



FROM PUSH-OUT TO CIVIC LEADERSHIP

A Case Study Brief of L.A.'s **Brothers, Sons, Selves** Coalition



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Who We Are

- 115 young male students of color each school year
- 2 innovative foundations
- Allies in education and government
- 1 shared vision

10 community based organizations

- Khmer Girls in Action
- Social Justice Learning Institute
- InnerCity Struggle
- Youth Justice Coalition
- Community Coalition
- Brotherhood Crusade
- Weingart East Los Angeles YMCA
- Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network
- Labor/Community Strategy Center
- Children's Defense Fund - CA



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What We Did Together

- Ended discriminatory, arbitrary suspensions in Los Angeles schools
- Helped create a new discipline policy that reduced suspensions and introduced a focus on restorative justice
- Lowered suspensions rates by 78% and raised graduation rates by 13%



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2011

- Barack Obama was president.
- The economic “recovery” was underway.
- And Liberty Hill Foundation convened a series of meetings with boys and young men of color from all across Los Angeles to discuss the life-expectancy crisis they faced, community safety, educational challenges and public health concerns.





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The Problem?

By every indicator from income to life expectancy, the well-being of young males of color in L.A. was in jeopardy. The boys were looking at:

- Early death
- Low wages
- Limited access to healthcare
- Low graduation rates
- Incarceration and arrest
- Few employment opportunities

They described:

- Living in a culture of violence
- Communities impacted by mass incarceration
- Being racially profiled by police
- Being bullied as LGBTQ people
- Being pushed out of school and the job market



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What Then?

1. Conditions called for an immediate, full-speed response. The young men couldn't wait even a few years to overcome the obstacles undermining L.A.'s future.
2. Liberty Hill partnered with The California Endowment to create the report "Young Men in Los Angeles Are Ready for Change" and the vision of bringing *bois* and young men of color together to find solutions.
3. At Liberty Hill, a new generation of students active with their local community organizations formed the Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition (BSS Coalition).
4. More than a dozen grassroots groups sent youth leaders and staff to participate.





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The Process

Q: What change could the boys envision that would do the most good for the greatest number of them, right then, right there?

A: They imagined they could create a more positive school environment—a place that was nurturing and didn't feel like a war zone. They could see the first step.

They took it.





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STORY:

Dylan Gray

The Future Candidate

- At 13, he was living with his mother in middle-class suburbs.
- She lost her job and their home.
- At 14, his parents decided he should live with his dad in a more urban, less affluent community of color while his mom left L.A. and went to the East Coast for work.

In my voice:

“When my mother lost her job and our home, we felt powerless. My mother carried a large burden of shame. What she could not offer [materially] she would replace with a hug. It gave us hope that we would one day overcome.”





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Dylan Gray

Facing New Challenges

- At Morningside High, he learned about “all the barriers that boys and men of color face.”
- Through the Black Male Youth Academy on campus, he joined the Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition.
- He was a leader in the successful campaign to ban discriminatory discipline policies in L.A. schools.
- In 2014, President Barack Obama met with Dylan, thanking him for work that inspired the president’s “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative.

In my voice:

“As I stood shoulder to shoulder with President Barack Obama I thought about my mother. I thought about our struggles. So when he made his rounds shaking hands, I embraced him with a hug. I wanted the president to understand that we are here and we are overcoming.”





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Dylan Gray

Today

- Dylan is now a sophomore and the current student body president at California State University, Chico.
- As a freshman, he served on the school's Commission of Diversity Affairs.
- He plans to go to law school and eventually run for office.

Research shows that youth participation in grassroots activist groups can promote cultural pride and empower participants to become civically engaged to actively change the conditions of their communities.





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TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS AND SELVES



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Students at schools in L.A.'s low income communities didn't feel nurtured.

They compared school to a war zone because their campuses were militarized.

- Students were surrounded by a large on-campus school police force.
- School police had arsenals of military surplus assault rifles and grenade launchers.
- Tens of thousands of students were cited and detained each year for truancy, or suspended for minor infractions.
- Punitive discipline targeted mostly students of color.





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Research shows that “zero tolerance” discipline policies are linked to a string of negative outcomes:

- Excessive suspensions
- Arbitrary suspensions for minor infractions
- Lost class time
- Increases in chances of failing a grade
- Decreases in graduation rates
- Racial disparity
- Lack of trust in authority, even by students who haven’t been suspended
- Likelihood of future incarceration

In 2011, before the coalition’s School Climate Bill of Rights was adopted, LAUSD suspended 18,888 students.



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The Campaign for LAUSD's School Climate Bill of Rights

The Brothers, Sons, Selves youth leaders shared testimony about how being suspended unjustly was pushing so many of them out of school and toward prison. Together, the coalition activists did what no single school's reformers could do:

- They pressured LAUSD to reform its discipline policies.
- They mobilized youth and teachers across the district to support discipline changes.
- They pushed administrators to implement positive restorative justice discipline on campuses quickly.

Through political education and training in community organizing, the BSS Coalition boys and young men, along with allied students, mentors, teachers and administrators, blazed a trail that led to lasting positive change within months of their first meeting.



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Victory for Brothers, Sons, Selves

Within three years of Brothers, Sons, Selves' 2011 inception, LAUSD responded to coalition's advocacy efforts by passing the "School Climate Bill of Rights."

Core policy change: A ban on suspensions for the discriminatory catch-all known as "willful defiance."

THE RESULT? The ban and a new emphasis on supportive discipline led to a 78% drop in suspensions and a 13% increase in graduation rates over a two-year period, mostly affecting Black and Latino students.



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STORY:

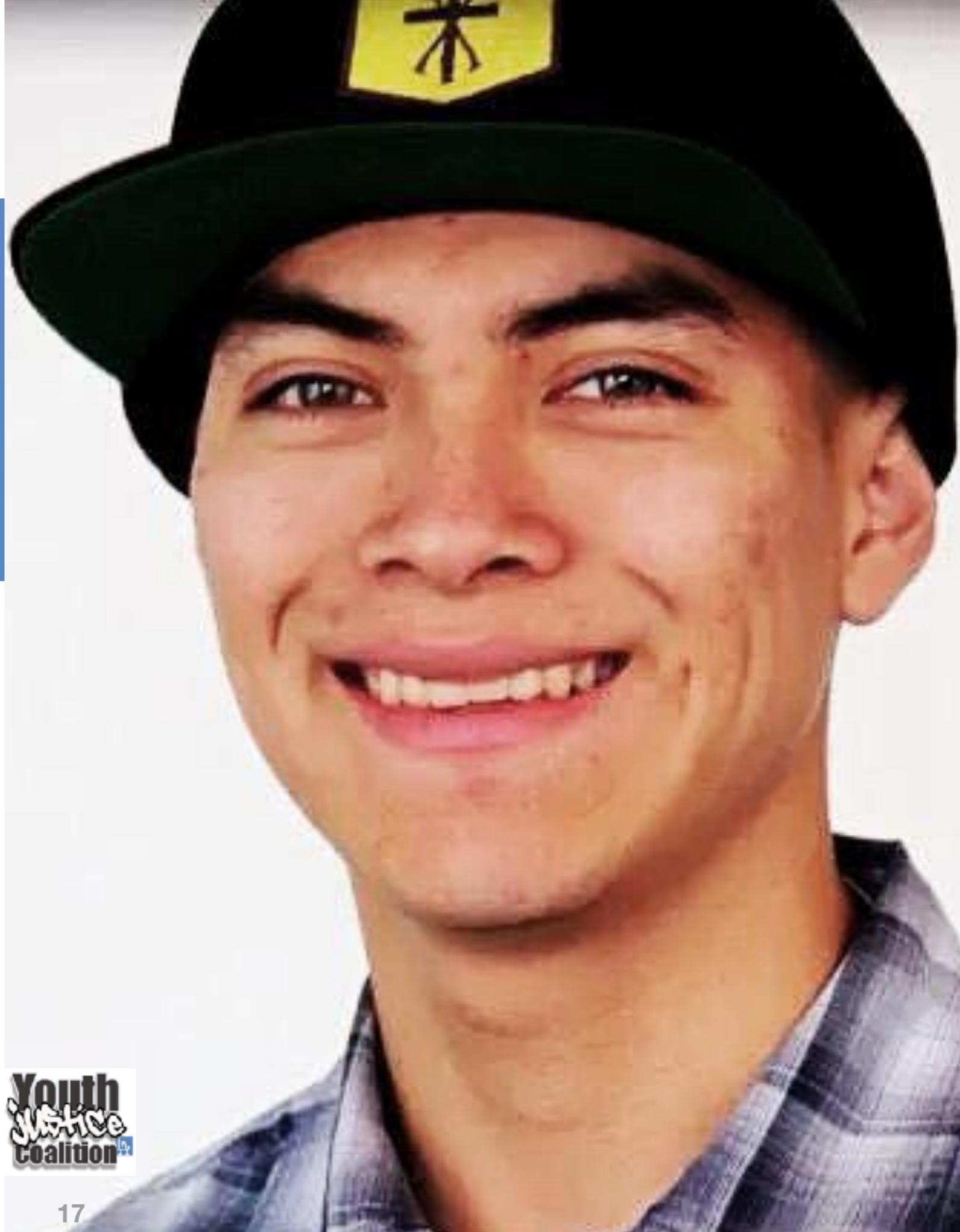
Eddie Flores

The Community Leader

- When Eddie was born, his mother was 13 and his father was incarcerated.
- Expelled for smoking and tagging, he took to the streets.
- Detained in juvenile hall, he had no class time and was often alone in a cell because his unit was in lock-down.

In my voice:

“We ate breakfast, lunch and dinner in our cell. We had some packets thrown at us for school, but most of the time, we didn’t have paper or pencil to write our families. They would take the pencils away from us if we had one. We had no books to read—nothing to distract my mind.”



Youth
Justice
Coalition



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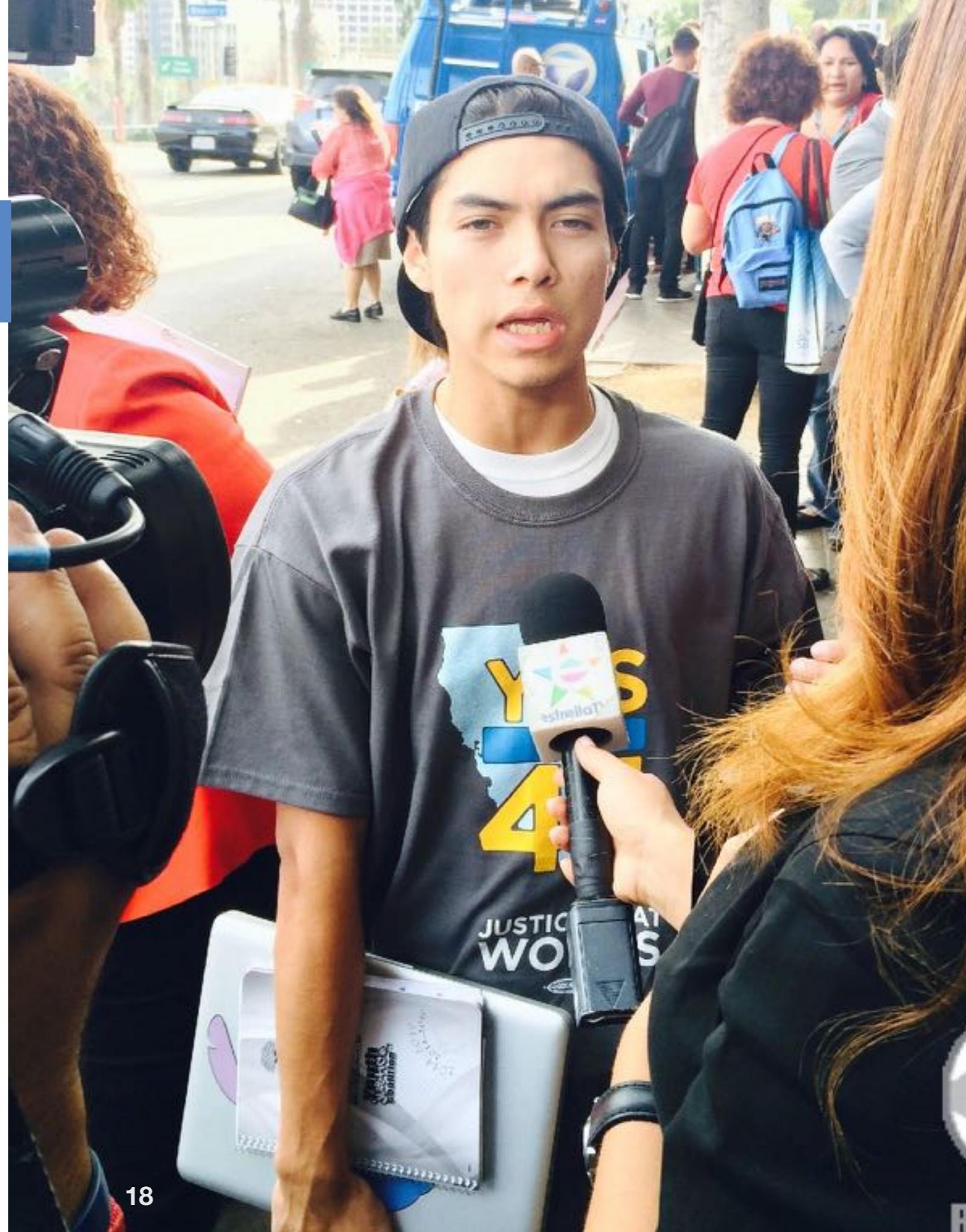
Eddie Flores

Purpose and Power

- On probation, Eddie was warned to re-enroll in school but received no guidance or list of schools that would accept him.
- An intervention worker told Eddie and his mother about FREE L.A. High School, housed at Youth Justice Coalition (YJC).
- Eddie enrolled and also joined YJC and the Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition, where he found hands-on training, healing, coaching and camaraderie.

In my voice:

“I found a school that understands me, and they pushed me to do well, and offered a lot of help to improve my skills. I graduated high school at the Youth Justice Coalition and am now a college student at L.A. Trade Tech.”





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Eddie Flores

Today

- As his mentor says, Eddie “travels the state as a motivational speaker,” advocating to improve the lives of low income youth of color.
- At the Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition, Eddie learned that he can “dream big and become something.”
- He plans to one day found a community organization with his mother to support young moms.

Research shows that involvement in youth organizing has positive outcomes for young people, including academic achievement, leadership opportunities and healing.





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TRANSFORMING SELVES



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STORY:

Joshua Ham

THE BRIDGE BUILDER

- Josh was a good student but was suspended for talking in class. He joined the Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition at 15.
- He didn't have a father at home, and drew inspiration and strength from the BSS Coalition's adult leaders.
- His world opened up through monthly meetings in different parts of L.A., where he learned about many cultures and communities.

In my voice:

“I was able to see that students at other schools and from different backgrounds experienced some of the same issues. Learning that we had these common struggles in spaces that allowed us to also learn more about our own and other cultures is one the things that made BSS special to me.”





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Joshua Ham

The Work

- Josh’s description of his high school’s in-school suspension program, run by a former prison guard, helped the BSS Coalition decide to focus on school suspension policy reform.
- He told the California Assembly Select Committee on the Status of Boys and Men of Color about his everyday reality at Manuel Arts High School—police cars out front, security guards at the gate, helicopters circling overhead.
- He says that patience is a skill he learned as a BSS advocate for policy reform.

In my voice:

“That stuff took work, meetings, and positive energy to remain focused on the task at hand in order to make sure that the policy was not just passed but implemented right.”





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Joshua Ham

Today

- Josh works for the Los Angeles Unified School District.
- In the halls at work, he passes posters on the School Climate Bill of Rights, a policy he helped create and implement, reforming discipline policies in LAUSD.
- “My advice to youth leaders is stay in it. Be focused. Don’t get discouraged if someone doesn’t want to sign your bill. Be optimistic. Be comfortable being you.”





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What does youth organizing look like?

The youth leaders of Brothers, Sons, Selves built power by:

- Engaging civic leaders to advocate for themselves
- Speaking to the media
- Holding meetings with school district and county officials, and organizing rallies
- Mobilizing their peers and families
- Deepening their understanding of political and government systems
- Making campaign decisions based on their lived experience

During the coalition's first six years, BSS members testified at three California State Assembly Select Committee on the Status of Boys and Men of Color hearings, and helped:

- Reform discipline policies in Long Beach schools
- Change the statewide education landscape as other districts implemented bans on willful defiance suspensions and stopped suspending four- and five-year olds
- Ensure that \$13 million of earmarked state funding went to counselors and special needs rather than school police





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Positive Outcomes

L.A. schools have been transformed, thanks to the boys and young men who shared their experiences in 2011, and their:

- Talents
- Good ideas
- Hard work
- Activism

Like their schools, BSS Coalition members—youth of color between 13 and 24 years of age—experienced personal growth and transformation. Participants achieved a 100% graduation rate, and all have continued on to college or military service.

Research shows that youth programs that engage young people in grassroots campaigns can enhance participants' academic skills and benefit their peers through the positive effects of policy change.



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THE BSS APPROACH

THE BSS

APPROACH



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Key Strategies for Success



1. Multi-Generational Leadership Model
2. Inclusive Masculinity & Culture
3. Dedicated Funding for 5+ Years
4. Neutral Program Manager & Convening Team
5. Clear Decision-Making Process
6. Inside-Outside Approach



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Multi-Generational Leadership Model

Many coalition stakeholders shape campaigns and decisions, including:

- High school youth leaders
- Executive directors, senior organizational leadership
- Youth organizing staff
- Foundation staff



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Inclusive Masculinity & Culture

The Brothers, Sons, Selves approach:

- Inclusion of LGBTQ justice organizations and youth leaders
- Safe space where masculinity and feminism coexist
- Multicultural identities embraced and integrated into youth leadership curriculum



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Dedicated Funding for 5+ Years

Funding is needed for:

- Convening team
- Youth stipends
- Individual organizations, including staff time and transportation costs
- Media and communication support



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Convening Team & Program Manager

The organizational structure:

- A dynamic team responsible for convening and co-facilitating, with a structure that is responsive to the varied and changing needs of the coalition
- 10 community based organizations, with youth leaders, organizers and senior leadership working with the convening team to shape consensus that advances campaign progress
- Dedicated program manager hired to implement strategies, and coordinate among organizations and youth



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Clear Decision Making Process

Strategies for making decisions:

- A consensus approach to strengthen youth development through the process of learning, discussing and deciding
- Spaces for working with gradations of agreement rather than relying on an all-or-nothing framework
- Small-group task forces for more complex decision-making and action



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WHAT WE CAN DO NEXT

WHAT CAN WE DO

NEXT



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The Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition, incubated for six years at Liberty Hill, **is now an independent coalition**, led by anchor organizations who have built capacity to lead and win.



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The BSS Coalition illustrates the **impact of robust philanthropic investment in the strategies** of convening grassroots organizations, scaling campaigns, focusing on grassroots and youth leadership, and driving policy change.



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When **fund**ers come together to **invest** in youth organizing, great things happen. Joint foundation funding made it possible for the organizers to press forward with urgency.



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The **value of public/private partnerships** is evident in the results of these deep collaborations between youth leaders, educators and state legislators.



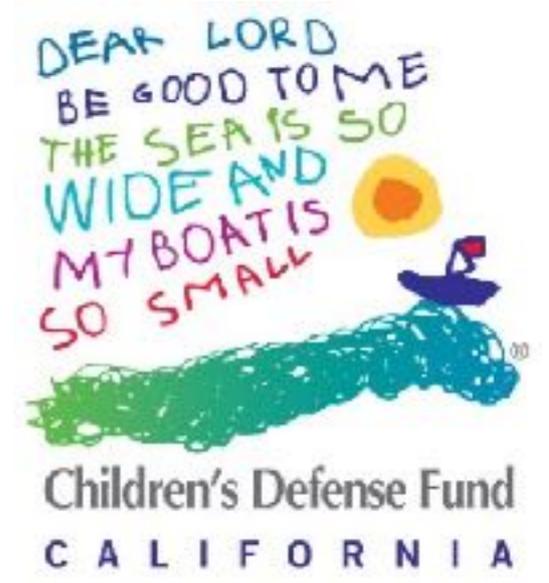
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Successful policy reforms are not only enacted but provided proper resources. The BSS Coalition's hyper-local focus on budget was essential to implementing the School Climate Bill of Rights.



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**More of these partnerships can
improve the lives of youth of
color and their communities.**



Khmer Girls in Action