

For Black Women Who Have Reconsidered Flipping School Boards When Letters and Lawsuits Weren't Enough: A Case Study on the Power Shifting Efforts of Black Women for a Better Education (BW4BE)

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Allyce La'Fay Pinchback-Johnson, Ed.D.

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For decades, Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) has blatantly disregarded and ostracized Black caregivers and community members who have attempted to address concerns about the educational experience of Black students. The only moderately successful strategy was political activism led by Dr. Barbara Sizemore in the 1970s to secure a board majority, who fired an ineffective superintendent and hired a transformational leader who improved outcomes for Black children.

In 2020, Black Women for a Better Education (BW4BE) was formed to bring renewed visibility to the plight of Black PPS students. After an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the PPS board not to renew the contract of the previous superintendent, BW4BE formed a political action committee (PAC) to support candidates for PPS board. After successful cycles in 2021 and 2023, BW4BE secured a school board majority who is poised to transform outcomes for Black PPS students.

Through an artifact analysis, interviews with school board slate members, and a sister circle with BW4BE founders, this case study answered two inquiry questions, 1) What were the contributing factors to BW4BE's success in shifting power from PPS by flipping the school board? 2) How does the Black mothering tradition influence the way Black women show up as community organizers for school reform?

Utilizing an endarkened feminist epistemology focused on Black women's ways of knowing, the case study chronicled BW4BE's inception, power shifting, and programming. Key findings about the success of BW4BE's power shifting efforts included the community's ongoing frustration with PPS, the desire for new school board representation, and circumstances surrounding the pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020. BW4BE's foundation in the Black mothering tradition provided mission alignment, safety, and a hyperfocus on Black children.

This case study highlighted the need to revisit the history of Black educational activism in Pittsburgh, take bold action in the face of fear and hierarchy, and acknowledge the ancestral connections to Black education justice work. The study concluded with reflection on the possibilities for a school board majority, alternatives to traditional urban schooling for Black children, recommendations for education-focused role groups, and an overview of BW4BE's future work.

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Preface

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Dedication

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To Dr. Barbara Sizemore and every other Black education advocate who dared to dream and fight on behalf of Black children in Pittsburgh.

1.0 Naming & Framing the Problem of Practice

1.1 Broader Problem Area

The early American colonies established “Slave Codes” (known also as “Black Codes” and “Code Noir) to “limit African social, economic, and political autonomy as well as to control the growth of a free African population,” which included restrictions on education (National Park Service, n.d., Laws that Bound section). Educating Black people was viewed as a direct threat to maintaining the American practice of slavery, resulting in laws forbidding Black people from learning to read and write (e.g., Virginia Revised Code of 1819), and making it a crime to teach them (e.g., South Carolina Act of 1740) (Goodell, 1853). Therefore, unsurprisingly when formal urban education centers were created in the mid/late 1800s because of the rapid growth of cities due to industrialization, Black children were systematically denied access to education in these settings and/or allocated disproportionately fewer resources (Delale-O’Connor, 2020).

Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS), established in 1835, shares the inherently racist origins of many other urban school districts. Of its twelve schools that existed by 1838, only one served Black children (Doell, 1994). In 1866, Black schools in Pittsburgh, governed by ward committees, were under the central board of education's control due to severe neglect (Tyack, 1974). In 1937, PPS hired its first full-time Black teacher, Paul Lawrence Peeler, after Black state representative Homer S. Brown led a legislative investigation of the district’s refusal to hire Black teachers because PPS claimed they were unqualified and white children could not learn from them (Doell, 1994). In 1955, PPS hired John Brewer as the first Black male principal, and in 1961, Gertrude

Wade became the district's first Black female principal (Huffaker, 2018; "Remembering alumna", 2020).

Between 1945 and 1965, the Black population of the district doubled from 18.8% to 36.7% (Doell, 1994). In 1965, the board's annual report called for "all reasonable measures to integrate student population and staff," which led to Columbus Middle School becoming the first desegregated PPS school in 1967 through a "magnet" process in which students from different neighborhoods were educated in a central location (Doell, 1994, para. 11). Finding this model focused on Columbus School an insufficient attempt at desegregation, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) mandated the district to create an official desegregation plan in 1968, which led to the formation of the Pittsburgh Council on Public Education (PCPE), composed of local district and government leaders. The PHRC's rejection of the PCPE's subsequent plans led to a decade-long battle between the two entities. In 1979, the PCPE created the Pittsburgh Desegregation Plan, which called for "program-oriented schools" based on the same magnet model that was previously denied. Despite the PHRC's rejection of this plan, PPS moved forward with opening these schools anyway in 1980 (Doell, 1994). The district's refusal to create a legitimate desegregation plan that improved the learning experience for Black children in PPS--and the PHRC's inability to hold the district accountable to do so--was an ongoing demonstration of the lack of recourse for Black children and families who were consistently failed by the district.

In the 1970s, Dr. Barbara Sizemore, Professor and Interim Chair of the Department of Black Community, Research, and Education at the University of Pittsburgh, conducted a study about higher achieving, predominately Black elementary schools in PPS. She found that the commonality between these schools was a set of routines established by school leadership that created an environment of high expectations and for teachers and students (Sizemore, 1987).

However, Dr. Sizemore's research was not popular among district leadership. In her paper entitled, "The Organization-A Viable Instrument for Progress," she candidly discusses the strong resistance she faced from PPS administrators when trying to conduct this study. The district asserted that an ethnographic study of this kind that highlighted the difference in routines that existed in high-achieving Black schools versus low-achieving Black schools would undermine the hard work that was supposedly happening in all schools and decrease morale of the district. Dr. Sizemore also contended that "the school officials were really embarrassed about the high performance of [high-achieving Black] schools because the performance raised questions about the lower achieving schools." She was not shy about sharing these stark differences with the Black caregivers of children in low-achieving schools and encouraging them to share their concerns with district leadership (Sizemore, 1987, p. 4).

Dr. Sizemore's study also mobilized the PPS school board; in particular, her husband Dr. Jake Millions. Through savvy political organizing in which they demonstrated to the Black community the power of politics to enact change in PPS, they were able to flip the seats of several school board members who had been apathetic to low Black student achievement, build alliances with current school board members, gain a board majority, and fire the superintendent (Sizemore, 1987). This was a newly viable, yet effective strategy given that PPS had just moved from a judge-appointed school board to a democratically elected school board in 1977 (Benic, 1976).

After ousting the previous superintendent, the PPS school board was left with a complicated decision about his successor. A search committee composed of four of the nine school board members narrowed the pool down to four candidates over a four-month span: two Black men and two white men. Board members who did not participate in the committee questioned its effectiveness and the rapid speed for making the decision (they suggested naming an interim

superintendent while the district cast a wider net). There was also underlying racial tension among the school board members which influenced their individual preferences for the next superintendent. Dr. Richard Wallace, a white man from Fitchburg, Massachusetts, arose as the compromise candidate, with several Black members of the board casting dissenting votes for his candidacy yet vowing to support him once he was appointed (Guo 1980; Marcus, 1980).

Dr. Richard Wallace was appointed as PPS superintendent in 1980 and ushered in an era of enlightenment during his twelve-year tenure, with a strong focus on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and equity that moved achievement for Black children in unprecedented ways (Sizemore, 1987). In a self-authored report on his work entitled, *The Superintendent of Education: Data Based Instructional Leadership*, Dr. Wallace shared his approach to this work. He had a strong focus on data-driven instructional leadership, which included the ongoing monitoring of basic skills mastery through the Monitoring Achievement in Pittsburgh (MAP) program. He also established Pittsburgh's Research-based Instructional Supervisory Model (PRISM) to provide structured feedback to educators through an intentional supervision and evaluation model. The School Improvement Program (SIP) was an intentional effort to raise the achievement of Black schools whose achievement was perennially low, run by a principal who had a track record of increasing Black student achievement. The program resulted in a significant increase in students performing at or above grade level in reading and math (Wallace, 1985). PPS became a national model for urban schooling, garnering interest from all over the country (Fondy, 1988; Guydon, 1988).

Despite the progress that had been made during Dr. Wallace's tenure, due to the persistent structural and systemic racism that has existed in PPS since its inception, Black student achievement in PPS continued to lag that of white students, Black students were disproportionately

suspended and expelled, and Black children were overrepresented in special education (Blanchett, 2006). In an interview with a Black caregiver whose children were in PPS in the 1980s, I learned about her frustration with white PPS teachers who received unsatisfactory ratings being transferred to predominantly Black schools, and Black students being excluded from gifted education programs based on racially biased testing practices. She and other Black caregivers attempted to make their voices heard through school and Title I parent engagement programs, but to no avail. When they shared their complaints with the state and federal government, the district disbanded its Title I parent advisory council. This antagonistic behavior towards Black caregivers who advocate for their children in predominantly white school settings, is rooted in racial, gender, and class discrimination and stereotyping, where Black caregivers are viewed as “uncaring and uninvolved” and penalized for their nonconformity to white-centered forms of caregiver engagement (Allen & White-Smith, 2017, p. 426).

Dr. Wallace retired from PPS in 1992. By then, Dr. Jake Milliones had left the school board for Pittsburgh City Council and other transitions had occurred on the school board, leaving the future of district governance and leadership in jeopardy. The next superintendent was a traditionalist who dismantled many of Dr. Wallace’s programs and resegregated the district through the creation of neighborhood-based K-8 programs, stripping PPS of the progress it made on increasing Black student achievement. This national movement of school resegregation in the 1990s was chronicled by Orfield and Yun (1999) who pointed to several Supreme Court Cases (*Milliken v. Bradley*, *Milliken v. Bradley II*, *Dowell*, *Freeman v. Pitts*, *Jenkins*) that effectively allowed local school boards to revert to segregated school districts.

To address these issues, Dr. Sizemore and other Black PPS caregivers organized the Advocates for African American Students in PPS, a group of PPS parents (including the one I

interviewed), families, and community members committed to addressing the achievement gap for Black children in PPS. In a letter to the editor the Equity Advisory Panel (2020) wrote to the *New Pittsburgh Courier*, they shared how the Advocates' recommendations for improving outcomes for Black children were ignored for years, including their disapproval of the Dr. Wallace's successor, whom the Advocates believed was less qualified than a Black candidate who was also being considered.

Fed up with being disregarded, the Advocates filed a complaint with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) against the PPS Board of Education in 1992 citing disparate outcomes for African American students in areas including achievement, discipline, access to gifted and talented courses, and personnel concerns. After 14 years, many of which included multiple appeals by PPS and silence from the PHRC, in 2006, the district and the Advocates reached a Conciliation Agreement that outlined 94 areas on which PPS needed to make improvements on behalf of Black children (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021a). To monitor the progress of the MOU, the Advocates fought for the formation of an Equity Advisory Panel (EAP), which consists of members of the PHRC, the Advocates for African American Students, and district-appointed members (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2019).

Due to the lack of adequate progress made on the Conciliation Agreement by 2012, the district and the PHRC entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which called for two additional years of monitoring. Citing a continued lack of substantial progress, in 2015, the parties entered a five-year MOU (which expired August 31, 2020), which required PPS to develop an implementation plan within nine months of signing the agreement (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2019). The plan, *On Track to Equity: Integrating Equity Throughout PPS*, was released on November 9, 2019 (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.a). The October 2020 PHRC report on the

progress of the MOU stated that there is still a large disparity between the outcomes of Black and white children in PPS, which resulted in the establishment of a new five-year MOU in 2022 set to expire in 2027 (Cunningham, 2020).

The new MOU called for an “Independent Equity Audit of the District’s system of education for its African American students” within four months of executing the new agreement (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2022, p. 3). The audit concluded in September 2023. Key findings of the audit were organized around four areas: patterns of racial disproportionality, policies and practices that help/hinder Black students, the effort and impact of implementing district equity policies, and systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity proactively and preventatively (MGT of America Consulting LLC, 2023).

While the statistics around Black student achievement and discipline were unsurprising given that these disproportionalities have existed for decades in PPS (some of which will be discussed in further detail later), the audit elevated the need for PPS to acknowledge the role COVID-19 has played in exacerbating digital divide and income inequality for Students of Color. The audit also concluded that it was not the district-wide policies that contributed to racial disproportionalities, but instead individual school policies and inconsistent application of district policies across schools (MGT of America Consulting LLC, 2023). This stance seemed contradictory given that in subsequent areas of the audit, there were key recommendations about aspects of the district’s drug offense policy and the lack of a PPS restorative justice framework, indicating that the district’s lack of consistent policies and frameworks likely contributed to variation across schools and perpetuate racial inequalities.

Another key finding of the equity audit was that the district had not been tracking equity efforts since the beginning of the pandemic, namely those laid out in the district’s 2019 *On Track*

to Equity implementation plan. This finding was especially alarming given the district mandate to carry out the agreements in the MOU with the EAP (MGT of America Consulting LLC, 2023). In an article published about the equity audit, board members expressed concern about whether the district will be able to effectively execute the recommendations, and if they were willing to address the more challenging yet potentially transformational recommendations, questions frequently asked of PPS when any report or plan is published (Forstadt, 2023).

In the nearly 200 years of the district's existence, Black PPS caregivers and community members have been on the front lines and providing critical scholarship to PPS to improve Black student outcomes and advocating on behalf of their children. Unfortunately, these efforts have not resulted in significant change due to the district's inability, unwillingness, and lack of motivation to listen to Black voices, comply with legally mandated rulings to change their policies and practices, and implement action plans with fidelity. Therefore, I contend that there is a pervasive problem of practice that this dissertation explores: **Outside of Black-led political activism to change PPS board and district leadership, Black caregiver attempts to collaborate and engage with the district in service of high-quality education for their children have been widely disregarded.**

The most promising path to transformation for Black PPS students came in the form of political activism in the 1970s led by Dr. Sizemore, Dr. Jake Milliones, and other Black activists that resulted in securing a school board majority who hired a more effective superintendent. Unfortunately, shifts in district and board leadership in the early 1990s resulted in a return to the status quo for Black PPS students, which led to the Advocates' 1992 lawsuit. Thus, it stands to reason that the only way for Black PPS families to gain, maintain, and sustain transformational outcomes for their children is through election and maintenance of a consistent board majority of

highly effective school board members who are committed to hiring and supporting a strong, Black student-focused, and an accountable district superintendent. This is the work Black scholars, community members, and the Advocates began nearly fifty years ago, and is the foundation on which Black Women for a Better Education (BW4BE) stands. This dissertation chronicled how BW4BE has been an extension of Black political education activism in Pittsburgh by advocating for effective district leadership and leveraging the PPS school board to improve outcomes for Black children.

1.2 Organizational System

Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) was established in 1835. The second largest school district in Pennsylvania and the largest of the forty-three districts in Allegheny County, it serves about 19,000 students in grades K-12 across fifty-four schools. With approximately 4,000 employees, the district is one of the largest employers in the region (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.b). PPS has an operating budget of nearly \$700 million, which is larger than the entire City of Pittsburgh's budget, and spends on average over \$28,000 per pupil, putting them near the top of the state for spending (Mistry, 2023). The district is governed by a nine-member democratically elected school board who serve four-year terms. The district's vision is that "all students will graduate high school college, career and life-ready prepared to complete a two-or four-year college degree or workforce certification" (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.c, District Vision section). Their mission states that "Pittsburgh Public Schools will be one of America's premier school districts, student-focused, well-managed, and innovative" (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.c, District Mission section).

PPS has continued to experience a significant decline in enrollment, the most significant occurring in the 1980s with the departure of the steel industry from the region. In the past five years, the district has seen a 14% decline in enrollment, which can likely be attributed to factors including the city losing about 2,000 residents ages 5-19 and an increase in charter enrollment of about 1,000 students. Children of color are overrepresented in PPS based on the city's population; the district is approximately 70% students of color, while Pittsburgh is about 35%. Similarly, there are significantly more students in PPS experiencing poverty than in the city, 66% vs. 20%. Students of color in PPS are segregated in schools with higher concentrations of poverty; 65% of Black students vs. 33% of white students attend schools where the concentration of poverty is 70% or higher. In addition to many students of color being segregated in schools with high concentrations of poverty, some of those schools are funded at significantly lower rates than those with lower concentrations of poverty (A+ Schools Pittsburgh, 2022).

The district's teacher population of approximately 2,000 is not reflective of its student population; only 16% of teachers in PPS are of color, and there are three schools where the teaching force is 100% white. While most teachers in PPS have at least ten years of teaching experience and novice teachers are spread evenly across schools, there are two predominately Black, high-poverty schools where between 30-40% of the teachers have less than three years of teaching experience (A+ Schools Pittsburgh, 2022). According to Proctor (1979), racial discrimination towards Black teachers has been a prevalent occurrence in the district since its inception in multiple ways, including the non-hiring of Black teachers from 1881-1933, the relegation of Black teachers to predominantly Black schools, restriction of Black teachers in certain subject areas and grade levels, and lack of career opportunities for Black educators in guidance counseling and principalships.

Outcomes in Pittsburgh Public Schools have always been and continue to be highly predictable by race, a contributing factor behind the 1992 lawsuit filed by the Advocates. The data that will be mentioned below, which is mostly reflective of the past two to five school years, could be a snapshot of nearly any period in PPS, given that outcomes for Black and Brown children have remained mostly stagnant, as corroborated by the 2020 PHRC report (Cunningham, 2020).

Children of Color in the district continue to score significantly worse on standardized tests than their white peers (who also score poorly overall), which has only been exacerbated by the gaps in learning during the pandemic. According to the A+ Schools Report to the Community (2022), Black, Hispanic, and low-income students showed the largest pandemic-related decreases on standardized tests as demonstrated through a comparison of outcomes during 2018-19 school year versus the 2021-22 school year (there was no testing during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years due to the pandemic). Additionally, an examination of eighth grade PPS student testing outcomes during the 2022-23 school year (i.e., students who were in third grade in 2018) showed a 25% decline in English Language Arts and a 62% decline in Math of students who scored proficient or advanced (A+ Schools Pittsburgh, 2023). 21% of students in PPS have IEPs, and their outcomes are exacerbated at the intersections of race and economic disadvantage (A+ Schools Pittsburgh, 2022).

Students of Color have less access to gifted education and accelerated courses than white students. While more Black students overall are taking AP and accelerated courses, they are still underrepresented based on district population (cite). These increases, especially in schools where the student population is predominately Black, can be attributed to the University of Pittsburgh Justice Scholars Program (founded and directed by Dr. Esohe Osai), which offered seven new

college credit earning courses and a rigorous preparatory experience for high school students (A+ Schools, 2023; University of Pittsburgh, n.d.).

While chronic absenteeism—which is defined as missing more than 10% of enrolled days—decreased by 16% in PPS between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, Black children have the highest rates in the district. Factors such as inconsistent transportation, health issues and school safety are noted as barriers to attendance based on feedback from PPS caregivers. Additionally, school holidays, half day professional learning Fridays, and post-standardized testing are times during the school year when absenteeism is especially high (A+ Schools, 2023).

Black students are suspended and expelled disproportionately compared to white students. Of the 2,623 students who were suspended during the 2022-23 school year, 73% were Black and 89% were economically disadvantaged. There has been a significant post-pandemic increase in PPS in suspensions due to incidents involving violence and weapons (from 3,701 incidents in the 2018-19 school year to 4,409 incidents in the 2022-23 school year) which begs further examination of root causes and district policies and practices (A+ Schools, 2023). The PPS police force is the main referrer of Black girls to the Allegheny County juvenile justice system, and Black PPS students are more likely to be referred to law enforcement than in 95% of comparable U.S. cities (Goodkind, 2016).

According to their belief statements, the district views families as critical partners in the education process (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.d). Coupled with the PPS Parent and Family Engagement Policy, the district highlights partnerships with caregivers to ensure that students are achieving at high levels. However, there are Black caregivers who have shared experiences to the contrary. The policy, adopted on September 27, 1989 (and most recently revised on May 26, 2021), provides guidance for how the school district will engage with parents and families in service of

student achievement. It was created to “ensure compliance with federal statutory provisions that specifically recognize parent and family engagement as a research-based educational practice that yields effective results” (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2021, Authority and Organization of Policy section). While this Parent and Family Engagement Policy purports to recognize parents, Black caregivers highlight instances in which they have felt unsupported. Therefore, it stands to reason that the creation of a policy says nothing of its application and impact.

Implementing a caregiver engagement policy is particularly difficult when the accountable parties at central office do not regularly engage with caregivers outside of selective district-wide caregiver advisory committees, nor do they have the capacity to support and monitor implementation at the school level (where most caregiver engagement occurs) in a meaningful way. Policy success also requires local capacity and will. While the policy makes mention of professional development to build capacity for caregiver engagement, the opportunities appear sporadic and at the discretion of individual staff members. Additionally, the willingness to create a robust caregiver engagement plan in the face of competing priorities and beyond what is mandated by law is a serious consideration. Further, the motivation of educators to view caregivers as partners on behalf of students depends on their willingness to adjust their previously held schemas about caregivers and their role in the educational experience (Fowler, 2013).

For urban school districts where Black and Brown students in particular experience perennially low outcomes, local, national, and federal education entities could easily point to caregivers of color as culprits for low achievement, especially since they are often characterized as “disinterested” and “uninvolved” in their children’s education (Leaders and Rodela, 2016, p. 22). Additionally, centering caregivers as a barrier to student achievement absolves school systems of accountability and discounts their role in perpetuating oppression. Further, given the blatant

disregard for Black families by PPS over the past thirty years as evidenced by the 1992 lawsuit which has yet to be resolved, it is difficult to believe that a caregiver engagement policy would result in an authentic partnership between the district and families, nor does the policy make mention of any of the improvement areas in the MOU which are directly connected to caregiver engagement and student achievement.

In a 2022 WESA article that highlighted the thirtieth anniversary of the 1992 lawsuit and the fourth MOU between the PPS and the EAP, Mrs. Wanda Henderson, an original complainant and Chair of the EAP remarked on the exhaustion yet motivation to persist in what has become lifelong work. She went on to talk about how she and the other Advocates underestimated the amount of time they would be in this work because they “didn’t really understand how the system did not work” (Schneider, 2022, para. 6). It is as if the lawsuit, the EAP, and each iteration of the MOU have become nonperformative proxies for progress (in which the documents themselves mark progress instead of progress itself), biding time until the next expiration date and inspiring less and less hope that transformation for Black PPS students will ever occur (Ahmed, 2012).

In thinking about PPS as an organization in relation to my problem of practice, it was important to highlight several key issues. First, PPS (and every other education institution) was never designed for Black children to achieve at high levels. Therefore, in a system where minimal change has occurred since its inception, disparate outcomes for Black children remain the norm. Second, policies “supporting” caregiver engagement did not extend beyond compliance, which generally looked like checked boxes by people who are most disconnected from the ground level where relationships are built. Third, PPS has done more than disregard Black caregivers; they have suppressed them. The handling of the lawsuit is evidence of it, and the residual is felt in ways in which Black caregivers currently engage with the district. From Black caregivers to go from being

among the most knowledgeable and engaged families in the district in the 1980s to feeling inadequate and unsure of how they can contribute to their children's education presently has a direct connection to how PPS has systematically silenced Black voices in the district and the community.

1.3 My Role in the System

I am a Black woman, mother, PPS parent, taxpayer, and former employee of the district. I am also the co-founder of Black Women for a Better Education (BW4BE), which has played an adversarial role to PPS since its inception. My five years in PPS central office, first as a project manager and then director of the professional development department, provides an intimate insider perspective of the district. In my roles, I was required to present to the EAP multiple times, which allowed me to interact with members directly and develop personal relationships with several of them. Additionally, I was trained as a racial equity affiliate for PPS, which bolstered my knowledge of the 1992 lawsuit and the subsequent MOUs.

We learned from Dr. Carter G. Woodson that “those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history” (Woodson, as cited in Jarrett, 2014, para. 6). I reflect on the Black scholars, activists, and forebears of PPS, some of whom have passed away, and how these stories and teachings transitioned with them. Learning about their history and its divinely guided influence on BW4BE's current work is motivating yet heavy as we continue the fight. As much as I thought I knew about the decades long struggle between the Advocates and the district, I only recently learned through my doctoral research about their prior success in securing a school board majority who replaced

an inadequate superintendent with one that moved the needle for Black PPS students. This revelation came as a bittersweet surprise, as it provides precedent for and validation of BW4BE's power shifting efforts, along with the stark reality that nearly fifty years later, this type of Black community-led political activism that upsets district power structures is still necessary. It is a further demonstration that there is no inherent and intrinsic motivation by this system to educate Black students, and progress is only made on the front lines of the struggle where power is taken from the district and returned to rightful hands of Black PPS caregivers.

We started BW4BE as a group of Black mothers, educators, district partners, and concerned community members in May 2020 out of frustration with the district's subpar response to COVID-19 and the subsequent remote learning rollout, a reflection of the myriad organizational inadequacies and shortcomings in PPS. In June 2020, BW4BE sent a letter to the PPS board calling for the nonrenewal of the superintendent's contract based on concerns with organizational management, financial management, COVID-19 crisis management, instructional excellence & safe and healthy school environments, and professionalism (Black Women for a Better Education, 2020). Despite gathering over 60 signatures on the letter, promoting a teacher-led petition calling for the nonrenewal of the superintendent's contract that received over 2,000 signatures, and mobilizing dozens of people to testify at the PPS board public hearing, the board decided to renew the superintendent's contract for four more years with a 7-2 vote.

Despite the initial setback, BW4BE has raised public awareness about issues in PPS through an ongoing series of town hall meetings, white papers, and social media engagement. Our work has received several accolades, and we are regularly called on as subject matter experts by the media and those looking to increase their knowledge of the education system. Building on this momentum, BW4BE ran a slate of five candidates for school board in 2021, three of whom were

elected. Through the mobilization of Black women and white allies, BW4BE has kept the public pressure on PPS, which coupled with state findings of ethics violations by the superintendent, led to his resignation in October 2021. We ran another slate of three candidates in the May 2023, two of whom were elected. As of the PPS board reorganization in December 2023, we have a board majority of BW4BE-supported candidates. Additionally, we received significant grant funding from a local foundation in Fall 2023 to build our internal infrastructure through paid part-time staff and advisory committee, enhance our programming offerings, strategize on how to transform the district with our board majority, and capture the story of Advocates' decades-long fight on behalf of Black children in PPS.

Given the strong connection between the Advocates and BW4BE, I have been able to build personal and professional relationships with Advocates and EAP members who have in turn been vulnerable in sharing personal details about their experiences with the district, namely past and present personnel who have been complicit in suppressing the voices and agency of Black caregivers. This perspective has been critical in confirming that Black caregivers have been stymied at every turn in their quest for better outcomes for their children, the effects of which are felt on how current Black caregivers are engaged by the district. I am mindful of how this relationship (and the nature of my departure from PPS) may limit my perspective or even my ability to engage in conversations with key parties in the district that would enhance my understanding of this issue.

1.4 Concerned Parties

Multiple concerned parties are explicitly charged with implementing caregiver engagement strategies for the district. In outlining their roles, I name the reflexivity of my approach, in which I describe their roles in how they are written and/or likely understood by those who hold them, while analyzing them through my own identities as a former PPS employee, district caregiver, BW4BE co-founder, and taxpayer.

The district has invested significant human, financial, and structural capital into their caregiver engagement efforts. There are extensive written policies related to caregiver engagement, several caregiver-based groups the district has created, and efforts toward an equitable approach to engagement since the 1992 lawsuit via the creation of an Office of Equity and the formation of the EAP. However, given my own lived experience with PPS, and the information I gathered in empathy and semi-structured interviews with current and former Black PPS caregivers, I contend that many of these actions are non-performative. The parties with the most power seem to show the least interest in authentically engaging Black caregivers, who in turn organize in the community, and are met with resistance from PPS because they have not advocated in ways acceptable to the district. As a result, a power struggle remains between a district that is not interested in critical discourse, and Black caregivers who desire better outcomes for their children.

1.4.1 PPS Board

The PPS board is a democratically elected body composed of nine members who each represent a geographical district within the City of Pittsburgh and Mt. Oliver Borough. Each school

board member is elected to a four-year, nonpaid term by taxpaying residents, including the Equity Advisory Panel (EAP), Black caregivers, and members of the PPS staff who live in the city. Primary responsibilities of the school board include hiring and evaluating the Superintendent who is responsible for leading PPS, providing ongoing financial oversight of the district budget (which they must approve annually), and creating/approving/denying policies and legislation that impact students and families (such as the district's Parent and Family Engagement policy and the most recent MOU between the EAP and PPS). According to the "About" section of the board's district webpage, they are "committed to providing the best education possible for every student" (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.e).

As members of representative government, school board members speak on behalf of residents, and *should* be regularly engaging concerned parties, namely caregivers, to inform their decisions. In August 2020, the PPS board voted 7-2 to renew the contract of the previous superintendent, despite objections from BW4BE and numerous community members. The disregard the school board showed for our concerns catalyzed BW4BE's decision to form a PAC and run a slate of school board members to oust school board members who did not share our interests on behalf of Black PPS students.

1.4.2 PPS Superintendent

The PPS Superintendent is the leader of the district and manages the entire district staff including the Family, Youth, and Community Engagement team, the Title Programs Office, principals, teachers, and Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Coordinators. They are directly responsible for ensuring that every child in PPS is educated at high levels, including Black students who have been perennially underserved by the district. The superintendent has a regular

audience with the EAP to report on progress in addressing the improvement areas outlined in the MOU, which was created as result of the 1992 lawsuit filed by the Advocates for African American Students due to the district's inability to educate Black children at high levels. The Family, Youth, and Community Engagement team resides in the Superintendent's office and oversees the school-based FACE Coordinators and the Parent Advisory Council, "the district's central mechanism for ensuring that parents are well informed about Pittsburgh Public Schools related matters, and that they have the opportunity to help develop District-level programming and policy and share information with District staff" (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.d, Parent Advisory Council section). The Superintendent by nature of being the "face" of PPS regularly engages with concerned community members at varying degrees.

1.4.3 PPS Family, Youth, and Community Engagement team

The Family, Youth, and Community Engagement team reside in the Superintendent's Office and are responsible for implementing a number of initiatives related to engagement, including the PPS parent survey, community schools, FACE Coordinators, Parent Advisory Council, Parent & Family Engagement Policy, Parent Hotline, Parent School Community Council (PSCC), Public Hearing, Student Advisory Council (important as students are often not provided access to decision makers), and Take a Father to School Day. These initiatives occur at both the district and school levels. The team is also responsible for implementing the annual review of the district's Parent and Family Engagement policy, which allows caregivers to weigh in.

In speaking with one of the Advocates and original complainants in the 1992 lawsuit, she described her frustration with the district's caregiver engagement efforts.

“So it's really a power base. And that's why I don't believe in none of this parent involvement anymore. Because nobody wants to share power. You know too much. You are too powerful, but what they don't understand is that if you get parents that know a lot they can help you when your butt is under fire but nobody wants to give with that power base.”

1.4.4 PPS Title Programs Office

According to the district website, the PPS Title Programs Office is “responsible for overseeing compliance with the Every Student Succeeds Act or ESSA and the management of funds governed by ESSA, specifically Title I, Title II, Title IV and School Improvement Grants” (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.f, Title Programs Office section). This includes the district’s Parent and Family Engagement policy. It is the office’s job to ensure that the policy is in compliance with ESSA so the district may receive Title I and other state and federal funding.

1.4.5 PPS Executive Director of the Office of Equity

According to the district’s Office of Equity webpage, the Executive Director of the Office of Equity “maintains, monitors, and distributes racial disparity data reports to the PHRC and the EAP” (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.g). They are responsible for ensuring the district complies with the MOU with the EAP. Their office provides professional development for district staff, principals, and teachers, and “coordinates and supports the District’s equity initiatives” (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.g). The role reports directly to the Superintendent as a member of the Executive Cabinet and must be approved by the school board. Outside of the EAP, it is unclear if the ED

connects directly with other Black caregivers and students, though members of their office may do so.

1.4.6 PPS Principals

Principals are the leaders of their school buildings. They are responsible for the implementation of the Parent and Family Engagement Policy in their schools, supervising teachers and FACE Coordinators, hosting monthly PSCC meetings, engaging with caregivers formally and informally, and ensuring that students are in a safe, high-quality learning environment.

1.4.7 PPS Teachers

Teachers are the leaders of their classrooms. Though they likely hold the least amount of power in impacting the Parent and Family Engagement Policy, yet they are most responsible for its implementation (whether they should be is a different question) given that they have the most regular touch points with students and caregivers. They report directly to principals and sometimes serve as FACE Coordinators. In PPS, approximately 86% of teachers are white, while 53% of students are Black.

1.4.8 PPS Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Coordinators

FACE Coordinators are “school-based staff members in every school who collaborate with school staff, parents and family members, and community organizations to provide a network of support for students” (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.h, FACE Coordinators section). In essence,

they are the official liaison between schools and caregivers, i.e., the “face” of the district for families. As a school-based staff member, they report to the principal, but they also are supported/managed by the Family and Community Engagement team. In addition to being a FACE Coordinator, they serve as teachers or other school-based staff members, meaning that it is not a full-time position.

1.4.9 Equity Advisory Panel (EAP)

The EAP was created in 2006 as part of the Conciliation Agreement between PPS and the Advocates for African American Students resulting from the 1992 lawsuit the Advocates filed against the district based on their inability to educate Black children at high levels. The EAP is composed of original complainants (i.e., Black caregivers) and district-appointed members (also Black caregivers and community members), and their role is to monitor progress of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) through regular meetings with the Superintendent and school board. The October 2020 Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission report on the progress of the MOU stated that there is still a large disparity between the outcomes of Black and white children in PPS (Cunningham, 2020). In August 2022, the school board approved a fourth iteration of the MOU to address these disparities, the first of which required the district to hire a firm to conduct an equity audit, which was completed in September 2023.

The building of the caregiver engagement infrastructure by the Advocates in the 1980s was intentional. Through exposure to regional and national trainings, they were able to see what other states had and fought to bring it to Pittsburgh. In speaking with an original complainant on the 1992 lawsuit who now serves on the EAP, she shared her belief of how the increased technical knowledge of Black caregivers meant a loss of control for the district which they tried to remedy

at every turn by silencing their voices. As she put it, “knowledge is power, and once you have that power base, you become a threat and that's what happened.”

The Advocates leveraged their intellectual and social capital to hold the district accountable for the inequities Black PPS students faced by calling the state and federal government to file complaints, when as the EAP member described, the district wasn't “doing things right.” She believed the district viewed Black caregivers as a “problem” because they “knew more than the teachers and principals.”

1.4.10 Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC)

Started in 1955, PHRC's mission is to “promote equal opportunity for all and enforce Pennsylvania's civil rights laws that protect people from unlawful discrimination” (Pittsburgh Human Relations Commission, n.d., PHRC Mission & Vision section). The Advocates for African American Students filed their 1992 lawsuit against PPS with the PHRC, and their role is to “monitor and measure the District's progress in achieving equity in achievement, discipline, special education and special program access” via the MOUs between the district and the EAP (Pittsburgh Public Schools, n.d.e). At the end of the MOU's term, the PHRC releases a report about the district's progress in meeting the goals in the MOU, the most recent of which was released in October 2020 and indicated that the district had not made adequate progress (Cunningham, 2020).

The PHRC's ability to hold PPS accountable for anything on behalf of Black students is questionable. The district moved forward with an insufficient desegregation plan in the 1970s which still has an impact on Black students today (Doell, 1994; Wertheimer, 2015). Reports about the district's lack of progress for Black children after each MOU without any recourse feel nonperformative at best. According to the PHRC's 2021-22 annual report, other cases resulted in

monetary compensation for the complainants and/or training for the respondents (Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, 2023). If PPS is unable to make any significant transformation by the end of the current MOU, perhaps it is time for a more substantive response from the PHRC.

1.4.11 Black PPS Caregivers

Black caregivers make up the majority of caregivers in PPS. While there is no shortage of district-sponsored caregiver engagement opportunities (e.g., PSCC, PTO, Parent Hotline, Public Hearing), there are logistical (e.g., timing of events, lack of childcare, limited transportation) and capital (e.g., intellectual, social) constraints to participation. Additionally, the lack of authenticity and/or being blatantly ignored or disregarded when issues arise limit participation in engagement opportunities. This is underscored by the lack of impact that the lawsuit filed over 30 years ago on behalf of Black students has had on improving outcomes.

Despite the language offered on PPS's website, Black caregivers are not always readily welcomed into schools as partners in their children's educational experience. Even when they are, they are not sure where they fit. As one Black mother shared during an empathy interview, "I didn't know what I could bring to the table. I didn't know what they needed from me...As Black parents we feel inadequate at times." Oftentimes caregivers believe they must "bring something to the table" or have certain skill set (e.g., fundraising) to make an impact in caregiver engagement groups, when in fact, as she put it, "we just need your presence."

1.4.12 Black PPS Students

Black students are overrepresented in PPS given the population of Pittsburgh (53% Black children in PPS; 25% Black population in Pittsburgh). Many disparate educational outcomes for Black students in PPS are predictable by race and are among some of the worst outcomes in the state. This is compounded by Pittsburgh being one of the worst cities in America for Black people/caregivers across multiple indicators (Goodkind et al., 2019). Black PPS students have never had a fighting chance given that PPS was not designed for Black children, nor was schooling in general. Despite these statistics, some Black students in PPS continue to “beat the odds” which should be the norm and not the exception.

1.4.13 Mayor’s Office/City Officials

The Mayor and the City of Pittsburgh have a vested interest in ensuring that PPS is a strong district because schools are what attract young families to a city. They may not be able to “make” the school board or the district do anything, but they can serve as strategic collaborators and critical friends where necessary. In a conversation between BW4BE and a coalition of non-school board Black elected officials in 2020 where we asked for their support in ousting the previous superintendent, we were told that they did not want to overstep the district’s authority, and that they did not know enough about the operations of PPS to get involved (though several of them were “knowledgeable enough” to enroll their children in magnet schools and/or schools outside of the district). However, in 2021, several City Councilmen did introduce legislation in 2021 declaring a “state of educational emergency in Pittsburgh,” primarily due to the amount of time PPS students spent in remote learning compared to other local districts who had returned to school

months prior. The declaration was met with sharp resistance by the school board, and nothing came from it (Davidson, 2021, para. 1). As taxpayers/voters, we have a responsibility (and the authority when leveraged properly) to hold all our elected officials accountable for working on behalf of Black students and families at every level of government.

With the plethora of concerned parties who oversee, are tasked with, and/or have the power to influence caregiver engagement in PPS (and the amount of human and financial capital expended in this area), it is confounding that the district has still not figured out a way to engage Black caregivers in meaningful ways. It leads to me to believe the disconnect stems from a lack of understanding of or unwillingness to engage Black caregivers in ways that matter and make sense to them; staff beliefs about caregivers' ability to serve as integral partners with the district and their children's schools; and the overall disregard for Black caregiver voices in the process as a means for the district to maintain power and control. School districts perpetuate the racist American belief of Black children as ineducable, and the constant antiblack violence enacted on Black students and caregivers is standard practice.

1.5 Review of Supporting Knowledge

In reviewing the literature, my goal was to understand the landscape of Black and Latinx-led community-based advocacy for education reform and the associated successes and challenges. Both the Advocates for African American Students in PPS and BW4BE are community-based education reform efforts; I was curious how our strategies, tactics, and pitfalls compared to similar groups around the country, the way Black and Latinx caregivers and how they were able to navigate power sharing and shifting with their local districts.

Questions I sought to answer included: 1) How does family educational involvement of Black and Latinx caregivers differ from traditional white, middle-class models and expectations of family/school engagement? 2) What role does capacity building play in enhancing Black and Brown families' community-based education reform efforts? 3) How does the Black mothering tradition influence the way Black women show up as community organizers for school reform?

I reviewed multiple source types, including reports, case studies, ethnographic studies, and portraitures. Search terms included “community organizing for education,” “Black activist mothering,” and “Black parent advocacy in education,” with suggestions for additional readings provided by my advisor. I also chose to use the term “caregiver” instead of “parent” to be inclusive of all adults responsible for a child’s upbringing. Much of the research I found around education organizing focused on Black and Latinx families, which prompted to narrow my area focus from “people of color” to “Black and Brown” to “Black and Latinx” families. Additionally, I took a special interest in researching Black and Latinx-led reform efforts across the country (e.g., Chicago, Los Angeles, New York), as well as stories of Black and Latinx mothers who began their advocacy efforts on behalf of their own children and often expanded to support other children, reflective of the othermothering tradition.

My review was organized into three sections. In the first section, I highlighted the characteristics of Black and Latinx caregiver engagement, and how it differs from that of white, middle-class families through its strong reliance on community collaboration and engagement in forms of transformational resistance. The second section explored the cultivation of intellectual, social, and political capital that result from capacity building for education reform, and how it builds trust and confidence among Black and Latinx caregivers to sustain family engagement efforts. Finally, I delved into the evolution of the Black mothering tradition from Africa to

enslavement to current educational movements, the way in which this form of advocacy challenged stereotypes of Black caregiver engagement, and how it serves as a model to districts.

How does family educational involvement of Black and Latinx caregivers differ from traditional white, middle-class models and expectations of family/school engagement?

Bartz et al. (2017) argued that low achievement and high suspension rates can be reversed for African American students when districts operate effective parental involvement programs. However, the ways in which Black and Latinx caregivers can and want to engage with schools differed from the traditional methods that districts tend to offer. Traditional family engagement methods tended to be top-down, relying heavily on “school-sanctioned” and “lower level” models and strategies such as parent/teacher organizations (PTOs), family nights, volunteering, and helping with homework (Barton et al., 2004, p. 4; Freelon, 2018, p.4). These types of engagement methods maintained the power imbalance between schools and families, as they did not position caregivers as decision makers or partners in their children’s education.

Barton et al. (2004) sought to understand caregiver engagement in high-poverty urban districts using the Ecologies of Parental Engagement (EPE) framework which highlighted the intersection of space (school and home/community) and capital (resources that can be activated for a desired purpose). Through case studies of a Black mother and a Latina mother, they uncovered three conjectures: caregiver engagement was the navigation of space and capital in relation to others in schools, engagement was both action and orientation to action, and engagement across spaces occurred at both the micro and macro level. Their research called attention to an important distinction between caregiver involvement and caregiver engagement, the former dictated by top-down, school-based structures, and the latter authored by parents’ navigation of space and capital.

Barriers to traditional methods of family engagement included logistical constraints (e.g., timing, transportation, childcare) and caregivers' past experiences with schools, both with their children and as former students. Engagement of Black and Latinx caregivers was often approached from a deficit perspective, built on the belief that they were "disinterested" and "uninvolved" in their children's education, lacked the skills to support their children's education, and did not value education overall (Barton, 2004; Gold et al., 2002; Ishimaru, 2014; Leaders and Rodela, 2016, p. 22). White families also possessed social capital that allowed them to navigate schools in ways that Black and Latinx families could not given the cultural congruence between white families and the education system (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011).

Feeling undervalued, unheard, and misunderstood by traditional family engagement methods, Black and Latinx families turned to community-based reform efforts to advocate for better outcomes for their children (Gold et al., 2002; Mediratta, 2007; Ishimaru, 2014; Welton & Freelon, 2018). Some of these strategies began organically with caregivers coming together over a shared issue and creating larger movements, while others were cultivated and supported by community-based organizations (CBOs) (Ishimaru, 2014; Zachary & Olatoye, 2001). The goal of this type of organizing was "the intentional building of power among parents, young people, and community residents, in low-income communities of color, to transform the accountability relationships between schools and the constituencies they serve," characterized by a history of organizing in other arenas (e.g., housing, employment), non-affiliation with the local school district (though collaboration may occur), and the intentionality of relationship, skill, and leadership development of participants in service of transformation (Mediratta, 2007, p. 197).

In their study of five educational organizing groups across the county, Gold et al. (2002) developed an Education Organizing Indicators Framework that highlighted eight characteristics of

community-based education reform that contributed to improved schools and student outcomes: Leadership Development, Community Power, Social Capital, Public Accountability, Equity, School/ Community Connection, School Climate, and High-Quality Instruction and Curriculum. They contended that “community organizing is essential to initiate, develop, and sustain long-term, dynamic school reform” (p. 5).

Issues such as school closings or perennially poor performance often catalyzed organizing efforts. Freelon’s (2018) case study of four Black parents in Chicago’s “Greenwood” neighborhood who emerged as leaders in the face of impending school closings demonstrated how these caregivers became education change agents in their local communities despite their children’s schools ultimately closing. Zachary & Olatoye (2001) chronicled the work of the Parent Action Committee (PAC), a group of South Bronx parent organizers. Through capacity building, mobilizing, and relationship building, PAC forced the resignation of the principal of a low-performing school, and continued their work to improve achievement for their children.

Organizers for education reform often engaged in a form of transformational resistance, one of the four oppositional behaviors described by Soloranzo and Bernal (2001). Characterized by high critique of social oppression and high motivation for social justice (imagine it in the top right quadrant of a Cartesian graph), transformational resistance considered the systemic nature of problems when offering critique, which was important for successful social change. Soloranzo & Bernal (2001) examined transformational resistance using critical race theory and LatCrit frameworks as demonstrated through the 1968 East LA school walkouts and the 1993 student strike for Chicano and Chicana studies. Students demonstrated transformational resistance by critiquing the school’s inequitable educational offerings and walking out as way to change it (a movement toward social justice). Transformational resistance could be demonstrated internally or

externally. A recounting of various methods of participation in the 1993 UCLA student strike explored the factors that influenced the ability and willingness of Latinx students to engage in outward protest, i.e., where LatCrit extended CRT to include language, culture, and immigration status.

While this framework was typically applied to student behavior, Freelon (2018) used it to better understand the behavior of caregivers working to create systemic change for their children. Through the observation of district hearings, community-led meetings, and demonstrations led by the teachers' union, interviews with four focal parents, and analysis of documents over the course of nine months, Freelon (2018) showed a pattern of transformational resistance among the Chicago Greenwood caregivers, an important demonstration of leadership and furtherance of the counternarrative that Black caregivers are indeed involved in their children's education. Black caregivers who engaged in transformational resistance had the potential to impact both their schools and the community at large. They often possessed historical and social context that districts did not (or chose to ignore). It also pushed against traditional forms of parent engagement by schools and had the potential to be truly transformational if districts were willing to be more open-minded about their ways of knowing and engaging families.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) who allowed Black and Latinx caregivers to lead while providing support, resources, and information were crucial to the reform process. The New Settlement Apartments (NSA), a CBO and housing development organization, worked alongside the South Bronx-based Parent Action Committee (PAC) to ignite a community-based education reform effort. Zachary & Olatoye (2001) pointed to three "Rs" that made the relationship successful: roots (in a neighborhood with a commitment to sustainability), relationships (with caregivers and communities who are the catalyst for reform), and resources (in the form of staff

and administrative infrastructure). The NSA also stood with the PAC at a crucial time when they could have partnered with the district on a funding opportunity, demonstrating their commitment to caregiver-led efforts.

The Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality, an amalgamation of Latinx community groups throughout Oregon formed in 1999 in response to a “crisis about Latino students’ experiences in the schools,” was intentional about partnering with the local school district at its inception, though the relationship between the district and the community returned to an adversarial state because the district ultimately refused to acquiesce power. Promising characteristics of the collaboration included caregivers being viewed as educational leaders and experts, shared responsibility for systemic change, adaptive solutions for capacity and relationship building, and political framing of reform efforts. Through relationship and capacity building that validated their lived experiences, parents were able to build power that the district was unable to ignore which pushed collaboration. Legitimacy and credibility of the group increased through involvement in local and national coalitions which provided support and funding to sustain the work (Ishimaru, 2014, p. 196).

Though not often validated by school systems, Black and Latinx caregivers’ organizing was a form of leadership and transformational resistance, through which existed the unique ability to mobilize key stakeholders in ways that traditional caregiver engagement by districts had fallen short. Specific strategies such as relationship building, public discourse, direct action, and self-sacrifice proved to be successful in influencing district decision making (Welton & Freelon, 2018). Barton et al. (2014) pointed to how caregivers were willing to risk “being misunderstood or even rejected, in order to create a space within the school in which [they] can engage in the type of reciprocal negotiations that formal school spaces do not facilitate” (p.8). This type of organizing

upset the traditional power dynamic between community and district and centered the community as the leaders of reform efforts based on their needs and lived experiences instead of the district.

One important output of Black and Latinx-led education reform movements was the building of intellectual, social, and political capital among the participants. The ability to understand the system, use that knowledge to navigate it, and shift power to caregivers and community were critical elements of transformation.

What role does capacity building play in enhancing Black and Latinx families' community-based education reform efforts?

White, middle-class families were more likely to possess the cultural capital to navigate school systems in ways that conformed with school standards and involvement expectations. They were perceived to value education more than Black and Latinx caregivers and had fewer barriers to participation in school-sponsored activities. They knew the “language of school” and were comfortable engaging teachers as equals (Lopez et al., 2005). White, middle-class families were more likely to—and were often rewarded for—using collective action to increase access to resources for their children (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011). For Black and Latinx families, capital building often happened at the community level, often through the support of community-based organizations and to the chagrin of school districts who were looking for caregivers to conform to traditional engagement models, not to disrupt them.

Black and Latinx families engaged in community-based education reform benefitted from increased knowledge and skills to navigate the school system, referred to in the literature using terms such as “intellectual capital” (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; p.4), “capacity building” (Lopez et al., 2005, p. 80; Marsh et al., 2015, p. 78), “leadership development” (Gold et al., 2002; p. 13), and “emergent social justice educational leadership” (Leaders & Rodela, 2016; p. 22). Bolivar &

Chrispeels (2011) defined intellectual capital as “the knowledge and capabilities of a collective with potential for collaborative joint action” (p. 5). In their study, participants in the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund’s (MALDEF) Parent School Partnership (PSP) program, comprised of twelve 2-hour weekly sessions which covered topics such as parents’ rights and responsibilities, the structure and function of the district, college readiness, and leadership development, demonstrated an increase in intellectual capacity across two dimensions: the “combination and exchange of individuals’ knowledge leading to innovation and the generation of new community knowledge that is greater than that possessed by any one individual in the community” (p. 30).

A case study of four national family engagement-focused organizations by Lopez et al. (2005) identified three areas in which capacity building for caregivers occurred: individual (increased knowledge and confidence), relational (improved school/family relations), and organizational (sustained family involvement). A review of a parent-engaged education reform effort in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) through the lens of democratic theory, a matrix on which the horizontal axis measures the who (participatory vs. representative) and the vertical axis measures the what and how (interest-based vs. deliberative) by Marsh et al. (2015) found a positive correlation between “quality capacity building” and more deliberative participation by caregivers (p. 78). Leadership Development, one of the eight characteristics of the Education Organizing Indicators Framework developed by Gold et al. (2002), was defined as the development of knowledge and skills in service of school improvement, which empowered caregivers and community leaders to “heighten their civic participation and sharpen their skills” in public roles (p. 13). Leaders & Rodela (2016) highlighted the emergence of social justice

leadership among Latina mothers as they moved towards action and advocacy through an understanding of systemic injustices in and around school.

Simply defined, social capital is the resources (i.e., power and information) a group could leverage, by nature of its existing social relationships, to obtain additional resources (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011). In their framework, Gold et al. (2005) defined Social Capital as “networks of mutual obligation and trust,” and referred to it alternatively as relational capital (p.13). In school settings, caregivers of color often lacked access to contexts to build relationships with people who possessed institutional resources and power, which in turn kept their social capital low. Several capacity building programs (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Lopez et al., 2005) in this review followed a model in which caregivers’ individual capacity building was coupled with opportunities to interact with each other, the program facilitator, and public officials, resulting in increased social capital.

Through participation in the MALDEF PSP program, caregivers demonstrated increased social capital across three dimensions: trust (increased trust of the instructors, MALDEF, and each other), norms and sanctions (norms for interaction with public officials, active participation in the system, and collective participation as a team), and information channels (access to information to influence decision making currently and to inform postsecondary plans) (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011). Lopez et al. (2005) pointed to relational capacity, the reciprocal relationship building between caregivers and schools, as a method for increased social capital cultivated through formal and informal networks.

Power (i.e., the ability to influence decision makers) was also an important aspect of school reform. Gold et al. (2002) argued that social capital is the building block of political capital and pointed to Community Power (strategic and collective action by community members to gain

resources and change policy) and Public Accountability (the public process for identifying problems and holding officials responsible for solutions) as other tenets of community organizing for education reform. The Texas Industrial Areas Foundation's (IAF) Alliance School initiative, designed to promote school reform in 120 public schools in districts across the state, built political capacity through school membership to a local affiliate of the network, capacity building, funding, and connection to other campaigns. The Fort Worth affiliate of the IAF, the Black-led Allied Communities of Tarrant (ACT) was credited as the foundation of the model. Their success in mobilizing families and improving outcomes for students encouraged other affiliates to undertake school reform efforts. Unlike other reform efforts which remain on the outside of districts, IAF was able to form internal partnerships to impact teaching practice, the success of which was rewarded with credibility from decision-making bodies and government funding allocated to reform efforts.

Caregiver-led education reform efforts could be difficult to sustain due to competing priorities, lack of funding for staff and programming, and fatigue experienced by Black and Latinx families from fighting with school systems despite the confidence and capital they gain from these efforts. Promising practices for sustainability included the support of intermediary organizations who possessed the resources and capacity to support caregiver-led efforts (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Lopez et al., 2005; Marsh et al., 2015; Warren, 2011; Zachary & Olatoye, 2001), connections to local and national movements to provide credibility, and funding to grassroots movements (Ishimaru, 2014; Warren, 2011).

Participation in community-based education reform efforts for Black and Latinx caregivers provided opportunities to learn and grow in spaces that are affirming, free of judgement, and culturally relevant. Latina mothers in the Valmos al kinder (Let's go to kindergarten) program

experienced an increase in *confianza* (trust) of the staff, fellow participants, and most importantly in themselves due to the safe space that was created for them to find their voices (Leaders & Rodela, 2016). Lopez et al. (2005) found that participation in educational reform efforts led by intermediary organizations increased individual confidence and efficacy among caregivers. Bolivar & Chrispeels (2011) highlighted the connection between intellectual and social capital and confidence, as increased knowledge about the system led to more active engagement and willingness to elevate issues and concerns. Black and Latinx-led community-based education reform efforts embodied the inherent, cultural desire for these groups to be in community, doing work that not only lifts their individual families, but the community as a whole. This communal orientation, rooted in care and focused on advocacy, was rooted in the mothering tradition, which will be highlighted in the next section.

How does the Black mothering tradition influence the way Black women show up as community organizers for school reform?

Black motherhood is a multifaceted, women-led, interdependent act. The concept of community mothering or “othermothering” is rooted in West African communal practices but became a necessity during slavery when Black mothers were sold away from their children (Edwards, 2000, p. 88). This practice evolved to include political, education, and community activism as Black women carried out their work from a place of motherhood, which shows up in the form of “church mothers” and “community mothers” (Edwards, 2000, p. 88-89). For Black women, activism was tied to motherhood, often having to balance the nurturing nature of childrearing with preparing and protecting their children from an oppressive culture. The motherhood approach was both informal (e.g., looking out for the neighborhood children) and strategic (e.g., “going up for the oppressed” through education and career choice in ways that

promote empowerment and social change). Black motherhood stood in contrast to the Eurocentric concept of motherhood, which was male-dependent, apolitical, and home-based. It grew out of necessity for Black women, as they were often forced into advocacy and activism through their own experiences with racism and oppression, and the desire to mitigate those experiences for their children (Edwards, 2000, p. 89).

In her study of 14 Black mothers in Los Angeles, Cooper (2007) described their school choices and educational advocacy as “motherwork”, which was characterized by a desire to ensure their children’s survival, improving their children’s life outcomes by seeking power, and fostering a positive racial identity in their children (p. 493). Black mothers viewed education as a means of survival and upward mobility for their children. The “positioned school choices” they make on where their children attend school reflected their best attempts (within their power) to achieve that (Cooper, 2007, p. 508). Traditional engagement methods and/or the lack of social, intellectual, and financial capital held by Black mothers (in contrast to white ones) do not always reflect those values.

Kakli (2011) stated that “institutional or political forms of racism and oppression coupled with everyday experiences of discrimination often compel Black women to work for justice in and for their communities. Indeed, Black women often possessed a heightened political consciousness because of the daily challenges and oppression their communities faced” (p. 178). This translated to their children and compelled them to advocate for better school conditions. Hale (1980, as cited in Edwards 2000) spoke about the sophisticated mediation between “an oppressive dominant culture and a nurturing Black value-structure” (p.87). The individual activism of the mother and activist highlighted in Kakli’s (2011) portraiture was situated in race-based activism and was catalyzed by her experience as a mother. Cooper (2007) built on this idea, characterizing Black

mothers' desire for the success of themselves and their children as a "maternal responsibility" given the constant devaluing of Black people by American society (p. 494).

Edwards (2000) contended that the femininity of Black womanhood was stripped away by slavery, given that Black women were expected to perform the same roles as Black men and treated differently than white women. Therefore, care, a trait associated with motherhood, was not ascribed to Black women. On the contrary, Black mothers demonstrated the ultimate care for their children through their advocacy and activism on their behalf. The desire for their children to survive and thrive in an oppressive world was a form of resistance rooted in care.

Sakho's (2017) work introduced the "Black Activist Mothering", an intersectional framework informed by Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory that described how Black women as mothers showed up in community work as resisters and transformers, building on Townsend Gilkes' work on "going up for the oppressed" (pp. 3, 7). This framework and its associated practices (gumbo ya ya, veil walking, and holding space) could be effective in the fight for urban school reform. Wilson (2015) uplifted a counternarrative to the disposability of Black people in a narrative study of eight Black woman educational activists in Detroit by examining their work through the lens of critical care, a practice in which Black women advocated on behalf of others from a place of deep empathy connected to our inherent mothering and communal socialization. Despite differences in ideology on school choice, all the women were committed to the uplift of Detroit children and worked tirelessly from the vantage points to achieve it.

This body of literature stood in direct contradiction to the notion that Black mothers were uninvolved or disengaged in their children's education. In fact, Black mothers had been at the center of nearly every struggle for liberation (Edwards, 2000). Black mothers continued to provide a model for how schools can engage them on behalf of their children. The Black mother and activist

in Kakli's (2011) portraiture demonstrated the length that mothers were willing to go (i.e., getting a job in the district) to ensure that their children (the ones they birth and those in the community) received a high-quality education. Their perceived defensiveness in advocating for their children was a form of caring and protection. Cooper's (2007) work drove home the point that districts must be willing to unpack their preconceived notions about Black mothers and how they should "show up" on behalf of their children, stating, "data indicate that low-income and working-class African-American mothers become frustrated and at times angered—not because they are irrational or enjoy confrontation but because they perceive educators as disrespecting and devaluing their families" (p. 508).

Most importantly, the legacy of Black motherhood as activism provided insight for districts how districts and officials could engage with Black families around education and resisted the politics of disposal that characterized neoliberal education reform (Wilson, 2015). Sakho (2017) reminded us that Black mothers were the ones "intentionally living in the margins" and therefore have a handle on systemic issues and the impact on their children (p.8). This provided an opportunity for schools to not only learn from Black mothers, but to follow their lead in centering the success of Black children.

While much of the research pointed to the role increased intellectual, social, and political capital played in propelling Black and Latinx caregiver-led education reform movements, these efforts ultimately resulted in small wins that did not transform the school districts in which they were embedded. Black and Latinx caregivers made the most headway in places where there was a shift in power, namely, a willingness for school systems to view caregivers as equal partners in educating children (e.g., Texas IAF). This brought credibility to their movements and government funding to support reform efforts (Warren, 2011). Community-based organizations also brought a

level of legitimacy to Black and Latinx-caregiver efforts that districts were not able to ignore. They were willing to wield their social capital on behalf of caregivers to propel their efforts in ways that each entity likely could not have done alone. The underlying issue, however, was that districts are the holders of power and could revert to old ways of caregiver engagement (e.g., the souring of the partnership between the district and the Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality, the South Bronx PAC being excluded from selecting a replacement principal), and ultimately made decisions that did not reflect the wishes of caregivers, like closing schools (Freelon, 2018; Ishimaru 2014; Zachary & Olatoye, 2001). Therefore, this work must extend beyond appealing to the system and hoping for collaboration or a positive outcome, but instead positioning Black and Latinx caregivers as key decision makers in the system.

1.6 Statement of the Problem of Practice

Pittsburgh Public Schools has a penchant for writing plans. From *Empowering Effective Teachers* to *Imagine PPS* to *On Track to Equity*, these colorful plans filled with the faces of joyful Black and Brown children are supposed to represent a new way of working for the district. It is what Ahmed (2012) describes as the “paper exercise” where the writing of the plans supersedes the action that should be derived from them (p. 87). Black Women for a Better Education (2021b) takes a step further where they contend that this heavy reliance on written plans is symptomatic of a pattern in PPS where “the safest parts of district plans are layered onto the status quo, benefiting those in power, while the parts that truly challenge the status quo are never implemented” (p. 4).

The district has been intentional in suppressing the voices of Black caregivers, advocates, and employees who have dared to raise concerns about the status of Black children in the district.

The political activism of Black community members in the 1970s led to a promising period of transformation for Black students in the 1980s but was not sustained after board and district leadership changes. Black caregivers who increased their technical knowledge of the educational system in the 1970s and 80s through participation in local and national programming were perceived as a threat to the district for knowing more than the teachers and principals. According to an original complainant on the lawsuit, the district's Title I parent advisory group was disbanded because the Black caregivers contacted the state and federal government when PPS "wasn't doing things right." The district was selective on who they chose for caregiver engagement opportunities based on who they could control. This silencing and ostracization extends to the community as evidenced through the way in which the Advocates waited fourteen years for the Human Relations Commission to support them with reaching a Conciliation Agreement with the district after filing their 1992 lawsuit. There has been minimal progress for Black children since then with no true recourse.

As previously stated, we are faced with a persistent problem of practice: **Outside of Black-led political activism to change PPS board and district leadership, Black caregiver attempts to collaborate and engage with the district in service of high-quality education for their children have been widely disregarded.** PPS disregards the advocacy efforts of Black families because they can, and because the community has not been able to sustain political activism that has led to quality school board members and superintendents. The lawsuit has not been enough. Elevating issues with the superintendent in ways that ultimately led to his resignation have not been enough. Therefore, the work of Black Women for a Better Education must expand beyond capital building to power shifting. It must become a training ground for future school board members and other elected officials. The PAC must support elections at every level to build a

throughline for education justice at every level of government. Black women must build and lead a coalition that will transform educational outcomes for our children. It is inevitable work given our predisposition toward advocacy, as evidenced through the way we mother our children, the ones we birth, and the ones we support.

2.0 Implementation Plan

In deciding how to approach my Dissertation in Practice, I originally planned to conduct a traditional PDSA cycle focused on change ideas to improve the BW4BE Learning Institute, our 8-session series for people interested in running for PPS board and/or becoming education thought leaders. I wanted to focus on increasing the number of Black PPS caregivers who participated in the Learning Institute. There are several reasons why I abandoned this plan. First, the grain size of individual caregiver advocacy efforts is too small as an area of study for my interests in organizing systems level change. While they are important and result in “wins” for students and families (especially the individuals who participated in the Learning Institute who went on to run for PPS board), I am more interested in the systems change that is needed to transform outcomes of Black children in PPS, or otherwise, we will continue to see the chasm between families with the wherewithal to navigate the district and those who cannot widen. The case for systems change and collective power shifting is also made in the literature where Gold et al. (2002) point to Community Power and Public Accountability as important elements of community-based education reform.

Second, increased intellectual and social capital of individual caregivers in PPS (and beyond) has not resulted in systems change, but in ostracization and retaliation, especially those affiliated with a Black woman scholar (i.e., Dr. Sizemore) who had been met with sharp resistance for wanting to study Black student achievement in the district. Per the account of an original complainant who is now on the Equity Advisory Panel (EAP), the increased knowledge and ability to navigate the system the Advocates gained through participation in local, state, and federal Title I programs resulted in the district shutting down their local parent advisory committee because they were leveraging their learning to hold the district accountable by reporting them to the

government. They were also told that the fact they knew more than district administrators and principals about education policy was problematic. Additionally, the Advocates' case was ignored for over a decade until it caught the attention of a PA Human Relations Commission member in Harrisburg because many lawyers in the region were reluctant to go up against PPS on behalf of poor Black students and families.

Third, the real potential for impact in PPS lies in the *ability to shift power from the district back to Black caregivers* as demonstrated through Dr. Sizemore and others' success with removing ineffective board and district leadership. Nothing else since then has had the same type of impact on outcomes for Black children. Both the Advocates and BW4BE tried traditional methods of engagement (i.e., contacting school board members, testifying at public hearings, participating in traditional caregiver engagement activities) to no avail. While our work still includes educating and mobilizing the public, the focus has been securing a PPS board majority. Having a group of people who share our interests and directly influence district policy, the budget, and oversight of the superintendent can change the trajectory of PPS for years to come.

BW4BE's advocacy for the nonrenewal of the previous superintendent's contract and our success in securing a PPS board majority was in essence a series of a change ideas and PDSA cycles. The story of these efforts and the implications for how they can transform outcomes for Black children was best told through a case study. This allowed us to not only document our work, but to share our learnings as an inspiration for other Black caregivers and concerned community members who want to shift power in their respective school districts on behalf of Black children. Our work is undergirded by the sisterhood we have built upon as Black women committed to education justice, as well of a set of conditions that catalyzed transformation (i.e., the previous

superintendent's shortcomings, a global pandemic, and an intimate knowledge of/connection to PPS), which makes our situation both unique and universal.

2.1 Inquiry Questions

Through artifact analysis, interviews, and sister circles, I answered several questions in my case study: 1) What were the contributing factors to BW4BE's success in shifting power from PPS by flipping the school board? 2) How does the Black mothering tradition influence the way Black women show up as community organizers for school reform?

With a newfound knowledge of the success Black scholars and advocates had in the 1970s with securing and leveraging a school board majority to hire a transformational superintendent, it became even more clear that BW4BE's work builds on their legacy. Black caregiver voices are only heard by PPS via political activism that upsets the power structure through community-led removal of district and board leadership who do not serve the interests of Black children and families. To answer the first question, I explored the turning point at which BW4BE realized that appealing to the hearts and minds of the school board members at that time was futile. In calling for the non-renewal of the previous superintendent's contract, we followed the proper channels of contacting our school board members, requesting meetings, and testifying at public hearings to no avail. Therefore, our only recourse was to seek out candidates who shared our goals and concerns to represent our interests on PPS board. It was also important to explore the unique set of conditions that surrounded our inception, including the ongoing concerns about the previous superintendent's effectiveness and leadership capabilities, the formation of BW4BE during the pandemic, the

growing frustrations of caregivers whose children were being educated virtually with little to no support from the district, and the support of white allies in financing and elevating our work.

It has been easy for our critics to cherry-pick BW4BE members and characterize our efforts as “the misdirected self-interests of a few” (Johnson, 2020b). As Black women who are unprotected in society and in this city, a communal and collective approach to this work was critical (Goodkind, et al., 2019). To answer the second question, I analyzed the organic way in which BW4BE formed and the reasons why we came together. Wilson’s (2015) lens of critical care is reflective of BW4BE’s shared leadership model. It was important to explore the protective factors inherent in our communal structure, as several of our founding members faced criticism and professional retaliation for their participation from other education organizers, “public school advocates,” and supporters of the previous superintendent.

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Why the Case Study

Stake (2005), as cited in Mertens (2015), contends that a case study is more about an object of study than a specific methodology, making it an effective approach to making meaning of complex phenomena. Case studies allow readers to bring their existing knowledge of similar cases, without losing sight of the unique elements of that case. This case study chronicled the unique and special circumstances in which BW4BE was formed, the connections to other Black-led community-based educational reform efforts in PPS, and the success in securing a PPS board

majority, while providing readers with ideas on how to shift power in school districts through school board elections.

2.2.2 Site and Participant Selection

Study participants were a combination of founding BW4BE members and candidates from our 2021 and 2023 PPS board slates. All participants had a strong understanding of BW4BE's work and were aligned with our mission, vision, and values. Interviews were conducted with the eight candidates who BW4BE supported across our two PPS board member slates, five of whom have won their elections. Sister circle participants were comprised of our founding members, i.e., Black women who have participated in BW4BE since its inception and who still inform and/or implement our day-to-day work. Each participant was asked for verbal consent prior to the conversations.

2.2.3 Data Collection

I utilized three data collection approaches to craft my case study: artifact analysis, interviews, and sister circles. There were a number of artifacts produced by or about BW4BE that I analyzed during this process, including the initial letter we sent to the PPS board in June 2020 calling for the nonrenewal of the superintendent's contract; the series of publications we wrote prior to the May 2021 primary election about the current state of PPS and our aspirations for the future; local media coverage of BW4BE; recordings of our town hall meetings, *On the Agenda* sessions, and Learning Institutes; and BW4BE social media posts. I believe these artifacts clarified how BW4BE came on the scene, the approach to our work, how and why we centered Black

children in the work, the issues we elevated, our shared leadership model as Black women, and how we addressed criticism for calling out the superintendent.

I conducted 60-minute interviews with each of the slate members. These interviews were conducted via Zoom for ease of recording and transcribing. Interviewees were asked why they chose to run for school board, why they sought the endorsement of BW4BE, and how they have (or would if they did not win their election) leveraged the power of a board majority to transform outcomes for Black children in PPS.

Sister circles have origins in the Black church and women's club movement (Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). They are structured in a way that decolonizes research by bringing the researcher and participants into community, unlike a traditional focus group where the researcher serves as a neutral facilitator. Additionally, out of respect for the methodology, sister circles should only be used by Black women with groups of Black women (Nathan et al., 2023). Neal-Barnett et al. (2010) contended that sister circles are “feasible interventions for African American professional women” as they reduce anxiety and foster supportive environments where they can speak freely and confidentially (p. 217). Given that BW4BE has a shared leadership model that allows us to “operate as a united front, in alignment with the sisterhood that runs deep with Black women,” sister circles were a culturally relevant method for this study (Black Women for a Better Education, n.d, Our Leadership section). I conducted one sister circle with a group of six founding BW4BE members (including myself) that was recorded for future transcription and analysis. I solicited the support of a peer facilitator for the sister circle so that I could fully participate. The goal of the sister circle was to recount the history and relevant context that led to the inception of BW4BE, discuss the successes and challenges of our programming, reflect on our power shifting work of obtaining a board majority, and look ahead to the future of BW4BE.

Table 1 BW4BE Case Study Data Collection Methods

Method	Sources/Resources	Connection to Inquiry Questions
Artifact Analysis	Board letter about the previous superintendent BW4BE publications Local media coverage on BW4BE Town Hall meeting recordings On the Agenda recordings Learning Institute recordings BW4BE social media posts	Origin story (Q1) Approach to work (Q1) Centering Black PPS students (Q2) Issue selection (Q1) Shared leadership model as Black women (Q2) Response to criticism (Q2)
Interviews	Candidates who were endorsed by BW4BE in the 2021 and 2023 election cycles (n=8)	Reason for running (Q1) Reason for seeking BW4BE endorsement (Q1, Q2) How they will leverage power to transform outcomes for Black PPS students (Q1)
Sister Circle	Founding members of BW4BE (including myself) with the support of a Black woman peer facilitator (n=6)	History and relevant context for BW4BE (Q1, Q2) Successes and challenges (Q1, Q2) Power shifting work (Q1) Looking ahead to the future (Q1, Q2) Black motherhood and sisterhood (Q2)

Note: Inquiry questions included, 1) What were the contributing factors to BW4BE’s success in shifting power from PPS by flipping the school board? 2) How does the Black mothering tradition influence the way Black women show up as community organizers for school reform?

2.2.4 Research Relationships with Participants

As a founding member of BW4BE and the person most closely tied to its operation, I would have been remiss in not providing my perspective as part of the sister circles. To allow my personal participation while maintaining strong ethics and validity, I utilized a Black woman facilitator who was familiar with our work for the sister circle. Given the close personal and professional relationships I have with all the study participants, my goal was to gather their perspectives in a way that answered my inquiry questions, while also fostering a safe, authentic environment that reflected the respect and camaraderie I have for and with each of them.

2.2.5 Data Analysis

My data analysis was situated in endarkened feminist epistemology, an approach developed by Dillard (2000)

“to articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African-American women” (p. 662).

Traditional approaches to research, in which the researcher is disconnected from the knowledge they are seeking to maintain objectivity, is not only a fallacy given that “all research is social construction and a cultural endeavor,” but contradictory to Black woman ways of knowing and being (Dillard, 2000, p. 662). Therefore, the utilization of an endarkened feminist epistemology, in which research is viewed as a responsibility, “answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry” was a useful approach for Black women researchers to show up as our most authentic selves (Dillard, 2000, p. 664).

Dillard (2000) went on to explain that narrative research, which is commonly used in Black, indigenous, and other marginalized communities (but often excluded from qualitative research more broadly), “illustrate[s] the relationships of power, the contexts of opportunity (or lack thereof) and...highlight the epistemological roots and their consequent local meanings...in the lives of Black women researchers more generally” (p. 664). Typical data analysis methods instruct us to break down dialogue into meaning units, codes, and themes in ways that separate the research from the interviewee, and the interviewee from their words. While I still highlighted overarching learnings about BW4BE through the analysis of the artifacts, interviews, and the sister

circle, I used narrative to humanize myself as the researcher (and a participant in the sister circle) and the people whose perspectives I shared in service of my responsibility to this work as a Black woman.

Dillard (2000) explored the utilization of life notes as a form of narrative research that “[embodies] the meaning and reflections that consciously attend to a whole life as it is embedded in sociocultural contexts and communities of affinity” (p. 664). She continued, representing data in this way

“[gestures] towards the confluence of the aesthetic, female, cultural sensibilities which are often stifled in traditional modes of representation and discourses mostly because they require (but rarely receive) translation from one context to the other which denaturalizes, reduces, and diminishes their richness and meaning. Further, the attempt within these narratives is to illustrate the relationships of power, the contexts of opportunity (or lack thereof) and to highlight the epistemological roots and their consequent local meanings in my life and the lives of Black women researchers more generally” (p. 664).

In upholding an endarkened feminist epistemology approach which highlights Black woman ways of knowing and centers narratives, I shared the story of BW4BE in five parts as a foundation for data analysis: Part 1: An Introduction of the BW4BE Founding Members, Part 2: The Call for a New PPS Superintendent, Part 3: From Awareness to Activism: Running a School Board Slate, Part 4: The BW4BE-Endorsed PPS board Candidates, Part 5: Capacity Building and Awareness Raising Efforts. In Part 1, I chronicled the early days of BW4BE and introduced six founding members (including myself) through life notes drawn from the sister circle. In Part 2, I provided contextual commentary about artifacts related to our efforts around the nonrenewal of the previous superintendent’s contract. In Part 3, I utilized a series of artifacts to describe the shift

in our work to political activism via the formation of our PAC and the decision to run two BW4BE-endorsed PPS board slates. In Part 4, I introduced the eight school board candidates through life notes drawn from the semi-structured interviews. In Part 5, I highlighted artifacts focused on BW4BE's capacity building and awareness raising work.

2.2.6 Reliability & Validity

Lincoln and Guba (1986) identified four measures of data quality and trustworthiness in research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Multiple levels of data review occurred throughout the process. As an initial level, participant answers were repeated to check for accuracy during the interviews and sister circles. Secondly, all conversations were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy. Thirdly, the stories of the research participants (who were assigned pseudonyms descriptive of how they show up in the work) were written as narratives that preface (and are interspersed within) the overarching set of headlines about BW4BE's power shifting work.

Through an artifact analysis and a series of interviews and sister circles, my case study sought to explain why BW4BE's power shifting efforts to gain a majority on the PPS board was a necessary step in improving outcomes for Black children in the district. This approach was further validated by the Black scholars and activists of the 1970s who utilized a similar approach to oust apathetic school board members and an ineffective superintendent, ushering in an era of promising transformation for Black PPS students. Subsequent community-based education reform efforts by the Advocates for African American Students and the current work of the Equity Advisory Panel in monitoring their MOU with the district has not been sufficient in moving the needle for Black children because the district's power has not been challenged as it was previously. In a return to

the political activism of previous decades, instead of appealing to the hearts and minds of stubborn school board members, BW4BE solicited candidates who share our interests and unapologetic commitment to Black children, provided capacity building, and provided human and financial capital to their campaigns. With a newly secured board majority, new possibilities for Black children in PPS are emerging.

3.0 The Story of BW4BE

As a Black woman, mother, and researcher connected to PPS as an alumna, former employee, parent, and co-founder of BW4BE, my lived experience with PPS and the trajectory of my life are inextricably linked to the district. While traditional research contexts might view this entanglement as biased, I, along with Dillard argued that it was a “legitimate and powerful...specialized body of knowledge” (p. 664.). Therefore, I presented this story of BW4BE as a five-part narrative of our founding, our activism to shift power in PPS through the disruption of district and board leadership, our community agitation, awareness raising, and capacity building efforts; and most importantly, the interconnected journeys of six founding members and eight BW4BE-endorsed PPS board candidates through my version of life notes.

Table 2 BW4BE Founding Members and PPS Board Slate Members

Name	Role	Appeared In
Arts Educator	2021 BW4BE PPS Board Slate Member	Part 3, Part 4
Career Educator	2023 BW4BE PPS Board Slate Member	Part 3, Part 4
Community Advocate	2023 BW4BE PPS Board Slate Member	Part 3, Part 4
Converted Teacher	2021 BW4BE PPS Board Slate Member	Part 3, Part 4
Creative Problem Solver	2021 BW4BE PPS Board Slate Member	Part 3, Part 4
Education Nerd	BW4BE Founding Member 2021 BW4BE PPS Board Slate Member	Part 1, Part 3, Part 4
Hereditary Activist	BW4BE Founding Member	Part 1
Lifelong Liberator	2021 BW4BE PPS Board Slate Member	Part 3, Part 4
Master Wayfinder	BW4BE Founding Member	Part 1
Parent Advocate	BW4BE Founding Member	Part 1
Risk Taker	BW4BE Founding Member	Part 1
Servant Leader	2021 BW4BE PPS Board Slate Member	Part 3, Part 4
Systems Disruptor	BW4BE Founding Member	Part 1

3.1 Part 1: An Introduction to the BW4BE Founding Members

Table 3 Part 1 Key BW4BE Events

Date	Event	Associated Artifacts
March 2020	Onset of COVID-19 pandemic	N/A
May 3, 2020	First official BW4BE meeting	BW4BE meeting notes
May 7, 2020	PBEOC forum with previous superintendent	Facebook Live forum recording
May 14, 2020	First-person essay by Black mother about lack of IEP supports during pandemic	PublicSource article
Late May 2020	BW4BE holding regular meetings	N/A

BW4BE began as organic conversations between a group of Black women in the Pittsburgh region. It was March 2020, and we had no idea at the time what was going to happen with the global pandemic. We thought we would quarantine for two weeks and return to business as usual. As birth, bonus, and community mothers of PPS students (and women who just gave a damn), we were watching the district closely and texting each other regularly about how unorganized their response to COVID seemed compared to other districts. Neighboring districts reminded their students to take their electronic devices home on Friday, March 13, 2020 (right before the world shut down), and classes resumed digitally as early as the following Monday. These students did not miss a beat with their education. Meanwhile, PPS was scrambling to develop a plan. At the time, only students at two schools, CAPA and SciTech, had individual access to devices. After a technology needs assessment survey that dragged on for weeks, the district decided that students and their families could go to their schools to pick up badly copied “learning packets” and send photos of completed work to their teachers.

By this time, the world had been shut down for almost two months. Even though it was clear that students would not be returning to school that year, there was still a responsibility by the district to educate students. On May 3, 2020, we invited a group of women to a Zoom call where

we discussed our concerns about PPS and how we could support families with summer learning. Somewhere around that time, we began referring to ourselves as Black Women for a Better Education (one of the founding members came up with the name). I do not quite remember the inspiration for the name, but it was a straightforward way of describing who we were and what we wanted for our children. In reviewing notes from the conversation, we organized our thoughts into a series of themes which would lay the groundwork for our letter and subsequent advocacy: educational content, COVID response/communication, summer, teachers union, school board/politics, state's role, and homeschooling. Early on we discussed bold ideas such as mobilizing families to testify at school board meetings, starting a PAC and turning the school board, and promoting a mass exodus of Black children from PPS into homeschooling co-ops. As next steps, we planned to focus on strategy and messaging. Our plans included investigating state levers for holding the district accountable, writing a letter on behalf of Black children and families to call out the ineptitude of the PPS, challenging the inaccurate white, liberal narratives of the district, organizing based on facts instead of ideology, and elevating the needs of Black children and what they deserved from PPS (see Appendix A).

In the meantime, local organizations were holding virtual forums where they invited the previous superintendent to share his plans for how the district would educate students during the pandemic. We infiltrated these events by mobilizing dozens of Black women to send the same questions to the moderators in hopes that they would be asked. Our strategy worked, and unsurprisingly the answers were scripted (it was clear that the answers were being read), they lacked depth, and left us further frustrated with the district. For example, for the May 7, 2020 forum hosted by the PBEOC, one question we asked everyone to send to the moderator was: Some families have lost confidence in PPS and are considering sending their students elsewhere. What

would you say to them to convince them that PPS is still the best choice for their students? When answering the question, the previous superintendent said there was a “multitude of factors” that everyone was dealing with and shared that “not everyone is mad and dissatisfied with Pittsburgh Public Schools,” but for those who were dissatisfied, the district was working on becoming a premier district for them (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2020, 0:7:14). Calling caregivers “mad” for being frustrated with PPS’s COVID response felt antagonistic, and a perpetuation of what Allen and White-Smith (2017) characterized as “deficit discourses” about Black caregivers (p.12).

Another catalyzing event was a first-person essay published by a Black PPS mother on May 14, 2020 about how her daughter was not receiving remote learning materials from the district in compliance with her IEP (Thompson, 2020). We mobilized the group to share the essay with the Pittsburgh Black Elected Official Coalition (PBEOC) via a scripted email and implored them to elevate our concerns to PPS (see Appendix B). Further interactions with PBEOC will be discussed in Part 2.

By late May 2020, BW4BE was well underway; there were a group of us who were meeting and communicating regularly, and we were quietly laying the groundwork for our movement. I asked six of these women to participate in a sister circle to reflect on this journey. We settled on one three-hour sister circle instead of two 90-minute sessions to accommodate our busy schedules. While the sister circle was supposed to occur in person, sickness in my family forced it to a virtual setting at the last minute. It was almost fitting that it worked out this way because BW4BE has been a mostly virtual movement since it started during the pandemic. The sister circle was facilitated by a Black woman supporter of BW4BE, which allowed me to actively participate as a founding member.

During the three-hour sister circle, the facilitator asked a series of ten questions about our backgrounds, the inspiration of our education advocacy, our connections to PPS, the secret sauce of BW4BE, how we navigated challenges, our focus on Black children, and the importance of sisterhood in this work (See Appendix C). Each participant also shared an artifact that symbolized Black motherhood or sisterhood. I assigned each founding member and our facilitator a pseudonym that characterized their approach to the work based on my assessment of what they shared, and what I know about them as my friends and sisters. A short biographical sketch of each of us is included below.

Table 4 BW4BE Founding Members

Name	Attended PPS	Worked at/with PPS	Children Attend(ed) PPS	Artifact	Artifact Significance
Dream Fulfilled (facilitator)	No	No	N/A	<i>Killing the Black Body</i> by Dorothy Roberts Picture of grandmother	Her entry point to the Black reproductive justice space Inspired by her stories and dreams for children and grandchildren to pursue education
Education Nerd	Yes	Yes	Yes	License plate from her “swagger wagon” (their family vehicle)	Representative of the strong bond formed with her children as they traveled to activities and made special memories around the city
Hereditary Activist	Yes	Yes	Yes	Award BW4BE won from a local organization	Validation of BW4BE’s work by the community despite the naysayers
Master Wayfinder	No	Yes	No	Fred Hampton poster Craft created by her oldest child	Revolutionary nature of Black womanhood and motherhood Limitless imagination as a family legacy
Parent Advocate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Oldest child’s baby book	Difficulty yet success navigating the medical system with a premature child foreshadowed navigating PPS
Risk Taker	No	Yes	No	Picture of grandparents on wedding day in 1925	Motivation from tenacity of grandparents to persist during Jim Crow
Systems Disruptor	No	Yes	Yes	Valentine’s Day card from her child	Breakthrough in child’s ability to read and write as motivation to persist in equity work

3.1.1 Dream Fulfilled (facilitator)

Dream Fulfilled, a Black woman South American immigrant, is a longtime supporter of BW4BE. She signed our June 1, 2020 letter to the PPS board calling for the non-renewal of the previous superintendent’s contract and supported the campaigns of our 2021 slate members.

For her artifact, Dream Fulfilled shared a copy of *Killing the Black Body* by Dorothy Roberts. She called it “one of her entry points to reproductive justice...[that] really speaks to the systemic and historical harm and abuse of Black women and their bodies in America, and just how much of it has become how we view Black women, and how white supremacy has really tried its best to control the narrative and the power.” Dream Keeper also shared a picture of her grandmother, who as a single mother who was only educated through the third grade “was one of the baddest to ever do it” and “didn’t take no shit from nobody.” She felt empowered sitting at the feet of her grandmother listening to stories and the dreams she had for her children and grandchildren to be educated (Dream Fulfilled holds a doctorate degree from a local university). Dream Fulfilled credited her grandmother for instilling in her a “[magnetic] attraction to strong Black women spaces” such as BW4BE.

3.1.2 Education Nerd

Education Nerd, a married parent of two college-aged PPS graduates, works for a local family foundation with a focus on K-12 education, STEM, and civics. She recounted her children’s experiences at PPS as a “decade of bumping up against this very persistent and problematic system,” and the “eye-opening” experience [through her job] of “seeing other school districts and the kinds of things that they are able to do for students.”

Education Nerd and her siblings serve as caregivers for their elderly parents who taught them some “valuable lessons about education,” were “particular about grades,” and regular participants in school events. Due to redlining, Education Nerd’s family was limited to where they could buy a home but considers her family the winner of the “public school lottery” given that the neighborhood had an “excellent [PPS] elementary school led by an amazing educator.” This “phenomenal experience [was] the very foundation of everything that [her] educational life was built on,” and informs her understanding of “what great school can do for kids.”

Education Nerd credits her passion for education to a classmate who was regularly sent out of class due to discipline issues, and her constant concern about the instruction her classmate was missing as a result. She was the child on the playground at recess trying to teach her classmates what they missed. Despite going to a “great elementary school,” she realized that some students were “just getting a raw deal in education.” This sentiment was compounded by Education Nerd’s acceptance into the district’s gifted program in third grade (which much to her chagrin is run in the same way it was in the 70s as it is today), and the fact that she and her first cousin were the only two students in their grade identified as gifted. Realizing the anomalies of the commonalities Education Nerd and her cousin had (attending Head Start, a two-parent household with two working parents, and parents regularly engaged in school), she became “keenly aware of those life circumstances that take educational opportunities away from kids.”

For her artifact, Education Nerd shared the license plate from her “swagger wagon,” the minivan in which she transported her young children to practices and activities (her husband traveled frequently for work, so it was just her and her kids most of the time). She recounted memories of taking her children to the park in that van, eating dinner, and reading Toni Morrison’s *The Big Box*, a book “about kids who adults said couldn’t handle their freedom.” The swagger

wagon became a “second home,” where Education Nerd and “her little pumpkins...became a people.”

3.1.3 Hereditary Activist

Hereditary Activist is a Pittsburgh native, wife, and mother of six (two by birth and four bonus children). She spends “everyday contemplating what her [youngest children’s] educational future is gonna look like.” She has a bonus child who is a senior in PPS, and her other bonus children have been in school districts around the region, including several PPS traditional and charter schools.

Her lineage includes paternal grandparents who lived in one of the last confederate capitals of America where the “KKK still march around the library like every Monday.” They were entrepreneurs who owned a small grocery store. Her paternal grandmother spent eight days in jail protesting segregation in the 1960s. Her paternal grandfather was also arrested for participating in sit-ins at lunch counters. Hereditary Activist’s father and his older siblings integrated their local high school. She was moved to tears recounting the “point of pride” of her father integrating his school and his “lived trauma” of experiencing it. She shared, “just think about what that could do to you as a child having to be on the forefront of a civil rights movement, but as an individual who then carries the legacy of their family.”

Hereditary Activist’s maternal grandparents moved to Pittsburgh from the south in the 1950s. They had seven children; two girls on the tail ends and five boys in between, and her mother is the youngest child. Her grandmother’s philosophy was that her boys could find jobs in trades or go to the military, but her daughters had to go to school. Her aunt became a nurse, and her mother became a teacher who taught in PPS for nearly forty years. Hereditary Activist’s mother had

numerous racist experiences in PPS (she refers to her alma mater as “Crackerbox High”), and she shared stories about running into some of her racist teachers when she returned to the district as a teacher, describing “the looks on their faces when they saw this Black child they didn’t think was gonna amount to anything” now as their colleague.

Despite her mother’s experience in PPS, she still believed in public schools and sent Hereditary Activist and her siblings to district schools. She attended a small PPS elementary school with “some of the most beautiful, wonderful teachers that you could have ever had, including [her] mom who taught [her] for two years.” From there she went to international studies-focused middle and high schools and completed the IB program. As she recalled, “I had a really strong experience at Pittsburgh Public Schools and had some of the best educators and administrators.” Hereditary Activist uses her own experience as a reminder “what the district is capable of...and [wants] to hold them to that standard for everyone. If the district was all bad or mediocre, fine, but they’re not. They know how to do it well in certain settings for certain kids so there’s really no excuse why everybody can’t get that level of education.”

Hereditary Activist’s first post-college job was at a local nonprofit where she was focused on increasing Black male student participation in the programs. She struggled to understand why the students were not “taking advantage of free programming.” Her first level of insight came from participating in a local leadership development program with district staff and administrators (and was also where she met Parent Advocate), where she learned about all the layers and bureaucracy in the district. Three years later, Hereditary Activist joined the staff of PPS. While she was not naive about students in the district receiving inequitable education (she referred to her alma mater as a “caste system” between the IB program on the third floor and mainstream programs in the

basement of the building), “going to central office really smacked [her] in the face in terms of the gross inequities and just how criminal it was.”

Hereditary Activist arrived at the district “in the throes of the Gates Foundation work,” an \$80 million investment from Gates and the federal government focused on teacher evaluation. A highlight of the work for her was “empowering educators to celebrate the profession and to lead their own professional development.” After two and a half years as a project manager focused on teacher evaluation and empowerment work, both her immediate supervisor and chief left the district, and she was promoted to a director role. Hereditary Activist realized her immediate supervisor had “really protected [her] from the foolishness that was PPS.” While she was aware of the dysfunction, “being in these meetings and seeing the way that people collect tax money at the expense of our kids as they march them to early graves and jail was disgusting.” Hereditary Activist was told to “bring it down” if she wanted to be at decision-making tables (what she referred to as “coon coaching”), which confused her coming from other Black women who appeared to have power to actually change things but chose not to assert their authority to do so. As she explained, “it was very clear that people were very comfortable [and] didn't really want to upset the apple cart. You know, people were happy to...collect a paycheck every two weeks and not do anything that was ever going to change the trajectory for kids.”

About four years into Hereditary Activist’s tenure at PPS, a new superintendent was hired. From the beginning, she had her suspicions, but then “the scandal broke about his qualifications and all the things that followed that, and [she realized] it was a serious problem.” Hereditary Activist found herself being pulled from projects directly related to her role and ostracized by senior leadership. She knew she needed to leave the district but “dragged [her] feet until one day she was called into [her boss’s] office and told [her] position was being closed.” In other words,

Hereditary Activist was fired. She described feeling a range of emotions, including “a lot of anger...some shame...some questioning of [herself],” especially since she often faced questions about her qualifications since she had not been a classroom teacher before coming to central office. Being fired revealed some personal insecurities Hereditary Activist had; she thought she “knew a lot and could be supportive and do things differently [in PPS], but just wasn’t accepted in that space.” Not wanting to be viewed as a “disgruntled employee that had a bone to pick [with PPS],” Hereditary Activist did not speak up about her experiences at first (though that assumption came up anyway when she co-founded BW4BE, so she remarked that she “should have just said the shit right when [she] left”), but it was healing for her to “take a step back, go to school, start a consulting business, and get married.” As she reflected, “I think it happened at the time and in the way it should have happened.”

For her artifact, Hereditary Activist shared the award BW4BE won from a local organization for their advocacy work. When she accepted the award on behalf of the group, she was “3,000 months pregnant and they put that pregnant picture on their advertisements for like the next three years.” She reflected on the “validation and recognition of what [BW4BE] was trying to accomplish with our work” in the face of “so many people who pushed back, criticisms, misconceptions, and just straight up just vitriol about what we were trying to do. But to be recognized and then to be able to get up there and just speak boldly about how we were going to transform this region through education in our advocacy work [was] a special moment.” Since she has had the award in her home for a few years, Hereditary Activist wants to “treat it like the Stanley Cup...and pass it on so [the other founding members] can display it proudly as well.”

3.1.4 Master Wayfinder

A married mother of four young children, Master Wayfinder was born in the rural south, where her aunt was the local president of the NAACP and “was always marching and picketing.” She moved back and forth between a few southern states as a child, and her mother worked in multiple school districts as a speech pathologist. Master Wayfinder’s mother “was always concerned about where [she and her siblings] went to school,” and they often attended schools outside of their neighborhood. When she was in fifth grade, her family moved to a new state where they did not know anyone except her uncle. Her mother really wanted her to attend a certain school, so she knocked on a random stranger’s door and asked her to use her address for a small fee each month. The woman agreed. Master Wayfinder commended her mother for “[swallowing] her pride for her kids to get the education that they deserved...and [humbling] herself” to a stranger who could have reported them. In the middle of high school, Master Wayfinder transitioned back to another southern state, where she participated in the IB program. She commented on how she “had really great education, always had really good teachers, [and] always had people who [she] felt cared about [her] trajectory. This is why she finds it “so surprising when there are teachers that don't care about kids.”

Master Wayfinder came to Pittsburgh to attend a local university. She followed in her mother’s footsteps and studied communications sciences (a pathway to speech pathology), even though she really wanted to study history and political science. Her mother discouraged her because she didn’t believe she could get a job in that field. Master Wayfinder had a “crisis of conscience” and decided not to pursue speech pathology because it was not what she wanted to do, and “because of [her] family’s fight, she realized that “there’s always another way.” Master Wayfinder “believes it is our collective responsibility to unlock the potential, the minds of all of

our kids. And the way we do that is by educating them.” She talked about the “unlimited possibilities when [Black children] are taught, when [they] can read, and when [they] can add. We come up with things like the super soaker, and the streetlight.”

After Master Wayfinder graduated, she realized there was “so much more that needed to be done” based on the stark differences between Pittsburgh natives and transplants. She wondered why Black Pittsburgh felt “so separate from the university” and if they were considered “third-class citizens” by the City. Master Wayfinder participated in a leadership development fellowship, worked as a youth organizer for a small local borough, and did some work with the County focused on youth support. The program was supposed to provide transition support for youth “transitioning out of care and into work...because the system fucked them up so bad,” but the program did not provide the structure the transitioning youth needed to be successful. And once the youth aged out, they were sent into the workforce with no tangible skills. As Master Wayfinder put it, they “were promoting these bad practices and all these white folks.”

Master Wayfinder’s experience left her “really angry about systems.” She started volunteering with the previous mayor’s campaign, she left her job and did a small stint at a local company in communications, and then “got a call from the mayor’s office to...be in operations, but [she] ended up in the youth space.” Her time in the mayor’s office taught her that “all of these bureaucratic systems just take way too much time to do real simple shit,” and simple solutions included organizing systems, streamlining processes, and eliminating paperwork. Master Wayfinder also saw firsthand how PPS board members interacted with the mayor. At one point, a small group of school board members asked the mayor for his support in keeping another board member out of the presidency, only for that group to turn around and vote for the other board member anyway. She also saw a different school board president stand by the mayor in

collaboration, but “cuss him out all the time in private,” because of the understanding that “for the sake of this city and the economic progress of the city, the city and schools had to be together.” Master Wayfinder was taken aback by a belief shared by some of her colleagues in the mayor’s office that getting on school board was “the end of your career” or the mayor shouldn’t “worry about what the schools are doing.” To her, that was “terrible advice” because it highlighted that people were more afraid of how speaking out against the PPS board would impact their local connections and affiliations than actually helping kids.

For her artifacts, Master Wayfinder shared a picture of Fred Hampton, who she “thinks about every day [because] the power of women, being a mom, being a Black woman and a Black mother; it’s all revolutionary.” She also shared a craft created by her oldest child. Her children do “a lot of crafts in [her] house all the time,” and it makes her “grateful for the creativity of [her] children and their own imaginations,” and the “lack of mental limitations.” Master Wayfinder connected these traits back to her mother, who also “has a crazy imagination. No one can ever say no to her.” She strives to not “let white supremacy change [her] mental models...[because] there’s always another way. There’s always something different out there.”

3.1.5 Parent Advocate

Parent Advocate was born and raised in Pittsburgh. She grew up in a “close-knit family” and draws inspiration from her mother who was pulled out of high school to care for her nephew with polio. Getting a good education was “instilled in [her] from a very young age and with that conviction [she] feels like Black families, Black parents, and Black children deserve an equal shot.”

A married mother of two grown children who graduated from PPS, Parent Advocate spent the first part of her professional life in the accounting field before trying her hand at entrepreneurship and opening a hair salon. Interacting with Black women in her salon, and with two children in PPS elementary schools at the time, “just being in that environment and listening to women talk about how difficult it was to navigate a public school system...took [her] on a journey of advocacy.” For the past eighteen years, Parent Advocate has served as a parent involvement and education consultant for the state government and spent fifteen years on one of the district’s advisory committees focused on racial equity. She is currently working for a STEAM program as part of a local university’s community engagement efforts and starting a business with her two adult children. Parent Advocate views her advocacy work as a God-ordained calling, where she brings “practical, grassroots compassion for children from [her] lane.”

For her artifact, Parent Advocate shared her oldest child’s baby book. Her baby spent seventy days in the NICU after being born at twenty-seven weeks gestation. She showed us a lock of hair cut from her baby’s head to prepare for a blood transfusion. Parent Advocate considers “motherhood [her] highest calling and [her] entry point into education.” She compared her experiences navigating the NICU and PPS; systems full of technical jargon that was hard to understand, staff that did not look like her or her children, and “a journey of marginalization.” Now in her early sixties, Parent Advocate reflects on how isolated she felt as a new mother in the medical and educational spaces, “which is what “keeps [her] in the struggle.”

3.1.6 Risk Taker

A Midwest native, Risk Taker has been in Pittsburgh for thirteen years after living in multiple cities throughout the United States and Europe. A former nonprofit leader, she was

recruited to Pittsburgh to run an organization “sight unseen, not knowing what the hell [she] was walking into...[which] was both a success and nightmare.” During her tenure, Risk Taker founded a charter school focused on dropout recovery but is often uncredited due to an issue with a “salty board member.” Risk Taker also has a background in qualitative research and has authored numerous books and publications on Black culture. Her ongoing motivation for this work is from a research lens; she reflected on how different the trajectories are for Black and white children born in our local hospitals, and how “the opportunities that are going to be provided for one that are not going to be provided for the other [have] nothing to do with their intellect...It is all about systemic oppression.” After finishing her doctorate, Risk Taker launched a consulting firm focused on DEI and organizational culture, where she currently works.

Moving to Pittsburgh was a culture shock for Risk Taker. She described being “confused” about the “division [and] dislike” between the city and the schools, which was not the case in her native city. During the two years that she worked to get her charter school approved by PPS, she “[learned] everything there was to learn about bureaucracy and scarily about how school board members actually felt about the children we were trying to help.” Even though her school was targeting students who had dropped out of PPS, they viewed her as competition, made “incredibly off putting and dismissive remarks about our kids,” and she often found herself crying in the car after the meetings because of the “absolute bullshit [she] saw.” Additionally, Risk Taker faced backlash in the professional space when she relocated to Pittsburgh. As she described, “from the day I walked into Pittsburgh I was being pulled to the side by Black people telling me I need to lower my voice. I need to straighten my hair. I need to understand that I had to pipe down in order to be successful here.”

Risk Taker's interest in public education is inspired by her multiple family members who were educators, including her grandmother (who lived to be 108), who was a "master teacher." She shared a story of how for years, her "amazingly tenacious" grandmother petitioned the Carnegie Libraries of New York for books for her small southern town, until "they got so sick of her...and showed up with crates and crates and crates of books," allowing her grandmother to build "one of the best libraries in the region." Risk Taker struggled with the decisions she made about her children's schooling. She and her now adult child struggled to navigate his midwestern public school district because they did not know how to deal with a "brilliant...six-foot-five Black Boy...who was so incredibly bright [but] had some mental health issues." With her college-aged child who was eight when they moved to Pittsburgh, Risk Taker admitted being "afraid" based on the district's outcomes, and choosing Catholic school over PPS, a decision she is still unsure was better.

For her artifact, Risk Taker shared a picture of her grandparents from their wedding day in 1925, proud of and inspired by her grandmother's "ability to work through the Jim Crow South and turn out some of the best and brightest [students]." She shared a story about how a rabid dog came on to her grandparents' all-Black campus in a small southern city threatening to bite the students. One of the students on campus shot the dog to keep it from attacking them. The next day, the dog's owner came to the campus and killed the student. In her worst days, Risk Taker remembers this story and "the kind of threat [her grandparents] were under at any given time because that's the lack of power they had, but in spite of all that what they turned out," which serves as her motivation.

3.1.7 Systems Disruptor

Systems Disruptor is the native of a rural town in Pennsylvania whose school district sued the state regarding the education funding mechanism and won. She has “been making people uncomfortable [her] entire life,” including her ninth-grade teacher who was angry that she wouldn’t stand for the pledge of allegiance. Despite the lack of belief in her abilities by her teachers who “never invested in [her],” she never doubted that she would attend college because she came from a family where “everybody goes to college.” Systems Disruptor started her collegiate journey in an Appalachian city, where she realized she had received a better education in her “podunk town” than some of her counterparts from other “massive campus high schools” around the country and world. When she transferred to a local college in Pittsburgh, Systems Disruptor met a professor who saw something in her and became her mentor.

Systems Disruptor worked at several organizations focused on teen parents, homelessness, and youth advocacy. Her experience as a truant advocate was her first experience with the district, and she “was already a thorn in Pittsburgh Public’s ass” before her child began attending PPS, because they accused her of “getting PPS in trouble with these IEPs.” Ironically, when Systems Disruptor sued the district on behalf of her child, the lawyer who represented the district was her former colleague at the youth advocacy organization, a “huge conflict of interest.” Systems Disruptor went on to contract with the county’s child welfare department, where she was connected with another mentor who assigned her to teams that audited caseworkers. Someone from a local university pulled her aside and told her she was doing organizational development work and should be making more money. This motivated Systems Disruptor to return to graduate school to study organizational development and change management. She currently consults in those areas, and

“[doesn’t] wanna work with anyone unless they're changing policies. That's it; unless you're changing a policy, you're not changing the system.”

System Disruptor gave birth to her child during her senior year in college. When her child began having seizures, the local hospital system was “jacking up [her child’s] life.” Despite her strong knowledge of social work, and her mom and brother’s roles as caseworkers, she struggled to navigate the hospital system. The struggle continued in PPS when System Disruptor’s child entered the district at the age of three due to their intellectual disability and epilepsy diagnosis. By the second day of school, they threatened to suspend her child, and by October she hired a lawyer. Even though it was highly uncommon to sue the district so early in a child’s school career, she persisted and eventually won her lawsuit. System Disruptor’s child was in PPS for eight years before she moved her child to a local charter school. In the two years her child has been there, they have learned how to read, and has become a more confident student. She recounted a story of her child coming home to share how they learned about “the Homestead strike...[and how] Columbus and the king and queen of Spain [were] bad people,” lessons that they would not get in PPS. Systems Disruptor’s passion for education is ignited by “people’s ability to live...and enjoy life.” She reflected on how students and families are impacted both academically and economically by these battles with school districts. Her child being suspended from school and constant meetings with the district prevented her from working and furthering her own education. When things finally settled down, Systems Disruptor was able to finish two degrees.

For her artifact, Systems Disruptor shared a Valentine’s Day card from her child, one of the first things they wrote and gave to her. She keeps it near her computer so she can “look at it every day on [her] meetings.” Systems Disruptor takes pride in having “a kid that [she’s] kept alive

for thirteen, going on fourteen years,” and being her child’s parent has taught her more than she has taught her child.

The six of us came from families who throughout generations emphasized the importance of education and went to tireless lengths for their children and grandchildren to receive a high-quality education. Risk Taker’s grandparents faced racial terrorism on their college campus while pursuing higher education, and her grandmother was relentless in getting quality books to start a library in her small town. Master Wayfinder’s mother risked jail to get her into a good school. Hereditary Activist’s paternal grandparents were on the frontlines of school desegregation as her father integrated his local high school, and her maternal grandmother began a legacy of post-secondary education for the women in her family starting with her daughters. Education Nerd’s school was assigned based on the neighborhood to which her family was redlined, but her parents were highly involved in caregiver engagement efforts. Parent Advocate’s mother ensured her children got a solid education even though she was denied one. Systems Disruptor’s family had a college going mindset that outweighed her teacher’s lack of belief in her.

We have also had a range of experiences with PPS as students, mothers, employees, advisory council members, and partners. Hereditary Activist and Education Nerd attended high-performing schools in the district. Education Nerd and Parent Advocate had to regularly advocate to ensure their children were being properly educated by PPS. Systems Disruptor eventually pulled her child out of the district after years of litigation for constant violations of her child’s IEP. Master Wayfinder and Risk Taker chose not to send their children to PPS. Both Hereditary Activist and Parent Advocate were pushed out of paid and volunteer positions with PPS for their outspokenness about district leadership and the poor quality of education for Black children. Risk Taker, Systems Disruptor, and Master Wayfinder were jaded by negative experiences with PPS when attempting

to partner with the district and/or advocate for Black children. Education Nerd was one of the only Black people who was willing to call for a new superintendent search when questions about the previous superintendent's qualifications were raised when he was hired.

Our group also brought extensive education and expertise to our work. Education Nerd and Risk Taker have doctorates. Hereditary Advocate is working on hers. Master Wayfinder and Systems Disruptor have graduate degrees. Parent Advocate is a well-respected consultant for our state education department who is called upon locally and nationally due to her strong knowledge of caregiver engagement policies and practices. We each brought a unique skill set to BW4BE as well. Hereditary Activist does much of the day-to-day project management and has institutional knowledge of PPS. Master Wayfinder's keen understanding of systems and power brokers makes her an excellent strategist. Education Nerd is a walking encyclopedia of education data and research, and her philanthropy background has been helpful in getting funds for our work. Systems Disruptor has been a strong mouthpiece for BW4BE in printed media, on panels, and in public spaces. Parent Advocate has a strong connection to Black PPS caregivers, is a credible community messenger, and has a deep understanding of the district's equity work. Risk Taker was instrumental in authoring our letter to the school board and has served as a facilitator for our town hall conversations.

In the "Our Leadership" section of the BW4BE website, we describe our leadership model: "We have a shared leadership model in which every member plays a role in content development and decision making. We operate as a united front, in alignment with the sisterhood that runs deep with Black women" (Black Women for a Better Education, n.d.). Many of us knew each other prior to starting BW4BE. Hereditary Activist and Master Wayfinder were college floormates and are dear friends. Education Nerd and Parent Advocate did education advocacy work with the same

organization. Parent Advocate and Hereditary Activist participated in a community educational leadership program together and crossed paths again in PPS. Master Wayfinder, Systems Disruptor, Risk Taker, and Hereditary Activist operate in many of the same circles as consultants. There was already a built-in trust between us when we started BW4BE.

With a multitude of experiences with the six of us working for and with PPS, extensive expertise in public education, lived experiences as Black women in Pittsburgh, genuine concern as mothers (biological and otherwise), and with sisterhood at the foundation, our BW4BE founding members were committed to creating a better district for our children. We understood that leadership at the board and district level were key leverage points to accomplishing this. In a pandemic where the ineptitude of PPS was on display, we saw a chance to demand a new superintendent.

3.2 Part 2: The Call for a New PPS Superintendent

Table 5 Part 2 Key BW4BE Events

Date	Event	Associated Artifacts
July 1, 2016	Previous superintendent hired by PPS	N/A
June 1, 2020	BW4BE letter to the PPS board calling for the nonrenewal of the superintendent’s contract	Letter to PPS board Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article (June 4) KDKA news segment (June 5) WTAE news segment (June 5) WESA article (June 8) PublicSource article (June 22)
June 8, 2020	Second letter to the PPS board from BW4BE due to their non-responsiveness	Letter to PPS board
August 26, 2020	Previous superintendent’s contract renewed	Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article (July 13) WESA article (August 24) Pittsburgh Tribune-Review article (August 25) PublicSource article (August 26)
September 8, 2021	Previous superintendent resigned from PPS amidst an ethics scandal	Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article (September 7) WESA article (September 8)

A district superintendent is equivalent to an organization’s chief executive officer. They are required to keep the board abreast of the status of the schools; hire, develop, and evaluate effective employees; maintain organizational compliance; develop and oversee a fiscally responsible budget; set a vision for providing high-quality education for students; and regularly engage with district families, community members, and partners (Eddins et al., 2022).

When the previous superintendent was hired in 2016, PPS was wrapping up a seven-year grant with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2009) focused on teacher effectiveness. That work resulted in a multi-measure evaluation system for teachers, but the professional development supports to accompany it were insufficient. I was hired by PPS in 2012, around the midway point of the Gates grant. Central office staff, especially on the “academic side of the house” (as we called it) was in constant influx). I was the third Director of Professional Development, there were two

Deputy Superintendents, and a revolving door of curriculum and instruction personnel. In 2015, PPS was invited to participate in a national cohort of districts (ironically also funded by Gates) who had undertaken teacher evaluation work at the expense of staff development to rebuild their professional learning systems (Learning Forward, n.d.). The overall failure of the Gates work that had not improved teacher performance nor student outcomes (and viewed by some grassroots education groups as the furtherance of a neoliberal education agenda), coupled with a rash of PPS school closures that occurred in the early 2000s left the community feeling fatigued and frustrated with the district (Dunton, 2014; King 2014; Wertheimer, 2017).

After superintendent Dr. Lane's retirement announcement, the board hired a search consultant to find a new superintendent. While there is typically a public bidding process for the search consultant (though not required by law), the PPS board president and another school board member recommended a search consultant they met at a conference. Local media raised questions about the vagueness of the expenditures submitted by the search consultant, and why the contract did not include vetting of the candidates' credentials (a task that was left to the PPS board), an issue that came to a head shortly after the previous superintendent's hiring (Behrman, 2016).

Though he was unanimously approved by the PPS board, the previous superintendent's 2016 arrival to PPS was mired in scandal due to accusations of plagiarism on his resume and embellishment of his professional record (Behrman & Lindstrom, 2016; Goldstein, 2016; KDKA, 2016; Marra, 2016). This caused a split in the community with so-called "education reformers" calling for a new search, and "grassroots community groups" calling it a ploy to dissolve the democratically elected board (Born & Potter, 2016). After an investigation into the accusations, the board voted 7-2 to retain the previous superintendent (Mitchell, 2016). Throughout the course of his tenure, there were two Black people who consistently questioned the previous

superintendent's qualifications, Education Nerd and Lifelong Liberator (who will be introduced further in Part 4).

On June 1, 2020, BW4BE wrote a letter to the PPS board calling for the nonrenewal of the previous superintendent's contract. We cited five areas of concern: organizational leadership, financial management, COVID-19 crisis management, instructional excellence & safe and healthy schools, and professionalism (see Appendix C). The letter was signed by fifty-five Black women (including all six of the founding members who participated in the sister circle), some of whom signed anonymously to avoid scrutiny and retaliation from their employers. We emailed the letter to all nine school board members and blind carbon copied several media outlets. We also posted the letter on our Facebook page. Within a week of its release, the letter had been viewed thousands of times.

Our letter also received significant media attention. A *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* article published the letter in its entirety, cited several salient quotes, and mentioned several names of the Black women who signed the letter, including mine, though none of us were asked for comment. There was no official response from the PPS board or administration because it was considered a personnel issue, though comments from individual board members ranged from apathy to willingness to hear community concern (Goldstein, 2020a). WTAE and KDKA News segments featured interviews with several letter signers, who reiterated that the letter was a call for better outcomes for Black children (not a personal attack), including more effective leadership (KDKA, 2020; Mayo, 2020.) The solicitor commented that the board had between July 2020 and February 2021 to decide about the contract renewal. WESA and PublicSource articles also featured quotes from several letter signers who spoke about their concerns with how the district had been operating during the pandemic. In the WESA article, a Black woman education activist who was not

connected to BW4BE was interviewed for the article and accused us of being “Black women who have never shown up,” though many of us were district employees and PPS community partners. Additionally, with several anonymous signers, it was impossible for her to make that statement with full confidence (Johnson, 2020a; Schneider, 2020a, para. 12).

Despite all the local and media attention the letter was receiving, the PPS board did not initially respond to BW4BE. On June 8, 2020, we sent another letter to them calling out their lack of responsiveness. We named each school board member individually, critiqued their responses to the media (or lack thereof), reminded them of how many of their constituents had signed the letter, asked for a timeline for the contract renewal decision, and requested to schedule conversations with them (see Appendix D). We finally received a response about a board policy that when emails are sent to all board members at once, it is the board president’s responsibility to respond, and some board members were waiting on her. Eventually, we were able to schedule meetings with several board members, all of whom were defensive about our critique of the previous superintendent’s performance. They blamed the pandemic for the district’s ineptitude and failed to acknowledge the systemic issues we outlined in the letter. A few of the school board members admonished us for not coming to them directly with our concerns given our personal and professional relationships with them, as if reaching out to them via their board email addresses is not an acceptable form of communication.

In the meantime, we continued to mobilize the community around our efforts for a contract nonrenewal, or at least a delay in making the decision (the board decided they were going to vote on the contract renewal in August 2020). BW4BE created social media posts questioning the district’s process for evaluating the previous superintendent. We had discovered PPS was out of compliance with state code by not having the most recent superintendent evaluation results posted

online, and then one day, the PPS webpage was updated with several years of evaluations. We wrote scripts for public hearings and distributed them to our email lists, resulting in dozens of testimonies. We also shared a petition started by an anonymous PPS teacher calling for a contract nonrenewal that garnered thousands of signatures.

The community was split on the renewal of the previous superintendent's contract (Schneider, 2020b; Simonton, 2020). The Western Pennsylvania Black Political Assembly, predominately comprised by Black men, sent a letter to the school board supporting the previous superintendent's contract renewal (Goldstein 2020b). Even though the group never contacted BW4BE or mentioned us directly, the convener of the group was quoted in a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article characterizing the call for the previous superintendent's removal as a "political attack by...community groups who have hidden agendas" (Goldstein, 2021, para. 4). BW4BE was accused multiple times of having ulterior motives, being a front for white neoliberal groups, and pushing a pro-charter school agenda.

On August 22, 2020, we met with the PBEOC to ask them to stand beside us in calling for the nonrenewal of the contract. They were not able to come to consensus to publicly support us but told us that they called PPS board members to inquire about the process and asked for transparency and accountability in evaluation. They also offered to work with us regardless of the board's decision, though there has been no BW4BE collaboration with any member of the PBEOC since that August 2020 conversation.

On August 26, 2020, the PPS board voted 7-2 to renew the previous superintendent's contract for four years, even though the board was not required to vote on the contract before February 2021. Lifelong Liberator was one of the two board members who voted against the contract renewal. The board president contended that the timing of the decision was to get the

district back on track post-COVID-19 in the face of an upcoming collective bargaining agreement year with the teachers' union and due to looming financial issues. In their comments at the legislative meeting, many of the board members spent more time criticizing Lifelong Liberator and those of us who called for the nonrenewal of the contract than providing concrete evidence for why a renewal was justified. In a PublicSource article, the previous superintendent “thanked the board ‘for a vote of confidence’ and said that ‘while the misdirected self-interests of a few attempted to take away from the progress we have made together, we are now able to move forward squarely focused on improving student outcomes’” (Johnson, 2020b, para. 5). It felt like that comment was directed toward BW4BE (especially me given my prior history with the district and the previous superintendent).

While the renewal of the contract in August 2020 felt like a defeat to BW4BE, it was expected. In the meantime, we doubled down on awareness raising and turned our attention to political power shifting. Our PPS board efforts will be discussed further in Parts 3 and 4, and our programs and outreach will be discussed in Part 5. During this time as the pandemic continued, families had become increasingly frustrated with the district's remote learning rollout as students waited months for devices, PPS students were unable to return to school for in-person learning at the same rate as their county counterparts, families were receiving truancy notices for signing on late to virtual learning, and students with IEPs were not receiving services (Johnson, 2021a; Thompson, 2020). A tipping point for many PPS families was the plan to make school start times earlier due to the lack of transportation, which was not only inconvenient, but contradicted medical research (Schneider, 2021a). Calls for new district leadership reemerged, this time from white families.

In a surprising turn of events, on September 8, 2021, the previous superintendent resigned from PPS effective October 1, 2021, amidst a series of ethics violations. Per state code, he was entitled to nearly \$400,000 in severance, the equivalent of one year of salary and benefits. According to a WESA article, the ethics investigation had been pending for two years, which meant the PPS board would have known about these issues since 2019, making their decision to hastily renew the previous superintendent’s contract even more questionable (Schneider, 2021b).

3.3 Part 3: From Awareness to Activism: Running a School Board Slate

Table 6 Part 3 Key BW4BE Events

Date	Event	Associated Artifacts
August 5, 2020	BW4BE announced intention to run PPS board slate at town hall	BW4BE town hall recording (August 5) BW4BE list of demands (August 5) WESA article (August 6) WESA Article (April 6)
January 25, 2021	BW4BE PAC launched	BW4BE PAC launch PowerPoint (January 25) WESA article (May 14)
February 9, 2021	BW4BE PAC endorsement meeting	N/A
February 23, 2021	BW4BE PPS board slate announced	N/A
May 18, 2021	PPS board primary election	N/A
November 2, 2021	PPS board general election	N/A
December 6, 2021	PPS board swearing in, Lifelong Liberator elected board president	N/A
January 11, 2023	BW4BE PAC endorsement meeting	N/A
January 20, 2023	BW4BE PPS board slate announced	N/A
May 16, 2023	PPS board primary election	N/A
November 7, 2023	PPS board general election	N/A
December 4, 2023	PPS board swearing in, BW4BE-endorsed candidates elected board president and second vice-president	N/A

The previous superintendent’s contract renewal was a disappointing yet unsurprising move by the PPS board. Knowing there was little hope that the board would vote against a contract renewal, BW4BE was already preparing for the next move. On August 5, 2020, we held the *We*

Demand a Better Education for Pittsburgh's Children virtual town hall, which garnered nearly 4,000 views on Facebook. Panelists included current PPS board members who provided insight on some of the district's issues, as well as board and district leaders from neighboring districts who shared promising practices (Black Women for a Better Education, 2020).

There were stark differences in how other districts handled the pandemic compared to PPS. A key demonstration was that nearly every district in the county returned to in-person learning for the 2020-21 school year except for PPS, who originally planned to spend the first nine weeks virtual. Only a fraction of students were able to return to in-person school at PPS during that year (Zenkevich, 2021). At the town hall, a neighboring superintendent talked about how he met with his staff daily during the pandemic and required his principals to share weekly key performance indicators for their students. PPS, on the other hand, was still struggling to get technology into the hands of students nearly six months into the pandemic, and the board members admitted that the district was not equipped nor prepared to educate students prior to the pandemic (Black Women for a Better Education, 2020).

At the town hall, we announced we would be running a slate of candidates for the 2021 PPS board election. Feeling unheard and unsupported by our current school board, our plan was to find school board candidates who shared our interests and work to get them elected. In a WESA article about the town hall, a BW4BE member shared how she spent her child's entire kindergarten and first grade years at board public hearings advocating for her child with an IEP to no avail (Schneider, 2020c). Additionally, we shared a list of ten demands for a more equitable school district focused on quality and equitable education, quality district leadership, and strong financial stewardship (see Appendix E).

Over the next few months, BW4BE undertook the challenging process of recruiting candidates for a PPS board slate. We collectively agreed to endorse incumbent Lifelong Liberator, who had been an ally in our contract nonrenewal efforts and a vocal proponent of better outcomes for Black children. We also agreed that we would not endorse anyone who had supported the contract renewal of the previous superintendent. The other slate members were recruited through personal connections and our BW4BE network. Details about their motivation to run for PPS board will be explored in Part 4. To prepare our slate members, we encouraged them to participate in the BWBE Learning Institute, a capacity building series which provided an overview of PPS, pertinent academic and nonacademic topics, board leadership district governance, and the process for running for school board. The Learning Institute will be discussed further in Part 5.

To support our PPS board slate, we formed a political action committee (PAC). The BW4BE PAC launched on January 25, 2021, and had three main purposes: 1) Endorse and support the campaigns of candidates for PPS board, 2) Increase awareness of issues in public education, and 3) Endorse candidates who are willing to speak boldly about the need to improve educational outcomes for Black children in this region. There were three donation tiers: #Ally Level (\$10/month), #ItsAboutTheKids Membership (\$40/month), and the #BW4BEInvestor Level (\$1,000+ annually). People who contributed at the top two tiers were granted membership benefits: 1) Voting on endorsements, Connections to endorsed candidates, 3) General membership meetings, 4) Newsletter access and updates, 5) Access to education awareness sessions (see Appendix F).

Our PAC raised nearly \$65,000 to support our slate, including a generous donation of \$25,000 from an individual donor. Given our inexperience with campaign finance, we inadvertently left the large donation off our finance report. It was brought to our attention by

WESA, and we corrected the error immediately and refiled the report. WESA subsequently wrote an article about school board campaign finances focused on addressing our error and investigating the donor, while ignoring or downplaying other financing issues such as attributing the teachers' union's late finance report to a "new electronic filing system" (Potter and Schneider, 2021c, para. 4). The article also omitted the name of a district administrator who donated to a non-BW4BE endorsed incumbent's campaign, even though the information was already public since people who make donations over \$50 have to be identified. It felt like the article was implying that we were trying to hide the large donation we received and the identity of the donor (whose former company has ties to AI and education technology), which fed into the lie that BW4BE was a neoliberal front. During the sister circle, PAC Chair Hereditary Activist and PAC Treasurer Systems Disruptor reflected on this incident, and the harm it caused to BW4BE and the two of them personally as they navigated amending the finance reports and answering questions for the interview. Systems Disruptor, who currently consults for WESA, still brings this issue up, and won't stop until they "redact that bullshit...and write something to apologize to us."

On February 9, 2021, we held our BW4BE PAC endorsement meeting. There were seven candidates who sought our endorsement: two from District 1, one from District 3, one from District 5, one from District 7, and two from District 9. Each candidate was given three to five minutes to introduce themselves and share why they were running for PPS board, followed by Q&A discussion. While the meeting was open to everyone, only PAC members were permitted to vote for endorsements. After the meeting, each member received a ballot and the responses to a comprehensive candidate questionnaire. Our 2021 Endorsed Slate, which we announced on February 23, 2021, included Converted Teacher, Creative Problem Solver, Education Nerd, Lifelong Liberator, and Servant Leader, all of whom will be introduced in Part 4.

Table 7 BW4BE 2021 School Board Slate

Name	Endorsements
Converted Teacher	Black Political Millennials, Pittsburgh Brown Mamas, Youth Political Strategies
Creative Problem Solver	Allegheny County Councilwoman Liv Bennett, Alliance for Police Accountability, Black Political Millennials, Pittsburgh Brown Mamas, Youth Political Strategies
Education Nerd	Black Political Millennials, Pittsburgh Brown Mamas, Youth Political Strategies
Lifelong Liberator	Black Political Millennials, Pittsburgh Brown Mamas, Youth Political Strategies
Servant Leader	Allegheny County Councilwoman Liv Bennett, Former PPS Board Member Alex Matthews, Pittsburgh Brown Mamas, Youth Political Strategies

The two candidates who were not endorsed by BW4BE decided to run anyway, so the 2021 primary election was a crowded field with three candidates from District 1 (one incumbent and two challengers), two candidates from District 3 (one incumbent and one challenger), two candidates from District 5 (one incumbent and one challenger), two candidates from District 7 (two challengers-the incumbent did not seek reelection), and two candidates from District 9 (one incumbent and two challengers). As a new PAC, we were not completely familiar with the political landscape, which led to our slate missing out on endorsements from the county's democratic committee and other popular entities. While some of our slate members interviewed for the teachers' union endorsement process, none of them were endorsed. However, community and politically focused groups such as Pittsburgh Brown Mamas (a network of Black mothers in the Pittsburgh region and beyond), Black Political Millennials, Youth Political Strategies, and Alliance for Police Accountability endorsed our candidates. Some slate members also earned endorsements from current and former elected officials such as Allegheny County Councilwoman Liv Bennett and former PPS board member Alex Matthews.

BW4BE provided consistent wraparound support for our slate members. We held weekly check-in meetings with the slate to monitor campaign progress, connected them with subject matter experts to build their knowledge of PPS, and prepared them for forums. We provided

thousands of dollars for each candidate and supported their individual campaign fundraising efforts. We hired PAC strategists to support our canvassing strategy, which resulted in a large contingency of paid and volunteer canvassers knocking on thousands of doors around the city. We sent out campaign mailers, ran ads in digital and printed media, created yard signs and T-shirts for candidates, and organized a coordinated get out the vote effort for election day.

The May 18, 2021 primary election resulted in three victories for the BW4BE PAC; the retention of an endorsed incumbent (District 3) and two seats flipped by endorsed challengers (Districts 5 and 9). Given Pennsylvania's rule that allows school board candidates to cross-file (a rule that our PAC did not take advantage of), the incumbents who lost their primary elections to our challengers remained on the ballot as Republicans, which resulted in additional contested races. On November 2, 2021, our challengers emerged victorious in the general election, and our three endorsed candidates were sworn into their school board seats on December 6, 2021. The biggest surprise of that evening was the election of Lifelong Liberator as PPS board president (a position he held for two years), especially given the harsh criticism he had faced for supporting the nonrenewal of the previous superintendent's contract. With three seats on the board, a BW4BE-endorsed candidate as board president, and an interim superintendent at the helm after the previous superintendent's resignation, the impact of BW4BE on public education in Pittsburgh was undeniable. However, it takes five seats to gain a board majority, so our work continued.

Throughout 2022 and into 2023, BW4BE continued our awareness raising and capacity building efforts (to be discussed further in Part 5), while also recruiting school board candidates for the 2023 election. This process proved to be easier than 2021, given that two people in our network had already expressed interest in running for their respective seats. We also had a much stronger grasp on the electoral landscape, which resulted in us announcing our slate much earlier,

two of our candidates cross-filing, all our candidates being endorsed by the Allegheny County Democratic Committee, and one of our candidates being endorsed by the teachers’ union.

We held our BW4BE PAC endorsement meeting on January 11, 2023. Three candidates sought our endorsement: one for District 2, one for District 4, and one for District 8. We had a conversation with the incumbent in District 6, but he was still unsure of his decision to seek reelection by the time we planned to release our slate (he ultimately decided not to run again), and we were not able to find a candidate to run in that district. We also asked the incumbent in District 2 to apply for our endorsement (even though she had voted for the renewal of the previous superintendent’s contract), but she declined. On January 20, 2023, we announced the endorsement of three candidates for the 2023 PPS board elections: Arts Educator, Career Educator, and Community Advocate, who will be introduced in Part 4.

Table 8 BW4BE 2023 School Board Slate

Name	Endorsements
Arts Educator	Allegheny County Democratic Committee, Pittsburgh City Councilwoman Erika Strassberger, Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey, Steel City Stonewall Democrats, Young Democrats of Allegheny County
Career Educator	Allegheny County Democratic Committee
Community Advocate	Allegheny County Democratic Committee, Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, Young Democrats of Allegheny County

The 2023 campaign field was much less crowded; only the District 2 race was contested between the incumbent and our endorsed challenger; the incumbents in Districts 4 and 8 decided not to seek reelection, and the challenger that finally emerged for District 6 ended up running unopposed. We faced criticism for endorsing a white man over a Black woman, which was not a new occurrence for us given the accusations wielded at us for our advocacy against the previous superintendent who was also Black. We reminded people that she did not apply for our endorsement, and that our process is guided by our PAC, who could have ultimately decided not

to endorse anyone for that seat. We also had full confidence in the challenger we endorsed given their extensive educational experience and advocacy, especially on behalf of Black children.

While our 2023 slate needed much less support, we still provided funds for their campaigns, weekly logistical and capacity building check-ins for the candidates, support for their canvassing efforts, and coordination around poll workers for election day. On May 16, 2023, our endorsed candidates in Districts 4 and 8 won their elections. Our District 2 candidate lost his primary election, and even though he remained on the November 7, 2023 general election ballot, he chose not to actively campaign. On December 4, 2023, our two endorsed candidates were sworn onto the PPS board, bringing our total to five. Additionally, a BW4BE-endorsed candidate succeeded Lifelong Liberator as board president, and another endorsed candidate was voted as second vice-president. Over almost four years, BW4BE created a successful movement focused on education advocacy and activism in Pittsburgh, resulting in a PPS board majority.

3.4 Part 4: The BW4BE-Endorsed PPS Board Candidates

Table 9 Part 4 Key BW4BE Events

Date	Event	Associated Artifacts
February 23, 2021	BW4BE 2021 PPS board slate announced	N/A
May 18, 2021	PPS board primary election	N/A
November 2, 2021	PPS board general election	N/A
December 6, 2021	PPS board swearing in, Lifelong Liberator elected board president	N/A
January 20, 2023	BW4BE 2023 PPS board slate announced	N/A
May 16, 2023	PPS board primary election	N/A
November 7, 2023	PPS board general election	N/A
December 4, 2023	PPS board swearing in, BW4BE-endorsed candidates elected board president and second vice-president	N/A

BW4BE ran eight candidates across two slates for PPS board: a slate of five candidates in 2021, and a slate of three in 2023. Three of the five candidates won their elections in 2021, and two of the three candidates won their elections in 2023. The five victorious candidates now comprise a majority on the PPS board. The eight candidates participated in semi-structured interviews where they were asked either eight or nine questions (the question about the BW4BE Learning Institute was omitted for candidates who did not participate) about their upbringing, their families, their connections to education more broadly and specifically to PPS, their experience running for PPS board, the support received from BW4BE, and the potential for a PPS board majority to transform outcomes for Black children (see Appendix H). Each candidate was assigned a pseudonym that characterizes their approach to the work and is described through a short vignette below.

Table 10 BW4BE-Endorsed School Board Candidates

Name	BW4BE Slate	Attended PPS	Kids Attend(ed) PPS	Worked at/with PPS	Attended BW4BE Institute
Arts Educator	2023	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Career Educator	2023	No	N/A	Yes	Yes
Community Advocate	2023	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Converted Teacher	2021	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes
Creative Problem Solver	2021	No	Yes	No	Yes
Education Nerd	2021	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lifelong Liberator	2021	Yes	Yes	No	No
Servant Leader	2021	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

3.4.1 Arts Educator

A married parent of two and “artist at heart” who paints, draws, and composes music (though not currently), Arts Educator relocated to Pittsburgh twelve years ago. A stint as a consultant working on a special project to figure out how the district could better coordinate with

nonprofit and government entities was Arts Educator’s “first real entree into PPS and into all of the opportunities and challenges that it is,” before moving into the city and their children attending schools in the district. Arts Educator currently leads an organization that regularly partners with teachers and administrators in PPS on arts-focused programs and initiatives.

Arts Educator “started down the path of education because it felt safe.” They credit a professor in their arts and education graduate program with helping them to “see the world differently and [to] understand the power of education. And not because of anything that she said, but because of how she treated me as a learner. And her pedagogical practice.” This experience informed Arts Educator’s adoption of a constructivist approach to their education work and how they design and evaluate programs.

Arts Educator ran for PPS board because they were “tired of trying to make change from the outside...[and] wanted one of nine votes, especially after their representative voted to renew the previous superintendent’s contract. Arts Educator converted to “a hundred percent running” when the district decided to postpone school by two weeks due to transportation issues, and their representative did not question the superintendent in a way “that demonstrated an appreciation for how dangerous this type of leadership decision was” for vulnerable families who would miss out on meals and childcare with a school delay. “That was the moment where [they] said...regardless of what else happens, I am throwing my hat in.”

3.4.2 Career Educator

Career Educator had a thirty-plus year educational career in urban and rural school systems across the region. The middle child of an Italian American family, the importance of education and attending college was enforced as early as the age of three for Career Educator via threats of

ending up in the prison across the street from the apartments in which they lived if they did not get an education. Career Educator's school experience in the 1950s and 1960s was a mix of fun and mental abuse by certain teachers. They credit a high school teacher "who taught history in a completely different way" and the "mind and cultural expanding learning experience" of coming to Pittsburgh in the late 1970s from a rural East Coast city with inspiring their pursuit of "educational excellence and transformation and [thinking] differently about how to do school."

Career Educator's first role in PPS in the late 1980s working on a districtwide dropout prevention program led to a mentoring relationship with their boss that inspired their journey into school leadership in PPS and district leadership around the region. They left the district after feeling discouraged as an assistant principal with "always hammering kids" and futile conversations with teachers about quality teaching that "put up barriers or [blamed] kids." A self-described semi-retiree, Career Educator still has "a passion and belief that we've got to do a better job and with our public schools, particularly those that have underserved and failed a number of young people" and is inspired by the late John Lewis's desire to get into "good trouble." They are committed to using what they learned during their career, including their failures, to "pay it forward."

Career Educator ran for PPS board because they "wanted to try to walk the talk" instead of sitting around and complaining as a retiree. With experience as a former district leader, they understood "that quality governance matters, and has a direct impact on what happens in a classroom and in a school building," a sentiment they believe aligned with Black Women for Better Education's "no-nonsense, results-oriented agenda for kids first."

3.4.3 Community Advocate

A Pittsburgh native, PPS graduate, and parent of three, Community Advocate spends significant time in schools and in the community providing “support where it’s needed.” A self-described “knucklehead” who “always found trouble,” many adults in school settings predicted that Community Advocate would be dead or in jail before high school graduation. Community Advocate’s late mother was an integral part of their educational experience, volunteering in the school office and helping them to “get right” when they were sent there following disciplinary issues. They view her as their “origin of inspiration” and “nucleus” of their advocacy work.

After missing out on an opportunity to be part of the Homecoming Court senior year, Community Advocate channeled that energy into student council and began speaking out on things that “were unjust or unfair.” After returning to the district as a parent, Community Advocate learned more about the “ins and outs” of how the school system works through volunteerism at their children’s schools. Coupled with “exposure to different things from conferences to trainings,” they felt compelled to support education not only for their children, “but for whatever young person felt the need to either ask me for support...or staff asking me for support.” Community Advocate is driven by an “understanding that some children, some families, and some staff don't have the support or representation that they need, so I try to provide that and if I can't provide it, I try to refer people to other people that could actually provide those things for our staff [and] families.”

Community Advocate ran for PPS board because “someone believed in [them], the assurance of support to navigate the process from Black Women for a Better Education, and to “honor [their] mom because she’s done so much.”

3.4.4 Converted Teacher

Born and raised in Pittsburgh's East End "pre-gentrification," Converted Teacher grew up as one of nine siblings and "incredibly poor." After their father was blackballed from his mill job in the 1980s, he was "forced to work his own thing...as an electrical contractor entrepreneur." Converted Teacher is a certified K-6 educator in the state of Pennsylvania who formerly taught in PPS, a former consultant, and currently serves on the staff of a local elected official.

Converted Teacher attended some of the "worst Pittsburgh Public Schools" until their mother decided to homeschool them beginning in seventh grade. They stayed connected to the district through athletics as an avid golf player for a PPS high school's men's team and family members who attended the district. During college, Converted Teacher's career trajectory was set on a different course after reading an article a classmate left on the printer about the Black/white achievement gap. It was at that point "something inside of [Converted Teacher] took hold, fire burned, and [they] immediately changed [their] major to education." Knowing the type of education they experienced in PPS, how their "mother had to fight with every teacher," and the barriers poor children faced in receiving a quality education, Converted Teacher went into education to "make some sort of a difference...the kids and students needed to see my face, and I'm from the community, and I understand the struggle."

Converted Teacher did not initially want to run for PPS board because of the scrutiny that comes with a public platform and the uncertainty of how their feelings about how Black children are "pushed through, looked over, passed over, stepped on" would be received. They eventually decided to "utilize [their] boldness whether [they] liked it or not" and run to put all of their "ideas, thoughts, dreams, and beliefs" out there instead of "[being] mad or being critical or saying something to the next person who was bold enough to do it."

3.4.5 Creative Problem Solver

Creative Problem Solver, a Pittsburgh transplant, is a non-profit founder, tech business founder, wife, and mother of two whose moniker is descriptive of the way they approach professional and social issues. A self-described “great communicator...with the gift of gab,” community and “being a contributing member of [their] social groups” are two important values to Creative Problem Solver. With children currently in PPS who “experience the education system firsthand, Creative Problem Solver is “very concerned about the experiences that they will have.” In thinking about their children, they also think about the children in “close proximity to them, and how “they will be impacted by the education system,” rooted in a sense of “general empathy around most things makes [them] think about others the way [they] think about [themselves].”

Creative Problem Solver ran for PPS board because they were asked by multiple people, and if a bunch of people are asking [them] to do something because they feel [they're] equipped to represent, then [they] do feel a certain pull to do it,” in addition to “[realizing] just how directly the school board impacts [their] family, [their] household, and [their] children.”

3.4.6 Education Nerd

Education Nerd is both a BW4BE founder and PPS board slate member. She was introduced in Part 1.

Education Nerd ran for PPS board because she did not want her district seat to go uncontested, and she “said from the very beginning, if we can't find anybody, [she would] do it.” During the pandemic, especially when the district delayed the start of school, she reached a “level of frustration” and had a “lack of patience” with PPS. After an extensive search for a candidate

with “all kinds of responses, but all of them were essentially no,” Education Nerd kept her promise, ran for the seat, and is “earning jewels in [her] crown” for her current board service.

3.4.7 Lifelong Liberator

Lifelong Liberator, a married parent of six, has been a “community leader, a Black liberation advocate, and organizer since the early 1960s.” After eleven years on City Council and six years at a local nonprofit, Lifelong Liberator “tried to retire, but throughout the whole period of community organizing, one of the issues that was always top of mind was the education of Black children, and how that fit into the liberation strategy.” Lifelong Liberator’s own education journey began in the Catholic school, but they were “invited to transfer” after “ a huge racial incident in the cafeteria.” Following an “equally unsuccessful” stint at a PPS high school, Lifelong Liberator ran away from home with no intention of finishing high school, but ended up graduating from high school in another state after their aunts got them re-enrolled in school. Inspired by Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream Speech” of 1963, they joined the Freedom Riders, which led to their lifelong study of the “liberation movement all over the planet throughout time.”

Lifelong Liberator ran for PPS board “cause nobody else in [their] neighborhood had all of the qualities that were necessary when a seat became vacant on the school board,” and they were challenged to run if the community could not find a younger, more energetic candidate. Coupled with previous campaign experience that included raising money and building “the organization necessary to win the seat,” as well as the “knowledge of the importance of education, and of improving the quality of education,” Lifelong Liberator “had to run.”

3.4.8 Servant Leader

Servant Leader is a Pittsburgh native, PPS graduate, parent of two, and avid animal lover. With a degree in business administration, Servant Leader “has spent the last 15 years in nonprofit management, generally at the executive level.” For nine years they worked at an organization that partners closely with the district, focused on decreasing college attendance disparities for Black and Brown students. Servant Leader believes their “core mission in life is to serve the people of Pittsburgh, especially our underserved community.”

After returning to Pittsburgh in the late 2000s, Servant Leader watched their elementary school-aged children struggle to “transition from a majority white suburban rural school district to a predominantly black urban school district” that was not willing to “move and adjust for or with them,” which sparked an interest in education. With now grown children, Servant Leader is motivated by the question of “how do we envision a better Pittsburgh if we don't envision a better school system to create that better Pittsburgh” and leaving a “legacy of change” for PPS.

Servant Leader ran for PPS board because they were “ready to re-engage on a more local level” after some time away from community work, they had friends who “thought highly enough of [them]” to ask them to run, and they were intrigued by the prospect of “[looking] at a system that had not served [their] kids as well as its should have...and [producing] a system that could work the way that it should.”

The eight BW4BE-endorsed candidates found their way to our PPS board slates in very different ways, yet there was a common set of factors that motivated their participation. These motivations will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4 as an answer to the inquiry questions.

3.5 Part 5: Capacity Building and Awareness Raising Efforts

Table 11 Part 5 Key BW4BE Events

Date	Event	Associated Artifacts
June 3, 2020	Launched BW4BE Facebook page	BW4BE Facebook page
September 19, 2020	Launched first BW4BE Learning Institute cohort	Zoom recordings of sessions
March 31-May 10, 2021	Released four-part publication series	<i>Let's Make History, Not Repeat It</i> (March 31) <i>Imagine PPS: What It Really Looks Like to Reimagine Pittsburgh Public Schools</i> (April 21) <i>Enough is Enough: New Times Call for New Tactics</i> (May 5) <i>Do Something: Black Children Need You to Get Involved</i> (May 10)
March 7-October 7, 2021	Hosted series of town hall conversations focused on <i>What School Could Be</i>	<i>What Do Safe Schools Look Like</i> (March 7) <i>What Does Bold, Successful School Leadership Look Like</i> (March 21) <i>What Does Effective and Engaging Remote Learning Look Like</i> (April 7) <i>Levers of Accountability</i> (October 7)
September 17, 2022	Launched second BW4BE Learning Institute cohort	Zoom recordings of sessions
September 22, 2022	Launched BW4BE <i>On the Agenda</i> series	Videos archived on Facebook

BW4BE’s capacity building and awareness raising strategy served as a strong complement to our political activism and power shifting efforts. PPS is an unnecessarily complex system that has historically been difficult for Black families to navigate. The pandemic provided unprecedented insight and access into a disorganized and dysfunctional district as families waited months for electronic devices, received conflicting messages when in-person school would resume, and watched districts around the county quickly return to in-person school as PPS scrambled to find its way. In this time of contradiction and confusion, BW4BE was a beacon of truth that was unafraid to lean into the nuance of issues and demand more of PPS even in the face of pandemic. One contributing factor to BW4BE’s success was, as Master Wayfinder put it, “Knowledge. Actual facts. Citations. Like, at the end of the day, we’re not making up anything and we have citations to prove it.” Education Nerd also attributed our success to the focus on facts.

“Our positions are not based on ideology. They're not based on what's to the left, what's progressive...they're based on reality and facts.”

Our messaging consistently emphasized several key points. First, the pandemic was not the cause of PPS’s issues, but their inability to respond successfully to this crisis was due to underlying and pervasive systemic issues exacerbated by inadequate leadership at the board and district levels. Second, Black children deserve a high-quality education, and our mission as BW4BE was to ensure that they received it. Third, a key leverage point to improving outcomes for Black children was electing qualified school board members who would take their responsibilities of hiring, firing, and evaluating the superintendent and financial stewardship seriously. Based on those guiding principles, we employed several strategies to inform and mobilize the community: social media, publications, town hall series, *On the Agenda*, and the BW4BE Learning Institute.

Table 12 BW4BE Awareness Raising and Capacity Building Strategies

Strategy	Description
Social Media	BW4BE Facebook page utilized as a source of awareness raising, information sharing, community building, and agitation
Publications	A series of four publications by BW4BE about the current state of PPS, our hopes and dreams for the district, our connection to the Advocates’ work, and a call to action for the community
Town Hall Series	Four virtual town hall meetings focused on BW4BE’s aspirations for <i>What School Could Be</i> , featuring local and national subject matter experts
<i>On the Agenda</i>	A thirty-minute virtual monthly conversation between a parent and a BW4BE-endorsed school board member about pertinent items on the PPS board legislative agenda
BW4BE Learning Institute	A capacity building series geared towards people interested in becoming education thought leaders and/or running for PPS board

3.5.1 Social Media

BW4BE utilized social media as a form of agitation. We used social media to increase the visibility of our letter to the PPS board. We posted hard truths and asked tough, thought-provoking

questions about the district to encourage community dialogue (Black Women for a Better Education, n.d.b). Examples included:

What are some of the items in the teacher's contract that perpetuate inequities in our district?

Who is responsible for school not starting today?

We have a school board that prioritizes political allies over community voice.

Who is complicit in the failing of Black children in Pittsburgh Public Schools?

Today the board will be voting on a pay increase during a pandemic for the superintendent for the 2021 school budget.

On June 9, 2020, BW4BE called out PPS on social media for being out of compliance with PA school code by not having the results of the previous superintendent's evaluations posted on the district's website for the past two years but providing pay increases and bonuses. Based on our efforts, the district posted the previous superintendent's evaluation results on July 13, 2020. The district was now technically in compliance with school code, but the document was vague. However, it was a clear indication that the district was watching us.

Social media attracted slate members to BW4BE. Servant Leader and Creative Problem solver first learned about BW4BE through social media and were drawn to the conversations. In reflecting on how BW4BE influenced conversations about education in Pittsburgh, Creative Problem Solver remarked on how podcasters and niche groups began talking about education because of BW4BE, and our slate members appeared on a local podcast typically focused on pop culture. It increased people's comfort level to ask questions about the district. Partnerships with established groups such as Pittsburgh Brown Mamas provided a forum for Black mothers to seek

information about the district. BW4BE hosted a forum with each of the 2021 slate members in the Brown Mamas group, who subsequently endorsed our slate.

3.5.2 Publications

During the 2021 election cycle, BW4BE released a series of four publications about the current state of PPS, our hopes and dreams for the district, our connection to the Advocates' work, and a call to action for the community. Each publication pointed back to the need to vote for a more qualified school board in the upcoming election. Our first publication, *Let's Make History: Not Repeat It*, released on March 30, 2021, discussed how the district had gotten increasingly worse in the past five years. We substantiated that claim with five assertions backed by data: 1) Spending has gotten out of control, with nothing to show for it. 2) Nearly 30 schools have closed, and enrollment continues to decline. 3) Extraordinary opportunities for innovation have been wasted. 4) Student achievement remains stagnant, and inequities persist. 5) There is dwindling public confidence, and no meaningful vision for change (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021b).

Imagine PPS: What It Really Looks Like to Reimagine Pittsburgh Public Schools, released on April 21, 2021, was our take on the district's Reimagine PPS plan and included five provocative ideas for transforming the district: 1) Imagine if SciTech and CAPA were our least innovative schools. 2) Imagine if the district took responsibility for connecting every child to a specific postsecondary opportunity. 3) Imagine if the district stopped saying "We're doing it" and started saying "Let's do it." 4) Imagine if the district went all in on teachers. 5) Imagine if the district put its \$26,909 per pupil expenditure directly into the hands of Black families (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021c).

BW4BE's third publication, *Enough is Enough: New Times Call for New Tactics*, was released on May 5, 2021. In this paper, we connected the Advocates' efforts and subsequent 1992 lawsuit to our current advocacy, lamented the lack of progress over the past four decades, and outlined six reasons why it was time for new tactics: 1) Black families have been more than loyal to PPS. 2) The same outcomes that catalyzed the Advocates persist today. 3) Meanwhile, the stakes for our children are higher than ever. 4) We are not without power, and we do have alternatives to PPS. 5) We must pursue new tactics and exercise our options. 6) It is time to modernize our movement and create new Black-led learning solutions (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021a).

In our final publication released on May 10, 2021, entitled *Do Something: Black Children Need You to Get Involved*, we called on the community to get involved in our fight for quality education for Black children with role-specific strategies for the following groups: Black families; white and non-Black families; PPS superintendent and cabinet; current and prospective PPS board members; teachers' union leaders; PPS teachers; Pittsburgh City Council and other elected officials; the Pittsburgh philanthropic and nonprofit community; and Pennsylvania state legislators, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021d).

3.5.3 Town Hall Series

In 2022, BW4BE hosted four virtual town hall meetings focused on our aspirations for what school could be, featuring local and national subject matter experts. Our March 7, 2022 town hall, *What Do Safe Schools Look Like*, was in response to the rise in physical violence in the district but expanded the definition of school safety to include safe and caring learning environments,

quality teaching, and non-oppressive policies as critical elements of safety (Black Women for a Better Education, 2022a). *What Does Bold, Successful School Leadership Look Like*, aired on March 21, 2022. This conversation featured experienced local and national district leaders who shared key qualities for PPS to look for during their upcoming superintendent search (Black Women for a Better Education, 2022b). The third town hall, *What Does Effective and Engaging Remote Learning Look Like*, aired April 7, 2022, and highlighted promising practices for effective and engaging remote learning (Black Women for a Better Education, 2022c). On October 7, 2022, BW4BE hosted a *Levers of Accountability* town hall focused on how accountability mechanisms including audits and litigation could be leveraged to achieve equity in Pittsburgh Public Schools (Black Women for a Better Education, 2022d). One of the panelists successfully ran for City Controller (who by default also serves as the Controller for PPS) in 2023 and has brought increased transparency to district audits and expenditures early in her tenure (City of Pittsburgh-Office of the Controller, 2024).

3.5.4 On the Agenda

In September 2022, BW4BE launched a series called *On the Agenda*, a thirty-minute virtual monthly conversation between a parent and a BW4BE-endorsed school board member about pertinent items on the legislative agenda. Topics have included curriculum adoptions, school safety policies, the allocation of COVID relief funds, and the amount of money PPS spends with Black vendor. There have also been several “special edition” *On the Agenda* sessions focused on the district budget and the facilities utilization plan. Viewers are encouraged to testify at the board public hearing and/or contact their school board member directly to share their perspectives on the issues. In their interview, Servant Leader commented on how *On the Agenda* helped them to take

a more laser focused view of the legislative agenda and the 10-15% of items that are related to student outcomes.

3.5.5 BW4BE Learning Institute

The BW4BE Learning Institute is a capacity building series geared towards people interested in becoming education thought leaders and/or running for PPS board. The first cohort, which was open to all Black women and anyone who was wanted to be considered for the 2021 BW4BE slate, was in Fall 2020 and included eight virtual sessions. The second cohort, which was open to anyone (and ended up being majority white), was in Fall 2022 and included a combination of eight in-person and virtual sessions. The Institute allowed participants to explore Black student and PPS-focused topics in a safe, intimate environment with local and national education experts. It also served as a training ground for prospective PPS board members by providing insight into the role directly from former board directors.

When asked about the role of the BW4BE Learning Institute in increasing understanding of PPS and encouraging their decision to run for PPS board (six of the eight slate members participated in the Institute), slate members highlighted the increased knowledge of PPS governance and operations, capacity building opportunities for prospective candidates, and the Institute as an intentional Black space as benefits. Community Advocate remarked how it helped them refine their two-to-three-minute pitch for PPS board forums. Converted Teacher appreciated how the Institute made district data easily accessible, which allowed them to use it to enhance the points of their platform. The knowledge shared by subject matter experts increased Creative Problem Solver's confidence to run a successful campaign and interact with constituents on the campaign trail. For Career Educator, checking their knowledge against people with different lived

experiences and being able to articulate their “why” was a value add. Education Nerd appreciated the opportunity to “nerd out about education issues” and learn about the specifics of the PPS board member role. Arts Educator participated in both cohorts of the Institute and appreciated the “designed majority Black space” of the first Institute cohort, as well as the plain speak about the issues and implications for PPS students.

BW4BE has become a trusted voice on education issues in the region through its awareness raising and capacity building efforts. We have attracted thousands of followers, mobilized hundreds of people to testify at public hearings, built a steady base of monthly PAC donors, and supported eight candidates to run for school board. As Education Nerd pointed out, “there’s also not a lot of back and forth nonsense... we just state the facts, give our position, say what we need to do, and keep moving.”

While it has been challenging for BW4BE to conduct consistent programming and maintain a steady social media presence because most of the work is done by unpaid founding members, recent foundation funding has provided an opportunity to hire contractors to provide project management and outreach support. Even when there is a hiatus, the community still looks to us for our perspective on current educational issues and to set the tone. Master Wayfinder compared us to Beyonce; like her, BW4BE only speaks when we have something to say, and when we do, it shifts the culture.

4.0 Main Findings and Key Takeaways

As previously discussed, BW4BE's work is an extension of the 1970s political activism led by Dr. Barbara Sizemore and the over thirty-year struggle of the Advocates. Outside of their direct action to mobilize a PPS board majority to hire an effective district leader, other efforts by led Black caregivers and community members (including the 1992 lawsuit) to advocate for better outcomes for Black students have been generally unsuccessful.

BW4BE stands on the shoulders of the Advocates with our current power shifting efforts, which have resulted in a PPS board majority, a necessary step in improving outcomes for Black children in the district, given the direct responsibility the school board has for monitoring and evaluating the performance of the superintendent. Through artifact analysis, interviews, and a sister circle, this case study centered around two questions: 1) What were the contributing factors to BW4BE's success in shifting power from PPS by flipping the school board? 2) How does the Black mothering tradition influence the way Black women show up as community organizers for school reform? In this chapter, I provide answers to the inquiry questions and uplift a set of takeaways that characterize BW4BE's journey.

4.1 Power Shifting Contributing Factors

BW4BE's success in shifting power from PPS by flipping the school board can be attributed to three factors. One, experiences with PPS left something to be desired. This was hardly a new sentiment, as Black PPS caregivers and community members have had an adversarial

relationship with the district for decades. This is not for a lack of trying, as Black scholars, caregivers, and community members have tried to share best practices, collaborate, and simply advocate for their children for years (New Pittsburgh Courier, 2020; Sizemore, 1987). Despite a substantial human and financial capital investment in caregiver engagement by PPS and a stated belief in the importance of caregiver-district partnership to accelerate student achievement, Black caregivers especially have been disregarded and disrespected by PPS (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2021). It has only been through the “extreme” methods of lawsuits and power shifting that any progress has occurred. We saw it in the 1970s political activism and subsequent 1992 lawsuit of the Advocates, and it has resulted in success for BW4BE thus far.

Two, current PPS board representation was inadequate. In the 1970s, Dr. Sizemore led the charge to oust an ineffective superintendent by leveraging the PPS board to use their authority to fire him. At a time when the board had recently transitioned to being publicly elected, she demonstrated the power we have as taxpayers and voters to demand that our school board carry out their responsibility to hire and hold accountable an effective superintendent. In 2020, our school board ignored the concerns of hundreds of community members and renewed the contract of the previous superintendent. The community responded by ousting several PPS board members in favor of BW4BE-supported candidates. Our BW4BE-endorsed school board majority reflects the community desire for stronger board representation.

Three, time and circumstances created a unique opportunity. The early years of the pandemic tested the infrastructure and leadership of many of our systems, and PPS was no exception. The district’s lack of investment in technology over the years resulted in the inability to pivot quickly to remote learning like other districts (Rihl, 2020). It took weeks for PPS to communicate with families about remote learning plans, and even longer for students with IEPs

(Thompson, 2020). Many families experienced firsthand a level of frustration with the district that their privilege had previously protected them from. In the backdrop, the country had a front-row seat to the modern-day lynching of Black people. White people and institutions (including Pitt) named both the racism we experienced and that which they perpetuated as culprits, and pledged solidarity to the Black community (Gallegher, 2020). BW4BE was able to capitalize on that momentum in service of our power shifting efforts on behalf of Black children. I will expand upon each of these factors below.

4.1.1 Experiences with PPS Left Something to be Desired

Experiences with PPS as a student, parent, and/or community partner left something to be desired. Dissatisfied with district leadership, Dr. Sizemore led a movement to gain a school board majority to oust him (Sizemore, 1987). This led to the hiring of a superintendent with a proven track record of improving outcomes for Black children, and PPS being lauded as a national model for urban school districts during that time (Guydon, 1988; Wallace, 1985). Despite the success of Dr. Wallace, the Advocates recognized the ongoing academic, social, and disciplinary inequities Black students faced and how the hiring of a traditionalist superintendent in 1992 would exacerbate those issues, which catalyzed the lawsuit (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021a; Equity Advisory Panel, 2020). The 2019 Gender Equity Commission Report underscored the disparate outcomes Black students in Pittsburgh have consistently faced as a compared to their local and national counterparts (Goodkind, 2019). Aforementioned challenges associated with the PPS remote learning rollout and response to the COVID-19 pandemic were merely symptomatic of the district's longstanding issues with leadership, technological infrastructure, operations, and

educational service delivery model (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021b, Black Women for a Better Education, 2020; Thompson, 2020)

These type of encounters with PPS by BW4BE founding members and slate members undergirded our awareness and capacity building strategy. BW4BE founding members have had varying experiences with PPS. The positive experiences, mainly as students, demonstrated the district's capability to serve Black students at high levels. It also constantly raised the question of why those experiences were not universal. While BW4BE founding members Education Nerd and Hereditary Activist had positive personal experiences with PPS as students, their experiences as PPS parents, employees, community partners, and those of their classmates were not, fueling their advocacy. Parent Advocate joined state and district advisory committees to learn how to better navigate the district in hopes of improving outcomes for Black children in the district and was eventually removed from the district group due to her outspokenness about the previous superintendent. Systems Disruptor sued PPS for their repeated violations of her child's individual education plan, and eventually transferred her child to a charter school in search of better educational options. Risk Taker's vexing experience with founding a district charter school in PPS and the perceptions board and district leadership held about Black children deterred her from sending her child to PPS. Master Wayfinder experienced an unwillingness by PPS to partner in her role with the city and the city's reservations to speak out about problems in the district. The blatant disregard of our concerns by the district illustrated the need for new board representation and motivated us to run the school board slates.

Each BW4BE slate member had some type of negative experience with PPS that fueled their desire to run. Lifelong Liberator was expelled from PPS as a student. Converted Teacher's mother pulled them out of PPS to be homeschooled after a series of horrendous educational

experiences. Community Advocate’s teachers saw no future for them beyond jail and death. Creative Problem Solver was concerned with the experiences their children were currently having in PPS, and Servant Leader and Education Nerd’s adult children had less than stellar experiences with the district. Career Educator was discouraged by the apathy of their colleagues. Arts Educator had grown frustrated with trying to improve the district as a community partner.

BW4BE was not shy about calling out the problems in the district and how they disproportionately impacted Black children. Our first publication highlighted some of the most pervasive issues in PPS in recent years, namely how increased revenue but fewer students and buildings over the past fifteen years had not yielded a positive academic return on investment (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021b). We criticized the lack of imagination in PPS in our second publication, calling for more innovative schools and stronger community collaboration (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021c). We used social media to help the community understand the adverse impacts of district decisions in real time such as the lack of a robust evaluation process for the superintendent, raising district taxes during the pandemic, and how COVID relief dollars were being spent. BW4BE gave voice to what PPS families were experiencing. Arts Education shared how they felt gaslighted by PPS during the pandemic, and how BW4BE provided a different analysis of the issues that was more aligned with theirs. Master Wayfinder talked about the “third way” that BW4BE offered, which was different than the typical binary of PPS education advocates. She shared, “this voice has always been there; the voice of Black women has always been present, but just an opportunity to say, hold on, we’re not OK with this.” Those messages resonated with the community, which was reflected at the ballot box.

4.1.2 Current PPS Board Representation was Inadequate

PPS board representation prior to BW4BE intervention was inadequate. Even in our early meetings before we officially decided to form a PAC to support PPS board candidates, we realized the school board was a key leverage point, which is why one of our first actions was to write a letter to them. Not only did the board disregard our advocacy, but they also renewed the superintendent's contract in record time out of defensiveness and arrogance. In the meantime, we had already laid the groundwork for the PAC with the goal of flipping the PPS board. Our messaging during the 2021 primary election season through our publications and social media always pointed the community to the upcoming election where they could directly influence who was on PPS board.

Many of the BW4BE slate members were not pleased with their representation and believed they were a better fit for the role. Education Nerd refused to let their school board member run unopposed and put their hat in the ring after failing to find another challenger. Arts Educator vehemently disagreed with their school board member's decisions to renew the previous superintendent's contract and postpone the start of school, which solidified their decision to run. Lifelong Liberator promised to run if they could not find a younger candidate and brought their previous experience as an elected official to the race. Career Educator understood the role of governance as a retired superintendent and wanted to contribute that knowledge to school board. Converted Teacher had ideas and solutions as a former PPS student and educator that would benefit Black PPS children.

In some ways, BW4BE was penalized for not following Pittsburgh's status quo for education advocacy. As Education Nerd put it, we did not "kiss all the rings" and ask for permission. Parent Advocate called out how education advocacy had become "self-serving" for

some of the long-time advocates who wanted to hold onto power and not “make room for others.” Additionally, in a city like Pittsburgh where there are very few degrees of separation, people who held our views about the changes needed in PPS were unwilling to speak out against board members with whom they have personal relationships. Master Wayfinder rightly attributed BW4BE’s success to not being “connected to [and paid by] the legacy institutions...of power in Pittsburgh...that have historically driven decisions about education.” The victories we gained during the 2021 election season demonstrated that BW4BE could successfully compete against major endorsement-granting entities.

4.1.3 Time and Circumstances Created a Unique Opportunity

The pandemic was an eye-opening experience for a Pittsburgh community with a general apathy for PPS. Even PPS caregivers who sent their children to school each day had no real idea about what was happening in schools until their homes became classrooms during virtual learning. While this was a new level of insight for all caregivers of school-aged children, it was apparent that the lack of foresight, proactivity, and leadership in PPS exacerbated the issues that arose during the pandemic. Districts with strong technological infrastructure and competent leadership pivoted quickly to maintain continuity in learning while PPS struggled. The district convened a nearly 300-person committee during the summer of 2020 to create a school reopening plan only to change course at the last minute, resulting in a full year of remote learning for most PPS students (Goldstein, 2020c). Other school districts around the county offered blended and/or hybrid models that allowed students to return to school buildings at least a few days a week (Maruca, 2020).

The dysfunction, mismanagement, and inequities the Advocates decried for decades were made visible to the community, and for some families, namely white ones, it was the first time

they felt the sting of the district's poor decision-making and leadership. As the Black mother who wrote the May 14, 2020 first-person essay in PublicSource put it, "For families like mine, disparities in education were present before COVID-19, and the district's response to the pandemic feels less like a huge departure from how things used to be. It's one more challenge for the district to overcome" (Thompson, 2020). White families flocked to BW4BE asking for our support around school start times (Johnson, 2021b). They staged a protest in front of PPS central office and wanted our blessing, which we gave in the form of sharing the information with our email distribution list. We also reminded them how a predominantly Black PPS high school had been starting at 7:15am for years and encouraged them to use their privilege to advance our advocacy for Black children.

Early in the pandemic the world witnessed the murders of Black men and women across America by white supremacists for simply being Black. Organizations released equity statements, companies changed the names of racist products, and some white people called all their Black friends to "check on them." Many of the actions of people and institutions ultimately proved to be non-performative, as many of those changes have been rolled back even further past the status quo (Ahmed, 2012). However, there was a moment in time where enough of the Pittsburgh community listened to Black women about public education and what their children were experiencing to support BW4BE financially, share our messaging, and vote for change on the PPS board. We had some avid white supporters who not only worked alongside us but defended us from attacks and validated our work. Below are a few Facebook posts from white women supporters right before the 2021 PPS board primary election.

"Woke up this morning to find out that my family is the subject of gossip and rumors because we support Black Women for a Better Education. I spent a minute being mad about it but

decided that giving these fabulous candidates my money would be a better use of my day” (C.Y, 5 May 2021).

“We justice minded liberals love to go to protests and chant ‘Trust Black Women! Support Black Women!’ But do we? When it requires us to actually listen, be challenged and consider that we might not have all the right answers, are we actually willing to listen to and trust Black women? Ya’ll are killin it” (B.B., 17 May 2021).

BW4BE also benefitted from the new perspective and energy our group brought to the education justice space. Our founding members were not new to education advocacy, but operating as a collective made the community stand up and take notice. As Master Wayfinder put it,

“I think the one thing that Pittsburghers look for is something new. Like honest to goodness, Pittsburghers will ride a wave. And so you gotta make sure you don't get stale because they'll also kick you to the curb real quick. But they're gonna ride a wave. And I think people got tired of like only one voice when it came to education advocacy...I think we just offered an opportunity for the nuance, we offered an opportunity to not go crazy on social media, right? [Other education groups were talking crazy to their elected officials and community leaders and fighting each other.] So I actually think all of their stuff helped us. I think they brought more attention to what we were doing, and I think in the time of George Floyd, you really think people are gonna go against a bunch of Black women. Everyone else in the space experiencing all of this white guilt. It was a lot of different factors happening at the same time and we rode the wave. With facts, but we were able to ride the wave and Pittsburgh was on the wave.”

BW4BE was intentional about connecting the district’s lack of crisis management during the pandemic to longstanding fiscal mismanagement, inadequate leadership, and disregard of

Black caregivers and community members. As Thompson (2020) stated in her first-person essay, “The school district was in crisis before COVID-19. It will be in crisis after the pandemic.” Like the Black Advocates before us, we offered political activism as a possibility to change board and district leadership. White allies who recognized their privilege in the experiences they had with the district, supported us financially, socially, and at the ballot box.

BW4BE is a part of a long line of Black maternal caregiver involvement in our children’s education, often done on behalf of our children to mitigate the effects of the oppression we face at the intersections of race and gender (Edwards, 2000; Kakli, 2011). This “motherwork,” which starkly differs from traditional, white caregiver involvement, is necessary for our children’s survival, to improve their life outcomes, and foster racial pride (Cooper, 2007, p. 493). While our white counterparts see themselves in certain aspects of our work and have joined along the way, the legacy of Black educational advocacy and activism in PPS has been consistent.

4.2 The Role of Black Mothering

The Black mothering tradition influenced the way Black women showed up as community organizers for school reform in three ways. One, the attraction to BW4BE was personal and mission aligned. The motivation to engage in this work was rooted in the lived experiences that our founding members and Black PPS board slate members were experiencing. All of us, white slate members included, shared a keen understanding of the inequities Black PPS families faced, and were personally compelled to make a difference.

Two, Black women have the unique and inherent ability to create supportive, safe spaces. Black mothering as a communal act has ancient African roots that have transcended intentional

efforts to strip Black women of their femininity and connections to motherhood during enslavement (Edwards, 2000). This manifests through critical care on behalf of our children and community as a form of resistance (Wilson, 2015). BW4BE began as a safe space for Black women who were frustrated by their experiences with the district, and translated to how we conducted our work and supported our PPS board slates.

Three, there was a hyperfocus on better outcomes for Black children. Like the Black Advocates who have preceded us, we all share the goal of improving PPS for our children. We understand the role a quality education plays in life outcomes for our children and the responsibility our district has in providing it. BW4BE returned to the needs of Black children at every turn despite questions about our motives and criticism of our approach.

4.2.1 The Attraction to BW4BE was Personal and Mission-Aligned

Cooper (2007) contended that motherwork for Black women was a form of power seeking that improved their children's outcomes and fostered a positive racial identity in their children. Kakli (2011) underscored the necessity of justice-oriented motherwork because of macro and microaggressions Black faced on daily basis in their communities. BW4BE did not shy away from addressing the impact that a poor education could have on our children. In our third publication, we stated: "The stakes are life and death for our children, and we refuse to lose another generation. In a society in which even the most highly educated Black people fear for their own safety and the safety of their children, a bad education is a devastating obstacle" (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021a, p. 4). Risk Taker called it the "generational kind of fortitude that we've had to have to save our children and to get them educated." She was attracted to BW4BE because of this type of risk taking they had not seen by many people in the Pittsburgh community.

The work of BW4BE was highly personal for the founding members. Most of us were connected to each other as close friends and longtime collaborators in the education space, and we each had a personal and/or professional connection to PPS. Many members of the community respected the expertise, lived experience, and the unapologetic stance we brought to conversations about public education in Pittsburgh. Parent Advocate contended that the biggest criticisms came from people who were jealous that they were not personally asked to participate.

King (2011, as cited in Sakho, 2017), highlighted the rhythmic, instinctive way in which Black women simultaneously resist oppressive narratives while allowing those narratives to drive us towards change via our community work, a task almost as easy as breathing. BW4BE happened alongside full-time jobs, childbirth, childrearing, job transitions, continuing education, the pandemic, illness, and loss. We experienced criticism, our individual and collective motivations have been questioned, and several of us have been confronted by other education activists in the region for our stance. Yet, there is a beautiful simplicity to BW4BE. Master Wayfinder reflected on the “ease” of this difficult work. She said,

“What's interesting is, when we got this started, it wasn't hard for us. It may have been hard to put ourselves out there, but it wasn't hard to do this. It wasn't hard to come together to pull together our resources. To utilize all of our abilities to collaborate and move this forward, to recognize that each of us have these talents to bring to the table, and to know the end goal is what we're after. And we're not really worried about who does what, which one gets the credit, all of those things, and we all have these amazing gifts. So we're literally bringing 100% all the time. So because each of us are working in our gifts, it just doesn't feel difficult. It doesn't feel difficult because we're allowed to at least from my perspective, be ourselves, bring our talent. We can apply those talents and like this shit comes easy.

Like we're allowed to do the shit that comes easy to us in this space, which is to me helping to propel the work.”

Every slate member felt drawn to BW4BE because of the personal or professional relationships they had with the founding members and/or the way in which the mission aligned with their own values. Community Advocate was introduced to the BW4BE by Master Wayfinder, and resonated with our stance that Black families should not be criticized or penalized for sending their children to charter schools if it is the best decision for their children. Servant Leader came across our social media posts and the newspaper articles about our efforts around the contract renewal and realized they had established relationships with a few of the founding members. They also joked that he knew better than to get on the bad side of Black women “who came together with force around the same cause.” Converted Teacher was asked to run for school board by Master Wayfinder, and in researching BW4BE, resonated with “the mission, the heart of the women, and how they were fighting for children and to dismantle systems...[and] the tinge of radicalism to BW4BE.” While Creative Problem Solver has close personal relationships with founding members, they resonated with the “poignant questions being asked [on social media] about the efficacy of the district” because they have children in PPS. As a former superintendent, Career Educator appreciated the data-backed letter by BW4BE calling for the nonrenewal of the previous superintendent’s contract, and how it broke “through the deafening and criminal silence about public education in this city.” “The focus, power, and inspiration of Black women in the struggle” who saw through the corruption and included the right people with the right strategies at the right time resonated with Lifelong Liberator. Education Nerd “believe[s] in the power of the Black woman” and relished the opportunity to be in community with them doing this work. For Arts Educator, “BW4BE provided a different and spot-on analysis of what was happening... things [in

the district] didn't make sense, but the leadership (with whom she had individual relationships) and the words of the group did.”

In the 1970s, the Advocates leveraged the court ruling that allowed for the first democratically elected board to oust an ineffective superintendent and replace him with one of the most effective superintendents PPS has ever had. In the 2020s, BW4BE revisited that strategy and was successful in electing a board majority. While it is early in their tenure, the community is looking to them and to BW4BE to make good on our commitment to Black children.

4.2.2 Black Women Inherently Create Supportive, Safe Spaces

Wilson (2015) offered the lens of critical care, a practice in which Black women practiced advocacy on behalf of others, rooted in Black women's inherent instinct for mothering and communal socialization. This framing served as a counternarrative to the perception that Black women do not care for their children and the overall disposability of Black people (Edwards, 2000; Wilson, 2015). As Master Wayfinder so aptly conveyed, being a Black woman and mother is revolutionary, drawing inspiration from Fred Hampton and her mother who put her potential freedom on the line to ensure she could attend a high-quality school. Community Advocate shared in detail the role their late mother played in keeping them on track in a school that did not value their existence, and how running for school board was to honor her legacy. Converted Teacher's mother homeschooled them after terrible experiences at multiple PPS schools. Lifelong Liberator situated BW4BE into the larger freedom movement context. They shared,

“[It] is embedded in their name. Black women, which conjures up images of my mother and the history of Black women in the struggle. And their focus was improving education

for our children. So the name Black women for a Better Education implies the importance of education as a part of the Black freedom movement. And it is still necessary.”

For members of the BW4BE slate, the PAC offered more than money, canvassing strategies, and forum preparation. Converted Teacher described it as a “sense of security.” Career Educator appreciated BW4BE’s role as “cheerleaders” and a “support system from an emotional human [standpoint]”. Lifelong Liberator appreciated being “led by the strength and power of Black women.” Education Nerd valued how BW4BE “just showed up” at forums and behind the scenes when she was on the campaign trail. For Arts Educator, BW4BE “felt like home.”

For the founding members, BW4BE was a safe haven for Black women who were experiencing a range of personal and professional experiences and transitions while navigating a pandemic. Hereditary Activist describes it as follows:

For me, it's just being able to show up in these spaces as our most authentic and vulnerable selves....[It] is a safe space, a safe haven to lean on each other and to be like, we're not crazy. This feels like the Twilight Zone, but no, we're not wrong. We're on the right side of history as it relates to this. I think that's really what this has been about, feeling, so alone and isolated in PPS...[and then after I left thinking about what] do I do with this knowledge and information and activism that I know lives in my DNA. I need to be able to do something with it. And I feel like that's really what this has been for me is to carry out, what feels like my life's work, what I've been called to do, like an extension of my legacy through Black Women for a Better Education.”

For Black women, the desire for their children to survive and thrive in an oppressive world is a form of resistance rooted in care (Edwards, 2000). In many ways BW4BE was building an

ecosystem countercultural to what Black families experience in schools and community. As Parent Advocate explained,

“[BW4BE was] a place of camaraderie, of joy, a learning opportunity, of freedom of speech. That's what it's been for me. And it's sad to think that, you know, our schools are such the opposite of what we have here...Even to take a pause from this group and then just to come in this space tonight [for the sister circle] and feel like I have not missed much. But that's the sisterhood that this group is about and represents for me.”

4.2.3 There was a Hyperfocus on Better Outcomes for Black Children

The marginalization of Black women not only provides a front row seat to systemic racial and gender-based oppression, but it makes them the most qualified to advocate on behalf of their children (Sakho, 2017). The mission of BW4BE is to ensure that Black children get the high-quality education they need and deserve. As much as critics have tried to question our motives and intentions, we have remained steadfast in our commitment and accountability to each other and to Black children. Parent Advocate views it as her life's purpose to “dwell among the children” in service to them. Systems Disruptor reflected on the resilience of Black children who have been consistently failed by the system as motivation to create systems where Black children do not need to be resilient. Education Nerd found herself in PPS board meetings “shaming people” who adultified children and made excuses for adult behavior. She said,

“The kids are behaving in really logical ways. The kids who show up at school and they act whatever kind of way, it's because school doesn't mean anything to them. It's because school has never meant anything to them. It's because school is not serving any purpose for them. But they have to be there because the law says they do. And so unless we change

what school is, then we will continue to have the same outcomes. It's not about the kids being different. We can't therapize them out of their behavior. We can't give them prizes so that they change their behavior. We have to fundamentally change how we do school. And in order to keep coming back to Black kids, sometimes you just have to shame people and say, you know, you're talking about thirteen-year-old children, right...a lot of our executive sections are, we're talking about thirteen-year-old children; they're babies.”

BW4BE endorsed school board members who had a passion for and/or experience with improving the lives of Black children. Education Nerd wanted to mirror the wonderful experience they had at their PPS elementary school, one that they realized very early was not the experience of their own classmates. Community Advocate, Converted Teacher, and Lifelong Liberator, and Servant Leader did not want to see their experiences or those of their children repeated for any other child. Creative Problem Solver was concerned about the ecosystem in which their children and those around them found themselves. Arts Educator was concerned about PPS board and district decisions and policies that impacted Black students, and Career Educator had the expertise to address those issues.

The strategies of BW4BE were in service of making PPS the high-quality district that Black children deserved. In our fourth publication, we called for the concerned parties of PPS to be more loyal to Black children than each other (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021d). BW4BE's truth-telling was attractive to Converted Teacher, who shared:

“[BW4BE] stirred the pot in a good way because you're coming with truth, and when you come with truth you can't argue with that. So it's just like pulling the sheets off of things that have just been status quo, and no longer condoning status quo, but demanding that Pittsburgh Public Schools be and do better by Black students. One of the things that I heard;

I can't remember who said it, but it never left me, is that if we do right by Black and Brown children, then all children are being educated. And that stuck with me when I heard it because it's absolutely true. If we want to be a better district, we have to make sure that black and children are properly being educated, or the district is not doing that great of a job. I don't care how you dress up the numbers.”

4.3 Key Takeaways

4.3.1 We Have Been Socialized to Pave Over People and History in PPS

When I worked at PPS I would often say, “our people perish from lack of context. During that time, I had long conversations with my mother about the cycles of reform and the revolving door of administrators she experienced in her thirty-eight years with the district. With every new person came a new idea, with no assessment of how the previous plans worked before implementing something new. While there were initiatives the district should have abandoned, there were just as many others that were successful but cast to the side with a change in leadership.

The 1970s political activism of the Advocates is a clear example of this. PPS was quick to “celebrate” the thirty-year anniversary of the 1992 lawsuit (though perennially failing outcomes are no cause for celebration), with no mention of how those same Advocates mobilized this city to elect effective board leadership who in turn hired a superintendent who made PPS a national model for urban education (Fondy, 1988; Guydon, 1988). The erasure of the transformational activism of the Advocates who fought for equity in PPS not only prevents us from learning from their success, but it dishonors their legacy.

Part of this doctoral journey for me has been the documentation of BW4BE's work, and exploring how we can be more intentional in capturing our story. As part of a grant from a local foundation, we requested funds for an archival project to tell the story of the Advocates. This presents an exciting opportunity to connect the dots on Black educational advocacy and activism in PPS. Hopefully, when BW4BE celebrates its thirtieth anniversary in 2050 it will be the turning point in this decades-long journey, and not another sad milestone for the lack of progress in PPS.

4.3.2 Bold Action Outweighs Unpopular Opinion and Hierarchy

Educational outcomes have been perennially poor for Black children in PPS since its inception (A+ Schools Pittsburgh, 2022; A+ Schools Pittsburgh, 2023; Sizemore, 1987; Tyack, 1974). Instances of Black activism on behalf of their children have been disregarded, abandoned, and erased. People with power choose to remain willfully ignorant about PPS (unless it involves their own children), lack motivation to speak out against colleagues and friends about their role in perpetuating these outcomes, and are unwilling to take the political hit of countering legacy institutions who hold their reelection or reappointment in the balance. PPS watchdog organizations bypassed opportunities to leverage the collective momentum to call the district out during the pandemic and chose instead to collaborate on minimally impactful initiative and organize around the district. Career Educator shared their appreciation for BW4BE's willingness say things that were unpopular:

“[BW4BE] came out when it wasn't popular to say things that a lot of people knew but for whatever reason weren't willing to say, and people who would publicly say one thing like, oh, we've got to support this, that, or the other, but behind the scenes would show doubt. You folks never apologize, and I'm not saying you were brazen or rude. But you were

persistent and professional, which is an attraction to me. Because taking unpopular stances on important issues, and staying the course, and adjusting of course based upon where the push back comes from, to me, is both a talent and a blessing that our city needs to embrace.”

Additionally, as Systems Disruptor rightly pointed out, advocacy in our region has conflated information with action and outputs with outcomes. She shared,

“So much in Pittsburgh advocacy is always looking at giving people access to information. But I think what [BW4BE] did was we didn't give people just access to information; we gave them access to change a system. We've got to bridge the access to information in the systemic change and activate that. And that's what Pittsburgh is not used to. Like this is literally just analysis paralysis.”

Education Nerd reflected on the criticism she received for having a position that was not “vetted” by the Pittsburgh education advocacy hierarchy,

“There were many Black people who came at me with regard to Black Women for Better Education. There were many more white people who were supportive, financially, but you would think that even the name is off-putting to white people and they wouldn't want to get behind it. So many Black people who came at me for [having a position on the previous superintendent]. You did not go through the proper protocol. You did not kiss all the rings. And when you do that, you end up having a position, right? Like that's all you have, and you still are not like reforming a district. Making a school district different is hard work. And you can't do it if you're comfortable. You can't do it if you're trying to keep your position. You can't do it if you want to get reelected. You can't do it if all those things are true, and that's part of the conundrum of Black Pittsburgh. Like, people telling me I didn't

go through the right channels. I'm like, I am almost 60 years old. Like, what are you saying to me right now?"

BW4BE faced massive criticism for our refusal to condemn charter schools. Our stance was that Black families should send their children to the schools where they could get the best education. We also called out the hypocrisy of demonizing Black caregivers who chose charter schools over traditional PPS schools when we have seen minimal progress on the thirty-year lawsuit between the EAP and PPS, and white people have been the most disloyal demographic to PPS given that the district population is disproportionately Black compared to city's population.

Arts Educator appreciated how BW4BE complicated the narrative about charter schools. They shared,

“I think that Black Women for a Better Education has helped to complicate the story about charter schools and have a reframe that this is not about charter schools. It's like moving away from the frame of charter schools as evil, but rather thinking about families from the perspective of families, and that all families have the right to make the best choices that they know how to make for their children. And who is anyone else to tell them that they're wrong...So just as like all families have the opportunity to make these choices, the data shows us that Black families in particular are disproportionately making the choice for charter, and so all the more, who is everyone to say that is not okay when we know that school outcome data is abysmal and most devastating for Black children, while simultaneously we know that forever white families have been working the choice system through the magnet system; picking and choosing which, PPS school they're going to, and in and out of private, private to CAPA. White families have been doing this forever, and

so retelling the story about how do we actually make PPS the school that no one wants to leave, the district that no one wants to leave. I think has been I think has been important.”

Community Advocate appreciated the validation of their own beliefs about charter schools.

They shared,

“[Hereditary Activist] was the original introduction to Black Women for a Better Education [for me]. She opened my eyes to some things that I stood for and gave me the wisdom not to be ashamed of sending my child to a charter school. Cause that's what they do. They try to put a shame on you. Cause they look at it as a money thing, and my thing is this: whoever's cooking the best food, that's the restaurant that you go to, right? So, why put yourself in a position, to put your children in a position, or recommend children of other families to places and spaces that aren't really catering to the specific needs [of Black children]...You want to make sure that the children are going to where they can actually be more successful.”

BW4BE's flat leadership model and collective responses under the group name was to prevent individual members from being cherrypicked and facing personal and professional retaliation. It still happened anyway. There were rumbles of Hereditary Activist being a disgruntled ex-PPS employee. Master Wayfinder received scrutiny from a funder of an organization on whose board she serves. Parent Advocate was removed from the EAP. White mothers were talking about us in private social media groups. The media blew clerical accounting errors out of proportion while showing grace to established entities. Yet, BW4BE persisted despite the pushback because the urgency of improving PPS for Black children outweighed the criticism and risk. Kakli (2011) and Cooper (2007) pointed to the same type of determination and resolve in the Black mothers they highlighted in their work; all of us went to great lengths on behalf of our children.

4.3.3 There is a Divine, Spiritual, Ancestral Throughline to BW4BE

Dillard (2000) contended that “spirituality is intimately woven into the ethos of an endarkened feminist epistemology, with a critical assumption that research is the pursuit of intellect, spirituality, and purpose focused on knowledge production, truth telling, and truth making (p. 672). Sakho’s (2017) Black Activist Mothering framework further operationalized endarkened feminist epistemology by providing three tools to connect lived experiences to theory and practice, *Gumbo Ya Ya*, *Veil Walking*, and *Holding Space*. Sakho (2017) stated,

“*Gumbo Ya Ya* as a sense making tool; then, allows for critically thinking about multiple stories including master narratives across space, place and time simultaneously while in concert with an event. While not necessarily documented, we, Black women as mothers, cultivate our intellectual and political development by invoking *Gumbo Ya Ya*, to make sense of our lived experiences by “layering multiple and asymmetrical stories” (p. 10).

Even before I fully understood the extent of the Advocates’ 1970s political activism that leveraged the PPS board to bring a transformational leader, I realized there was a deeper connection to BW4BE’s work predating the 1992 lawsuit. This was confirmed for me through my committee member Dr. Martez Files, who shared a piece by Dr. Sizemore to include in the framing of this dissertation. Dr. Files’s inclusion on my committee was the result of a “chance” meeting when he was invited to one of my classes by the professor. His lived experience as a Black feminist scholar and activist was the perfect addition to my committee. To me, the convergence of these events was not happenstance, but my own version of *Gumbo Ya Ya*, in which the pieces came together at the perfect time, place, and space.

Several of the BW4BE founding members reflected on the spiritual aspects of BW4BE’s work and their call to advocacy on behalf of Black children rooted in legacy. Dream Fulfilled

shared that she felt “magnetically attracted to strong Black women spaces, including [BW4BE].” Risk Taker called it the generational fortitude to educate and save our children. Master Wayfinder reminded us of the ever-present voice of Black women in the education advocacy space. Hereditary Activist referred to her participation in BW4BE as an “extension of [her] legacy.” Parent Advocate shared,

“So it's just like this unction, this calling. I look at it as all spiritual warfare. You know, I have centered myself. I have resigned to say this is what I'm supposed to do on this earth in this way. And I feel lucky that I had a collective passion and was introduced to these women in different ways, and still even though I haven't seen you all in a while [prior to the sister circle], I feel still honored that you called me, [Hereditary Activist] and very much a part of this group.”

Lifelong Liberator, whose pseudonym is reflective of their dedication to the ongoing Black struggle, was a catalyst for BW4BE’s advocacy efforts. We were able to operationalize their call for new district leadership through the letter and provide much-needed support for them on school board as the lone PPS board incumbent unapologetically committed to Black student achievement. Our partnership with and support of Lifelong Liberator as our elder was in some ways a passing of the torch.

Veil Walking is a way in which Black women navigate this journey of Black Activist Mothering across space, place and time. Sakho (2017) explained it as follows:

“When we *Veil Walk*, we are carrying messages and possibilities back and forth between individuals, systems, structures, and histories. This means that when we work the borders, gaps, margins and liminal spaces we are passing through veils on a quest not only to transport and translate knowledge from the dominant world back to these uneven and

inequitable spaces but also, to carry that rich thick counter-knowledge *from the bottom up* and across systems of power” (p. 11).

Dr. Sizemore veil walked between university scholar and community activist, elevating best practices in Black PPS student achievement while actively leveraging the school board to appoint new leadership when her scholarship and advocacy was disregarded. The Advocates veil walked between traditional methods of district caregiver engagement and a lawsuit against PPS when they were not granted the same level of privilege as white parents for the same type of advocacy. They were admonished as poor Black caregivers for their audacity to sue the school district. Similarly, BW4BE reverted to power shifting efforts when fact-based advocacy for new district leadership was ignored. In each case, we utilized methods of the dominant culture (i.e., litigation, civic engagement, and the electoral process) to put power in the hands of marginalized Black people in service of their children.

Lifelong Liberator, reflected on the role education plays in progressing the Black liberation movement.

“As I study the liberation movement all over the planet throughout time, the education of the next generation of leaders is extremely important. And none is more important than the education of Black children in the United States of America. The struggle that we are fighting is a long-term struggle, and if we look forward to the development of leaders in that struggle, it begins with how well they're educated. Educated academically; also educated about the world and educated about our people and our struggle. So, it's, it's always been a vital component of the Black liberation struggle, and it still is today.”

BW4BE operates in the nuance, as many educational issues are not black and white. Sakho described *Holding Space* as

“the willingness to honor a multiplicity of truths with a level of vulnerability that resists judgment while at the same moment holding inequity and injustice accountable or unapologetically enacting spiritual militancy” (Sakho, 2017, p. 11).

Education Nerd reflected on how BW4BE has expanded the conversation about education in the region:

“Black Women for a Better Education has made the conversation more nuanced. And forced people to think in ways that they hadn't necessarily thought before. And even if they don't recognize out loud that they have done that. So I think that one of the things that we have done, especially in when it comes to the whole idea of like what's best for Black kids...there have been like oh black kids need services and they need strong district schools and they need da da da da da da. And Black Women for a Better Education is sort of like, okay, those things are the case, and there are some other ways that we can look at our circumstances and sort of poke holes in these ideas that are like commonly held beliefs about what Black kids need for to get a good education.”

BW4BE not only reenergized a conversation about public education in Pittsburgh, but it also helped people to see the possibilities for advocacy and activism to address myriad issues that disproportionately impact Black people in this region. As Creative Problem shared,

“We can talk about the very tangible effects of Black Women for a Better Education. The goal is to increase people's awareness of how things work so that they can become more engaged, to have a better running [PPS school] board. But I think there is some indirect positive consequences that come from Black Women for a Better Education being created. Something like this empowers people to notice when something does not work and decide to move. And I think that's powerful. It doesn't have to be education, it can be voting rights,

it can be youth programming, it can be any number of issues because we have plenty to choose from, but I think when you can see a group of people mobilize, organize and act, it gives other people a very clear vision of what that looks like so that they can do it for themselves.”

While we are adamantly against anyone and anything that does not have the best interests of Black children in mind, the ways in which we get there are multifaceted. We understand the role of Black people as both oppressors and liberators in PPS. We see charter schools as a benefit and a detriment to our children. We want PPS to become a better district while we also ponder how to facilitate a mass exodus of Black children from a system that has constantly failed them. As Black women who are constantly on the margins of society, we hold space for this discomfort while creating a safe space for others to join us there alongside our ancestors and elders in the fight for educational justice in PPS.

5.0 Wonderings, Recommendations, and Future Work

In this final chapter, I share two wonderings that point towards the future of BW4BE and what we aspire to accomplish on behalf of Black children and families in PPS. I then outline a set of role-specific recommendations for people and groups interested in this type of work. I end with ideas for future BW4BE projects and potential research opportunities.

5.1 Wonderings

5.1.1 What can a PPS board majority actually accomplish?

Following in the footsteps of Dr. Sizemore's 1970s political activism, BW4BE was successful in securing a PPS board majority. That school board hired a transformational leader who moved the needle for Black children during his twelve-year tenure. The BW4BE-supported group of five have been in office together since December 4, 2023, and have at least the next two years together before 2025 PPS board elections. Education Nerd, who has been on the board since 2021, has seen significant changes in the past four months now that there is a BW4BE board majority. The board is hiring a governance coach to improve the way they operate. They requested a facilities utilization plan from district administration to understand and make informed decisions about the district's footprint. They are sharing resources and information with out of school time partners more intentionally. Servant Leader credited BW4BE's On the Agenda series for helping

them consider how many items on the agenda could be approved via a consent agenda to make time for meaningful discussion on high-impact items.

While our majority was not in place in time to collectively select the current PPS superintendent (though three of our members were on the board at the time and approved his appointment), this board better understands the role the superintendent plays in transforming outcomes for Black children and their role in holding him accountable. Servant Leader shared,

“I think the first and most significant way that [BW4BE] impacted conversations is really around the work and effort needed to make a change at the superintendent level. You know, the superintendent is the driver of the educational bus to use that kind of analogy, and, you know, we had for 5 or 6 years a superintendent that was not serving our kids in the way that we needed to. I think the first move and probably the biggest move that was made was a concerted effort of putting together a slate of candidates that sent a signal to the [previous] superintendent that things were gonna change. And I think that’s probably the most powerful thing that anybody can do is signal, with authority and backing that staying the same is not gonna be acceptable.”

Both the BW4BE founding members and the slate members have high expectations for the PPS board majority. Converted Teacher viewed the slate’s knowledge, willingness to have difficult conversations, an orientation towards solutions, and a focus on children and families as assets. Arts Educator appreciated the “sufficient number of school directors with a more robust understanding of the experience of Black children in PPS...and [how] there are more school directors who are more focused on the work than looking like they're doing the work and performing the work.” Servant Leader valued the opportunity to have “the really hard conversations,” as it is easy for PPS

board members to be distracted by the minutia instead of focusing on the big picture. Creative Problem Solver shared their perspective on the value BW4BE and the slate bring to PPS:

“I think that the values that Black Women for a Better Education has presented are very holistic. And when I think about the district currently and the way that it runs, there are just a lot of marks that are being missed. The perspective that endorsed candidates for Black Women for a Better Education, that Black Women for Better Education as a platform presents and has people think about, allows us to really reach our most marginalized children and families. And I am a proponent of a rising tide lifts all boats, so it's not enough to just change outcomes for one type of child. It's about changing an entire system and increasing the standards that we have for an entire system. Black Women for a Better Education has challenged the system in so many ways that the level of mediocrity that they were operating in before is just totally unacceptable out loud, right? Like it's not just something that's happening between two people having a conversation on a bus, it is vocalized that this level of inefficiency and ineffectiveness is unacceptable. And I think that having a board majority that is endorsed by Black Women for a Better Education with candidates who were pushed by Black Women for a Better Education allows for a balance in what was in my opinion, a previously incompetent system. So I think it brings a certain level of competency to board operations, to board governance that will impact not just the way the board is run, but the way that the entire district feels about its board. About the support of their board. About the ability of the board to effectively run the district. So I think that it will improve the confidence that people have in the school board's ability to have a successful school district.”

Lifelong Liberator called out the need for a common agenda, not just among the five BW4BE-endorsed candidates, but all the Black PPS board members. They shared,

“It's not enough just to be the majority, we have to understand that we are the majority and that that comes with a certain responsibility and a certain strategy of work...Some of that Black majority may just see it as their individual responsibility to be on the board, not that they have a particular responsibility for a strategy of improving the education of Black students. Black students in the Pittsburgh School District are suffering. They're struggling. They are not being educated. They are being the victims of racist stereotypes. And the Black members of the board can do a lot about that if we're conscious of it, and we see it as our responsibility, part of our responsibility, on the school board, and we meet and talk together among each other to figure out how we improve it. So it's an added layer of work and responsibility for the Black members to function as a majority.”

Career Educator reiterated the need for a common agenda that pulls “all the pieces of the puzzle...[into] a transformational picture.” To accomplish this, Education Nerd contended that governance must be the starting point,

“This board majority is going to, is going to really dig in on appropriate governance...We've not been able to get anything done partly because we don't even know what's appropriate for us to be doing. And we have had such a focus on, here are the board tabs. This is what we have to vote on, and the bigger conversation of what is it that we should be considering has not even come up. This particular board I know we are beginning to have those conversations. What are those bigger issues that we should be considering that will have a real impact on outcomes for kids.”

Systems Disruptor shared her hope that an aligned PPS board could catalyze regional power by helping people to understand the relationship between the school board, city, and county as it relates to decisions about land, given that property taxes are the direct funder of the school district. “Increasing the power of the vote in the three-voting system,” she said, “that would give a lot of power to a lot of powerless people.”

Having a slim majority of five is not without its risks, however. Community Advocate reflected on the balance of PPS board members supporting the agenda of the groups that endorsed them while also standing on their personal morals, which may not always be aligned. Both Servant Leader and Lifelong Liberator called on BW4BE to continue to support the PPS board majority as they navigate the next two years. Servant Leader shared,

“If there are instances where folks will kind of get out of line because of personal or, you know, whatever positions, I think having [BW4BE] that can bring it back together and say, you know, let's cut out all the personal stuff and let's get back to the work of serving kids, I think has the potential to really be influential, not just through 2024, but through 2025 because that majority is not gonna go away for, you know, the next 2 years. And so, you know, I think to continue, or at least grow into that space of being conveners or continuing to be conveners as we move through this next year and the year after and the decisions have to be made, to really just be the driving force around reminding folks that this is what we've signed up to do.”

With district reconfiguration on the docket for this board, which will likely result in the unpopular process of closing schools, this board majority has a tough road ahead. However, Education Nerd is optimistic about the board majority's ability to navigate it. She shared,

“So I think that one of the things that we're going to be able to do is to elevate a conversation about, about our school footprint, about footprints, period. Where lots of people have sort of dug in and said, you can't close our schools, I think that this Black Women for a Better Education majority on the board is going to be able to push past some of that and really think about what is in the best interest of the district, but also what's in the best interest of kids. Our current footprint in the district is not serving Black kids well. So I think that we're gonna be able to have those conversations.”

It is easy to fall into the trap of building capacity as the impetus for closing schools. BW4BE has been clear about the importance of centering Black students in decisions about the district footprint. We understand the harm that closing schools in predominately Black neighborhoods has caused in our city, but we also understand the harm of keeping ineffective ones open.

The legacy of this PPS board majority is directly tied to that of BW4BE, which brings both hope and pause. Even people who have wanted to do the right thing have found themselves complicit in perpetuating white supremacy. I could not fully escape it during my time in PPS. While changes to the board and district leadership in the late 1970s brought on an era of enlightenment in PPS, progress came to a screeching halt a little over a decade later. The 1992 PPS board hired a traditionalist who rolled back Dr. Wallace's progress and resegregated the district (Wertheimer, 2015). The irony was that his successor was an internal hire, which underscores the need for districts to ensure full system buy-in and engage in intentional succession planning.

Further, board members are still individuals who can ultimately cast their votes in ways that benefit their personal interests. Even Dr. Wallace's appointment was not a unanimous decision

(Guo, 1980; Marcus, 1980). With a slim five-person majority, one school board member deviating from the group can be detrimental to progress. Therefore, it will be important for BW4BE to keep the PPS board members grounded in their commitment to Black children. We have funds to provide coaching and strategizing support for our school board members. Those individual conversations with our board majority members, led by a former superintendent in our network, have been helpful in guiding their decision making. However, due to the PA Sunshine Act (1998), we cannot privately convene the full group since they compose a board quorum.

A metanalysis of educational reform efforts by McKinsey found that transformation took approximately eight to twelve years (Arundel, 2024). For our board majority, is two years enough to demonstrate enough change to maintain a school board majority? Will our candidates want to seek reelection? If not, will other people step up to carry out their agenda? Will they be reelected if the public cannot see the potential in the transformation they are trying to lead? Is true transformation possible in a system that would fare better by being dismantled?

5.1.2 Is a mass exodus of Black children from PPS the actual answer?

In our third publication where we lamented how we are still facing the same issues the Advocates fought against decades ago, BW4BE (2021a) wrote:

“While much is the same, there are also new possibilities. Since the Advocates started their work, new school options have emerged, albeit imperfect ones...If there has been one “silver lining” of the pandemic, it is that it has opened our minds to how we think about school, and it’s forced us to explore new ways of educating our children...But these new possibilities also threaten the sustainability of the District, and open up opportunities for us, as Black families, to leverage our power and take control over our own destinies—just

as white families have been doing for years. At this point in history, Pittsburgh Public Schools needs us as much or more than we need them” (p. 5)

Black families have been the most loyal demographic to PPS since the white flight that followed desegregation. However, in the decades that our children have been the majority, the district has remained laser focused on how to appease and appeal to white families. Even well-intentioned programs like the Pittsburgh Promise were more focused on bringing white families back into the city than better supporting the Black students who were already here.

BW4BE has been called the “charter PAC” for supporting autonomy for Black families to send their children to the best educational option for them. This same type of criticism is never levied on white city-dwelling families who do not choose PPS or most PPS teachers who live outside the city. While our current efforts have been focused on district transformation, we have never shied away from speaking boldly about what a “Blexit” (Black mass exodus) of Black families from PPS could look like, and how BW4BE might create an ecosystem of high-quality learning opportunities for families.

The idea of alternative learning options for Black children is not unique to BW4BE. During the pandemic, the number of Black families around the country homeschooling their children quintupled (Moscufo, 2022). Pittsburgh Brown Mamas, whose founder Muffy Mendoza homeschooled her children for years, provides resources for current and prospective homeschooling families (Pittsburgh Brown Mamas, n.d.). Converted Teacher’s mother removed her from PPS to homeschool her after a series of negative experiences with the district. As Black women, we realize that no singular education system will work for everyone, but we could surely take the best of many systems to create something new for our children. We remain cautiously optimistic about the ability for PPS to meet this need, but we are not holding our breaths.

5.2 What can individuals and systems learn from BW4BE?

In defining the responsibility Black women researchers have to their community and its well-being when conducting educational inquiry, Dillard (2000) shared, “to know something is to have a living relationship with it, influencing and being influenced by it, responding to and being responsible for it” (p. 673). As a Black woman researcher and co-founder of BW4BE, I am responsible for the Black children I birthed, I raise, and those in my community. The candidness with which I share the following role-specific truths and recommendations come from a place of maternal protection and deep love for Black children.

5.2.1 To PPS and other urban school districts

Get behind Black women or get left behind. Black women will never stop advocating for their children to get a high-quality education. We will risk jail, public criticism, and go to great lengths to remove people from positions that harm our children. The work of Dr. Sizemore, BW4BE, and education reform efforts across the country is a testament to the power and tenacity of Black women. We understand the critical relationship between the school board and the superintendent. Pittsburgh’s legacy of educational political activism provides a toolkit for how districts across the region and county can mobilize their communities to gain school board majorities and oust ineffective superintendents.

We are also unafraid to remove our children from harmful urban school districts and/or opt out of them altogether. There are more educational options available now than in the 1970s. The number of Black children enrolling in charter schools will continue to increase if the traditional schools are not serving our needs. Learn from the charter schools under your purview and utilize

their best practices to create innovative schooling options. Hold accountable the ones that are not effective. Commit to teaching the whole Black child. We will not continue to subject our children to districts, schools, and educators who do not love them.

Prioritize Black students in district reconfiguration efforts. Do not rebuild districts for the white students you hope will return; improve them for the Black students who are there now. Do not support tax abatements for companies and developers that gentrify neighborhoods and push Black families out of your districts, especially if they are the most loyal demographic in your district. If there must be some type of compromise, consider payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) programs to support district initiatives (Royston, et al., 2022).

5.2.2 To elected officials

Have a stance on education that goes further than your own personal position/interests. PPS does not exist in a bubble. Other governing bodies and entities have a responsibility to Black children in this region, and BW4BE has brought that message to the forefront. As Master Wayfinder put it,

“Long term, I think [our work was about] ensuring that people had a perspective in this region about education so that everyone can understand it's our collective responsibility what happens to the lives of these kids. You know, I think that's when like things will change for young people. Like trying to raise the consciousness of people related to education, I think is the work of Black women for a Better Education. And so that means like Mayor, you don't get off the hook to talk about education, you know, State Rep you don't get off the hook to talk about education. Like you just don't get off the hook. You have to have a perspective. And so, you know, I think when more people can continue to

have that perspective, it's a bit more informed. We're continuing to let people know that we're watching. I think that's when it will change for kids. But it has to be consistent, right? We gotta keep doing it, but I think that's what will lead to the change for kids.”

We understand the interconnectedness of our government and have been laying the groundwork for years to support other elected officials through our PAC. If you want our support, take a bold stance for Black children or risk getting your seat flipped.

5.2.3 To teachers’ unions

We can start PACs and influence local elections as well. In 2021, our PAC got three PPS board members elected. Our teachers’ union got two. We were able to raise at least \$5,000 for each of our candidates just like our teachers’ union. We have put a stake in the sand about our expectations for school board representation. Join forces with us and co-endorse candidates who we know have children’s best interest in mind.

We are also not afraid to call out your hypocrisy. Most of our teachers do not live in the city. We have always supported families in making the best educational choices for their children. What we do not support is the criticism of Black families for choosing charter schools and/or other non-PPS options when your children’s school choices and your tax dollars do not support our city.

We respect teachers and your right to unionize. We know that safe and effective learning environments are mutually beneficial for students and teachers. That said, we do not accept any practice or policy that puts adults' interests over children's needs. Revisit your collective bargaining agreements. Make changes to the places where children are being harmed.

5.2.4 To the PHRC, PDE, PA Auditor General, and other governing bodies

Stop playing in our faces. What's the point of having standards and MOUs if there is no recourse when our districts fall short? These schools are failing our children and marching them to jail and early graves. Utilize your authority to hold these districts accountable. Withhold funding until they develop a real plan for improving outcomes for Black children. Develop a plan to conduct regular audits of school districts. Take actionable steps to resolve the Advocates' thirty-plus year lawsuit against PPS.

5.2.5 To white people

Trust Black women. We inherently lead with the best interests of everyone in mind. Your liberation is tied to ours. Get in the fight to advocate for all children and utilize your privilege to elevate issues on behalf of Black children and families. Talk to other white people about these issues and do not ask us for additional labor unless we offer it.

Worry more about the way in which white flight and decision-making about school choice have impacted urban school districts than how and where Black families are educating their children. Ask yourself why certain school options are acceptable for Black children if they are not acceptable for yours.

Also, stop claiming to be proponents of public schools if your child's school is not educating Black children as well as or better than it is educating your child. Interrogate why schools and classrooms in your district are racially segregated especially in accelerated courses. If your advocacy does not include the voices of Black families, then your well-intentioned efforts will likely result in even more harm.

5.2.6 To aspiring BW4BE chapters and education justice advocates

Lead with facts. Partner with local organizations and universities and/or submit right-to-know requests obtain district data. Build your intellectual capital around district systems, operations, and power structures. Creating the BW4BE Learning Institute allowed us to build a cadre of educational thought leaders and prospective board members who were highly knowledgeable about our district.

Keep the needs of Black children centered. If the focus is on what is best for students, then you are moving in the right direction. Be unafraid to speak up against any adult, system, or structure knowingly harming children. Be reminded that holding Black adults in positions of power in educational systems to a lower standard because they are Black, especially at the expense of Black children, is a perpetuation of racism.

Build a school board bench. Identify people who are interested in running for the school board. Build their education knowledge base. Connect them to members of your community who are interested in education and/or major election influencers. Ask them to run for the school board. When they tell you no, ask them again. Raise money for them. Canvass for them. Introduce them to other people who will support their campaigns. Support them in refining their talking points.

Operate as a protective collective. BW4BE has been called everything but our name. Our motivations have been questioned. The attacks have been personal and professional. That is why the sisterhood has been so important. We understand each other. We can show up as our authentic selves. We speak as a group. We make collective decisions. Our individual strengths create a powerful whole.

Take care of yourself. Since we started BW4BE, our founding members have had babies, changed jobs, lost loved ones, moved into new homes, and battled illness. This is all while living

through a pandemic in one of the worst cities in America for Black women (Goodkind, 2019). Find time for genuine self-care. Take naps. Close your laptop and love on your children; the work will be there tomorrow. Do not let these systems kill you any faster than they already are.

This list of groups and associated recommendations is not exhaustive. The main takeaway is that no one gets to straddle the fence when it comes to the education of Black children.

5.3 Future Work

The work of BW4BE is ongoing as we continue to implement our programming, support our PPS board majority, and tackle current district issues. We have been fortunate to receive significant funds from a local foundation, including a multi-year grant to add capacity to our team, expand our communications, and bolster our programming. I share a few highlights of current and potential work below.

5.3.1 A Focus on District Reconfiguration

As previously discussed, PPS has initiated conversations about the district footprint. In the past, this has resulted in a rash of school closures which have disproportionately affected Black PPS students and families (cite). While BW4BE is not adamantly against school closures like other grassroots education advocacy groups, we are hyperfocused on the impact district reconfiguration will have on Black children. To keep the community informed about the process and how they can get involved, we are hosting regular *On the Agenda* special edition conversations with the PPS board president about the status of the district facilities utilization plan. Given that broad public

outreach was part of the board mandate for creating the plan, we are exploring community outreach options to ensure that Black voices are represented in this process. We also plan to host a conversation with past PPS board members who were responsible for closing schools in the mid-late 2000s to learn from their mistakes and avoid challenges, and more broadly explore the pitfalls of past district consolidation efforts. BW4BE is also interested in exploring the possibilities around district reconfiguration. We are working to schedule a conversation with the superintendent of a Midwest school district that is currently undergoing district reconfiguration. We are also exploring the research about responsible district rightsizing to inform a set of recommendations for PPS, which may lead to additional conversations with national district leaders and/or subsequent publications.

5.3.2 Learning from the PPS “Era of Enlightenment”

Dr. Wallace’s twelve-year tenure from 1980-1992 marked a transformational time for PPS (cite). We are currently finalizing a publication highlighting some of the best practices of his administration and how we can revisit them in service of improving outcomes for Black children in PPS. The publication makes special mention of Dr. Sizemore’s political activism that set the foundation for the PPS board majority to oust an ineffective superintendent and hire Dr. Wallace to elevate the role that the Pittsburgh Black community played in changing the trajectory for their children (Sizemore, 1987).

5.3.3 Challenging the PPS Budget Deficit Narrative

Despite having a \$900 million budget and a higher cost per pupil than nearly 95% of districts across the state, PPS contends that they are facing a budget deficit, which will likely be addressed through staff furloughs and tax increases (cite, cite). BW4BE expressed concern about district spending in our first publication, questioning exorbitant expenditures on travel, education technology, and hundreds of new staff members under the previous superintendent's administration (cite). The district also plans to sue the county to force a county-wide tax reassessment to inform future spending, as assessment appeals stand to significantly reduce the district's revenue (cite).

If PPS is in fact facing insolvency in the next few years if they cannot curb their spending, BW4BE's stance is that they should take extreme measures to address it. We are interested in partnering with a local university to create a financial model to predict how much revenue could be recovered if PPS universally reinstated its Pittsburgh residency requirement. Currently, district teachers and school leaders, who make up most district staff, are not required to live in the city. While we are not confident that PPS will reinstate the residency requirement, we view this exercise as a demonstration of how the needs and convenience of mostly white adults are prioritized over Black children.

5.3.4 Supporting and Maintaining Our PPS Board Majority

Our PPS board majority is the most critical part of our strategy to improve outcomes for Black children in the district. We are in regular contact with members to understand key district issues and support their thinking on how to best represent our interest at the decision-making table. Our grant funding has allowed us to pay a consultant to provide coaching and support for our

members, which typically happens individually to maintain compliance with the PA Sunshine Act (cite).

School board elections occur every two years. We are currently gauging the interest of our three 2021 school board members in running for reelection. We are also actively seeking prospective candidates to run for the seats we did not win in 2021 and to succeed our current board members if they decide not to run again. We will begin revising our program of studies for the BW4BE Learning Institute in the next few months as we prepare to train prospective school board candidates in the fall.

5.3.5 Creating a BW4BE Advisory Committee

In our shared leadership model, we often discuss plans for action or ask for more broad support as issues arise. We have received funding to support a paid advisory board where up to fifteen Black women will meet quarterly to set the priorities of BW4BE, assess the efficacy of our programs and efforts, and represent BW4BE at other education-focused tables based on their expertise and interest.

5.3.6 Documenting Black Educational Advocacy and Activism in Pittsburgh

BW4BE's third publication was intentional in naming the Advocates as the foundation for our work (Black Women for a Better Education, 2021a). We will be able to make that connection more explicit through an archival project where we can properly chronicle the Advocates' work and the throughline to ours in partnership with a local university.

In coming to understand the parallels between Dr. Sizemore's political activism and ours, I am personally interested in deepening my knowledge of Black educational activism in Pittsburgh and possibly writing a book.

5.3.7 Expanding Beyond PPS

BW4BE has received several requests to replicate our work in neighboring districts, especially those where Black families are being relocated due to gentrification. As we utilize foundation dollars to grow our internal capacity by hiring a project manager, we will explore the feasibility of expanding.

We will also explore the feasibility of sharing my dissertation and the other publications more broadly via journals and at conferences so we might garner interest from people around the country looking to create similar organizations, which could result in additional revenue for BW4BE. We will also continue to apply for local and national foundation dollars to further our work.

5.4 Conclusion

Co-creating BW4BE with my friends and sisters has been a life-altering experience for me. It is surreal that a few text messages about PPS's response to the pandemic turned into a movement that has the potential to impact Black families in the region for generations to come. But at the same time, it is not surprising because our group of founding members are bold, smart, and

passionate Black women who have been making waves in Pittsburgh for decades. As Education Nerd put it,

“I believe in the power of the Black woman. I don't think that there's a creature on earth as a segment of the population that's more effective. And when I can be in community with brilliant Black women who just get shit done, I will do that. I will do that every time.”

The community that we built validated the feelings of isolation that Black women feel in Pittsburgh. Systems Disruptor shared,

“I'ma be really honest. I'm super lonely. Like, this is probably the only space, the only people [to whom] I can say, ‘should I say that’, and [you all] be like, yup. It's not like, ‘how dare you’, or ‘that's crazy’ or ‘I don't know.’ It's just super lonely, especially in Pittsburgh...I feel like Black Women for a Better Education for me was an outlet. Then also the camaraderie and the sisterhood. And then also the continued effort, cause I'm a long-term person and it ain't shiny new object over here. And I appreciate that.”

Dillard (2006), in naming the spiritual pursuit of research as an assumption of endarkened feminist epistemology, stated,

“Such spiritual concerns are articulated epistemologically in that value is placed on individual expressiveness; individual differences are not seen as detracting from but as enriching to an endarkened feminist epistemology, the foundations and processes of our work” (p. 674).

In wrapping up our sister circle, Dream Fulfilled shared her observation of the authenticity in which BW4BE founding members can show up, stating,

“When we get to be ourselves and be ourselves with each other, we do so much for the next person. We do so much for the next person and for the next Black woman. We do so much for the next person and for the next Black woman, after us.”

For a long time, BW4BE’s Facebook cover photo was the famous Fannie Lou Hamer quote, “Nobody’s free until everybody is free” (Hamer et al., 2011, p. 137). Lifelong Liberator described their work in this way: “The education of our children is still a vital component of the liberation agenda, and I’m still trying to contribute to making our school district more relevant, and of higher quality than it is right now. That’s it.” BW4BE’s mission is simple: to ensure that every child in PPS receives a high-quality education. And in the words of *Ella’s Song*, “we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes” (Reagon, 1988).

Appendix A

Appendix A Notes from the May 3, 2020 BW4BE Meeting

Meeting notes from 5/3:

Important to have two strategies.

- Build some things up.
- Tear some things down.

The district can no longer abdicate responsibility!

EDUCATIONAL CONTENT:

- The “packets” that have been distributed for school use during the quarantine are busy work that is not helping to grow students academically.
- The educational content at PPS, in general, is not rigorous.
- Expectations for students and families are low and that parents’ opinions are ignored (especially to the extent that those opinions make school administrators and teachers uncomfortable).
- The district’s inability/unwillingness to partner with other organizations in the region is detrimental to students.
- Black students are ineligible for the Pittsburgh Promise at rates much higher than their counterparts, in spite of the fairly low eligibility requirements.

COVID RESPONSE – COMMUNICATION:

- The district’s communication with parents is insufficient, as evidenced by the complete lack of information (about academic matters) from the district for the first 3 weeks of quarantine.
- Regarding the grab and go meal program, despite the district’s claim of success, it is clear that many community organizations (churches, 412 Food Rescue, the Latino Community Center, and others) are at least equally responsible for families receiving food.

SUMMER:

- What will summer/early fall look like for black kids?
- What do kids need this summer?
- What exists? What needs to be built? Who can do this work?

TEACHERS’ UNION:

- Teachers who want to meet the needs of their students are ostracized.
- The union allows the bar for teachers to remain low.
- The collective bargaining agreement hinders progress within the district.
- The president of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers has children who are students in the North Allegheny School District.

GENERAL NARRATIVE:

- Liberal white people protect the institution of public schooling and the ineptitude of the district.
- Many people in our communities do not fully understand what is happening in the

district (i.e. many believe our schools are under-funded).

- The broader black community needs to be advocating for the needs of black students who are being under-served in the district.
- The broader black community must know what good education looks like.

SCHOOL BOARD/ POLITICS:

- Where do local, state, and federal legislators stand with regard to our district? Rich Fitzgerald, Liv Bennet, Summer Lee
- How is the school board evaluating the superintendent?
- We have to get parents involved and ready to speak out at board meetings.
- We have to demand that the mayor take a stand about the school district.
- We have to show up at meetings in full force.
- We can't push this school board, they're too entrenched. We need to turn it.
- We can start a PAC. We can take over the PAC that already exists.

STATE'S ROLE:

- What is the State's role in improving the district?
- A model: the alliance for police accountability worked to get the principal of Woodland Hills High School's (?) principal certification revoked.
Go to state and ask for an audit of employees' certifications.

HOMESCHOOLING:

- Black families are considering home-schooling more seriously.
- There are tons of free homeschooling resources.
- A mass exodus of black kids from PPS – to homeschool co-ops would send a clear message to the district while providing a more rigorous/effective schooling experience.

WHAT'S NEXT:

- We need to think strategically about what we can do.
 - We should investigate what levers exist at the state level.
 - Work to expose the district re: their ineptitude.
 - Change the narrative about who black kids are and what they deserve.
 - Determine what needs to be built to provide effective schooling for black kids.
- Try to find teachers/district employees who want change and find ways to support them.
- Speak out to change the inaccurate narrative – respond to the liberal, white narratives about the district.
- Find black ways to reach and organize people. Base organizing principles on facts, not ideology.
- Write a letter to the district, taking a stand about what should be done in support of black children.
- Investigate how a PAC can help us turn the board.
- Figure out summer! May include increasing capacity to consult with families re: homeschooling.

Appendix B Email to PBEOC

Email to Elected Officials with Amber's Public Source Article

To: School Board Representative*

Cc: pghblackelectedofficials@gmail.com

Subject: Black moms like me will not be patient with Pittsburgh Public Schools. We need to demand more.

Dear _____,

My name is _____ and I am one of your constituents. I am writing because as a Black woman, I am gravely concerned about the state of Pittsburgh Public Schools, especially their response during this pandemic. I want to bring to your attention a [first-person essay](#) written by Black PPS mother Amber Thompson that appeared in Public Source on May 14th, where she shares the disappointing and frustrating experience she's had with getting remote learning materials for her daughter from the district.

In her essay Ms. Thompson correctly asserts that the behavior displayed by PPS is not exclusive to the pandemic, but instead their standard operating procedure. As she states, "For families like mine, disparities in education were present before COVID-19, and the district's response to the pandemic feels less like a huge departure from how things used to be. It's one more challenge for the district to overcome."

The district has been operating at an unacceptable level for decades and has blamed everyone for their shortcomings except themselves. This pandemic has simply exposed more broadly these abject failures that we've allowed to persist. As my elected representatives, I implore you to speak up and hold PPS accountable for providing the high-quality education our children deserve.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

*Unsure of which PPS school board district you live in? Find it [here](#). Need your school board representative's email address? Find it [here](#).

Appendix C Sister Circle Protocol

Purpose Statement: This Black Women for a Better Education case study will chronicle the unique and special circumstances in which BW4BE was formed, the connections to other Black-led community-based educational reform efforts in PPS, and the success in securing a PPS board majority, while providing readers with ideas on how to shift power in school districts through school board elections.

Central Research Question: How does the Black mothering tradition influence the way Black women show up as community organizers for school reform?

Related Research Questions

- What are the conditions that led to the formation of BW4BE?
- How has our sisterhood as Black women supported our shared leadership model?
- How has the mothering tradition of Black women served as a protective factor for each other and the Black children we aim to serve?

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this sister circle about your experience as a founding member of Black Women for a Better Education. Sister circles are a research method used for and by Black women which allow the researcher to be in community with participants. The sister circle will be approximately 3 hours.

The purpose of this case study is to chronicle the power shifting efforts of Black Women for a Better Education and our efforts to secure a school board majority. We will discuss a series of questions about how our history and context, the successes and challenges, our power shifting work, and our plans for the future.

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself. What do/did you do for work? Tell me a little bit about your family.
2. What does your artifact mean to you in relation to motherhood/sisterhood/womanhood?
3. Who and/or what ignites your passion for education?
4. What was your experience/knowledge/action with PPS prior to your participation in BW4BE?
5. What were the contributing factors to BW4BE's success?
6. How has BW4BE been different from other education-focused efforts you participated in? What is BW4BE's "secret sauce?"
7. Written and social media has played a dual role in the promoting and criticizing of the work of BW4BE. This attention has sometimes targeted specific individuals and questioned the validity of the intent and purpose of the work. Some critics even cited conspiracies in campaign finances in school board elections. How did these experiences influence your approach with the work of BW4BE and with each other?
8. How do you (individually and collectively) continue to center the experiences of Black children in your work?
9. How might a BW4BE-supported school board majority transform outcomes for Black children in our region?
10. What does it mean to you to be in sisterhood with other Black women? How has this influenced the work of BW4BE?

**Appendix D June 1, 2020 Letter to PPS Board Calling for the Nonrenewal of the Previous
Superintendent’s Contract**

Black Women for a Better Education

PPS Board of Directors
Room 239, Administration Building
341 S. Bellefield Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

June 1, 2020

Re: Contract Renewal for Superintendent Anthony Hamlet

Dear PPS Board of Directors:

Please find attached a letter from a coalition of Black women who are affiliated with PPS as parents, alumni, former employees, retirees, partners, and concerned community members. We meet regularly with the intent of ensuring that Black children in this region receive the consistent high-quality education they both deserve and need. **To that end, after careful thought, we have outlined in the letter an argument against renewing the contract of Superintendent Anthony Hamlet.** As the letter is quite detailed, we offer a summary below.

Grounds for not renewing the 5-year contract of Superintendent Anthony Hamlet

- 1) Organizational Leadership
 - a) Excessive loss of talented, veteran team members with institutional knowledge
 - b) High turnover of the leadership team
 - c) Failure to become a “transformational leader”
 - d) Long delays in or failure to fill critical staff positions
- 2) Financial Management
 - a) Excessive spending on extraneous central office staff, high-paid consultants, and on educational technology contracts
 - b) Approximately \$25,000 per month for out-of-town professional development with questionable returns on investment
 - c) Unauthorized trip to Cuba at taxpayers’ expense with minimal accountability for the action from the board
 - d) No-bid contracts for clients of a company for which he is a paid consultant
- 3) COVID-19 Crisis Management
 - a) Students lost weeks of instruction as the district scrambled to develop a learning plan

- b) Students with disabilities did not receive instruction for close to two months, violating IEPs and 504 plans
 - c) Low resolution, low instruction printed learning packets distributed to families who had to find ways to pick them up
 - d) Inequitable distribution of technology, widening the district access and opportunity gap
 - e) Ineffective leadership and communication on the district's plans during the COVID-19 pandemic
- 4) Instructional Excellence & Safe and Healthy School Environments
- a) Test scores remain stagnant at best
 - b) The achievement gap between Black and White students remains broad
 - c) Access to and success in AP courses for Black children is limited
 - d) Expulsion rates for Black children are in the top 10 in the Commonwealth
 - e) Black students' high referral rate to the police
 - f) Equity plan devoid of meaningful metrics
- 5) Professionalism
- a) Dr. Hamlet has a reputation for being aloof and inaccessible
 - b) History of cancelling important meetings or sending surrogates to key meetings
 - c) Public rift with government leaders and dissatisfaction with his performance by the philanthropic sector
 - d) Questionable qualifications and past performance

Sincerely,

Black Women for a Better Education

Attachments:

Expanded letter

Full signature page

Supportive footnotes

PPS Board of Directors
Room 239, Administration Building
341 S. Bellefield Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

June 1, 2020

Dear PPS Board of Directors,

We are a group of Black women PPS parents, alumni, former employees, retirees, and concerned community members committed to ensuring that all Black children in this region receive the high-quality education they deserve. **We are writing to urge you to vote against renewing Superintendent Anthony Hamlet's contract. We are in serious times and we need a real leader for this region.** We believe that Dr. Hamlet has not led the district successfully in the areas of: organizational leadership, financial management, providing safe and healthy school environments, and instructional excellence.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP: Dr. Hamlet is not an effective organizational leader. Given the multitude of retirements at the executive level shortly after Dr. Hamlet's arrival, he was tasked with rebuilding nearly his entire leadership team. While this should have been an exciting opportunity to bring in the best and brightest local and national talent, it has been a revolving door as the majority of Dr. Hamlet's hires have left either abruptly or under nefarious circumstances (e.g., Chief of Human Resources Milton Walters¹ and Pittsburgh Perry Principal James Cooper²). At his hiring, Dr. Hamlet was touted as a "transformational leader" and he committed to creating an Office of School Transformation to support the schools with the lowest achievement.³ However, it took Dr. Hamlet two years to find a leader for this office,⁴ and Dr. Lynett Hookfin resigned after one year despite agreeing to a three-year contract.⁵ Additionally, under his leadership, the stability of the district has continued to deteriorate. Veteran staff have resigned or their positions have not been renewed, including staff brought to the district by Dr. Hamlet from outside of the region. Most notable are: Deputy Superintendent Anthony Anderson (3 years), Chief Academic Officer Seema Ramji (8 months), Chief Information Officer Scott Gutowski (5 years in this role), Assistant Superintendent of Student Support Services Melissa Friez (1 year in this role), and Executive Director of Literacy Kendra Wester (3 years). To date many of these critical roles, including Deputy Superintendent and Chief Information Officer, have not been filled with new hires.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT: While COVID-19 has put the district at risk of facing a large budget shortfall,⁶ Dr. Hamlet's financial management prior to the pandemic has been questionable at best. His excessive spending on extraneous central office staff, high-paid consultants, \$14 million in educational technology contracts,⁷ and nearly \$25,000 a month expenses on out-of-town "professional development" opportunities has crippled the district. There has been little to no return on investment for educators and students.⁸ The investigation into Dr. Hamlet and his staff's unauthorized trip to Cuba came at the taxpayers' expense and resulted in little to no accountability requested of him by members of this board, which is an unacceptable response to such an egregious violation.⁹ This, along with the conflict of interest created by Dr. Hamlet receiving pay for

consulting with a company whose clients received no-bid contracts with the district, should have resulted in his immediate termination.¹⁰

COVID-19 CRISIS MANAGEMENT: Dr. Hamlet’s lack of leadership and transparency during the pandemic has left students and their families feeling frustrated. The district’s transition to remote learning was unsatisfactory. At a minimum, students lost nearly three weeks of instruction and after eight weeks, students with disabilities are still without specially designed instruction, which is required by their IEPs and 504 plans.¹¹ In comparison, neighboring districts with 1:1 access to technology were able to begin right away.¹² After spending weeks administering a technology needs assessment survey, PPS provided families with low-resolution printed packets that families were responsible for retrieving from schools.¹³ To make matters worse, an inequitable privacy policy was administered whereby CAPA and Sci-Tech students received video-enabled devices and other PPS students received technology with video access disabled.¹⁴ This type of behavior furthers an already widening access and opportunity gap that persists in the district. When asked specific questions about remote learning and the response to COVID-19 in several virtual forums, including those hosted by The Forbes Funds and the Pittsburgh Black Elected Officials Coalition, Dr. Hamlet’s circumlocution and vagueness about future plans left viewers even more disappointed than before.¹⁵

INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE & SAFE AND HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS: The discriminatory practices against Black students in PPS began long before Dr. Hamlet arrived, and we are not the first group of Black people to bring light to these issues. The complaint brought against the district in 1992 by the Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools was finally acknowledged in 2006 when a Conciliation Agreement was established between the Advocates and the district.¹⁶ The Equity Advisory Panel (EAP), established as part of this agreement, continues to be placated with empty promises by the district.¹⁷ Fourteen years later, no real progress has been made. PSSA test scores have remained stagnant, while Keystone test scores have declined. While there have been minimal academic gains, the gap between Black and White student performance persists and achievement for all students leaves much to be desired.¹⁸ The Gender Equity Commission (GEC) report outlined a number of metrics on which Black children continue to disproportionately underperform compared to their White (and sometimes AMLON) counterparts, including access to and passing of AP courses and tests, enrollment in eighth grade algebra, enrollment in gifted and talented programs, and grade retention rates.¹⁹ Despite passing a K-2 suspension ban that has resulted in an overall decline in suspensions, Black children, especially those with exceptionalities, are still suspended at disproportionate rates.²⁰ The GEC report also stated that Black students are suspended from school and arrested at school at higher rates than White students, and that Black students are referred to the police more often than in 95% of other districts (with Black girls being referred to the police more than in 99% of similar cities).²¹ To “illustrate the District’s commitment to moving beyond compliance with the MOU to demonstrate its commitment to achieving true equity,” PPS released an equity implementation plan in 2019, *On Track to Equity*, but the plan is devoid of any real metrics and reads more like a list of aspirations.²²

PROFESSIONALISM: Dr. Hamlet’s arrival to Pittsburgh was mired in scandal. He was recommended by a search consultant who admittedly did not vet him (and who was not properly vetted himself) after a non-transparent selection process.²³ A review of Dr. Hamlet’s credentials

revealed instances of plagiarism, inaccuracies in his employment history, and inflation of his contribution to student outcomes.²⁴ Though Dr. Hamlet was “cleared” of wrongdoing in a rushed investigation at the expense of the taxpayers,²⁵ by then, many of us (including two board members who voted to rescind his contract) had lost confidence that Dr. Hamlet was the right person for the job.²⁶

Despite Dr. Hamlet’s rocky start, many community, foundation, and government leaders calling for his removal were still willing to collaborate (some of whom have signed this letter). However, at nearly every turn, Dr. Hamlet has been evasive, operating the district like an island and further ostracizing the community to the detriment of Pittsburgh children. His public rift with the Mayor and his tendency to cancel meetings (or send subordinates in his place) with key stakeholders who have offered their support has been nothing short of embarrassing.²⁷ Even when Dr. Hamlet addresses or interacts with the public, his answers seem rehearsed, often circumvent real issues and concerns, and are filled with nonsensical education jargon.

As PPS school board directors, it is time for you to admit that Dr. Hamlet’s tenure has been an abject failure and to allow his contract to expire at the end of the 2020-21 school year. Our students and families deserve a superintendent who is competent, honest, innovative, and not the center of continuous negative press. We do not take lightly the implications of Black women asking a school board with a Black president to not renew the contract of a Black superintendent of a school district with majority Black students. We are aware of the optics, however, we demand better for our Black children. We have had enough and our children deserve better. If this democratically elected school board is not courageous enough to do what is right, we will make our discontent known at the ballot box during election time.

Sincerely,

Black Women for a Better Education

- Deirdra Bullock, PPS Alumna, PPS Parent, District 1
- Tamera Gaines, PPS Parent, District 1
- C. Howard, PPS Alumna, District 1
- Ashley McClain, PPS Parent and Alumna, District 1
- Brandi McNeill, PPS Parent and Alumna, District 1
- Danielle Poole, PPS Alumna, District 1
- E. Speaks, Retired PPS Employee, District 1
- Dorie Taylor, PPS Parent, District 1
- University of Pittsburgh Faculty Member, District 1
- Former PPS Parent, District 1
- Darlise Kearney, Community Member, District 2
- T. Matthews, Mentor to 2 PPS Students, Public Health Professional, Concerned Citizen, District 2
- Dr. Cheryl Hall-Russell, President & Chief Cultural Consultant, BW3, District 2
- Amber Thompson, District 2
- PPS Alumna, PPS Community Partner, District 2
- Kathi Elliott, Concerned Community Member, District 3

C.C. Robinson, Concerned Community Member, District 3
R. Robinson, Concerned Citizen, Education Advocate, District 3
T. Taloute, Concerned Community Member, District 3
R. DeVaughn, Concerned Community Member, District 5
T. Reed, Parent, District 5
Marilyn Whitelock, Concerned Community Member, District 6
Khamil Scantling, Parent and Business Owner, District 7
Tieisha Collins, PPS Alumna, District 8
J. Harris, Parent, District 8
Kimmil Harris, District 8
Maxine Lewis, Community Member, District 8
Allyce Pinchback-Johnson, Former PPS Employee, PPS Alumna, Parent, District 8
La'Fay Pinchback, Retired PPS Teacher of 38 Years, District 8
S. Reed, Concerned Community Member, District 8
M. Reifman, PPS Parent, PPS Alumna, District 8
Cheryl Ruffin, PPS Alumna, District 8
J. Ruffin, Concerned Community Member, District 8
Maria T. Searcy, PPS EAP and Consultant, Pennsylvania Department of Education, District 8
J. Shealey, PPS Parent, District 8
Alecia Dawn Young, PPS Alumna, Concerned Community Member, District 8
Concerned Community Member, District 8
Cynthia Mendoza, Founder, Brown Mamas, LLC and Homeschooling Parent, District 9
Amanda Neatrour, Parent and Concerned Citizen, District 9
Geraldine Rowe, PPS Alumna District 9
LaTrenda Sherrill, Parent and Concerned Citizen, District 9
School of Education Faculty Member, Duquesne University
S. Jeffrey, Higher Education Professional, Concerned Citizen
S. Bolden, PPS Partner and Concerned Citizen
K. Johnson, PPS Alumna
Lakita Bullock, PPS Alumna
C.S., Juvenile Defense Attorney and Child Advocate, Active PA Bar License
C. Tyler, PPS Alumna and Former PPS Employee
Brandi Fisher, President, Alliance for Police Accountability
Amber McNeal, PPS Parent
J. Shirriel, PPS Alumna, Parent and Concerned Citizen
Evelyn King, Retired PPS School Administrator
Audra Chisom, Former PPS Parent
C. Rue, PPS Parent
PPS Out-of School-Time Partner (Citywide)

Footnotes

- ¹<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2018/03/27/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-human-resources-chief-Milton-Walters-suspended-fired-district-policy/stories/201803260105>
- ²<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2018/05/10/Pittsburgh-Perry-Traditional-Academy-principal-suspension-leave-James-Cooper-Anthony-Hamlet/stories/201805090209>
- ³<https://www.wesa.fm/post/pittsburgh-public-schools-tap-florida-educator-top-job#stream/0>
- ⁴<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2018/06/21/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-Anthony-Hamlet-board-hires-Office-of-Transformation/stories/201806210137>
- ⁵[https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/pghboe/Board.nsf/files/BEDUS37D6433/\\$file/Human%20Resources%20Report%20No.%204857%20-%20July%2024%2C%202019.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/pghboe/Board.nsf/files/BEDUS37D6433/$file/Human%20Resources%20Report%20No.%204857%20-%20July%2024%2C%202019.pdf)
- ⁶<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2020/05/12/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-board-district-budget-revenue-projections-coronavirus/stories/202005120151>
- ⁷<https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/05/16/pittsburgh-public-schools-tech-contracts/>
- ⁸<https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/08/27/kdka-investigates-gets-action-superintendent-hamlet/>
- ⁹<https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/10/16/anthony-hamlet-reprimanded-by-school-board/>
- ¹⁰<https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/07/10/anthony-hamlet-being-paid-as-consultant-for-erdi>
- ¹¹<https://www.publicsource.org/black-moms-like-me-will-not-be-patient-with-pittsburgh-public-schools-we-need-to-demand-more/>
- ¹²<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2020/04/05/remote-learning-schools-prepared-shutdown-Pittsburgh-Western-PA-school-districts/stories/202004010125>
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- ¹⁴<https://www.wesa.fm/post/city-school-district-disabled-cameras-student-issued-computers-because-privacy-concerns#stream/0>
- ¹⁵<https://www.facebook.com/PittsburghPublicSchools/videos/232088091540293/>
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- ¹⁷<https://newpittsburghcourier.com/2020/02/25/2020-vision-the-decade-for-true-equity-in-pittsburgh-public-schools/>
- ¹⁸<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2019/09/03/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-test-scores-student-achievement-board-Anthony-Hamlet-PSSA/stories/201909030153>
- ^{19,21}https://www.socialwork.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/publication-images/pittsburghs_inequality_across_gender_and_race_09_18_19.pdf
- ²⁰<https://triblive.com/local/pittsburgh-allegheny/activists-call-on-pittsburgh-public-schools-to-extend-suspension-ban-up-to-5th-grade/>
- ²²<https://www.pghschools.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=1416&dataid=14599&FileName=PPS%20Equity%20Report%202019%20NOV%2021%20-%20Final%20with%20Bib.pdf>
- ²³<https://www.wesa.fm/post/pittsburgh-schools-groups-pull-support-call-new-superintendent-search#stream/0>
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- ²⁵<https://archive.triblive.com/news/resume-check-in-pittsburgh-superintendent-search-broke-spending-limit/>
- ²⁶<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2016/06/29/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-board-votes-to-keep-Anthony-Hamlet-as-superintendent/stories/201606290220>
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**Appendix E June 8, 2020 Follow-Up Letter to PPS Board Criticizing Their Lack of
Responsiveness**

Black Women for a Better Education

PPS Board of Directors
Room 239, Administration Building
341 S. Bellefield Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

June 8, 2020

Re: PPS Board of Directors' Lack of Responsiveness to Their Constituents

Dear PPS Board of Directors:

It has been one week since Black Women for a Better Education sent the PPS Board of Directors a letter calling for the non-renewal of Superintendent Anthony Hamlet's contract. To date, our group has not heard directly from you or any of your representatives. As your constituents, to whom you are accountable as a democratically elected board, we find this lack of response disappointing.

In a Post Gazette article released on June 4th, Ms. Wilson stated that there would be no comment from board members, as Dr. Hamlet's contract is a personnel matter. At the bare minimum, Ms. Wilson, as board president you could have acknowledged the receipt of the letter, which included signatures of 10 Black women who live in your district. While we understand you are prohibited from commenting directly about Superintendent Hamlet's job performance, we urge you to publicize a timeline and process by which the board plans to make the decision regarding his contract renewal.

Despite Ms. Wilson's stance, three board members responded publicly to the letter. Mr. Carter stated that he was "not interested in discussing or reading any information about contract renewal and/or reappointment...at this time" As the school board member with the largest number of constituent endorsers of the letter (14), Mr. Carter, your interest should have been piqued. We agree that preparation for the fall is of utmost importance, yet the plans for next school year and our concerns about Dr. Hamlet's ability to implement them are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, while you were correct in stating that Dr. Hamlet's contract expires next year, the window for considering renewal begins on July 1st, making a June 1st letter more than timely.

Ms. Kennedy also chose to respond publicly to the letter, stating, “people are going to have their opinions, and they’re free to do that. At the end of the day, I have to look at things objectively.” As a reminder, the carefully researched letter (signed by 2 of your district residents) bore 27 citations from 8 unique sources, which should not be classified as “opinion.”

Ms. Taliaferro publicly responded to the letter by saying, “I take matters like this very seriously, and feel it [is] important to hear the concerns of the community and represent those voices at the board table.” We appreciate that sentiment, Ms. Taliaferro, and though we have not heard from you as a group, we understand that you have been in contact with at least one group member who lives in your district. As a new board member, you have a unique opportunity to set a precedent for the way in which this board interacts with its constituents, allowing their thoughts and concerns to inform the decision-making process.

Mr. Udin, Ms. Harbin, Mr. Gallagher, Ms. Falls, and Ms. Edwards: you may have followed protocol by not commenting on a personnel matter (or availing yourself for comment in general), but your choice not to respond to us directly acknowledging receipt of the letter and/or validating our perspectives is misaligned with your roles as school board members. Mr. Udin, as the one who first called attention to Superintendent Hamlet’s contract renewal, we most certainly expected to hear from you.

Please understand that this situation is much larger than Dr. Hamlet’s contract. It is about the quality of education that Pittsburgh Public Schools provides for its students. As partners in this process, we depend upon the ability to engage with the board. If engagement with constituents and key stakeholders is not something that you desire, then that leaves a question about your purpose as a board of directors. The voices of students, families, educators, constituents, and key stakeholders must be a part of this decision.

Your board webpage states that you are “committed to providing the best education possible for every student by providing outstanding teachers, programs and services that enable every student to achieve their maximum potential.” As constituents and stakeholders, we are 55 Black women who are directly invested in the success of Black children served by the district; and we, as a collective, are imploring you to uphold this mission. We invite you to read our letter thoroughly and then contact us at blackwomenforabettereducation@gmail.com. We are eager to begin a conversation about our shared commitment to providing the education that our children so richly need and deserve.

Sincerely,

Black Women for a Better Education

Appendix F BW4BE List of Demands

Black Women for a Better Education demand:

1. A district that will educate and affirm the whole Black child, actively engaging families, students, and the community to define and support wholeness.
2. A district that will educate all students, especially those with disabilities, at high levels by employing a teaching force representative of our student population with expertise in cutting-edge and culturally relevant pedagogies.
3. A district that provides safe, restorative, and rigorous learning environments for students in our schools, in juvenile detention centers, and mental health facilities.
4. A district that commits resources to family and community engagement dedicated to disrupting the school to prison pipeline.
5. A superintendent who:
 - communicates effectively;
 - has experience with maximizing student achievement;
 - can implement a tangible and measurable blueprint for student and district success;
 - elevates the expertise of teachers and administrators and the lived experiences of community, students, and families;
 - develops mutually beneficial relationships with key community and government stakeholders; and
 - cares deeply about Black children.
6. A school board that will expertly govern itself and the district, serving as a regional leader and convener while monitoring and employing regional and national best practices.
7. A school board that prioritizes constituent needs over political interests to ensure the needs of schools, students, and families are met.
8. A school board that provides equitable, strong, and transparent administrative and fiscal oversight.
9. A budget that centers the needs of students, demonstrates a strong return on investment for the high cost per pupil spending, and provides autonomy for principals to create school-based budgets that best serve the needs of their students.
10. A school district that acknowledges and sources innovation from charter schools and homeschooling families, given the important role they play in the education of Black students in the Pittsburgh region.

Appendix G BW4BE PAC Launch PowerPoint Outline

Slide 1: Black Women for a Better Education

- PAC Interest Meeting
- January 18, 2021

Slide 2: BW4BE Overview

- Black women PPS parents, alumni, former employees, retirees, and concerned community members
 - Intergenerational
 - Educational advocacy experience ranges from novice to expert
- Committed to ensuring that Black children get the education they need and deserve
- Shared leadership model
 - Every member plays a role in content development and decision making
 - Operate as a united front, in alignment with the sisterhood that runs deep with Black women
- Started meeting in May 2020 out of frustration with the district's response to COVID-19
 - Reflection of many organizational inadequacies and shortcomings

Slide 3: BW4BE Stats

- 6/1: Letter to PPS School Board <https://bit.ly/HamletNonRenewal>
 - 55 original signatures
 - 61 signatures to date
 - 3,000+ views
- 6/4: Launched Facebook page
 - 1316 likes
 - 1464 followers
- 6/4: Shared educator petition
 - 6/4: ~ 200 signatures
 - 2,600+ signatures
 - 6/8: Second Letter to PPS School Board
 - 7/9 board members responded
 - 6/15: Launched Facebook group
 - 224 members

Slide 4: BW4BE Town Hall

- 8/5: Hosted the *We Demand a Better Education for Pittsburgh's Children* [Town Hall](#)
 - Featured Panelists: Kevin Carter, Ashley Comans, James Harris, Amber Thompson, Sala Udin
 - 3,600+ views
 - Released a [list of 10 demands](#) for the district
 - Committed to running a slate of school board candidates in the 2021 election (Districts 1, 3, 5, 7, 9)

Slide 5: Media Mentions

- **June 4:** [Black women's group asks PPS board to let Superintendent Hamlet's contract expire \(Pittsburgh Post-Gazette\)](#)
- **June 5:** [50+ Black women sign letter urging Pittsburgh's school board not to renew superintendent's contract \(WTAE\)](#)
- **June 5:** [Community Activists Call For Pittsburgh Public Schools' Superintendent's Contract Not To Be Renewed \(KDKA\)](#)
- **June 8:** [City School Board Will Evaluate Superintendent's Work Next Month, Some Want Him Out \(WESA\)](#)
- **June 10:** [Citing 'abject failure' by Pittsburgh Public Schools superintendent, black female leaders call for no contract renewal \(Pittsburgh Tribune Review\)](#)
- **June 10:** [Should police be in Pittsburgh schools? Advocates' call for removal reignited in wake of Floyd's death \(Public Source\)](#)
- **June 11:** [Black Women for a Better Education | I saw this online, and as a student at PPS I believe that you should read this \(Reddit\)](#)
- **June 22:** [Did vacancies in key administration positions at Pittsburgh Public Schools contribute to a slow district response to COVID-19? \(Public Source\)](#)
- **June 22:** [KDKA Radio Morning Show with Larry Richert and Kevin Battle \(KDKA News Radio 1020\)](#)
- **July 13:** [Black Political Assembly supports new contract for PPS chief Hamlet \(Pittsburgh Post-Gazette\)](#)
- **August 4:** [Black Women for a Better Education to host virtual town hall](#)
- **August 6:** [Black Women Advocating For A Better City School District Plan To Run Slate Of Board Candidates](#)
- **August 25:** [City School District Board To Vote On Renewing Superintendent's Contract Months Ahead Of Deadline](#)

Slide 6: BW4BE PAC

- Endorse and support the campaigns of candidates for PPS school board
- Increase awareness of issues in public education
- Endorse candidates who are willing to speak boldly about the need to improve educational outcomes for Black children in this region

Slide 7: Ally Level (\$10/month)

- You want to ensure that Black Women for a Better Education has support.
- You want to stay updated as much as possible.
- You want to be a part of this movement.
- You are not ready for membership but want to do something to support.

Slide 8: #ItsAboutTheKids Membership (\$40/month)

- You care about kids and you want to ensure that common-sense solutions for children, especially Black children, prevail in the Pittsburgh region.

Slide 9: PAC Membership Benefits

- Voting on Endorsements
- Connections to Endorsed Candidates
- General Membership Meetings
- Newsletter Access and Updates
- Access to Education Awareness Sessions

Slide 10: #BW4BEInvestor (\$1,000+ annually)

- This is a commitment to the work of the Political Action Committee
- Supporters of black women and leadership
- Investors in Black-led leadership in the Greater Pittsburgh region

Slide 11: Asks

- Donate to the PAC
- Encourage your network to donate
- Connect us to prospective candidates
- Support the campaigns of the PPS school board candidates
- Raise awareness of issues in public education

Appendix H Board Interview Protocol

Purpose Statement: This Black Women for a Better Education case study will chronicle the unique and special circumstances in which BW4BE was formed, the connections to other Black-led community-based educational reform efforts in PPS, and the success in securing a PPS board majority, while providing readers with ideas on how to shift power in school districts through school board elections.

Central Research Question: What were the contributing factors to BW4BE's success in shifting power from PPS by flipping the school board?

Related Research Questions

- What are the motivating factors that influence the decision to run for school board?
- What are the conditions that lead to a successful school board run?

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this interview about your experience as a PPS school board candidate endorsed by Black Women for a Better Education. The purpose of this case study is to chronicle the power shifting efforts of Black Women for a Better Education and our efforts to secure a school board majority. I am interested in learning about your experience as a candidate and how your engagement with Black Women for a Better Education shaped your experience.

You may refuse to answer, skip any question, or stop the interview at any time. I will be recording and transcribing our interview for future analysis. Do I have your consent to proceed?

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself. What do/did you do for work? Tell me a little bit about your family.
2. Who and/or what ignites your passion for education?
3. What is your connection to Pittsburgh Public Schools?
4. How did you learn about Black Women for a Better Education? What resonated with you about our work?
5. Why did you decide to run for school board?
6. Why did you seek an endorsement from Black Women for a Better Education? What was this process like for you?
7. (If they participated) How did participation in the BW4BE Learning Institute support your understanding of key issues in PPS and influence your decision to run for school board? Please cite specific experiences that resonated with you.
8. In what ways did BW4BE support you during your campaign? Can you offer a story or example that illustrates that?
9. In what ways has BW4BE influenced conversations about education in our city? Can you share specific examples or stories?
10. How might a BW4BE-supported school board majority transform outcomes for Black children in our region?

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