



How is Broward County, Fla., advancing racial justice for families involved with the child protection system?

Q&A with Corey Best,¹ Community Curator

Children of color are disproportionately represented at nearly every decision point in the child welfare system. Corey Best is the founder of Mining for Gold, a curator of community experiences that utilizes those ideas and expertise to shape new thinking within complex systems. He brings a combination of lived and professional experience to his work advocating for racial justice and transformation within child welfare. In this Q&A, Best shares his experience and the lessons he has learned leading this complex work in Broward County, Fla.

How did your work with Broward County begin?

The Urban League and the Department of Human Services of Broward County convene 20 to 30 organizations and community partners monthly. In 2016, executive leadership began focusing on advancing racial justice for and with Black families in the county. In 2017, I began attending this highly productive meeting and establishing relationships with other leaders. Before we could really understand the data, we had to ask ourselves, “What tangible and non-tangible structures



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drive these outcomes?” The meetings provided a platform for galvanizing and growing community-wide attention to the racism that is deeply embedded within the child welfare system, and to raise our collective consciousness. In partnership with other community-based organizations, we formed a race equity workgroup and began further exploring the root causes of racial disparities that we were seeing in the data. Of the 50 ZIP codes in Broward County, 60% of Black children who were being removed came from just two ZIP codes.

What did the community conversations focus on?

As a group, we organized and hosted a series of community cafes. The first wave consisted of parents, youth, and caregivers who were asked questions through the lens of services: *What prevention services do you need? What support would have been most helpful for your family? What prevented you from getting those services?* At the time, we were still thinking of family engagement as systems or services engagement. After a second wave of community conversations a year later, we recognized that the issue was not about services at all.

In 2018, we expanded our community conversations to also include frontline workers, including staff from the sheriff’s office, community workers, and members of the race equity work group. This time, we asked about accountability to racial justice: *Where does it begin and end when it comes to your organization?*

We used what we learned in these conversations to make three recommendations about what was needed: 1) accountability, 2) increased authentic family engagement, and 3) family perspective infused throughout all levels of the race equity work group. We went through a compression planning session as a group and came to consensus about where to focus first. We chose to start with accountability.

What does accountability mean?

It means having clear, measurable goals to undo racism in systems. We can talk about disparities for hours. But if we were focused on preventing Black and brown children from entering care at a higher rate than white

children, we had to ask ourselves tough questions: *What variables are driving the data? What are the behaviors? Why do racial disparities exist? What historical occurrences created them? What can we do?* This is all adaptive work.

The dominant culture values linear thinking and a one-, two-, three-point plan, but undoing 402 years of thinking is not easy. The wicked question was: What levers would have the biggest impact on staff and organizational worldview? We knew a shift in thinking was required before we would be able to positively impact our families. We decided to ground our work in four process-oriented goals and six guiding principles.

Our **four goals** acknowledge that achieving race equity is not only a value and a desired outcome, but a process of intentional action to:

1. Eliminate systemic barriers that have produced historical and contemporary inequities based on race.
2. Target the distribution of resources and access to opportunity to members of groups that have experienced systemic and institutional discrimination and oppression.
3. Create new systems, policies, and practices that institutionalize equity, accountability, and community/family engagement, and support sustainable, transformational change.
4. Disaggregate data extracted from child- and family-serving systems, as that will determine our collective progress toward race equity.

To accomplish these four goals, we identified **six guiding principles**:

1. Continuous institutional and structural analysis to understand how practice, policies, and systems create an inequitable distribution of power and resources.
2. Respectfully confronting and naming racism at the interpersonal, cultural, institutional, and systemic levels.

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3. Courageous partnerships with families that include actively engaging and sharing in decision-making with community members of color.
4. Rigorous assessment to stay grounded in our desire to shift power imbalances and achieve race equity.
5. Shared accountability to continuously monitor and evaluate our work.
6. Commitment to action, innovation and transformational change.

Did you focus on a certain decision point?

We wanted to start where the child protection agency first has the most influence: the investigation. In Broward County, law enforcement is involved when children are removed from their families. We decided to start a pilot program in partnership with law enforcement called the Authentic Family Engagement and Strengthening Initiative to change how we see, engage with, and approach families at the first point of contact. Our hypothesis was: *If families experience authentic family engagement and have their concrete needs met, they will have more robust protective factors.*

We started piloting our approach in October 2018 in the ZIP codes experiencing the most race-based disparity, which included a values-based assessment, unit coaching, and support from the action team. Our pilot group included one unit consisting of six investigators, a supervisor, a manager, and a parent partner. We also devoted some flexible funding to make the work happen. The pilot group went through a two-day workshop facilitated by the North Carolina-based Race Equity Institute, where group members were educated about the history of racism, power, and collective action. Training does not cure things, nor should it be prescribed as a solution. But these learning opportunities did expose people to how our racialized ideas have formed with effective strategies to manage and minimize the impact of interpersonal racism. Staff were also engaged to support parents as they build protective factors. We have started to utilize the [Protective Factors Survey developed by FRIENDS](#) as

a way to measure the positive impact that authentic relationships have on families.

The coaching sessions have been an anchor. The unit, squad, management team, parent partner team, and staff from the community-based care organizations that manage cases attend the coaching sessions. We talk about protective factors: *What's working? Were you challenged?* Each member sets a goal that is achievable. One of the biggest challenges people face is determining how this is a part of their work. We can't mandate people to learn about racism. We are growing in our collective understanding that it is impossible to separate the macro from the micro. Many of the staff defend or deny racial biases exist. Through group work, activities, and brave conversations we have begun to make the invisible, visible.

We are measuring change in various ways: through our outlined goals, a racial justice learning questionnaire, and by simply asking individuals where they feel they have grown. As humans, we run from things that are framed as difficult. Race talk is one of those topics. The gold is in the reframe: *These conversations are to develop us.* And growth doesn't happen in the absence of pain. We try extremely hard not to allow despair to get the last word. If we do this to the best of our ability, creating space to have effective race talk is something that can have a huge impact on the system overall, which is why we hope the leadership across the organization will begin to make this approach the norm, not the exception.

What have you seen so far?

The pilot was successful in reducing the number of Black children entering foster care in the ZIP codes we focused in, and we rolled out this approach more broadly in April 2019. In addition to looking at the trend data, we are measuring authentic family engagement, mindset shifts, and parent satisfaction on a 90-day basis. We also utilize a values-based assessment tool for investigators that we developed with child protective investigators and a core implementation team within Broward County Sheriff's Office. The values came directly from what we learned in the community cafes. Our primary question was: *What behaviors do you want to see in the workforce?* This tool became another

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brick in the foundation and is used in supervision to guide coaching conversations about racism and racial bias. Having frontline staff build and design this approach gave added value to the efficacy and functionality of the tool.

As a result, staff are more aware of their racial bias and recognize this awareness is key to developing authentic family engagement practices. Florida Atlantic University (FAU) has been our research arm and is assisting us with an evaluation. From the very beginning, we partnered with FAU to test our theory about the importance of authentic engagement and gain valuable knowledge about what we could hone in on as we developed a concept paper for the field of social work. We are now moving into phase two of an evaluation. Outside of formal law enforcement, child protective services is seen as the most punitive, carceral system in the county, from the family perspective. If child protection can do it, then the larger community can do it. We want to expand this to the larger community to further test our hypothesis that treating people differently truly matters. And the way to begin is through changing our minds about the false ideas we've been told about Black and brown families.

In the ZIP codes we are working in, there has been a steady decline in the number of Black children being removed from their parents. Since 2018, the number of Black children removed from their families decreased by 36% (from 128 Black children removed

in state FY2018 to 82 in FY2021), greater than the overall decline of 28% for all children entering care in these ZIP codes. A summary of our approach and preliminary evaluation findings were recently selected for publication.²

What did the families think about this new way of doing investigations?

We worked with FAU to call every family that had been investigated and ask how the investigation went: *How did the investigators treat your family? Did they value your role as a parent? Were they honest and open? Did they treat you with respect?* A parent's perspective is so undervalued. But this was another structure of accountability. About 50% of parents participated in the survey. Because parents have extraordinarily little trust in our child protective system, the response rate was no surprise. What was even more revealing was how staff felt about parents after immersing themselves in this process. Many staff reported that they came to view families more fully, and recognize that many parents who are exposed to child protection face environmental conditions that our system does not always account for, including segregation, racial discrimination, redlining, under-employment, etc. This revelation naturally increased the trust and authenticity between staff and parents. Overwhelmingly, parents who submitted feedback indicated that they felt seen, heard, and had power over the course of their investigation.



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What is the role of leadership?

This work requires commitment, endurance, and fortitude from leadership and a level of risk-tolerance. During the initial phases of development, formal leadership was a part of the design team. A year into the work, there was a leadership change. This shift required a nuanced level of support and intentional communication as the transition took place. Our leadership has been involved in building the assessment, supporting the race equity workgroup, and getting support from other nonprofits and community organizations. It is my belief that the most important function leaders can play is to recognize that their staff have innate qualities to lead change. We are taught

that a leader is a position. In the work of advancing racial justice and organizing for real change, a leader must possess a set of behaviors that afford others with opportunities to use their skills to sustain big ideas that benefit families. Alone, we do not know everything. But together, we know a lot more. This is the approach that we have taken in Broward.

What I suggest to many leaders in this work is that they examine core assumptions about what it means to lead versus manage individuals. As we engage in this hard work, adaptive strategies must be elevated in order to model, build internal relationships, and cultivate an organization steeped in values-driven work.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

1 Adapted from an interview on May 22, 2020, and email correspondence on July 27, 2021.

2 Best, C., Cooley, M., Colvin, M., and Crichlow, V. (2021) Authentic family engagement and strengthening: A promising family-centered approach for advancing racial justice with families involved with the child protection system. *Child Welfare*. (99)5, p. 97-117.

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