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Last month's acquittal in the case of the State of Florida v. George Zimmerman once again illuminates the schisms between Americans on issues of racial profiling; equitable systems of justice; and cultural perceptions of privilege and mistrust based on race. Immediately following the verdict, a number of polls conducted by Quinnipiac, Rasmussen, Gallup, YouGov and many others, including media outlets, reveal an unsurprising split among Black and White respondents on whether the verdict, or the process, happened correctly.

Trayvon Martin's tragic and infuriating loss of life at the hands of community watchman George Zimmerman has prompted spirited discussions about the verdict at almost every social outlet to express either vindication or outrage about the series of events on the night of February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida. Recently amongst colleagues in the field of philanthropy who have been investing directly in social justice strategies, there have been a number of formal and informal huddles to check-in together to see how this and other recent killings of youth of color, especially of Black men and boys, has affected us individually and our collective work. Most importantly, as we begin [Black Philanthropy month](#) this August, many of us have been [checking-in to acknowledge the most encouraging work](#) being done to improve the dire circumstances for youth of color and to figure out what *else* the field must do with the resources and leadership that we have to increase opportunities for all young people to have a quality life absolved of despair and violence.

While instances of attacks on youth of color by rouge vigilantes and overzealous lawmen curiously seem to be occurring more frequently, the greatest threat to our youth has been the systematic and historical dearth of opportunities in communities of color for leadership and sustainability, and the ensuing mythos of a ubiquitous negligence of self-determination. Since 1989, the Edward W. Hazen Foundation's national funding has focused primarily on supporting engaged parents and community leaders to organize to improve schools and to support the development of youth leaders to organize for social justice in communities of color. The work of these organized parents, youth of color and their allies have been critical in the fight against injustices such as the killing of Trayvon Martin and in increasing opportunities for better teachers, counselors, jobs, housing, facilities, policing, school discipline, media representation and public policy. Furthermore, their work has been critical in the fight against the fallacy that these citizens don't care about their neighborhoods.

While all of our individual biases matter greatly in the way others are treated in this society, systems and structures that block opportunity and uphold inequity perform a formidable function in also restricting the development of our individual and shared values based on shared perceptions of those denied. In turn, these interdependent values become a part of our

culture and thusly the systems that govern us. Because the costly and complicated long term work of correcting centuries of exploitation and injustice for the profit of the most powerful in this Country appears so daunting, our collective default in the case of young people of color has been to place a higher concern and value on their acceptable behavior, rather than helping to deliver an acceptable quality of life that evades many of them. As professionals and citizens, we have not done enough to level the playing field for all of our young people and yet in uncomplicated and sometimes subconscious ways, we have made decisions about who we are most comfortable with receiving the ultimate denial of opportunity to live up to one's full potential. Perhaps it is those young people who misbehave in school, or the ones who are here "illegally," or we simply continue to lump all those from low-wealth communities of color together as unworthy until proven worthy, or guilty until proven innocent.

In the areas of the Country where the Foundation provides support to grassroots organizations, many parents and youth have not accepted the violence, disinvestment, scapegoating and half-way solutions that continue to threaten their prosperity and rights as participants in this democratic society. Hazen grantees, independently and as part of regional and national Dignity in Schools Campaigns (DSC) have been engaged in community-driven work to change local school culture and policy, and a national call to action for schools to end the harsh disciplinary policies and law enforcement tactics that push too many young people out of school and to create positive climates for learning and adopt alternative approaches to discipline that protect the rights of all young people. One of Campaign's most provocative arguments is that if Trayvon Martin had not been suspended out of school under "Zero Tolerance" rules, he would have been home in Miami and would have never crossed paths with Zimmerman.

In Chicago, where violence and the corporatization of public resources has made headlines over the last few years, young leaders have been organizing for more transparency around school discipline, a reduction in public and charter school use of suspensions, a commitment to restorative justice programs that commute normal off-site dismissals, a moratorium on unnecessary school closures in primarily Black neighborhoods and a reinvestment in affordable housing and youth employment. Last year, youth organizers were able to secure a historic police contract with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) that cut spending on school police officers in half, end automatic two-week suspensions for minor offenses, end arrests for disorderly conduct through a revised CPS Student Code of Conduct, stop the closures of 20 of the 25 south side schools on the CPS list to be shuttered and were able to secure millions of dollars in new state funding for summer youth employment.

In Wisconsin, where emotions from Henry Spooner's recent conviction for murder of a 13 year neighbor are still raw, students are organizing to address the overwhelming shortfall in bilingual education, implement a plan to restore in-state tuition benefits for undocumented students in Wisconsin, build a multi-racial base of students engaged in civic engagement and social justice and improve educational equity through implementation of a Student Bill of Rights.

Youth organizers, parents and researchers in Denver have been partnered to ensure that all students enter high school on grade level and prepared to succeed in postsecondary

educational settings by calling for extended learning time beyond test preparation. This year, youth organizers also won a Memo of Understanding between Denver Public Schools and the Denver Police Department that limits police involvement in minor school offenses and passage of a state bill that will significantly reduce referrals and arrests by law enforcement in schools and new state policy that would allow qualified undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition.

Several Hazen grantees in California are driving campaigns to ensure that students have access to, and are prepared for, the A-G high school course sequence required for admission to the State's four year universities. Last Fall's grassroots organizing supported Proposition 30 victory in California toward tax increases brings to light the ongoing need for grassroots organizations to do more to eliminate loopholes for the ultra-rich and change the way state revenue is distributed to schools that serve the highest need students.

As a result of years of organizing work, Bronx, NY parents supported by Hazen won a commitment from NYPD School Safety Division officials to take concrete action steps to reduce the summonses, arrests and suspensions of Bronx students. Also in the Bronx, students organized to initiate a restorative justice program on two high school campuses and will work with citywide organizing partners to change the NYC discipline code to mandate restorative justice practices for all level-three infractions, rather than suspension or arrests. Hazen's grantees in New York are also working to improve the enrollment policies of specialized high schools to increase the matriculation of students of color, organizing in a citywide initiative to prepare all NYC students for college and pushing for the passage of the Community Safety Act legislative package in the City Council to improve police practices and policy where young people of color are disproportionately profiled without provocation.

Philanthropy's response to Trayvon's death and similar killings of Jacksonville's Jordan Davis and Milwaukee's Darius Simmons, must be an increased support for the efforts of grassroots groups that are already organizing to dismantle racist systems and working to increase the agency of concerned citizens to create positive changes in their community. Funders that serve communities of color and that invest in social justice should begin to dialogue more with one another and with the communities they serve to examine the evidence for community organizing as a social change strategy, to figure out what the challenges are for the long-term sustainability of this important work and what are the new opportunities for increased impact. Finally, there is also a growing need to support the development of organizations and leaders of colors, especially in Black communities to change both the reality and perceptions of community improvement being led from within communities.