

Organization Name: [WA-BLOC](#)

Date of Interview: 4/16/2024

Organization Interviewees: Laura Wright, Sierra Parsons, Katie Brantley

Impact 100 GRT Interviewers: 1Gretchen Boehm and Yuliya Obshtyr Hemerlein

Application: [Click here](#)

Organization Mission: Our mission is to build and nurture intergenerational leaders through transformative education and revolutionary social action.

What are the compelling reasons for Impact 100 to partner with this organization?

WA-BLOC is truly walking the walk as a community based organization. Deeply committed to serving southeast Seattle. WA-BLOC was founded out of a group of educators, Rainier Beach high school students and community leaders who took a stand against transportation inequity in 2016, when Seattle Public Schools set a walk zone of 2 miles. The group tracked how affected students were penalized and the inequities of those penalties. This led to the creation of WA-BLOC which set a goal to get to the root causes of inequities in southeast Seattle Schools, not provide a band aid. WA-BLOC has three main focus areas: 1) literacy for students furthest from educational justice, school based restorative justice and BLOC (building leaders of change).

Do you have any reservations about this organization as a potential grantee partner for Impact 100? None.

What does the organization do?

WA-BLOC addresses social inequities for under-served populations by disrupting historic and continued oppression and racism in public education that harm Black and brown youth. Three main program areas:

- 1) Freedom Schools Literacy Program - free 5-week, literacy-based summer program serving students furthest from educational justice. Core components: Culturally Reflective Literacy Curriculum; Intergenerational Leadership Development; Social Action; Parent, Family and Community Engagement; and Nutrition and Health.
- 2) School based Restorative Justice - directly serve over 225 students and 250 school leaders/educators annually via site-based partnerships with 7 schools, and SPS district-wide training series and consultations.
- 3) BLOC (Building Leaders of Change) organizing includes building collective power and partnership with Black and brown youth to address issues impacting them and their community. Past campaigns include our Transit Justice Campaign leading to free ORCA cards for all Seattle Public Schools' high school students in 2018 (now throughout King County - over 24,000 students!), removing police officers from Seattle Public schools in 2020, advocating for increased culturally responsive mental health in schools, addressing community gun violence, and more.

Who does the organization serve?

WA-BLOC's efforts specifically serve K-12 Black and brown youth with an emphasis on elementary-age scholars and public school communities in southeast Seattle. Formal school partnerships include Emerson Elementary, Madrona Elementary, Wing Luke Elementary, John Muir Elementary, Lowell Elementary, Pathfinder K-8, Licton Springs K-8. Based on current and historical participant data, 78% + of program youth identify as Black/African American, 86% qualify for Free/Reduced Lunch and 29% meet grade level standards in English Language Arts.

How does the organization reflect, maintain proximity to and stay accountable to the community it serves?

WA-BLOC has a special connection with former students and families. A priority in the Freedom Schools program is making sure folks who have been part of the program provide input and actively shape the program. Intergenerational leadership development is crucial. WA-BLOC has a beautiful and special connection to community members which drives their work. The Freedom Schools Coordinator is consistently reaching out to families and former scholars to figure out how to keep them involved in the program. WA-BLOC maintains their geographic focus on the south end of Seattle.

What inequity is the organization addressing and what is the root cause of that inequity? How is the organization addressing this?

Exclusionary discipline disproportionately affects Black and brown students in Seattle Public Schools compared to their white peers. "Restorative Practices" have emerged as a crucial solution to bridge the gap between educators and students, addressing safety concerns and preventing harm. By fostering relationships and amplifying voices, restorative practices reduce exclusion and build community, similar to nurturing relationships at home. Even predominantly white schools face cultural challenges, with students highlighting issues like racism and sexism that contrast educators' perceptions. Storytelling and circle discussions reveal root causes of inequities, guiding efforts to involve student leaders and shift policies towards restorative approaches. Ultimately, addressing exclusionary discipline is key to creating connected and inclusive school communities, achieved through restorative practices and leaders as liaisons between students and administrators.

How is the organization collaborating with other community-based organizations?

The community has a longstanding history of practicing restorative practices, which have been integral to their organizing efforts for decades. While SPS has recently acknowledged the importance of restorative practices, the community, including WA-BLOC, has been actively engaged in advocating for these approaches, particularly in challenging systems like the juvenile justice system. This advocacy formed the foundation of their community partnerships and has significantly contributed to the development and implementation of restorative practices within select Seattle public schools. Despite the district recognizing restorative practices as a core philosophy, SPS has not allocated adequate funding (with 1.0 FTE currently allocated), thus relying heavily on community partnerships such as WA-BLOC. The city of Seattle has also played a crucial role in funding and supporting these initiatives. Former educators and community organizers who now provide consulting and professional development services contribute significantly to our district-wide community of practice events, ensuring that community leadership and expertise are visible and accessible within the district. Additionally, during the summer Freedom Schools program, local businesses provide activities such as gardening, bike programs, art-based workshops, and partnerships with organizations like the Seattle Public Library and local community members for read-aloud sessions and human library interviews. WA-BLOC is an integral part of keeping the community based organizations interconnected and utilizing their joint resources to serve the community and its young people.

What is the vision for the organization in 5 years?

WA-BLOC is piloting a middle school internship program this summer and plans to reintroduce Freedom Schools to high schoolers, with a focus on social action. WA-BLOC is considering offering Freedom Schools as an after-school program year-round to promote critical literacy and identity affirmation. With the City of Seattle levy ending soon, there is uncertainty about funding for restorative practices. WA-BLOC aims to advocate for continued funding, partnering strategically with more schools to strengthen communities and reduce reliance on law enforcement. Also, WA-BLOC is exploring the intersection of restorative practices and mental health, collaborating with professionals to address unmet needs. Rooted in South Seattle, WA-BLOC is

committed to fostering thriving Black and brown communities. Afterschool Freedom Schools represent a tangible next step, supported by enthusiastic staff and potential school partnerships.

What is the organization's area of greatest need?

Unrestricted funding to ensure sustainability and avoid interruptions in services for the school partners. WA-BLOC has built strong foundations of partnership with new schools for restorative practices, and maintaining these partnerships is crucial to continue the work. Advocacy this summer will determine if funding continues, receiving grants like the one from Impact 100 is essential for committing to their school partners and maintaining access to ongoing programming. Restorative practices require time and foster a cultural shift in schools, emphasizing the importance of sustained partnerships. Additionally, WA-BLOC shared their eagerness to expand Freedom Schools After School Program, allowing to showcase growth and impact throughout the school year, especially given the limitations on out-of-school programming post-pandemic. Impact 100 funding would allow WA-BLOC to grow and make a lasting impact in the South Seattle community beyond just the summer months.

Highlight a story of impact.

- 1) In 2022 a WA-BLOC partner K-5 school had 12 in-school suspensions, a concerning figure given the young age of these students. In 2023 the number decreased to only two in-school suspensions. Which highlights the effectiveness of focusing on WA-BLOC's strategies, particularly relationship building. WA-BLOC is anticipating and hoping to reach a reduction of zero in-school suspensions.
- 2) Summer 2023, Freedom Schools saw 70% of scholars increase their reading by at least one level. This success was especially meaningful as it was achieved while utilizing WA-BLOC's own curriculum.
- 3) A former Freedom Scholar student asking to return to the program as an intern. Showcasing the genuine connections and enthusiasm the students have for the WA-BLOC initiatives.