



CASE STUDY

# THE HORIZON FOUNDATION'S RACIAL EQUITY COLLABORATIVE:

*Advocating for Educational Equity*

**EQUAL**  
**MEASURE**

FINDING  
PROMISE  
FUELING  
CHANGE



# A NEW VISION FOR HEALTH OUTCOMES

For over two decades, the Horizon Foundation’s priority has been promoting healthy lives and improving health-related outcomes for residents of Howard County, Maryland. But as they saw health inequities continue to widen along racial and socioeconomic lines in the county, the Foundation began to think differently. To achieve their mission of promoting long, healthy, and prosperous lives in the county, Horizon realized they must consider all of Howard County as an ecosystem affected by long-term systemic and institutional racism, rather than only addressing health disparities. This new lens required that they develop strategies that would drive change to the policies, practices, and systems from which the inequities stem and address root causes head-on.

In support of this vision, the Foundation launched a bold new approach to its grantmaking: **investing in local leaders and organizations serving diverse communities by equipping them with the tools and capacities to advocate for and advance equitable local policies and systems change** – regardless of the organizations’ overall focus.



The Foundation established the first **Racial Equity Collaborative** by inviting five Howard County organizations to be part of their first cohort: African American Community Roundtable, Association of Community Services (ACS), Equity4HC, HopeWorks, and the Howard County Chinese School. Organizations received financial support, training, and individual and team coaching to build their knowledge and awareness of the impact of systemic and institutional racism and enhance their capacity to organize and advocate for policy change.

The experience was as impactful for participants as it was challenging. Participants faced their own biases, shared their lived experiences, and confronted stereotypes and racism. Through these challenging conversations, the Collaborative members built strong, authentic connections with one another that prioritized trust, empathy, and mutual understanding and respect of other perspectives and experiences. Empowered by their newly formed relationships, the participants were catalyzed to organize for effective action in their county.



## A Call to Action

In 2020, the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) was considering Educational Equity Policy 1080 (henceforth “Policy 1080”) – Howard County’s response to the Maryland State Board of Education’s requirement of districts to adopt equity standards. The Horizon Foundation’s Racial Equity Collaborative, representing the diverse communities of Howard County and strongly committed to advancing equity for residents, immediately recognized the opportunity of this policy to advance educational equity for all children. But the proposed language felt inadequate to realize equity. The Collaborative members felt the policy considerations needed to be stronger and more concretely address the historical and systemic barriers faced by students of color.

Having just completed the first year of racial equity and policy training with their cohort, the Horizon Foundation’s Racial Equity Collaborative was willing and prepared to collaborate, organize, and advocate for changes to benefit their communities and all residents of Howard County. Advocating for Policy 1080 proved to be a critical first test of how their skills could be leveraged for community change.

## ADVANCING EQUITY THROUGH COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

### Putting Theory into Practice

Before joining the Racial Equity Collaborative, most participants’ work prioritized designing and implementing community programs to improve outcomes for residents. Throughout the first year of the Racial Equity Collaborative, participants were immersed in trainings designed to give each member a deeper understanding of local policy processes and develop aptitudes and capacities to advocate for policy changes. But pivoting from a program lens to an advocacy lens requires shifts in both individual mindsets and organizational culture.

***“The [advocacy] veil was lifted. Advocacy [is] experiential.”***

Policy 1080 provided a tangible advocacy campaign that not only complemented participants’ year-long training, but also cemented the value of advocacy as tool to fight injustice.



The Horizon Foundation’s Racial Equity Collaborative



## Buying Time to Organize

By the time the Racial Equity Collaborative reviewed HCPSS' Policy 1080, a vote was already scheduled with the school board. The Collaborative knew from its training that it needed time to organize its members, draft new policy recommendations, and build public support. In less than two weeks, the Collaborative members successfully lobbied School Board members to delay the vote – a necessary and critical first step in the Collaborative's organizing and advocacy strategy. But celebrating this victory was brief; the Collaborative would have to make efficient use of the extra time if their vision for equity in Howard County was to be incorporated into the new policy.

It would have been easy for Collaborative members to accept the original language of Policy 1080. After all, a bill that purports to achieve educational equity would appear to be in line with the goals of the Equity Collaborative. But the members were quick to assess that language that equivocates on structural barriers to equity would not only hold racial disparities in place, but would also mask opportunities for future change under the guise of already passing an equity bill.

The Collaborative drafted amendments to ensure real barriers to educational equity were addressed with tangible goals and metrics of success:

- » Setting annual equity goals, including explicit activities around racial equity aligned to the budget;
- » Instituting a transparent process to solicit public input on the goals and share back progress with the public;
- » Hiring, retaining, and promoting teachers who reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of the student population;
- » Implementing a culturally relevant curriculum that includes the perspectives of marginalized and underrepresented groups; and
- » Collecting and reporting student achievement data that is disaggregated by race.

## Community Support

Recognizing the school board would respond best to broad community support, the Collaborative's early efforts focused on sharing their message with their organizations and respective communities. The members' outreach was multifaceted, ranging from individual meetings with community leaders addressing their specific needs to taking out advertisements in local media to share their message widely. The Collaborative conveyed to their communities the value of educational equity for all Howard County residents – ensuring all students have access to high-quality, multi-cultural education – garnering buy-in from a diverse constituency.

HOWARD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS:

### ***A Need for Equitable Policies***

Serving just under 60,000 students, Howard County Public Schools operates 77 schools in suburban Maryland, nestled between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. The district's vision and mission statements emphasize diversity and inclusivity, acknowledging a racially diverse student body (23.3% of students identify as Asian, 24.7% as Black, 12.5% as Latino, and 32.8% as White). Despite consistently high rankings, significant racial disparities persist in student achievement, discipline, and teacher diversity.



## Delivering a Unified Message

During a public hearing, representatives from each Collaborative testified on the proposed amendments. Each organization participated in amplifying the importance of specific amendments as well as delivering an overarching message for change. The Collaborative planned the testimony sequence to align with their overall strategy and leveraged the specific knowledge and skillsets of individual members. The group’s testimony also harnessed the power of youth voice, including local children – students in the HCPSS – to testify on behalf of specific amendments and the overall need for change.

## Adopting Policy on Behalf of Howard County Families

The Howard County School Board passed the five amendments designed and advocated for by the Collaborative by an 8-0 vote. The Collaborative’s five amendments refined Policy 1080’s language and honed the focus on racial equity in the Howard County Public School System. In passing Policy 1080, HCPSS today names systemic racism, sexism, ableism, bias, and institutional barriers as obstacles to achieving educational equity. Its comprehensive policy now aims to address disparities and inequities throughout the school system, including academic achievement, access to coursework and curriculum, access to support and extracurricular activities, and school discipline.

***“We became leaders based on what we learned...We became the leaders we needed to be.”***

## KEY PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY

The Collaborative’s victory in amending Policy 1080 came after intensive year-long trainings and professional development. Horizon Foundation partnered with trained facilitators and consultants that brought their expertise in both racial equity and advocacy to the cohort. These trainings not only introduced concepts critical to advocacy, ranging from identifying individuals and groups that influence decisions to the power of community organizing, but offered opportunities for collaborative members to role play scenarios and conversations before implementing them. Collaborative members practiced advancing an advocacy strategy, including grassroots organizing, lobbying leaders, and delivering their message to key constituents, before implementing it during the Policy 1080 campaign. The cohort’s advocacy experience put into action several principles that aided their community organizing:

### Embracing Others’ Humanity

Collaborative members understood their efforts to amend Policy 1080 relied on buy-in and support from the community. Participants identified “influencers” — individuals throughout Howard County in a position to influence the vote, including school district officials, school board members, and community groups like the teachers’ union. The Collaborative leveraged the relational skills they developed during their cohort experience, remembering these influencers were fellow community members with their own values, priorities, and perspectives. This understanding helped Collaborative members tailor their messaging campaign.

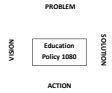


## Crafting Effective Messages

### KEY MESSAGES July 2020

The Howard County Public School System is one of the top school districts in Maryland; however, our education system in both the county and across the country is failing students of color. Significant racial/ethnic disparities persist in achievement, discipline, teacher diversity and more, and these disparities create barriers for students of color to achieve their full potential. Howard County is set to vote on a new policy to improve equity in education but the current draft of the policy falls short and needs significant strengthening.

We want all children to thrive both inside and outside the classroom and be able to access the necessary resources and opportunities in school they need to achieve their goals. The school system's equity policy should eliminate barriers that prevent children of color from achieving good health, opportunity and other determinants of wellbeing. We want to see deep, meaningful changes to policies and practices in our schools to better serve all of our students – particularly our students of color.



Tell the Howard County Board of Education to implement the changes suggested by the Howard County Equity Collaborative which will better eliminate racial inequities across the system and foster more inclusive school communities.

Policy 1080 should eliminate racial inequities across the system and foster more inclusive school communities. The Howard County Equity Collaborative suggests the following key changes to strengthen the policy:

1. Set yearly, achievable, equity goals and a line-item budget to achieve them. At least one of the goals should be racial equity related.
2. Use a transparent process to gain public input on goal setting and to measure annual progress towards achieving them.
3. Hire, retain and promote teachers that reflect the racial/ethnic makeup of the student population.
4. Implement a culturally relevant curriculum that includes perspectives of marginalized and underrepresented groups and require annual equity training for all teachers.
5. Collect and report relevant data that is disaggregated by race and other factors.

The Collaborative’s advocacy efforts relied on effectively communicating its vision for change to influence decision-makers. Members shared broad messages, “projecting power” by quantifying the number of residents, organizations, and communities they represent, intentionally balancing that with personal stories of individuals or families supported by their work. The Collaborative harnessed its talking points in a ‘message wheel’ that articulated a shared vision of equity for Howard County, an understanding of the problem they hoped to solve, their solution in the form of amendments to Policy 1080, and actions the Collaborative is taking to promote its solution.

Message Wheel developed by the Collaborative for the campaign to amend Policy 1080

## Bringing People Along

Collaborative members had to garner “buy-in” at various levels, leveraging both their communication and negotiation skills. Members practiced gathering allies, finding common ground, and putting differences aside, focusing instead on the greater good that could be achieved together. Participants had to build agreement:

**AMONG THE COHORT.** Collaborative members came together to develop amendments to Policy 1080, collaborating to design a shared vision and recommended language. This required marrying the needs of members’ own organizations with the concerns of the larger collaborative.

**WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION.** Before they could sign their organization’s name to the recommended amendments, collaborative members also needed to bring along their staff and board. For some, this meant taking on organizational risk as Policy 1080 represented the organization’s first local advocacy campaign. In the end, Collaborative members felt that learning how to influence decision-makers while standing up for educational equity proved a risk worth taking.

**WITHIN THE COMMUNITY.** Members connected with their broader communities – students, parents, colleagues, partner organizations— to generate support for the amendments. Harnessing the strength of their broad community support, members communicated the rationale for these changes to their constituents, emphasizing the importance of educational equity for all children in Howard County. Members leaned on their collaborative skills and experiences to build buy-in from individuals and move them to action, including writing emails and making phone calls to support the amendments.



## Speaking with a Unified Voice

The Collaborative advocated for change as one group – the Howard County Equity Collaborative – in lieu of individual organizations, recognizing their influence was greater collectively. Participants noted the diversity of the Collaborative’s organizations as an important strength, reflecting the diversity of Howard County.

*“Had we not done that [advocacy] as a group, we wouldn’t have been successful...if it had just been our organization advocating, I don’t know that we would have been successful.”*

## Leaning Into Individual Strengths

The Collaborative leveraged and honored the skills and previous experiences of the individual participants and their organizations. These included connections with community members, access to subject matter experts, and previous advocacy experience. Individual members used their expertise to lead different efforts on behalf of the Collaborative’s advocacy campaign.

## Leading with Relationships

The consistent through-line between the Equity Collaborative’s training in racial equity and advocacy and its successful campaign to amend Policy 1080 was the role of deep, personal relationships. In truth, the relationships built between Collaborative participants were essential groundwork for its advocacy campaign.



**BUILDING TRUST, EMPATHY, AND UNDERSTANDING.** The Equity Collaborative members came into the cohort understanding their own individual experience and perspective. But a series of “relational meetings” — intimate, challenging, illuminating one-on-ones with fellow cohort members expanded their understanding and appreciation of others’ perspectives. Relational meetings allowed for cohort members to create genuine connections, humanize each other, recognize each other’s strengths, and appreciate each other’s lived experiences. These relational meetings paved a path for Collaborative members to see their biases, stereotypes, and misconceptions about other communities.



**UNITING AND UNIFYING.** The challenging and rewarding work of the relational meetings further instilled the value of advancing equity in Howard County and advocating on behalf of all residents, specifically communities of color. The meetings solidified bonds not just among participants, but also strengthened their connection broadly to Howard County and its diverse communities.



**FORGING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS.** The skills, approaches, and mindsets cultivated through the relational meetings set the foundation for the Collaborative’s advocacy campaign. Members approached their constituents, including community groups and school board members, through a relational lens — actively listening to their wishes, articulating shared understanding of challenges, and empathizing with their concerns. The diversity of the voices represented by the Collaborative’s policy stance gave further weight and legitimacy to its ask; the school board recognized the greater Howard County community was in support of their recommendations.



## A BLUEPRINT FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Through its successful advocacy campaign, the Horizon Foundation Equity Collaborative showed how a diverse group of local leaders can prioritize, organize, and mobilize to change policies and begin to shift systems. The campaign operationalized the concepts from a year’s worth of training, leaving Collaborative members with the necessary tools, experience, and confidence to lead campaigns with their own organizations.

The Policy 1080 campaign also gives the Horizon Foundation evidence their concept worked. Intentional, targeted capacity building in local leaders and organizations can have ripple effects in communities, giving the leaders the knowledge to not only see and understand the root causes of the inequities they are fighting against, but the skills needed to change them.

**Board of Education**  
**You get an **A+** for Equity**

The Howard County Board of Education unanimously passed a strong equity policy that will help eliminate barriers to student success. HCPSS will now:

- \* Set yearly, realistic equity goals
- \* Get public input on those goals
- \* Ensure more budget transparency
- \* Intentionally hire, promote and retain teachers of color
- \* Implement a more culturally relevant curriculum
- \* Make equity data available on the HCPSS website

To join us or learn more about our work, visit <http://bit.ly/hocoequity>

**Howard County Equity Collaborative**

AACR Association of Community Services of Howard County Equity4HC HORIZON FOUNDATION

## METHODOLOGY

In the summer of 2020, Equal Measure, the learning and evaluation partner of the Horizon Foundation, began an evaluation of the Foundation’s Racial Equity Collaborative. The purpose of the evaluation was to document the Horizon Foundation’s racial equity initiative journey and to capture lessons learned from Collaborative activities.

Equal Measure gathered feedback from Foundation and Collaborative members and staff. Educational Equity Policy 1080 emerged as a formative experience that all Collaborative members valued and saw as a collective achievement.

Equal Measure conducted interviews with representatives from each of the four participating organizations in the Collaborative and with the Horizon Foundation staff to capture the Policy 1080 story. Themes from those interviews are presented in this brief.