



Organizational Transformation to Break Cycles of Intergenerational Poverty:

Leveraging the Capabilities of
Comic Relief US to Advance
Global Education

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic reversed progress toward the global education Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), disproportionately impacting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and people living in poverty. According to the United Nations, the global pandemic wiped out 20 years of education gains and an additional 101 million more children failed to demonstrate basic reading skills.¹ Now more than ever, there is an urgent need for innovative approaches to ensure the quality education and livelihoods of future generations. Recognizing that the global community must mobilize to achieve the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals, Comic Relief US (CRUS) set off on a brave journey to transform its organizational dynamics and processes to ensure it plays a key role in promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Through this journey, CRUS is incorporating participatory grantmaking models, committing to cross-cutting principles of gender and racial equity, supporting youth leadership, and diversifying the voices and perspectives shaping institutional decisions.

Before the pandemic, CRUS committed to a process of strengthening its diversity, equity, and inclusion practices across the organization. This paper summarizes CRUS' efforts to improve organizational culture and capacity to advance access, equity, and justice. The internal journey is illustrated through the evolution of CRUS' education strategy and its alignment to the organization's empowerment strategy; both are part of CRUS' four grantmaking pillars.

CRUS has a compelling theory of change grounded in its core values and commitment to addressing both the root causes and consequences of poverty. Focusing on marginalized communities and BIPOC-led and serving organizations, CRUS' refreshed approach centers the voices of people directly impacted by poverty and supports solutions that empower children and their families. As a global grantmaking organization, CRUS is also creating opportunities for individual, foundation, and corporate funders to channel resources and participate in the global movement towards an ambitious social impact goal - to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

To follow is an overview of the global education landscape, emerging philanthropic models, and CRUS' efforts to leverage education as a means to empowerment and economic mobility. We have also included "Grantee Spotlights" throughout the paper that demonstrate the impactful work our grantee partners are doing.

The Landscape

Reporting an increase in extreme poverty for the first time in a generation, the United Nations now projects that 600 million people, or 7% of the world population, will be living in poverty in 2030.² Already-existing patterns of inequality compounded by the pandemic exacerbated a learning crisis with massive disruptions to the

¹ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/goal-04/>

² <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/goal-01/>

provision of education across the world – highlighting patterns that serve as wakeup calls and catalysts for change.

Prior to the emergence of COVID-19, 258 million children were out of school and approximately 400 million primary and lower secondary school students could not achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics.³ At the height of the pandemic, 1.6 billion learners were affected by school closures, with resource-constrained communities disproportionately impacted.⁴ Girls in poorer countries missed 22% more school days than boys, for example, and nearly one-third of the world's children overall could not access the technologies they needed to participate in remote learning.⁵

The World Bank suggests we broaden our understanding of poverty beyond economic data points. For example, *learning poverty*, defined as the inability to read simple texts by age 10, is an early indicator that a young learner will not complete basic education or acquire the skills needed to thrive.⁶ Projecting that school closures and inequitable access to technologies will increase the percentage of children who experience learning poverty from 53% to 70%, the World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF suggest that the current generation is at risk of losing \$17 trillion in earnings, negatively impacting the potential and well-being of future generations.⁷

As the global education community grapples with the massive learning loss and uncertainty caused by the ongoing pandemic, the sector faces a critical shortage of funding to ensure equitable access to quality basic education. The economic downturn and pandemic-related fiscal strains are estimated to widen the *funding gap* from \$39 billion to \$200 billion per year.⁸ While access to the funding needed to build and sustain systemic capacity to ensure access to quality learning opportunities for underserved children is essential, coordinated action across the sector is a related urgent need. Getting and keeping all children in school and learning requires all education stakeholders – including governments, educators, civil society, businesses, and philanthropic entities – to mobilize and coordinate resources in impactful ways.

³ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2018). Skills and innovation in G20 countries. Information paper No. 50. UIS. <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/ip50-skills-innovation-g20-countries-2018-en.pdf>

⁴ UNESCO. (2021). Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707>

⁵ Save the Children. (2021). Build forward better: How the global community must act now to secure children's learning in crisis. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/build-forward-better-how-global-community-must-act-now-secure-childrens-learning-crises/>

⁶ World Bank. (2019). Ending learning poverty: What will it take? <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/32553/142659.pdf>

⁷ World Bank, UNESCO, & UNICEF. (2021). The state of the global education crisis: A path to recovery. www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/the-state-of-the-global-education-crisis-a-path-to-recovery

⁸ OECD. (2020). Philanthropy and education - Education giving in the midst of COVID-19. www.oecd.org/dev/NetFWD_Covid-EDU_Study.pdf

Crises Hastening Transformation

The acute and long-term impacts of the global pandemic on low-income countries and historically marginalized communities require the urgent reconsideration of how the global funders mobilize and allocate resources. As one example, simultaneous strains on education and health systems laid bare longstanding and highly racialized access, quality, and outcomes disparities – at a time when racial discrimination surged in highly visible ways around the world, particularly in the United States.⁹ These circumstances highlighted how much needs to be done to address structural racism and poverty by moving the needle on their root causes. Faced with stark realities, many organizations are using equity and justice lenses to guide programming and funding decisions in education and other domains associated with social change.

Addressing entrenched inequality requires recognition of the ways power imbalances and social norms perpetuate inequality for generations, as well as philanthropic strategies that explicitly advance equity and justice. Such a strategic shift requires attention to the root causes of inequality, a process that should ideally take place in parallel with organizational efforts to strengthen diversity, equity, and inclusion.¹⁰ Strategies that advance equity and justice seek to address the full reality of communities rather than narrow solutions to solve social problems. Such strategies typically follow these five principles:¹¹

1. Equity and justice are centered, with members of excluded groups recognized as the best source of solutions;
2. They focus on the larger problem of why a problem exists, rather than just addressing the consequences;
3. Investments prioritize the levers that lead to change (e.g., messaging and narrative shifts, elevating transformative models), not only direct service provision;
4. Emphasis is placed on understanding the ecosystem of actors addressing a problem and extending collaborative efforts beyond the organization's typical network; and
5. Solutions should push beyond the status quo to prioritize investments that impact the problem, not only its consequences.

⁹Addo, I. Y. (2020). Double pandemic: Racial discrimination amid coronavirus disease 2019. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 2(1), 1–4.

¹⁰ Community Science. (2021). Philanthropic strategy that advances equity and justice: Five Principles. <https://communityscience.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/White-Paper-Equity-Justice-Strategy.pdf>

¹¹ Dholakia, A. (2021). Five principles to advance equity and justice in philanthropic strategies. <https://www.geofunders.org/about-us/perspectives/181>

Political and social shifts in the economic landscape have historically prompted action toward more effective philanthropic practices.¹² Urgency around addressing the impacts of the pandemic and accelerating progress have forced organizations to re-evaluate their ways of working to support more efficient use of resources and to increase impact. Such shifts ideally begin with internal culture and structure revisions, including efforts to better align people and processes, with implications for their external funding and engagement strategies.

There is growing recognition that funders seeking to accelerate and sustain social change must go beyond internal process transformation to engage partner organizations more effectively. As an example, sharing aspects of decision-making and supporting social movements that directly empower communities to shape their own solutions and monitor their own progress. In addition to new lenses regarding where resources should be directed, there are calls to center issues of power and intersectionality.¹³

Emerging Philanthropic Models

Funders should provide tools to guide philanthropic organizations in their transitions from extractive models that perpetuate power dynamics toward transformative approaches that seek to redistribute wealth and democratize power. The transition toward philanthropic models that lead to transformative outcomes takes place along a continuum from extractive toward regenerative practices in an organization's relationship to grantees and communities, leadership, operations, and allocation of resources, as well as grantmaking strategies, processes, and decisions.

For example, extractive relationships to grantees and communities are paternalistic and risk averse. **Regenerative approaches**, on the other hand, acknowledge grantees' expertise and lived experiences and prioritize enabling grantees to design their own solutions. Extractive leadership upholds the status quo, while regenerative leadership supports communities to effectively steward philanthropic resources. Whereas extractive grantmaking strategies perpetuate donor interests through siloed programs, regenerative strategies are deeply informed by community needs and priorities and developed by leaders who are accountable to local communities.¹⁴

Participatory grantmaking, an engagement framework that prioritizes shared decision making and the agency of nonprofit organizations,¹⁵ aims to empower frontline organizations through unrestricted funding and general operating grants, allowing grantee partners to allocate resources to mission-aligned activities as they see fit. Such approaches are framed as pathways to build grantees' capacity and

¹² Hewlett Foundation. (2017). Peer to peer: At the heart of influencing more effective philanthropy.

<https://hewlett.org/peer-to-peer-at-the-heart-of-influencing-more-effective-philanthropy/>

¹³ Lief, L. (2020). Social justice philanthropy restructures to focus on power. Inside Philanthropy.

www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2020/2/12/social-justice-philanthropy-restructures-to-focus-on-power

¹⁴ Justice Funders. (2019). Just transition for philanthropy. http://justicefunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Spectrum_Final_12.6.pdf

¹⁵ Gibson, C. (2017). *Participatory grantmaking: Has its time come?* Ford Foundation. www.fordfoundation.org/media/3599/participatory_grantmaking-lmv7.pdf

empower nonprofits to serve as intermediaries with devolved authority to direct funds to effective frontline organizations.¹⁶ This approach to engagement is relevant to grantmaking strategies that serve the needs of marginalized people because it extends the reach of donor funding to smaller, grassroots initiatives that may not have the structures necessary to receive funds from US-based entities and may also require additional support to manage the resources.

The realities of the pandemic revealed the extent to which these philanthropic engagement frameworks remained largely aspirational. Restrictions on travel and in-person convenings severely prevented funders' ability to conduct site visits and tested assumptions that philanthropic entities were actively working to transform the inherent power imbalances between funders and nonprofit organizations.¹⁷

Unrestricted funding enables nonprofit organizations to remain nimble and resilient in response to evolving community needs. Unrestricted funding is an outcome of employing an equity lens to grantmaking and allows leaders to focus on acute needs rather than negotiate with funders to redirect resources from their approved projects or line items.¹⁸ A recent survey of nonprofit leaders in the United States revealed that unrestricted assets were 76% smaller for organizations led by people of color, a data point that illustrates and continues to replicate the compounded impact of inequality.¹⁹

¹⁶ Foundation Center. (2018). *Deciding together: Shifting power and resources through participatory grantmaking*. https://grantcraft.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/12/DecidingTogether_Final_20181002.pdf

¹⁷ Wong, N., & McGrath, A. (2020). Building a trust-based philanthropy to shift power back to communities. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/building_a_trust_based_philanthropy_to_shift_power_back_to_communities

¹⁸ Steele, L. (2021). No strings attached: A guide to giving unrestricted funds. <https://blog.submittable.com/unrestricted-funds/>

¹⁹ Rendon, J. (2020). Nonprofits led by people of color win less grant money with more strings. https://www.philanthropy.com/article/nonprofits-led-by-people-of-color-win-less-grant-money-with-more-strings-study/?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in

Grantee Spotlight

Jumpstart: Partnering to Expand Services to Underserved Children and Families in the US South

Jumpstart and CRUS are aligned in their committed and transformative journey towards participatory grantmaking. Both organizations took a step back to review their practices and assess gaps, both independently reorienting their missions to address the root causes of inequality. CRUS has enabled Jumpstart to scale their early childhood education programming in the Southeast US. Their early childhood program aims to close the opportunity gap for pre-school children in underserved communities in Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Washington, D.C. The current program engages 1,200 children, to support the development of language, literacy, and social emotional skills and ensure they are prepared for kindergarten.

Jumpstart appreciates its partnership with CRUS for reasons beyond the funding. **CRUS is in the minority of Jumpstart's funders who provide unrestricted funding and describe the level of flexibility as 'unique and special' because it allows them to focus on the work.** The two organizations are also aligned in their commitment to infusing DEI throughout all aspects of their organizational strategy, systems, and processes. Jumpstart is very excited about their DEI work and has prioritized finding ways to more creatively communicate the deep aspects that remain hidden to most of their donor partners. **CRUS is aware of their DEI journey "because they ask the right questions or provide the space for us to share it."**

CRUS: A Brave Journey toward Transformation

CRUS is gaining traction as an institutional leader with respect to creating conditions to tackle the compounding challenges of advancing access, equity, and justice. CRUS was established in 2015, as an independent sister organization to UK-based Comic Relief, which was founded in 1985. Together, these organizations have raised \$2 billion for their shared mission to leverage the power of entertainment to generate social change and enable a just world, free from poverty.

Like its sister organization, CRUS occupies a unique space at the nexus of entertainment, philanthropy, and social change. CRUS has raised over \$330 million since 2015, impacting the lives of 30 million children and families across 38 countries. Media and technology industry executive Alison Moore became CEO in late 2019, as CRUS was completing its first 5-year grant cycle, bringing with her a passion for creating opportunities and platforms. Alison assumed her leadership mantle just as the young organization was ready to take stock of and build on lessons from its startup period to mature the organization into a leader in global poverty alleviation

efforts. In January 2020, when the US was still largely oblivious to the sweeping changes on the horizon, CRUS committed to a process to review its mission, operational strategies, and organizational culture – with specific attention to strengthening diversity, equity, and inclusion across its people and processes.

Heading into the pandemic, CRUS already had an eye toward adopting a participatory grantmaking model. This philanthropic model seeks to break down the traditional power dynamics between funders and grantees by engaging grant recipients and other stakeholders as peers in processes traditionally handled by the funder. Social unrest ignited in the US by the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor stressed the urgency for grantmaking organizations to move past quantifiable, short-term outcomes toward transformative approaches designed to sustainably impact communities. This new landscape presented timely challenges to CRUS to clarify who they are and how they show up to respond – and to provide leadership suitable for this new moment and context.

Grantee Spotlight

We-Care Foundation: Home-based Literacy Initiatives

WE-CARE Foundation, a Liberian NGO, was founded in 1992 to create a society of readers and writers and improve the quality of education for all Liberians. **This partnership developed through CRUS' refreshed approach to identifying partners through landscape analysis, engaging stakeholders with lived experience, and deep engagements in priority geographies and issue areas.** CRUS is partnering with We-Care to extend its Family Literacy Initiative (FLI) to additional communities. The program targets young children and their parents to fill a gap in the provision of early childhood education opportunities in impoverished communities across Liberia. The evidence-based program improves children's readiness and supports their transition into primary school.

FLI is delivered through trained Home Visitors who work one-on-one with parents over a three-year period to support children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. **This intensive home-based program is holistic in its effort to impact not just young children but their households.** Literacy Boxes are provided to each participating family. Parents and caregivers are empowered as their children's first teachers and are also able to enroll in adult literacy classes. **We-Care's leadership asserts that the program's success is the result of a responsive design and continuous improvement that is best managed by small organizations that are rooted in the communities they serve.**

Laying Foundations for New Ways of Doing

Transformational change is rooted in equitable, relational practice driven by relationships that are built through humility, listening, and connectedness.²⁰ Guided by an understanding that good listening is a first step towards authentic and meaningful participatory grantmaking, in 2019 CRUS began an intentional process to review its strategy and approach to grantmaking.²¹ The grantmaking team initiated extensive conversations with grantee partners and peer networks to better understand the needs of the communities and social problems they were seeking to impact and to identify opportunities to improve their practice. This resulted in a **commitment to participatory grantmaking as a *direction of travel* in the ongoing evolution of CRUS' grantmaking strategy.**

Beyond efforts to transform the ways they engage and support grantee partners, the team **committed to cross-cutting principles of gender and racial equity**, centering the voices of those directly impacted by poverty and supporting interventions that strengthen the capacity of children and their families to build more resilient communities. For the education sector, the **commitment to building resilience inspired an expanded focus on education as a continuum from early childhood through to post-secondary training and career readiness.**

CRUS piloted its commitment to support youth leadership and diversify the perspectives that shape its decisions by launching a Youth Advisory Council (YAC) in 2020. The YAC is composed of eight young leaders from across the United States, Somalia, Colombia, and Cambodia. It ensures the organization's effort to support youth leadership is informed by lived experiences and leverages the insights of young people already serving as advocates in their communities. The YAC are led in a program that entails four components:

- Leadership and development, which includes training on grantmaking and public speaking;
- Mentorship, which connects YAC members with a mentor to support career development;
- Thought leadership and communication, which entails a platform for YAC members to lead discussions on key issues; and
- The Juntanza Fund, which positions YAC members to lead in a grantmaking process that invests in youth-led programs globally. CRUS committed \$50,000 for the initial fund, through which YAC screened 175 applications and issued six grants.

CRUS aims to expand participatory grantmaking over the next three years into their organizational approach by increasing the council from eight to ten members, boosting the size of the Juntanza Fund, and creating more opportunities for

²⁰ Azuri, M. (2021). Humility, listening, and connectedness: Building partners relationships that drive equitable practice. <https://www.geofunders.org/about-us/perspectives/177>

²¹ Gibson, C. (2018). Deciding together: Shifting power and resources through participatory grantmaking. Foundation Center. <https://grantcraft.org/content/guides/deciding-together/>

members to contribute to the organization's strategy. Beyond the impact for CRUS, the YAC is already directly impacting the lives and organizations of its members. Giuliana Bryan Alvarez, a young leader representing African-descendant and indigenous youth across Colombia, noted that the experience and training she's received as a YAC member has enabled her to create new programs, encourage a more robust communications strategy, and progress to a more senior position within her organization.

Grantee Spotlight

EMpower: A Thought Partner Positioned to Empower Girls and Grassroots Organizations

EMpower partners with community-based organizations in emerging markets to amplify solutions informed by the voices and experiences of marginalized young people. EMpower supports partners in 15 countries, with a priority on strengthening the youth development sector and supporting girls and young women to overcome the compounded consequences of the multiple forms of inequality that they face. CRUS supports the *Pathways to Economic Wellbeing for Adolescent Girls in India's Cities* – providing sub-grants to local NGOs that promote inclusive learning and decent livelihoods for adolescent girls and young women through grantmaking, capacity building, and sector strengthening.

EMpower is committed to participatory grantmaking and has served as a thought partner for CRUS as they continue along their journey. EMpower partners with local organizations for up to ten years, providing both long-term financial support and capacity building to ensure they grow into sustainable entities that deliver solutions that integrate the priorities and perspectives of girls and marginalized communities.

EMpower's commitment to participatory grantmaking and governance is evidenced by its Girls Advisory Council (GAC). Launched in 2018, the GAC is composed of girl leaders who are empowered to advise the organization's grantmaking strategy in India to ensure it meets the needs of adolescent girls. **This experience deepens EMpower's relationship with CRUS, positioning them as a thought partner for CRUS as they developed and now seek to extend the role of its Youth Advisory Council.**

CRUS Grantmaking Today

Four Programmatic Pillars

CRUS funding, primarily generated through its Red Nose Day campaign, is deployed through four grantmaking pillars. These areas of interventional focus, which have been prioritized as necessary to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty are:

- **SAFE**, protecting 'children on the move' from violence, abuse, and exploitation;
- **HEALTHY**, enabling access to quality healthcare and mental health services, supporting food security and nutrition, and ensuring disease prevention through access to life-saving vaccines and other means for low-income children;
- **EDUCATED**, expanding access to quality education and ensure success at key milestone in the education pipeline, from birth through young adulthood with a focus on STEAM and college and workforce readiness;
- **EMPOWERED**, enabling opportunities for children to develop as leaders, advocate for their rights, and increase their access to economic mobility.

With these foundations in place, CRUS is working to create a more symbiotic relationship between the education and empowerment pillars, recognizing the need for the sector to (1) move beyond its traditional focus on equitable access to learning opportunities and (2) identify innovative initiatives that will impact livelihoods and transform communities. CRUS recognizes the essential role of education in breaking the cycle of poverty and supports innovative programming from birth through young adulthood, from early childhood education through college preparation programs. Since issuing its first grant in 2015, CRUS has disbursed \$49 million through 50 grants to educational programs that support children to stay in school and access to digital tools; provide academic enrichment, financial education, and job readiness skills; and empower students and their parents to actively engage in learning.

Grantee Spotlight

Room to Read: Targeting Literacy

Founded in 2000, Room to Read tackles education and gender inequalities in 16 countries around the world – and is well positioned in CRUS regional priority areas, including the US South and India. Shared priority areas create additional opportunities for CRUS and its funding partners to accelerate impact. In the US South, for example, Room to Read is responding to the need for inclusive reading materials and is working with diverse authors and illustrators to develop materials to support STEAM, a growing area of interest for CRUS.

CRUS supports Room to Read's Girls Education Program for Secondary School Girls within host communities in the Cox's Bazar Region of Bangladesh. Targeting girls from 'families on the move,' this initiative provides adapted remote educational programming through digital and radio platforms, mentoring, school fee assistance, and community engagement activities. Ongoing support for the program has allowed Room to Read to engage 1,300 girls and deepen their response in the face of the pandemic and a recent influx of Rohingya refugees in host communities. Crises situations increase the risks facing these girls and stretch the resources needed to ensure their continuous access to education. The program addresses specific barriers to education faced by girls from migrant families: restrictive social taboos, sexual harassment, discrimination, and extreme poverty. **This initiative reflects CRUS' new commitment to empowerment and prioritization of gender equity.**

Five Guiding Principles, a Holistic Theory of Change, and a New Social Impact Goal

CRUS grantmaking is informed by five guiding principles established through extensive internal processes that embody the essence of participatory grantmaking. These values are:

- **Impact**, ensuring grantmaking is outcomes-driven and evidence-based;
- **Inclusion**, centering the voices of communities most impacted by poverty to inform solutions;
- **Interdependence**, bridging silos and enabling partnerships to advance an ecosystem approach to grantmaking;
- **Integrity**, adhering to strict ethical standards and transparency;
- **Intersectionality**, accounting for the intersections across issues, populations, and identities.

The organization-wide process of internal reflection and learning enabled CRUS to consolidate their commitment to addressing the structural causes and consequences of poverty. After achieving the clarity and momentum necessary to

articulate *how* they might pursue a bold social impact goal, it became possible to voice a foundational theory of change grounded in the organization's core values. The theory posits that CRUS can build into an organization that embodies its values and achieves its vision; uses its platforms and expertise to amplify stories of change and voices of communities most impacted by intergenerational poverty; resource community-based partners and programs to accomplish its social impact goal; and mobilize a diversified, engaged donor and funder base.

This theory of change brings unique holism to CRUS's approaches to grantmaking, thought leadership, advocacy, fundraising, communications, and marketing. Accepted as the framework for and articulation of CRUS' organizational culture, the theory of change defines CRUS as an organization and guides all aspects of decision making. Moving forward, CRUS is well positioned to catalyze a global movement through strategies and mechanisms of engagement that strengthen the social impact ecosystem to achieve **the organization's new social impact goal: *breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty.***

CRUS leaders recognized that the organization's transformation had to begin internally, by first establishing cohesion around the narrative of who they are and a review of how they engage with the organizations and issues they support. CRUS' internal process included plans to diversify their Board of Directors and the types of organizations they support. CRUS has committed to increasing its investments to organizations led by people of color in the United States and local leaders in low- and middle-income countries. In 2021, 45% of Red Nose Day grants went to BIPOC and locally-led organizations.²²

The precedent of difficult conversations, clear intentions, and emerging pathways *pre-pandemic* ultimately enabled CRUS to avoid the fate of countless other organizations. In 2020 and 2021, philanthropic entities scrambled as it became clear they had little more than vacuous messaging and ostensible commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion – rather than brave and sustained action toward those outcomes. Ayo Roach, CRUS Vice President for Grants Programs, indicates that this trend will continue with an even more intentional effort to incorporate principles of trust-based philanthropy across the organization.

At CRUS, the effort to build on the success and global impact of CRUS' signature Red Nose Day campaign and mission to end child poverty began with a sincere process of self-reflection and commitment to adjusting their internal systems to better respond to the needs of more diverse frontline organizations. These were essential first steps to CRUS's current mission to support organizations in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty *and* catalyze a global movement of like-minded organizations and individuals to make this happen.

CRUS made a strategic decision to broaden focus beyond the consequences of poverty to include addressing the underlying causes that perpetuate cycles of

²² Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC)

intergenerational poverty. Research shows that intergenerational poverty is only prevented when a family's economic security is sustainably increased and the adverse social conditions that perpetuate poverty, or the consequences of poverty, are addressed.²³ The role of the education sector in improving economic sustainability and wellbeing are well documented and illustrate the value of streamlining education and empowerment approaches to have a more sustainable and lasting impact on communities. The grantmaking team's exploration of what they could do to help move people out of poverty focused their attention on economic mobility for young people and increased investments in solutions that develop agency and leadership skills among youth.

The pandemic's impact on health and well-being further stressed the importance of utilizing an intersectional lens and appreciating the long-term complexities of poverty. Longitudinal studies illustrate the impact of sound early childhood interventions that also engage their families. Parental efforts to stimulate children's cognitive skills and social competence were found to increase the average earnings of participants by 42% after 20 years.²⁴ Social safety net programs, such as quality early childhood education, are also well documented for their long-term impact and role in breaking the cycle of poverty. With respect to gender as a highly relevant aspect of intersectional identity, for example, a recent Oxfam International report documents the disproportionate economic impact of the pandemic on women, who lost approximately \$800 billion in earnings from formal employment in 2020 alone, with a job loss rate of 5%.²⁵ Women's economic stress and income-generation instabilities represent additional barriers to the success of current and future generations. Given the connections between quality education and sustainable livelihoods, and the role of mothers in ensuring the education and achievement of their children, especially their daughters.²⁶

²³ Kirp, D. L. (2021). A way to break the cycle of poverty. Opinion guest essay. www.nytimes.com/2021/12/02/opinion/politics/child-poverty-us.html

²⁴ Van Ryzin, M. J., Fishbein, D., & Biglan, A. (2018). The promise of prevention science for addressing intergenerational poverty. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 24(1), 128–43. <https://doi.org/10.1037/law0000138>

²⁵ Oxfam International. (2021). Covid-19 cost women globally over \$800 billion in lost income in one year. www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/covid-19-cost-women-globally-over-800-billion-lost-income-one-year. Also highly impacted were younger workers, who experienced an 8.7% reduction in employment worldwide (International Labour Organization, 2021, Covid-19 and the world of work, Seventh edition, www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_767028.pdf). The comparatively high impact on these two broad communities stems from their greater tendency to hold low-skilled and low-wage jobs, which offer less security.

²⁶ Abuya, B. A., Mumah, J., Austrian, K., Mutisya, M., & Karibu, C. (2018). Mothers' education and girls' achievement in Kibera: The link with self-efficacy. *SAGE Open*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244018765608>

Grantee Spotlight

American Indian College Fund: Creating Pathways for the Most Marginalized

The American Indian College Fund (AICF) is one of CRUS' newest partners. AICF was founded in 1989 to support Native students along the pathway from college to careers and to provide critical support to Tribal Colleges and Universities. AICF is a leader in the indigenous education space, and they were identified through CRUS' landscape analysis in search of partners rooted in Native communities. CRUS' funding supports the Native Pathways to College – High School Pathways Program. **This initiative is tailored to indigenous students, a community with the lowest college attendance and graduation rates in the United States.** The program channels resources into 30 high schools in reservation communities, promoting high school completion and progress into higher education and building a culture of college-going culture at schools that serve Native youth. The program aligns with CRUS' intersectional approach to education and empowerment and promotes its commitment to deepen investments in programs that promote racial equity in indigenous communities.

AICF's existing donor base has an overwhelming preference for scholarship or early childhood education initiatives. They are actively seeking to attract more donor funding towards this initiative, and CRUS' partnership is also a means to help them raise the profile of native populations within minority education movements. In addition to their willingness to fund AICF's newest programmatic area, which comes with more risks than the other programs they have been implementing for over 30 years, CRUS stands out for the level of transparency, flexibility, and support they provide. Further, the partnership with CRUS has influenced AICF's institutional development. **CRUS' due diligence and inquiries on mechanisms to ensure diversity, equity and inclusion prompted the development of AICF's first safeguarding policy, codifying their commitment to child protection.**

An Evolving Education Strategy

A recent report from Save the Children proposing recommendations that address crises in the education sector includes *reaching the most marginalized children first* and *shifting power and resources to national and local civil society*.²⁷ While these are recommendations embraced by numerous organizations in the social sector,

²⁷ Save the Children. (2021). Build forward better: How the global community must act now to secure children's learning in crisis. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/build-forward-better-how-global-community-must-act-now-secure-childrens-learning-crises/>

they prove difficult to implement without brave and transformational processes,²⁸ as demonstrated in CRUS' evolving education strategy.

The US South is the epicenter of child poverty in the country and a particular priority in CRUS' education strategy, along with Puerto Rico and Indigenous communities. The US South has been plagued with endemic poverty, systemic inequities, and low educational achievement among Black and low-income communities for generations. Prior to the pandemic, over 80% of Black 4th grade students did not meet proficiency standards in reading and math, and over 77% of low-income students fell below the mark.²⁹ Minority and low-income students in this region are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic's disruptions and experience increased levels of learning loss, due to existing inequities that include a digital divide that restricts engagement in remote learning.

Beyond prioritizing geographies with the greatest need, CRUS maintains a focus on mobilizing an effective ecosystem of funders and partner organizations in those settings. Commitment to a transformative and participatory grantmaking model is evidenced by CRUS' inclusion of a broader range of partner organizations, which now include local civil society organizations in developing countries that more risk-averse institutions tend to avoid funding directly. CRUS' commitment to building meaningful relationships and investing in capacity building that equips frontline organizations to deliver solutions for their own communities can be leveraged by others.

West Africa was chosen as a geographical priority because of how few funders there are in that space, compared to other regions of the continent. One exciting new CRUS partner is **West Africa Vocational Education (WAVE)**, an organization that both serves as an intermediary *and* reflects the alignment between CRUS' education and empowerment pillars. In 2022, resources from CRUS will help empower 500 youth across Nigeria with marketable skills and entrepreneurship training. WAVE will also support other frontline organizations to replicate its successful model.

As a global grantmaking organization, CRUS is creating opportunities for individual donors, foundations, and corporations to channel investments and participate in the global movement to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. CRUS' inclusive range of grantee partners includes organizations that deliver solutions to advance access, equity, and justice for young people and their families. Grantee partners reflect CRUS' refreshed focus on racial and gender equity, youth development, and economic empowerment.

Comcast NBCUniversal has partnered with CRUS to co-fund grants to organizations including **Boys and Girls Club of America (BGCA)** since 2018. The grant enabled BGCA to directly serve over 500,000 young people across the United States with

²⁸ Foxworth, R., & Haymon, M. (2021). Shifting power to communities in grant funding. Stanford Social Innovation Review. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/shifting_power_to_communities_in_grant_funding

²⁹ Southern Education Foundation (2022). Economic vitality and education in the South: The South's pre-pandemic position, <https://www.southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-eves-prepandemic-position/>.

programs that bridge the digital divide, create safe and culturally relevant spaces for learning, and provide nutritious meals after-school and over summer holidays. In 2021, the shared annual commitment was redirected to five, mainly BIPOC-led organizations with programs in STEAM, workforce readiness, and racial equity. CRUS continues to partner with the BGCA Native Clubs program, serving a total of 50,000 children and youth across the U.S. living on Native Lands.

CRUS' partnership with the **Southern Black Girls and Women's Consortium (SBGWC)** illustrates its commitment to enabling innovative and responsive approaches to empowering Black girls. CRUS supports SBGWC's efforts to provide small grants and technical assistance to 400 Black girls and young women (ages 12-24) in 12 southern US states, empowering them to design initiatives for spreading #BlackGirlJoy in their communities, develop leadership skills, and engage in the narrative shift toward girl-centered philanthropy.

Leaning into its second 5-year grant cycle, CRUS is focused on expanding its own ecosystem of funding partners. CRUS is keen to establish partnerships to advance thought leadership and opportunities to share its own journey with other strategy and values-aligned organizations. Much can be learned from CRUS' commitment to align the entire organization around its social impact goal to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and ensure the organization's culture reflects a relevant theory of change.

CRUS is positioned to support its partners to advance equity, access, and justice in education and accelerate progress toward a bold social impact goal. As evidenced by the success of the Red Nose Day campaign, with its strong track record of generating resources to create pathways out of poverty, CRUS offers a wealth of expertise in marketing, communications, fundraising, and direct consumer engagement. These strengths create significant opportunities for the organization to grow its partner base and to amplify their own impact.

Establishment of an Innovation and Growth Fund

The team at CRUS is not only intentional about collaboration with grantee partners, but also eager to activate a new generation of philanthropists and activists to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. A \$10 million Innovation and Growth Fund has been established to strengthen the infrastructure needed to build new multi-platform campaigns that drive awareness, facilitate engagement, and mobilize resources. Lauren Spitzer, CRUS' Senior Vice President for Fundraising and Philanthropy, explained that **the Innovation and Growth Fund, which will mobilize an additional \$1 billion over the next ten years, will serve as an incubator for growth, enable support for new programs, and deepen existing work.**

These resources will enable CRUS to engage new generations of donors and lead the field in digital and content-based fundraising, enhance data analytics and CRM capabilities, and create frictionless processes to facilitate giving. Across each focal

pillar, CRUS will utilize funding for programs that embrace intersectionality and advance gender and racial equity. For example, the YAC's Juntanza Fund and youth-led platform to convene young changemakers for global intergenerational dialogue is a focus of this fund.

Conclusion

Bravery is a key determinant of successful organizational journeys toward more inclusive and participatory grantmaking models that deliver transformative goals, such as breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty.³⁰ It is, indeed, a brave journey, rather than just the organization's commitment, that is creating the direction being established at CRUS. Advancing access, equity, and justice in education are part of CRUS' social impact goal, and this is reflected through the organization's renewed education strategy and effort to enhance alignment between the education and empowerment pillars. While CRUS' bold social impact goal seems ever more elusive as the pandemic continues to disproportionately impact the educational opportunities and socioeconomic well-being of people living in poverty, high-impact pathways are taking shape through CRUS. The timely commitment to ensuring more unrestricted resources reach organizations that are BIPOC- and locally-led positions CRUS as an example of how enterprises can transform their processes to respond to compounding challenges.

As this organization has shown and this document illustrates, it is necessary for funders and nonprofits to avoid imposing short-term solutions from the outside, and instead commit to prioritizing transformative, inclusive philanthropic models and related practices.

³⁰ <https://buildupadvisory.com/>

About the Author

Organizational Transformation to Break Cycles of Intergenerational Poverty: Leveraging the Capabilities of Comic Relief US to Advance Global Education was prepared by Aleesha Taylor, Ed.D, Principal, Herald Advisors.

Dr. Aleesha Taylor is the Principal of Herald Advisors, a consulting firm she founded in 2016 to enable leaders and organizations to thrive in the intersections of philanthropy, education, and international development. Aleesha brings a wealth of experience as a technical leader and strategist. She is an Independent Senior Adviser of [Education.org](https://www.education.org) (formerly Insights for Education). From July 2020 to April 2021, she was [Education.org](https://www.education.org)'s Interim Chief Technical Officer, playing a key role in building their new and growing program portfolio, overseeing the development of country-level teams and activities, establishing strategic partnerships, and guiding the adaptation of data categorization frameworks and analysis for the education sector. Herald Advisors' clients include Comic Relief (US), UN Girls Education Initiative, Global Partnership for Education, KIND Foundation, Lever for Change (MacArthur Foundation), International Education Funders Group, Africa Grantmakers Affinity Group, Open Society Foundations, Bernard van Leer Foundation, Chemonics and Oxford Policy Management. A native of the Bronx, NY, Aleesha is passionate about advancing equity and justice through the education sector. Until 2016, she was the Deputy Director of the Open Society Foundations' education program, where she managed a team across five countries to implement a global grant making portfolio that sought to strengthen education systems and civil society. She is a specialist in systems building, particularly in conflict-affected states. She has worked closely with the governments of Liberia and Myanmar to advise and shape the development of their education systems following their respective democratic transitions. Aleesha was central to the creation of the Private Sector/Foundations constituency of the Global Partnership for Education's Board of Directors and served as its representative on the Board's Financial Advisory Committee, which channeled \$1.2 billion in grant funding to developing country governments during her tenure. Prior to joining the Open Society Foundations in July 2007 as a Senior Program Manager, Aleesha was a Lecturer in International Educational Development at Columbia University's Teachers College, where she also completed her doctoral studies. She also holds degrees in psychology from Spelman College and the Graduate Faculty for Political and Social Sciences of the New School for Social Research.