



Center for the
Study of
Social Policy
Ideas into Action

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:

CSSP's Journey to
Center Equity,
Inclusion, and Justice

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INTRODUCTION

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to build a racially, socially, and economically just society in which all children, youth, and families thrive. For more than four decades, CSSP has influenced and supported elected officials, public administrators, community leaders, families, and neighborhood residents to take action to better support children, youth, and families, especially those who face the most significant barriers to opportunity. We are recognized for our leadership in shaping policy, reforming public systems, and building the capacity of communities. Our work is intended to positively impact outcomes for all parents and children through multiple generations.

Our commitment to equity can be traced to our earliest work, which focused on income inequality, ability, age, and race. In 1983, we published *A Dream Deferred: Economic Status of Black Americans: A Working Paper*, which recognized the impact of systemic and institutional racism in creating enduring economic and wealth disparities impacting African-Americans. Our early policy efforts were dedicated to improving access to and quality of care for disabled children and adults, expanding public income support and health care benefits for families living in poverty, improving tax credits for working families, and working with state and federal policymakers to promote equitable approaches to increase opportunities for all kids and families. Our work is always evidence-based and data-driven, and—from the beginning—we promoted the critical importance of disaggregating data by race and ethnicity to lift up how children of all backgrounds fare in relationship to each other.

The more formal beginning of our internal journey began in 2003, when we ramped up our efforts to ensure that CSSP's work focused on racial equity and that organizational policies and practices reflected that same commitment. A catalyst for that effort began as CSSP, with colleagues from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Casey Family Programs, Casey Family Services, and the Marguerite Casey Foundation, formed the Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare (the Alliance), a coalition focused on understanding the data and causative factors that lead to racial inequity and disparities, particularly among children in foster care. Members of the Alliance recognized the need for training on historical and current racism and how racism has shaped public policies and institutions, including child welfare, mental health, and education systems. CSSP became the lead organizational partner in that Alliance which has continued to today.

As the CSSP staff working most closely on the Alliance began to deepen their knowledge of structural racism and its effects and their skills in carrying out this external facing work, they quickly recognized that CSSP would benefit from a focused, internal effort with a parallel and proclaimed organizational commitment to creating a culture of self-reflection, organizational improvement, and dedication to confronting and dismantling racism and valuing equity. The decision to invest time and resources to assess and shift internal culture, and provide all staff with the opportunity to build their knowledge and competency, has been an ongoing, shared commitment since that time.

Fifteen years later, we continue to describe CSSP as being on a racial equity journey—a journey that requires ongoing development, reflection, and action. During the course of this journey, CSSP declared that its work was directed to being an anti-racist organization. That is, CSSP affirmatively and publicly strives to recognize, reveal, and dismantle structural and institutional racism within our organization and in the work that we do in the field. Staff have joined CSSP and this collective journey at different stages and bring different life and professional experiences, which continue to inform and advance our efforts. This short narrative captures our racial equity journey for those wanting to understand and learn from where we have come, how we moved forward, what we have accomplished, and where we have yet to go. Like our journey, this document will also change and grow with our collective experiences.

OUR STAGES OF GROWTH

STAGE ONE: *PREPARING FOR CHANGE*

CSSP's formal racial equity journey began in 2003 when staff made requests for ongoing learning and professional development opportunities on diversity, equity, and disparities. While not all staff were sure that they wanted to be on this journey, and there was not a pre-defined path, our first goal was clear: we needed to build a safe and open environment for productive, effective conversations about racial equity within our organization and how we approached our work.

To help us in assessing our needs for growth, we engaged a trusted and skilled consultant to talk to each staff individually to take the temperature of the organization and understand our organization culture. We relied on a small, voluntary group of staff who organized and promoted joint sharing and learning opportunities on race and ethnicity. These activities prompted critical and impactful conversations among staff, building stronger bonds of trust and accountability, and were crucial in establishing the initially fragile threads of a CSSP culture willing to talk openly and honestly about issues of race.

A key step in beginning to shift culture was developing and adopting a shared vocabulary, particularly in terms of defining and understanding disproportionality, overrepresentation, and disparity as well as structural and institutional racism. This shared vocabulary was critical for a number of reasons—it helped create a shared understanding of the issues facing communities that are impacted by our work, and created a baseline of staff knowledge in support of our culture shift. But—perhaps most importantly—the work on a shared vocabulary acted to ensure a safe space for all staff to participate in the conversation because there was a foundation of common language to build upon.

Together and individually, staff struggled with the conversations, trainings, and various approaches to understanding racial equity that were employed. We recognized that these learning opportunities could neither happen in a vacuum nor be one-time events. We continued to work through our own learning as challenges arose, keeping race and racism at the core of our conversations. At this early stage, we did not declare ourselves to be on a journey toward being an anti-racist organization—that concept and commitment took root following several of those shared learning experiences, conversations, and trainings.



STAGE TWO: MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Having defined a core, shared vocabulary and a collective understanding of structural and institutional racism—steps that supported our desire to insure a welcoming, inclusive, and safe environment for more deliberate racial equity work—we felt that our progress to this point had been incremental and sometimes hard to assess. At one of the trainings staff participated in, we were introduced to the idea of what an anti-racist organization would look like. CSSP staff and leadership agreed that was a goal we wanted to pursue, and began more intensive and intentional actions to become an anti-racist, equity-centered organization. We set new and ambitious goals to move beyond creating safe spaces and encouraging self-education to making changes in our infrastructure and ways of doing business.

Our first step was to move away from a core team of staff solely working on these issues and instead make all CSSP staff responsible for and accountable to our shared standards around racial equity. During this phase, CSSP focused on changing four key pillars of our work: improving organizational infrastructure; training and supporting all staff on racial equity concepts, theories, and strategies; developing external partnerships to more broadly engage with others on similar racial equity journeys and share our lessons and beginning expertise; and realigning all external work to promote racial equity and dismantle racial inequities. The activities under the four pillars included the following activities:

Organizational Structures:

- Identified core competencies for staff and ensured these competencies are evaluated and supported as part of annual performance reviews.
- Changed hiring and recruitment policies to achieve a more diverse pool of applicants and hires.
- Diversified the board of directors.
- Revisited contracts and vendors to ensure we were as open and inclusive as possible and required organizations with whom we work to provide data on their staff diversity.
- Diversified CSSP's investment portfolio to align with our equity and social justice values.
- Created an organizational assessment and benchmarking tool for progress related to racial equity.
- Developed a messaging platform for all staff to use in their communications.
- Created an organizational unit as part of CSSP's Leadership Team charged with coordinating and developing high level accountability for Equity, Inclusion, and Justice.

Training:

- Built an internal racial equity library.
- Mandated and provided multiple all-staff trainings and learning opportunities to expand staff knowledge.
- Invested in individual professional development to support learning opportunities about racial equity.
- Created an internal racial equity training curricula to onboard new staff.

Partnerships:

- Intentionally built partnerships with new organizations and funders supporting racial equity efforts.

- Founded the Racial Equity and Justice Learning Community—a loose alliance with other national non-profits based in Washington, D.C. who are committed to improving their organization's racial equity, inclusion, and justice policies and practices
- Expanded technical assistance, tools, and resources to support racial equity efforts more broadly in the field.

External Work:

- Ensured that that each of our specific bodies of work includes an explicit focus on racial inequities in our messaging, strategy, and tool development, data collection, and accountability for results. Some specific examples include the Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare; getREAL—an initiative focused on supporting LGBTQ+ children, youth, and families in child welfare; Institutional Analysis—a qualitative diagnostic tool for understanding root causes of racial disparities in public systems; inSIGHT: A curriculum for understanding and addressing implicit racial bias for frontline child welfare workers; support for a network of Parent Leaders working to insure equitable outcomes in early childhood systems and programs, among others.
- Developed and promote a policy agenda that consistently and persistently centers racial equity.
- Created and implemented strategies for training our partners and stakeholders on issues of structural and institutional racism and implicit bias.
- Created and disseminated numerous publications on best policies and practices to promote equity in communities and public systems.
- Increased racial equity communications strategies with policymakers, funders, and administrators.

STAGE THREE: IDEAS INTO ACTION

CSSP enters the next 20 years with the commitment to become even more explicit in identifying the historical and institutional root causes of inequities and in developing solutions that go beyond short term fixes. We want to change the landscape of outcomes for children and families in this country which can only happen by directly dismantling barriers to equity, and feel we have a critical role and contribution to make in advancing that effort.

Currently, our commitment to being “anti-racist” holds us accountable to the following:

- Being prepared for and competent in confronting and addressing inequities encountered in our many areas of work.
- Strengthening knowledge, skills, attitudes, and individual personal competencies to address inequities based on race, both internally and in our external work and written products.
- Explicitly promoting racial equity in our organization's human resources, management, governance, and hiring practices.
- Ensuring that all staff are competent in acknowledging the impact of structural and institutional racism and address explicit practices that treat people differently based on race.
- Focusing on changing the narrative on how issues of racial inequity are discussed in our internal and external work and products.
- Understanding and addressing how policies and practices must account for the intersecting identities of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability.
- Continuing to shift power by being more transparent and inclusive in decision-making and identifying opportunities for staff to contribute and share their expertise.

With this roadmap, and our constant commitment to living our values and aligning with our mission, we will continually revisit our impact in advancing equity, inclusion, and justice and stand ready to find meaningful ways to measure our strategies for effectiveness and make adjustments to be ever more effective.



LESSONS LEARNED

What we have learned over the past fifteen years is that the challenging work needed to become an anti-racist organization doesn't produce results overnight, and is at the same time, incredibly urgent and rewarding. It requires dedicated staff time, attention, accountability, and infrastructure. We continue to grow and deepen our commitment, while recognizing our own frailties—in this journey, we all have and will make mistakes. Our charge is to recognize them, call them out, learn from them, and seek authentic ways to ensure we do not make the same mistakes twice.

This work requires brutal candor. As a mission driven organization, it became clear we could no longer lift up our values if we failed to discuss the structural and racial inequities facing the families and communities we care about, and the role of systems and policies in perpetuating inequity. It took an intentional shift in focus to do the internal work to increase our knowledge and skills, as our sense of urgency is always pointed externally to improve outcomes for children and families. Management issues and unclear or inadequate internal systems can exacerbate negative experiences for staff that may have nothing to do with race, but may be conflated with race. Having a transparent process to differentiate these issues and taking steps to honestly identify both management issues and racial equity issues is essential.

This work requires agreement at all levels. Leadership must embrace the importance of focusing on racial equity and participate in critical activities—and be actively involved at all phases of the journey. Likewise staff—either a committed, cross-section, or the entire organization—must be free (and encouraged) to share in the journey, ask hard questions, and elevate the discussion and solutions. Staff must have the authority to move work forward, ensure accountability, and promote transparency at all levels of the organization.

This work requires an equal commitment to examining and improving internal AND external efforts. Internal project teams need to continue to deepen their ability to use and center racial equity within their work. At an organizational level, the Board, Leadership and all staff need to engage in ongoing reflection and evaluation to ensure that gains are maintained, policies and practices are continually re-examined, and accountability measures are in place to insure that commitments are kept and policy and practice improvements are followed.

This work requires continuous commitment and constant attention. As staff leave the organization and/or new staff join it, it is important to retain the culture of commitment to equity. This means helping newer staff understand the historical journey of our organization while affirming and learning from the new and different perspectives that different people bring to the table. New staff bring new experiences and have unique personal journeys—there is intentional work to recognize and honor their journeys and help them feel they belong in the organization and are part of the organization's racial equity journey. It is important to emphasize that at CSSP, we work to help staff feel they belong, not push staff to “fit in” to our existing culture. This is an imperfect process; it takes time and a give-and-take, and requires patience to identify and work through differences and tensions, but ultimately makes for a stronger organization.

This work requires that we continue to push ourselves to measure if and how we are making an impact. As a field, we need to continue to develop better measures for how our focus as an intermediary organization on achieving racial equity contributes to better outcomes for the children, families, and communities we care about.

This work takes evolving leadership. Champions of the process may need to step up to move work forward, or step away to let others lead. Being nimble, allowing for honest dialogue, and respecting peoples' own journey and ability to continuously lead this work, is a necessary part of the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure that there is openness in the process. Use data to continue examining hiring, promotion, contracting, and other practices and procedures. Develop performance measures and an accountability structure that staff and leadership agree upon and use. Create a structure for continuous reflection and improvement, and make space for mid-course corrections.

Identify champions—both internal and external—who will support and hold the organization accountable. These can be board members, staff, external partners, funders, etc., and they should be involved continuously.

Shift the accountability for achieving equity from champions to leaders. There are champions (internal staff, board members, key partners) who persistently drive racial equity work forward and there are named leaders within an organization—in this work, sometimes they are the same person, sometimes they are different. While champions are crucial for support, ultimately organizational leaders are responsible for building and maintaining a culture of equity and for holding their staff accountable for embodying equity in their work. This may require significant investment and support and be individualized to the strengths and needs of each leader.

Create the expectation that all staff are leaders and change agents for racial equity. Racial equity work is not optional when looking to achieve improvements for children, youth, and families. All staff, regardless of their position in the organization, should understand they have a critical role to play in advancing equity both within and external to the organization.

Recruit diverse staff. In order to ensure a diverse and qualified pool of candidates, organizations must ensure their hiring process does not reinforce white privilege and power. Protocols must be examined and changed to ensure the hiring committee is diverse and the hiring process does not advantage those who already have disproportionate advantages (i.e., look to advertise beyond particular colleges and universities, actively recruit within diverse networks; assess candidate's knowledge of and commitment to racial equity work in the candidate selection process).

Retain diverse staff. Understand that there is a difference between diversity and inclusion. Organizations must cultivate a culture that ensures a “safe space” for people to bring their whole selves, and remember that many staff, particularly people of color, are experiencing varying types of oppression in their daily lives. Further, while safe spaces are important, work toward creating “brave spaces”—that is, spaces where difficult conversations can happen, where staff genuinely interact with each other, learn together, and grow. Staff in brave spaces take risks together and work to recognize when their questions and comments may unintentionally cause hurt or other impacts on staff and the work is done to account for and redress these transgressions.

Prepare for sustainability if there are changes in leadership. A focus on racial equity should be embedded in the organizations mission, values, and strategic plans. The infrastructure—practices and accountability mechanisms—of the organization must actively be realigned so that efforts to become an anti-racist organization are core to the organization, and advancement of racial equity efforts are not dependent on a single staff person or small group.

Foster an inclusive and respectful environment that values staff as whole individuals, and ensures staff don't blame others or assume disinterest or poor motivations, but encourages openness, dialogue and room for understanding.

Balance the need for ongoing internal capacity building while maintaining a laser-like focus on external work to improve outcomes for children and families. It means having a dual focus and double bottom line, but is crucial to staff having a high level of proficiency and pushing work focused on equity forward.

Seek secure funding that allows for dedicated staff time to focus on racial equity. Commit organizational resources—both money and time, but also the creation of a culture that seeks out learning on this work—to ensure that staff are constantly working to grow and improve. Prioritize this work as much as you prioritize core programmatic/organizational work and support staff so that they can take advantage of training opportunities.

CONCLUSION

CSSP has been on this journey—in some form or another—for more than four decades. The path has not been straight and the work has never been easy, but our commitment to racial equity has been a foundational, core part of our mission from the beginning. We know that we must be vigilant in continuing our internal and external work described above to ensure we are ultimately helping and promoting racial equity and justice. Further, we believe that CSSP's unique blend of work that bridges policy, systems change, and community change—along with our long-standing and deep relationships with local, state, and federal decision makers—positions us to be effective and impactful, as an organization committed to building a racially, socially, and economically just society in which all children, youth, and families thrive.

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