

POWERU

CENTER for 
SOCIAL CHANGE
PEOPLE • LAND • POWER

OUR HISTORY

Power U Center Social Change (Power U) was co-founded in 1999 by renowned organizers, Denise Perry and Sheila O'Farrell. Being originally based in Miami's historic Black community, Overtown, much of our early work centered on environmental justice, affordable quality housing, and fighting gentrification. In 2008, Power U began youth organizing after a student was put into a chokehold at Miami Edison Senior High School by the former principal. During this time, Power U began organizing youth to fight back against school-push out and criminalization. After the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, Power U activated a new wave of young people who were becoming passionate about social justice. After the acquittal of George Zimmerman, Power U took over the Florida capital for 31 days.

In 2009, Power U launched its first reproductive justice project, Powerful Women and Families (PWF). PWF focused on developing the consciousness and organizing skills of Black mothers to increase their agency over their own birthing experiences. Through our workshops, training, and campaigns we demystified the medicalization of birthing, exposed community members to the tradition of midwifery, and extolled the benefits of breastfeeding. Due to capacity and resources constraints, Power U made the decision to close the PWF program but stays committed to maintaining reproductive justice as a key component of our work.



As part of this commitment, we've partnered with other organizations to mobilize support for Marissa Alexander, a mother who was tragically convicted of attempted murder for defending herself from her abusive husband. During school semesters, we work at a local alternative high school for young parents. This program utilizes an integrated curriculum that combines birth education and political education to develop participants' analysis of reproductive justice, criminalization, and restorative justice.

For years, Power U organizers and youth members attended School Board hearings and attempted to build relationships with school board officials to advocate for the implementation of restorative justice practices in schools. With our influence, MDCPS piloted restorative justice in two middle schools.



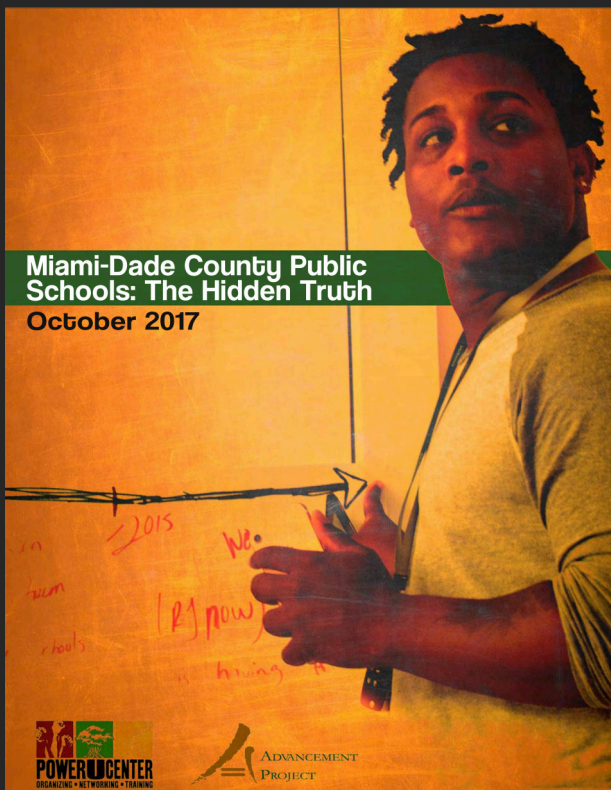
BUILDING FUTURES

In 2015, Power U made national news when MDCPS said they would no longer suspend students but instead send them to “Student Success Centers”, where students could get further support. While thrilled to know there was a program in place to keep young people in school, through student testimonials, we began to uncover “Student Success Centers” had inexcusable flaws that weren’t benefiting its students. The concept of “Student Success Centers” was a step in the right direction in its attempt to provide students with the promise of additional support and resources. Unfortunately, the lack of data to back its success and the experiences we were hearing from students, promoted us to hold school officials accountable to the promises it made it its students and their communities.

In 2017, we released a report, Miami Dade County Public Schools: The Hidden Truth, where we surveyed and interviewed over 500 young people about their experience in MDCPS. In this report, accounts of ramped sexual assault, poorly tracked programming, lack of transparency and resources exposed some truths about MDCPS that has otherwise been unreported.

OUR REPORT

“THE HIDDEN TRUTH”



500+ STUDENTS
3 MIAMI HIGH SCHOOLS

**LESS THAN
60% FELT
THEIR SCHOOL
COUSELORS
AID STUDENT
ISSUES**

**LESS THAN
40% FELT THEIR
SCHOOL DEALT
WITH SEXUAL
HARRASSMENT
EFFECTIVELY**

*FULL REPORT AVAILABLE AT WWW.POWERU.ORG



In our student led circles earlier this year, we learned of slut shaming and/or inappropriate commentary from staff and students that had contributed to girls not wanting to attend school. Young parents have shared they are not supported when trying to stay at their home school, nor are they offered parental leave. As an organization which has made significant progress naming the problems in our public schools, this work has helped crystalize a key point that issues regarding school pushout is not limited to suspensions and the school-to-prison pipeline. Issues of gender oppression, sexual harassment, lack of support for young parents, and ineffective comprehensive sex education has had implications in school pushout and jeopardized the liberty of our young people. While the school police budget has increased, its investments in support services such as mental health counselors and comprehensive sex education is not reflected in their budget priorities.



Currently our central focus is on organizing young people to fight for safe and supportive schools that put an end to school pushout. We are building Power U chapters in different high schools and fighting for schools that prioritize human development over profit, where all youth have the resources, access and opportunity to reach their full potential and where they are treated with dignity, regardless of race, gender or economic situation. We are also organizing local community members and building power with teachers advocating that the school district increases their pay and prioritizes funding for student supports such as mental health counselors and comprehensive sex education and divests funding from school police. We believe that as a community, we have a stake in the decisions that are made and have a say in our governance

Over the last decade or so, our demands haven't changed but have become clear in the eyes of our youth members. They understand the contradictions between what they believe is important for their education and what the school districts ultimately decided to fund. This is a critical moment for us to engage newly activated young people in our organization to test if young people themselves can activate adults and truly challenge those who hold seats of power through their understanding of the school board budget. Our work is focused on continuing to recruit and consolidate a core group of Black and Brown working class youth whose leadership is being uplifted and who are developed to understand the budget to then build power through civic engagement and with teacher to challenge the School Board, the city and the state.



Power University was formed to build an organizing base around urban issues in low-income inner-city neighborhoods.

Co-founded Root Cause and sponsored 34 mile march against the Free Trade Area of the Americas

Provided alternative certified graduation for more than 140 students who met graduation requirements but were denied diplomas due to FCAT.

Established the People of Color Alliance for Public Schools to work for the systemic change in the Miami-Dade Public School system.

Created the SCRUB program, which required a standard of excellence and accountability for clean schools and clean bathrooms.

Power U Center for Social Change was incorporated as a separate, community-owned grassroots organization.

1998

2000

2002

2004

2006

2008

Conducted community planning session with Florida Atlantic University and Overtown residents.

Stopped the expansion of an I-95 ramp in Overtown, already devastated by I-95.

Stopped toxic dumping in Wagner Creek; won the fight for a Turnpike Noise Wall

Power U aided in securing over \$1 million in inner city school improvements.

Renter's Majority Project did a city-wide survey for renters

Power U introduces a new program called Powerful Women & Families.

Power U Youth held their first community forum to end the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Pipeline

2010

2012

2014

Power U Youth held their first community forum to end the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Pipeline

Suspension rates decreased this school year in part due to our pressure on school board and Vitti to make this happen. Asst. Superintendent Nikoli Vitti is disallowing the "Tardy Tank" and making principals figure out how to keep students in classes, so that they are receiving their education for the day.

2007

- ▶ **Youth leaders trained by Power U conduct assessment of disciplinary practices in Booker T. Washington High School and present findings and demands to School Board, teachers, and students.**
- ▶ **County takes back the land from City and Power U provides input to the new RFP process.**
- ▶ **Won second lawsuit against City of Miami and Crosswinds Developers.**
- ▶ **Organized several town hall meetings, vigils, and marches to City Hall where residents spoke out against luxury condos requesting low-income housing.**
- ▶ **Established first Overtown Renter's Association.**

2006

- ▶ **Won first lawsuit against the City of Miami for improper bidding procedures.**
- ▶ **Submitted Environmental Community Impact Report on proposed use of public land for luxury condo development.**

**2020 &
BEYOND**

**WE CONTINUE TO
BUILD FUTURES
AND CREATE
THE CHANGE
WE WANT
WITHIN OUR
COMMUNITIES**