

# Zakiyah Ansari



Photo: Dante Bowen

**Zakiyah Ansari** is a parent organizer and advocacy director for the [New York State Alliance for Quality Education \(@AQE\\_NY\)](#), the leading statewide organization working on educational-justice issues in New York. Ansari is the mother of eight children and grandparent of three, and she has spent two decades as a community organizer fighting against educational injustice and the oppression of black and brown people. In 2017, Ansari was named one of *City & State New York* magazine's **25 most influential people in Brooklyn**. She also volunteers with [Justice League NYC \(@NYjusticeleague\)](#).

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*Interview by Stephen Abbott*

**Q: You originally got into education organizing as a parent, and you were a volunteer organizer for several years before it became your profession. Can you tell us a little about your personal journey, and about how those early experiences shaped your views on organizing and power?**

One of my daughter's teachers said, "You should join the Parent Teacher Association." It was something I had never thought about or considered before, even though I was always engaged in my children's education. I would go on trips when I could. I went to parent-teacher conferences. When they had shows, I was there. But I didn't have a real voice in their education. So I said, "Yeah, sure. I'll join." At that time, I had seven kids. I was a mother and a wife, but I don't think I had a strong self-identity separate from my family. When I reflect on that time now, I think I needed something different in my life, and that invitation came at the right moment.

When I decided to join the Parent-Teacher Association, I showed up on the first day excited and ready to get some things done. But I recall someone pretty much saying, "I don't know why you're excited about being here because you're never going to get any parents to come out." I was shocked—I wasn't expecting that at all. That's just not who I am, so I took that attitude as a challenge. I said to myself, "How would I want to be engaged as a parent?" I always try to look at things that way.

That PTA room wasn't seen as a welcoming place, so I left the room, went out into the hallway, and started greeting parents and saying "good morning" to everyone. I started letting people know that the PTA is open to them. After I started talking to everybody, we went from having five parents who were Learning Leaders to 30 parents. At the time, Learning Leaders was a program that trained parents throughout New York City Public Schools to be volunteers and tutors in the classroom. We

started with maybe ten or so people coming to PTA meetings regularly to having hundreds of people coming to those meetings. It was so fluid that you couldn't tell the parents from the educators and paraprofessionals.

To this day, former students will ask me if I still work at the school; I was there so much they thought I was an employee. Because the school was right across the street from my house, I would often be there from when I dropped my kids off in the morning to maybe 9:00 or 10:00 at night. When I had a free moment, I was at the school.

During that time, the United Federation of Teachers had parent outreach programs in every borough of the city. I attended the Brooklyn group, which is where I first learned it wasn't a rosy situation in every school. Parents, school counselors, and other school employees and volunteers from across Brooklyn attended those meetings. We talked about all the issues in the schools. But we weren't just venting—we wanted to create solutions. We were *in community*, and we started to figure out how to help each other.



Zakiyah Ansari speaking out at a rally in Albany, New York, organized to demand the equitable funding of public schools in the state. Photo: Jodiah Jacobs.

At the same time, New York University had a Community Involvement Program, and that's where I began to learn what organizing was, what labor was, what unions were. I had no idea how any of those things worked. So I learned some lingo, and I started to understand how the city structured the schools and how decisions were made. I also learned how to facilitate a meeting, how to organize an agenda—all those things that you don't get taught in a typical PTA. When I learned those skills, it really improved my craft as a PTA president and parent leader in my district.

Being part of the Parent Teacher Association showed me the importance of parent engagement. Day by day, administrators, teachers, and others in the school stood up a little differently when I walked by, they addressed me differently, and they were more open and willing to engage—whether it was authentic or not. They started seeing my power as a parent even before I started seeing it myself. These early experiences also broadened my mind, and I began to see how I could bring other parents and community members along. I started to see that it was not just about my child and my school—we had to be working for every child in every school. I started to see that all the issues were connected and that every person’s story mattered.

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When I realized that I had some power, I started wielding my power. When you’re a parent, you have power. But when you have the knowledge of how systems work, how the schools work, who’s running the unions and making decisions, that knowledge, combined with my role as a parent, was extremely powerful. I started to understand what organizing really was. It wasn’t just about wielding power for the sake of wielding it; it was about using power to challenge systems of oppression and liberate children—all the black and brown and poor children—and teach them how beautiful and special they truly are.

When I was involved in the Brooklyn Education Collaborative—which was one of the collaboratives birthed by the Community Involvement Program—they knew what we needed to see. While we were able to articulate what we needed at the time—what our schools *should* look like—many of us had not actually seen it. The organizers were very intentional about taking parents to visit schools both inside and outside of New York City. On one trip, I visited some schools in a predominantly white community in Massachusetts. The purpose was to see what other folks have—not to long for what they had, but to be able to see other schools in action and better define the problem.

When we visited one of the schools, we saw all these kids excited to learn. The school was just beautiful. We went into this one classroom where there was a lot of noise but it wasn’t chaotic. Students were talking to each other and walking around. The teacher wasn’t at the front; she was centered in the middle somewhere working with students. We were like, “Where’s the teacher?” When we went to eat lunch, the lunchroom was amazing. Students would even go outside to eat their lunch. We just couldn’t believe they were allowed to go outside for lunch.

The schools we visited had great auditoriums and some of the schools had more than one gym. They had a huge list of afterschool programs and sports and curriculum options that was just exciting to see. Once we got a taste of those schools, our question was, “Why can’t our children have that?” Right? But the real question is not, “Why can’t our kids have those kinds of schools?” The real question is, “Why *don’t* they have those schools?”

Then you realize that it’s because they’re black, they’re brown, and they’re poor. I don’t think I fully understood the depth of the problem early on, but I started to see that the problem wasn’t limited to my little borough in Brooklyn or a few other districts. It was happening everywhere. That was an “aha” moment for a lot of us.

At that point, I had three children in middle school. Their middle school was great, and it’s still a great middle school today. They had access to a science lab that was state of the art. They could take advanced classes. They had drama. The auditorium was beautiful and everything else. My kids had those kinds of opportunities, but it was just luck. Back then, children went to their local community schools, and our family was fortunate to have a really great middle school in the neighborhood. My kids had access to all those great things, but if they lived 30 minutes away in any direction, they probably wouldn’t have that school.

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That’s when my rose-colored glasses were taken off. The problem was bigger than my children. I always knew my children would be okay educationally—because I was going to fight—but those early experiences opened up my eyes. I saw that black and brown and poor children are under attack in this country. So I started asking: *What can we do? What can I do? What role can I play?* That’s how it started. I was fortunate, though, because I got engaged in organizing. I didn’t have to figure it out alone; we did it collectively. We couldn’t take on all the problems in the city, but we knew if we got some victories it would impact tens of thousands of children, and then we could move onto the next thing.

Look, I’m a black Muslim woman. At the time I had seven children, and I was dealing with a lot of personal stuff. I had low self-esteem and low self-confidence. But being part of that PTA, and having



some people see something in me from the get-go, those experiences encouraged me to get more involved and keep going.

Pretty soon, I was being put in the forefront. I'm facilitating meetings with high-level folks like chancellors, deputy chancellors, public officials. I'm talking to the press and speaking about the issues. And I'm making demands on a system that normally doesn't take demands from black women very well. They don't even listen to us. So I start doing that. And at the same time, we're pushing an agenda—getting science equipment into middle schools in four Brooklyn school districts—and we win. After all the advocating, speaking at press conferences, facilitating meetings, and sitting toe-to-toe with the folks who can make the decisions, we got a victory for four predominantly black and brown districts.

It was almost overwhelming. I couldn't believe I had that confidence, and the pride I felt was just surreal. It makes you crave the next one, you know? I wanted to win more because that one victory was not enough. I wanted to take it to the next level and get to the end goal, which is that none of us should have to struggle to get the schools our children deserve. Our win with the science equipment and a few other small victories—which was followed by the disappointment of not getting the science labs we wanted—made us realize that we needed to build citywide parent power. That realization led to the creation of the [\*\*NYC Coalition for Educational Justice\*\*](#).

My journey was really important to getting me to where I am today. Twenty years ago, I didn't have the knowledge and the language I have now. I didn't even know what my goal was. It was those experiences and all the stories I've heard from parents and students and educators over the years that fuels my commitment to the work—what we call *education for liberation*.

But it wasn't until maybe five years ago that I really felt comfortable saying *I'm a parent leader*, as crazy as that may be. As black and brown folks, and as women, too, we often feel that it's arrogant to think of yourself as a leader with power. It took me 15 years to get to the point of feeling that it's okay to see myself as a leader.

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**Q: You just spoke about the role of confidence and self-esteem in your own evolution, and I feel this is a topic we should be talking about more. People tend to only think of low confidence or low self-esteem as individual attributes, but they can also manifest at the community level. For example, I've seen parents in wealthy suburban communities react angrily and start mobilizing when there's a rumor their school might eliminate some program for high-achieving students, but then we have low-income communities across the country that have endured decades of severe neglect, disinvestment, and deterioration in**

**their local schools. What role does confidence play in community empowerment and disempowerment, in your view? And is building both individual and community confidence an explicit part of your approach to organizing?**

I think confidence comes with the work. I didn't have confidence going in, and I still struggle with it today. What got me going, what started to build my confidence, were those small victories and the relationships I built along the way. The confidence grows step by step. But what really got me to take action was when I started peeling back the layers and seeing that it wasn't just about my child or my local school. This is bigger than me and it's bigger than my children. The problems that impacted my family were systemic in black, brown, and poor communities. For me, that went to the core of what it means to be a mother and protect children.

At some point, I could no longer sit in ignorance and say I didn't know; and now that I knew, I couldn't turn my eye. The question became: What I was going to do to help make things right? That's what often happens in organizing. Many times parents get involved in their children's schools because of where they are right then and there, and it's their child who gets them motivated. But after you start advocating for your child, you often see that the problem is far bigger than what's happening to your child.



“Family is what centers me and keeps me in the game.” —Zakiyah Ansari



I also think confidence comes out of your story, and that confidence is coupled with vulnerability. People often see me as confident, but really I'm just sharing my story. I share it from a place that I hope people can relate to, and I've found that our stories motivate folks to get involved and do something in their own community.

So it comes across as confidence, and maybe it is, but I don't see it that way. I'm just being vulnerable, being honest, and standing in my truth and sharing it with others.

What I often see is communities being empowered by each other. We have a national coalition called the [Journey for Justice Alliance \(@J4J\\_USA\)](#), which I co-initiated with a phenomenal organizer in Chicago named [Jitu Brown \(@brothajitu\)](#). He's been doing organizing almost 30 years now. We created J4J when school closures started happening in 2000 and were rampant across the country. Today, we're in about 30 cities.

We're creating a pipeline of intergenerational black and brown parent and youth organizers. Some of the members have been doing organizing for decades, and some of them are new and just getting started. That's how you start building confidence in communities—by empowering each other. We offer feedback and strategize together about what's happening in New York City, Chicago, New Orleans, Oakland, Philly, Milwaukee, D.C., wherever. That kind of national alliance was new to most of us, and it empowers communities because they know that someone has their back and that it's someone they can trust. It's just empowering to know that it's not happening to you alone.

In fact, that's how J4J started. I was feeling alone in New York City when Mayor Bloomberg closed a large number of schools. That was my first outreach to Jitu in a while. The city was about to close maybe 20 schools, and all this other stuff was happening, so I called him up because I was feeling overwhelmed and I knew I could trust him. Then we started calling other folks and found out that school closures and school privatizations were happening all across the country.

It started with an issue that was impacting us here in New York City and in Chicago, but it motivated us to make connections across the country. We created a community—a family—and it built up the confidence of our individual organizations. One thing you mentioned earlier is that keeping people isolated and disconnected and questioning their own instincts is a way to keep them disempowered. One of the fundamentals of organizing is bringing people together to let them know they're not alone. When people share issues and concerns, they can start building cross-coalitional solidarity. That's the work.

Here's an example: One of the things we're able to do

with Journey for Justice is identify things that are coming down the line. We've seen the bad actors before, the ones putting their money behind the privatization of public schools, but they often disguise themselves. Imagine that you hear about some unknown organization that's come into your city or town, you can now reach to a national network that can say, "Oh yeah, we know them. This is what they did to us and this is how we pushed back against them."

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That's invaluable information that we didn't have when we started out. When we were working in silos early on, these groups could come into our cities and start doing what they wanted to do with our schools, and we didn't know what to do. They have big money behind them, so they were able to infiltrate our cities, push their agenda, and then get out real quick and go somewhere else. But now we're able to make connections, both internally and publicly, to expose the web of dark money funding these groups.

A while back, New York City was looking for a new chancellor, and several names were floating around. So we found out what city these people were in, and we started making phone calls. I called up organizations in those cities and asked, "What do you know about this person? Do we want this person?" Some would say, "No. That person has done X, Y, and Z." I would ask them to send us the information, and we would push back against that person. Now imagine if we didn't have that network, right? These are some of the really beautiful unintended consequences of creating this national space and acknowledging that we're stronger together.

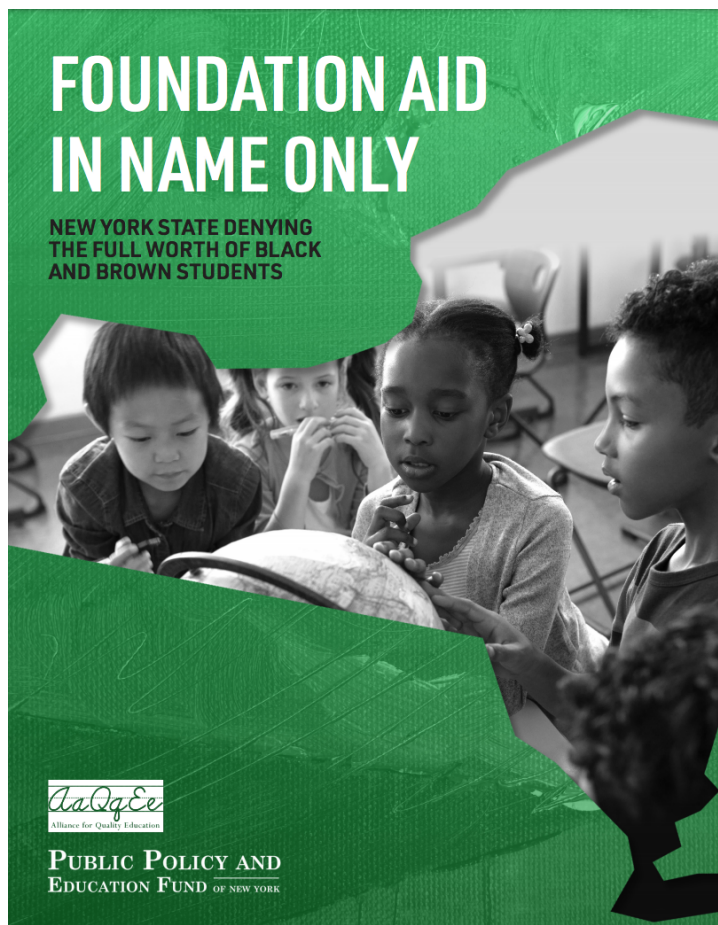
Let's be clear: It's not easy. Along with the national work, there's a lot of local work that still has to be done. But building that kind of community has been extremely powerful.

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**Q: A lot of your work is focused on the connection between school funding and educational equity—or, more specifically, on how many local problems in schools can be traced back to funding inequities at the state and federal levels. Can you tell us about the work you've**

**done this issue and what you've learned about it over the years?**

I'll start with the local and state. The organization I work for is called the Alliance for Quality Education, and we've been working on an equity lawsuit here in New York called the **Campaign for Fiscal Equity**. It was started back in 1993 by black and brown parents in Washington Heights who saw all kinds of problems in their schools. They finally said something's wrong here and something has to be done. While it started locally, they realized they had to take it to the state level if they were going to get justice. In 1993, they initiated the lawsuit, and it took 13 years to work its way through the courts. In 2006, the Court of Appeals ruled that New York State was not meeting its constitutional obligation to provide every child with a sound basic education.



In 2007, New York State enacted a school-funding system known as the Foundation Aid formula, which was “designed to provide predictable, sustainable, and transparent funding for public schools, free of political manipulations.” The Alliance for Quality Education’s [\*Foundation Aid in Name Only: New York State Denying the Full Worth of Black and Brown Students\*](#), a collaboration with the Public Policy and Education Fund of New York, details how the state has not used the Foundation Aid formula since 2011. Source: Alliance for Quality Education

The Alliance for Quality Education was only supposed to be a campaign for this particular issue, but here we are almost 20 years later. Because of the organizing that happened for years leading up to the decision—we brought together parents, families, students, educators, and organizers from across the state and the five cities of Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, Yonkers, and New York City—we were able to get then Governor Spitzer to commit a historic amount—almost \$6 billion—to the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. It was supposed to be a four-year investment, but we only got two years. Yet in those two years, with an additional billion-plus dollars going into the school system, we began to see improvements in public education statewide.

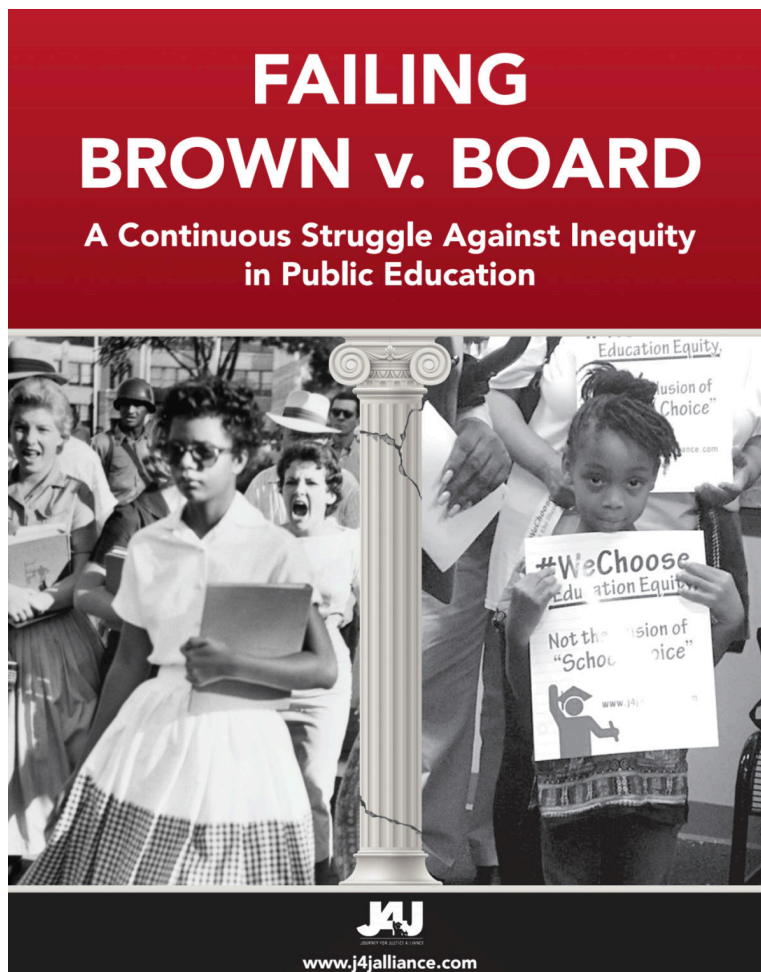
Then the market crashed and—as you can imagine—it's been an uphill battle ever since. For the last 13 years, we've been trying to get New York State to fully fund the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. Here we are 13 years later with about \$4 billion still owed to public schools serving black, brown, and poor children throughout New York State. And during those years, we've seen the loss of tens of thousands of teachers and hundreds of programs. We've seen schools deteriorating. We've seen pretty much anything and everything that could negatively impact the education of children. While we've had some success stopping cuts in state funding, we're still fighting to get the full \$4 billion commitment that's owed to our children.

Look, we know that money matters. If money wasn't important, white affluent parents and others who can afford it wouldn't be sending their kids to private schools or working so hard to make sure their children have everything they need to succeed in school. After all the years I've been doing this work, it's pretty clear to me that black, brown, and poor children are not a priority in our state or our nation. We don't even need to go into all the history; we just need to look at an organization like the Alliance for Quality Education that has to fight tooth and nail just to keep Campaign for Fiscal Equity alive.

We've seen a generation of children who have not had access to the basic educational opportunities that other children have. And yet one of the arguments we often hear is that *you just want money* or *we've already given you so much money*. No, we *don't* just want money. We have an agenda. We want community schools, and we know what those community schools should be offering our children. We want to end the school-to-prison pipeline. We want to make sure that all four-year-olds in New York State have universal access to high-quality, full-day prekindergarten. All right? We can name all the things we want the money to be spent on, but racism and prejudice just keep these narratives alive—like we want more money just for the sake of having more money.

Nationally it's no different. Just the other day, we were in Washington, D.C. with the Journey for Justice

Alliance and the **Alliance to Reclaim our Schools** ([@ReclaimOurSchls](#)) to demand that the government finally fulfill its 40% funding commitment to Title I, which has only been **funded at closer to 15% for the last few decades**. We were demanding \$580 billion to fully fund the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** or IDEA. Can you imagine what \$580 billion could do for those schools, students, and communities? Of course, some people will say that's a lot of money, but black, brown, and poor children have been shortchanged that much. When will they finally get the money they're owed?



[Failing Brown v. Board: A Continuous Struggle Against Inequity in Public Education](#) illuminates how the public-school system in the United States still bears the hallmarks of racial segregation, inequity, and injustice more than 60 years after the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that "separate and equal" was inherently unequal and unfair. The report examines high school course offerings in 12 cities report and shows how black, brown, and poor students are systemically denied educational opportunities that are readily available to white and more affluent students in nearby schools. *Source: Journey for Justice Alliance*

I was listening to an **interview with James Baldwin** and he basically says: *How much time do you want for your progress? My grandparents had to wait. My father had to wait. I had to wait. My nieces*



and nephews had to wait. That statement just got to me because there's always a reason why black, brown, and poor children have to wait. It's never the right time. It's been 65 years since Brown vs. the Board of Education, and we still haven't got that done in this country. The Journey for Justice Alliance has [a report called \*\*Failing Brown v. Board\*\*](#) that shows the continuing disparities between predominantly black or brown schools and their white counterparts.

I think it's just astonishing that some children in Chicago have to take art online. *Online art?* How do you take art online? It's astonishing that parents in Chicago have to do a five-week hunger strike to save Dyett High School when at the same time the mayor was [giving millions of dollars to a school in a white community that didn't need millions of dollars.](#)

That's why we fight so hard for funding because money and equity are intertwined. They're not separate.

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**Q: Another example is the often-observed connection between funding inequities, school privatization, and the school-to-prison pipeline. I know you have given this topic a lot of thought, and it might be instructive to break it down. How are these issues connected? And can you give us a few real-world examples of the problem that you've encountered in your work?**

How are they connected? Wow. That's a big question because it's such a tangled web.

I can see how it will almost seem conspiratorial if your eyes haven't been opened yet, or if you haven't had the opportunity to see it with your own eyes like I have. Jitu Brown says it's like a [three-card monte](#). The game always makes it seem like you can win, and then they pull that sleight of hand and you realize it's all a scam.

Let's just take one issue in school privatization, which is just a huge problem nationally. Part of the problem is the stealing of our democracy and our voice in the education process. One maneuver is to make school boards appointed instead of elected. When there's a state takeover of your district or your school, well, that can be the first step toward school privatization. When you have a school board that's appointed, it now becomes much easier for dark money to seep in and influence those boards, and all of

sudden they begin to make decisions that are more pro-charter, more anti-public-school, and less democratic. And there's also the fact that millions of dollars from national dark-money groups are now being spent on local school-board elections, which used to be something that people never paid much attention to. These groups know that when you take community voice and power away, the community can't vote on a budget that's equitable—that it strangles democracy.

How about the funding inequities that we see across the board nationally? These funding disparities sabotage our schools and undermine their ability to be providers of inspiration for our black and brown and poor students.

Imagine that I'm a black student going to school, and I'm not inspired by anything I see. When I walk into school I have to go through metal detectors and scanners. I see police officers everywhere I turn. I'm already seen as *less than*, as someone who's going to do something wrong, as some kind of criminal. And when I get to my desk, I don't see any teachers who look like me. But I'm supposed to sit there and listen to them lecture me about a history that doesn't reflect me or my culture.

The teacher doesn't really see me or what I bring—I'm just a deficit. And as soon as I speak out and want to talk about the history that that's not being shared, the true history that I learned at home, now I'm being combative. But if I was a white child in a suburban school, speaking up like that would be seen as constructive debate, right? Yet because I'm a black child, they call in security. I'm not listening and doing as I'm told. Now I'm looking at getting suspended or kicked out of school. I'm caught up in the system.

We know what the research says and we know what the data says: once a child has more than one suspension, that child is already on the path to not graduating, not getting a job, and ending up in prison. A few years ago, I was in New Orleans where they had just built a new high school, and literally right next to the high school they were building a jail. What are they saying to those children? When you have to walk past a prison to go to a school with metal detectors? Are they saying *we don't want y'all to have to walk too far*?

We see examples of this play out over and over again. Here in New York, we're trying to get the **Safe and Supportive Schools Act** passed, which would end suspensions in grades K-to-three. And, yes, I did just say *K-to-three*: they suspend *five-year-olds*. And they not only suspend them, but they handcuff them sometimes, as well. We've seen that happen. The bill would also reduce suspensions from the current max, which is 180 days—that's a full school year, and it's not even considered an expulsion. What does that do to those children? Getting suspended an entire year for doing some small thing? You would think this was common sense, but we're having a hard time pushing that bill.

These issues have real impacts. Let's take charters specifically, which have really embraced zero-tolerance discipline policies. A zero-tolerance policy means that if you're not paying attention, if you're not sitting up straight, if your feet are not firmly planted on the floor, if you're not silent at lunch, then you can get suspended. We hear stories that are just shameful from young people all across the country. Children being forced to walk down the hall silently with their arms behind their backs and teachers using sticks to prod them along. Or elementary school children who have to sit at lunch perfectly quiet without speaking or saying anything, otherwise they get in trouble. That doesn't sound like an education to me—that sounds like they're preparing those kids for prison.

I think it's really important for people to get the full picture, and not get caught up in racist narratives that allow people to say, "No, no, no, that's not happening." Because it is happening—it's happening all over the country. If we're not talking to the students, families, and communities on the ground who are experiencing these policies every day, and we're not getting their stories out, we're doing a disservice.

I believe no one has the right to tell somebody their experience is wrong, and that's why stories matter on all these fronts. It's the stories that have allowed us to make the connections here in New York, and nationally through Journey for Justice, and to figure out how all these issues are intertwined and who the players are.

It's important for us to understand how all of this works because people still don't believe it's happening. But it is happening. In New York City, [we spend \\$2 billion a year on charter schools](#), even though our public schools statewide are still owed \$4 billion dollars from an equity lawsuit that was settled in 2006. What does this say about our priorities?

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**Q: You've been discussing the importance of making systems-level connections. What strategies have you used to help communities decode and understand the larger patterns at play in education systems? And what happens when communities start connecting up problems and creating their own solutions?**

I feel like Journey for Justice is a perfect example of a strategy that works. Take the [We Choose](#)

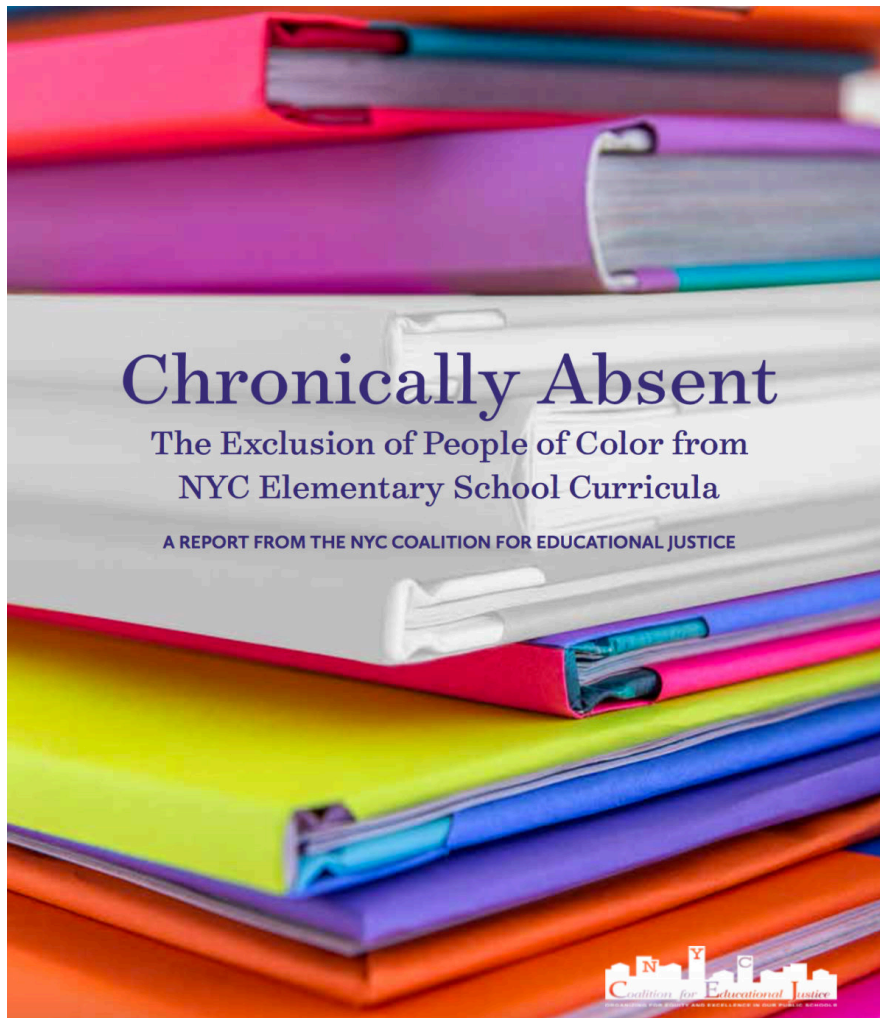
**campaign.** We intentionally built that campaign to be a diverse space. We invited in white allies because we know that if we're going to create solutions, then all of us have to be in on it. If we have white allies working on the campaign, and if they talk to their friends, and their friends talk to their friends, we can really make some change happen. When that happens, you can get a movement.

As I mentioned, what really helps folks are the stories—the individual stories of struggle and how people are being personally impacted. But we also couple personal stories with white papers and reports because we know that data often helps to elevate the stories of the black and brown and poor parents who no one listens to. Sometimes the stories are not enough, and the research helps to get the message to the next level with the media, elected officials, change-makers, or funders. I don't think one can work without the other.

The Coalition for Educational Justice—I talked about them earlier on—is a parent-led group New York City. I was a founding parent member of the organization, and it's about 14 years old this year, I think. The group is led by black, brown, and immigrant parents in New York City, and they're trying to change education policy citywide. What you need is an agenda, and you need to talk about very specific things that can get done. Starting in 2017, their campaign **focused on getting culturally responsive education in classrooms**. They understood how important it is that children see themselves in the books they read and that they learn about their real history—not some whitewashed history. For more than two years, they've been pushing this agenda in New York City.

When Chancellor Carranza came on last year, we met with him. We didn't let up on the urgency. We said you're new, we understand that, but the urgency for families is still the same and our agenda isn't going to stop. We need funding to do implicit-bias training for teachers. That was our demand: we wanted teachers to get trained on implicit bias. And we didn't say white teachers; we said teachers because everybody comes with bias.

Not too long after that, we got the mayor to commit \$23 million for implicit-bias training, which is still happening in schools across New York City as we speak.



Based on an evaluation of more than 700 books across three commonly used book lists and seven K-5 English Language Arts curricula, [\*Chronically Absent: The Exclusion of People of Color from NYC Elementary School Curricula\*](#) reveals how people of color are underrepresented in New York City's public school curricula and learning materials at the elementary level. The authors call on the New York City Department of Education to adopt a culturally responsive curriculum in the city's schools. *Source: NYC Coalition for Educational Justice*

That victory only happened because black, brown, and immigrant parents pushed that agenda, and that's because they were the ones who saw the need. They knew how it would impact not just their children but *all children*. So they kept on pushing with press conferences and getting those who make the decisions to the table. They came out with a huge victory that's having a reverberating impact across the country. Can you imagine the level of excitement felt by these parents? We didn't expect it. And we didn't expect to get that amount of money.

We're still riding that high, but the fight continues. Now we're focused on changing the curriculum. The



Coalition for Educational Justice just put out a report called **Chronically Absent**, which documents how a child in elementary school can go from kindergarten through fifth grade—six years of education—seeing more animals on the cover of books than black, Latinx, or Asian people combined. In a city that’s only 15% white students, 84% of the elementary-school books are written by white authors and 52% of covers are identified with white folks. About 41% of the student population in New York City is Latinx, and yet only 5% of the books are by Latinx authors, and I believe 8% of book covers feature Latinx people.

Something has got to change.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

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