

MAY 2024

ORGANIZING FOR EDUCATION IN COLORADO

FUNDER COLLABORATIVE

TEN YEAR IMPACT REPORT
2014 - 2024



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OVERVIEW

The Organizing for Education in Colorado (OEC) Funder Collaborative, formerly known as the Colorado Education Organizing Funder Collaborative or CEO, has invested in local nonprofits that organize grassroots communities regarding education in Denver and Aurora Public Schools. OEC grew from a legacy of national funding to increase family engagement in educational systems, starting with the Anne E. Casey Foundation in 2005. From 2007 to 2014, local and national funders partnered to provide funding for collaboration within education. In 2014, OEC transitioned to a locally funded initiative. This model fosters a student-centered, equitable, and responsive educational system by supporting organizations that amplify the voices of communities and students often silenced or overlooked based on their race, ethnicity, language, gender, or lack of neighborhood wealth. COVID deeply impacted youths, families, communities, and schools, increasing the need for OEC while limiting the time and space available. OEC hired Rooted-Growth to evaluate and summarize its impact between 2014-2024.



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METHODS

FOUR DATA SOURCES WERE TRIANGULATED TO IDENTIFY THE KEY FINDINGS OF OEC'S IMPACT, INCLUDING;

- Grant reports
- 12 impact interviews with grantee, consultants, and education funders
- Two focus groups with 12 youth from public high schools across the state
- Youthroots data from multiple working groups with 265 Denver youths



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KEY FINDINGS

OEC's 10 years of funding for grassroots and grasstops community organizations in education led to the successful accomplishment of anticipated outcomes. Rooted-Growth highlighted areas where there is strong potential for growth.

Key findings indicate that OEC reached its primary goal of increasing the voice and power of those least represented or heard in the educational system through its grantmaking efforts and processes. OEC's distribution of strategic efforts contributed to a paradigm shift in Colorado's educational system where organizing is now perceived to improve school systems.

OEC distributed a total of \$2,827,418 in grants (averaging \$314,157 per year) over the past 10 years to 23 organizations. However, OEC's efforts to share social capital, provide long-term support for capacity building and sustainability, and demonstrate the impact of the organizing have been limited by the small size of its grants, and the time and capacity of the OEC funders.

Interviewees contextualized that when OEC's funders have other priorities within their foundations, they must actively advocate for each dollar. The strain on resources amplifies stress for all involved. Simultaneously, OEC's distinctive and uncommon role enhances its value within Colorado's educational systems.



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OEC prioritized equity in its operations and through the recipients of its funding.

OEC's unrestricted general operating grants allowed grantees to use the money in the ways that best supported their efforts. OEC's diverse funders prioritize community-focused organizations with a critical eye on social disparities by ethnicity/race and inequitable wealth distribution. The positionality of OEC funders was associated with their focus on equity in education and community-driven grantees. Before COVID, OEC funded convenings that supported strategic alignment, development, and follow-through on a theory of change and strategic plan, communication, and awareness of grantees' common purpose, motivation, and belonging in reforming education in Denver and Aurora. Almost all interviewees suggested that OEC resume pre-COVID activities to increase alignment of practices, knowledge transfer, and comradery.

OEC's strategic choice of grantees supported pathways for youths and communities to leverage their collective power and create change.

Grantees bridged community members and educational institutions by building relationships, acquiring institutional and community knowledge, and brokering knowledge gaps within the dynamic political landscape of public education systems. Grantees coached and mentored students, families, and community members in order to enhance advocacy and leadership skills; students voiced their opinions in the Denver Post, Chalkbeat Colorado, EdPost, and digital community newsletters; grantees increased communities' connections and awareness of the political system by hosting community forums with gubernatorial candidates and issue-based campaigns; and trained community members to hold leadership positions within educational systems.

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Funding youth-led leadership and civic engagement programming increased youths' motivation and attachment to school while simultaneously increasing career-related skills and identities.

Grantee programming provided youth with increased educational opportunities, leadership training, a sense of community with peers, an activist orientation, and scaffolded critical thinking skills. These experiences facilitated their ability to care about issues affecting themselves and others. Youth described developing transferable career-oriented skills such as public speaking, identifying and leveraging partners, improving soft teamwork skills, raising awareness, fundraising, community organizing, and advocating for policy change. Engaging in extracurriculars increased students' motivation, connection to, and engagement in their educational systems. Leadership and the experience of activism supported youths' career exploration, career identity, and career decision-making skills. For example, OEC-supported interventions led one youth to see themselves as a future lawyer.

Youth changemakers identified key structural changes needed within their schools and noted adults were key barriers to their desired change.

Students aspire to see changes in educational structures and youth-adult relationships. The emphasized outcomes predominantly revolved around structural aspects, particularly in funding, curriculum, addressing mental health, more youth leadership positions within educational structures, and gun violence. Bringing these changes to fruition necessitates prioritizing and elevating youth voice on issues that affect them by cultivating positive youth-adult relationships. Simply stated, youths require adults' structural, social, and financial capital to bolster their commendable ambitions for bringing about change within school, educational, and social systems.

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TOP THREE AREAS OF IMPACT

TOP THREE AREAS FOR GROWTH

SOURCE: 10 TO 12 IMPACT INTERVIEWS

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- 77% said OEC increased the voice and power of students and community members who are most impacted by inequity in Colorado.
- 64% said OEC built a more connected and proactive educational system, resulting in a strong base that can be activated quickly.
- 45% said OEC built leadership capacity within Denver’s community of color

- 77% said OEC could improve its system for transitioning social capital from funders within the state to grantees and then connecting those grantees to resources
- 76% said OEC could improve how well it builds capacity and long-term sustainability of organizing in community impacted by inequity within the educational ecosystem.
- 70% said OEC could increase its demonstration of the impact of grassroots organizing so that the education ecosystem does not think to act without authentic student and family partnerships.