

# EDUCATION IS LIBERATION: THE POWER OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION SPACES

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a point in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* when Douglass—a child, enslaved, and recently brought to Baltimore—receives his first reading lessons.<sup>1</sup> The lessons end almost as soon as they begin, with his master, Mr. Auld, forbidding further learning for the following reason:

A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now . . . if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master.<sup>2</sup>

Douglass eventually learned to read and write but was forced to do so in secret for fear of retaliation from his masters.<sup>3</sup> Other enslaved people across the southern United States did not have such luck, beset as they were by racist laws that made it illegal for Black people to learn, to be

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<sup>1</sup> FREDERICK DOUGLASS, *NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE* 33 (Boston, Anti-Slavery Office 1845).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 36, 38.

taught, and in some cases, even to assemble; the penalties for such acts included fines, corporal punishment, and imprisonment.<sup>4</sup>

Common practice and legal regimes during the era of slavery severely inhibited the education of Black people,<sup>5</sup> establishing a societal precedent for erecting barriers to Black attainment of education. This nation's Black population has since faced (and continues to face) immense obstacles to learning, including a persistent racial achievement gap<sup>6</sup> and the destruction of affirmative action programs in higher education.<sup>7</sup>

When we understand ours to be a society where anti-Black racism is the rule, Mr. Auld's treatment of a young Frederick Douglass is no longer shocking. Instead, it is normal, as is any other instance of racism or discrimination that is perpetrated against a Black person in this country. Discrimination in education is an integral part of this reality, and as Mr. Auld's tirade demonstrated, denying Black people the opportunity to learn is a necessary part of maintaining a status quo that denies them equality and basic human dignity.

I submit that the development of alternative education spaces is a remedy for the racial antagonism that Black students face within the United States' education system. Alternative education spaces are independent of the nation's traditional educational structures—i.e. public, private, and charter schools—and are created by people of color, for people of color. They are a response to this nation's failure to foster a learning environment that respects and values students of color.

In this Note, I discuss the extent to which this nation's traditional education system has failed Black students, using the state of New York

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Act of 1740, 7 Statutes at Large of South Carolina 397 (1840), <https://perma.cc/CS5V-6X9W> (“[A]ll and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereinafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught, to write . . . shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.”); Assembling of Negroes. Trading by Free Negroes., VA. CODE ANN. § 54-31 (1849) (subsequently repealed), <https://perma.cc/DKG6-5TWZ> (“Every assemblage of negroes for the purpose of religious worship . . . and every assemblage of negroes for the purpose of instruction in reading or writing, or in the nighttime for any purpose, shall be an unlawful assembly.”).

<sup>5</sup> Data from the U.S. government show that in 1870, nearly eighty percent of the non-white population aged fourteen or older was illiterate, compared to approximately twelve percent of the white population. *National Assessment of Adult Literacy*, NAT'L CTR. FOR EDUC. STAT., <https://perma.cc/KD2N-JQ8S> (last visited Jan. 5, 2020). In 1870, the Black population accounted for approximately ninety-eight percent of the non-white population. Campbell Gibson & Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States* 19 tbl.1 (U.S. Census Bureau, Working Paper No. 56, 2002), <https://perma.cc/4D65-JB49>.

<sup>6</sup> *Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gaps*, STANFORD CTR. FOR EDUC. POL'Y ANALYSIS, <https://perma.cc/S3CC-B339> (last visited Jan. 5, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> See *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 244 (2003); *Regents of the Univ. of Cal. v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978).

to demonstrate the limitations that state bureaucracy place on traditional education. I then explore historical and contemporary iterations of alternative education spaces—Black Panther liberation schools and 696 Build Queensbridge’s Youth Builder initiative, respectively—in order to further develop the conversation surrounding their necessity, viability, and impact.

#### I. THE UNITED STATES EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: A RESULT OF OPPRESSION

The earliest renditions of public education in colonial America had among their motives a desire to prevent children from growing up “ignorant and idle.”<sup>8</sup> The Massachusetts Act of 1647, recognized as the United States’ first compulsory education law,<sup>9</sup> was intended to train individuals to be citizens and public servants in a “civilized state.”<sup>10</sup>

Given the relatively noble rationale for the inception of public education in America, how has our system deviated so dramatically from the principles laid out by the Massachusetts Bay colony? The answer lies in the development of racist housing laws and policies at multiple levels of government, the effect of those laws on public education, and the Supreme Court’s failure to address the resulting racial inequality in the nation’s education system.

During much of the twentieth century, the United States weaponized law across all levels of government to perpetuate myriad forms of racial discrimination in the housing market. At the federal level, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration created the Federal Housing Administration (“FHA”) in 1934,<sup>11</sup> which made mortgages—and thus, homeownership—exceedingly affordable for white families, but excluded Black families from enjoying the same opportunity.<sup>12</sup> The FHA

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<sup>8</sup> Billy D. Walker, *The Local Property Tax for Public Schools: Some Historical Perspectives*, 9 J. EDUC. FIN. 265, 268 (1984).

<sup>9</sup> See Erin Blakemore, *America’s First Mandatory Education Law Was Inspired by Satan*, MENTAL FLOSS (Mar. 2, 2017), <https://perma.cc/Z98J-FWT5>.

<sup>10</sup> Walker, *supra* note 8, at 269.

<sup>11</sup> *The Federal Housing Administration (FHA)*, U.S. DEP’T HOUSING & URB. DEV., <https://perma.cc/RCA2-GAC5> (last visited Jan. 5, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> The FHA adopted system of color-coded maps created by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (“HOLC”) that rated neighborhoods according to their perceived “stability.” “Safe” neighborhoods were colored green, while the riskiest neighborhoods were colored red; of course, neighborhoods inhabited by any number of Black families were colored red, and the FHA refused to issue mortgages to residents of “redlined” neighborhoods. RICHARD ROTHSTEIN, *THE COLOR OF LAW: A FORGOTTEN HISTORY OF HOW OUR GOVERNMENT SEGREGATED AMERICA* 63–67 (2017); see also Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Case for Reparations*, ATLANTIC (June 2014), <https://perma.cc/JW2Z-RRJ2> (“Redlining went beyond FHA-backed loans and spread to the entire mortgage industry, which was already rife with racism, excluding black people from most legitimate means of obtaining a mortgage.”).

embraced racism and laid the foundation for an exploitative housing market that benefitted white families and allowed them freedom, while crushing Black families and severely limiting where they could purchase homes.

At the local level, restrictive covenants and racial zoning laws were the racist tools of choice. Used for racist ends beginning in the late nineteenth century, restrictive covenants forbade resale of property to Black Americans and other racial minorities.<sup>13</sup> In *Shelley v. Kraemer*, the Supreme Court held that government enforcement of restrictive covenants was unconstitutional,<sup>14</sup> but the FHA supported their use for years following the decision.<sup>15</sup> The same pattern emerged in the public sector where racial zoning laws, the public sector analog of restrictive covenants, were used as early as 1910 to separate white and Black families, especially cities with large, established Black populations.<sup>16</sup> In 1917, the Supreme Court ruled in *Buchanan v. Warley* that a racial zoning ordinance violated the Fourteenth Amendment,<sup>17</sup> but the practice persisted into the late 1960s.<sup>18</sup>

Decades later in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, a Texas state law mandating the use of local property taxes to provide forty percent of funding for public education<sup>19</sup> resulted in vastly uneven funding across the property-richest and property-poorest school districts in the state.<sup>20</sup> Appellees claimed that the law interfered with Texas students' fundamental right to an education, but the Court ruled that a fundamental right to education was neither explicitly recognized in the Constitution nor "implicitly so protected" and found the property tax law to be constitutional.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> ROTHSTEIN, *supra* note 12, at 78.

<sup>14</sup> *Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1, 13 (1948).

<sup>15</sup> ROTHSTEIN, *supra* note 12, at 88-90.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 44.

<sup>17</sup> *Buchanan v. Warley*, 245 U.S. 60, 82 (1917).

<sup>18</sup> ROTHSTEIN, *supra* note 12, at 47-48.

<sup>19</sup> *San Antonio Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 1, 73 (1973) (Marshall, J., dissenting).

<sup>20</sup> In a sample of 110 Texas school districts at the time, the richest ten districts (each of which had at least \$100,000 available in taxable property per pupil) were able to raise an average of \$610 per pupil, while the poorest four districts (each with less than \$10,000 available in taxable property per pupil) were only able to raise an average of \$63 per pupil. This near-tenfold disparity existed despite the poorest districts employing a property tax rate of more than double the rate of the richest districts. *Id.* at 74-76.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 35, 55. Marshall's dissent, which spanned more than sixty pages and included four appendices, was grounded in his assertion that "the fundamental importance of education is amply indicated by the prior decisions of this Court, by the unique status accorded public education by our society, and by the close relationship between education and some of our most basic constitutional values." *Id.* at 111.

As a result of the Court's decision in *Rodriguez*, the United States still lacks a federally recognized right to education.<sup>22</sup> The decision has also consigned students across the country to a reality that inevitably results in massive disparities in available educational resources for students in property-poor and property-rich school districts,<sup>23</sup> reflecting the Black-white wealth divide.<sup>24</sup> These disparities are not a coincidence. Rather, they are a result of the purposeful decisions of federal, state, and local forces to discriminate against people of color in the U.S. housing market, which prevented Black families from building wealth through homeownership for decades.<sup>25</sup>

Let us also consider the socioemotional challenges that Black students face within the walls of a given school, which are as damaging as the structural challenges. No matter the funding a school receives, students of color often must contend with an environment that does not reflect their lives and experiences. Anthropologist John U. Ogbu observed that because of these and other obstacles, all minority students must grapple with educational policies and practices that antagonize them, as well as facing general mistreatment in schools and classrooms.<sup>26</sup> How can Black students be expected to learn at all—let alone at the level of their peers—when they must navigate this gauntlet that rejects their very existence?

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<sup>22</sup> As of January 2020, out of the 200 constitutions posted on the Constitute Project's website, 193 constitutions contain the word "education"; the United States is one of the seven countries whose constitution does not. See CONSTITUTE PROJECT, <https://perma.cc/GEV4-RGTF> (last visited Jan. 24, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Nearly half of the nation's education revenues come from local property taxes. See JOEL MCFARLAND ET AL., NAT'L CTR. FOR EDUC. STATISTICS, THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION 2019, at 136 (2019), <https://perma.cc/UD2F-CNZ5>.

<sup>24</sup> As of 2016, the median income for white families was \$61,200, while the median income for Black families was \$35,400; the mean income for these groups was \$123,400 and \$54,000, respectively. Median net worth in 2016 was \$171,000 for white families compared to \$17,600 for Black families, while mean net worth for each group was \$933,700 and \$138,200, respectively. Lisa J. Dettling et al., *Recent Trends in Wealth-Holding by Race and Ethnicity: Evidence from the Survey of Consumer Finances*, BOARD GOVERNORS FED. RES. SYS.: FEDS NOTES (Sept. 27, 2017), <https://perma.cc/STZ5-Z3X6>.

<sup>25</sup> See generally Christopher E. Herbert et al., *Is Homeownership Still an Effective Means of Building Wealth for Low Income and Minority Households? (Was it Ever?)*, HARV. U. JOINT CTR. HOUSING STUD. (2013), <https://perma.cc/XPR7-RULA>. For information on the drastic disparities in value between Black and white-owned homes, see ANDRE PERRY ET AL., BROOKINGS METRO. POLICY PROGRAM, THE DEVALUATION OF ASSETS IN BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS: THE CASE OF RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY 11 (2018), <https://perma.cc/59UD-GMMP>.

<sup>26</sup> John U. Ogbu & Herbert D. Simons, *Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities: A Cultural-Ecological Theory of School Performance with Some Implications for Education*, 29 ANTHROPOLOGY & EDUC. Q. 155, 161 (1998).

Black students contend with implicit racial bias<sup>27</sup> as early as pre-school, when Black preschoolers are more than three times as likely to be suspended as their white classmates and account for nearly half of all pre-school suspensions, despite making up only nineteen percent of all pre-school enrollment.<sup>28</sup> Across the nation, Black students in K-12 schools are disproportionately disciplined, no matter the type of disciplinary action, level of school poverty, or type of public school attended.<sup>29</sup> And schools are not intentional about creating and sustaining diversity in order to address racial bias, whether in curricula or in teacher and administrative hiring. As of 2016, eighty-two percent of teachers and eighty percent of principals in K-12 public schools in the United States were white,<sup>30</sup> which explains (at least in part) why teacher education programs systematically fail to prepare white teachers to critique their own privilege or to critique systems of colonialism, imperialism, and systemic racism.<sup>31</sup>

Traditional education spaces fail to provide students of color with adequate resources, discipline them harshly and at disproportionate rates compared to their white classmates, subject them to racist treatment and microaggressions, do not provide curricular resources that acknowledge and attack anti-Black racism and other forms of oppression, and routinely fail to provide them with role models who look like them in faculty and administrative positions. For the sake of the well-being and success of students of color, we must explore alternatives to this system.

## II. THE POWER OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION SPACES

An alternative education space is created by people of color for the purpose of providing students of color with a learning environment that teaches, centers, and nurtures them. While it does fulfill an educational function insofar as it provides students of color with a place to learn and

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<sup>27</sup> Implicit biases are automatic associations that our minds make associated with a social group. They are dangerous in a structurally racist society because they result in the association of negative stereotypes—e.g. criminality—with the disfavored racial group, i.e. the Black population. See L. Song Richardson & Phillip Atiba Goff, *Self-Defense and the Suspicion Heuristic*, 98 IOWA L. REV. 293, 301-07 (2012).

<sup>28</sup> WALTER S. GILLIAM ET AL., YALE UNIV. CHILD STUDY CTR., DO EARLY EDUCATORS' IMPLICIT BIASES REGARDING SEX AND RACE RELATE TO BEHAVIOR EXPECTATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF PRESCHOOL EXPULSIONS AND SUSPENSIONS? 2 (2016), <https://perma.cc/VGN6-MJY2>.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-18-258, K-12 EDUCATION: DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES FOR BLACK STUDENTS, BOYS, AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES 12 (2018), <https://perma.cc/2325-6HET>.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., THE STATE OF RACIAL DIVERSITY IN THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE 3 (2016), <https://perma.cc/SML9-WLGP>.

<sup>31</sup> Ellen Swartz, *Stepping Outside the Master Script: Re-Connecting the History of American Education*, 76 J. NEGRO EDUC. 173, 173 (2007).

grow, an alternative education space is separate from traditional education structures in the United States (e.g. public, private, or charter schools) and exists independent of those structures.<sup>32</sup> An alternative education space is an “alternative” to traditional education for two reasons: (1) unlike traditional educational structures, it centers and nurtures students of color; and (2) it is independent of many of the constraints typically placed on traditional education spaces.

The first reason is crucial—an alternative education space performs a vital role because it provides a learning experience that centers the lived experiences of students of color.

Renowned educator bell hooks attests to the success of this approach when describing her own childhood educational experience. She writes:

Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women . . . Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission.

To fulfill that mission, my teachers made sure they “knew” us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshipped, what our homes were like, and how we were treated in the family . . .

Attending school then was sheer joy.<sup>33</sup>

Contrast that with hooks’ experience in white schools:

When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children rightly would require a political commitment . . . For black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school.<sup>34</sup>

hooks’ experiences in all-Black and integrated schools speak volumes: the former brought her joy and was invested in her success, while the latter destroyed her love for learning and lacked passion for her academic and personal growth. This disparity was obvious to hooks when she was a student and remains true for many students of color today.

The second reason why alternative education spaces are “alternative” is as important as the first—these spaces are independent of the typical bureaucratic constraints imposed by state actors, meaning that ultimately,

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<sup>32</sup> Alternative education spaces may take any number of forms, including after school programs or summer camps.

<sup>33</sup> BELL HOOKS, *TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS: EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM* 2-3 (1994).

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 3.

they are accountable to their communities rather than to government. This independence is important, because the constraints imposed on other educational entities that are ostensibly alternatives—e.g. private and charter schools—directly affect learning in those classrooms.

A nonpublic (private or charter) school must satisfy a list of twenty-one items in order to incorporate in New York State,<sup>35</sup> and must also consult the “Manual for New Administrators of Nonpublic Schools” which lays out additional guidelines and state requirements.<sup>36</sup> Nonpublic schools must ensure that their students receive an education that is “substantially equivalent” to the education that public school students receive in that school district.<sup>37</sup>

While substantial equivalence does not require that nonpublic schools be mirror images of public schools, New York encourages nonpublic schools to commit to a number of optional actions, including registering with the State Education Department and administering state standardized tests for fourth and eighth grade students.<sup>38</sup> If the state is encouraging nonpublic schools to follow public school standards in the name of substantial equivalency, and nonpublic schools are incentivized to do so in order to remain operational, this would seem to limit the extent to which a nonpublic school presents a true alternative to public school education.

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<sup>35</sup> *Starting a School*, N.Y. STATE EDUC. DEP’T, <https://perma.cc/Q7MK-AALR> (last updated Nov. 15, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> *Manual for New Administrators of Nonpublic Schools*, N.Y. STATE EDUC. DEP’T, <https://perma.cc/89N3-2UDW> (last updated Oct. 25, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> *State Requirements and Programs*, N.Y. STATE EDUC. DEP’T, <https://perma.cc/DCK4-ENRF> (last updated Feb. 12, 2018) (“If a child attends a nonpublic school or is being educated at home, the board of education of each school district must be assured that the child is receiving instruction which is substantially equivalent to that provided in the public schools of the district of residence.”); *see also* Press Release, N.Y. State Educ. Dep’t, State Education Department Proposes Regulations for Substantially Equivalent Instruction for Nonpublic School Students (May 31, 2019), <https://perma.cc/WTB3-QP8R> (“Substantial equivalency means an instructional program is comparable to that offered in the public schools and is designed to facilitate the progression of students from grade to grade.”).

<sup>38</sup> Secondary nonpublic schools that do not register with the State Education Department are prohibited from administering the Regents examinations and from awarding diplomas. With respect to standardized testing, New York applies a subtle pressure by stating that seventy-five percent of all nonpublic school fourth and eighth grade students participate in standardized testing. New York also makes its state curricula the basis of its standardized testing, although the state notes that nonpublic schools are not obligated to adopt those curricula. *See State Requirements and Programs*, *supra* note 37. Deciding not to administer standardized tests does not automatically disqualify a nonpublic school from satisfying the substantial equivalency requirement, but that choice “does make it more difficult to judge” whether the substantial equivalency requirement has been met. *Substantial Equivalency of Instruction in Nonpublic Schools*, N.Y. STATE EDUC. DEP’T, <https://perma.cc/P6W4-AHVS> (last updated Jan. 8, 2020).



The Black Panther liberation schools and 696 Build Queensbridge represent examples of *creating* a better educational option for students of color rather than remaining limited by the unsatisfactory choices provided by the government.

A. *Black Panther Liberation Schools*

The primary mission of the Black Panther Party, founded in 1966,<sup>39</sup> was to meet the various needs of poor African Americans by combating police brutality, providing food, bolstering healthcare, and educating young people.<sup>40</sup> In their manifesto-like Ten-Point Program, the Panthers emphasized the importance of education for Black Americans. The fifth point in the Program reads:

We Want Education For Our People That Exposes The True Nature Of This Decadent American Society. We Want Education That Teaches Us Our True History And Our Role In The Present-Day Society.

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.<sup>41</sup>

Rather than entrust the minds of Black youth to the American educational system, the Panthers began to create liberation schools in 1969 as part of their “survival programs.”<sup>42</sup> The first liberation school, established in Berkeley, California in 1969, provided a wholly political education to its elementary and middle school-aged students, who, through their learning, could soon explain racism, fascism, capitalism, and the history of the Black Panther Party, among other things.<sup>43</sup> The school had a weekly curriculum that ranged from history and culture to field trips and current events; community volunteers and Panthers themselves staffed and taught

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<sup>39</sup> PAUL ALKEBULAN, *SURVIVAL PENDING REVOLUTION: THE HISTORY OF THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY*, at xi (2007).

<sup>40</sup> Ericka Huggins & Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, *Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education: The Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School*, in *WANT TO START A REVOLUTION?: RADICAL WOMEN IN THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE* 161 (Dayo F. Gore et al. eds., 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Huey P. Newton, *War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America* (June 1, 1980) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz).

<sup>42</sup> These programs also included breakfast programs and medical clinics. ALKEBULAN, *supra* note 39, at 28, 33.

<sup>43</sup> Daniel Perlstein, *Minds Stayed on Freedom: Politics and Pedagogy in the African American Freedom Struggle*, *RADICAL TCHR.*, May 2004, at 23, 26.

in the liberation schools.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the Panthers secured a space for Black youth located firmly outside of traditional public school structures and firmly within the structure of the Black Panther Party itself.

In 1971, the Panthers established the Intercommunal Youth Institute (“IYI”) in Oakland.<sup>45</sup> Students received full daily instruction and were grouped according to their performance level as opposed to traditional grade levels.<sup>46</sup> The IYI’s nontraditional curriculum included community work, and the students were taught to be politically aware – for instance, they honed their writing skills by writing letters to Panthers who were incarcerated.<sup>47</sup> The IYI was completely independent of the struggling Oakland Unified School District, with its operational expenses fully covered by the Panthers’ fundraising efforts and community support.<sup>48</sup> Other liberation schools enjoyed similar levels of independence: they too raised funds and relied on community support, and they also adhered to long-standing rules against applying for or accepting state funding of any sort.<sup>49</sup>

By 1975, the Panthers transformed the IYI into the Oakland Community School (“OCS”),<sup>50</sup> which would become the Panthers’ “flagship” alternative education space.<sup>51</sup> Like the IYI, OCS was very different from traditional American schools in form and in function. Its staff was primarily African American; the curriculum was culturally relevant to its Black students and accommodated varying student learning styles and instructor teaching styles; it engaged in minimal standardized testing; and it required instructors to submit academic and social evaluations of students rather than letter grades.<sup>52</sup> The school also provided meals, healthcare referrals, and transportation.<sup>53</sup>

The IYI and OCS were shining examples of the liberation school initiative, which successfully implemented and popularized an alternative education system.<sup>54</sup> They also were an embodiment of the Panthers’ commitment to replace American institutions rather than reform them.<sup>55</sup> The fulcrum of the liberation school model never wavered—it was always

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<sup>44</sup> ALKEBULAN, *supra* note 39, at 33-34.

<sup>45</sup> Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest, *supra* note 40, at 162.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 168.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 168-69.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 169.

<sup>49</sup> ALKEBULAN, *supra* note 39, at 34.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*; Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest, *supra* note 40, at 170.

<sup>51</sup> Perlstein, *supra* note 43, at 27.

<sup>52</sup> Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest, *supra* note 40, at 172-73, 176.

<sup>53</sup> ALKEBULAN, *supra* note 39, at 34.

<sup>54</sup> OCS actually outlasted the Black Panther Party (which folded in 1980), operating independently until 1982, when it graduated its last class of students. *Id.* at 35.

<sup>55</sup> Perlstein, *supra* note 43, at 25.

blackness and Black empowerment, with the intention of providing a safe, alternative educational environment that valued students of color in a way traditional education had not shown itself capable. The liberation schools have inspired other iterations of alternative education spaces in the years since their inception.

*B. 696 Build Queensbridge Youth Builder Initiative*

696 Build Queensbridge's Youth Builder initiative is a program in the mold of the Black Panther survival programs and liberation schools.<sup>56</sup> Since 2016, 696 has been deeply involved in Queensbridge, which is the largest public housing development in North America.<sup>57</sup> The organization has affected great change in the community through its implementation of the Cure Violence Model, which originated in Chicago and aims to stop the spread of violence by using behavior change and disease control methods.<sup>58</sup> For more than a year immediately following its start in Queensbridge, 696 played a major role in preventing even a single incidence of gun violence from occurring within the Queensbridge community.<sup>59</sup>

696's work encompasses more than just violence prevention; the organization is also intentional about reaching out to young people of color in the community aged fourteen to twenty-four and involving them in the program as Youth Builders.<sup>60</sup> The young people apply for the Youth Builder position, and if they are accepted they are paid to attend the program after school from Tuesday to Friday, and during the day on Saturday. The program's educational offerings include classes on critical thinking, conflict resolution, financial literacy, arts and culture, and health and wellness.<sup>61</sup> Because 696 is a job for the Youth Builders, it incentivizes the Youth Builders to participate fully and take control of their own education.

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<sup>56</sup> I have worked with 696 Build Queensbridge as a facilitator and curriculum developer for the educational component of the program. The name "696 Build Queensbridge" is a reference to the six blocks and ninety-six units per building that comprise Queensbridge Houses. Jim Dwyer, *Six Blocks, 96 Buildings, Zero Shootings: New Recipe at the Queensbridge Houses*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 19, 2017), <https://perma.cc/UU2U-9YK5>.

<sup>57</sup> Press Release, NYC Housing Authority, Mayor de Blasio and NYCHA Announce Completion of Roof Replacements at Queensbridge Houses, North America's Largest Public Housing Development (Dec. 1, 2016), <https://perma.cc/QA22-KA3H>.

<sup>58</sup> Cure Violence treats violence as a disease and aims to detect and interrupt conflict, identify and treat the highest risk individuals, and change social norms. *Who We Are*, CURE VIOLENCE, <https://perma.cc/F6NV-L7NR> (last visited Jan. 24, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> Dwyer, *supra* note 56.

<sup>60</sup> *Youth Builders*, 696 BUILD QUEENSBIDGE, <https://perma.cc/6ZCF-VEZC> (last visited Jan. 24, 2020).

<sup>61</sup> *Id.*

696 provides an alternative education space for its Youth Builders, and for many of these young people, engaging in learning outside of traditional classrooms is a welcome change of scenery. The daily “classes” are all geared toward the empowerment of students of color and of Queensbridge. In their critical thinking sessions, the Youth Builders have discussed topics such as the historical foundations of racism, applying what they learn to their personal situations and their community; financial literacy fills knowledge gaps about socioeconomic conditions and economic empowerment of the Black community; and arts and culture, rather than focus on dead white males,<sup>62</sup> instead engages in initiatives that encourage Youth Builders to express themselves through mediums such as podcast creation or music recording.<sup>63</sup>

Each day, learning is facilitated by the same 696 staff members who engage in 696’s violence prevention and reduction work in Queensbridge and neighboring communities; they are people whom the Youth Builders trust and respect.<sup>64</sup> They facilitate learning through circle discussions that situate all participants on equal footing. Conversations can be loud, and they do not always adhere to the prescribed norms of “educational” discourse; at times, speakers talk over each other, and the voices of the Youth Builders tend to dominate the discussions.

To an outsider, this might be chaos. But for the Youth Builders—routinely silenced in traditional school settings, and who have withstood years of classes that have emphasized an American history, culture, and society that is hostile to their existence—the dynamic at 696 represents freedom and liberation. At 696, these young people are part of a more egalitarian educational system. Their input is solicited with regularity, the subject matter is relatable, and the facilitators are people who they can trust, who look like them, and who come from similar life situations. 696’s alternative education could not be further removed from the reality of traditional American education.

Like the Panthers did for the Black youth in their communities, 696 provides vital support for Black youth in Queensbridge. 696 protects the futures of Queensbridge’s young people by providing them with an af-

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<sup>62</sup> See Alison Flood, *Yale English Students Call for End of Focus on White Male Writers*, GUARDIAN (June 1, 2016, 7:24 AM), <https://perma.cc/SM3B-MLK2> (explaining that the Western literary canon is comprised mostly of dead white males).

<sup>63</sup> *Youth Builders*, *supra* note 60.

<sup>64</sup> The Cure Violence Model refers to these staff members as “credible messengers.” They are an integral part of the community they serve. Some have been involved with the carceral system and/or the activities they now work to prevent. These qualities help them connect with the Youth Builders and impart wisdom that outsiders cannot. *Cure Violence Glossary*, JOHN JAY RES. & EVALUATION CTR. (Apr. 17, 2015), <https://perma.cc/PK7S-2VGJ>.

firming educational experience that arms them with the truth about themselves and society. 696 has not only demonstrated its capacity to drastically reduce gun violence in Queensbridge, but through its alternative education program, it has also provided its Youth Builders with the critical thought and self-awareness needed to become difference-makers in their own right.

#### CONCLUSION: A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

There is a lack of consensus between state governments about what alternative education is and does.<sup>65</sup> The only (vaguely) unifying theory of state-sponsored alternative education is that alternative education is a space that focuses on discipline and “behavioral problems.”<sup>66</sup> This is not liberation. While it might be impractical to expect states to agree on the exact same definition of alternative education, focusing on discipline rather than human dignity, anti-racism, and equality cedes an opportunity to create something special. This focus also risks perpetrating and perpetuating the same discrimination present in society at large, discrimination that alternative education spaces should instead be actively naming and combating.

The examples of the Panthers and 696 are instructive. These organizations dared to create their own educational models and to use alternative education spaces as a means for circumventing the pitfalls of the nation’s traditional educational apparatus. We have the blueprint—now, we must continue to construct and support alternative education spaces that are committed to young people of color.

Ultimately, an educational revolution may require a critical mass of alternative education spaces that are committed to antiracism and students of color, tailored to their communities, and replicable for others. Popularizing this vision of education could start the process of reversing generations’ worth of racial oppression in the educational system. As we look for a way to “solve” this nation’s foundational issues with racism and other forms of discrimination, a radical reimagination of the way we educate young people—inspired by the work of radically progressive groups—represents a starting point.

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<sup>65</sup> ALLAN POROWSKI ET AL., U.S. DEP’T OF EDUC., NAT’L CTR. FOR EDUC. EVALUATION AND REG’L ASSISTANCE, HOW DO STATES DEFINE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION? 1 (2014).

<sup>66</sup> *Id.* at i.