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How Anti-Racist Participatory Policy Advocacy Can Change Delaware's Education System

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SIT Graduate Institute Capstone

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Shyanne Miller April 22, 2017

### Abstract

Non-profit organizations fighting for change in the education system are more likely to realize their mission by engaging members of the public, particularly parents and students. However, engaging the public in a meaningful way requires an understanding of barriers to participation in the education system (racism), a shift away from colorblind, liberal ideology typically used to drive non-profit activity, and the undertaking of an anti-racist agenda when working within communities. Here, I offer a set of guidelines which the Rodel Foundation of Delaware can follow to implement anti-racist, participatory policy advocacy. Starting with a review of racism in Delaware's education system, I offer Rodel a means of adopting an anti-racist agenda internally. Then, I offer a framework by which Rodel can engage parents and students in advocacy that is community-driven and community-owned. Without an explicit focus on dismantling racism in the education system through participatory policy advocacy, education reform efforts will remain incremental and non-transformative.

## How Anti-Racist Participatory Policy Advocacy Can Change Delaware's Education System

Public involvement in education is essential to transforming the public school system (Orr and Rogers, 2011; Warren and Mapp, 2011; Mediratta, et al., 2009). Like many other spheres in our democratic society, public involvement is required if there is to be a shift towards a more effective and equitable system (Orr and Rogers, 2011; Warren and Mapp, 2011; Mediratta, et al., 2009). History has proven that. However, there is an equality problem when it comes to community engagement in public education. Minority and impoverished parents are less likely and less able to engage in public education—in other words they have an “unequal voice” (Orr and Rogers, 2011). Despite this, these disadvantaged citizens still find a way to engage, though they often must navigate barriers that their more socially and economically privileged counterparts are less likely to come across (Orr and Rogers, 2011; Chavkin and Williams, 1989). These barriers are myriad, including a lack of resources such as money, time, and political clout (Orr and Rogers, 2011; Warren and Mapp, 2011; Mediratta, et al., 2009; Chavkin and Williams, 1989). At their roots, these barriers are the result of systemic and institutionalized oppressions that have disempowered and marginalized impoverished, minority parents and students. Racist and classist policies and legislation are responsible for ensuring that minority and low-income parents and students are excluded from educational and civic engagement opportunities (Orr and Rogers, 2011; Warren and Mapp, 2011).

Why focus on marginalized parents and students? Policymaking in general is supposed to be a democratic process that involves as many stakeholders as possible. The historical exclusion of black, brown, and impoverished people from the policymaking process makes for a lack of representation in not only the decision-making bodies but also in the stakeholder engagement

process (Tschannen-Moran, 2000; Abrams and Gibbs, 2002; Turney and Kao, 2014). Yet, this systematic exclusion of parents and students from engaging in education makes little sense not only because they have a large stake in the field, but because historically, they have been instrumental in challenging the status quo and demanding change at all levels of the school system. There is a plethora of literature documenting the influence of the community in the education sphere, whether it is advocating for democratic governance in their school, co-producing educational services for students, grassroots campaigns to overcome education inequality, forming strategic alliances to influence district-level decision-making, or rallying around a unifying cause to enact new policies (Orr and Rogers, 2011, Mediratta et al., 2009, Warren and Mapp, 2011). Marginalized groups have been instrumental in challenging the status quo and demanding equitable change at all levels of the school system. While there is also ample literature specifically regarding parental involvement in student education, much of it is focused on individualized involvement targeted at ensuring the academic achievement of their children or simply supporting their school activities (Coleman, 1991; Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Lareau and Shumar, 1996). While this level of involvement is important to student success, it is not heavily discussed within the scope of this paper. Here, I focus on the collective engagement of parents and students pushing for institutional and systemic changes that transform the public school system into an equitable, inclusive, and accountable learning system. I make the argument for education advocacy organizations—particularly the Rodel Foundation of Delaware—to take an anti-racist participatory policy advocacy approach to education reform. Without this approach, Rodel cannot and will not fulfill its mission of improving Delaware’s public education system. An explicit focus on equity and increasing public participation by facilitating citizen-centered advocacy can be a successful strategy for education policy advocates.

First, however, I will review the layout of this paper. Below I provide a brief history of Delaware's education system, starting just before the passing of *Brown v. Board* and continuing into the present. That history will give an idea of both the policy that created Delaware's public education system as we know it and the role that parents, students, and other members of the community played in dismantling the segregated school system. That will lead us into a discussion of participation's role in community development and advocacy. Then I will end with a framework for how to take an anti-racist participatory approach to policy advocacy. Before all that, however, I will orient you on the role of racism in education policy and how anti-racist policy advocacy can challenge that.

### **Anti-racist Participatory Policy Advocacy**

Before exploring the role public participation plays in systemic change in education, I must emphasize and elaborate upon the role that racism plays in the policymaking process. It is important to note that the racism I am writing about is not as explicit in the policymaking procedure today as was during the majority of U.S. history. This racism is institutionalized, systemic, and *invisible* (Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Despite much progress in removing racial discrimination from legislation and policy, racism remains a significant factor in inequity within the United States (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Racism in policy-making is masked by colorblind decision-making, where the role racism plays is downplayed, deprioritized, or simply neglected (Gillborn, 2005). The results are often neoliberal, colorblind policies that (intentionally or unintentionally) maintain or exacerbate the conditions which exclude black and brown people from participating as stakeholders in the policy-making process (Apple, 2001; Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). In order to avoid further marginalizing these groups, policy-making needs to take place using an actively anti-racist lens,

particularly one that analyzes and critiques the current process for lawmaking (Gillborn, 2005). In other words, the process and players cannot and should not neglect the role racism plays in reproducing inequality in society, and should vigorously work to dismantle it.

Just as an actively anti-racist approach is necessary for fair rulemaking, an actively anti-racist approach to policy advocacy is crucial to ensuring that equitable policies are being passed, and that we are holding the state accountable to ensure that all citizens are considered in policy processes and outcomes. Anti-racist policy advocacy is centered on people and works to “resist unequal power relations at every level” (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007, p. 22). This form of advocacy uses a participatory approach, which engages people in analyzing the problem or issue, educates them on political decision-making, empowers them with the capacity to negotiate with decision-makers alongside advocates, and supports them in alliance building (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007). Education policy advocacy organizations will see more influence in policy when they begin to engage marginalized citizens in their advocacy, and empower them to act on their own accord. Using anti-racist, participatory policy advocacy (PPA) these groups will be able to more effectively and efficiently do so.

The first step in anti-racist PPA is a review of the history of institutionalized racism in education policy. This step is essential to adequately analyzing the history of racism in education and the role community members played in countering it. Using Delaware as a case study of sorts, I explore the latter statements through a review of the process of desegregation in the state and how instrumental citizens were in making that happen. This review is followed by an analysis of the origins of the participatory development model and an explanation of how this model can be re-purposed for use in policy advocacy campaigns. Then I will explore how an organization with limited experience with anti-racism and parent and student engagement can



make this shift to anti-racist PPA in order to fulfill their mission of improving the public education system for all students. The guidelines and recommendations provided here will be customized for the Rodel Foundation of Delaware, however the approach outlined can be used by any policy advocacy organization.

### **What is the Rodel Foundation of Delaware?**

The Rodel Foundation of Delaware was established in 1999 by Bill and Don Budinger. The Foundation grew out of Rodel Inc., a Delaware-based electronics company that grew into an international company that is now owned by Dow (Rodel Foundation website, 2016). The Rodel Foundation has a mission to make Delaware's education system one of the best in the world through the promotion of policy, seed funding for "innovative, potentially high-impact initiatives", and the creation and leading of diverse partnerships (Rodel Foundation Website, 2016, n.p.). Therefore, much of the work they do plays on their strengths, including their role as a "critical friend and thought partner" (p. 16), their ability to "think big" (p. 26), and their "strong use of data and evidence based approaches" (p. 15) (Jenkins and Wisdom, 2014).

Since 1999, Rodel has made progress in policy areas such as early childhood education, supporting state-wide academic standards, and advocating for high quality professional development and training of educators. Rodel's strategic investments were instrumental in helping establish Teach for America- Delaware and Innovative Schools, a Delawarean non-profit that supports educators in adopting new school models (Rodel Foundation website, 2016). Rodel's hard fought efforts to establish and maintain partnerships with Delawarean education stakeholders (including government, business, and civic leaders) have been useful for getting more perspectives around the table. Lastly, but not least, the Foundation created the Rodel Teacher Council. Established in 2013, the Rodel Teacher Council is a group a teachers convened

by the organization who are tasked with exploring solutions for improving education and “their craft, and leveraging their voices for the benefits of their students” (Rodel Foundation website, 2016, n.p.). Rodel’s strengths as a critical friend and thought partner and long-term thinker can also be leveraged in steering the organization towards anti-racist PPA. As it stands, the organization makes an excellent candidate for this undertaking, as it has seen many successes but also recognizes the necessity to further their work. Hopefully, a review of how Delaware’s education system got to where it is today can help advance Rodel’s efforts.

### **Institutionalized Racism in the First State: Then and Now**

Institutionalized racism in Delaware education policy from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup> century has contributed to the disempowerment of minority parents and students, and can be blamed for the unsatisfactory state of the education system today. One year after the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, Delaware’s Constitution was amended to ensure that separate but equal public schooling for white and non-white students was implemented statewide (Urban League, 2002; Shagaloff, 1955). Segregated schools remained a staple in Delaware’s education system more than 75 years afterwards (Urban League, 2002). A series of pre-Brown equalization lawsuits paved the way for Delaware to join the Brown case. These landmark lawsuits included schools from elementary to college level (Raffel, 1980). In all cases, it was found that the quality of education for black students was not equal to white schools due to inadequate funding, and physical and instructional deficiencies (Urban League, 2002; Raffel, 1980). Many of these pre-Brown lawsuits were supported by the NAACP, who provided legal representation for parents and students who were fed up with the inferior conditions of black schools. In particular, in *Belton v. Gebhart 1952*, seven Howard High School students raised their voices in protest of the substandard conditions they were forced to learn in (Raffel,

1980). In *Bulah v. Gebhart* 1952, a mother fought for her daughter's right to ride the white-only bus to her black school, something she was *legally* denied by the bus driver (Raffel, 1980). In both of these cases the Delaware Supreme Court ruled in favor of the students and parents. However, the state appealed the cases to the U.S. Supreme Court. Thus, Delaware joined Kansas, Virginia, South Carolina and Washington, DC in the *Brown v. Board* case (Raffel, 1980). Of course, the case resulted in the desegregation of schools nationwide.

Post-Brown, it took two decades for Delaware to fully desegregate public schools (Urban League, 2002). "Southern Delaware experienced major resistance and conflict" (Raffel, 1980, p. 42). Kent and Sussex county towns resisted first through litigation, and then through organized public demonstrations and threats of violence, until integration was forced through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in 1967 (Raffel, 1980; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). The process of school desegregation in Wilmington was also long and arduous (Raffel, 1980; Shagaloff, 1955). Despite an official plan for integration, poor implementation of the plan left many schools racially identifiable—an issue that would cause further litigation (Raffel, 1980; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). In *Evans v. Buchanan* (first opened in 1956, reopened 1971) a black mother claimed racial discrimination by Clayton school district, and "that the district had not submitted a desegregation plan to the State Board of Education" (Raffel, 1980, p. 44; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). This case exposed the many dilatory tactics that were being used in Wilmington to maintain the status quo (Raffel, 1980; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). One of these tactics included the Educational Advancement Act of 1968, a law that prevented any school districts with more than 12,000 students from consolidating with other school districts, and that stated that the boundaries of Wilmington schools must be within the boundaries of the city (Raffel, 1980; Urban League, 2002; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). The result was that districts in the City of

Wilmington (majority black districts) could not consolidate with those in the suburbs (mostly white) to advance desegregation (Urban League, 2002; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). In 1976, as a result of *Evans v. Buchanan*, the Educational Advancement Act was found unconstitutional (Raffel, 1980; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). However, it did not address how Wilmington was to continue desegregating the city--- through an intra- or inter-district plan (Raffel, 1980). It wasn't until 1978 that a court-ordered plan to desegregate by bussing emerged (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014).

Attempts to desegregate through bussing polarized New Castle County (Raffel, 1980; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). Amongst government officials, attitudes towards bussing were varied (Raffel, 1980). Some state legislators opposed bussing and even passed some symbolic anti-bussing legislation—though nothing truly obstructive to desegregation (Raffel, 1980; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). Representatives of Delaware at the federal level also took stands against bussing. However, this was countered locally in New Castle County where desegregation efforts were supported by religious, nonprofit, educational and business groups (Raffel, 1980; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). This community involvement was targeted towards preparing communities for desegregation, as they were not invited to develop the actual desegregation plans (Raffel, 1980). One important coalition of government, education, parent, and other community representatives was the Breakfast Group. The Breakfast Group met regularly to discuss issues regarding planning for desegregation implementation—from preparing students for desegregation to crisis intervention. The Breakfast Group meetings established trust amongst the various stakeholders, allowed for sharing information and ideas, and acted as a “testing ground” for the capacity of attending groups (Raffel, 1980, p. 146). Most importantly, however, was that the group was an advisory board of sorts for guests and participants (Raffel, 1980). Unfortunately, the Breakfast

Group was not public and did not take an open stand on the issue of school desegregation. That, among other issues (lack of participation from some school districts, lack of formal rules/guidelines, and the secrecy through which the meetings were carried out) made it difficult for the Breakfast Group to exercise the influence it desired (Raffel, 1980). Consequently, the Citizen's Alliance for Public Education was formed in 1976. This alliance decided to publicly take a stand for desegregation through bussing. The Alliance consisted of the same community stakeholders listed above and their goal was to peacefully implement desegregation of schools through support for public schools and informed community participation. The multi-racial coalition was influential in the establishment of parent and student advisory groups onto desegregation task forces (Raffel, 1980).

The activities of pro-desegregation and pro-busing the community were countered by much of the white, suburban population and the grassroots, anti-busing organization Positive Action Committee (PAC) (Raffel, 1980; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). PAC was successful in ensuring that the anti-busing agenda was high on political leaders' and legislative members' lists, and prominent in the public conversation (Raffel, 1980; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). However, their efforts and goals to prevent school desegregation, build a constituency of 10,000 members, and influence anti-busing policy ultimately failed. In 1978, desegregation in Wilmington and New Castle County as a whole was realized through court-ordered bussing (Raffel, 1980; WEIC, 2016; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). For the next two decades, there was sustained pressure to continue desegregation throughout Delaware school districts, despite the loosening of desegregation standards across the country (WEIC, 2016).

Between 1995 and 1996 federal oversight of desegregation subsided following the realization of a petition from the State Board of Education for unitary status (Boyer and

Ratledge, 2014; WEIC, 2016). Unitary status is a legal term that meant a state had fulfilled its duty to desegregate schools and should no longer be held under court supervision (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). By 1995 the Delaware General Assembly amended the Delaware Constitution to remove the separate education system from law books (WEIC, 2016; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). That same year court-ordered bussing was ended and power to oversee school districts was returned to locals (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). Opponents to the decision to grant the state unitary status cited statistics arguing that desegregation and vestiges of racism still plagued black and brown students in Delaware, who lagged behind their white peers in academic achievement and were subject to harsher disciplinary actions than white students (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). Those concerns however, were interpreted by the deciding judge as the consequences of poverty and disadvantaged circumstances—not racial segregation (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014).

In addition, just five years later the Neighborhood Schools Act 2000 threatened the progress made over the past 20 years by requiring that the four school districts in the City of Wilmington assign all students to the school closest to their residence (WEIC, 2016; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). Although the Neighborhood Schools Act was passed into law smoothly, the public was not supportive. Many, including but not limited to the city newspaper, University of Delaware officials, and city school districts predicted that the law would re-segregate city students (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). Today, many argue that racial segregation is strong and present in Delaware schools (Niemeyer, et al. 2014; Glenn, 2011; Albright, 2014).

Another contentious sector within public education that some argue increased racial segregation is charter schools (Whitehurst et al., 2016; Ware and Fuestch, n.d.; Frankenburg et al. 2012; Pika and Raffel, n.d.) The Delaware Charter School Act was established in 1995 (WEIC, 2016; Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). Any entity could establish a charter school, so long as

they were approved by the state and local boards of education (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014).

Charter schools are a part of the public school system and are also publicly funded, however they are exempt from much of the state's education laws and regulations, except for reporting on enrollment, performance goals, revenue and a few other items (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). In two separate studies of charter schools in Delaware it was revealed that schools in New Castle County were racially segregated, with many urban charter schools overrepresented by black students and suburban charters overrepresented by white students (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014; Ware and Fuestch, n.d.; Pika and Raffel, n.d.). However, there was still a preference for charter schools by black families (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). In fact, school choice options—the option for a student to attend a school they weren't assigned to-- were more appealing to many low-income and minority parents. While some parents may see the school choice option as an opportunity to send their children to a better school, it is also likely that these parents preferred to have their children attend a school closer to the workplace to avoid bussing, or to avoid the complications with having to visit a school far from home (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014). Despite the fact that school choice options do offer more educational opportunity for minority and low-income students, it is not the solution for creating educational equity (Boyer and Ratledge, 2014).

Clearly, racial segregation in the public school system remains a serious barrier to fair education for black and brown students. Many involved in the fight for better education are grappling with the vestiges of institutional racism on the achievement of black and brown and low-income Delawarean students. According to Delaware Public Education at a Glance, Rodel's guidebook summarizing student enrollment data, student performance, post-secondary readiness, educator quality and other factors in public education, students of color and low-income students

across the state still lag behind their peers in academic achievement and equal access to educational opportunity (2015-16 Delaware Public Education at a Glance, 2016). Students of color represent more than 50 percent of students enrolled in public schools across the state; Mixed-race, American Indian, and Asian and Hawaiian students are the fastest growing population and Hispanic and Latino students are the second fastest growing (2015-16 Delaware Public Education at a Glance, 2016). Low-income students comprise over one-third of the public school student population in Delaware (2015-16 Delaware Public Education at a Glance, 2016). In the state's standardized test, the Smarter Assessment, black and Latino students scores were more than 20 percentage points lower than white students in both reading and math (2015-16 Delaware Public Education at a Glance, 2016). A similar achievement gap exists between low-income students and non-low-income students. College readiness for minority and low-income students also presents concern, with remediation rates of 50 percent or higher (2015-16 Delaware Public Education at a Glance, 2016). Despite the efforts to desegregate schools, educational opportunities for students of color and low-income students have yet to be fully equalized to those of their wealthier, white counterparts.

Still, Delaware has come a long way from separate but equal. The slow dismantling of the dual school system was met with intense resistance throughout the state-- though counter-resistance from people of color and other Delawareans was instrumental in desegregating schools. However, we must recognize that there are still major barriers to racial equity in education. Laws within the past 30 years still prove to be obstacles to racial desegregation and equalizing educational opportunity. The fight for racial desegregation in public schools is one major example of how participation by and engagement of parents and students, among other members of the community, can be an effective policy advocacy technique. In the following



section, I introduce anti-racist PPA and deconstruct it to understand its origins. I will explore how an explicitly anti-racist participatory approach can be-- and has been--used to empower citizens to influence policy.

### **Making the Case for Community Participation in Policy Advocacy**

A participatory approach to policy advocacy in education—one that involves parents and students in the advocacy process for transforming public education at a systemic level--- is essential to any organization whose mission is to improve the public school system. Therefore increasing the capacity of marginalized groups to influence education policy is in the best interest of policy advocacy organizations. Anti-racist PPA is a method that combines aspects of participatory action research and community development with policy advocacy in an effort to raise the voices of those most affected by the issue that needs to be solved. The method seeks to empower, lift (rather than give) the voices of, and build the capacity of historically underrepresented and under resourced communities. In order to understand the power of anti-racist PPA, one must understand participation as a community development and research technique.

Participation is defined as “ways of effectively and ethically engaging people in processes, structures, spaces, and decisions that affect their lives, and working with them to achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes on their own terms. ” (Kindon, 2010, p. 518) Kindon (2010) argues that this definition emphasizes a need for a critique of power relations, constructed difference, inequality, and how those oppressive structures can be dismantled in an inclusive manner. In its most radical context, the participatory approach originated in grass-roots feminist, environmentalist, anti-imperial, post-colonial, and anti-racist political and social movements. In these movements, the process for change and enhanced capacity for engagement relied on

building trusting relationships, dialogue, and activism (Kendon, 2010). Some approaches that use participation include community organizing, popular education, and participatory action research (Castelloe et al., 2002; Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2006; Veneklasen and Miller, 2007).

In Participatory Action Research, (PAR) academic researchers partner with ordinary citizens as “co-researchers and decision-makers in their own right” (Kendon, 2010, 520). The process emphasizes the criticality of the unique experiences that these oppressed groups hold and the potential for these communities to develop solutions to their own problems. This is research done with a group, not on them (Kendon, 2010). The main roots of PAR are from action research and participatory research—both forms of research that are aimed at effecting social change and dismantling oppressive systems (Kendon, 2010; Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2006). In the search for practical conclusions and community produced solutions, action research employs a method of systematic inquiry and reflection that result in some form of social and change and action (Kendon, 2010; Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2006). Participatory research is more explicitly centered on the humanity of participants as self-directing, autonomous and responsible agents that have the capacity to direct their own lives. However, the thing about participatory research that distinguishes it from action research is that no “external action towards change” is required (Kendon, 2010, p.522). Over time though, these distinctions were contested and eventually have become distorted as participatory research and action research merged into PAR (Kendon, 2010). PAR is now used as a method of informing community development projects.

Participation is also used in popular education, which is mainly associated with Paulo Freire (Castelloe et al., 2002). Popular education is a form of learning based on experience,

dialogue, and reflection about the larger social, political and economic spheres that the participants live in (Castelloe et al., 2002). Popular education is a method that uses participation to empower people, expose social hierarchies and constructed divisions--- something that is often missed when it comes to community development and advocacy (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007; Castelloe et al., 2002). While popular education is useful in that aspect, it does not provide the necessary guidance for project planning and implementation the way in which community organizing does (Castelloe et al., 2002).

Community organizing can be thought of as the process in which people are brought together to accomplish a task that benefits the community as a whole (Castelloe et al., 2002). The process includes capacity building to improve the social, political, and economic well-being of the community (Castelloe et al., 2002). Often community organizing involves teaching and developing the tools, tactics, and methods needed to build clout, mobilize people, and negotiate power and resources (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007). This participatory approach has a major strength in that it focuses on a specific issue and tries to win that issue. However, when activities are managed and carried out by those outside of the community, the process tends to become a mild form of participation--- one that will not leave lasting change for community members (Castelloe et al., 2002; Veneklasen and Miller, 2007).

When it comes to democratizing the process for engagement, participation offers a myriad of ways in which organizations can make involving the community a fair and inclusive process (Castelloe et al., 2002; Veneklasen and Miller, 2007). However, the participatory techniques, methods, and processes developed within community organizing, PAR, and popular education could be misused (unintentionally or intentionally), resulting in the reinforcement of current power structures (Rocheleau and Slocum, 1995). Unpacking, analyzing, and critiquing

“the relations of power embedded in the broader social context as well as in the participatory process itself” are required to avoid this (Rocheleau and Slocum, 1995, p. 17). Power is complex, manifesting at different levels of explicitness in various contexts, making an analysis of power by both researchers, developers and participants crucial to the process (Gaventa, 2006; Rocheleau and Slocum, 1995). In participatory activities, there also must be a critical look at the spaces in which participation happens, and how accessible, permeable, inclusive, and inviting these spaces are (Gaventa, 2006). Additionally, without a hard look at the intersecting identities that make up a community (race, ethnicity, gender, ability, locality, religion, culture, and class) researchers and developers may make assumptions about a communities’ capability to participate that actually result in the exclusion of many potential participants (Gibson-Wood, and Wakefield, 2012; Rocheleau and Slocum, 1995). However, I would argue that one of the most dangerous pitfalls of participation lies in an approach that is not explicitly anti-racist. An explicit anti-racist approach to participation can ensure that one employs techniques that directly call out, oppose, and work to dismantle structural and institutional racism and racial discrimination. In the case of a policy advocacy organization looking to change education, an anti-racist participatory approach to the problem is a must.

Throughout the remainder of this paper, I will offer a general guide on how any policy advocacy organization can undertake anti-racist PPA as a useful tool for furthering their mission for structural and social change. However, as I mentioned before, I hope that Rodel in particular can use the guidance and recommendations here to embrace anti-racist PPA. Keeping in mind the limitations and experience of the organization, as well as the challenges that will come up, this guide will specifically address two items:

1. **Shifting organizational behavior to undertake an internal anti-racist agenda.** I will very briefly and broadly explore the internal shifts Rodel must make to effectively engage in anti-racist PPA. The section begins with a breakdown of how colorblindness in non-profit sector prohibits the adoption of anti-racist technique. It continues with a discussion of the role diversity and inclusion play in prioritizing anti-racism. It concludes with the ways in which reflection can be used to build solidarity between Rodel and the community, as well as hold Rodel accountable to parents and students.
2. **Engaging Delawarean parents and students through anti-racist PPA.** This section includes a set of frameworks and guidelines through which Rodel can build a relationship with a parents and students; foster transparency amongst the community; create a group with a common vision; plan and implement projects; and use reflection to remain adaptive and maintain accountability.

### **Shifting Non-profit Organizational Behavior: Catalyzing Social Change through an Anti-Racist Agenda**

Anti-racist PPA is about the fight for social change. Rodel is fighting for social change within the education system—trying to make public education in Delaware excellent and accountable. Social change is defined as the “modification of mechanisms within the social structure, marked by changes in culture, behaviors, organization, and value systems” (Form, 2016, n.p.). In their attempt to change public education, Rodel is trying to shift the dominant education narrative and restructure the rules of the system so that all kids are valued, teachers are celebrated and provide excellent service, and the system is responsive to the needs of all

individuals. However, they are doing so using a strategy that does not call out racism as part of the reason Delaware's public education system is not working for all students.

As a policy advocacy organization, Rodel is aware of the imbalance of power within Delaware's education system, and they understand that social change only occurs when power relations are recognized and asymmetries in power are rectified (Slocum, 2016). However, that is not enough. While Rodel may be conscious of systemic oppression through racism, without explicitly addressing it throughout its work they will not be able to overcome it to realize its vision. Therefore, it would be helpful for Rodel to evaluate why they has yet to overtly identify racism as a factor that plays a role in student academic outcomes, college and career readiness, student discipline, and school funding. Rodel's relationships with members of the business sector, leaders in education at the district level, and with the Delaware Department of Education discourages the organization from taking an explicit anti-racist stance. Possible future sources of funding may also be a barrier to explicitly calling out racism, as fulfilling grant requirements can be restrictive for non-profit activities. Relationships and partnerships will need to be carefully examined and maneuvered in order to make the internal shift that is needed to begin to call racism by its name. The content of this section offers methods through which Rodel can make the internal shift needed to actively recognize and call out racism within the education system. This includes an analysis of how liberal ideology and colorblind practices reproduce racism in education, the role diversity and inclusion play in the internal shift, and how self-reflexivity and building solidarity can be the start for anti-racist PPA. Here are three steps to for creating an anti-racist praxis internal to the organization.

1. Unpack the liberal/colorblind discourses within the non-profit sector that reinforce institutionalized and structural racism.

2. Foster diversity and inclusivity within nonprofit staff, governance, and partnerships.
3. Harness the power of reflection and building solidarity through an empowerment model.

**Unpack the liberal/colorblind discourses within non-profits that reinforce racism.**

Organizations looking to make social change tend to use liberal and colorblind ideals to further their mission; however the result is often a reinforcement of the status quo for marginalized populations. Typically, this liberal approach misses inequality and ignores skewed power relations. In other words, a liberal ideology supports colorblindness, which fortifies structural and institutional racism. Non-profits, such as Rodel, working towards social change often work within a liberal ideology that overlooks racism as a structure to be undone in order to reach racial equity. In so doing, they may actually reinforce systemic racism. Unpacking liberalism and colorblindness are significant parts of the shift towards an anti-racist agenda.

Liberal discourses use rhetoric of freedom, equal opportunity, and fair treatment (Choi, 2008; Jackson, 2009). This rhetoric is supportive of colorblind ideology, which is a form of racism that “sustains and justifies” the current power structure (Choi, 2008, p. 54). The United States was built on liberal ideology--- freedom, independence, sovereignty--- however, this nation was simultaneously build upon racism and colonialism (Jackson, 2009). While some argue that the two ideas are the antithesis of one another, the fact remains that racism and liberal ideology exist symbiotically--- and it is argued that “racism has been and remains fundamental to [liberal] democracy’s existence” (Jackson, 2009, p. 171). The freedom that was celebrated and fought for during the early years of this nation was never meant for non-whites. However, as time went on and explicit racism became socially unacceptable, colorblindness developed as a mainstream method by which both individuals and institutions practiced racism (Jackson, 2009, p. 173).

Yet, I must emphasize that colorblindness manifests in various manners. Rodel may not be operating under a we-don't-see-color mantra, however, they may be unknowingly partaking in other types of colorblindness. Take, for instance, in the deficit perspective. The deficit perspective is the idea of false empathy towards black and brown peoples which is manifested through cultural racism (Choi, 2008). Poor parenting, bad decision-making, lack of interest in school are the reasons for the achievement gap—rather than racism within the education system. Liberal organizations may also be propagating meritocracy as a colorblind ideology--- in other words pushing the bootstrap theory (Choi, 2008). Part of the meritocracy paradigm is the reduction of racial problems to socio-economic problems--- which makes the point that socio-economic status is “an attainable trait instead of birth-ascribed” and therefore can be overcome by hard work (Choi, 2008, p.62). Finally, the use of the neoliberal, post-modern framework to downplay race and racism is another form of colorblindness that doesn't fit the mainstream definition of it. It is here that ideas such as intersectionality are misused to try to de-bunk the fact that racism exists or downplay the role of racism (Choi, 2008). This is often seen in comments such as “What about gender and class?” or comparing wealthy, successful people of color to poor white people. While the intersectionality of these multiple identities exists and is complicated, often the purpose of bringing it up is to minimize the role of racism and to preserve the status quo (Choi, 2008). These forms of colorblindness do not solve the problems of systemic oppression (Jackson, 2009). In fact, colorblindness' main goal is to go beyond race without addressing racism (Jackson, 2009). Because Rodel has not addressed the role racism plays in the education system nor have they acknowledged the need for anti-racism as part of the remedy, they are operating under a colorblind ideology.



Organizations working within a liberal and colorblind ideology frequently ignore racism and end up alienating the very people they are trying to help. Anti-racist practices should always start with a fundamental recognition of the dominant liberal ideology that pervades the education sphere, influences behavior, and maintains social hierarchies (Slocum, 2016). Social change requires a re-examination of how our dominant ideologies disempower and marginalize people of color, therefore if Rodel is to truly address the problems in education they need to discard the colorblind rhetoric and explicitly address the role race and racism play in Delaware's public school system.

### **Fostering Diversity and Inclusion**

The benefits of fostering diversity and inclusive practices have been well researched and widely shared within the non-profit sector, the business sector, and institutions of higher education. Inclusive practices not only allow for a non-profit's constituents to inform and contribute to the services of the organization, but they also provide opportunities for non-profits to be transparent in their activities (Brown, 2002). Advantages to having a diverse organization include improved group performance, the production of more and better ideas, and more creativity and innovation (Phillips, 2014; Hewlett et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2010). Although, these benefits are widely known and some non-profit personnel perceive their organization's leadership as valuing diversity, many have noticed that the value does not translate well into practice (Schwartz et al., 2012). For example, when looking at racial diversity in the non-profit sector there are many gaps in the representation of people of color within these organizations when compared to the make-up of the nation or locality (Schwartz et al., 2012). Non-profit staff makeup tends to be majority white, with less than 20 percent of staff members of color. Board structures are similar, with only 14 percent of board members identifying as people of color

(Schwartz et al., 2012). In fact, people of color are more likely to be receiving the services of a non-profit than to be employed or governing one (Schwartz et al., 2012).

However, there are some barriers to creating a diverse team, including recruiting and retaining, and prioritizing diversification. Inclusive, equitable practices are key to retention and recruiting. Challenges to recruiting include “poor access to diverse networks, interview methods that fail to demonstrate an organization’s commitment to diversity, and rushed hiring processes that do not allow for adequate time to develop diverse candidate pools” (Schwartz et al., 2012, p. 6). Typically, organizations that have trouble retaining minorities aren’t addressing bias, discrimination, and other unfair practices or attitudes within the organization. Or, sometimes a lack of diversity can be as simple as a lack of prioritization amongst board members and staff leaders within the organization (Schwartz et al., 2012). Identifying and rectifying these barriers to diversification and inclusion are critical to practicing anti-racism within non-profit organizations. Diversity and inclusion practices and policies are also critical to shifting away from the liberal, colorblind mindset towards an anti-racist ideology.

Shifting the internal culture requires top down buy-in, meaning non-profit organizations need to engage leadership personnel (executive staff and management and board members) in researching and establishing policies around diversity (Greene, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2012; National Council of Non-profits, n.d. ). The prioritization of diversity and inclusion by leadership will make the efforts more sustainable overtime, and helps avoid the pitfalls of good intentions without accountability (Community Foundations for Youth and California Tomorrow, n.d.). Not only does non-profit leadership need to prioritize diversity, they also need to understand it. Rodel, for example, understands diversity as more than race; it includes gender, class, sexuality and ability.

Many resources on diversity and inclusion advocate for some sort of board and staff member education on systems of oppression (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Greene, 2007; Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth and California Tomorrow, n.d.). In terms of race, racism and anti-racism, workshops are often the go-to. Though it may not be sufficient to fully educate a team on systemic and institutionalized racism, a workshop does lay the seeds for further analysis and internal conversations (Greene, 2007). In these internal conversations, difficult discussions will take place and leaders should be trained to openly acknowledge tensions and to quickly resolve friction between employees (Greene, 2007). The education around the issue should be used to further inform the formation of policies around diversity and inclusion and to assist in the shift in the internal culture of non-profits towards policies and procedures that increase staff diversity through intentional recruitment and retention (Community Foundations for Youth and California Tomorrow, n.d.; Greene, 2007).

So, what does this internal shift look like? The Greater Milwaukee Foundation had a goal to be a leader in creating a more inclusive region, especially focusing on “cross-racial awareness and understanding” (Community Foundation for Youth and California Tomorrow, n.d.). However, as a predominately white organization, they did not have the experience, relationships, or capacity to be that leader. Challenges included mis-aligned understanding of what practicing racial equity looked like, a lack of ability to effectively discuss issues of race and racism, and lack of shared vision of what they wanted to accomplish. Following an organization-wide evaluation and assessment, including a comprehensive review of staff and board diversity and commitment to racial equity in its activities—processes were developed to begin addressing diversity within the organization (Community Foundation for Youth and California Tomorrow, n.d.). The establishment of an organization-wide steering committee whose task was to drive and

hold accountable the organization to diversity and inclusion as well as the creation of work-groups comprised of different members from each department led to some progress for The Greater Milwaukee Foundation. In addition to the adoption of an explicitly stated diversity policy, the organization changed its hiring process to be more proactive in seeking out people of color. Finally, the foundation changed its approach to appointing trustees from external appointments to board appointments, making it easier for the board to diversify trustee membership (Community Foundation for Youth and California Tomorrow, n.d.).

Practicing diversity and inclusion on boards is an overlooked tool of anti-racism. Effective governance of a non-profit entity will require an in-depth understanding of the community at large—particularly stakeholder groups (Brown, 2002). The public’s confidence in governance of non-profits is quickly diminishing and leaving citizens distrustful of true intentions (McCambridge, 2004). This is the case for Rodel, who some perceive as being pushed by business interests rather than the interests of students, parents, and teachers. To combat this, Rodel could undertake a more inclusive approach to governance, one that systematically consults stakeholders such as parents and students to inform the work (Brown, 2002). It is important to institutionalize practices for including parents and students to inform the board about the needs and concerns of the community (Brown, 2002). One organization that has done an exemplary job of stakeholder engagement is the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), a Boston organization that uses the land trust model as a means of urban community development (DSNI website, 2017). DSNI uses a model of collective community control—the results of which can be seen on its board. DSNI has a 35 member board with intentional, equal representation of the community’s four major community ethnic groups: African Americans, Whites, Cape Verdeans, and Latinos (DSNI website, 2017). Furthermore, the board is representative of residents, non-

profits, religious organizations, and business groups. (DSNI website, 2017). DSNI's inclusive practices and explicit focus on racial diversity has helped advance its mission of community development through the land trust model.

By focusing on increasing diversity and instituting inclusive practices, Rodel could make bigger strides towards completing its mission. Rodel can make sure that it is practicing anti-racism through 1) practices that make an organization more transparent and accessible; 2) building the effectiveness of the organization's staff and board in engaging in anti-racist discussion and praxis; and 3) directing their energies towards institutionalizing policies and processes that foster diversity and inclusion.

### **Using Reflection to Build Solidarity and Empower Communities**

As the shift in internal culture takes place, an analysis of the organization's impact on the targeted community should be taking place as well. This analysis is a part of the reflection process, and it is a crucial stage for all non-profit organizations. In the reflection stage, the organization evaluates the strategies they have used, notes lessons learned, and plans their next steps (Griffith et al., 2007). Also part of the reflection process is asking questions about who benefitted from the work done, who was involved and who was not involved (Slocum, 2016). The reflection process requires the organization to hold itself accountable to not only its mission but to those members of the community whose lives they work to improve. In the case of Rodel, they are looking to improve students' academic experience. Reflection can be used to ensure that future practices mirror more inclusive methods, ones that have the potential for creating solidarity between Rodel, the targeted community, and partnering organizations (Slocum, 2016). As new relationships arise, different projects develop, and the decision-making process unfolds,

they will begin to see whether they are working on behalf of marginalized communities or if they are empowering them.

It is this empowerment strategy that leads to solidarity with the people that the organization is trying to help. Solidarity between an organization and its target community is essential to anti-racist PPA. Solidarity is about elevating the voices of the marginalized community through empowerment. Empowerment theory and strategies have various definitions that inform its practice (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). Many approach it through an individualized perspective— attaching “individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behavior to social policy and social change” (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995, p. 569). Some approach empowerment from the perspective of organizations, who can use the tools of social power to influence action among members of the community, drive or stifle public discourse, and influence public perception about a community (Speer and Hughey, 1995). Within the world of development, the term empowerment invokes the image of a non-profit or non-governmental organization helping a community to overcome poverty and “structural disadvantage” through participatory practices and better access to resources (Kilby, 2004, p.1). Empowerment strategies, however defined, are often used in non-profit spheres and are of particular interest to those practicing various forms of community organizing and development (Speer and Hughey, 1995; Kilby, 2004). I explore the ways in which Rodel can and does use the empowerment strategy, and how it can be essential to building solidarity.

Solidarity can be established through empowering activities such as placing members of the community in leadership positions, offering resources (space, time, money, platforms) to leaders already doing community development work in the targeted area, or simply listening to parents and students voice their concerns (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). Rodel uses an

empowerment strategy with its Rodel Teacher Council, which it equips with the tools necessary to help teachers promote student-centered policies and practices. From engaging with legislators to awareness-raising, Rodel prepares members of the teacher council to do policy advocacy, and while they rarely use the term empowerment to describe this work, it does fit the description. And, it is effective. Teachers on the Rodel Teacher Council are able to be heard by those in power through the spaces Rodel makes accessible—whether it is through the blog sphere or in state hall. However, there are some limitations. For one, Rodel chooses who gets to be on the Rodel Teacher Council, as they use an application and interview process to align potential candidates with their values and mission. This leaves out a substantial part of the teaching community whose values may not wholly align with Rodel's, which limits the scope of perceptions and experiences which Rodel can use to solve problems in education. Similarly, while much of the work is done with the intention to amplify teacher voice, often Rodel's voice overpowers it. And---although Rodel does not claim in any sense to practice community organizing and citizen empowerment--- their policy advocacy work with teachers is still largely driven and controlled by Rodel staff. All this limits not only the teachers themselves in promoting student-centered policy changes, but limits Rodel in its ability to realize significant progress in their mission. Rodel's current use of empowerment strategies does not use some of the basic tenets of anti-racism, which is enhancing the ability of community members to affect change and fostering shared leadership and decision-making. In other words, simply using an empowerment strategy does not automatically equal solidarity and commitment.

So what is the shift being called for here? Accountability needs to be incorporated into empowerment strategies in order to build solidarity (Kilby, 2004). In order to truly empower constituents, accountability to stakeholders-- including parents and students--alongside teachers,

must be defined and formalized (Kilby, 2004). By institutionalizing accountability to these groups, Rodel would be ensuring that there is more balanced power in the relationship between the community and the organization, a major piece of what solidarity looks like (Kilby, 2004; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). Accountability comes down to explicitly shared expectations, agreements, and explanations or justifications of actions (Kilby, 2004).

“Accountability in this framework is not a simple matter of reports and accounts, but rather it is as much about power, authority, and ownership” (Kilby, 2004, p.4). Yet, the challenge of being accountable to parents and students is that it sometimes conflicts with their need to remain accountable to board and donor interests (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002; Kilby, 2004). Other challenges to building this type of relationship include discarding the “caretaker culture” many organizations hold when doing advocacy work, learning to share power and decision-making, and instituting democratic governance (Annie E. Casey, 2002).

Overcoming these challenges first requires an understanding of how Rodel interacts with members of the community, which brings me back to the importance of reflection. As Rodel reflects on its interactions or lack thereof with parents, students, and teachers, they will begin to see whether or not their strategies are empowering and building solidarity. As they identify points of intervention, they will begin to see where these internal shifts need to be made in order to start practicing anti-racist PPA.

The following section further elaborates on how to build and maintain solidarity through anti-racist PPA. It includes strategies for listening to the community and being transparent, empowering parents and students, and how Rodel can use its excellent project planning and execution skills to help establish a sustainable parent and student constituent base. This work



however starts with an internal shift in the way Rodel operates. Here is a quick recap of the three steps needed for undertaking an anti-racist internal agenda:

1. **Deconstruct liberal and colorblind discourses that pervade non-profit organizations (and larger society).** Understanding how colorblindness manifests in an organization's activities and values is a pre-requisite to shifting a non-profit organization's internal culture. Colorblindness impedes organizations from recognizing and addressing racism in the education system, therefore unpacking it is a first step when engaging with anti-racism.
2. **Diversity and inclusion are important tools for shifting towards more equitable practices and policies.** Through workshops and training, leaders will begin to reevaluate and change policies and procedures, encourage and enable staff to engage in hard conversations around race and racism, and begin to both value *and* practice diversity and inclusion. As diversity and inclusion become institutionalized, the mission is more likely to be realized.
3. **Continuously reflect on how the public is being engaged and empowered.** As organizations begin to engage in external anti-racist efforts, they are encouraged to use empowerment as a means to build solidarity. This calls for formalized accountability to the public, collaborative decision-making and control, and a better balance of power between the organization and their constituents.

The final part of this paper will lay out a series of procedures that can be adopted by Rodel to incorporate anti-racist PPA into their advocacy strategy. The following is not an exhaustive list of every step that needs to be taken in order to include parents and students in the policy advocacy process. However, I identify each framework as crucial to making sure that the

advocacy process is both anti-racist and participatory. The following guidelines ask for organizations to listen to the perspectives of parents and students, foster organizational transparency, establish and provide training for the group, provide support in planning out a community-driven strategy, and take the time to reflect on the activity. Each framework will be organized as follows:

- Objectives
- Rationale
- An explanation or example of how to carry out the objectives
- Challenges to carrying out the objectives and tips to overcome those challenges

### **Establish a Common Understanding of the Problem**

#### **Objectives**

1. Listen to parents and students to gain a common understanding of the problems with the education system.
2. Foster transparency and build trust. Listen to parents' and students' perception of Rodel to determine how Rodel can be more transparent to the broader public.
3. Build new relationships. Use what is learned to cultivate a relationship with these stakeholders that is based on transparency and trust.

#### **Rationale**

Rodel's shift to practicing anti-racist PPA starts by listening to parents and students and building organizational credibility amongst them (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007). By listening, Rodel is able to deconstruct their pre-conceived notions about these groups' perceptions of the

problems with Delaware's education system. More importantly, it stops Rodel from speaking for these groups (Fielding, 2004). By speaking for parents and students, Rodel can run the risk of re-affirming the existing power structure or could silence these groups who might articulate their problems with the education system in a less damaging, victimizing way (Fielding, 2004).

Listening also matters in terms of building transparency and credibility, as Rodel must be able to understand exactly how parents and students perceive them as an organization.

Transparency builds credibility amongst potential participants within the community (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007). Building transparency—and consequently credibility and visibility amongst parents and students—gives Rodel a chance to build a level of trust and respect that not all organizations fighting for change within the education system have. The result is a relationship with the public that is essential to anti-racist PPA.

### **Fostering Transparency and Building Trust through a Common Understanding of the Problem**

From surveys, interviews, community meetings and town halls, to full-on landscape analyses and other research techniques, gathering the perspectives of a particular group can be simple and easy or complex, time-consuming and costly. What makes it all difficult is the fact that you must know your community well in order to choose the most useful and efficient method of collecting perspectives (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007). Being able to recognize whose voices are being excluded or forgotten from the education reform community is an essential part of all advocacy and public engagement work (Gibson-Wood and Wakefield, 2012). However, once those groups are identified, a method must be devised for what makes sense in gathering their perspectives on the issues (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007; Gibson-Wood and Wakefield,

2012). Creativity and flexibility are necessary for gathering parents' and students' perspectives; here are some examples of techniques used to listen and build transparency.

### **Incorporating Student Voice in Efforts to Address Academic Achievement**

When writing about gathering students' perspectives for school reform efforts, Dana Mitra (2007) makes the argument that student ownership and student voice matters. Often, data is collected and interpreted by non-students (be it teachers, researchers, etc....), leaving students out of the most important step of the listening process drawing meaning from the data (Mitra, 2007). Using a combination of focus groups, surveys, interviews, and shadowing students offers a more nuanced view of their experiences within different facets of the education system (Mitra, 2007). However, by not including students in the interpretation of gathered data, school reformists were missing out on getting clarity on the very perspectives they were researching. By not involving students in the entire listening process there remains a high likelihood of researchers making generalizations about why some students were failing academically and other weren't. The specific, contextual information needed to determine the cause for failure could only come from the students themselves (Mitra, 2007).

To ensure that this contextual information was being counted, researchers purposefully fostered student ownership and voice by involving students in both the collection, interpretation and analysis of the data. By allowing students to analyze the data, researchers were less likely to make errors in the interpretation of both qualitative and quantitative data. Researchers were also able to capitalize on student voice to adequately assess the academic achievement issues in the school (Mitra, 2007). Because they were able to participate and be heard, students re-framed what teachers and researchers thought was student laziness and disinterest as the cause for

academic failure, to a combination of structural and procedural issues with student support systems (Mitra, 2007).

### **Building Organizational Transparency**

Organizational transparency is about actively telling the public know who you are, what you do, and what your agenda is. This, however, goes beyond financial transparency. While financial transparency matters, it is not the only item central to building a good relationship with parents and students. Building transparency does not have to be separate from the listening process. For example, community immersion allows for making contact with parents and students (Castelloe et al., 2002). Rodel practices a form of community immersion through schools visits, for example. During these school visits, Rodel makes it a point to listen and observe classroom practices. They also use this time for explaining who Rodel is and allowing for teachers and school leaders to probe into what they do and what their agenda is.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), offers a great model for transparency through its board member practices. DSNI offers a very useful method of community engagement that not only results in anti-racist, anti-capitalist community development but also makes DSNI a very transparent organization (DSNI, 2017). DSNI's board make-up is one form of transparency (and true community ownership) that not only allows members of the community to see DSNI's contribution to the local area but also drive their activities (DSNI website, 2017).

Rodel can also build transparency around its agenda is through the use of an already existing and useful application on its website: the Legislative Monitor. This tool is a weekly update of all education-related legislation introduced by Delaware General Assembly (Rodel website, 2017). This list is easy to read, links directly to the Delaware General Assembly

website, and even lets you know who sponsors the bill—which is necessary for any education reform advocate who is looking for the most up-to-date information on legislation. Using this tracker, Rodel could foster transparency by providing an explicit explanation of their position on particular issues. Not only would it help people working in education reform identify Rodel as a potential ally or partner on specific issues, but an explanation of Rodel’s position helps parents and students identify where Rodel stands on particular issues. The result could be more engagement of parents and students and setting the record straight for those in the Delaware education sphere that speculate on what Rodel stands for.

### **Challenges**

Some of the challenges to building a common understanding of the problem through listening and fostering transparency are the usual culprits in non-profit work: staff capacity, lack of resources, and lack of time (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007). Also, making sense of multiple, sometimes conflicting experiences can be difficult, making it tempting to make generalizations (Mitra, 2007; Fielding, 2004). Rodel’s experience in planning out detailed processes and will be useful in being able to ensure that parents and students are more involved in the listening and information gathering stages. Gathering a common understanding of the issue requires direct collaboration with parents and students, and that means transparency is mandatory for building those relationships. Here are a few tips that will help Rodel work through some of these challenges.

### **Tips for Listening**

- **Actually listen.** Don’t go in with a predetermined set of issues and solutions. This is about knowing parents’ and students’ concerns, perceptions, and experiences (Castelloe, et al., 2002).

- **Be prepared for conflicting views.** The views of parents and students may not be the same as Rodel's. That is expected. However, often people are misled by thinking that all members of a particular group think the same way about a problem. This misconception leads to stereotyping and other dangerous, false generalizations (Mitra, 2007; Fielding, 2004).
- **Ask for how they view the problem *and* how they envision the solution.** Part of the relationship-building process is about valuing all input, not just asking questions to affirm what we may already know about problems in Delaware's education system. Rarely are parents and students asked how *they* would fix the problem (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007).

### **Tips for Building Transparency**

- **Reach out to leaders in the community that are immersed in the issues every day.**  
While there are some black and Latino community leaders that are well known, there are also some lesser known influential figures within the education sphere that should also be consulted for an understanding of the issue. For Rodel, it is important to seek out those community leaders to step out of the normal network circles they inhabit (Castelloe et al., 2002).
- **Find organizations that work directly with students and make time to talk directly to the students.** Rather than having student voice filtered through parents and teachers, go directly to the source (Mitra, 2007; Fielding, 2004).

### **Form a Group and Equip Parents and Students to Make a Change**

**Objectives**

1. Convene a group of parents and students that want to change the education system.
2. Train the group in policy advocacy techniques.

**Rationale:**

As the listening and relationship building progress, there will be some parents and students who feel that just talking about the problems in education is enough. Rodel can be instrumental in establishing a community-based group that wants to transform the education system just as much as they do. Rodel's experience convening the Rodel Teacher Council is one great example of what that could look like, specifically in terms of training for advocacy. Just as well, Rodel has the experience needed to guide any group in articulating a mission and theory of change--- important parts of all grassroots organizations (Taplin and Clark, 2012). This type of training is essential to of anti-racist PPA as it is a strategy for empowering students and parents to participate and lead the fight for education reform (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007). The process through which the Rodel Teacher Council is trained to engage with legislators offers a great example of an activity Rodel does that could be used to implement with parents and students.

**Setting the Course: Establishing a Mission and Theory of Change**

The Northeast Indiana Friends of Public Education (NIFPE) was formed in 2011 by retired teachers, parents, administrators and other community members to push for education reform (NIFPE website, n.d.). NIFPE created a toolkit for grassroots organizing that can be useful for channeling frustrations with the education system into action (NIFPE website, n.d.). NIFPE recommends starting by asking members to write a mission statement, derived from previous conversations about what they want the education system to look like. All members of NIFPE contributed to the formation of the mission statement, creating community ownership and



establishing an atmosphere of cooperation amongst the group in the beginning (NIFPE website, n.d.). Forming the mission, however, often leads to the question of how to fulfill the goals of the organization.

A theory of change allows for parents and students to identify the interventions they see making a difference in public education (Taplin and Clark, 2012). When parents and students are empowered to create their own theory of change, Rodel is able to learn what assumptions they make about the education system, thus they are able to understand how to approach training the group to maximize their strengths and talents (Taplin and Clark, 2012). Cooperatively building a theory of change will also help Rodel and the group probe the various rationales they all share for why they chose that strategy and it gives Rodel a specific insight into how parents and students *see* change happening (Taplin and Clark, 2012). In particular, it reveals who parents and students think is involved in making change happen, their perception of how much influence they have in changing the education system, perceived challenges, what they are optimistic about, and what areas they will be interested in receiving training in. Once parents and students establish their theory of change, Rodel will be able to move forward with equipping the group.

### **Training and Equipping the group**

Equipping the group with the knowledge and tools they need should be done soon after the establishment of the mission and theory of change. In order to fully participate in changing the education system, parents and students must be able to understand how policy change happens, from the school level to the state level. Training should include building a knowledge base of the political decision making process and how a bill becomes a law (Schultz, 2003). Advocacy organizations should also empower parents and students with tools and tricks of the trade--- such as how to identify key players and analyze the political landscape to build alliances

(Schultz, 2003; Veneklasen and Miller, 2007). The Rodel Teacher Council is an excellent example of how useful training for policy advocacy is. Over the length of a school year, Rodel prepares Delawarean teachers to advocate for policies that advance outcomes for student achievement, including student-centered learning techniques, the use of technology in classrooms, and a focus on individualized needs of students (Rodel Foundation website, 2017). The Rodel Teacher Council has released policy briefs with recommendations for how to make Delaware's public education system more student-centered. As part of the process, not only does Rodel provide the members of the council with the education needed to speak about personalized learning as experts, but they also provide them with the skills they need to talk directly to legislators to advocate for reform. They do so by organizing Legislative Day, which is a day-long event in which teachers are able to advocate for their policy recommendations directly to lawmakers. Rodel trains them in the soft skills they need in order to engage a legislator, such as developing an elevator pitch and preparing statements and personal stories to share. In a blog, two members of the Rodel Teacher Council write about how "Legislative Day" changed their perspectives about advocacy:

"As teachers, we rarely get the opportunity to meet with the high-level decision-makers. In March, we had the awesome privilege of spending a day at Legislative Hall in Dover, where we sat down with some of the state's top policymakers. They listened, they asked questions, and they shared in our discussion. Most importantly—we felt like our words had meaning. We felt valued."--- (Jermain Williams and Melissa Grunewald, 2016)

The skills and tools parents and students could learn from an organization such as the Rodel Foundation would be invaluable for both furthering Rodel's mission and for any future

advocacy the group wants to do. However, participants will have a very hard time getting things done without resources such as funding. The communities Rodel will be empowering may not have the financial ability to participate. Executing some activities can be costly for some, whether it is due to travel or maybe even taking off work to participate. Rodel ensures that members of the Rodel Teacher Council receive a stipend for their participation, which lightens the financial burden that participation puts on the teachers. Typically, their meetings provide food and they pay for the costs of a substitute teacher. In order to help the Rodel Teacher Council offer awareness-raising opportunities to the public, they aided in securing a small grant for the Rodel Teacher Council to hold a conference that celebrated teaching and held free professional development training to teachers across Delaware (Howton, 2017). This financial support of the council facilitated the participation of teachers by reducing the financial burden on them. That same support can be extended to students and parents.

### **Challenges**

Forming a group is tricky when it comes to writing the mission statement and figuring out the direction of the group. Disagreements are more likely to come when people explore how they want to tackle a problem, as opposed to identifying what the problem is or stating what they want to accomplish through their mission. Rodel's experience in convening various stakeholders to tackle a common problem will come in handy when trying to align the multiple interests of many parents and students towards a goal of improving Delaware's education system.

Forming and equipping a group is difficult because there are simply some things that are out of the hands of the organizer. Despite the efforts of Rodel to provide members of the Rodel Teacher Council with as much support as possible, they still had to rely on them to show up to meetings, return phone calls, and answer emails to get the work done. Just like teachers, parents

and students are often busy with life and work. No matter how much effort Rodel puts into supporting (financially or skills training) community members, there is no guarantee that all of them will be able to participate fully. In order to combat this it is important to ensure that efforts are driven by parents and students. This maintains the momentum the group had in the beginning. This also requires a change for Rodel—who might need to relinquish some control. Much of the leg work (organizing meetings, forming messaging, creating content for presentations and policy briefs) needs to be done by the parents and students.

### **Identify the Issue and Plan the Approach**

#### **Objectives**

1. Identify the issue. Create ownership of the work by allowing parents and students to identify the issues they want to take on.
2. Plan the approach to the issue.

#### **Rationale**

Often, once the group of parents and students find that they have a mission and theory of change, it is instinct to try to jump right into solving the problem. While a common understanding the problem is important for deriving the vision and theory of change, it cannot be the sole basis for goals, activities, and desired outcomes. The next steps are to collectively identify the issues and plan the advocacy strategy. Because parents and students are directly affected by education policies, they offer a unique, undervalued perspective that should not be taken for granted in the process of identifying issues and solutions. Identifying the issue means looking at the symptoms of the larger problem of racism in the education system and using that to identify points of intervention (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007; Bergstrom et al., n.d.). Choosing

an issue helps parents and students prioritize what they want to put effort into changing and helps select the appropriate strategies and tactics for achieving a solution (Veneklasen and Miler, 2007). The most important part of analyzing and identifying the issue is the participatory part. Ensuring that the activity is participatory--- that it is driven and owned by parents and students--- is essential to the sustainability of the project (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007; Bergstrom et al., n.d.). Benefits of taking a participatory approach to prioritizing issues include helping develop healthy negotiation skills and a debating process within the group—a necessary component of decision-making and planning for advocacy (Schultz, 2003). It also increases the knowledge and consciousness of the participants, and it reveals to the advocacy organization the variation of ideas and perceptions amongst the community (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007).

### **Planning the Approach**

The approach to solving the issue must be well planned. Rodel is excellent at strategizing and has plenty of contacts to carry out a campaign. Anti-racist PPA, however, combines that expertise with the leadership and input of parents and students and meaningful collaboration with other partners to produce well-thought out, appropriate advocacy tactics. As Rodel guides this group in choosing tactics, they should keep in mind whether or not parents and students can participate. For example, a full-time working, single father may be unable to attend a visit to Delaware state legislature at three in the afternoon. Parents might feel more comfortable with a one-on-one meeting with a legislator at their local school building or community center than in the state building (Schultz, 2002). Tactics chosen should also be about empowering participants (Gibson-Wood and Wakefield, 2012). This could be something as simple as getting students to draft a letter to the editor or an op-ed to the local newspaper to raise awareness of the issue. When it comes to building awareness, Rodel can provide the necessary data and evidence needed

for participants to make the case for their issue, while they provide the experience, knowledge, and community connections needed to disseminate the information to the public.

The planning stage should be well thought out to ensure full participation. This means making sure the activities are safe and accessible for participants (Gibson-Wood and Wakefield, 2012). While some situations, such as protests and rallies, are easy to tell when things are becoming unsafe, there are others that are not so easy to distinguish. For example, a simple awareness-raising activity about the school-to-prison pipeline can re-traumatize for a student who has experienced abuse at the hands of police. A parent could risk confrontation with a boss if they take an open position on a controversial education issue. Or an undocumented immigrant father may be reluctant to go to state hall to talk to legislators for fear of arrest or deportation. Parents and students should be kept in the loop for all decisions made to ensure not only the safety of the activity but to continue to foster ownership of the process (Bergstrom et al., n.d.).

While there are plenty of tactics that can be done as a group, the power of alliance-building cannot be overlooked in anti-racist PPA. As an organization that specializes in convening different voices in education around one table, Rodel is able to produce a strong and diverse set of allies for this advocacy campaign. These connections and their ability to help organizations align interests to push for a common cause will be just what is needed for building the perfect set of partners to advance the mission of the community. While alliances can be slow, hard to form, and take time to get aligned the power of gathering unique and sometimes more experienced perspectives makes it worth the work (Schultz, 2002; Unsicker, 2013). Making Connections, a 10 year long community development initiative by the Annie E. Casey Foundation used a participatory approach in their community engagement strategy. In an effort to improve the lives of children in disadvantaged communities across the country, Making

Connections was able to foster community engagement amongst various racially diverse communities using anti-racist, participatory techniques. Specific issues were prioritized locally and residents were involved throughout the planning processes (Herbert and Gallion, 2016). In Denver, Colorado, one Making Connections organizer emphasized the need for building alliance as a means of intensifying efforts to create systemic change (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005). The case was also made that building alliances avoided re-inventing the wheel by helping identify who was already working on the same issues in the community and supplementing what parents and students could not bring to the table (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005). Again, Rodel's strength in alliance-building and convening various stakeholders make them the ideal organization for connecting community members to other organizations dedicated to transforming education.

### **Challenges**

- Sometimes more immediate issues take precedence over the long-term fight. Anti-racist PPA is about recognizing that some immediate needs outweigh the big, long-term issues. Poverty and marginalization often create precarious situations that need the immediate attention of parents and students. This does not mean that parents and students aren't worried about the issues, it means that these concerns need to be taken into consideration as issues are prioritized (Gibson-Wood and Wakefield, 2012). Flexibility and patience matter in anti-racist PPA.
- Building alliances tends to be complex and time consuming. Some people might believe that the participating organizations must be fully aligned in order to work together. Alliances, networks, and coalitions need to be carefully planned, including taking into consideration the length of time the organizations will be partnering, the roles and

strengths of everyone involved, and how decisions are going to be made (Unsicker, 2013; Schultz, 2003; Veneklasen and Miller, 2007).

Here are some tips for how to prioritize which issues to tackle (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007).

The solution to the issues should:

- Result in the significant improvement in community members' lives
- Empower ordinary people by providing opportunities for leadership and political engagement
- Impact as many people as possible
- Build relationships across the community
- Have a clear goal and timeframe
- Be achievable

### **Implementation and Reflection**

#### **Objectives:**

1. **Implement the project.** Mobilize parents and students to complete the planned activities.
2. **Build a process for reflection.** Take time reflect on lessons learned from the activity, process, and its outcomes.

#### **Rationale:**

Mobilizing parents and students to carry out their activities is the chance for an advocacy organization to step back into a supportive role while parents and students take the wheel. The purpose of the action should be about offering participants a chance to practice leadership and to experience how political decision-making happens first hand. During this time, participants can realize the outcomes of their goals. Mobilization should be safe, well planned, empowering, and fun for participants (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007). Throughout the implementation process



Rodel should be on standby to provide support as needed. After implementation the participants reflect on what they learned and then they plan the next steps (Castelloe et al., 2002).

Many argue that reflection allows for participants to re-orient themselves and stay adaptive in their efforts to create social change (Castelloe et al., 2002; Amulya et al., 2003). During reflection, the group has the opportunity to revisit their mission and theory of change and see how their actions align with them. Rodel should be ready to help the participants process through this time, as it will be essential to the planning process that comes after. Rodel should also be using this reflection to be evaluating how well they built solidarity with parents and students, how well they fostered community ownership, and the sustainability of their work.

### **Reflection: Stepping Back and Re-orienting for Next Steps**

Rather than focusing on implementation directly, I will use this space to explore how reflection can be a useful tool for anti-racist PPA. Learning from the activity is perhaps the most important part of the implementation process. Parents and students take this time to reflect on the execution of the activity, whether it was successful, which parts failed, and how it can be improved (Castelloe et al. 2002). This is also the time for the participants to give feedback to the advocacy organization on how they could have better supported them. While it is tempting to do this through a survey, it might be better to reflect through mixed methods, including in-depth interviews and group discussions (Amulya et al., 2003).

In one type of reflection activity, advocates and participants all identify critical moments in their activities. Critical moments are the moments that stand out the most for participants, ones that signify a significant turning point in the activity (Amulya et al., 2003). Rather than working through a discussion focusing on anecdotes, these critical moments are deconstructed and analyzed by the group as a whole (Amulya et al., 2003). Dialogue is used to help reveal the

various perceptions of these critical moments and eventually participants are able to articulate the significance of what led up to these critical moments and what contributed to the successes and short-comings of the activity (Amulya et al., 2003). Reviewing the activity in this way also helps keep the organization accountable, in that they are able to see where changes need to be made. After rostering lessons learned and skills developed, the next step is to jump right back into the planning process (Castelloe et al, 2002). This second planning stage also takes into consideration changes in the social, political and economic landscape (Castelloe et al., 2002). It also may require calling in allies to take part in the planning process, or even re-evaluating which allies are still necessary.

### **Challenges**

- **Critical reflection takes time, resources, and skills.** From facilitation to recording results, the process of critical reflection can tie up time and resources. Similarly, the process works best when done with an experienced facilitator—which may require training or even hiring a consultant (McDowell et al., 2005).
- **Power dynamics between and within the group can make things complicated.** Awareness of power differences is essential to ensure that no voices are being stifled and all participants feel able to express concerns freely (McDowell et al., 2005). This could mean a reflection process that allows parents and students to speak outside of the presence of Rodel, using anonymity and maybe in confidentiality to ensure safety.

### **Conclusion**

Public engagement for education is necessary for education reform. However, parents and students are often overlooked as stakeholders that can inform and drive changes in education policy. Impoverished parents and people of color are much less likely to be involved in

education reform than their wealthy, white peers. Students are also overlooked by education policy reformists, despite being education's biggest stakeholders. Anti-racist participatory policy advocacy provides a method by which non-profit organizations can begin to involve parents and students in their efforts to change the education system. While the guidelines provided throughout this paper were written for the Rodel Foundation of Delaware, they can be adapted for other organizations working for systemic change in almost any sector. The beginning of anti-racist PPA starts with a strong analysis of the role of racism in the education system throughout history and its lasting effects. Following this analysis, Rodel should look internally, assessing how they have handled racism and inequity in their work. A close examination of the liberal, colorblind ideology that often pervades non-profit work is necessary to evaluate how it plays a role in Rodel's activities. This internal review also includes a look at the organization's diversity and reflection on how they have built solidarity between them and the community they seek to improve. After this process, Rodel can begin to explore listening to parents and students and building transparency amongst the community. Listening helps build a common understanding of what the problems are in education while building transparency allows parents and students to better understand the Rodel's agenda. Anti-racist PPA is about allowing parents and students identify the issues they want to address and allowing them to define their paths of intervention while providing the training, skills, and knowledge they need to do policy advocacy. Once they implement the plan, time should be taken to reflect on the process. Reflection provides opportunity for re-orientation and to stay adaptive. However, it also provides a moment for Rodel to ask questions about how their engagement went, to ensure they are allowing for community ownership of the advocacy process and remaining accountable to their own mission.

Anti-racist participatory policy advocacy has the potential to change the way Rodel does the work they do. As they work tirelessly to do grass-tops engagement of educational stakeholders, the foundation has made great progress in the areas they worked in. This makes them the perfect organization for connecting parents and students to the community leaders, business partners, and policy makers that already have access to and voice in the education reform sphere. I hope that using the guidelines in this paper, the reach of Rodel could be expanded and a more participatory method of advocacy adopted. By doing so, parents and students can help drive Rodel's work and can transform the education system.

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