

How to advocate for the schools our children deserve

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SUMMARY

In this episode of the Your Parenting Mojo podcast, hosts Jen and Cassie engage with equity expert Allison Kryer Brown to discuss the challenges parents face in advocating for equitable education in schools. They explore the systemic inequities that affect students, particularly those from marginalized communities, and emphasize the importance of parent engagement and advocacy in driving meaningful change.

- Parents often feel uncomfortable speaking up about school issues, leading to disparities in how policies are applied.*
- Advocacy is crucial for addressing systemic inequities in education, and parents must work together to amplify their voices.*
- Schools are microcosms of society, reflecting broader cultural and political divisions, which can hinder equitable practices.*
- Equity differs from equality; it focuses on fairness and meeting individual needs rather than treating everyone the same.*
- Parents can support their children's education in various ways beyond traditional volunteering, such as engaging in community organizing and advocacy.*
- Building relationships with school staff and other parents is essential for effective advocacy and creating a supportive school community.*
- Systemic barriers, including funding disparities and cultural assumptions, often prevent full parental engagement in schools.*
- Collaborative efforts, such as partnering with school board members and community organizations, can lead to impactful policy changes that benefit all students.*

[Music] hello and welcome to the your parenting Mojo podcast how comfortable do you feel speaking up about something your child's School needs have you noticed that some parents seem to feel more comfortable speaking up than others have you ever noticed that sometimes rules and policies in school don't seem to be applied evenly to all students while squeaky Wheels who raise issues that

concern them and their children tend to get addressed if you have and you'd like to understand more about what you're seeing and know what to do about it then this episode is for you today I'm here with two very special guests Cassie Gardner manikian who is a longtime listener of the podcast as well as a coach and consultant who supports leaders focused on social change to achieve their goals we also have Allison kryer Brown an award-winning Equity

practitioner trainer and Scholar who has worked at the intersections of prek to2 Education family and Community engagement environmental justice and local government Allison has co-authored and contributed to a variety of books most recently engagement for Equitable outcomes a practitioners Playbook she is a staunch supporter of excellence and equity in public schools fervently believes that the systemic inequities that harm the rights dignity and potential of people of color and people with low incomes can be undone so

welcome Cassie thank thanks so much for teeing up this interview for us yes thanks for having me and Allison thank you so much for being here and sharing your wisdom and expertise with us we really appreciate it yeah thank you for the opportunity and I'm delighted to be here on the podcast super so Cassie you were the whole reason that we have this conversation here today and so I wonder can you tell us just a little bit about

what prompted you to reach out to me in the first place yeah thank you Jen and I'm so grateful to collaborate with you on this episode you know I've been listening to this uh podcast since the summer of 2020 when I was seeking more anti-racist parenting resources for my three little boys uh who at the time were three and under while dealing with postpartum anxiety and it was a lot especially during the pandemic and your podcast has really supported me and my

confidence as a mom on multiple levels and thank you Allison for all your work supporting parents communities and Educators on this critical issue um so yeah to introduce myself I'm identify as a white privileged mom of three boys now ages 7 five and five and I live in Pasadena California which has one of the densest concentrations of private schools in the US due to a history of segregation and there's a strong narrative here against public schools

and I've tried to counter that by sending my kids to public schools and volunteering a few hours a month uh at my kids school and The more I've engaged in the school I've learned that schools are microcosm of society and we're at this moment of cultural and political division where not everyone's on the same page about what's best for schools um and you know Jen I really reached out to you on Facebook a few months ago out

of frustration with the system wanting to know how to be a better Advocate uh as a parent in a public school setting and our district is wonderfully diverse our local school is relatively privileged affluent and white and I've learned there are just so many challenges around education Equity um so for example I've learned that Hispanic or latinx and English language learner kids are falling behind I've witnessed microaggressions and implicit bias affecting children of color along with

disproportionate discipline of black students and last year our school's only Asian-American teacher was fired and was told he wasn't a good fit despite being an amazing teacher especially to neurodiverse kids like my son and I know that if we're facing these issues at our school the struggles at other Public Schools must be way more intense with devastating consequences so as a white anti-racist parent I feel a responsibility to advance Equity within our school and um you know we're fortunate to have a

parent group focused on educational Equity but we're really struggling to find our voice and be heard due to a

lot of bureaucratic red tape and lack of inclusive leadership so I hope that's helpful background context and I'm so grateful to talk with you Allison as an expert in this field to share your wisdom and guidance for parents on how to advocate for the schools our kids deserve awesome thanks for setting that groundwork Cassie and so I think you're

going to kick us off right with um with our first question for Allison um so did you want to head right into that sure yeah that all being said Allison can you tell us a bit about your work and what you see are the most important elements of it sure so again I'm very happy to be here uh on the podcast and I think the way that I'll introduce myself for your listeners is I'm coming here with a

couple of hats um so first professionally um I am I don't mind saying it I am an award-winning Equity practitioner trainer and Scholar I am a practicing scholar in my field I have been doing this work for more than 15 years um I currently actually uh direct racial Equity training um for local government and I've done this space done this work in both the school space directly um leading a nationally recognized family engagement project of the talent stories project of teaching

for change which really approached engagement um through an approach that was informed by racial Justice Community organizing popular education and the top research in family engagement so um one of the ways I described the work that I did for many years with people is I spent more than 10 years in and out of the parent centers at drop off in teachers classrooms and coaching principles I coached DCPS and uh Public Charter School principles in Washington DC for more than 10 years before uh

transitioning into local government and leading Equity work there um and in addition to that I am a parent of two young kids this fall I will have a first grader and a fifth grader uh in DC public schools so I come to this from uh a variety of hats both personal and professional H and I draw on both of those to do this work uh even thinking about my own upbringing because um one thing that we don't realize often is how

much our own upbringing informs how we show up um at school both both you know just in terms of the many different ways that parents are supporting their children in schools on a day-to-day basis um but even in you know how we feel about things like advocacy um speaking up and being able to notice um what's going on in our schools uh in terms of you know how are different groups truly benefiting from and being included in the school community so um

it's a pleasure to be here and go ahead and ask me your first question again yeah thank you so much Allison it's incredible to hear about background and all the hats you're bringing um yeah would would love you know you talked about parent advocacy and um you know I know that's a big focus is working for Equitable outcomes in schools and just curious what do those terms mean to you sure so um one of the first things let's

start with Equity so one of the ways that I explain Equity to people especially people who say you know well shouldn't we be working towards equality you know why are we working towards equity and so I always tell people equality is one of the highest values and ideals that we have in this country and in our society um

however Equity or equality is really about treating everyone the same and there can be value in that um but when you talk about

giving the same resources the same treatment the same supports that does not serve everyone um well not even equally but doesn't serve everyone well and so uh equality is really about sort of that input side and that process side of just treating everyone the same regardless of you know where or how they are positioned in the school or in society Equity as I explain it is really our path to get to more equal and just outcomes so Equity is about fairness it

is about need and it's about the steps that we need to take to actually get to equal outcomes and the fairness piece is a key part to understand about Equity um because what what he does is it requires us to look at both the past and the present um and the context in which our students in school communities are and to figure out what are these specific strategies and supports that we need to do so that we have all children reading

on grade level we have all children uh you know being able to not just perform math and and Science and in all of these other areas um when you talk about College and Career Readiness but what do we need so that we really can address the whole child um you know one of the things I think is very often uh for us to forget and even people in schools to forget is we're not just here for

students like these are children and children need things to grow and learn um Beyond just you know that Reading Writing arithmetic um so our schools are also preparing not just the workers of tomorrow but they're preparing uh the citizens and and the residents of Tomorrow the community members of tomorrow and the artists of tomorrow so there's so much that we really do need to pour into um our schools and investing in our children and that's where advocacy comes in so as someone

who's done um engagement work uh both supporting schools to engage families uh and then I've also done engagement work as a government employee uh and so engagement is really about the organization or the entity that has the power so the institutions and the systems that have power engagement is about the steps that they take to bring in stakeholders in including students including families um into decision-making processes listening to them to inform and shape um you know the

policies the programs the plans Etc that is two directional engagement should all be two- directional advocacy is actually one directional advocacy is the people who are supposed to be benefiting uh from these institution systems and policies coming together often coming together and working together to voice and to push for those policies programs and plans to be done in ways that will benefit them so advocacy is really about us uh as parents caregivers uh community

members speaking up and pushing for the schools that our children deserve there's a lot to unpack in all of that I think we're gonna we're gonna spend the rest of our time together basically unpacking what you just said um and so Alison I'm wondering if we can sort of Go Back to Basics a little bit because I can imagine particularly because I know that a large majority of my audience identifies as white um and may have experience School in

certain

ways when they were kids and so now they kind of have this idea that well kind of showing up for my child's School means volunteering in the classroom means going on field trips right maybe joining the PTA and so I'm wondering can you uh start by laying some groundwork on what are other ways that children's parents May support them and their learning that maybe less visible than some of the ways that we might be accustomed to seeing

that support happen yeah sure and um for your audience members who are listening and not uh able to see our recording uh so I do identify as a black woman um I'm heterosexual and uh from I would say growing up I grew up in the upper middle class I think here especially in DC the way rents and and housing keeps going up I count myself in the middle class um and I have a disability um so I'm very

used to looking at things from sort of different cross-sections and intersections and that very much uh lends itself to the work that I do uh so to the question of how are parents supporting um their children in schools and what are some of the roles that they can play so what you listed you know PTA you know sign up for the bake sale um those are come to back to school night uh those and even read with your kids

for 15 minutes if I had to summarize what are sort of the usual ways that you know schools communicate they are expecting parents to engage or to participate that's usually it and the role that parents pay in their children's education school learning and otherwise goes so far beyond that so the saying that children are their or parents are their children's first teachers is absolutely true um by the time children get to preschool and then on to kindergarten you know those F

first five years of life are so tremendous in how children children um children's brains are shaping and sets a really really strong foundation and so you know everything that parents are doing from making sure the children have you know are getting to school on time uh to nutrition um looking at those uh extracurricular and and learning activities that children are do and even talking with your children there's a big movement you know talk sing and read to

your children they are sponges and they are constantly learning from us and I think one thing that we don't appreciate and enough um in terms of important roles that parents play and I'm going to use parents as a Shand for parents and caregivers uh and any adult who is helping to care for a child um but we have a lot of parents who quite frankly making the rent payments you know working those jobs to make sure that

rent is paid that you know kids have their clothes and that hair is done um you know all the things that we do to build up kids self-esteem those are all really important to how children um gr up in school and how uh children learn and see themselves um and even develop their own sense of identity and uh sense of agency so there's so much that we don't see that is happening um that parents are doing and I will go ahead and say myself

as a you know I am not one of the parents uh who is dropping off uh often you know before the Bell so you know but uh my kids are there every single day you know we we're checking the backpack and we're checking the homework as much as we can but we play a lot with our kids um I my oldest is very very competitive so we playing a lot of games at home and learning you

know about sportsmanship and how do you channel that energy and just as we get to know our children um that is actually an important form of knowledge lived knowledge and experiential knowledge is an important form of knowledge whether it's about your children about your neighborhood about the school Community all of those are important and and resources that schools can tap into wow thank you so much Allison I mean this is so amazing you listing out all of the ways that parents can

contribute to their children's education it reminds me kind of of the mental load parents are holding of all all the things for our kids and just I think it's so important that we appreciate all of those steps it takes to drop our kids off at school on time and ensure they're getting the most out of their education um so thank you for listing all that um you know I recognized I'm extremely privileged to be able to volunteer in my

kids school and as you mentioned you know that's not the case for all parents due to so many underlying systemic factors kind of underneath that Iceberg and you know breaking down those factors will go into um and curious in your experience you know what are some of the reasons why parents uh some parents might not seem to be involved in their children's education yeah so I really appreciate your framing of that question of you know what might

be the reason um you know that it might seem that some parents may not be involved in their children's education and quite frankly it really depends on what the school is actually seeing so again laid out those sort of cookie cutter expectations um that are often placed upon parents um by schools and when those expectations aren't visibly met then often times particularly when it comes to black and brown parents uh and caregivers uh we may not realize it

you know those who've been Educators um you know we may say that we're not but often times um black and brown parents are being looked down upon if they are not checking those sort of traditional boxes um but one of the things uh that is really important to note is that parents and caregivers are coming from a wide variety of experiences with school and their understanding of school and also I one of the things the messages

I'm constantly driving home with people is this is not a question of do parents care this is a question of capacity so you know even things like those evening meetings you know I tell people dinner doesn't cook itself clothes don't fold themselves dishes don't wash themselves you know even with the machines that we have and I've worked with a lot of parents and supported a lot of parents who actually were you know not only working jobs but

oftentimes going back to school themselves to set a model for their children uh and to look at how can they improve their family status so we are oftentimes very much informed by a lot of assumptions that are made and

there are there are real barriers in terms of you know can people take off work um just even Transportation sometimes to and from the school especially during that rush hour traffic um these can all get in the way the timing of school

events I can tell you having done family engagement professionally for more than 10 years there is not one specific time that you can pick where everyone in the school every single family can be represented and we need to respect that and that's one of the reasons why when family engagement is done well it's done through a multi-pronged approach because particularly when it comes to the school uh it is actually incumbent upon the school to find ways to lower and address

those barriers to participation and there have been strategies that have helped um that especially have emerged in years um home visits are um one of the strategies especially when they're done well and teachers are trained and supported you know not just expecting parents to come to the school but how can we go to and meet them where they're at and sometimes those home visits might be done at the local library or you know even a local restaurant um or space

where parents feel comfortable U but yes we have a number of parents who may not feel comfortable we have a number of parents who you would be surprised but I see this a lot in Washington DC who when they look at their own experience in education growing up and even the experience they've had as parents now and I'm going to in particular speak from the Viewpoint of many black and brown parents especially those who have lower

incomes but oftentimes when parents I've worked with speak up they don't see a response or feel heard or respected even by the system you know if we say we need this this is what we need for our school or this is what my child needs and you know if that consistently is not listened to um or you know maybe it's listened to but you don't see the action behind it then why would you continue to speak up if you don't feel that your

voice matters so again we're often times coming with a lot of assumptions about why parents um may or may not be involved uh that also there are also cultural uh pieces especially if you're you're talking about immigrant communities and recent immigrant communities I've worked with families from Central America I've work with families from E Ethiopia Eastern parts of Africa I've work with families from uh the Asian diaspora um and culturally we've found that there are some

commonalities uh not in every single household or family um but there are some cultural norms of you know I send my child to the school and the teacher educates them and then you know I do what I do at home who am I to question the teacher who am I to question the principal and that was a lot of the work that I was doing at teaching for change was actually Meeting those parents and families where they are not just trying

to tell them here's what we want you to do or here's what we expect you to do but actually listening to them and getting to understand where they were and how we then could meet them there and if you look at teaching for changes work there's several videos If you go on the site teachingforchange.org um shout out to my people still

there uh uh very much support their work during the 35th Anniversary so um please do uh

support teaching for change but you'll see in some of those videos that we I mean we had Parents reading in classes who could not actually functionally read and that was because we knew that they wanted to support SCH say well you can read in class well okay well what time are we going to do it you know what books are we going to read and a lot of parents you know may not feel comfortable getting up in front of the

class like just think yourself what would it be like to stand up you know in front of the class um you know and even to read a book just even how you hold the book A lot of these are things that you know those of us who have education privilege may take uh for granted so um one of the things that we did at teaching for change that I'm very proud of is you know we bring selections of

books and we always chose Multicultural anti-bias books because the parents wanted to fill in the gaps you know they knew they would read about you know there were a lot of topics that they'll definitely read about at school but learning about their own cultures learning about messages of justice and Community parents wanted to be a part of filling in those gaps in the curriculum and so you know they would select a book um they always knew you might read in

your child's class but we going to read across the school and we have these great pictures and videos of parents coming and reading four and five and six at a time because even the idea of maybe I don't feel comfortable reading the book you know a whole book myself but if I read a page and you read a page and you read a page you see now that lowers the barrier you know for Access and participation and invites people in and

then they make connections the teachers love it we used to have a whole parking lot of strollers right outside the classrooms um and so there's a combination of you know those of us who feel comfortable um whether we're working in schools or other parents sometimes things um really are more accessible when we come together in groups but it really is about meeting people where they at because where they are at because we had parents who you

know uh not only did not necessarily speak English um but we had a number of parents who were not necessarily literate in the language that they spoke um so I work with families coming from Central American countries that spoke indigenous language where Spanish was their second language and they may or may not have learned uh you know to read that um but we would tell what we would tell people is you know you can always come and hold the book you know if we

have more people to hold the books and flip the pages you know kids can then you know we have better visual you know V visuals for the kids and so we had a lot of parents who participated that way I mean we had tons of parents who would read in the classrooms and then when you start to find that entry point where people start to build comfort and relationships including with other parents that's how you build community

and Community is how you bring people into the school yeah wow thank you so much Alison there's so much wisdom you're sharing about like co-creating Community right and how do we make that happen by meeting people where they're at and through inclusive Equitable you know models of participation and really acknowledging um all those systemic barriers that you named so beautifully

um I I'm curious kind of digging a little deeper um what kinds of social justice underlying challenges uh do you see in schools um you know that you can maybe elaborate on again that are kind of hindering that that co-creation of school Community yeah in in terms of hindering the co-creation of school Community one of the biggest uh challenges is really funding resources and capacity including

on the school side um so one of the reasons why a lot of the family engagement work um that I did was very effective was because it was n't only my team of parent organizers who were supporting the schools but we actually had a requirement that schools identify a parent coordinator that takes resourcing and Staffing in the school um and quite frankly there is a lot more that we could do if we were resourcing and Staffing our schools more um you

know think about all of the teachers that we have that you know are also a coach for you know something here all of the club you know more of the clubs and um opportunities that we could have uh you know if we had additional St and resources so that is really a key component teaching and working in schools is very challenging work it continues to only grow more challenging and actually engaging families is a recipe for uh success for student

outcomes improving student outcomes um but I think I think when it when it comes to the barriers um to advocacy a lot of it is you know people and particularly parents and care forgivers just don't know what they don't know so a lot of people don't know how the school really works and functions as a system they don't necessarily know there are things that you can ask for you can push for you know that your school should be

receiving we should not be running out of toilet paper in you know November and April of every year um the things that you see in school that could be improved for your children there are specific people and positions uh that you can Advocate to um but these see is a really really good example of just the entire education system is very convoluted we have you know so many different offices and people just aren't really sure which

office does what you know who do I go to um how to get things done and again that's even if they feel comfortable um you know just even approaching and speaking up but I can tell you A lot of the things that I've learned in a lot of the advocacy um efforts that I've been involved in and that's ranged from you know why H why have all of these other school buildings been renovated and modernized and our school has not been

touched since it was founded in 1971 I've been a part of um advocacy efforts to get Librarians sometimes even security guards more field trips to get more slots in after care and a lot of that starts by people asking questions uh the after schooling started because did you get into Aftercare did you get into Aftercare and then parents as they started speaking to each other this is the power of community started realizing that there was a larger issue

that

wasn't just impacting them individually so you know some of the barriers that we have to just even creating Community I I will say the if PTA and PTO meetings are done very well then they are creating creating Community but unfortunately that that doesn't always happen that's not inherently baked into the model so a combination of information community so that way people don't feel isolated and they feel comfortable and then when you don't know where to go or how to get a question

answered you have folks and there's a role for everyone to play we can talk about this more but there's a role for everyone to play as we start to ask and figure out well what would it take to get more after care spots sometimes that starts with a teacher I can't tell you how many advocacy efforts start with the teacher or staff member that parents actually feel comfortable speaking to um and then you know from there you kind of

learn well we need to talk to the principal about this okay well if the issue goes beyond the principle well who do we call next or who can we reach out to for help so over the years I was able to build up this great network of you know folks who were experts on the school budgets I know way more about modernizing schools in DC public schools than I ever quite frankly wanted to know and that's just from going through this

effort of continuing to ask the questions knock on the doors and just figure it out because there are a few places where you know exactly how to make change or again even how the system is laid out and works just just often not readily available and explained so what people don't see when they do see these big advocacy efforts you don't realize all of the work it takes of just coming together working together asking questions sharing information being

curious and just continuing to push Alison I'm wondering if you can also talk a little bit more about money because where money gathers and where money flows I think is really important to this conversation as well yeah so I I will go ahead and tell you now Jen I will very much encourage you to have a follow-up episode that just specifically talks about school funding because it's I mean it's a huge issue and it it's an issue that also in

many ways does need to be localized so one of the sort of pervasive issues Nationwide um that we still unfortunately often see is uh schools when you have a system where each individual school is funded based on the property taxes of the area then in the wealthier neighborhoods where you have more revenues coming in from property taxes those schools tend to be you know better funded than in areas where you have lower property taxes um in this

country you know thanks to capitalism and the history of racial Capital that we capitalism that we have um that very often and very strongly tends to correlate with race as well so areas that are wider tend to also be wealthier um areas that tend to have more black and brown families and communities tend to have um lower property taxes and less resources that does not hold true and constant for every single School Community but it is an ongoing and a

legacy issue to be addressed that also couples with you know things like how much can your PTA or PTO you know raise um you know and are they filling in gaps or are they adding to uh again Washington DC is a really interesting example um that in many ways replicates the Norms but is different structurally so in DC for the DC public school system schools are not funded individually based on the property taxes of the neighborhoods around them um instead

what effectively happens is the taxes are all pulled and the funding comes out in the budget and is distributed based on the number of students that are being educated and then it's further redistributed um you know if you're adding in Title One funds if you are adding in funds for special education um you know for students with disabilities so on and so forth and so there are parts of the funding mechanism that you know do look equal and there

are parts that do look Equitable and yet still the schools are by and large underfunded to the point where we have ptas in Washington DC that are consistently raising over a million dollars each year and we have a wide wide range of schools that don't even have a PTA or a PTO we have schools yeah we have schools in DC that are funding AIDs that where the PTO is funding AIDS funding the science teacher um funding

actual programs in the school and we also see we have a pervasive issue where Public Schools especially those that do not have um you know PTO or PTA uh may be receiving extra funds like title \$1 you know so on and so forth um but if you actually run the numbers and do the analysis of the budget those extra dollars are aren't adding on top of a fully funded school so instead of supplementing we found there's a

pervasive issue of they're actually supplanting so the dollars that are supposed to be extra are just being used to keep the school afloat and just keep the staff you know sort of that you have so the underfunding and under resourcing of public schools uh is a very serious issue that impacts us all it's a complicated issue when you add in things like funding for Charter Schools um and Charter Schools can play uh you know a vital role um they can play a vital role

uh in our education ecosystem um however I'm certainly in the campus says you know are charter schools are not the solution and I'm always asking you know well does this new school opening how does that benefit the students we already have in the schools that already exist um if you bring vouchers into the conversation you know that is you're talking about spreading the dollars even more that's a conversation in and of itself but these are very real and

relevant issues that impact are we fully staffed this year does every grade get to go on a field trip um I love my kids school but the field trips that they get are largely through summer camp so and one of the I need to say this because one of the drums that I've also been consistently beating that I see now is sort of a the canary and the coal mine are really just sort of like a marker of

the resourcing of your school is could your school put on a school play next year like think about what it takes to put on a school play Not only do you need to potentially you know pay the rights to use the script we're also

talking about the costumes you know the lighting the props and then even above and beyond that do you have the Staffing or the volunteers who can work with the kids who aren't burnt out by the day-to-day

of their job and can actually make that commitment to put on a school play so to me a school play is a new hallm marker of resourcing for our schools whether it's provided by the school district um or otherwise I'm going to leave private schools out of this conversation because I think that's a separate conversation um yes different yeah and then even something like you know the idea now you know 10 years ago we were really pushing

hard for parent centers and parent coordinators um because when you talk about taking those extra efforts to engage with families which quite frankly really should not be seen as extra family engagement should not be seen as extra um the reason it is is because of a resourcing issue of time bandwidth uh energy so school resourcing is absolutely one of the equity issues that we need to address we can better resource our schools um a lot of

advocacy work and a lot of the work that I do is just not accepting the norm as it is you know I'm in Washington DC you mean to tell me in the nation's capital we cannot have outstanding public schools that can fully serve each and every single child I just refuse to accept that um we look at other countries and you know there are other countries where they are freshly cooking and preparing you know breakfast and

lunch and those snacks in the kitchens at the schools you know from from scratch to the table and so um yeah that's one of the reasons why I'm very still very very big into advocacy and the important role that it plays because uh parents parents really have been the drivers of a lot of you know what we do see and benefit from in schools coming from speaking up and demanding the schools that our kids deserve we just

this year celebrated the 70th Ann 70th anniversary of Brown versus the Board of Education which was the land makes Landmark ruling that led to desegregation of public schools separate but unequal is inherently unequal the brown first board ruling was the results of five court cases that the NAACP strategically brought to the US Supreme Court and in each of those cases there were students who were centered um who were denied access uh based on D based on segregated schools well who do you

think played the role of bringing those court cases to the NAACP um of working with the lawyers of one of those court cases happened here in Washington DC bowling verse sharp and it was uh Black's parents who were fed up at the overcrowding in DC's black schools we had schools in DC that were in under the segregated system that were so crowded that the black students had to come to school in shifts either the morning shift or the

afternoon shift and that was not the case for any white schools in the district so you're literally talking about half an education you know compared to your peers and the you know these legal changes in the fight for justice came because the parents said we don't accept that so it's really important for us to note as parents um as caregivers and community members that speaking up and advocacy for our children is always worth doing yeah yeah thank you for that and

and so I know that uh you know we talked a lot about funding and I know that policies are also really important to you um and you know how policies are developed and how they're applied and I I would love to dig into that but I know Cassie has a lot of questions about okay how can we make change and so I really want to make sure that we have time for that so Cassie do you want to kind of lead us through sort

of a discussion of like where where do we go from here right if we're seeing some of these issues in our schools what practically can we do to really bring about the change the kind of change that Allison is H talking about yeah thank you so much Jen thanks Allison for that incredible history um so you and your you know folks you work with have produced so many amazing resources for principles and teachers and parents who

want to work toward building equity and education but this kind of assumes that maybe there's someone in the school with Authority who wants to start making these changes and if I'm a parent who sees you know my child's school has some challenges in this area but maybe the principal hasn't been receptive to it or the PTA seems more comfortable kind of doing things as they've always been done what would you suggest I try especially when everyone you know as you named

teachers administrators and parents are already seem over capacity yeah so that's a that's a really interesting question because you know sometimes you know they're sort of the case by case thing right so like what is this particular issue um that you want to work for is this uh you know and I think advocacy starts um whether it's something related to your specific child or to the classroom or even to the grade you know why does our grade have

no field trips this year um when you're talking about things like you know we should create a diversity Equity inclusion and Justice committee um when you're looking at issues related to you know funding resources curriculum policy yeah so there's each of those may require a bit of a different angle and a bit of a different approach um but one of the first things that I would say um that people can do is start talking to others around you um ask people in the

school questions um ask other parents you know have they noticed this do they know anything about this um and one of the things that I encourage people to do as well again depending on what your issue is uh is you know go to your elected leaders ask your elected leaders we have a state board of education here there are people who's who are paid to be public servants um to support you and oftentimes they may not know about the

direct issues going on in your P specific school you know affecting your specific grade and I know for a lot of folks that may still be a leap you know and and still be um an effort to even do that but the first thing really is figure out who you can speak up to and speak up with because if we see something but if we you know just keep it to you know ourselves that's not going to start the gears of moving

towards change and um there's one of the resources that I have that I um that I'll leave as recommended uh in addition to my book which we haven't talked to but I'll get to that in just a moment um but there's a book and I have it here so I want to make sure I get the title correct uh by Deepa AER and it's called social change now now

a guide for reflection and connection and one of the

things that I appreciate about this book is um she introduces what she calls the social change ecosystem framework and really it's the idea is that there is a role that everyone can play so you know she say some people um are guides in the work that they do they can help figure out and navigate well what are the different parts of the system you know what office you know handles this matter um there other people who are you know

disruptors who are willing to you know challenge the principal or you know write that email you know I tell people we do need email Warriors that is something that you can absolutely harness for good um there are some folks who are Visionaries who you know really they have a vision for well here's what we could do and here's what it could look like there are so many different roles um connectors is one as well are you someone who is very comfortable you

know talking to other people talking to other parents do you know how to break the ice so one of the key you know sort of lessons to take from this is I encourage people to lean into their strengths and lean into the areas in which they are most comfortable and as you start to do that and especially when you can make connections with others then you start to be able to leverage leverage strengths all right and uh and

that again is that's how we build community and we have more power when we are in community so you know if you see an issue oftentimes we may want to jump straight to you know sort of resolving the issue or or what do we do um ask questions make connections with others because you then you might find out something like oh well did you know the principal does a meeting once a month um or I actually serve for my children's

school um in DC public schools we have a body that's called The elsat Local School advisory team and that is actually it's required of every school it's made up of the principal teacher um parents and there's a spot for Community member and that's a place where you can advocate so depending on your school your school system uh you know just the context of where you are a lot of really good organizing work is just First Learning

the landscape um with which you are in but again one step that everyone can always take and it might surprise you this is my first recommendation is just start by making connections asking questions getting more information because as you get more information and make those connections then sort of the impossible starts to become the possible okay and then I want to build on that a little bit and uh because that where you know Cassie's question was

kind of framed up as well if if we're the ones kind of on the ground level as parents who are starting this work right but maybe there's a principal listening to this or maybe uh I'm a parent and I know that my principal is at least receptive to some of these ideas I'm wondering can you tell us about some tools that could take us to the next level and and I'm thinking of some of the things that that you helped to

produce in your work for teaching for change can you tell us about how some of those can help us to advance

our dialogue and our practice on that yeah so when it comes to schools and administrators in particular there's a whole field of family engagement and how to do family engagement well and you know sometimes things that I've seen parents do is they help connect principles in schools um to some of these resources so uh again I'll do

Shameless plug for teaching for change um there's several guys there there's a whole manual on how to do monthly parent principal chats um including sample agendas you know we really try to make it easy for people and share the lessons that we've learned um there's a publication that you'll see between families and schools which I continue to be tremendously proud of that um offers some really key ways to challenge our assumptions because one of the reasons

why administrators and people working in schools sometimes are hard may maybe hard to move is because they don't realize they are actually being held back by their assumptions about parents um and schools and students you know and families and even what could be possible and what could be done um but then I will be very honest this is where I have to put both my parent hat on and my community organizer um hat on if you are

running into that kind of tension if you are you know seeing that kind of push back I have been a part of efforts of parents who came together and said this school leadership does not represent the best interest of our children and have directly challenge that because at the end of the day um particularly speaking about public schools public schools are there to serve the public um the teachers administrators and staff all the way up

through central office they are public servants and I say that professionally as a public servant myself uh if we are not adequately serving our schools and school communities then we need to be doing a better job and one of the ways that we can learn and have to accept that is by actually listening to the people who know these schools best the people who are there the students the families the teachers because we're the ones who can tell you what's really

going on you know we can tell you that there has been no sub you know we haven't been able to get subs for a long time and so now the instructional coach is you know serving as you know this a step in for one of the teachers who's you know out or you know leave for a different kind of reason um we're the ones who have eyes and ears on you know the AIDS are being spread

too thin or we don't have enough AIDS right now so there's it's there's there is a a natural push and pool um our schools are democratic institutions and they require Democratic action and I and I'm going to particularly talk about that lowercase D Democratic you know of the active involvement of the people and democracy is not just at the polls it is in your schools on a day-to-day basis we will improve and transform our schools and the systems that serve them by us

speaking up and I'm going to pause there but that actually um does connect directly to uh research that support set as well not just for Education um but I'm a co-author of a book called engagement for Equitable outcomes of practitioners Playbook uh and we actually lay out there and I'm happy to you know kind of just briefly walk through some examples of why this advocacy approach is actually connected to research and how we get to

more

Equitable and improved outcomes yeah did you want to share a little of that with us yeah sure so um again the book Shameless plug uh is engagement for Equitable outcomes and I co-author this book with um two professors from uh former professors from our graduate program um so uh I have a bachelor's degree in uh US History uh and I also have a master's degree in public administration um so that's a degree for folks who are

particularly interested in nonprofit um government at all levels and so we teamed up on this book that really started by asking the question um of saying you know we know we have these pervasive inequalities and inequities you know specifically speaking about the United States but in our society and in particular they largely break down along racial lines when you look at Health outcomes education outcomes you know income you look across all these major systems so we have these pervasive

inequities but education is a great example we can say well we also have programs um that have been shown to be strong and promising interventions you know we have programs that can help close some of these gaps so if we have the problems and we have some potential Solutions well why haven't we solved the problems and so it really starts looking at you know what are the challenges in us being able to replicate successful programs then also to be able to scale

successful program programs up and so we lay out the research for why there are challenges But ultimately I think kind of the the in a kernel or in a nutshell that I'll provide is even when we have something promising we need to use our data to inform our decision-making but the data and the you know the program structure and design itself doesn't actually speak to and for the people and the context in which you're bringing in

so for us to actually be successful you need the policy makers you need data crunchers we need do need to be looking at our school and other data but the framework that we lay out is that it's data and engagement for Equitable outcomes so the people who are intended to benefit the most whether it's students whether it's families whether it's teachers whether it's other community members they need to be involved at every stage and step including even defining what is the

problem or the issue that we want to solve because people working in you know government or at the school level or policy makers are often coming to these conversations with you know their own or our own particular framing um and there are interests behind that um sometimes it's you know we need to get this done before the end of the year um that's not necessarily the same priorities that families and students in school communities have so the programs that

were able to replicate and were able to scale for Success it was because they did it with the people and with the communities that were supposed to benefit because then they could shape and say well they did this here but here's how it would work better here even something in schools and the work that um you know teaching for change we had signature activities that we would bring into a school we had one where parents would read in the class we had a

model for doing monthly parent principal meetings we had another um program that was uh or another model for how to do grade level parent meetings if you've heard of academic parent teacher team meetings we had our own version of that we call them grade level dialogues but even when we would go into a new school we'd first have to figure out you know sort of what are the strengths of this school how do parents and students and

families and even the teachers and staff themselves see the school community and then sort of like what's the place for us to start so we never came and imposed any of you know our programs or approaches on schools we always did a process of co-creation and listening um because also sometimes there were other issues going on in the school and so we're not trying to Eclipse that you know or take over that you really have to listen and work and build with people

because that can also give you a sense of you know what are we ready for right now um what do we need to work towards in in the long term and you know again if I am coming in well-meaning U well what do I need to know about what else is going on in the school Community who I can build with and and how to do that so um and advocacy then when I talked about that sort of one directional piece

advocacy is really about being proactive in speaking up for what our children and what our school communities need um so advocacy is part of that work of data and engagement is how we get to Equitable outcomes so thank you so much for sharing that Alison and I know that Cassie has more questions on okay yes from the macro level that makes perfect sense and then like what does that actually mean for like boots on the ground so Cassie how do you want to kind

of wrap up our time together today yeah this has been so helpful Alison you know I'm just so curious what advice you might have for our school um in that we do have this diversity Equity inclusion priority in our district strategic plan you know we have this parent group focused on social justice our teachers get anti-racist professional development and yet there's still all these things happening at our school and there's just a big difference between policies and

practices so I'm really curious you know what advice you might have for parents um who are eager to support schools and invest their time and resources in helping them to kind of implement these policies and um kind of be more accountable yeah so when the policies are there and when the practice isn't um honestly that is an ongoing uh and

widespread um issue that I think a lot of people are consistently working towards and that honestly will probably be I think one of the main things that I would pull out so when I think about yeah there there is a lot there is a lot written in policy but especially at the school level we do see continued inequities so one thing I I can say and I have more of an appreciation um for this of working in government now there

are some things that will take time uh it took 400 years um to get us to this point today and for the bulk of that history um our systems and structures um were literally rooted in white supremacy and so it would be remissive me to not bring that into some of the framing of you know if we don't see instant results well we didn't get here

in an instant either so it is going to take some

rolling up the sleeves and being consistent and pressing forward I would also say be strategic um one of the best ways to make change in your school is to really figure out and hone in on what is something that we can do that really is going to be actionable and that we can do uh for the school you sometimes you might want to break it down what can we do for the school what can we do with

the school um especially as you have these coordinated efforts sometimes you know parents in those committees can be very useful in you know being the researchers themselves and what are some of these top practices or you know who can we bring in or you know bringing in lessons from you know set different books and and other efforts um but you really do want to draw on the strengths of your school community and hold up lift up those inequities and where we

are falling short um because one thing that also happens in at the school level and even in policymaking we may come up with a solution and say okay well this is the strategy that we're going to do and we try it once and well maybe the first time we don't quite get it but what did we learn from that how can we improve so often times we're not really actually looking for a lot of things that are brand new a lot of times it's

actually really being strategic and how do we leverage what we know and what we have and how do we grow and improve but you know things like uh bias um stereotypes structural racism these are all built into our Public School Systems you know unfortunately so so I also you know want to encourage people if you don't again get the instant results that you're hoping for you do need to keep pressing keeping strategic um there have been sometimes where I've seen you know

you kind of walk down One path and you figure out maybe we're not fully equipped to do this but figure out you know what we are equipped to do and you know there's so much potential that we really do have for our schools that's one of the that's one of the frustrations that I have about us not you know fully resourcing our schools there is so much potential there for us to unpack um but you know I'm constantly

reminded that you know to get to you know even what we have today um took a lot of constant and consistent work and pushing and pressure even I was having a conversation with someone or it's it's come up in the news really where we're talking about you know we should provide all kids you know with lunch we should make school lunch debt a thing of the past and and just even the idea of free breakfast and lunch at schools came from

I'm from Oakland California so you know of course I have to shout out you know the Black Panther Party um you know who started this effort to say we are going to feed children children perform better in school when they are not hungry so it just even that idea and figuring out how to implement that and you know the fact that now that is actually policy like free breakfast and lunch you know for um you know Title One schools you know

schools who are and and for families with lower incomes so there's a part of this where we have to push um

Community organizers if veteran Community organizers will tell you you don't win every battle but we have to learn and so what you tried this year you may see some successes you may see some results there's an important part of equity and engagement work that always involves reflection and you know you can't to be honest you can't always

look to you know people like me or even other experts for the answers the answers um are with in the community the answers are within your specific context um you know sort of of your school and we those of us who do equity and Community engagement work uh to be frank we're in this for the Long Haul it's like anti-racism work it is a commitment that you make you strategize you try things uh you learn um and that's quite

frankly what's behind a lot of the secret sauce of our success so you know one thing I hope that you know your listeners and audience take away from this is quite frankly you have to start you know start somewhere start somewhere and keep taking those next steps because success does not come overnight um to transform systems requires real work and there are things that we can do individually and that they there are things that we can do that we are much

stronger when we are working together but at the end of the day when I think about what my children deserve and what I believe that children you know across my city um and across this country do deserve uh even though I haven't figured it all out um that's just what push that's what pushes me to keep going and that quite frankly is how we're going to get there it reminds me of that proverb uh about uh planting a tree who under whose

shade you do not expect to sit and I could imagine that the people who bought those lawsuits that were ultimately resolved in brown B Board of Education maybe their kids were graduated by the time that was actually resolved right and we get to Bear the the the fruits of their labor and so we are kind of establishing we're planting more seeds today that we may never sit under the shade that we are trying to plant and

yet somebody else's child will sit under that shade in the future and they will be able to plant more seeds because of it so and it's not always in the distant future in uh Washington DC we were able to push uh it took a some years of advocacy but we were able to get um our Council and then the mayor to pass a law that now requires for every school to have a librarian the media specialist

position that used to come up in um testimonies each year for schools you know we shouldn't be choosing that we have to cut our librarian and so even some of our immediate advocacy efforts like you said when you across schools when we start listening and you realize that this issue is not just an issue for me alone and then when you started hearing from across all of our different Wars in Washington DC that this was a

pervasive issue um we actually were able to get the policy change and as someone who sits on the elet and reviews the school's budget each year when the you know funding comes out I'm so glad that the librarian is a protected position that we don't have to fight for and that again illustrates there is always possibility and so we we just can't resign ourselves um to the status quo we can and it really is quite frankly up to

us to push for it because the systems are not designed to transform themselves that's not what systems are designed to do they are designed to execute so we are the ones who actually are best position to push and to transform um the systems and again we can do that in ways as individuals um but we are always stronger together and as you have the capacity you know to learn to contribute I encourage people to do that yeah and so we we always try to

leave listeners with uh some some practices that they can try based on kind of where they are in their Journey right there are some people who are going to be super super new to this work just understanding it for the first time through this conversation today there are going to be other people who were much further along on this journey have been working on it for a while and so we think about these at the levels of right

I'm curious I'm just just learning about it I'm learning more about it I'm I'm ready for growth I'm ready for change right and so I I to me hear the Curious loud and clear talk to other parents talk to parents in your community and see what issues they're facing so I'm curious if you agree on that and then um are there sort of this mid level and this you know I've been practicing for a while um sort of growth

level that you would advise parents to actions to take for parents yeah so I so there's the talking to other people is kind of like that ice Breer that that first step and that also includes you know talking to getting to know folks in the school um because when you start to actually build relationships with principles with teachers um you know that's one of the ways that you know I certainly find out about you know what's going on in school

as as you build that trust because ultimately you know we want the kids to you know we want kids to have what they need um for those who I would say are at that sort of you know midlevel you know have some knowledge have some comfort some familiarity I would offer I think sort of two strands one is well actually maybe three strands so one is go from the asking questions to really start building Connections in community

outside your comfort zone okay so it's very easy for us to talk to parents who look like us you know families that seem like us um but this isn't just about doing advocacy for people this is really about acting in solidarity so uh if you feel comfortable start making it just even talking to people again you know parents that may and that you maybe don't usually talk to you would really be surprised you would really be surprised um how powerful that

can end up being I would also encourage people to learn more about the systems and the structure and the ecosystem in which you're in what you see when you get to the school is only the tip of the iceberg of decision making when it comes to what happens in schools so start to take more of a peak um under the water because you know you might be that person to be able to say well actually it's this office that you go to it's

this office and every time you know things that I've learned about the school system have really been we're trying to solve an issue who can actually solve it you know and where do we need to go so um there isn't necessarily know that there isn't necessarily a manual or a Playbook um but it's worth taking that time and then also I would encourage um you know PE people to continue on their anti-racist um journey I so appreciate that this is a podcast

on that really centers um anti-racism as one of your core components because that also is how we Act solidarity this is not about charity um this is not about sympathy this is not even about empathy this is really about solidarity and then for your folks who are more advanced um the key word that I would say is act is you know action so take action uh send that email you know um ask that question

and but always do that again it's it's just really building on what I said for that midlevel make even more connections um you know figure out how can you start to hey do you know such and such I I I'm connecting people all the time oh did you know this parent they live they're in your neighborhood so be one of those agents that can help you know either lend your skills directly to advocacy efforts and what's going on in your

school um that can help bring people together and for all uh you know people at all ages stages and you know whatever part of your journey continue to support your own children and take care of yourselves as well because we show up for this work best when um when we are at our best um to being very honest doing this work when we talk about capacity uh you know I want to be very real like you know it it takes

energy to really um do this so find ways to be strategic um you know give more when you can give more uh connect and also look at some of the organizations in your area that are doing work um in DC have word education councils which are just Community groups that formed to say you know here's a space where we can talk about what's happening in our schools um there are different nonprofits in advocacy groups you know

of that are working in education spaces so if you're in that advanced area again start looking at not only the ecosystem of the school but some of the larger ecosystem because what a lot of advocacy groups are also looking for is parents who can speak to those issues and when you are doing that if you are serving as a parent representative again we are in solidarity we want to be in solidarity um because strong Public Schools benefit

us all and one last thought that I do have to give that also applies to just each of those levels uh for anyone who's listening to this podcast who maybe is not a parent or caregiver um there's a role that you can play too you know as a working mom I am always trying to figure out what are we having for dinner tonight you know right now I'm think about back to school shopping and and

all of these other things it it really is a lot to be apparent on these days we have much less support many of us than previous generations uh and so one of the ways that people can be supportive to parents um children and school communities is to help and support on some of that advocacy uh so there are several um women who are black women here in DC um who do not have children but they're either in some kind of

leadership role or they're participating in some of these different groups that I've talked about I call them the education aunties because that is a role that we need the aunties to play we need people who can go and testify at the Schoolboard meeting we need people who can go you know who can sometimes write the emails who are willing to go and speak to the superintendent um you know or the chancellor it's at no loss to

them you know so um there there's a collective role for for each of us to play um there are very often few straightforward answers and sometimes the answers that we do receive we need to challenge them because again at the end of the day um our schools will get better when we speak up and when we work together yeah I think that that issue that you touched on about you know our schools serve all of us right they don't

just serve children they serve our entire Society um and yeah it's in in our culture it's like issues related to children are I mean that's parents job that's not anybody else's job when actually it's it's our whole culture's job and I so appreciate you uh wrapping up with that um Cassie is there anything you'd like to say to to kind of feel complete in our conversation as the person who brought this about uh this is just so helpful thank

you so much Allison it resonates so deeply with the anti-racist work we've been doing and just one thing I'd like to mention that you know I think is maybe relevant is in terms of being strategic it's been really challenging on the anti-racist front and that's a lifelong commitment and we've also found a lot of success actually partnering with an awesome School Board member around green schoolyards who's a fellow Mom an activist and a woman of color and

through that project we're working with parents across the district and we're actually able to make meaningful progress at the district level um on a policy win you know earmarking some upcoming bond funds to transform our schoolyard into a more sustainable and engaging environment for all students so I think there's a lot of promise and hope and opportunities to find and work with allies in the school system to achieve impactful change so just wanted to share that last little policy victory

that we're proud of um because to me it sh shines a light on ways to be strategic in different ways yeah beautiful thanks for sharing that and and illuminates the idea that you don't have to just look within your school right there there are other people in other places who can bring about change so thank you Cassie for surfacing this issue and being willing to come and and basically run the interview with me really appreciate your

energy and and your thoughtfulness in in uh setting up this conversation so thank you Cassie thank you so much Jen it's been such a pleasure and thank you so much Allison for your time and talent and wisdom and guidance it's just been so inspiring so thank you yeah and you just said what I was gonna say yeah no I appreciate you both yeah thank you so much yes really appreciate your time and your resources and we'll

put links to all of the teaching for change resources that Allison has been a part of throughout her career as well as her books and all of the papers that I read in preparation for this episode all that is going to be available at your parenting mojo.com Equitable outcomes Allison wanted me to share that many of the parents she worked with went from volunteering in school to joining the staff at the school testifying to city leaders and

even running for local office she was and continues to be inspired by by them and on that note I would also like to add that parents like Cassie and the parents in my learning membership Community whose children are in school and who fight for the well-being of their own children and all children in school inspire me as well [Music]