DOIN' THE WORK: Frontline Stories of Social Change

Organizing to End the School-to-Prison Pipeline – Jewel Patterson, MS; Edgar Ibarria; Nicole Bates, JD
Episode 58
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Shimon Cohen:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talk with Jewel Patterson, Edgar Ibarria, and Nicole Bates about their work organizing to end the school-to-prison pipeline in California. Jewel is a lead organizer with COPE, Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement, a Black-led, faith-based, grassroots nonprofit in the Inland Empire. Edgar is a senior lead organizer with CADRE, a parent-led organization in South L.A. Nicole is a movement lawyer with C4LL, The Collective for Liberatory Lawyering. They define the school-to-prison pipeline and explain how criminalization functions in schools, disproportionately affecting Black and Brown students and families.

Jewel and Edgar share how they organize with students and families ,as well as examples of the way students and families are impacted. Nicole discusses the legal issues and strategies that she and other C4LL lawyers use to challenge and change legislation. We talk specifically about their work to change the law on the school discipline category called "willful defiance", which is a vague term allowing suspensions and expulsions for "disrupting school activities or otherwise willfully defying the authority of school staff." This change has resulted in fewer suspensions and expulsions in lower grades, yet it needs to be expanded to upper grades and high school, so the work continues.

They discuss surveillance in schools, metal detectors, police in schools, the lack of counseling, and how they organize to change all of this and reimagine safety, including the victory of defunding school police 25 million dollars and reinvesting that money in a Black student achievement program. They explain how they build power, the importance of coalitions, movement lawyers, and some of the successes, as well as challenges, of their efforts. They cover so much and really break it down in ways that can provide a blueprint for others. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UH has a phenomenal social work program that offers face-to-face master's and doctorate degrees as well as an online and hybrid MSW. They offer one of the country's only political social work programs and an abolitionist focused learning opportunity. Located in the heart of Houston, the program is guided by their bold vision to achieve racial, social, economic, and political justice, local to global. In the classroom and through research, they are committed to challenging systems and reimagining ways to achieve justice and liberation. Go to www.uh.edu/socialwork to learn more. And now, the interview.

Thank you all so much for coming on Doin' The Work. Nicole, Jewel, Edgar, really, really just happy to connect with you all. Got to give props to my friend Jordan Thierry for making this connection happen because of his phenomenal advocacy and policy work on this issue. He's the one who connected me to all of you to get into a deeper dive on the really important work you do to end the school-to-prison pipeline in California. So just to start, could you each give a brief intro on who you are and what your organization does?

Edgar Ibarria:

I'll go.

Jewel Patterson:

Okay.

Edgar Ibarria:

Hello everybody. My name is Edgar Ibarria. I'm a senior lead organizer at CADRE. We are a parent-led organization in South L.A. for over 20 years. Our work is focused around leadership development and leadership advocacy and all to end the school-to-prison pipeline.

Jewel Patterson:

Hey everyone. My name is Jewel Patterson. I am a lead organizer with COPE. COPE stands for Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement. We were established in 2000 and our mission in short is to revitalize the communities in which we live, work, and worship. We are Black-led, faith-based grassroot nonprofit in the Inland Empire in California, which is San Bernardino and Riverside Counties.

Nicole Bates:

Hey folks, my name is Nicole Bates, and I am a movement lawyer at the Collective for Liberatory Lawyering based out of South L.A., but also doing some regional work in the Inland Empire and the Central Valley, and the collective works collaboratively within the movement ecosystem to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and create conditions for transformative education. We focus on interdisciplinary long-term monitoring of conditions in schools with a sharp focus on human rights of the most marginalized students and parents.

Shimon Cohen:

Awesome. I'm so excited to have you all on here. The work you're doing is phenomenal and I know folks are going to learn a lot from what you all have to say. Let's get into, what is the school-to-prison pipeline? So folks listening, following the transcript, can have a base understanding of it. Who wants to start?

Jewel Patterson:

Okay, yeah, I can try it. So, I like to tell people, especially when I'm working with students that first and foremost, it's not a physical pipeline. Let's start there. It's a set of laws that essentially ensure that students, particularly Black and Brown students, are funneled into like a metaphorical pipeline that leads them into basically having more interactions, unnecessary interactions with law enforcement and then eventually those interactions can lead to juvenile hall, jails, prisons, things like that.

Edgar Ibarria:

Yeah, I would just add, it's that connection between school and prison. And sometimes families can't see it, but they experience it also just by what it's surrounded too like community violence, lack of employment, mass incarceration, poverty, all these things that surround the experience that also contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Nicole Bates:

And I think I would add that it's, as Jewel was explaining about the set of laws, that it's really the zero tolerance policies that schools have where there's no discretion, and that they don't take into account the context of the ways that young people are showing up, like Edgar was talking about, all the community violence or poverty or these basic necessities that young people are not having that then they show up to schools and then are being harshly punished, disproportionately Black and Brown students, disproportionately more than their White counterparts.

And then the additional presence of police on campus leads to this, like Jewel was saying, this unnecessary interaction and then surveillance and criminalization of young people that then funnels them. We know that when they're suspended and expelled, that means that they're more likely to fall behind in their schooling. We know that they're more likely to drop out, which means that if they're dropping out, then what are they doing? They're outside of school and more likely to have more interactions with police and end up in the juvenile justice system, which is a repetitive process, which means they're also more likely to be arrested and sent to... as adults. It starts as juveniles, but it ends up to be this real funneling into the criminal, I don't even want to say justice system, but this criminal penal system.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. And something that really strikes me with conversations around schools and education is we're always told education is supposed to be this way out of poverty. Education is going to uplift people. Education is like social mobility. But number one, that's a myth in a lot of ways. But we've got these students in school trying to do what society is telling them to do, but they're facing this, they're facing this criminalization within the school.

Edgar Ibarria:

Yeah. Most definitely, I was bought into the idea of even going to higher education. And when I decided to do that, I most definitely didn't have the requirements to even attend a class, especially even a community college and be ready to sit there and listen, learn. So I felt like I was cheated even out of a degree, especially in high school, a high school diploma that I feel like I didn't deserve because I wasn't ready, I didn't feel prepared. And some of the things I also had conversations even with some of our senior core parents about the kind of education that they received, whether it was actually something that they felt was a quality.

And that's really what continues the school-to-prison pipeline is the kind of quality of education that's missing that helps people learn, helps students understand, not only the grading, but also growth, if there's actual growth of that person. If they're teaching that person how to be just a better human being, that's some of the stuff that we touch on at CADRE is really like, yes, the grades are important, learning most definitely of math, arithmetics, science and all that is important, but also is the teachers, is the school invested in their actual growth. And that's something that's also missing within our schools that I believe that contributes to this feeling of not being prepared afterwards.

Nicole Bates:

Yeah, I think I would add that the education system is just a microcosm of our larger society steeped in white supremacy and racist ideals. So yeah, just white supremacy and America, education works for the people that it's supposed to work for. We would say it's broken. It's not working for our babies, it's not working for our families, but it's doing what it was created to do. So I think what we stress is that we want to change school culture so that it's more positive, it's moving away from these harsh discipline

practices and moving more towards having a human rights lens. So believing in the human dignity and respect of all students no matter what they look like. So that's a lot of kind of what we push as we're talking about shifting school culture.

Jewel Patterson:

What I think is important also to add to what you all are saying and what we know, Edgar in doing this work, students are feeling these things as well. Students are feeling this, like you're saying, this unpreparedness, students are feeling this way of like, "Okay, hold on. It seems like there's something similar happening to me when I walk into a store. That's also happening to me when I'm here on campus." So students are feeling this kind of thing. Even when they don't have that language to express it, they're still feeling these things. So I think it's important when we're talking about shifting how schools work for students to highlight their voices and help them understand how they have the power to also change what they're seeing, what they're feeling on their campus.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, absolutely. So let's talk a little about how criminalization functions in schools. Maybe some examples you know of, situations you've heard of from the work you do and the larger ways it functions. I know we got into it a little but just going a little deeper into it.

Edgar Ibarria:

Criminalization starts with the assumptions and also just punitive responses to something that could be addressed by a conversation or developing a better relationship with the school, I mean with the parents. What we've seen, at least in our experience, it has been how parents are put against each other first. And then it becomes this thing between parents, good parents and bad parents, parents that are in favor of some of the decisions that the school makes versus those that are being impacted that are feeling like they're being pushed out or pushed behind and not being included.

And then it also shows up when those parents also that feel it and are trying to make a change also are either ostracized because of their advocacy and voice too, that it becomes also a feeling of powerlessness. Because if they say something, for example, like one of our parents, Amelia, when she was attending our SWPBIS meetings, school-wide positive behavioral support meetings, which is our meetings that are in LAUSD that helps support, create interventions for behavioral issues, to discuss how to become or how to create a better school climate through discussions and looking at data and addressing some of the issues that are happening when they're happening, where are they happening and all that. These are meetings that are intended to address and promote a positive school climate.

But most of the time, these meetings are also held by parents that are very active or picked by the school. To have a real conversation about these issues, especially about school climate, you have to have parents that are being impacted. You have to have students and parents who the school is talking about numerically, right, through the data to find out how to create a school climate. So when Amelia was addressing, "You know what? We're talking about something, but it's only a few staff here and myself as a parent. We need to have more Black representation in this meeting." I think it was the PSA that asked her like, "Do you really want that"? That was the response like, "Do you really want that? You know by doing that, you are going to limit your power as a parent, limit your voice." Basically they were telling her, "You know what? If you start advocating that way, you're going to lose any kind of power you have here because you're no longer going to be that parent that we're going to look to."

And she understood it and there were some consequences for her in that, which was some of her peers at school would tell her like, why is she advocating this? Why is she asking for Black parents to be at the

meeting? So there's also some structural anti-Blackness that goes on within our schools that creates this, right? But it was ultimately something to challenge because it was really fake power, it was tokenized power that the school was giving parents. And when it really came to agitating, changing of practices, they weren't really about that. I think that's one of the things that we find too in schools, especially now when they're adapting language that they're using. I mean, they're using it, but they don't really mean that. Because if they really are talking about parent engagement or student engagement, they have to be ready for that kind of agitation, that challenge of power that they're not going to be willing to give the community because it's really just tokenized, that's what they're looking for.

Jewel Patterson:

I'm thinking of two things that help the school-to-prison pipeline function. Well first, I will say, I kinda want to walk through a scenario made up by many voices. So I'm thinking of, let's imagine a student, they're missing school a lot because they're babysitting their siblings. So they get pushed out of traditional schools into alternative schools, which look like "bad schools". So now that stereotype is on them, that they're a bad student because they got kicked out of the traditional school, and that they're maybe even a criminal because most of the students they are around now at this alternative school are there for expulsion for any number of things.

They are now at this school where teachers are giving out, and not only teachers but administrators, staff, they're giving out tough love because that's what they feel like students need at this school. They need to just have a little bit of tough love and they'll get back on the right track, but that further disconnects the student from the school. So then that student starts to feel like, "I don't have an out at home and I don't have an out at school." They're frustrated. They have things that they want to talk about, but they don't have an outlet to talk about those spaces. People keep telling them to go to the academic counselor to express their emotions, and the academic counselor doesn't have time for that, right?

And then the student ends up taking it out in their work, not necessarily in their grades all the time, but then maybe it is, "Oh, I'm not doing well in this class because this one particular tough love teacher I cannot stand, so I'm going to cuss her out actually. I'm going to cuss her out today because I don't have time for it." And then that cuss out ends up being something that C4LL, you all, would tell us is disrupting school or property or something like that. Now it gets written off as something interesting like that. Now the student is labeled, branded almost like, "Okay, this is a criminal student. We need to treat this student in such a manner now, and we need to be harder on this student, give them harsher punishment. We need to do this, do that, do that." And really all that's happening in the student's world is almost the walls are coming in, in, in, in, in. And in the school, it's almost like a feeling of, "Well, we have to keep on doing it so that this student can start to get on the right track."

And that's how I see a lot of times the school-to-prison pipeline functions. It functions through tough love. It functions through this like, "I'm not stopping to actually ask you a question about what's going on with you, why did you blow up in class like that? How can we help you out? What's your story? Who are you?" We're not asking those questions. And a lot of times, schools don't even have the mental health and mental wellness spaces for students to even sit to think about it themselves, right? And so that's how I see it function a lot. So that's coming from almost a student side.

The parent side, there's even been situations that we've been seeing where parents are identifying trouble happening. Literally identifying like, "My student is coming back to me and telling me that there's some frustrations going on with her. She feels like there's going to be a fight that happens and she's going to have to defend herself. How can I step in as a parent, talk to the other parents, do

anything like that?" And schools have been like, "No, we don't. We're not doing that. We're not talking to you, parent. We're not worried about your student who's a group leader." Or using terms that's like criminalizing the student, even if it's lightly just using stuff that's not actually like, "Your student is a thug," but it's giving that, right? So even in those ways where we're like shunning parents and we're not allowing parents to come to the school and say, "Hey, something's been happening at home, how do we make sure that it doesn't manifest in this school?" That's another way that a school-to-prison pipeline is able to function or is allowed to function in schools.

Edgar Ibarria:

When our parents started investigating back in 2006, everybody was, at least different orgs, were on the college readiness. And parents were trying to figure out what was causing this large number of what they would say was dropouts. So, once parents started investigating and seeing the causes and the reasons why there was this large number of dropouts, it was like willful defiance and suspensions and expulsions. I think that's where it was easier to track and see the school-to-prison pipeline especially, what I'm trying to say, right? Now, it's a little harder because they don't suspend students at that rate, at least in LAUSD, as they were doing more than 10 years ago.

But it's the practices like what Jewel's talking about, the things that they're doing that creates... And that is harder to sometimes notice for us because it could be a small little thing but then it contributes to a large thing that causes it. So it could be, "You know what? My son is not interested right now in this topic that that's being discussed in the class." And this is what some of the parents say, "I'm trying to make sure that the teacher understands that my son doesn't find interest in this topic. And yeah we are working on it, but I want to work with you just to make sure that he doesn't fall behind." So it's how also the teacher just takes on that challenge, which is very hard, but at the same time, it's part of that mutual relationship that we're trying to encourage schools and our parents to build, because it can't be just a one way thing.

So if it's not addressed and then it becomes some kind of behavioral issue, and then it becomes an issue where it builds up to frustration, not only from the student, but also the parent towards the teacher, and then it becomes this repetitive thing where the teacher now has a thing for that parent because that parent's always calling them or complaining. Then that creates, not only the feeling of being left out or being pushed out, but also it creates that separation between the teacher and that family. And that could contribute to some stuff that happens outside, in the playground, and all that.

Our parents work towards the monitoring aspect of it too and identifying where do these things start. How can we intervene so that it doesn't become something bigger? And that's the harder work about monitoring policies that schools push because most schools think that just because the policy is there and they could have a few minutes to discuss it, that it's going to automatically address some of the things that will happen. And it takes a lot of more work and transparency also from the school to be humble, to be like, "You know what? Yeah, We don't have this. We do need a support. We do need community input. And we want to work with the community to address some of these issues."

Nicole Bates:

So, to the point around willful defiance, and Shimon, I know that you guys did have a whole segment on that with Jordan who, by the way, we both went to Howard University together. So, I know Jordan, HU. Shout out to Jordan. But for those who didn't hear that segment, willful defiance as defined in the California Education Code, it's just anything that a student does to willfully defy valid school authority, which what does that even mean? That could be, like Edgar was saying, "Okay, my kid just today is not interested, so maybe they put their head down." That's willful defiance. If I come to class and I'm not

prepared with the right pencil and paper, that's willful defiance. If I wear my hat backwards, that's willful defiance. If I come to class late, you know what? It's whatever the "valid school authority", you all can't see my air quotes, but the "valid school authority" is that they defy.

And so what we were finding was that it was these subjective ways to really target, I'm going to say target, Black and Brown students, students with disabilities, right? And that's why we were seeing such an uptick with suspensions and expulsions for that particular reason. Because of all of the community efforts around willful defiance, we were able to get it banned for expulsions and most recently for K through 8. It does leave out high school students so they can still be suspended for that. It was a long, hard road. It took five plus years of advocacy. It wasn't just like, "Oh, you guys should see the data shows that suspensions don't work. They don't actually support kids making different decisions or better decisions."

And then we talk about the school-to-prison pipeline, there was a lot of pushback from teachers, unions, and folks that felt they should have the right to be able to have class management. They were talking about class management and the ability to allow other students to learn. And just so you know that the willful defiance is actually... that law is sunsetting in 2025, so there is going to be another push to hopefully be able to get it codified into law where there is not the ability for anyone to be able to be expelled or suspended for willful defiance.

But even just thinking about the other way that young people are criminalized, thinking about the over surveillance of students. Like in LAUSD, I don't know, Edgar if you want to talk a little bit about how up until a couple years ago there were metal detectors in every high school. They were able to use pepper spray. There's these different touchpoints including... So, in addition to the punitive laws, there were also ways in which probation officers were roaming on campuses and they try to present themselves as friendly and as this like alternative for students and they're like, "Oh, do you want to join our voluntary probation program so that we can have more ability to survey your life? And you've never had a court case, but we just want to help you. We're like restorative justice almost, right?" Like, "Don't you believe me? I'm friendly, I'm Joe friendly."

Shimon Cohen:

Officer friendly.

Nicole Bates:

Officer friendly, and it's ridiculous. But these are the things that are happening on our campuses that allow for this increased opportunities and touchpoints for criminalization of our young people in addition to these harsh practices. So I don't know, Edgar, if you wanna... you guys had a whole campaign to get metal detectors eliminated on campuses.

Edgar Ibarria:

Yeah, well that was actually The Strategy Center that was pushing on that work. But we worked together to pass the School Climate Bill of Rights in 2013 and our work really was more like where is the direction around, like what you were mentioning, is the school taking like what you mentioned and where the funds were being used and how the school police was incorporating themselves into now these new positions that were coming in, and they were asking for training around restorative justice. We were looking at the relationship between how they take some of the students' trust and how that trust was being broken in certain situations or outside. We had a situation where a police officer eventually became a school police officer and that officer was using their familiarity and knowledge of some of the folks outside into campus. So, that trust was already being broken and there were criminalizing some of

our parents' sons. And that was just some of the examples of why some of this training wasn't working and it was being used in the wrong way.

Nicole Bates:

And not to mention that LAUSD is the second high... They have their own school police department and it's the second highest, is it 40? It was $45 million just to fund their own separate school police department. L.A. still has its own police department. So, a lot of the efforts have been to defund, so through the efforts of a lot of community partners, CADRE's a part of that effort, but The Police Free School Steering Committee, which is a collaboration of grassroot organizers, they were able to get a bill... a school resolution pass, was it 2020 or 2021? And they were able to defund $25 million, which is huge, and to reinvest that into a Black student achievement program. So really it's like, how do we reinvest this money to actually provide supports for our young people in ways that we know that cops just are not providing the supports that our community needs?

Shimon Cohen:

I remember when Jordan was teaching me about willful defiance when I was learning about it and there was a clip of a Black student explaining that his teacher gave them the assignment that they had to speak or write about something that was positive about slavery. And the student was like, "I'm not doing that." Willful defiance. Suspension. Now he's got a record. He's criminalized. But the assignment was racist. It's a white supremacy power trip. I'm hoping we can talk a little more about that or some of the other campaigns to get into some of the specifics of how you organize. What does some of the on-the-ground work look like? For folks checking out this podcast who are against the school-to-prison pipeline, who are for abolition, police free schools, and wondering how to get involved, how to build power, how to get into the legal process to pass legislation, if we could get into some of that, it would be great.

Jewel Patterson:

It looks like so many things because to a part of your question, how do people get involved in this work? I think the best thing is not to recreate the wheel if it already exists, if something already exists, right? Sometimes it doesn't exist, so do your thing. But if you can search out some spaces where people are already having these conversations, already doing the work. Students, which is where kind of my first mind goes to young people, how can you change your own environment? I... first off, know that you have the power. And even in those situations where you feel very stuck like, this person has higher ranking than me, this person is a teacher, this person is a principal, all these kind of things, know that you have the power, and there are more than likely enough students on campus feeling the same way as you so that you can make something shake.

So that's kind of where my first mind goes to. It's important for us when we're talking, like I was saying earlier, when we're talking about these issues to not overlook the students who are being directly affected by a lot of these things, that we're as adults, we can talk about these policies and X, Y, and Z and help them understand how they can be in the mix to change those things, which that might look like being on a club on campus that talks about approving and disproving budgets or whatever it is. It could be going all the way to the school district, maybe sometimes X, Y, and Z. So I think that that is some ways where this work can actually happen.

Other than that, this question about what does it actually look like to organize around these things, organize around getting police off campus, organizing around stopping these school-to-prison pipeline policies and stuff like that? It looks like a lot of talking. And when I say talking, I mean this because

narrative shift is important. So shifting the narrative from we need police on our student campuses because students are bad or because that idea, right?

Nicole Bates:

They're dangerous, right?

Jewel Patterson:

Right, they're dangerous, so we need police to corral these students together. Shifting it from that to even some basic science, students are going through things in their bodies and then moving from there to okay, how do we actually have students discuss what they're going through? How do we... da, da, da, all those kind of conversations have to happen before any policies get put into place.

Shimon Cohen:

Who are you having those conversations with? Who are you shifting the narrative with?

Jewel Patterson:

That's a good question. So I'm come from a youth organizer line, so I deal mostly with young people. So my first mind is I'm first having those conversations with students, because even some students are like, "Well what other way is their safety? I've never known a school that doesn't have metal detectors. So are you telling me they didn't have metal detectors back in the day? What does that look like?" Students may not know that, so helping to raise their consciousness around this issue and help them understand there's different ways of doing things, which one works best for you? And asking them that and then allowing them to say like, "Oh, okay, well something maybe a mixture of these things." And that's shifting the narrative. Even talking to parents, "Hey parents, remember back when you were growing up, what did that look like? Or what does safety now mean to you? What are you hoping your student will get out of school that maybe they're not seeing now or that you want more of right now?"

But having those kind of conversations with students and parents I think are very important. And then once you start to get that, the people power, so you have these families who are on your side, then going toward the next step. Maybe the school board is the next step, talking to the school or maybe you talk to a principal and say, "Hey, do you want to be courageous and be a model for the other schools in this district?" Stuff like that, just kind of helping each person in their own little space, understand why this might be a little bit more important than your thinking right now, or there might be a way that we can stretch your imagination to look at something that has not been highlighted in the past 10 years in schools. So yeah, that's what I'm thinking. And I hope I answered one of the questions at least.

Shimon Cohen:

Definitely.

Nicole Bates:

Wait, Jewel that raise for me, and I'm hoping maybe you and Edgar can talk to or speak to it, but as you're talking about how important narrative change is, that's 50% of my work, probably of your work too, right? It's a huge part. So I would say, or I would ask as organizers that are organizing Black and Brown people, what are some of the challenges that you guys have faced right around negat–narrative change, excuse me, around policing and safety and especially in the wake of all of these, all of this violence that's been happening around guns and all the fear-mongering that's been happening and the

opposition that we've received? Even though we still know that our North Star is abolition and we still know that we've… we know for a fact that we do not think that police equals safety, just maybe what has been your strategy or how have you guys been able to kind of meet people where they are and support moving them or not? I don't know. I'm curious. I don't want to put words in your mouth.

Edgar Ibarria:

No, it's a lot of work. It's tough, most definitely. And yes, most definitely, it starts with a narrative shift. It's 50% of the work that we do. Well, for us we have some kind of structure in the process of itself because we've been invested in this for 20 years already since our co-founder Maisie Chin and Rosalinda Hill, they started off with discussion like, "Let's just have conversation about what's going on and educate ourselves around this." We've taken that formula and created into a whole academy now that we have that runs for the whole school year, where we develop not only our empowerment tools but also our advocacy tools to engage. So for most parents, the feeling of powerlessness is also heavy because just the question itself is heavy. "I want to see change. I want to see these dramatic changes and I know that's not going to happen."

That's what most parents... like, "We're talking about change, but I'm not going to see that. That's change, that's probably going to happen years from now." And that's kind of hard to take, especially when we're asking folks, "Hey, you know what? We want to create a change. But the systemic change that we're asking for, you might not see it until a long time." So we got to break it into pieces. Well, we might not see this dramatic transformative change 20 years from now or it might take five years, whatever that might take. But I can guarantee you that there's going to be some change this semester and we're taking steps. I can guarantee you that if we practice some of our own tools to empower yourself to create some goals, to work and develop some questions, empowering questions that you want to ask some of the decision makers that we're going to see a slight change in how they respond to you and how you create power in that space.

And then I can guarantee you that we will, at least, by the end of school year, accomplish some of the goals that you have that are academic and also personal goals because we want to also talk about growth. And in that process, we're going to engage you around how to view this not only as a thing that you're engaged that that's about you, but also about all of us. So this is where our transformation from the "me" to the "we" comes because everybody, I want to make this, I want to see this, I want this happen to my child, and this doesn't always happen in a year, but eventually that person, you know what?

We are making these changes. We are working towards all children in our schools, so that's that transformation. So it does take time. It is part of that narrative shift. We do engage in political education. We talk about our own migration stories and this is where it's very important because for an organization that's working with Black and Brown parents, hearing migration, hearing where we come from, what is our story, it's part of the humanizing process that it takes for us to connect with struggle, to connect with issues that are impacting all of us in this current location that we're at now.

So how do we get here? So it's part of that process. And then these two, the further discussions, which is around police too. We started off with willful defiance, then it evolved to the School Climate Bill of Rights and monitoring PBIS, student-wide positive behavioral support. And before we even were able to talk about defund school police, we had to have a conversation like, are we in solidarity with zero suspension of Black students? And that was a hard conversation because it had to touch on the issues of like, "Well, if they're getting in trouble, it must be because of something happened." It must be our parents and all that. So we had to have that conversation and hear each other and hear parents that are actually being impacted and humanize that. After that, then discussion around safety because all

parents care about safety, they care. But it's the discussion around reimagining school safety is something that we're talking with the Police Free LAUSD.

We're reimagining school safety, how can it be reinvested? So jumping from zero suspensions to defund school police, it did take layers of discussions to again humanize because we know that parents still different about the topic. So we're not trying to do what the school is already doing, which is going to put parents against parents, students against students, and all that community against community. So if this needs to take longer for us to engage this discussion, then we have to invest in that time to develop it.

And ultimately, there's going to be parents that are not going to agree with it, and then they're going to probably look elsewhere. But if they're invested in their own development and growth, and yes, it might feel weird, it might feel like, why Black students? Why not just all of us too? Because we center Black voices, Black parents. And that feeling again too, it requires a discussion around where is that coming from and again, humanizing the experience, humanizing this discussion. And so it's not a one meeting, it's a few meeting thing that happens, it's one-on-ones to discuss that. And that's a lot of investment too. Not everybody is up for that too, right? So I give props to all the parents and every community member that's hung on for doing this work.

Jewel Patterson:

I also wanted to, as you're speaking, I'm thinking about people look at California and think, "Oh, the girls are progressive over there. Everyone is on the same page. Let's all get go and there's Hollywood and there's all these different San Francisco and stuff," and then there's like boom, here's the Inland Empire. No, but I think it's important for us to talk about that we're a big state. And different counties especially, they have different personalities and different even political context to deal with, and they even different history and X, Y and Z to deal with. So I'm listening to you talk, Edgar, and I'm like, "Yes, L.A." and then we're talking about L.A. defunding this and putting money over here. These are big steps.

These are big goals that we have also, but we're not there yet. And there's steps and there's different levels to this. So I'm also thinking about we started this conversation before I even started with the COPE and we started discussing decreasing citations for students. And that was our first step to think saying like, "Hey, maybe we can rethink what safety looks like for our students." Let's just decrease what citations we're giving, right? Then from there, we move on and we're now talking about local funding. Local, what is it called? LCFF-

Nicole Bates:

Local control funding formula.

Jewel Patterson:

Yes, okay. Thank you. So we're talking about that and we're talking about, okay, how can we ensure that high need students get what they need? And we're kind of slowly moving this needle and slowly walking folks too. And now we're at the point where one of our students is in a police free schools fellowship and she's learning a lot about what that means. We've yet to put it on blast and say, you know what I mean? Like, "Get the police out of here," because it's a delicate conversation that we've seen some other organizations in other districts had that fight and they lost. But that loss still was a win in the right direction.

So because they started that conversation, we're now able to push the needle a little further and a little further. So big dreams, I'm looking at CADRE and I'm like, exactly, we want to have those conversations. We want to have those conversations about why we're focusing right on uplifting and centralizing Black

students and Black voices. We want to have those conversations about why it's important for us to move dollars from school police and to actually let's fund something else that focuses on wellness for our students. We want to have those conversations. But again, I think just generally, I'm thinking it's important for us to remember when we are thinking about California that there are different conversations that are happening in different spaces. Not everyone is on the same page, although we very much hope to be soon.

Shimon Cohen:

Something I'm thinking about, as you all are talking, are the grassroots efforts and the work that go into that. The conversations you're having with students, with parents, with everyone you have these conversations with, and the police have millions of dollars on their side, and the administration and teachers and the union funding behind it, and then you have people power. But there's a lot that has to go into that. And I think about parents and students too, people are working, people are struggling. Times are tough. They've been tough for a while, but they've really, really been tough these last couple years. How do parents, when do you meet with them? How does this even happen? Because some of that feels huge to me that you can even have those meetings because there is so much people are dealing with.

Jewel Patterson:

Yeah. Go ahead, Edgar.

Edgar Ibarria:

Well, for us it's we've tried to stay consistent at least in the timeframe of where our meetings are at. Most of our meetings are in the evening. Right now, it's 5:30 to 7:30. And normally, we're going to catch most of the parents that are working throughout the day that are coming in back home. Some of our parents, with the whole Zoom thing, it kind of opened up some windows because we could now have meetings on the go, and for some parents, they don't have to come to our office. Some parents are driving back home, some parents are catching the meeting in the parking of the work. So that's kind of opened up opportunities. But ultimately, also it's based on just availability of what they're able. We do also engage in one-on-ones to fill in some of the areas that we talk about. So it's also broken into, for us, is around two things.

One, it's like the self piece and the other is the advocacy. And then so self piece really is the bigger long term because if a parent is still around discussing their issue, which is valid, but it's just issues and they're not making that connection to how their advocacy could impact other parents or model for the teacher how to do some things and not do something. If they don't draw that connection, then we have to work to make sure that that parent understands just how powerful their voice can be if they engage it and make these changes. The other piece is the practice. "I try these Edgar and this is the response and this is what they said to me." And then so we got to work it out, so we have to assess it whether the action was actually helpful, if it helped move anything, it helped move the needle or not.

So a lot of that too also is part of the engagement that happens during the time that they're available, and that's hard too. I'm consistently texting folks, "Hey, when are you available this week?" And I know that everyone's time is precious so it's not like I could meet with them every single week. But based on just their availability, we continue to move it and yeah, it's a lot of work, but they make it ultimately happen. And I think we do believe in having self-agency, so they say no, there's nothing wrong with that. So as organizers too, yeah, they're going to get to the noes, but we got to continue and let's move on and see if they could get away some time another week. Or maybe this parent's not ready to talk about

these things because they're having other things that are impacting their life right now and this is not the right time. So let's revisit this conversation some other time.

Shimon Cohen:

Do you all go door-to-door too?

Edgar Ibarria:

Yeah. Now we did during the pandemic, what we did first was engage all our poll of list of folks that we had and reassess those numbers and see if they were going to be able to engage us through Zoom. We adopted to Zoom. We did all these steps to get folks into, learn how to use Zoom and that was some trial and error then. So we started doing outreach this summer again and yeah, it was the learning experience too, because you have to engage folks whether they're on the keep a distance side of things or they're okay, and then just measure it that way. We also contemplated going back to the office having hybrids, but it depends too just because different parents have different capacities too. So we're still waiting on it. But yeah, most definitely outreach is important.

Nicole Bates:

I was going to say, Jewel, I didn't know if you wanted to talk about how you engage young people differently or the same... It's a struggle. I used to work... Yeah, go ahead.

Jewel Patterson:

Woo. The kids are all right. But yeah, they're doing a lot. They're going through a lot right now. And the students we work with, they're not, "Oh, how can I get my community service time in, so I can put it on my resume?"

Nicole Bates:

Resume.

Jewel Patterson:

These are students who are like, "I'm actually working at Taco Bell and I have all of these things that I'm doing at school. I'm stressed out because the homework is way too much and somebody in my family just got COVID. But yeah, I'll come to the meeting tonight." These are students who got a lot going on. So sometimes it takes constantly us hitting them up and saying, "Hey, remember me. Hey remember this thing, blah, blah, blah." And then once they get in this space, they light up, they're passionate, they're ready to talk about it. So it's working really right from a human, I want to say like human standpoint.

"We know you're going through stuff, right? I'm not trying to pressure you, I just know this. It could be an outlet for some of the things that you're feeling, some of the frustrations that you're feeling. Can I pick you like, do you need me to pick you up?" Because transportation is not always guaranteed. So having those conversations and then especially texting, just checking in sometimes, doing a little double tap on Instagram just so they know, "Hey, I'm thinking about..." Just always engaging with students is helpful for them to feel like, "Yeah, I would like to go over there and spend some of my time discussing these things or deciding I want to do a public comment even though I'm nervous and all of these kind of things." It just helps if you're in constant communication, not just about the work but just about how they are.

And then parents, I can say Ms. Devona is the one who is a parent organizer at COPE. It's in between their work times, so right maybe they're doing taking a lunch, that's when she's talking to them. Maybe it's, "Good morning, how are you?" kind of text messages. Maybe it's after they get off of work. For instance, even right now, we're having what we call our education subcommittee meeting tonight. And this is the first one that's in person in a long time or ever I think.

And there are parents coming. There are 20 something parents who are deciding like, "After I get off of work, I'm actually going to drive over there and come hang out and let's discuss this." And that's a testament to those individual conversations like you were talking about Edgar, those one-on-ones and that relationship building that you're doing. It's also a testament to our parents, our community, who's so passionate about this that they're like, "No matter how tired I am, and yes I got to cook dinner when I get back from this meeting and yes I got to pick up these kids and I'm going to set aside time to do something that can help our community change positively."

Edgar Ibarria:

That's amazing. I would say that's also just the trust that the parents have in COPE in what you're all doing. So that's the commitment that they share too.

Jewel Patterson:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

I think the support you're providing for parents and the commitment and organizing they are doing is phenomenal. It's huge. I want to talk with you about something before we start to wrap up. Nicole, with willful defiance, you mentioned it's K-8 right now that you were able to get rid of those suspensions but not high school. And that's just as an example, and this question isn't specific to that. But for all of you, how do you decide what to push for and what not to push for? Jewel, you kind of mentioned this around police out of schools and certain places not being ready for that yet. So how do you decide that? And then all of you care so deeply about this, so how do you reconcile that within yourself too? Because I think that's hard, so I just wanted to hear it from you all.

Edgar Ibarria:

Well, for us, like I mentioned, we only have one campaign. So for us, it's the Right to Education Campaign, and we've been working on this for the past 20 years. So the only thing we do is just get more in depth into campaign itself. It started with willful defiance, but then it became monitoring implementations. And now we're transitioning into the same thing about monitoring implementation practice, positive implementation practices, but now incorporating police, the police presence, what are the situations? What are things that causes school to call police? What are some of the things that are going in campus, in the classroom that will cause someone from school to call the police? And that's the finding for us. So we know we're not there because with COVID, things changed. We're still trying to figure out whether they allow parents in campus. Not all campuses do that, right?

We're still trying to figure out how far parents got access to their teachers. Is it just online? Going to meet with them 101? Can they go in a classroom? So while we want to do this police monitoring, we know that we're still trying to figure out just parents access. So sometimes that kind of informs just where we're at in regards to even discussion though. We know we need more allies, we need more parents in this discussion. So we have to create also opportunities so that parents develop, create community so that we can eventually have more parents monitoring schools. So we would like to have a

bunch of parents going, but now we have our small group of 26 folks. So that also informs just how hard we could go into our schools. And then also the conversation around school safety, around the mass shootings too also, we had that conversation and it brought up feelings. But they also, at least for our parents, it also informed us that, hey, you know what? Even though police were there, especially Uvalde, like there was a big failure there.

So we had to continue to think about school safety in a different way. And the narrative shifts are going to be there from the school telling us about where money should be invested, how many police we should get, but this is how we feel about it. So we had that conversation with a group of parents though, but we had to extend that and create the opportunity to more parents to engage that. So that also informs just how far in depth we can go with that discussion. So I guess to also answer, it is just piece by piece and we have to measure just where parents are at if we want to be somewhere as organized, but we're not there yet. We can't force it to be there yet. We have to be meet them where parents are at and where the discussion's at, but create the opportunities for the discussion.

And that might mean for us engaging around where the difference is at, if there is a difference or having one-on-ones around where that feeling is coming and respect it. Because ultimately, we've been in disagreements, especially with amongst parents. But the question we ask is, even if we disagree in this topic, can we be in solidarity with the parents? Can we be in solidarity with those parents being impacted? And that's what led us also to being in solidarity with zero suspension. Even though my child is not being suspended, can I be in solidarity with this Black student and this Black parent? So that's also part of the development that we have now.

Jewel Patterson:

Yeah, echoing what you said. And also, it's talking to our base, whether that is students, parents, community members, faith leaders, congregations, talking to them first. We just finished even coming, I hate to say coming out of COVID because we're actually still in it. But so in the fall last year and early this year, we finished up a listening session that we had with our base in so many different ways. Surveys, one-on-ones, focus groups, all these kind of ways, we listen to our community to hear what is going on now that students are now moving back into schools. Distant learning is sort of being a thing of the past for a lot of these schools. Parents, how are you dealing with these things? So just listening to our community. From there, we were able to say, "Okay, this is what our community is really caring about right now."

This is top of the mind. In COPE, we have five different issue areas that we work in. But specifically in education, we were able to hear a lot of things from students and from parents and even from some people who work in the school districts and work in schools. And that is what has shaped us thinking about what a campaign might look like. From those conversations, we've then been able to move that into, okay, if we decide we want to find a solution on this issue, what might that look like? And so moving people into this kind of imagination sphere, but it starts with listening to our base. And then there might be things that come up that are the term like low hanging fruit. There are some things that maybe we can go ahead and go for right now that we know we're going to win. We know that's easy and that will energize our base for something that's more long term.

And say we have these little small things that at least we're doing. Look, this took two months to do instead of two years, so you might highlight those things and then also forecast, okay, but within two years this is where we want to be. So this is the work that we need to do. And sometimes that does look like I was talking about earlier, testing the climate and saying, we might lose this, but we're going to lose it forward. We're going to fail forward on this thing so that somebody else can come and the way that we've paved, they can start where we ended and pick it up.

And so those are some ways that we pick the issues, but we look at the what's really important to our base. And then we also look at like, what is the landscape? What's the political landscape? What are people talking about? What's the social landscape? Maybe something big has happened, how does that shape how people are thinking about it right now? And then we have to take all of these things into context and then figure out, is this something that our base wants to do for the long term or is this something that they just are, I want to get stuff my chest right now? So yeah, those are some ways.

Nicole Bates:

Yeah, no, I totally echo what both of you all said. What I heard both of you say was really around deep listening. You have to listen to what the base is wanting. And then also, I think what's important is having a North Star, which I think all of us have and, or have created and are part of both local, regional, and statewide coalitions that have very similar North Stars. So there's also some alignment, aligning yourselves with folks that you can talk about different strategies with. You can think through like, "Okay, so this is happening in my landscape. What's happening in your landscape? Can we do some peer to peer learning? How did that work for you all?" Like, "Okay, let's see if this could work for our organization."

Yeah, and I think also just to, Jewel, you were talking about how sometimes it's like picking the low hanging fruit and kind of using that to propel you to your North Star. Sometimes you win it and sometimes you don't. So when I think about willful defiance, we lost a lot of years. We did not win. And just more recently, we lost with mandatory notifications, SB 1273, which we didn't even really get to talk about as much. But all of that teaches us how to come back the next time and how do we galvanize and get the support that we need to move that forward.

So it's not always that we're picking and choosing. So for willful defiance, right now, you can't be expelled for willful defiance but only K through 8. That was a carve out that we won. They didn't want to give us anything, but we had to fight years and years and years to get folks on our side. We talking about this narrative shift, changing the political will, all of that takes time. So it wasn't that we chose that. Our ideas that no kid would ever be suspended or expelled for something as silly as putting their head down because they're tired or they haven't eaten that day or don't have the supplies that they need for school, whatever defying valid school authority. So yeah, I think it takes having short term goals but always with the North Star in mind and always centering and listening to those who are most impacted by this work.

Edgar Ibarria:

I was going to say, that's why I appreciate because we're all part of DSC California, Dignity in Schools California, and part of our work is really to move and build, so we're in that process. We're learning from each other, parents are learning, students are learning from mothers and we're defining our local work. Well, our local work is informing the statewide work. And then so through practices is how we've learned how to do things like locally here, it was through BOP's work, the Black Organizing Project's work in Oakland and how they defunded the Oakland school police that we took on notes and are adapting and learning from their practices. So I think that that's the power too of just centering in our members and listening and also learning from each other.

Jewel Patterson:

Yes. Plus one learning from each other. Yes.

Shimon Cohen:

What was the name of that statewide coalition?

Edgar Ibarria:

Oh, Dignity in Schools California. DSC, shout out.

Shimon Cohen:

So before we wrap up, I just want to make sure, is there anything you all want to add?

Edgar Ibarria:

Yeah, I mean the work is heavy, especially for our members, but Jewel and Nicole has mentioned, the passion builds up because there's a trust in the collective work that we're doing, and it builds up from just organizing, building a relationship with folks. I think that's one of the things that schools, institutions fail oftenly is building an actual relationship with people, listening, humanizing the experience, and meeting folks where they're at. No matter how many times LAUSD tries to implement their own shadow, what community is doing, they skip a step there because they don't think about the process in regards to like building relationships with them.

They just want that transaction that comes immediately. So the investment that parents put into the work ultimately ripples in the way how they model and share their experiences and their knowledge to other parents and what the intent that will also do thing eventually. The change might not, like I mentioned earlier, might not show up immediately, but in the short term. Well, the changes that we're looking for might not show immediately, but in the short term, the small steps might. And that's part of what gives parents hope. That's part of what parents can measure and see and do and replicate again the following year. And hopefully, many of our parents after their kids graduate, they continue just to develop those and support those skills, so are the parents that are doing for the first time. And that's how we keep moving and shaping at it until we build a mass movement.

Jewel Patterson:

I wanted to speak on two things. So I think a question that was posed earlier was how do us as organizers or people doing this work, how do we sustain ourselves or something of the sort? Yeah, it's hard work, so it's hard for our families, our students, and the folks who are impacted every day by these things. Sometimes organizers are also those people. So that's even harder to think about. I think it's important for us in the things that we do and in doing this work to remember that rest is key because we want to be here to make the change and to hopefully see that change and rest in a way that sometimes feels uncomfortable, rest in a way that's like, "Wait, don't I have something to do? I should be doing something." But no, that kind of rest is necessary for this work and for balancing ourselves in this work.

And then also, imagination is key in whatever way you can exercise that muscle of imagination. You should because that's going to be key for us to actually figure out how we're going to change this world into something that we love, we all love, and it's all safe for all of us. And then I also wanted to just say to the question of movement lawyers, what is the role? I do want to touch on that because when I tell you it has been one of the things that... the heavy lifting like we talked about is that narrative shifting. And when you're able to work in partnership with some lawyers who understand your vision, who understand those struggles that you're having, who want to work for a world that looks different than what we're living in now, it's so helpful because you're able to get this information that is going to move the hearts and the minds of people who are doing this work.

And then we're able to then take that and say, "You have to listen to us because look at all this data we have." And so now all of a sudden, community becomes a little more, I guess, validated because we have movement lawyers who are standing by our side. So I just want to say that's an incredible thing that I have learned in organizing is to work side by side. Some lawyers like C4LL that are actually understanding what we need to be able to push a issue forward.

Nicole Bates:

That's so funny, Jewel, that you mentioned that because I was going to bring that up because we hadn't talked really about movement lawyers yet, and I was one of the ones on the call, and we're missing you Ashleigh and Ruth. But it makes me smile to hear you say just how beautiful that partnership can be. Because I think oftentimes when we think about the law, it can be this really oppressive thing and lawyers can use it in a very oppressive way. But I think there is beauty when you have the right people that are utilizing it and really working alongside you all. Really I feel like we're working from behind you all and just supporting whatever work that you guys are doing, recognizing that the law is a tool, but it is not the only tool, and that people power really is more impactful for transformation. I think believing and understanding the wisdom and the expertise of community of young people, of parents, of elders and centering that, and the work is so key to the work that we as movement lawyers do.

We put aside our privilege. So what I went to law school, who cares? Because the expertise that community has for their own experiences in the ways in which this work is impacting their lives, it's so much more important than criminal law or contracts suit or torts or whatever. And so I just wanted to say, I find it such a privilege and I'm so grateful to be able to do this work alongside you all, and I know I'm the newest member, but I'm just so grateful to do this work with you all and to continue to learn from you all.

And I think one of the best things or the most impactful things for me that I learned from you all is just hope. The way that you all just keep go. There's not as much hope in the law, but to just see you all continue to get up. It don't matter what pandemic, what mass shooting, what the president says or passes, the fact that you all just keep getting up day after day and doing this work and talking to families and talking to young people is such a joy and I learned so much from you all. So I just want to say thank you all. It's such a pleasure.

Edgar Ibarria:

Likewise.

Nicole Bates:

Thank you.

Edgar Ibarria:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

That was beautiful. That was beautiful. I just want to thank you all for coming on the podcast, sharing your experience and doing the work.

Jewel Patterson:

Yeah, thank you.

Nicole Bates:

Thank you.

Jewel Patterson:

Yes.

Edgar Ibarria:

Most definitely.

Nicole Bates:

It'll probably have to be part two, three, and four. But yes, we're excited too for this initial conversation.

Jewel Patterson:

To really dig deep on it, then yeah, it's going to have to be some parts to it.

Shimon Cohen:

Let's do it.

Nicole Bates:

Okay.

Edgar Ibarria:

Yep.

Shimon Cohen:

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