

STORY 5: INCLUDING YOUR ALLIES, Impact Silver Spring

In one community, several race relations and racial justice organizations met to discuss a recent report about their school system's racial inequities. The large citizen advocacy organization that had produced the report hosted the meeting. There was much enthusiasm for the report's release, since it provided some hard evidence about real differences in the experiences of students in the school district. It covered things like students of color's access to services, differences in the quality of materials available across school buildings in different neighborhoods, differences in the levels of experience of teachers' assigned to different school buildings and achievement scores by race. While the groups were pleased about the information that was now available, there was also some concern and skepticism about how those statistics would be interpreted by various groups and individuals within the larger community.

Each organization was currently working in the school system to address racial issues and disparities - each with a very different approach. The approaches included an after school program for African American males, a parent empowerment program, a youth camp focused on social justice issues, community organizing and advocacy focused on the achievement gap, teacher training on multiracial curricula, and a dialogue program for parents.

The meeting's purpose was to discuss how to educate the public about the educational inequities in the school system in a way that put the responsibility for solving the issues with the school system and not just individual students or their parents (not "blaming the victim").

But the participants became stuck on some other issues - wanting to know each organization's racial analysis, questioning the impact of each other's programs on changing the status quo. They critiqued the racial/ethnic composition of each others' organizations and what the people in the room knew about racism in the schools. Tension, lack of trust, and misunderstandings about each other's approaches shut the meeting down earlier than scheduled.

The citizen advocacy organization was frustrated with the outcome of the meeting. However, they used the experience to reflect on their approach to organizing among their potential allies to prepare for disseminating the report.

Their next steps were to:

- Set up individual meetings with each organization to learn their concerns and collect information about their programs and philosophy.
- Compile each organization's information and distribute it.

- Host another meeting that focused on organizations sharing information about their programs and philosophies. They also provided time for groups to discuss and further understand each others' approaches.

At a following meeting, the group discussed different racial groups' perceptions of the school system and began creating a common message to accompany the evidence in the report.

This process slowed down the dissemination of the report (compared to the original timeline set by the report's sponsors). But the investment paid off. The group was able to create a joint message - making it harder for others in the community to "divide and conquer" those people interested in eliminating racial inequities in the school system. In addition, many of the relationships built were sustained, which helped when the groups needed to join together to address the next pressing need.