

COMBINING INSIDER AND OUTSIDER STRATEGIES

The Path to Transformative Justice

“Insider” youth organizing strategies build relationships with decision makers and people who exert influence over them, provide access to institutional decision-making processes, and prepare youth for future insider leadership roles. Insider approaches have traditionally been considered incompatible with “outsider” approaches that rely on collective action and leveraging of public political pressure. Combining [insider-outsider strategies](#) amplifies youth voices within insider spaces, creates pressure for change, and helps hold leaders accountable. Combining insider and outsider strategies can create tensions, but also offers a way to work toward a transformative, humanizing vision of social justice.

This section is part of the Developing Youth Power Series, based on a study of youth organizing groups in California that was conducted by the [CU Boulder Research Hub](#) between 2021 and 2024.

What’s In This Section

Youth organizers participating in our study during the spring of 2022 reported the coordinated use of both insider and outsider strategies for social change. This is in keeping with emerging research, which highlights the complementary ways in which groups can make use of both strategies (Donoso, 2017; Pettinicchio, 2012; Banzak, 2010; Abers & Keck, 2009). However, it contrasts with older research and conventional youth organizing wisdom, which tends to treat organizations as using either insider strategies or outsider strategies, unable to navigate the tension between them (Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

Existing literature on insider organizing strategies commonly describes activities such as lobbying, policymaking, technical analysis, and discussion forums (see, for example Wagner et. al, 2023). But organizing leaders in our study identified insider strategies that extended well beyond policy-focused efforts to include activities like running school-based youth programs in partnership with

the district or carrying out participatory design processes for new schools with students, teachers, and administrators.

Previous research on education organizing also documents the utility of outsider strategies for creating external political pressure needed for people working within systems like schools to advance equitable change (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Organizing leaders in our study used outsider strategies, such as community advocacy campaigns or ballot initiatives, in coordination with insider studies, to put political pressure on education and political systems.

In this section, we explore the complementary use of insider and outsider strategies for social change. The theme of combining diverse organizing strategies can also be seen in our sections on [long-term visions for youth organizing](#) and [funding challenges](#).

Organizers expanded on their use of insider and outsider strategies in the summer of 2023. They described the purposeful coordination of insider and outsider strategies as essential to making progress towards their long-term visions for social change. They noted that insider strategies build relationships with decision makers, gain access to decision-making and implementation processes, and prepare youth to assume insider leadership and decision-making roles in the future. However, given the ways in which youth voices are discounted or marginalized in these spaces, outsider strategies are necessary to amplify youth voices, create the pressure needed to motivate change, and hold leaders accountable.

Leaders in our study persisted in the use of both insider and outsider strategies despite resulting tensions, which sometimes threatened the viability and continuity of insider strategies. Indeed, organizers suggested that persisting in the use of both strategies, by drawing on relationships and leveraging public pressure to continue their work, was the key to navigating tensions that arose. Some suggested that the use of both insider and outsider strategies was a way to embody the transformative, humanizing approaches to social justice that were at the core of their long-term visions for social change.



Insider and Outsider Organizing Strategies


A Coordinated, Complementary Mix of Strategies

While some participating leaders pursued only insider or only outsider strategies, most indicated that they use a mix of insider and outsider strategies. In contrast to the dominant discourse, in which insider and outsider strategies are often treated as distinct, participants talked about insider and outsider strategies as being complementary and intertwined. (For prior research on combining insider-outsider strategies, see Donoso, 2017; Pettinicchio, 2012; Banzak, 2010; Abers & Keck, 2009). One participant noted:

“We do capacity building work with school districts and we do youth organizing with school districts. And sometimes the young people that are participating in the capacity-building work with our adult professionals are also the same young people that are showing up in numbers to protest at a school board meeting or something like that.”

Another participant expanded on the complementary nature of insider and outsider strategies.

“Having those relationships with folks on the inside who are the ones that are going to be responsible for implementing the new policies that we’ve kind of put in place is really important. So that we’re able to kind of collaborate . . . with them, work alongside them and holding them accountable in kind of moving the process forward. And then of course we wouldn’t have won that policy if it were not for all of the pressure that our constituents and our community members showed up in full force at meetings to do and just engaging the larger public in it.”



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- Youth Organizing Leader

The Need for Outsider Strategies to Realize Changes Sought through Insider Strategies

Participants pointed to severe constraints on the potential to create meaningful change through insider strategies alone. One focus group participant listed the many ways in which internal power structures marginalized youth.

“Youth who sit on the school board and serve as student representation, yeah, they can talk and they can participate. But they don’t even have voting power in the board meetings. So that’s another thing, it’s, like, they’re on the inside, but they’re really—they don’t have any power, you know what I mean? [She names a number of juvenile justice oriented committees.] . . . All these meetings are happening during times when youth are in school. And so there’s not a lot of space for them to be a part of that work in those conversations. . . . I feel like there’s not a lot of regard for youth agency in spaces where it’s really – these are systems for and about young people.”

Echoing findings from other research (e.g., Valladares, et al., 2021) on the importance of outsider pressure tactics for enacting policy change, participants noted that the restrictions on youth agency within insider strategies can require outsider action to motivate change. Some participants also indicated that complementary use of insider and outsider strategies was required even when (former) youth organizers were in positions of power. One participant pointed to the high-profile example of Los Angeles mayor Karen Bass, who was a youth organizer and founded a community-based social justice organization:

“Karen Bass is who she is, and she has her own political agenda. And she has to engage with City Council and the rest of the city, who might not be aligned with what we do, right? So for us, it’s like we do have to do the work with our members to be able to identify the issues and keep that – keep true to who we are in terms of what is most important to our residents, right? And then how do we push the Mayor and be able to support her in the things that we like and push back against things that we don’t like, right?”

For some youth organizing groups, the complementary use of insider and outsider strategies was not situational or temporary, but an enduring feature of their long-term social change strategies. It was seen as necessary to ensure accountability and action, even when it came to leaders with whom they had strong, longstanding relationships.



Challenges and Takeaways

Challenges

Participants indicated that their use of both insider and outsider strategies could cause tension, both with the people and groups they collaborated with through insider strategies and with groups focused on outsider strategies. One participant described the situation this way:

“And for people who don’t understand that kind of strategy [complementary use of insider-outsider approaches], they’re like, “Hey, I thought we were working well together. Why are you getting your young people to do this?” And then people who are all about the organizing are like, “Hey, I thought you were with us. Why are you working with the district?” You’re just like, “Well, these are two different strategies towards the same direction.” And it just — yes, it creates a lot of challenges.”

Others pointed out that tension over the combined use of insider and outsider strategies could have great costs for youth organizing groups. When tensions arose, they faced the potential of losing resources, relationships, and access to processes developed through insider strategies. Some spoke of partnerships ending over these tensions. Others talked about the loss of access to school facilities. One participant said:

“And that’s one thing that can be challenging to navigate is how do you push up against people who maybe say, “Oh, you can’t come back onto school campuses anymore,” or prevent you accessing classes for classroom presentations or whatever else it may be? There may be pushback in that way as well.”



Takeaways

Organizing groups use complementary insider and outsider strategies to navigate tensions that arise and to embody [transformative social justice](#). Participants whose organizations used complementary insider and outsider strategies saw them both as a source of tension and as the key to navigating that tension.

For example, the participant who discussed the possibility of losing access to school campuses and resources emphasized that fear should not dissuade them from radical, outside strategies. At the same time, she noted the importance of developing strong relationships with people in power, whose support they could leverage to sustain access to school facilities when tensions arose.

Some participants, going one step further, saw the coordinated use of insider and outsider approaches as embodying transformative approaches to social justice. In transformative social justice, the goals of shifting policy and practice are pursued alongside ongoing work to heal from trauma and treat each other with humanity to advance collective liberation.

The 2020 Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing scan demonstrated that this approach to youth organizing is becoming more common (Valladares, et al., 2021) and participants in our focus groups spoke powerfully to the ways in which a transformative justice approach fit with their use insider and outsider strategies (see the section on [leadership development](#) for additional discussion of transformative justice approaches).

One participant explained this perspective:

“We do the insider-outsider work in the context of retaining our own humanity. So we may actually disagree with the DA. You know what I mean? But at the same time, we understand that the DA and our local [police] officers, they’ve had to experience traumas in our communities in the same way that we have. And so, there’s an invitation there for us to heal together while being super critical and condemning of the institution that they represent, right? And so, there’s a human element to it . . . and so that’s kind of how we maintain the insider-outsider stuff . . . People try to weaponize a relationship, which means it’s not a real relationship, right? And so, I think the way we counter that is one, we always have our public narrative kind of present. There’s always an invitation to live into a greater humanity, and there’s always an invitation to actually come together, heal with us.”

From this perspective, the use of complementary insider and outsider strategies is more than just an effective means to the desired goal of long-term social change, it is a manifestation of the type of change that groups seek to create. Some scholars have referred to this as “[prefigurative politics](#)”; see, for example, Lin et al., 2016. Thus, the coordinated use of insider and outsider strategies is a means for youth organizing groups to extend the critical consciousness and healing work discussed in the section on youth development, while also increasing the effectiveness of their efforts to enact [change in programs and policies that impact youth](#).