

## **“Report to the Membership - 2020”**

Each year, at the November Annual Meeting of the Community Forum for Economic Justice, the Board of Directors prepares a report for the membership, summarizing the work of the previous twelve months. The style and content of each report differs, but each provides a picture of our work under the challenges and opportunities we faced during the year.

### **THE YEAR 2020 HAS BEEN TRULY UNIQUE.**

**FROM NOVEMBER OF 2019 THROUGH JANUARY OF 2020, SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION WAS THE CENTRAL FOCUS OF OUR ORGANIZING.** Members of the Community Forum, in collaboration with CAFÉ (Community Action for Education) and MAPE (Michiana Activists for Public Education) responded to the threat posed from the location of an additional Charter School (Purdue Polytechnic) in South Bend.

In early November, we met with education activists from Indianapolis, Bloomington and Fort Wayne to share our experiences as public education advocates. Members of the IPS Community Coalition and Indiana Coalition for Public Education provided valuable information and support for our efforts to oppose the granting of a charter for Purdue Polytechnic’s expansion into South Bend.

We failed to stop Purdue from receiving the new charter but were successful in our opposition to a proposal that would locate the school within Washington High School. At the February 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the South Bend Board of School Trustees, the proposal was withdrawn.

**THIS WAS NOT OUR ONLY ACTIVITY IN EARLY 2020.** We sponsored a public forum: “Promoting a Just Wage Economy” featuring a project by members of the University of Notre Dame’s Higgins Labor Program.

A group of economic development activists (Jen Betz, Consuella Hopkins, Stacey Odom and Regina Williams-Preston) presented a workshop at the “Prosperity Indiana Summit” in Indianapolis, addressing the theme of Development without Displacement.

We supported the CAFÉ forum about the South Bend Empowerment Zone, continued our involvement in VITA - the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program, and developed plans for a showing of Backpack Full of Cash, the prize-winning documentary about the privatization of public education.

**AND THEN THE PANDEMIC HIT!** By the end of the second week of March, there was growing concern about the dangers of COVID 19. Meetings began to be cancelled, including the planned showing of Backpack Full of Cash. A “Stay at Home” order was issued on March 24, and VITA volunteers were no longer able to provide services for local taxpayers.

**FOR THE NEXT TWO MONTHS, WE LEARNED TO OPERATE UNDER DRASTICALLY CHANGED CONDITIONS.** Workplaces, community organizations and individual activists worked from home and met via zoom. Expanded use of social media increased public participation in meetings of school boards and local government bodies. It also provided access to political education opportunities from groups located far from South Bend.

With the support of Goodwill Industries of Michiana and the University of Notre Dame, VITA volunteers developed an innovative and effective way of completing income tax returns safely, protecting the health of preparers and taxpayers and the security of the process. VITA will continue in 2021, under the sponsorship of Goodwill Industries. Training sessions for new and returning volunteer tax preparers have begun.

Arrangements were made for a weekend on-line showing of Backpack Full of Cash, followed by discussion of the documentary in Zoom breakout rooms. A conclusion from the "Discussion Summary and Next Steps" report read: "Everyone agreed: we must take **deliberate action** to ensure each and every child in South bend has access to the quality public schools they deserve."

The number of public education activists grew. Following extensive discussion, the Community Forum Board of Directors voted to support the School Finance Referendums and encouraged all of our members to personally contact friends, family, neighbors and co-workers to encourage their support on the May 5<sup>th</sup> primary ballot.

### **ON MAY 24<sup>TH</sup>, GEORGE FLOYD WAS MURDERED BY THE MINNEAPOLIS POLICE.**

COVID 19, and the economic suffering that resulted, were already laying bare the inequitable manifestations of systemic racism. Mr. Floyd certainly was not the first Black man to be killed by the police. However, his killing was personally experienced worldwide.

Massive demonstrations protested his death and the racist system that has produced so many such murders and protected the murderers who carried them out. The historically broad support for the demonstrations and for leaders such as those in the growing Black Lives Matter movement fueled a summer of discussion and action about the racism found in the institutions that shape our life -- including policing and the need for a Community Review Board, education and the presence of police within our schools, and health disparities. In July, the St. Joseph County Board of Health passed a resolution declaring racism a public health crisis in St. Joseph County and committing to actions that would counter the negative consequences of racism.

### **TWO ORGANIZING EVENTS WERE THE FOCUS OF OUR EDUCATION WORK AS THE NOVEMBER 3<sup>RD</sup> ELECTION DREW NEARER AND WORK IN THE COUNTY CONTINUED.**

In September, we co-sponsored a successful School Board Candidate Forum with CAFÉ, MAPE, Black Lives Matter, Michiana Alliance against Racist & Political Repression, MLK, Jr. Sr. Men's Club, and the American Democracy Project, School of Education and Civil Rights Heritage Center, all of IU South Bend.

"Viewing Education Through a Racial Equity Lens" was the topic of our October Public Forum. Dr. Patricia Payne, Director of the Indianapolis Public Schools Racial Equity Office led the discussion of a policy adopted by the IPS Board of School Trustees that provides a valuable historical example of an educational commitment to address the damaging inequities that must be corrected.

Throughout the year, we supported the activities of OSSA (Open Space and Agricultural Alliance) as they continued their campaign against the IRC (Indiana Enterprise Center) that would destroy farmland and their community. We anticipate continued involvement in struggles that take us beyond the boundaries of South Bend and into St. Joseph County.

**THAT TAKES US TO THE END OF OCTOBER. THIS YEAR WAS UNIQUE, BUT AREN'T THEY ALL?**