



# BETTER TOGETHER

Lasting political impact is hard to garner and even harder to sustain. However, there is strength in numbers. No one organization is universally influential in all circles, so coalition partnerships give advocates an opportunity to collectively expand their sphere of influence, relying on new voices and insights to sharpen coordinated strategy and deepen support.

However, being in a coalition is also messy business. In this playbook, more than 20 advocacy organizations from eight states share lessons learned on building relationships and trust, creating space for conflict and navigating inevitable disagreements, and sustaining their work.



# USING THIS TOOL

This playbook reflects the hard-earned wisdom of advocates across the country. It is designed to serve as a reference as you build and strengthen partnerships, navigate challenging circumstances, or explain your investment in coalitions to funders.

Whether you read the playbook cover to cover or use the table of contents to identify the one section most applicable to your current work, we hope lessons learned from your colleagues will expedite your progress.

Thank you to all organizations who contibuted:

A for Arizona	Educators for Excellence-Minnesota
A+ Colorado	Expect More Arizona
Climb Higher Colorado	League of Education Voters
Colorado Succeeds	Stand for Children Arizona
ConnCAN	Stand for Children Colorado
Connecticut Council for Education Reform	Stand for Children Louisiana
Democrats for Education Reform Colorado	Stand for Children Washington
Democrats for Education Reform Louisiana	Teach Plus Massachusetts
Democrats for Education Reform Washington	Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition
EdAllies	Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE)
The Education Trust	TennesseeCAN



## How can I use this tool?

Share key findings with coalition partners to support conversations about development and impact.

## 6 PRACTICES OF COALITION-BUILDING

*The art of building & sustaining coalitions*

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# BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

1. Find Common Ground in your Work
2. Create Real Connections with your Partners
3. Get the Right People at the Table
4. Earn Trust

“Be comfortable understanding that each group can’t be in 100 percent understanding. We work in a Venn Diagram. As long as we focus on that we’re able to move the ball forward.”

- Connecticut Council  
for Education Reform

# BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

## Find Common Ground in your Work

“Partner building isn’t something you do as an afterthought. It’s not something you do when you need partnership out of your partners. It’s ongoing.”

- Stand for Children Louisiana

- While coalition partners may not completely align on every issue, advocates in sustaining coalitions understand where they agree with their partners.
- Experienced advocates have learned that shifting political dynamics—both state and federal—require nimble and innovative strategy, including joining forces with groups you don’t work with normally.
- Even if individuals have changed at organizations that are traditionally in opposition, leaders caution that there still may be residual distrust.

## Shared Threats Bring People Together

- Rolling back high standards
- Lowering the bar on assessments
- Removing charter schools
- Navigating budget

## Create Real Connections with your Partners

“It’s a slower start, but when we do it, we move faster and farther.”

-League of Education Voters

- High stakes make groups eager to take action. However, seasoned leaders invest time to build meaningful relationships with partners across the coalition. This is especially true when working with unlikely partners.
- Members from sustaining coalitions said they utilized social settings, like happy hours, coffee, or dinner, to deepen relationships, and in many cases, this helped them navigate tough conversations later down the road with their partnership still intact.

## Get the Right People at the Table

“We had a vast group of people who had not necessarily partnered together in the past, and the fact that we all agreed was powerful and spoke for itself.”

- A+ Colorado

- Partners in successful coalitions invited more than just their normal allies, including stakeholders that could speak to the power and impact of policies from multiple perspectives— teachers unions, community and family groups, business, religious, and political leaders, etc.

# BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

- Working with groups you have historically disagreed with can make a powerful statement. Seasoned coalition partners engage partners in a conversation about common goals and why it's mutually beneficial to work together.
- Experienced advocates include all coalition partners—and to some extent groups who will be implementing the policy—in the work of the coalition early, before decision-making happens.
- Coalitions are designed to share diverse voices. Seasoned coalition partners seek out groups that don't always have a voice in the broader conversation but are deeply affected by K-12 outcomes.

## Teachers Unions as Partners

Lessons learned from Teach Plus Massachusetts and Expect More Arizona about union partnerships:

- Both advocates and unions need each other; however, be prepared for inherent skepticism.
- To start the conversation with a fresh tone, someone must be the first to reach out to build trust.
- Establish that you want to build a better relationship and solve this issue together.
- “Remember, you're both only human. You can't change the past. Focus on the future.”

“Diversity of representation helped get our agenda heard. Lawmakers understand that this is not a policy-only agenda; this is a group of people who personally care about and have experienced this issue.”

- Educators for Excellence-Minnesota

EdAllies emphasizes the importance of incorporating groups that will implement legislation into discussions—like districts or state departments. If you don't, they caution against creating a policy that looks perfect on paper and fails during implementation. They speak from experience—initially passing legislation through coalition work and revising during a subsequent legislative session because of implementation challenges.

## Partnering with Faith Leaders

Pastors can be the most credible advocates for those least well-served by schools. ConnCAN began working with area clergy leaders in 2011. Listening to the needs and aspirations of the faith community and the needs of the communities which they serve was critical to identifying mutual interests. Those important relationship conversations became the basis for collective impact on the political and legislative process.

ConnCAN organized trips to the state capitol to engage faith-based leaders in the legislative process. They described a palpable change in energy when the group of clergy leaders walked through the halls—legislators paid attention.

ConnCAN is now working with 30 plus clergy leaders across the state to shine a light on the need for a revised Connecticut school funding formula. Because this group of faith leaders in Connecticut is so engaged in influencing positive policy change and because many legislators will rely on the clergy for access to their congregation during the next election cycle, ConnCAN says faith leaders are moving their legislators to action.

# BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

## Partnering with Community & Civil Rights Organizations

“When an organization has been historically left out of certain conversations, trust may be harder to build. You should be prepared for conversations about why now and what’s different now.”

- The Education Trust

- Constantly evaluate if those least well-served are at the table.
- Don’t just invite partners to join your space; meet them in their space.
- Understand that communities are not monolithic. Recognize and value that each organization or group has different priorities.
- Approach real, deep partnerships with a sense of humility.

## Earn Trust

“When you’re in the trenches, it’s hard to have each other’s backs if you don’t trust each other.”

- League of Education Voters

- Seasoned coalition partners develop clear expectations for what happens behind closed doors and what happens in public. Boundaries can help avoid back channel communications that negate the coalition’s message.
- Sustaining coalition partners also commit to direct and respectful communications among members, even if it’s uncomfortable when they disagree.
- Advocates understand that personalities within the group do matter and will be different. They attempt to push past differences to build lasting working relationships.

## Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, & Adjourning

*Model cited by several organizations to support the coalition process:*

**Forming:** In its early stages, teams devote time to defining structure, goals, roles, and direction so that members can build trust.

**Storming:** Members may become frustrated with progress or express disagreement with goals, expectations, roles, or responsibilities. This is an opportunity to refocus the team’s direction or approach.

**Norming:** Individual expectations and the reality of the team’s experience begin to align. Members feel valued and comfortable expressing their opinion.

**Performing:** The team makes progress toward its goals. The contributions of individual members are valued and celebrated, and members feel satisfaction in the team’s effectiveness.

**Adjourning:** Members evaluate their success, and identify lessons learned.

SOURCE: ProjectManagement.com & Massachusetts Institute of Technology Human Resources

# DETERMINE SHARED PURPOSE

1. Develop a North Star
2. Establish a Leadership Model
3. Define the Ideal Size and Scope

“There are a million ways we may disagree, but there are benefits to working together.”

- Democrats for Education Reform Washington

# DETERMINE SHARED PURPOSE

## Develop a North Star

“Our whole goal in life is to see the highest number of kids in the best schools in the shortest amount of time.”  
- A for Arizona

- Coalition partners emphasized the importance of coming to a high-level agreement about what you’re working on and making that your focus. Asking questions of yourself and partners can help.
  1. What brings each organization to the conversation?
  2. What problem is each organization trying to solve?
  3. What are the goals of the group, and how does that relate to the goals of individual organizations?
- Advocates know that establishing a coordinated advocacy strategy around broad initiatives brings people to—and keeps them at—the table.

“It would be unwieldy if we tried to agree on everything.”  
- Colorado Succeeds

## Establish a Leadership Model

“Coalition leadership has to know how to invest different organizations in the coalition’s issues to promote engagement.”  
- Connecticut Council for Education Reform

- Advocates describe leadership in a healthy coalition as constantly evolving.
- Strong coalitions have multiple leaders who contribute in different ways and who also know that sometimes even strong leaders need to be followers.
- Partners in sustaining coalitions know that organizations have different and changing roles based on their strengths and capacity.



### What is a coalition?

Derived from a Latin word that means “to grow together,” a coalition is an alliance of different organizations or entities that commit to an agreed-upon purpose and shared decision-making for joint action or impact.

While partners work together, each participating organization maintains its own autonomy.

## Keeping it Informal

In the Pelican State, Stand for Children Louisiana works with an intentionally informal coalition. Even without officially defining themselves as a coalition, the group maintains deep relationships and trust, enabling them to move nimbly. Recognizing that each partner has different stakeholder and political relationships, the partners share information and devote time and thought to aligning messages and actions. Whether it’s a three-hour strategy session to discuss ESSA recommendations to the state board of education or a phone call to debrief a community engagement meeting, Stand for Children Louisiana describes a deep commitment to informal partnerships.

# DETERMINE SHARED PURPOSE

- In a large coalition, Network members recommend keeping the decision-making body small and communicating the decision-making structure to the whole group.
- Some coalition partners rely on a steering committee or a core group of members that are always involved in the decision-making process, who then relay important information to other members.
- As strategy shifts, advocates say leadership can emerge and evolve based on members' strengths and weaknesses.

## Define the Ideal Size & Scope

“Do you want a big diverse coalition or do you want a small activist coalition? The bigger you get and the more people you have at the table, the less you are going to be able to push the limits.”

- EdAllies

- Experienced coalition partners know there is no one-size-fits-all
- Advocates said placing limitations on the size and reach of the coalition may be necessary to maintain impact and control.
- Larger coalitions often capture more diverse voices, while smaller coalitions can often be more action-oriented.

While coordination is often necessary—especially for larger coalitions—the higher the level of coordination by specific coalition members, the lower the level of ownership is for other partners.

### What does overcoordination look like?

- The same coalition partners are always assigning roles and duties.
- Discussions are so controlled partners aren't able to voice dissent.
- Areas of concern or action aren't surfacing organically because the coalition's work is so prescriptive.

## There's no one-size-fits-all approach

“We had a strong core that could work together and be transparent and have enough authority to move forward.”  
- Stand for Children Arizona

“It's important to understand that you don't need every single voice at every step of the process, but you need clear ways to reengage people throughout, particularly to ensure everyone is bought into decisions.”  
- A+ Colorado

## Decision Making

In Tennessee, the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) describes a steering committee of coalition partners as an important leadership mechanism for the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition. The steering committee—something many PIE Network members described as critical for larger coalitions—is empowered to make broad decisions about the coalition's work. Similarly, Colorado Succeeds details being in a coalition that charged a steering committee to set the North Star, or guiding vision.

# ESTABLISH GROUND RULES

1. Establish How Partners will Communicate
2. Identify Strengths and Contributions
3. Agree How to Move the Work Forward

“Are you the type of coalition where it’s okay for people to come and just have their voices heard, or do you want a commitment that everyone goes home with homework?”

- EdAllies

# ESTABLISH GROUND RULES

## Establish How Partners Will Communicate

“Don’t recreate the wheel; go where people already are. Use established meetings or events—even if they aren’t related to the coalition—as opportunities to discuss the work with partners.”

-Expect More Arizona

- Partners in sustaining coalitions schedule regular coalition meetings and invite all stakeholders.
- Time-strapped advocates capitalize on already established meetings and moments to discuss coalition work with their partners—talking in the hallway before a legislative hearing, carpooling to a major event, extending an already-scheduled check-in with a partner.
- Experienced coalition partners commit to over-communicating with their partners via phone, email and text.
- Seasoned leaders said they create a consistent way to relay information about the coalition to their own team.

## Internal Communication

When Stand for Children Arizona was deep in coalition work on Proposition 123—a coalition designed to support a ballot measure that secured billions for state education funding—they relied on tight internal communications within their own organization. One Stand for Children Arizona team member served as the point person for the coalition and led daily 4 p.m. calls with the entire internal team, sharing updates and discussing progress on important components of the public campaign like mailers and stakeholder lists.

## Identify Strengths & Contributions of Members

“In a large coalition we have this continuum of people that we are trying to bring along. Just like in a classroom you have students that you can’t feed fast enough. Then, you have others that will do something when they’re asked.”

- Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition

- At the beginning of their work, experienced coalition partners determine the capacity of each organization and what they are willing/able to contribute.
  1. Who is good at what?
  2. How much capacity does each organization have to contribute?
  3. What level of engagement can each organization commit to?
- Advocates in sustaining coalitions are attentive to evolving opportunities for members to use their strengths, and constantly reassess how they or their partners can contribute.

# ESTABLISH GROUND RULES

## Agree How to Move the Work Forward

“It’s easy for there always to be this lingering question; once we leave the meeting who is actually going to do the work?”

- EdAllies

- Carving out structured time to meet face-to-face is important to partners in sustaining coalitions. Schedule meetings and develop the agenda in advance. Assign pre-work when possible.
- Seasoned coalition members recommend selecting a strong moderator who will ensure that all voices are heard and that no groups are being marginalized.
- To avoid confusion or frustration later, advocates encourage making next steps clear to the whole group.

## Habits for the Long Haul

In Connecticut, ConnCAN and the Connecticut Council for Education Reform (CCER) detail several habits that have helped them sustain a coalition called the Big Six. Each organization sends their executive director—both as a show of commitment to the coalition and to ensure each coalition member has maximum authority to make decisions for their organization.

The coalition consists of many talented and proven leaders, and the group is thoughtful about which organization is the most effective lead on specific issues. Sometimes ConnCAN and CCER take a step back because a leader from one of the coalition’s traditional education organizations can best deliver the group’s message. A thoughtful approach to roles and jobs within the coalition has helped keep the partnership moving forward. However, because these habits depend on the leadership style of individual members, as the leaders in the coalition change, these roles and habits may evolve.

# MAINTAIN TRANSPARENCY

1. Get Real About What Partners Need
2. Factor In and Move Past Egos
3. Trust is Hard to Build and Even Harder to Rebuild

“We needed two very different groups to come to the same conclusion for two very different reasons.”

- Expect More Arizona

# MAINTAIN TRANSPARENCY

## Get Real About What Partners Need

“The goal of the coalition should override any personal disagreements that exist.”

- Democrats for Education Reform Louisiana

- Some advocates felt frustrated because it was unclear how their coalition partners were making progress on components of the work.
- Leaders suggested being transparent about the information you have and the information you need from other coalition partners.
- Sustaining coalition partners are clear about what they need to invest stakeholders in their work. Experienced advocates know the same messages won't resonate with everyone.

“Not all coalition members will agree on every piece of policy, and that's ok. Different coalition members answer to different stakeholders, and sometimes priorities differ.”

- Democrats for Education Reform Colorado

## Factor In & Move Past Egos

“Understand the coalition's mission is bigger than your organization. If someone else needs to take the lead to make it happen, it's for the greater good.”

- Connecticut Council for Education Reform

- Even seasoned leaders have to regularly remind themselves that the collective impact of the coalition is more important than the ego of the individual.
- Experienced coalition partners anticipate turf issues, and invest early in understanding what their partners need to prevent this from becoming an overwhelming factor.

## Trust is Hard to Build and Even Harder to Rebuild

During their work on Proposition 123, Stand for Children Arizona says trust was one of the biggest issues facing their coalition. Because the coalition included so many groups that didn't historically work together, there was an inherent skepticism. Establishing a “best-case scenario” and “a worst-case scenario” for working together helped the group move forward, especially since the worst-case scenario was dramatically underfunded schools.

Stand for Children Arizona also recommends spending some of your own political capital to earn the trust of your coalition partners. Bring your message and your stakeholders into spaces you wouldn't normally go. Show your partners that you are willing to leverage your audience to share messages and framing that are important to them.

# ANTICIPATE CONFLICT

1. Intentionally Acknowledge Differences
2. Stay Above the Clouds
3. Make Room for Disagreements

“Don’t be afraid of painful issues and conversations.”

- A for Arizona

# ANTICIPATE CONFLICT

## Intentionally Acknowledge Differences

“Disagreements are best worked out in close, candid family conversations.”

TennesseeCAN

- Partners in sustaining coalitions know that conflict is normal and healthy. They work to identify small elephants in the room before they become big elephants.
- Experienced advocates also create room for everyone to speak their mind while also becoming a problem solver and recognizing when the conversation is no longer productive.
- If all coalition partners agree all the time, strong leaders recognize that the coalition may not be listening to or representing the entire community.

“Be thoughtful about where everyone is coming from and remember that our ultimate goal is the same—educating kids to a higher standard.”

- Stand for Children  
Colorado

## Establish Compromises Early

Name and discuss areas for potential conflict. In Minnesota, EdAllies describes coalition members deeply engaged in legislative work at the state capitol who often have to make quick decisions to advance the work. As a result, EdAllies recommends establishing early the compromises that coalition members are willing to make. Defining the bottom line—what is an acceptable compromise and what is not—empowers coalition members on the front lines to make informed and timely decisions that represent the coalition. Having these conversations early can mitigate conflict.

## Stay Above the Clouds

“What is the bigger issue that people can champion to get them around this disagreement?”

Connecticut Council for Education Reform

- In the midst of conflict, experienced advocates focus on where coalition members overlap, not where they disagree.
- Partners in sustaining coalitions know that strong beliefs around fundamental education issues can help disagreeing coalition members find their way around smaller conflicts.
- Seasoned coalition partners can be helpful moderators in tense discussions.

# ANTICIPATE CONFLICT

## Making Room for Disagreements

This is not easy work. Advocates in Washington state—Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) Washington, League of Education Voters (LEV), and Stand for Children Washington—suggest creating space to disagree. One of their strategies is to build a diverse coalition. Because each organization in a diverse coalition inherently has a different vision, mission, and stakeholders, there has to be more room for disagreements.

However as coalitions grow and become more diverse, advocates stress the benefits of using a skilled facilitator to moderate discussion, whether a third-party facilitator or a coalition member. They described a practiced facilitator as someone who knows when to raise the heat to surface uncomfortable issues and when to lower the heat when discussion becomes unproductive.

## Engage External Facilitators

ConnCAN points to years of facilitated conversations as the reason their sustaining Big Six coalition was able to agree on and release a joint school finance platform. Facilitated conversations—like the ones ConnCAN, DFER Washington, LEV, and Stand for Children Washington describe—ensure no coalition members are marginalized. Skilled facilitators recognize when coalition members are harboring dissent and encourage them to speak out. All groups should be able to voice their opinions, and then give others the chance to change their mind or move forward with the original plan of action.

# PACKAGE YOUR RESULTS

1. Anticipate Getting Stuck on Credit
2. Using Momentum to Move Forward

“Elbows can get sharp when it comes to funding.”

# PACKAGE YOUR RESULTS

## Anticipate Getting Stuck on Credit

Seasoned partners recognize that many coalition members will have to quantify their work and impact for funders, both during and at the end of a campaign. While elbows can get sharp when it comes to funding, experienced advocates know that their reputation and relationships are better served by giving credit where it's due and sometimes, even where it's not.

Experienced advocates also create opportunities to measure what went right and what didn't—and why. They recognize that learning from mistakes can be just as valuable as succeeding.

Partners in sustaining coalitions understand the value of collecting information to tell your story of impact. While metrics are important, advocates know that they must use narratives and data to secure funding to fight another day.

“Coalition goals are only achieved when it's about the work and not about the credit. Recognize what each partner brings to the table and honor that in the group dynamic.”

- Democrats for Education Reform Colorado

## Using Momentum to Move Forward

“This is long-term work, building deep relationships with others trying to do the same thing.”  
- Stand for Children Washington

Sustaining coalition partners celebrate incremental victories in the middle and at the end of their work, understanding that celebration can breed synergy. Don't forget what you've already accomplished.

Experienced leaders understand how the coalition has benefited their organization, and they can articulate how they plan to utilize relationships they've built moving forward.



## Questions to Evaluate Impact

- What has been done?
- Were specific objectives met and carried out as intended?
- What changes have been made in the community or field as a result of the coalition's efforts?

SOURCE: Ohio State University Extension

## Measuring Impact

The Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition, which includes the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), uses data points around the numbers of coalition members, op-eds, people on their email list, and media mentions to help quantify their work during a campaign.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Trust among coalition partners is hard to build and even harder to rebuild.
2. Conflict is a healthy and normal part of coalition work.
3. Revisit and refresh your shared vision and roles as priorities and needs change.

## PIE Network Helps Advocates to...

Find others working on similar issues. By regularly collecting information from around the Network, we can connect leaders.

Track and share wisdom; lessons learned from another situation can help you do your work more efficiently.

### Sources

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