

DALLAS

REFUSES

TO LOSE



werefusetolose.org

 **WE REFUSE
TO LOSE**

TRUTH IS ESSENTIAL.
TRUTH IS POWER.
TRUTH IS HEALING.
TRUTH FOR DALLAS.
TRUTH IS COURAGE.
TRUTH IS URGENT.
TRUTH IS JUSTICE.
TRUTH IS YOURS.
TRUTH IS NOW.

Introducing the We Refuse to Lose Series

AN EDUCATION FIRST PRODUCTION

The **We Refuse to Lose** series explores what cradle-to-career initiatives across the country are doing to improve outcomes for students of color and those experiencing poverty. The series profiles five communities—Buffalo, Chattanooga, Dallas, the Rio Grande Valley and Tacoma—that are working to close racial gaps for students journeying from early education to careers. A majority of these students come from populations that have been historically oppressed and marginalized through poorly resourced schools, employment, housing and loan discrimination, police violence, a disproportionate criminal justice system and harsh immigration policies.

Since early 2019, the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** has supported these five community partnerships and convened their leaders as a learning community. It commissioned **Education First** to write this series to share how these communities refuse to lose their children and youth to the effects of systemic racism and a new and formidable foe—COVID-19.

COVER PHOTO BY COMMIT



Regarded as a leading education-focused backbone organization, Commit works with partners across Dallas County and the state of Texas. In 2019, it helped to **redesign the state's school finance system** to ensure that schools with the highest number of students experiencing poverty have the resources they need to deliver data-driven improvement strategies. Commit's work to **improve the quality of teaching and access to the internet** for students experiencing economic insecurity have taken on greater importance during the pandemic, as has its commitment to bring even greater **economic and racial fairness** to the workplace.



KARLA GARCIA,
DALLAS ISD TRUSTEE
AND COLLEGE
ACCESS & SUCCESS
ASSOCIATE AT THE
COMMIT PARTNERSHIP

In 2019, Karla Garcia became the first Latina elected to the Dallas Independent School District (ISD) Board of Trustees.

She was only 22. The Dallas ISD graduate is also a senior associate for Commit, the cradle-to-career education partnership operating in North Texas. The organization recently named a conference room in her honor, acknowledging her status as an education pioneer in the community.

Garcia is the child of Mexican immigrants, including a father who she says was deported at least eight times since he arrived at the age of 14. He eventually became a citizen in 2002, adding immense stability to the family of five. Garcia says her parents, now in their fifties, still work jobs for hourly rates of pay, with her mother a team leader at Taco Bell and her father a construction worker. Two weeks after her graduation from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she says, she was making more than her parents' combined household income. She says she experiences trauma when she remembers how her family struggled to cover essentials with little left for anything else. Garcia views her success as a combination of her hard work and a stroke of luck that most people didn't have. Growing up in Pleasant Grove, a southeast Dallas community where poverty is consistent and often extreme, she attended an elementary school that was bad enough to be on the brink of closure because of consistently poor performance—though it is a Blue-Ribbon School today (more on that later). She says that her education journey, supplemented by what her parents could provide with their first- and third-grade educations from rural Mexico, really took off on the last day of school at Edward Titche Elementary School.

“The principal came up to my mom and asked where I'd be going to middle school. When my mom told him, he said, 'Oh no, I think there's a much better option, and I think she's got the grades for it.' ” That better option was a selective, all-girls middle and high

“I have a ticket to social mobility, better health outcomes, better life outcomes simply because a concerned adult set me off on an education journey beyond my family’s means at the age of 10. It’s the high-quality education I dream of for all of Dallas’s students”

—KARLA GARCIA, DALLAS ISD TRUSTEE AND COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS ASSOCIATE AT THE COMMIT PARTNERSHIP



school that Dallas ISD had just opened. The principal arranged for the school counselors to complete all the paperwork Garcia needed so that it wouldn’t become an obstacle. “We didn’t have to do a thing, and I was accepted after the interview.”

At Irma Lerma Rangel Young Women’s Leadership School (the school’s namesake was a pioneer like Garcia: she was the first Latina elected to the Texas House of Representatives in 1976), Garcia acknowledges she enjoyed much smaller class sizes and additional resources such as a staff person dedicated only to college access and millions of dollars in scholarship money for college. Garcia believes that she’s leading a much different life than most of the people she grew up with because of the quality education she received at the school. She reflects: “It’s not that I made good choices in order to succeed. At Rangel, I had only good choices to

make: mandatory enrollment in AP classes, dedicated extracurriculars, mandatory summer enrichment and college access opportunities, access to a network of professionals that served as mentors and role models, and a Black female principal who demanded the best out of all of us every day. Place me there for seven years of the most critical years of my development, and it’s no wonder the model works.”

Garcia continues, “I have a ticket to social mobility, better health outcomes, better life outcomes simply because a concerned adult set me off on an education journey beyond my family’s means at the age of 10. It’s the high-quality education I dream of for all of Dallas’s students. That’s why I ran for the school board, and that’s why I work for Commit. Commit is making sure that more and more students have access to the opportunities I did.”

The Commit Partnership (Commit)

Commit is a Dallas County cradle-to-career education initiative working to ensure all North Texas students receive an equitable education that prepares them to flourish in college and career. It recently changed its “north star” from a focus solely on students’ educational outcomes to ensuring that by 2040, 50 percent of residents ages 25–34, “irrespective of race,” have living wage jobs. Commit engages more than 200 partners: public and private schools, colleges and universities, foundations, businesses and nonprofits. A member of the national StriveTogether Network, it facilitates several branded initiatives in partnership with other institutions. Early Matters Dallas raises awareness about the importance of high-quality early education by operating an annual PreK enrollment campaign

and supporting school district partners in their implementation of higher-quality early childhood education. Best in Class endeavors to increase the number of students who have access to effective and diverse teachers. The Dallas County Promise is a postsecondary continuous improvement effort facilitated in part through last-dollar scholarships and success coaches. These coaches help students to access and succeed within the college experience and workforce entry. Its state advocacy efforts engage policymakers with robust data and insights to help address various structural education challenges, including inequitable K12 and higher education funding, inadequate teacher pay and inequitable effective teacher placement in historically marginalized schools.

The income inequality Garcia experienced as a child and the major disparities it creates between racial groups is profound in Dallas.

Dallas's high-profile D Magazine, drawing on a report that ranked Dallas last among major American cities in economic inclusivity, observes that "a city's economic success does not necessarily affect all of its residents." It suggests "that's why Dallas, bristling with shiny new development ... can fare well on so many economic measures while leaving so many people, most of



JERRY HAWKINS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF DALLAS TRUTH, RACIAL HEALING, AND TRANSFORMATION

them Black or brown and living in the southern half of the city, behind.”¹ A 2018 Communities Foundation of Texas report on economic opportunity concurred with these observations. It concluded that there are race-based barriers to upward mobility in the city, where there are “high levels of geographic segregation by race-ethnicity, income, educational attainment and wealth.” It continues, “What this means for low-to-moderate income Dallas residents—and for people of color who are disproportionately represented in that category—is that where they live profoundly influences their access to opportunity. Because access to quality schools, health care, good paying jobs and safe neighborhoods are increasingly interrelated, it is more and more difficult for individuals to overcome barriers to opportunity on their own.”²

Jerry Hawkins' perspective on race-based income and wealth inequality in Dallas is one that reframes how we typically think about these issues. Dallas's history of leaving people of color behind should not center on the damage done to them, in this case having much less family wealth and lower paying jobs, Hawkins says. Rather, it should focus on the wealth Black people helped build for the city's white population.

Hawkins is the executive director of Dallas Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation, an organization launched in 2016 with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.



Income Inequality in Dallas

Commit reports that 25–34-year-old white residents of Dallas County are currently three times more likely than their 25–34-year-old Black and Latino neighbors to have the access, resources and supports needed to be employed at a living wage. It also reports that 72 percent of Dallas County students—80 percent of whom are Black or Latino—experience economic insecurity.



Commit has established as a primary goal that **at least 50 percent of all residents of Dallas County ages 25-34 will be earning a living wage by 2040 and that “all races are equally likely to earn a living wage.”**

Its mission is to bring greater racial inclusion to the city. The work starts, Hawkins says, by addressing what really happened: the truth.

“There is a myth that Dallas was started in the middle of nowhere by pioneers and that oil was the industry that built Dallas. In reality, Dallas was taken through the genocide of Native Americans and was built on cotton and the labor of enslaved Black people and Black sharecroppers,” he says. He points to the stadium where the annual college bowl game commemorated the economic engine that initially built Dallas and adds, “It’s not hard to figure out why Dallas is where the Cotton Bowl was held for many years.”

Historians agree with Hawkins’ assertions. Historian Christina Snyder, for example, identifies the motivation behind American policies of Indian removal in the 19th century: “Indian Removal was a blanket policy aimed at ‘removing’ all Eastern Indians west of the Mississippi River. In total, 100,000 Indians were forced to leave. Most came from the South, where settlers coveted the rich lands—potential cotton fields—still controlled by large Indian nations.”³ Writing in *Texas Monthly* in a review of books about who and what industries built America’s powerful economy, historian and Texan

Michael Ennis asserts simply, “All our familiar tales of cattle kingdoms and oil barons notwithstanding, cotton ruled the culture and economy of our state [Texas] for its entire first century.”⁴

While Black people helped create white wealth in Dallas, Hawkins points out, government programs prevented them from building their own in the 20th century: redlining (the practice of denying federally guaranteed home loans to people of color), public housing policies that segregated races, government-funded infrastructure that encouraged white flight to the suburbs (taking businesses with them), among other policies and programs. (See the Tacoma and Buffalo We Refuse Profiles for additional information on how these forms of discrimination denied families of color opportunities to build wealth through home ownership.) “Federal housing and other policies helped create white wealth; it didn’t just create Black poverty,” says Hawkins. “We can’t simply program ourselves out of this mess.”

Hawkins suggests that reparations would provide the economic justice Black Americans have been denied. Regardless of how a community frames economic inequality or seeks to address it, an aggressive approach is required. Commit has established as a primary goal that at least 50 percent of all residents of Dallas County ages 25–34 will be earning a living wage by 2040 and that “all races are equally likely to earn a living wage.” Its work on both closing the digital divide (see page 22) and ensuring that students who attend the highest poverty schools—where most of the county’s Black and Latino students attend—seek to ratchet up the quality of teaching they receive (since it is teaching quality that drives student success more than any other school-based factor (see page 18), are just two examples. And Commit itself has addressed income inequality within its own organization (see page 10) as it continues to bring greater diversity, equity and inclusion to its own workplace.

Commit has confronted income and other inequalities within its own organization.

That confrontation is part of its commitment to bring greater diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) to a 60-person staff that is now 50 percent people of color. Commit has been having internal discussions about issues of race since 2016, when the organization was one-quarter of its current size. It is not the organization it was in 2011 on numerous fronts.

Commit has its origins in a strong focus on educational equity. It opened its doors in 2011 after founder Todd Williams participated in what he calls a “national best practices tour” on which Dallas County leaders discovered the StriveTogether affiliate in Cincinnati. StriveTogether is a national network of cradle-to-career education initiatives and follows a core value that “working to achieve racial and ethnic equity shapes who we are and what we do.” In 2012, Commit became a member of the network and began by focusing its initial efforts on providing insights to leaders based on data that had been disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status and other aspects of student identity. The goal of this work was to help improve educational outcomes for students, particularly in the early-learning space.

Following Commit’s inception, Williams and other community leaders began to explore the data. What they found for children of color living in poverty in Dallas County is indefensible, he says, and they made a clear call for an entire community to move into action. Hence, Dallas leaders “committed” to changing these outcomes.

While at the outset there was a commitment to bringing greater equity to outcomes across races and family income, the organization had not yet grappled with other issues of equity. “Equity is not just an outcome, not just a narrowing of the achievement gap,” says Sagar Desai, an eight-year Commit staffer, former chief operating officer and one of Commit’s earliest hires, now at StriveTogether. “It’s a process. It’s how you staff your organization, how decisions get made within it, and how you shift power into communities.”

At Commit, initial power and decision-making authority was largely white and male. Kim Manns, the former director of Commit’s Early Matters Learning Partnership, is a Black woman. She came to direct Commit’s equity work as well and then was supported by the organization in late 2020 to start her own



Diversity means understanding that each individual is unique along dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical abilities, religious and political beliefs or other ideologies. **Equity** is the state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair. **Inclusion** is the action or state of including or being included within a group or structure. It involves authentic and empowered participation and a sense of belonging.

—FROM GLOBAL DIVERSITY & TALENT STRATEGIES,
PITNEY BOWES, INC.



“You first have to understand the context of Dallas. Seventy percent of the K12 students in Dallas live in economically insecure environments. Half of all K12 students are Hispanic/Latinx and a quarter Black. Taken together, that means that 75 percent of the students we serve are students of color. To best serve them and see the impact we want to create by giving many more access to living wage jobs, we have to understand the systemic factors that have created these outcomes. Those systemic factors require that we do internal DEI work and develop an understanding of the systems we want to change. Part of it is truly being able to understand those systems, their history and current-day impact and how we can dismantle them.”

—ERICA ADAMS, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS AT COMMIT

“Commit is a different organization now, and it’s beautiful.”

—SAGAR DESAI, FORMER CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, COMMIT

consulting firm focused on equity training. In that capacity, she continues to work with the organization. Of the years 2016 and 2017, she says, “Most of the power was basically in four men, three of them white, and one Asian-American [Desai].” Desai notes that during that period “most of our staff of color were less senior. If we valued diverse racial perspectives, we were going to have trouble.”

Staff reported concerns about lack of transparency and fairness in the decision-making process, discrepancies in compensation and the hierarchical nature of the organization. At the time, Manns reported to a staff person who was in turn reporting to Desai; she observes, “I was two layers down, and there wasn’t a rationale for that hierarchy that pointed to more expertise or experience than me. That was tough.”

“At that moment in time, I wasn’t sure about my future in the organization,” says Manns.

Manns credits Desai for taking the initiative to make internal DEI work an organizational priority. “I understood that we were a pretty white organization and that we had that reputation in the community. We were the ‘noble organization of white people’ trying to do good work versus working with the community,” says Desai. “It felt like we were struggling; we were leaving something on the table,” he adds.

Desai also says it was a time of introspection. “It felt like we were just getting incremental change without an equity lens. We started realizing that things had to be different.”

After discussions with Desai, CEO Todd Williams convened regular meetings with him, Manns and other

organizational leaders. They discussed committing to a process of improving diversity, equity and inclusion within the organization, believing that the organization could not support external partner efforts to become more diverse, equitable and inclusive until Commit understood what the journey was like. Williams says, “As a volunteer CEO, I had been more focused on driving the external work because helping address our significant student need had been what [drove] me to found Commit in the first place. I frankly had been less focused on career management or ensuring internal equity until others brought it to my attention.”

In May 2017, the group agreed to hire an external consultant to conduct an equity audit (an assessment to identify structural inequities), which included interviews with each employee. The internal audit uncovered information that was different from that revealed by an organizational culture survey administered by Commit leadership. Reflecting on that point in time, Manns says, “I think people never had a space to talk about what was on their minds until then. One of the things that came up was that people didn’t feel like they were being compensated or promoted in a fair way. This was a painful time because people knew their livelihoods were being affected.”

Commit formed an internal equity committee that ultimately recommended focusing on the structural inequities the audit revealed by (1) examining its identity, goals, decision-making processes and intended and unintended consequences of its actions; (2) prioritizing more inclusive stakeholder engagement than it had in the past; (3) creating a culture of understanding and trust by breaking down structural barriers; and (4) creating more equitable policies

and practices related to decision-making, hiring, employee benefits and salaries.

The organization initially took on its salary inequities. As is their practice, leaders in the organization took the audit information and examined its internal compensation data, determining there were some racial inequities in its compensation system. Commit provided compensation retroactively to those harmed, and it committed to greater future transparency, publishing annually for all staff a document showing salaries broken out by band and disaggregated by race and gender while keeping individual salaries confidential.

Mann realized that with these efforts, Commit had made an unusual commitment to racial equity. While she had once thought about leaving, Manns decided to stay. “I didn’t leave once they started to make changes. It was the first time I’d been in an organization where people knew the inequities and actually did something about it. That made me stay. I had been in organizations where even if they knew, they didn’t care,” says Manns.

The changes Manns speaks of—in addition to bringing greater equity to compensation—are significant. Once two layers down in a hierarchy, Manns became a direct report to CEO Williams. Commit also conducted internal trainings on equity and inclusion and began to think about recruitment differently. “As a result of the trainings, we started recruiting more people of color,” Manns says. Staff of color increased from 26 percent in 2017 to 50 percent in 2021. The executive team now has nine people on it, seven of whom are women and four of whom are women of color who lead large pieces of the organization’s work. Further, to increase transparency in decision-making, the organization developed a decision-making matrix to reflect when CEO Todd Williams and President Dottie Smith make decisions and when other decisions fall to the executive team, a broader leadership team or the entire staff. “We now talk openly about distributing leadership,” says Erica Adams, who is the managing director of strategic relationships.



Commit’s internal DEI work also has had an impact on the future strategic direction of the partnership, one that addresses one of Dallas’s most pernicious problems: the profound wealth and income gaps that exist. Dottie Smith reports that internal DEI work uncovered that even though people of color on Commit’s staff “had received a strong education, they still had faced challenges getting job opportunities over the course of their career.” That information dovetailed with a living wage analysis conducted by Commit. “That analysis,” Smith says, “showed that a degree does in fact carry a different value for people of color.”

The direction that emerged from staff input through DEI work and the living wage analysis engendered the creation of a forthcoming five-year strategic plan and objectives focused on living wage jobs. Commit’s new “north star” is that at least 50 percent of all residents of the county ages 25–34 will be earning a living wage by 2040 and that “all races are equally likely to earn a living wage.”

No current or former employees of Commit believe they’ve covered all the ground they need to, but Desai concludes that “Commit is a different organization now, and it’s beautiful.” Smith suggests that Commit will continue to address these challenges to “develop

muscle memory for equity work so we can take it externally. What we do internally will translate to our external work.” That, she says, is a process that can never stop.

Of the importance of that process to the region’s school children, Adams says: “Until you recognize that school systems were designed to support white students, you won’t have the external impact you want. Texas’ student body is increasingly of color and economically insecure. The system needs to be redesigned to meet the needs of those students, so we need to better understand those systems and reflect those students.”

“As an organization we knew we could not support our partners in changing inequitable policies, practices and resourcing unless we were also doing that work internally. DEI work is life-long work that requires ongoing learning, growth and action to produce equitable outcomes—our journey ultimately had to start with examining our culture, policies and practices. As part of the process of taking inventory of our internal practices and culture, our staff had to also build and sharpen their equity lens. The inner work had to come before we could translate our knowledge and skills to our work in supporting the community. As an organization we know that DEI is mission critical—we have to identify and address inequities if we want to play a collaborative role in creating a more inclusive and equitable Dallas County for our students and youth.”

—ANGELA KILEY, CHIEF OF STAFF AT THE COMMIT PARTNERSHIP

“It was the first time I’d been in an organization where people knew the inequities and actually did something about it.”

—KIM MANN, FORMER DIRECTOR OF EARLY MATTERS DALLAS AT THE COMMIT PARTNERSHIP

Commit is building its internal DEI muscles so it can maintain its relentless focus on equity externally.

Before starting Commit in 2011, Williams, the founding chair and CEO, served as both a partner and a global co-head of Goldman Sachs real estate private equity investment area, which he says was “gender diverse but 95 percent white.”

Williams reflects on being a commercially successful white male in the private sector prior to forming Commit and his own personal DEI journey. He understands his privilege even though he grew up with significant financial insecurity, living in a series of small rental houses and heavily relying on Pell grants and loans to pay for college. Williams says that he was always affected by the storytelling of others who grew up in poverty and were victims of racial hatred. He wanted his own children to hear those stories; one spring, he and his wife packed the family up, took their children on a tour of landmarks and museums in the Deep South and exposed them to stories, books and podcasts on the civil rights movement.

Acknowledging Williams’ role as the leader of Commit and his commitment to data-informed decision-making, Texas Governor Greg Abbott asked Williams to sit on a 13-member commission for what would arguably be the state’s most substantial commitment to equity in education: a complete redesign of the Texas school finance system that provided \$6.5 billion of new funding into education, with much of it directed toward

students and schools with the greatest levels of economic insecurity. Major efforts created by the law, called House Bill 3, to boost equity include funding full-day PreK, providing increased per-student funding as campus poverty concentrates and compensating a district’s most effective teachers on a sliding scale depending on the socioeconomic levels of the school they choose to work in. The most effective teachers working in schools most impacted by poverty and those working in hard-to-staff rural schools can now receive up to an additional \$32,000 a year. Other components of the law include using state dollars to extend the elementary school year by up to 30 days to help reduce summer learning loss and new funding opportunities for districts based on college-, career-, or military-readiness student outcomes. Williams chaired the Commission’s outcome committee, which developed both the metrics the new funding system would target and its 35 major recommendations. “Funding should always highly align with and support the outcomes you’re shooting for,” he says.

The law places substantial emphasis on the importance of great teaching, and helping ensure great educators exist in every classroom is one of Commit’s major priorities. It operationalizes this priority through its Best in Class initiative, another ongoing external effort to bring greater racial equity to Dallas County and throughout the state.



TODD WILLIAMS, FOUNDING CHAIR AND CEO OF THE COMMIT PARTNERSHIP (CENTER)

Commit’s Ongoing DEI Work: 2021 and Beyond

Commit continues its internal work. It will always be ongoing and hard, Dottie Smith, president of Commit, reports. A former second grade teacher, instructional coach and partner at TNTP who oversaw teacher-preparation programs, Smith arrived in Dallas and at Commit in 2018. When she took the job, she knew she wanted to focus on racial equity and make a commitment to DEI her priority, believing that the organization would need to build its equity muscles internally before becoming more effective with equity work externally. She oversees three buckets of DEI work.

First, there’s training. “The people, knowledge, skills and mindsets people need to do DEI—that’s the hard and soft stuff,” says Smith. Smith adds that when she’s examining a deliverable and her gut worries it isn’t at her standard, she now asks herself whether that’s really true, whether there may be different preferences and approaches staff take because of who they are. “We really try to address hierarchy and power dynamics that live

within the manager-managee relationship in our trainings,” she says.

The second bucket is DEI policy. This includes making sure there’s a BIPOC vendor list to choose from and addressing rising health insurance costs. “We have to consider the associate band of our staff (junior level employees) who will struggle more with additional out-of-pocket costs they will incur.” As a result, Commit has decided to subsidize health insurance for associates at a higher level than other staff.

Finally, there is DEI practice and how the organization operationalizes it. This includes using a common rubric to score everyone’s annual evaluation. When managers complete all the evaluations, leadership assesses for differences in outcomes across race and gender. And the organization this past year did a training on implicit bias as it went into the review cycle.

Dominique McCain leads Best in Class as an ode to her grandmother.



DOMINIQUE MCCAIN, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF BEST IN CLASS AT THE COMMIT PARTNERSHIP



“She was from a small town in Louisiana and was the first Black woman in her neighborhood to own a home and the first Black teacher at my elementary school. I do everything for her. I am her legacy.”

A former classroom teacher, instructional coach and director of Dallas ISD’s internal teacher preparation program, McCain manages a staff of nine spread across two organizations, Commit and Educate Texas, a nonprofit anchored at the Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT). Though it is a statewide program, Best in Class has made a large imprint with CFT’s partnership and financial support in Dallas County, Commit’s backyard.

McCain believes that there need to be more regional teachers of color: No Dallas County district has an equal or greater percentage of Hispanic teachers than students, and roughly a third of County districts are also underrepresented in their percentage of Black teachers versus students. She says that her experience leading a teacher preparation program taught her that teachers of color like their jobs more and often do a better job of educating children. As evidence, she points to data that Bain & Company collected for Commit that shows teachers of color are far more likely to suggest to students that teaching is a good career.

To get more teachers of color, she believes there need to be more high school and college graduates of color who then enter the profession. The key to getting more graduates of color, she adds, is making sure they get what matters most to a quality education: effective teaching. That key animates the work of Best in Class.

McCain oversees several strategies in service to four key levers: (1) attracting greater numbers of talented, diverse candidates as teachers and school leaders; (2) preparing future teacher and school leaders to meet the needs of students; (3) supporting teachers and school leaders with opportunities for ongoing learning and development; and (4) increasing the retention of the most promising and effective educators.

To push on these levers, Best in Class provides toolkits to support educator evaluation, strategic compensation and change management, and boutique consulting in multiple-measure evaluation and strategic compensation.

A signature component of its work is the Accelerating Campus Excellence (ACE) effort pioneered by Dallas ISD and now replicated in 13 districts on campuses educating roughly 35,000 students across the state. ACE is Best in Class’s effort to help school districts develop compensation systems aligned to evaluation systems and then use that alignment to provide an incentive for effective educators to work in schools reflecting the lowest student achievement. In this capacity, Best in Class works with districts to access the \$1.4 billion Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA) created by House Bill 3. Best in Class provides technical assistance to school districts as they prepare their applications, with McCain and her colleagues helping 18 districts across the state submit for TIA funding in Spring 2021. As a result of these efforts, of the more than \$40 million dollars allotted for TIA funding in the 2019–2020 school year, over \$30 million went to districts across the state supported by Best in Class. Additionally, more than 70 percent of the

“When I learned in November 2017 that Commit and Best in Class could help provide me with the analysis to determine a list of my 300 best teachers who have historically been growing kids, I just about fell off my desk chair. And then when they did, we used it to help reconstitute and reshape the culture and student trajectory for my four schools of highest poverty and did so while introducing teacher incentive pay at these four schools. This has been hard and disruptive work the last three years, but I am parlaying the success of these four schools to change my district culture—and it’s working.”

—JEANNIE STONE, SUPERINTENDENT, RICHARDSON ISD

districts in Dallas County secured TIA funding.

ACE falls into the tradition of a quarter-century American effort to undo a profound national racial injustice: the fact that students of color and students experiencing economic insecurity are most likely to be taught by the least experienced and least effective teachers on campuses with the highest annual turnover. The National Governors Association long ago made the case that students of color and students experiencing poverty are taught throughout their entire school careers by a “steady stream of unqualified teachers.” The Education Trust also argued that educational inequity would disappear if these groups of children were taught in equal measure by the same quality of teachers. And similar cases were made by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future and the Teaching Commission, both of which observed that the American education system draws the best teachers into schools with higher-income, white student bodies.⁵

Commit believes this is directly correlated to the nation’s use of a seniority-based pay system that has never paid a district’s effective teachers to work on campuses where they are needed most. “If one’s pay is tied solely to years of service, we will never reverse this inequity ... which is why it was so critical to pass the Teacher Incentive Allotment under HB3 and structurally reward a district’s most effective educators for teaching on a campus where challenges are the greatest,” says Williams.

Best in Class, through its support of ACE, is able to augment substantially increased compensation for the most effective teachers in schools that reflect the lowest achievement, up to \$32,000 a year in additional moneys. And initial results suggest the effort improves student achievement. A 2020 statewide evaluation of ACE showed that ACE schools improved both math and reading scores on the state assessment year-over-year at greater rates than state and non-ACE peer schools. In Dallas ISD, the first cohort of schools that began the ACE program in 2016 saw three years of consecutive growth in math and reading. The second cohort saw reading scores increase by 10

percent overall and 18 percent for Latino students—compared to 3 percent and 5 percent in peer comparison schools.

The success of ACE, McCain suggests, is embodied in turning around the elementary school that Commit senior associate and Dallas ISD school board trustee Karla Garcia attended. “Titche Elementary School in Dallas ISD is a bright example of what can happen when resources are afforded a school with high populations of students of color who also live in poverty,” she says. “It was an IR [Improvement Required] campus, and within the first year of ACE, it soared to a point shy of being identified as an ‘A’ school and earned six of six distinctions—in one year. And it was recognized as a National Blue-Ribbon School just three years later.” Says Williams, “The students and families didn’t change. The adults and resources did.”

Cynthia Wilson, Dallas ISD’s chief of human capital management, notes that the success of Titche and other ACE campuses is due to the district’s ability to strategically place personnel. Dallas ISD transitioned out all Titche teachers who did not demonstrate high performance. In fact, she says, they typically replace at least 80 percent of the faculty at ACE schools. “We identified a charismatic, strong, instructionally focused leader who created a culture of excellence and then created the opportunity to earn up to \$100,000 as a teacher to attract a very talented teaching staff,” Wilson says. “Plus, teachers have an extra hour added to their schedules to write lesson plans collaboratively, explore best teaching practices and engage in other professional development activities.”

“I see the consistency of excellence, of effective teaching, from classroom to classroom,” Wilson concludes.

While effective teaching is essential to graduating more students of color, economic inequality has made it difficult for many students to acquire the technology they need to learn—a fact laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Commit’s new strategic plan connects effective teaching to its economic mobility goals

Commit’s new strategic plan calls for “deepening its multi-year workstreams” such as Best in Class. It identifies activities already facilitated by Best in Class as strategies it will consider pursuing: strategic educator staffing, the Teacher Incentive Allotment and professional development focused on literacy.

To increase the number of students of color who access living wage jobs means that, first, they need to graduate from high school. The key to getting more graduates of color, says Dominique McCain, who leads Best in Class, “is making sure they get what matters most to a quality K12 education: effective teaching.” That key animates the work of Best in Class.

“What’s keeping you up at night?” Dottie Smith asked Dallas County’s superintendents as she reached out to them when schools closed in the initial stages of the pandemic.



Smith reports that internet connectivity dominated conversations. So, Commit convened the chief technology officers of nine Dallas County school districts to develop solutions. Jack Kelanic of Dallas ISD is one. He now co-chairs the group with Smith. The coalition has grown to more than 40 community leaders, including the chief technology officers of the nine districts, the Dallas Regional Chamber, City of Dallas, the Dallas Innovation Alliance and the Federal Reserve Bank.

“The group had to figure out how to keep the wheels moving for education,” says Kelanic. “Commit has the skills to bring people together. The collaboration they’ve orchestrated is magic.”

The group began by developing an understanding of the problem. Commit performed a data analysis for the group using census and other information. It identified 10 high-poverty zip codes (which in Dallas means mainly populations of students of color) where students did not have internet access. The group decided to pursue short-, medium- and long-term strategies to ensure that students would continue learning with access to the internet during the pandemic and beyond.

In the short term, the group arranged to set up hotspots in the neighborhoods within those 10 areas. The effort included an awareness campaign using print and digital media to get the message out; it urged parents to call school district offices if they

did not have access to the internet. The coalition connected 75,000 households and distributed approximately 100,000 computers.

Commit’s connections to local and national foundations allowed the group to raise money to support the effort. “Commit opened doors for us,” says Kelanic. “And they facilitated meetings, did project management, all the stuff that keeps us moving forward.”

The coalition has two long-term strategies. “The short-term strategy is only a stopgap measure,” says Kelanic. The group’s first long-term strategy is to get families connected to local internet providers such as AT&T, Spectrum and Comcast. Kelanic says that the group

hasn’t been as successful in this strategy yet, and much work remains to be done.

The second long-term strategy is more aggressive, Kelanic says. The coalition is piloting the building-out of its own networks. “We’re super excited about the work. We’re creating networks in five neighborhoods in the near-term, and the first one went live in December 2020. The other four are in the pipeline,” Kelanic says, adding that the effort has clear learning goals: determining if the service can be good, how cost effective it is and whether it’s sustainable.

“This work won’t stop when the pandemic is over. We’ve got to address the results of economic inequality in our community permanently.”

Despite the profound economic inequality that exists in Dallas and the further inequities it engenders, Commit believes there is real hope that greater racial healing and equitable outcomes are possible.



Commit CEO and founder Todd Williams believes there is hope for Dallas County because of leaders like Jeannie Stone. “Jeannie Stone is a courageous superintendent committed to serving all of her students,” says Williams of the leader of the Richardson Independent School District (ISD), one of Commit’s school district partners. Superintendent since 2017, Stone has been an assistant superintendent, an adjunct professor, principal and teacher.

“In my school district you don’t use that term ‘racism’ lightly,” she says. In fact, when she witnessed racist memes leveled by students of a largely all-white school against students of a largely all-Black one, she didn’t call it an overtly racist act. “I decided we needed to go softer at the time. It would have caused more fires than I wanted to put out. I was wrong.”

Stone, like Commit through its internal DEI work, has been on her own journey to learn more about race and how it has an impact on life and work, and she has attended programs offered by Dallas Truth, Racial Healing & Reconciliation. She recounts learning from Black women attending the program how they were treated by white people and in particular, how they didn’t believe they could be authentic in their interactions with white co-workers. “I did not fully understand that,” says Stone. “I couldn’t believe that people couldn’t bring themselves to work.”

Seeking to apply her learning, Stone says, she asked a Black member of her cabinet if it was okay to acknowledge that he was Black. He responded by saying, “Are you asking if it is okay to acknowledge who I am?” A new level of trust opened between

the two of them, Stone says. “I immediately understood what he was saying, and I began to have understandings I didn’t have before.”

Then Stone took a bold step, authoring an op-ed in the Dallas Morning News. The newspaper entitled it “Richardson ISD Superintendent: I’m learning to talk about systemic racism in our district.” In the op-ed, she takes herself to task for using the term “racial insensitivity” to call out the racist memes instead of calling them “racist.” She writes, “By prioritizing political correctness, I was in fact the one being insensitive. To not name racism in this instance was to deny the experience of the Black members of my community. Fortunately, for me ... staff members and parents trusted me enough to let me know how my words hurt them, and they afforded me grace that I

did not deserve in order to learn and grow from the experience.”

There’s been a lot of learning and growing at Commit over the past several years as well, as it has taken substantial steps to bring greater racial diversity and fairness to its own organization. Though it still has a way to go, Todd Williams believes there is hope for Dallas because of people like Stone, who show great courage and are willing to talk openly about issues of race. As he learned from Best in Class Managing Director Dominique McCain, “When we know better, we have to do better. And we know better now.”

End Notes

¹Dallas Ranks Dead Last in Study of Economic Inclusivity, D Magazine, April 26, 2018.

²Dallas: Economic Opportunity Assessment, Communities Foundation of Texas and Center for Public Policy Priorities, March 2018.

³See [How the Forced Removal of the Southeast's Indians Turned Native Lands into Slave Plantations](#), Christina Snyder, Zocalo Public Square, January 2, 2019.

⁴[The White Stuff](#), Michael Ennis, Texas Monthly, March 2015.

⁵See [What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future, America's Future, Report of the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future](#), Summer 1996; The Role of Teacher Expertise and Experience in Students' Opportunity to Learn, Linda Darling-Hammond, Strategies for Linking School Finance and Students' Opportunity to Learn, National Governors Association, 1996; [Good Teaching Matters: How Well-Qualified Teachers Can Close the Gap](#), Kati Haycock, Thinking K-16, Vol 3, Issue 2, Summer 1998; and [Teaching At Risk: Progress and Potholes](#), The Teaching Commission, Spring 2006.

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Published June 2021

We Refuse to Lose is a project of Education First.