuals so that they move from learning how to take individual action on to collective action, to becoming leaders in organizing actions and state-level advocacy. Coleman explained, “Maybe not everyone stays for the whole thing, but the first six months would be about core community organizing, and then the next six months would be legislative training through hands-on work, and then the last six months would be civic engagement training through working elections.”

Given this rethinking and reframing of the Organizing Institute, FaithActs anticipates the next cohort will be in 2024. This will provide it the time and space to look at the data and reflect on what it should continue doing and where it has room for improvement.

Fundraising and Organizational Structure

During FaithActs' early days, Prince-Stewart took advantage of the charter school wins to secure seed funding and then build its funder base from there. At the same time, Prince-Stewart has been strategic in how and where FaithActs seeks funding, ensuring that she can keep the work mission-aligned without overextending her team's commitments. FaithActs is currently at an inflection point with its fundraising, and Prince-Stewart has hired staff who can focus solely on that task. This frees up her time to engage more deeply in the day-to-day work of running an organization.

Key Lessons Learned

- 1. Being intentional when seeking funding safeguards a mission- and member-centric approach, even if that means saying "no" to funders.** Prince-Stewart knew it was important for her to take time in the initial days to build relationships with faith leaders and parents so that FaithActs could do authentic organizing work in the future. This meant saying "no" to some funders and what they wanted FaithActs to do.
- 2. Being strategic in hiring and outsourcing, including leveraging parent and clergy organizers, frees up valuable leadership time.** With a small staff, Prince-Stewart realized she needed a dedicated staff person to handle the grant writing and reporting requirements, which freed up her time to work in the community.



Being intentional when seeking funding safeguards a mission- and member-centric approach, even if that means saying “no” to funders.

Prince-Stewart knew the 2014 win — getting all four charter school applications approved — created an important proof point she could leverage to raise money for FaithActs. She secured \$600,000 in initial seed funding from three primary donors for the first three years of FaithActs. This seed funding created a bit of breathing room for Prince-Stewart, allowing her the time and space to focus on the work of launching an organization. “I knew we were a growing organization, and I had to meaningfully engage those funders and secure new donations. But the seed money also allowed me to focus on the work, and I didn’t have the pressure of starting at zero in year one, two, or three.” The seed money also helped to secure additional funding from other philanthropic entities that were initially hesitant to give to a faith-based organization. Prince-Stewart said, “Sometimes a funder may not be totally sold on the faith aspect of our organization, but they see other funders are funding us, and so they assume we must be doing something worthwhile and worth investing in.”

Since 2015, FaithActs has grown its funding nearly sixfold, from \$678,000 in fiscal year (FY) 2015 to \$3.9 million in FY21. Of that, 98% comes from foundations and contributions (Figure 1). In terms of expenditures, in FY21, FaithActs spent \$2.4 million. Nearly one-third of its expenses (31%) went to outreach, 20% went to training, and another 13% went to community events (Figure 2). The remaining 36% went to fundraising, management and general operations, and other programs.

As of April 2023, FaithActs has a seven-month cash reserve, which Prince-Stewart has strategically built up. “The reserve is helpful in a year when we are struggling with fundraising. People don’t see the reserve and think we’re good and don’t need funding, but that we are in a healthy fiscal position to invest in so we can continue the work.”

Early on, Prince-Stewart prioritized participating in conferences and on panels to raise FaithActs’ profile among funders and within the sector. She said, “I had a lot of early opportunities to talk about work I had done, and so there was a lot of exposure at conferences, and I was asked to speak on panels. I remember being places and literally raising money because I was talking about the work, and a funder was there and came up to me saying they want to learn more about my organization.”

FIGURE 1: FAITHACTS REVENUE, FY21

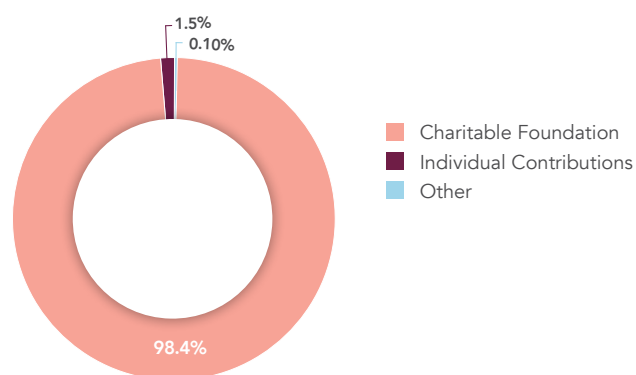
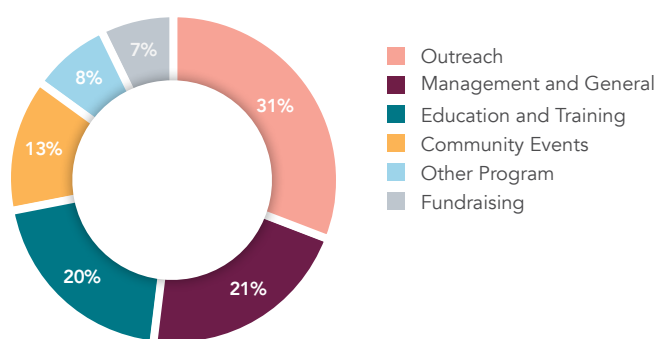


FIGURE 2: FAITHACTS EXPENSES, FY21



Sources: FY21 financials provided by FaithActs for Education.

She also learned early on how important it was for her to sell herself as a dynamic, mission-driven leader. She said, “I’ve learned people do things for people, not organizations. I understood I wasn’t selling people on FaithActs; I was selling people on me as a leader and asking them to invest in me as a leader.”

Prince-Stewart has also learned to be bold in asking for funding: “Closed mouths don’t get fed, so I wasn’t afraid to ask for money. Every time I am in front of a funder, I am asking them for funding. I didn’t realize how people ease into the conversations and have multiple conversations. I don’t have time for that. I have work to do. So, I make the ask up front.”

As Prince-Stewart has worked on fundraising, she has intentionally avoided accepting money from funders not aligned with FaithActs’ mission and values. “I strategically didn’t ask for money from certain people. And we have walked away from funding because the funders were asking us to do things we didn’t want to do or weren’t comfortable with.” FaithActs has also not sought any public funding. Coleman explained: “We’ve never received state, federal, or local funding. The reason for that is because federal and state and local officials are the decision makers on the issues that we are making demands around, and we can’t afford to be beholden to them.”

Another key lesson Prince-Stewart has learned is to not be afraid to say “no.” She explained that in the early days of FaithActs, she knew she needed to take the time to develop and foster relationships with faith leaders and their congregations so they could build up their member base and enable the organization to fulfill its mission. To achieve this, she told funders she would not do anything that might take away from building up the organization. “One of the best things we did early on was to say ‘no.’ I had to strike when the iron was hot

with fundraising, which was positive. But the negative part of that was people assumed we would just do the same things over and over again. Our three largest funders were pretty frustrated by me saying we needed to stop and build because we hadn’t built up the parent organizing piece. I knew that if we were going to be sustainable that we needed to have this organized base of people.”

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—JAMILAH PRINCE-STEWART
Founding Executive Director, FaithActs

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—BRITTANY COLEMAN
Founding Member and Chief Impact Officer, FaithActs

Since FaithActs didn't reach its fundraising goal in FY22, Prince-Stewart has become more intentional and strategic in her fundraising approach. One piece of this was hiring additional staff: "We hired a grant writer, and we hired a communications person who can do the development work. Previously, we had no development staff, and it was just me or Brittany [Coleman] or whoever could work on a grant proposal. But that wasn't sustainable. I should have known that I deserved a development person sooner. So now that I don't have to sit down and write a bunch of grant reports, I realize I have so much more time to do the work."

Prince-Stewart has also been thinking about how she could better leverage her board to help with fundraising, which is now primarily made up of pastors and community representatives. "One hundred percent of our board gives annually, and they give what they can, which does demonstrate their commitment to the organization. But we're not getting a ton of fundraising support from our board. That has been a challenge." At the same time, Prince-Stewart wants to ensure that the board represents pastors and the community. "It's been a huge gift that our board is representative of the voices in our community, and it's been a seamless transition between our board and our membership in terms of how we experience both spaces. They don't just oversee the work; they do the work."

Balancing the desire for fundraising support with the need to have the board represent the community is an ongoing challenge. Prince-Stewart and her team are considering ways to strengthen the board's fundraising capacity. "My leadership team and I have talked about having a fundraising or finance committee, and we are thinking about bringing people on our board who have greater funding capacity. However, our board is a sacred space, and we're highly protective of this organization. So, the folks we bring on need to be aligned with our people and connected to our work. It's going to take time to figure it out."

Being strategic in hiring and outsourcing, including leveraging parent and clergy organizers, frees up valuable leadership time.

When FaithActs officially launched in February 2015, it had two staff members — Prince-Stewart and Coleman. Prince-Stewart said about hiring Coleman, "Brittany thinks very differently than me and has a different skill set. I knew when I said 'yes' to Pastor McCullough, I would need a really strong number two. I knew I needed someone to handle the operations and finances of the organization, and to do the things I didn't like or wasn't good at doing so I could do the things I was uniquely qualified to do. I've seen too many leaders try to do too much too often and not get anything done. I knew I needed to ask for enough money so I could hire us both. I knew that if it was just me, it would crumble."

Shortly after launching in 2015, Prince-Stewart and the founding pastors revisited the strategic plan they had written in 2014 so they could think about who the organization's next hires would be. Prince-Stewart explained that they knew they needed to hire someone to do programming and an organizer so they could build partnerships in communities where "we didn't yet have strong relationships and we hadn't built up that parent organizing piece. We needed someone with relationships that could get us into rooms and do the type of activities we needed to get things done."

FaithActs currently has a staff of 10 individuals across four departments: strategy, communications, impact, and organizing. The team is intentionally small so they can devote as many resources as possible to the core work of organizing. They contract out for certain services, such as accounting, to be good stewards of their money and ensure that full-time staff can focus their time and energy on organizing. And when FaithActs does consider hiring for a new role, its leaders do so through the lens of how the role will support and advance the organizing work.

Conclusion

FaithActs for Education's impact over the past eight years results from strategic decisions to center Black faith leaders and their congregations in their organizing work. FaithActs is still growing and learning as it works to build on the success of the Organizing Institute and formalize more leadership structures that create opportunities for members to lead organizing efforts and campaigns. While FaithActs is looking to expand its funding equity work at the state level, the deep local work its members are doing to create better conditions and raise student achievement for historically marginalized students is essential to making sure all students can fulfill their potential. ✦

"In the African American community, the church is one of the only places that still we own and where our people can come together. It's the one area for us to be able to really share in conversation and get the word out. I don't know if FaithActs would have been as successful if they were doing it outside of the church."

—**BISHOP DANIEL BLAND**

Clergy Organizer, FaithActs
Senior Pastor, Revival Church



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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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