

“NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US”

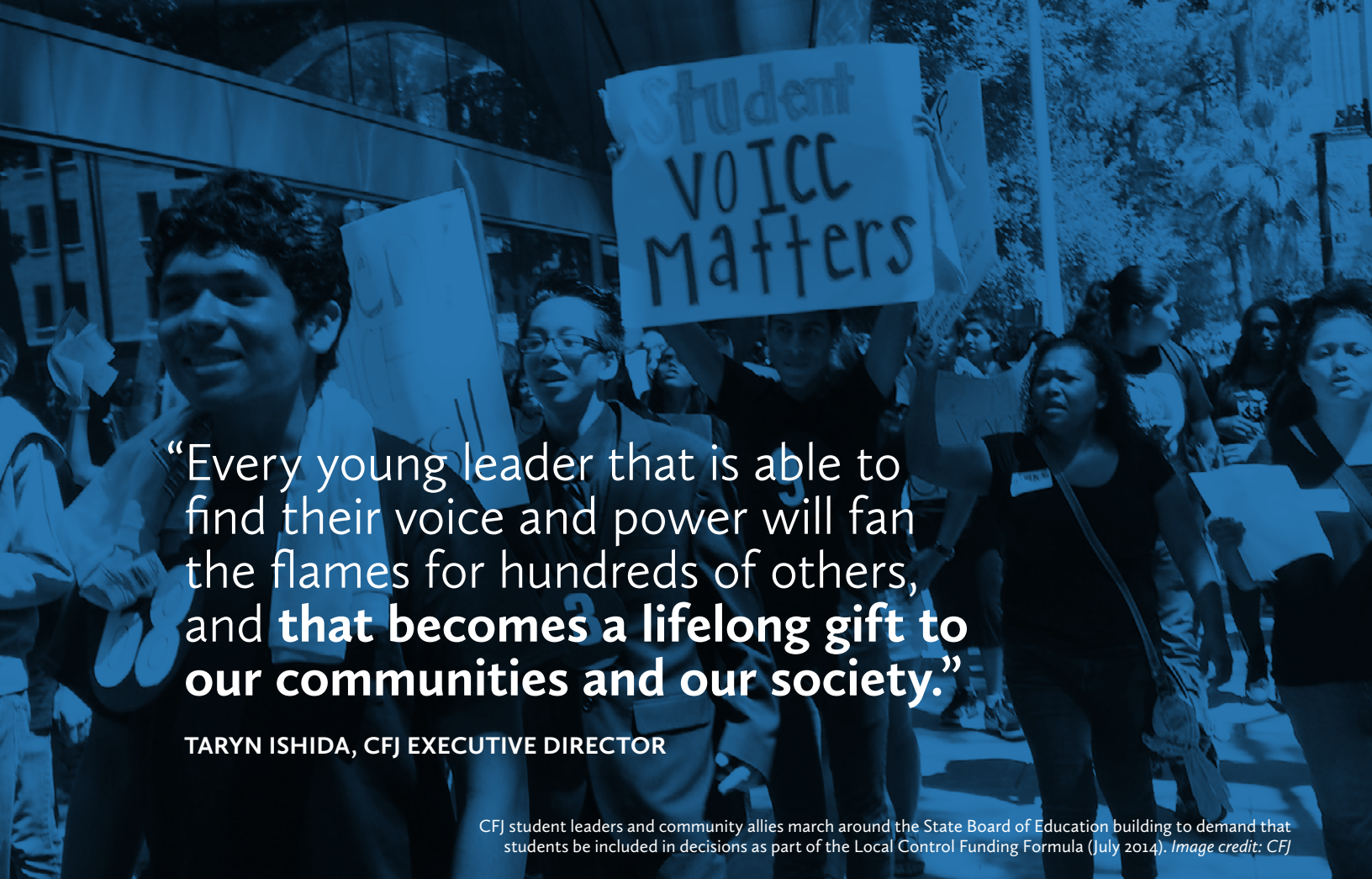
A Local Control
Funding Formula (LCFF)
Case Study on East Side
Union High School District



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“Every young leader that is able to find their voice and power will fan the flames for hundreds of others, and **that becomes a lifelong gift to our communities and our society.**”

TARYN ISHIDA, CFJ EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

CFJ student leaders and community allies march around the State Board of Education building to demand that students be included in decisions as part of the Local Control Funding Formula (July 2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

This case study offers an account of how East Side Union High School District (ESUHSD or “The District”) in San Jose, in partnership with Californians for Justice (CFJ), a youth-led educational justice organization, is developing student voice, power, and participation to drive more equitable outcomes for every student.

Although nine years have passed since the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) was signed into law in 2013, little is known about how and whether LCFF has empowered young people to take a more active role in influencing and contributing to educational justice. Phrases like ‘youth empowerment,’ ‘youth voice,’ and ‘youth participation’ have quickly gathered momentum. However, efforts to implement student voice and power are often muddled by concerns over their value, legitimacy, and purpose.

As educators and policymakers attempt to implement efforts and policies to develop student voice, many continue to grapple with common questions, including:

*How can student voice and power **support broader educational and racial justice efforts?***

*Will student voice **improve educational outcomes or produce practical and innovative solutions?***

*How can partnerships with youth-led community-based organizations **support school districts in moving towards meaningful student voice and participation?***

*How will this work **change the educational experiences of students and adults?***

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Key Findings

The development of youth voice, power, and participation in San Jose is informed by a rich legacy of organizers and local communities fighting rapidly growing educational, economic, and racial inequities, and illustrates important lessons for school systems that want to advance equity in education.

1. There is great potential for partnerships between school districts and community-based organizations working towards equity and educational justice.

Such partnerships can be mutually beneficial: CFJ saw a unique opportunity for youth leaders to directly impact policy, practice and pedagogy at the district level, and The District recognized the potential of CFJ's knowledge, skills and student-led organizing for advancing educational equity and democratic practices at ESUHSD.

2. Structure and culture are interdependent factors that must be addressed when advancing youth voice, power, and participation.

Deliberate structures must be created to support and create space for youth voice, and we must equip youth with the tools necessary to participate meaningfully within these structures. Cultural changes within school systems must also occur to ensure that youth are heard, their contributions valued, and their voices influence meaningful action.

3. Engaging in democratic and critical spaces fosters a shift in students' civic identities and their engagement with their own education and academic trajectories.

Staff and student collaboration towards shared goals facilitated new adult-youth relationships, which in turn led to new conceptions of students' identities as civic participators and agents of change. Gaby, a sophomore, shared: "I'm actually letting my voice and my thoughts be heard, rather than just keeping them in and silently observing... [this work] has helped us gain power to take back our schools. I know there's a lot of focus at our school on academics without really seeing other things. We are much more than only academics."

4. When given power and leadership opportunities, youth leaders defy deficit and adultist beliefs about them.

Students sought to address issues of educational equity, highlighted the importance of centering the voices of those most marginalized, and courageously demonstrated willingness and capacity to navigate difficult but necessary conversations about issues of educational disparities, race, and gender, amongst others.

*"When Californians for Justice came into our district, that really turned things around. It empowered students to be involved in their communities. We brought up issues that the district hadn't thought about, like **mental health resources, and making sure students are prepared for college and being welcomed into school spaces. We're making racial justice a priority and including that in everything we do as a district.**"*

PAULA ESCOBAR, STUDENT LEADER



Impact

While most stakeholders we interviewed believed that the “real impact” of the work was connected to a broader, long-term struggle for educational justice, the ways in which this work is already impacting the district are clear.

1. Student voice affirms and supports the goals and the vision of The District.

Student priorities consistently centered their educational futures and those of their peers. In addition, students have worked actively as allies of the district, understanding that it is a “tough job and they [The District] need help with that” (student leader) and working alongside District staff to develop programs.

“One of our fears was that if you lift up student voice, somehow it’s going to be anti-what you’re about as a district: anti-adult, anti-educator. What we’ve learned from this is that it’s completely not true... you can lift up student voice, and our students will grab on to the mission, and vision, and where we want to go. ‘We’re in! We want that too.’”

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

2. Students refine existing work by introducing nuance, specificity, questions, and a set of experiences that positively impact decisions.

Vander Zee shared how after youth joined conversations at the district level, the approach changed; it “not only changed the questions that were being asked but made the nature of the conversation richer and more authentic.”

3. Students leverage their own unique perspectives and experiences to contribute new, innovative ideas to The District.

Examples include professional development at both the school and the district level, new and creative ways to use LCFF funds, informing the design of the district’s new high schools, and decisions around curriculum.



Student volunteers pose after supporting CFJ’s “My Voice Matters” community town hall in ESUHSD (2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

Challenges

To authentically support youth power, voice and participation, school systems must be willing to face long-standing and deep-seated structures, practices, and cultures.

1. Deep contradictions exist between the principles and values of empowering youth and school practices, structures, and culture.

This reality is present in daily interactions, curriculum, leadership and governance, and pedagogical practices.

"We come to the district or to our school's leadership meetings and they tell us that our voices matter, then we go back to the classroom and our voices do not matter at all."

STUDENT LEADER

2. School systems must address deficit-oriented beliefs and assumptions about students, especially Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other groups of marginalized students.

Existing structures have contributed to the silencing, dismissal, and criminalization of certain groups of students. This cultural change must also address existing inequities within student leadership spaces.

*"[Students] want to find out what things really mean and then engage. Take disproportionality across educational opportunities, experiences, and outcomes. **Creating better schools requires confronting biases and inequities, and this requires multiple hard and honest conversations.**"*

TERESA MARQUEZ, DISTRICT ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

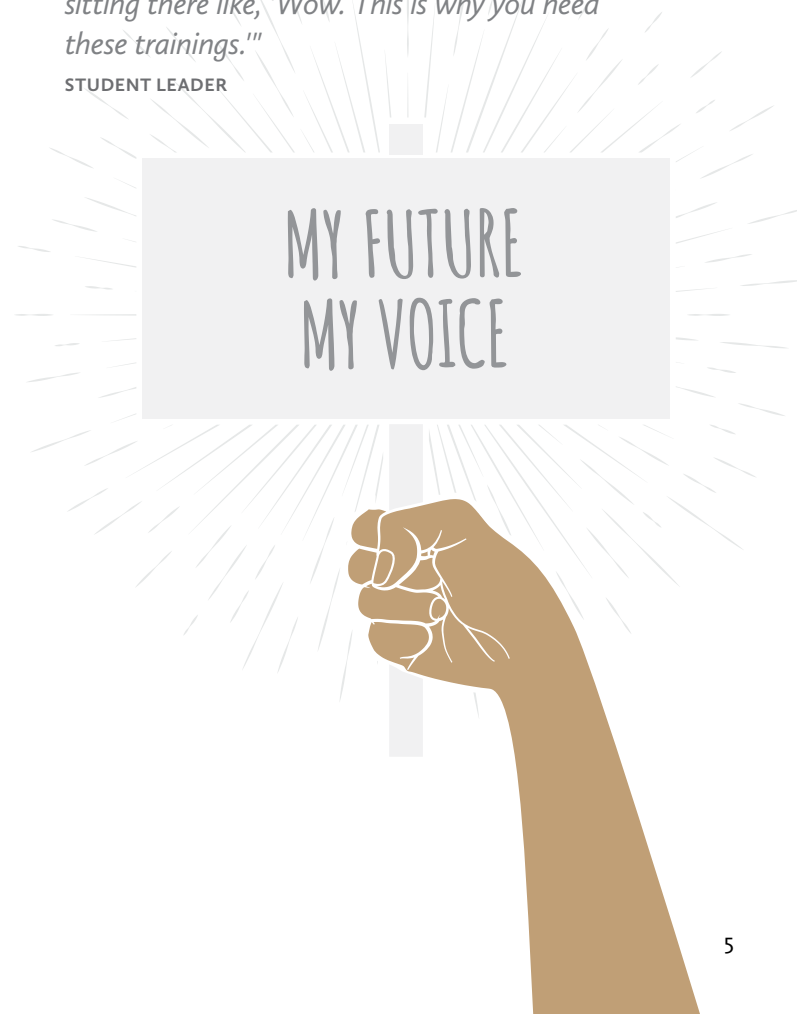
3. School systems are often reluctant to the transformative change required to address historic inequities.

Students were often met with the reluctance of adults to engage with and confront these issues, and a system with little capacity, short policy life cycles, high attrition rates, and little infrastructure to sustain and cultivate their efforts.

"Teachers have been getting implicit bias training and some teachers are like, 'Oh, this is stupid. Why are we doing this?'"

I've had teachers who went on a whole 30-minute rant about these trainings. And I, as a student, who have encouraged the district to implement these trainings, am sitting there like, 'Wow. This is why you need these trainings.'"

STUDENT LEADER



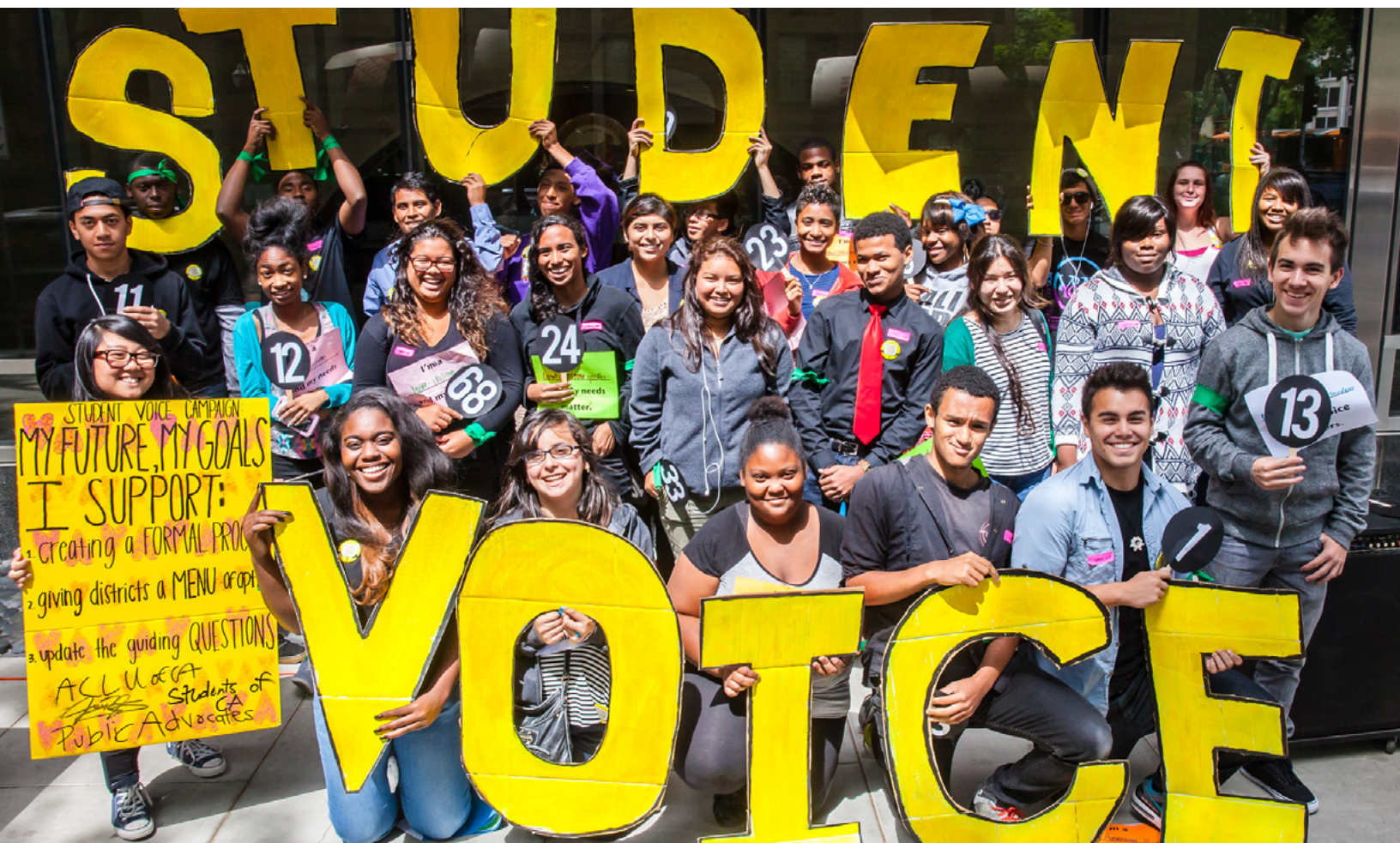
Conclusion

This case study demonstrates how the leadership, knowledge, and determination of students have improved the educational policies, practices, and experiences of students within The District, and created new paths and possibilities for what education can look like.

As Rosa de Leon, former youth organizer and now Strategy Director for CFJ explained, ESUHSD has come a long way from “[this work] was the right thing to do,” to the work being “transformative for students and adults”. As we asked stakeholders across the district what they believed was the biggest impact of the work, one resounding theme continued to surface:

*“It is not so much of, ‘look at this particular story or these particular wins’; we certainly have had big wins for students and families. **The biggest impact has been creating spaces where students are influencing decisions to come, spaces where students are beginning to influence the fabric of and practices in schools, and spaces that are changing both the adults and the students.**”*

TERESA MARQUEZ, DISTRICT ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES



CFJ student leaders gather outside the State Board of Education building after their silent protest to demand that students be included in decisions as part of the Local Control Funding Formula (May 2014). Image credit: CFJ

District-Level Recommendations for Youth-Led Change

- **Ensure structures created for youth and stakeholder participation in educational leadership, governance, and policymaking address equity and parity in participation.** Existing arrangements of power and the cultures of participation and deliberation often run counter to the goals of such structures.
- **Design student empowerment and democratic governance efforts and policies that encourage systemwide structural and cultural transformation,** as opposed to mere compliance.
- **Prioritize efforts and policies aimed at nurturing youth voice, power and participation as a way to dismantle deficit-oriented beliefs about students,** especially Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other marginalized youth.
- **Develop a clear set of goals and indicators to track progress** towards set policy and program goals with student leaders and partner organizations.
- **Honor the work, knowledge, and experience that community organizations and social movements hold** and develop partnerships grounded in a shared pursuit of educational justice and equity.
- **Emphasize and build deliberate mechanisms so that policy initiatives center the importance of knowledge transfer** and continuing to build upon, sustain, and cultivate existing efforts.



CFJ student leaders hold a silent protest inside the State Board of Education building to demand that students be included in decisions as part of the Local Control Funding Formula (May 2014). *Image credit: CFJ*