



BUILT TO LAST

An Oral History of 50CAN's
First 15 Years

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A Letter from Marc

Dear Friends,

50CAN has always been the ultimate group project, built one state at a time through an unlikely collaboration of state leaders, national staff, parents, philanthropists, board members and strategic partners. When we set out to tell the story of our first 15 years, the only way to do it justice was to tell it through the voices of the people who made it possible.

What follows is an oral history drawn from two dozen interviews, capturing the good, the messy, the surprising and the quietly transformative. These stories trace the thrill of early victories, the unexpected barriers to growth, the hard-won lessons of merging organizations and the moment the entire playbook had to be rewritten.

My hope is that this collection serves both as a record of where we've been and as a guide for what's to come. For new advocates and veterans alike, these reflections offer a reminder: you don't have to have it all figured out at the beginning to take the first step in building something to last.



Marc Porter Magee
CEO and Founder, 50CAN



As Told By...



Adena Silberstein

SVP of Growth, 50CAN, 2011-14
Development Director, ConnCAN, 2009-10



Alex Johnston

CEO, ConnCAN, 2005-11



Amanda Aragon

ED, NewMexicoKidsCAN, 2017-present



Ann Borowiec

Co-chair, JerseyCAN & Board Member,
50CAN, 2013-present



Anna Marcucio

Senior Program Officer, Walton Family
Foundation, 2013-present
COO, ConnCAN, 2010-13



Curtis Valentine

ED, MarylandCAN, 2011-13



David Sun-Miyashiro

ED, HawaiiKidsCAN, 2017-present



Derrell Bradford

President, 50CAN, 2021-present
EVP, 50CAN, 2016-21



Ed Kirby

Board Chair, 50CAN Action Fund, 2015-19
Walton Family Foundation, 2000-14



Hanna Skandera

President & CEO, Daniels Fund, 2020-present
NM Secretary of Education, 2011-17



Ingrid Reynoso

COO, 50CAN, 2011-16



Jim Blew

President, StudentsFirst, 2014-16
Walton Family Foundation, 2005-14



Joe Williams

Director, Walton Education Coalition, 2015-21
ED, DFER, 2007-15



Jonathan Nikkila

EVP, 50CAN, 2018-present
Director of State Programs, AFC, 2009-18



Jonah Edelman

CEO, Stand for Children, 1996-present



Karen Silverman

SVP of Campaigns, 50CAN, 2011-14
Communications Director, ConnCAN, 2008-10



Kellen Arno

VP of Strategy & Communications,
StudentsFirst, 2012-16



Kenna Little

VP of Finance & Operations, 50CAN,
2021-present



Lisa Gibes de Gac

VP of Strategy & External Relations, 50CAN,
2016-18
Chief of Staff, 50CAN, 2012-16



Lisa Keegan

Board Chair, 50CAN Action Fund, & Board
Member, 50CAN, 2021-present



Lori Armistead

Director, WEC, 2025-present
Senior Program Officer, Walton Family
Foundation, 2011-24



Marc Porter Magee

CEO & Founder, 50CAN, 2011-present
COO, ConnCAN, 2005-10



Maryellen Butke

ED, RI-CAN, 2010-12



Michael Petrilli

President, Thomas B. Fordham Institute,
2005-present



Michael O'Sullivan

ED, GeorgiaCAN, 2016-present
State Director, StudentsFirst, 2013-16



Michelle Rhee

Founder & CEO, StudentsFirst, 2010-14
Chancellor, DC Public Schools, 2007-10



Subira Gordon

ED, ConnCAN, 2018-23



Sunny Larson

Bloomberg Philanthropies, 2015-present



Vallay Varro

President, 50CAN, 2013-21
ED, MinnCAN, 2010-12

Chapter 1

The ConnCAN Way

2005-2008

**Marc Porter Magee**

CEO & Founder, 50CAN, 2011-present
COO, ConnCAN, 2005-10

Marc Porter Magee: We never felt like employees of ConnCAN. We felt like co-owners of the organization. I think that came from the top. Alex lived and breathed ConnCAN. He was fanatically committed to its mission and its success. And that rubbed off on everyone and ultimately inspired the key tenet of the 50CAN model: Successful advocacy campaigns start with an executive director who is all in.

**Alex Johnston**

CEO, ConnCAN, 2005-11

Alex Johnston: I do think there's something to that. You need space for people to feel ownership over a campaign. Especially for the donors who so generously supported ConnCAN, they knew that I was at the Capitol at 2:00am fighting for these ideas, and that created a lot of buy-in into what we were doing.

**Karen Silverman**

SVP of Campaigns, 50CAN, 2011-14
Communications Director, ConnCAN, 2008-10

Karen Silverman: The other thing that made ConnCAN work was that there was a coming together of talent. There were just good people who brought in different, complementary skill sets. We experimented with different things. We weren't afraid to try and fail.

Marc Porter Magee: At the top was Alex, a literal Rhodes Scholar, and behind him was both a board and an advisory board that was really a who's who of Connecticut. And a lot of the staff had come from national advocacy and research organizations right before joining ConnCAN: I had worked at the Progressive Policy Institute, Jen Alexander had worked at American Institutes for Research, Karen Silverman had worked at the Save Darfur Coalition.

Karen Silverman: We had an attitude that was like, "Just because we're a local grassroots group with a state focus doesn't mean we can't do work that's as good as any organization anywhere." And pretty soon people started to ask, "Oh, what are these people doing in Connecticut that feels so high quality?"



Adena Silberstein

SVP of Growth, 50CAN, 2011-14
Development Director, ConnCAN, 2009-10

Adena Silberstein: It felt energizing in the best way. And work often does not feel like that. But when it does, it's sort of magical. Marc's message to us was: "Be creative, be iterative, be innovative." We really responded well to that. We didn't take ourselves too seriously and we loved taking risks but we also felt like what we were doing really mattered and had the potential to have real impact.

“We had an attitude that was like, ‘Just because we’re a local grassroots group with a state focus doesn’t mean we can’t do work that’s as good as any organization anywhere.’”

- Karen Silverman

Karen Silverman: I personally felt so believed in and that fueled a lot of what I did at ConnCAN. I remember Marc said something to me once when I had been at my job for a little while: “Oh, you’re better at this than me.” And I was like, “Okay, well, he believes in me, so I can do these things that I’m not sure I believe I can do.” That was very meaningful, so much so that I remember it 20 years later.

Alex Johnston: Another key in those early years is we set out public goals and we were accountable to them. At the beginning of the year, when we announced our campaign goals we didn’t know whether we would win or lose. When we were able to announce we had won, people respected that because we’d said in advance what success was, and we were willing to fall short in the name of a goal that was meaningful. But the psychology of that was rough. It was very stressful.

Karen Silverman: We started with this campaign called “Mind the Gaps” to get people talking about the achievement gap in Connecticut, which had been almost completely ignored up until that point. Marc then brought in this idea of microtargeting and we were using technology in really innovative ways to find thousands of people to join these issue campaigns. It was like wind at our backs.

Chapter 2

The Need for Local Advocacy and the Idea of 50CAN 2009



Alex Johnston: It was a very optimistic time for education reform advocacy. By 2009, Race to the Top had launched and I vividly remember when Connecticut filed its federal application. We read through it, and we counted all the questions the state officials literally didn't answer, having just left blanks in the application. I knew we could turn this into something big. So, we just started speaking out: "Look, this is crazy. You say that you're committed to moving forward like so many other states are, but you're mailing it in, literally." This was right before the 2010 legislative session and, in some ways, there was peak momentum for policy change. Race to the Top was also an opportunity to show people that ConnCAN had a comprehensive policy agenda. And we secured sweeping changes that year in the legislature.



Michelle Rhee

Founder & CEO, StudentsFirst, 2010-14
Chancellor, DC Public Schools, 2007-10

Michelle Rhee: It's interesting because the need for advocacy is exactly the same now as it was back then. In 2009, as superintendent I was trying to enact all these pretty significant policy changes in DC, and there was obviously a ton of pushback on them. But I also ran into so many parents who wanted a better system and who were not going to be able to sit at the city council hearing for hours on end to testify. And I wondered why there weren't more organized ways to make those voices heard to counterbalance the voices of the defenders of the status quo. It was clear it couldn't be coordinated by the superintendent. So, it had to come from external sources.



Joe Williams

Director, Walton Education Coalition, 2015-21
ED, DFER, 2007-15

Joe Williams: There was just a lot of pent-up need in the field for advocacy, writ large, in all forms in 2009. There was a lot of work that got done initially, sort of riding the fumes of the '90s when governors and business

leaders got together and said, “We need to do something different.” But they operated from the top down. So, you had growth in the charter school sector, Teach For America and lots of other kinds of programs. But there wasn’t bottom-up support for it. A governor could ram something through, but the long-term support wasn’t there, particularly in state legislatures. It was a pretty wide open playing field and the world was ready for a group like 50CAN to come in and create playbooks for bottom-up, multi-issue state advocacy.

Alex Johnston: By 2009, ConnCAN was one of the leading examples of how to do this at the state level. And our phone was ringing. We heard from civic leaders in Minnesota that they were trying to start something there. They reached out and said: “You guys are doing something that we want to do here. Can you come and share how ConnCAN works?” And I think it was things like that that led us to realize this was bigger than just Connecticut.

Marc Porter Magee: It felt like there was a window of opportunity to do more. But it was a pretty fuzzy idea at first. Should we run a training program for would-be advocates? Should we start a consulting wing of ConnCAN? Is there something more direct we could do to help? I was just really passionate about the idea that there should be more groups like ConnCAN across the country. I remember how hard it was for us in those early years and it didn’t make sense to me that local leaders would have to start from scratch.

Alex Johnston: In many ways, Marc’s entrepreneurial vision drove that initial idea forward to something that eventually became 50CAN. We had a lot of debates and different points of view that year about what that should look like or how it might function. And I remember I didn’t like the name 50CAN because I felt like there was already good stuff happening in some places around the country and I didn’t want to send a signal that we wanted to step over those existing efforts. And I think Marc’s response was like, “Yeah, you know what? It’s all good. We just need this kind of thing everywhere.”

Karen Silverman: I remember Marc coming to me one day and saying, “I have a crazy idea I want to run by you.” Which, by the way, is something he did a lot. They weren’t all at the level of, “Let’s start a new national organization,” but it was like, “What if we did this? What if we did that?” I think there was this kind of energy that started to become contagious.

Marc Porter Magee: We had a big whiteboard in my office, and we were messing around with how you’d staff it, what you’d call it, all that stuff. It was just a fun puzzle to solve. Where we landed pretty quickly was the idea: Just like we staff up Alex, we could staff up other leaders



Anna Marcucio

Senior Program Officer, Walton Family Foundation, 2013-present
COO, ConnCAN, 2010-13

and do it faster, better and cheaper than they could on their own. The original plan was to build 50CAN inside ConnCAN. But the ConnCAN board was worried that would result in mission creep. Instead they offered to incubate 50CAN inside ConnCAN for a year and then it would be spun off. So the clock was ticking: we had 12 months to build 50CAN and I had to hire a great replacement as ConnCAN's COO.

Anna Marcucio: In summer of 2010, Marc called me and said, "Hey, I'm starting this new national organization, and I know you're from Connecticut. Would you be willing to come and take my place at ConnCAN?" I said, "No, thanks. I'm good." I was about to have a baby and I liked my job at the American Federation for Children. While on maternity leave, I was up in Connecticut visiting my mom, somehow Marc found out, and said, "Listen, we have built a great team at ConnCAN. We just need the right COO for this next era. We're all going to hop in a car to meet you at a diner in Westport." I met the team and they were great. But I still wasn't ready to make the jump.

Marc Porter Magee: My wife and I had our third child on September 3rd, two weeks before 50CAN's first board meeting and four months before we had to leave ConnCAN. I still didn't have an exit strategy because I hadn't replaced myself and we hadn't secured the money we needed to make our first payroll. Every morning in September I would take the dog out for a long walk and that was the only time I could make work calls, so I would use that time to call Anna and talk about the COO job.

Anna Marcucio: Eventually, Marc's enthusiasm for ConnCAN and the work ahead won me over and I accepted the job.

Marc Porter Magee: After I got through the challenge of replacing myself, I turned to the even bigger challenge of getting this new organization launched. It was pretty scary to have given my notice that I was leaving ConnCAN by the end of the year. I had three kids under three at home, it was definitely not a great time personally to make a leap of faith into an organization that hadn't raised any money yet. Karen and Adena gave me a lot of confidence that we could still do it because I think if they hadn't been all in at that point, then the idea probably would have died. Our first breakthrough was a 10 minute phone call in October with the famous venture capitalist Arthur Rock. After I made a short pitch he said to me: "I don't know if this idea will work but I will give you some startup funds and if you are still around in a year, come and see me and we will talk more." He had been the first investor in Intel, so it seemed like a good omen that he became 50CAN's first investor, too. But to make sure we were still around in a year, we knew we would need more gifts.

**Ed Kirby**

Board Chair, 50CAN Action Fund, 2015-19
Walton Family Foundation, 2000-14

Ed Kirby: I was familiar with ConnCAN, but not intimately. I had followed their successes improving Connecticut charter school policies. I had met Alex Johnston here and there, but didn't know him well. Marc invited me to ConnCAN's New Haven office to talk through the plan for 50CAN. Their office was in an old firearms factory on the edge of the city. Very minimalist and scrappy – I loved it. Walton at the time was a very small team. We didn't have any highly-developed method for looking at the map of the country and asking: "Where does a group like 50CAN fit into a long-range plan?" At the time, 90% of our focus was on charter schools and parental choice policies like vouchers and tax credit scholarships. Jim Blew always had an instinct to think more broadly about the issues we supported. What was compelling to me about the 50CAN idea is that, at its core, it was seeking to be influential across multiple issues. They supported expanding parental choice but also wanted to engage on other high-value policies like school finance, transparency, accountability and teacher quality. At the time there were almost no national entities achieving consequential results on these sorts of reforms. We decided that given the team's track record at ConnCAN and its coherent, disciplined approach, 50CAN was worth the bet.

**Jim Blew**

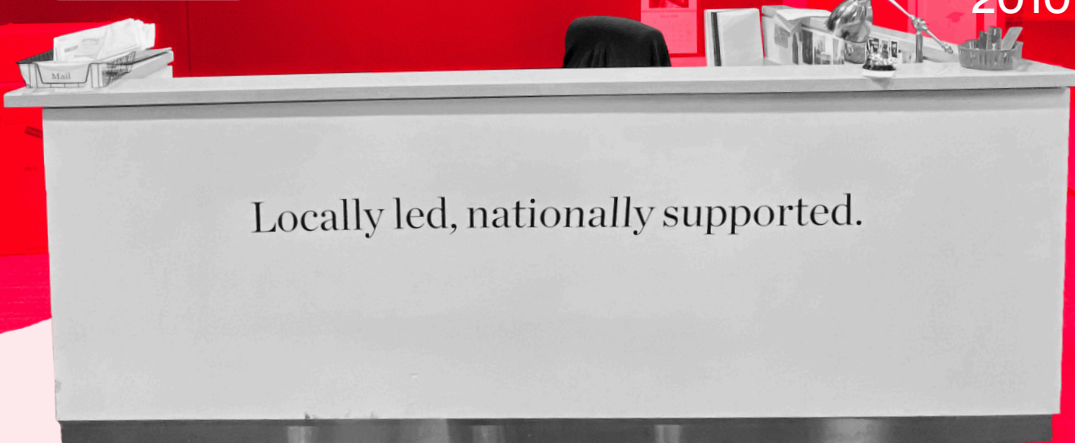
President, StudentsFirst, 2014-16
Walton Family Foundation, 2005-14

Jim Blew: I never thought choice was sufficient. I saw it as an important precondition. You also need real transparency. So it was interesting to us that ConnCAN had a broader agenda and we liked that it was succeeding in a blue state but doing so with some critical distance from the traditional stakeholder groups. If the team behind ConnCAN could bring that approach to more states, we thought that was an idea worth supporting.

Marc Porter Magee: I remember asking Ed which states he would like us to go to next and he said: "Which-ever states will make this idea work." That was how he and Jim operated. They weren't overly constrained by their own strategic plans and they were very friendly to new opportunities and entrepreneurs. It was really refreshing. With support from some key ConnCAN funders, plus the gifts from Rock and Walton, we now had enough money to make payroll. It was time to start hiring the team.

“It was a pretty wide open playing field and the world was ready for a group like 50CAN to come in and create playbooks for bottom-up, multi-issue state advocacy.”

- Joe Williams



Locally led, nationally supported.



Lisa Keegan

Board Chair, 50CAN Action Fund, & Board
Member, 50CAN, 2021-present

Lisa Keegan: What Marc was proposing was a nationwide network where states were in charge. That locally-led orientation was the thing that the movement was missing the most at the time. So many of the policy organizations that had gotten set up were saying: “Here is the answer. You should take it to your state and do the exact same thing.” But nobody can parachute their way in and just say, “You should do it the way it worked for us in our state.” Marc never talked like that. He was grounded in genuinely liking local leaders and being empathetic to what they are going through in their own states and all their hopes and dreams.

Karen Silverman: The fact that Marc was the COO and not the CEO of ConnCAN might have been a big part of 50CAN’s ultimate success. Everyone at 50CAN was there to support the state leader, even Marc. The pitch was so straightforward: can we help you build something in your state?

Adena Silberstein: Being really clear about who you are, what you stand for, and telling that story consistently is what gives you actual legs to stand on in that start-up year. It gives you the strong organizational DNA you need to last. We believed in the idea of 50CAN and were excited to share that with anyone who would listen.

Ed Kirby: The whole issue of a locally-driven model is that so much of it comes down to the skills, the relationships and the hustle of the actual individuals working in a given state. In that start-up year, 50CAN attracted exceptional state CAN founders who embodied those attributes, especially Vallay Varro in Minnesota and Maryellen Butke in Rhode Island.



Maryellen Butke
ED, RI-CAN, 2010-12

Maryellen Butke: For eight years I had been the director of organizational development across the six Big Picture Learning schools in Rhode Island. The schools were innovative but we were constantly fighting against the forces of the status quo that wanted us closed. Our schools were islands of hope and it felt like we were plucking kids out of the river. Eventually I felt like I had to find a way to go upstream to understand why there were so many children failing in our school system. When I heard that 50CAN was starting an education advocacy campaign in Rhode Island, I thought to myself: this was written for me, I just have to convince them that I can do it.



Vallay Varro
President, 50CAN, 2013-21
ED, MinnCAN, 2010-12

Vallay Varro: It was such a moment for me personally and professionally, and politically and policy-wise for Minnesota. I had been working as a political appointee in the mayor's office in St. Paul, focusing primarily on education. I also had had this harebrained idea that I would try to run for school board and I had just been elected. So, joining 50CAN as the founding ED of MinnCAN felt like a continuation of work that I had been doing, but in a stepped up way.

Karen Silverman: I had just gotten into graduate school at the University of Chicago and they had given me a full ride, which felt really hard to pass up. I remember talking to Marc, and he was like, "That's fine. You can still do that. You'll just do both." And then I had a baby so I was a new mom in graduate school while working at a startup. I don't know what I was thinking! But it just felt so exciting. And I grew up so much with 50CAN. It turned out I learned a lot more than I did in grad school.



Ingrid Reynoso
COO, 50CAN, 2011-16

Ingrid Reynoso: I loved that 50CAN was brand-new just because there was such a spirit of entrepreneurship in those early days. That's what drew me in. And I love education because I really feel that it absolutely changed my life. The opportunities I've been able to have growing up in New York City and having had teachers who were so wonderful in my middle school, who connected me with a scholarship program that allowed me to go off to boarding school because that was how much they believed in me. It definitely changed my life. So, I loved the idea of supporting kids and giving them an opportunity to succeed. And it also felt like a cool, smart, diverse group of people from different backgrounds and perspectives that I really wanted to work with on this mission.

“We believed in the idea of 50CAN and were excited to share that with anyone who would listen.”

- Adena Silberstein

Ed Kirby: The biggest risk or challenge I identified was whether the 50CAN team could replicate their success in Connecticut in other states. It wasn't a lack of faith in Marc and the team—it was just going to be an overwhelming challenge for anybody. Another risk was that 50CAN was multi-issue. It's much easier to remain focused on attaining specific concrete objectives if you're a single-issue initiative. But Marc and his team were confident that they could manage the complexity of being a multi-issue operation, and on the Walton team we were always willing to take risks on the right people. I also appreciated the humility and groundedness Marc and his colleagues exhibited. They were totally honest about the overwhelming learning curve they were embarking on, and they never got lulled into a mindset of arrogance or a false sense of expertise that so many others in the education reform movement have gotten caught up in.



Michael Petrilli

President, Thomas B. Fordham Institute,
2005-present

Michael Petrilli: I was glad funders were making the investment to scale up state advocacy. It was clear from Fordham's perspective we weren't—as a think tank—going to be able to have a presence in every state. But the more state groups that were out there, the bigger the chance we had to have an impact by partnering with them. And 50CAN's approach seemed to avoid the problem of being top down. Because of our Ohio experience, we were particularly sensitive to that. We knew what it felt like to have national groups swoop in and try to tell us what to do. So we wanted to help 50CAN any way we could.



Lisa Gibes de Gac

VP of Strategy & External Relations, 50CAN,
2016-18
Chief of Staff, 50CAN, 2012-16

Lisa Gibes de Gac: I was teaching in Philadelphia with Teach For America. There were budget cuts going on in the school district and there were pink slips going out left and right. And this is how I learned about LIFO: Last in, first out. It was a real illuminating moment for how dysfunctional school systems can be. Here I was a second-year teacher and my principal was saying, "We love you. We want to keep you, but we can't." I applied for a few internships and ended up at the Fordham Institute doing a policy internship there. The 50CAN DC team at the time was housed in a large office at Fordham that Mike Petrilli had lent to 50CAN. Gretchen Guffy, the VP of Policy for 50CAN, was working out of that office and told me about the job and everything moved really quickly and soon I was on the team.



Curtis Valentine

ED, MarylandCAN, 2011-13

Curtis Valentine: I had just finished working on the Obama campaign and I was writing about my experiences as a new dad and working with a lot of state senators and state delegates on organizing and getting votes out. I had taught in Prince George's County and it was clear that the education system wasn't up to the standards I would want for my child. Marc said to me: "Curtis, we've got a great team to support you along the way. What we are looking for is a local leader who believes in the mission and can be a great spokesperson and organizer for this movement in Maryland." It sounded like the right opportunity at the right time, so I said: "I'm in."

Early Wins and Bumps in the Road

2011-2012



Marc Porter Magee: I was confident in that first year, maybe too confident, maybe a little naive but very much in the mindset of, “This will be fun.” And what could easily be lost in all the org charts and planning documents is that at the heart of the idea of 50CAN is that we had fun in the actual day-to-day work. We derived a tremendous amount of joy from when it all came together in a great campaign.

Maryellen Butke: The 50CAN team poured so much into me in that first year. Not just all the work they did on RI-CAN to get it off to a strong start, but also into my development. Alex Johnston took a week off from work at ConnCAN and went up to Harvard with me for a week-long training on negotiation to get us ready for our first legislative session. Jen Alexander, who was leading policy at ConnCAN at the time, took so much time to explain the ins and outs of policies with me. It was amazing.

Karen Silverman: I remember flying into Rhode Island and being at dinner the night before our big launch event at the State House and there was an electric feeling. It felt like the sky was the limit. I think for me personally, because communications was my area, it was such an amazing time and place where communicating felt very

central to the work itself. We spent a lot of time thinking about the branding and the rollout. How do we talk about the policies we're advocating for? And how do we create a sense of drama throughout the campaign?

Vallay Varro: Everyone in Minnesota took us seriously from the get-go. We commanded the attention of the media. We commanded the attention of those at the state Capitol. I never had any concern—maybe this was naive—that we would fail. And then we got a number of big wins in that first legislative session and we used our early childhood win to go right back into campaign mode for the early childhood Race to the Top competition and that resulted in another win for an additional \$20 million. It was a great start.

Maryellen Butke: Our first major project we took on was a communications campaign tied to the launch of the movie *Waiting for Superman*. We had 500 people come out for the event. A lot of legislators were there. The governor came. We had to turn people away because we ran out of room. I remember thinking: "This is what a movement looks like. Rhode Island is ready."

“And what could easily be lost in all the org charts and planning documents is that at the heart of the idea of 50CAN is that we had fun in the actual day-to-day work. We derived a tremendous amount of joy from when it all came together in a great campaign.”

- Marc Porter Magee

Marc Porter Magee: We had some great early wins but it quickly became clear that we also had a lot to learn. My experience—which wasn't even that much, just five years in Connecticut—was working in the same office with everyone, on a small team, in one small state. And when we started 50CAN, we were like, "We've done it in one state. This is going to give us a huge advantage." But when the EDs hit barriers that were specific to their states, it was hard to help them find a solution. That was when I realized "Oh, this is not like ConnCAN at all because I'm not actually there in the states for all these conversations and decisions."

Curtis Valentine: One of the first things I did when I took on the role of executive director of MarylandCAN

was that I got myself appointed to the Governor's Workforce Investment Board, which is the policymaking body for workforce development in the State of Maryland. It felt like a real breakthrough but was kind of daunting—a real wow moment—of the problems at the top. There was very little urgency. And at the same time, the key charter school leaders were really nervous about demanding too much change. They were like, “If we need anything we will let you know.” And I'm like, “Okay. We want to do a rally. We want to bring all your parents together at the Capitol.” And they were like, “No, we're good. We are going to sit this session out.” It felt like we were truly starting from scratch. I remember I saw someone who worked in the local NEA chapter and I went up to introduce myself and he said: “I know who you are, we just had a meeting to make sure you fail.” That's how year one went.

Maryellen Butke: Fighting for charter school expansion wasn't on our original goals list because it wasn't supposed to be something that needed too much advocacy. But I got a call from our charter partners that they had a community hearing coming up and they wanted me to come. Then we got notification an hour beforehand that they were moving it to a different building because so many people were planning on showing up. When I got there, it was the biggest shit show I had ever seen. There were hundreds of people there who turned out to protest the new charter school. It looked like the entire fire department was there on the side of the teachers union. We were completely outmatched.

Marc Porter Magee: I remember I was on an Amtrak train when Maryellen called from the event. I had to step in between two train cars to take the call and I had never felt further away from a campaign at that moment. In Connecticut we were never more than an hour's drive away from anything. Now, I might as well have been on the moon.

Maryellen Butke: The issue was that the plan called for opening the school in Cranston and no one had done the on-the-ground work to build support in the community. The charter application ended up getting denied. But we didn't give up. We rolled up our sleeves and went to work on a new plan, which ended up being a new application where the location shifted to Providence. We had to invent a new playbook and build up our team. We ended up going door-to-door in the communities we wanted to serve. After six more months of continuous work, the school was approved in a 5-4 vote.

Marc Porter Magee: One of the things I'm most proud of from that era is that Maryellen and the team found a way to win that fight. A lot of people would have given up. RI-CAN didn't. And now those schools are thriving. According to Stanford's CREDO study, the Rhode Island charter school sector is the most consistently high-per-

forming of any state in the country. No one can take that win away from Maryellen and the team. It changed thousands of lives for the better.

Ingrid Reynoso: Despite these early successes, we were constantly on the edge of a financial disaster. I'm always thrifty in my personal life. I will spend the gas to drive back home to get a dollar off coupon if I forget to bring it. So I was doing cash flow daily. We didn't have much money in the bank. We always had to have backup plans like, "Maybe the leadership team can forgo their next paycheck if this grant doesn't come through?" I was always thinking, "We're not going to make it," and then the money would come in. Marc always got it done just in time. It worked because as a leadership team we were really transparent about things with each other. Especially in a startup, it is crucial everyone has the financial data so decisions can be made based on the facts.

Adena Silberstein: At some point all the juggling we were trying to do and all the close calls of almost running out of money took its toll. Karen was pregnant. I had a baby. Vallay had just had a baby. Marc had three kids under three at home. And we were trying to fly around the country to get this new organization off the ground. It really was a jarring shift from the more fun and relaxed vibe of ConnCAN. After the highs of those early state launches, it started to all feel really hard.

Vallay Varro: After our first two legislative sessions, new people were coming and I made the move from MinnCAN to the national team. And I remember it being really messy all the way around from a relationship perspective. It's never easy when the people who used to be your peers are now your direct reports.

Lisa Gibes de Gac: There was definitely a lot of tension when I joined the team in 2012. After that startup honeymoon period ended, we had to think about what kind of organization we needed to be for the next phase of growth. I was doing a lot of work with the executive team, coordinating across the national departments. We had two different national offices—one in New York City and one in DC. The state teams were dispersed around the country and we had a number of national staff that were virtual employees. There were a lot of pieces to keep track of. I remember Marc throwing out the idea that maybe I could play a "chief of staff type role." The only frame of reference at that point I had for a chief of staff was *The West Wing*. I think to this day that was one of my favorite roles in my career. We redesigned the state-national relationship, created the first menu of national services that the states could count on, redraw the lines of responsibility, and created the rules around campaign planning. The goals-strategies-tactics framework we enacted ended up being a huge step forward.

Ingrid Reynoso: There's always tension when you have a centralized place trying to bring some order to the organization and then you have teams out in the field saying: "The central office doesn't really know what we go through. They don't have an idea what it's like on the ground." You see that in school districts and CMOs and it was also something we had to work through at 50CAN.

Marc Porter Magee: It's easy to lose track of why you are doing something when you are growing. Our informal motto in those early years had been "locally-led, nationally-supported." So I had that painted in the entrance to our national office. And we put up clocks set to the different time zones of our state campaigns in that entrance so it was the first thing national team members saw each morning. I think it helped remind us that even if we are in DC, this is about state-level change.

“We redesigned the state-national relationship, created the first menu of national services that the states could count on, redrew the lines of responsibility, and created the rules around campaign planning. The goals-strategies-tactics framework we enacted ended up being a huge step forward.”

- Lisa Gibes de Gac

Building It to Last

2013-2015



Lisa Keegan: One of the things Milton Friedman said that stuck with me is that it does not matter what happens to your work tomorrow, it matters what happens 20 to 50 years from now. You have to trust the process. When I joined the 50CAN board, one thing that really impressed me was how committed everyone was to not trying to impose the ideal law on every state. It takes a lot of discipline to avoid that because the drive to centrally plan all of this is so magnetic. Resisting that is a hallmark of 50CAN. There is a shared vision across the states, but the state policy goals are always picked by the EDs.

Joe Williams: 50CAN was talking about winning hearts and minds and had a thoughtful, bottom-up policy process that took local leaders from conception of an idea to its implementation. That's what I always liked about what 50CAN brought to state coalitions. They were saying: "Let's get the pieces in place, let's do this right." That was in the DNA of 50CAN from day one. It was designed to be durable. Everybody else was just trying to get to the next round of funding. They made a big splash and then they were gone. 50CAN was building it to last.

Marc Porter Magee: From the very beginning we had thought that expanding to New Jersey could make a lot of sense. After all, it shared a lot with Connecticut: they



Ann Borowiec

Co-chair, JerseyCAN & Board Member,
50CAN, 2013-present

were both mid-sized wealthy states with high overall levels of student achievement and huge achievement gaps. But we knew it would only work with the right local leaders. I was thrilled when I got introduced to Ann Borowiec.

Ann Borowiec: We had pulled together a group of business and education leaders in New Jersey because there was no clear education advocacy voice in the state standing up for what makes sense for our children. We saw the benefit of a national partner and the idea of joining a national group that believes this work should be “locally-led, and nationally-supported” was appealing to us. There are benefits of having national shared resources, with decisions made at the local level. What emerged from that collaboration was JerseyCAN.

Marc Porter Magee: Ann not only created one of our strongest state campaigns but she made a big impact on the whole network when she joined the national board. Drawing upon her extensive experience in the financial world, she pushed us to cut the cost of national services and remake our organizational model to be much more sustainable. Under her leadership we introduced state budgets with true ED control, regular profit and loss statements for each state campaign and dedicated state reserves so the state campaigns kept the money they didn’t spend each year. These changes aligned everyone around the goal of a strong balance sheet and made the 50CAN network financially resilient enough to weather all the challenges to come.



Derrell Bradford

President, 50CAN, 2021-present
EVP, 50CAN, 2016-21

Derrell Bradford: I had been following the progress of ConnCAN since the beginning. I remember Alex Johnston came to visit E3, the New Jersey education advocacy organization where I worked at the time, to talk about the plans for ConnCAN and exchange ideas. I just loved the products the ConnCAN team produced: every report, every study, it just raised the bar for the whole field. And so when Marc and team were looking to expand into New York and New Jersey, I was eager to help out any way I could. By 2013, I had finished working at a new political group called Better Education for Kids where I also served as the state director for StudentsFirst New Jersey. Marc sent me a job description that combined heading up NYCAN with a national role at 50CAN that played to my strengths. And when I read the job description, it felt so thoughtfully composed just for me, that in my head I was like, “I would be a real asshole if I didn’t take this job.”



Lori Armistead

Director, WEC, 2025-present
Senior Program Officer, Walton Family
Foundation, 2011-24

Lori Armistead: Getting Derrell was a major win because he was just so eager and charismatic and unafraid. He can connect with a second grader in an urban charter school and also with a billionaire over cocktails. He just has this incredible ability to meet people where they are and talk to them with genuine interest. When he joined 50CAN suddenly they had a well-respected rockstar in the ed reform world on their team.



Hanna Skandera

President & CEO, Daniels Fund, 2020-present
NM Secretary of Education, 2011-17



Jonah Edelman

CEO, Stand for Children, 1996-present

Hanna Skandera: Marc and I were in the same Pahara Fellowship cohort, which gave me the opportunity to get to know him and learn about their approach to advocacy. What immediately stood out was the dynamic between Marc and Derrell. They are incredibly strong leaders who pair their conviction with humility and consistently put the organization's mission first. They embody the kind of character you hope to see in leadership.

Jonah Edelman: It definitely felt like a period where there were a lot of new actors wanting to do multi-state advocacy. This was a period where there was a noteworthy bipartisan consensus around some of the key priorities. And at the same time, there was growing opposition on the left and right.

Ed Kirby: Something core to 50CAN and key to its success is that it has always remained urgently focused on student achievement and the public policies necessary to attain it. It never allowed itself to get distracted by inconsequential faddish reforms or the inane political theater of taking this side or that side of cultural and ideological battles that have no relationship to student academic formation. I credit Derrell Bradford with communicating that clarity of focus stridently and emphatically both within 50CAN and publicly. Because Marc, Derrell and the team have remained singleminded about their mission and the nature of their work, they have maintained trust and credibility with advocates and elected officials of all political stripes. That's a really big accomplishment.

Lisa Gibes de Gac: I think it was around 2015 that we started to hit our stride in terms of the national side of the work. We loved working on ways to get the vision across nationally and even though we weren't in 50 states we loved thinking of it as a kind of a 50-state campaign. That was our mantra: We need to care about national communications, we need to care about national fundraising, we need to care about our national brand. And out of that grew a lot of national projects that have continued to pay off.

Ingrid Reynoso: We always had fun together. I remember that we started something called "FunCAN" to keep the creativity and fun going. We would dream up activities we could do, where we would meet, and it tapped into the creativity of all these talented people. Even though we didn't have a lot of money, we also prioritized an annual retreat where we could get together and have fun together. And I think that kind of thing turned out to be really important.

Curtis Valentine: Over time, the 50CAN brand grew. And over the years, being a part of this network of 50CAN alumni really mattered and opened a lot of doors for me. I would not be at the Progressive Policy Institute today without MarylandCAN and there are so many 50CAN alumni from this era doing great things in the world.

Mergers, Acquisitions and Growth

2016-2019



StudentsFirst

Michelle Rhee: When we first announced the launch of StudentsFirst on the Oprah Winfrey Show in December 2010, our ask to everyone watching was to sign up. Within days we had several hundred thousand members. But it became harder and harder to drive the conversation from the national level over time and I got to a point where I thought: “I am not helpful in this equation anymore.” I felt like the landscape had become ridiculously polarized and it really stopped us from being able to have meaningful conversations about policy that brought people together. So, I thought, “I’m going to extract myself and give someone else a chance to step in and lead.”

Kellen Arno: At the end of the day, it was very evident that you could be Ashley in Pennsylvania, but you were still “Ashley, who works with Michelle Rhee.” That was just the reality. In some ways it was powerful and then in other ways it created challenges.



Kellen Arno

VP of Strategy & Communications,
StudentsFirst, 2012-16

Jim Blew: When I was at Walton I saw the top-down approach of StudentsFirst as a compliment to 50CAN's more bottom-up approach. I think the models co-existed quite well in the early years. But when I took over as the president of StudentsFirst in November 2014, I came to realize that that top-down model can work when you have a celebrity leader like Michelle Rhee. When she stepped away, that top-down approach was no longer sustainable at the same level of funding.

Kellen Arno: Michelle was such a force of nature that I think two things happened. One, we lost some of that power overnight when she stepped down. And two, it became more apparent that if you're an elected official who didn't like us but was a little afraid of us, waiting us out became a viable strategy. I think Jim did a really good job making us a more efficient organization, adopting a more coalition-based strategy, and working to better diversify our fundraising. I think all of us knew within a year after Michelle had left that the path forward for StudentsFirst to continue to be a strong, sustainable organization was really, really difficult.

Jim Blew: By 2015 the philanthropic support for traditional ed reform advocacy had dropped enormously. Many funders were surprised by how hard this work really is. To make an education advocacy organization successful you need to have sustainable infrastructure and top talent pursuing goals over the long run. Most donors want to see results quicker than they are actually going to happen. So, Ed Kirby and I started talking about combining these ideas with the goal of producing something that could be more sustainable. StudentsFirst had incredible talent but we were at risk of it going away.

“ We started a conversation where we looked state-by-state at both organizations in terms of what we had built and how we could combine those strengths. That process was really hard but the way that Marc and his team navigated their way through these decisions really showed the StudentsFirst folks they were serious about making this work. ”

- Michelle Rhee

Marc Porter Magee: At that point I thought our locally-led, nationally-supported model had proven to be the right path forward. But we still weren't getting the big wins we wanted. One thing I think we got wrong at first was running our state campaigns only within our 501c3, which meant we couldn't do electoral politics. And StudentsFirst was set up in the exact opposite way: they were a 501c4 from the very beginning. I felt like we were playing catch up on having a robust program to build political clout.

Kellen Arno: I think we experienced the inverse where 50CAN was so excellent at telling a really powerful, empathic story about this work, which we weren't very good at. We were all politics. Everything went through a political framework and a political lens, and everything was built and engineered around that. When the political winds change, you don't have much to fall back on.

Marc Porter Magee: In November 2015, Ed Kirby, who was now serving as the board chair of the 50CAN Action Fund, approached me and said he and Jim Blew had met up for drinks and Jim floated the idea of a merger between 50CAN and StudentsFirst. Ed wanted to know if I was interested. I said, "Sure." It was clear there were risks but it also seemed to offer the promise of exactly what we needed: a way to speed up the process of getting bigger and better.

Michelle Rhee: I had always had a very positive impression of 50CAN as being one of the groups that was not territorial and also not dogmatic on policy. Marc wasn't insisting states pursue particular policies in a particular year, but rather deeply understanding what communities wanted and needed. And he had built state campaigns that were going to be around for implementation after the policies passed. We started a conversation where we looked state-by-state at both organizations in terms of what we had built and how we could combine those strengths. That process was really hard but the way that Marc and his team navigated their way through these decisions really showed the StudentsFirst folks they were serious about making this work.

Lori Armistead: The Walton family and its foundation were significant investors in StudentsFirst and the infrastructure that they built. But by that time, I'd been living in Georgia for a few years, so I had gotten to know Michael O'Sullivan and the StudentsFirst Georgia team. And obviously I had spent a lot of time at Walton with Jim Blew before he moved to StudentsFirst. Jim was saying "I've gotten under the hood, and it's tough." I didn't know Marc and I worried that he was just getting his footing in building this national network. Doubling its size felt very risky for a not-yet-really-proven leader.

Kellen Arno: It's funny how you remember these weird details in your life. I remember walking my dog at night and Michelle called me. She said "This is what we're doing. I need you to do X, Y, Z." And I immediately got to work thinking through questions like "What do we want to avoid and what does success look like?"

Lisa Gibes de Gac: It felt like a David and Goliath moment. I remember thinking: "Wait, what? They are much bigger than us. How is this supposed to work?" That was a real defining moment. Before that we were just the scrappy underdogs. Now, people were seeking out our help.

Kellen Arno: The process of working through the details went on for months. Marc and Lisa were great partners in running a process to get to a shared understanding. There were some people on the StudentsFirst side who were pushing for us to keep all of our state campaigns and I was like, "It's not realistic. Our goal has to be to land this plane and not have it crash."



Michael O'Sullivan

ED, GeorgiaCAN, 2016-present
State Director, StudentsFirst, 2013-16

Michael O'Sullivan: There was a rumor among EDs that something was happening. But there had been rumors before. It was shocking when it actually transpired because we were told "Hey, here's what's happening. It's being announced tomorrow." It just blew all of us away. I didn't know much about 50CAN. We barely had time to even tell our funders what was going on before it was announced.

Marc Porter Magee: Michael was really important to this plan because Georgia was one of StudentFirst's most successful states and right before I called him it occurred to me he might say no. So, I just said that I respected what he had built, I understood this was a choice and I wanted to know what he needed to hear to come on board.

Michael O'Sullivan: The first person I called after talking to Marc was Lori Armistead. And I said, "Hey, I just heard what's going on. Can I come see you?" And she said, "Absolutely." So, I drove all the way out to Duluth and she just spelled it all out for me: "This is what happened, and this is why." I asked, "What do I do?" And she replied, "You do whatever you want to do. You do what you think makes sense."

“After the merger, 50CAN grew even further into a truly bipartisan, geographically diverse organization.”

- Lori Armistead

Marc Porter Magee: Michael said he had a great community organizer named Steven Quinn and that Steven was essential to their success and he understood we would have to run in the black but he needed a deputy if this was going to work. So, Michael and Steven came on board together and along with the teams from Tennessee and South Carolina, we had locked in everyone we needed.

Kellen Arno: Then we had to have these tough conversations with a lot of the StudentsFirst national staff. We had to say: most of us are going to be out of a job when this is over, but how we manage this is going to be our legacy at this organization. And full credit to our staff, they all embraced that mission. They all gave 100% right up until their last day. And then 10 years later to see the StudentsFirst members that moved over to 50CAN and thrived—like Andi Shaw—and just the journey they’ve been on. That’s a testament to Jim’s and Michelle’s leadership through this challenging time.

Vallay Varro: I think the process of integrating these StudentsFirst state campaigns made us think more about what we had built and the opportunity to keep evolving our model. It raised a big question of what we needed to do to be sustainable. We leaned even more into the idea of local leadership and we accepted that some state campaigns would be big and some would be small, some would be very political and some would focus on the community level. It worked but it meant that what it meant to be a 50CAN campaign was changing.

Lori Armistead: The StudentsFirst state campaigns—Tennessee, Georgia and South Carolina—that joined 50CAN were further along in building up the political side of the work than the existing 50CAN states. I think that helped strengthen 50CAN’s overall political approach as well. They also made the 50CAN network far more diverse from a geographic and political perspective, which is a very unique value-add that 50CAN has that a lot of other organizations don’t. After the merger, 50CAN grew even further into a truly bipartisan, geographically diverse organization.

The Action Fund

Marc Porter Magee: After the StudentsFirst merger was completed, it became clear that the missing piece in the 50CAN model was a robust political operation. We were fortunate that, as Action Fund board chair, Ed Kirby had led us through a strategic planning process so we knew what needed to be done. I met with the Walton team and made my pitch for start-up funds. They said that in order for Walton to contribute C4 funds we would need a really strong leader on staff to head up the project, a “Jonathan Nikkila-type.” So, I figured the sim-

**Jonathan Nikkila**

EVP, 50CAN, 2018-present
Director of State Programs, AFC, 2009-18

plest way forward was just to talk to Jonathan and see if he might be interested in joining the team.

Jonathan Nikkila: I had actually helped Vallay write the job description for the role earlier just to help her out and I had given no thought to actually doing it. And then she called me and said, “So you know that job description? How would you like to do it?”

Marc Porter Magee: It was sort of make-or-break for us but Jonathan is a thoughtful guy and he didn’t rush his decision. We spent a lot of time on the phone just talking about the opportunity.

Jonathan Nikkila: I called around and talked to a lot of people about what they thought. People I really trusted spoke highly of 50CAN. In my career, I’d never really taken a big risk like this before, but I decided I was ready to take on a new challenge.

Marc Porter Magee: At the time, we weren’t actually in great shape on the political side. Most of our states hadn’t raised a dime in C4 or PAC money and hadn’t won any races.

Jonathan Nikkila: I was expecting more money than we had to start, so that was hard. At AFC, we had whatever we needed in terms of political funds in the states we were in. I had to be scrappier, and I wasn’t always successful in those early years. I would say to our EDs: “Let’s do elections.” And the EDs were like, “Eh, maybe. We’ll think about it.” But eventually things started to turn around.

New States through Fellowships

Marc Porter Magee: Derrell, Vallay and I had been through the Pahara Fellowship and that got us thinking about fellowships as a vehicle in the advocacy space. We came up with a few ideas: a full-time fellowship to incubate new state campaigns, a part-time fellowship for emerging local advocates and a part-time fellowship to help local advocates communicate on the national stage.

Derrell Bradford: We called that last fellowship National Voices. And a big part of the idea was that we can’t have good advocacy if we can’t continue to work across the aisle in an increasingly polarized world. It was bipartisan-by-design from the very beginning.

Vallay Varro: Growing to new states was hard. Oftentimes, 18 months of exploration didn’t pan out because not all of the ingredients were there. And sometimes it felt like we were forcing it, or we spent too much time doing that discovery work, or we got too attached to a particular prospective state. Finding the right ED was really hard. You had to be a great coalition builder, fundraiser and advocate. It felt like we were looking for a unicorn.

So approaching growth with a fellowship allowed people to spend a year with us before becoming ED and then it wasn't all on us to put the pieces together.

Hanna Skandera: At the time, I was completing my tenure as State Superintendent in New Mexico, and it had become unmistakably clear that there was no ecosystem outside of government to advance meaningful education change. There were no education reform advocacy organizations. I kept thinking that government cannot do this alone. Even if we succeeded in driving short-term improvements, which we certainly worked to do, they would be unlikely to endure without a broader infrastructure that could sustain momentum across administrations and communities. When I learned about the 50CAN fellowship, which was designed to help local leaders launch their own advocacy organizations, it felt like exactly what New Mexico needed. I did everything I could to ensure the next fellowship cohort could be positioned to support the state.



Amanda Aragon
ED, NewMexicoKidsCAN, 2017-present

Amanda Aragon: Hanna brought the fellowship opportunity to my attention. She knew that we needed advocacy outside of the agency and saw that it was something that I was extremely passionate about. In my mind, there was never a question of if it would work. Once I decided to do the fellowship, I said to myself: "Well, we are launching this. It might fail, but we're definitely launching this new organization." It was really hard, but I had a great example in Hanna who had modeled resilience.

Hanna Skandera: Today, if you look at New Mexico's ecosystem, the leadership consists of next-generation talent. These are people like Amanda, who were coming up through the department as I was stepping down. Facilitating that generational transition while also serving as the connective tissue throughout the process is precisely what 50CAN helped make possible. The team built a bridge to a new era. I am not aware of another national organization that has enabled this kind of durable transition in more than one place, and 50CAN has done it in more than a dozen states.

Amanda Aragon: I found the fellowship to be incredibly helpful, partially because there really isn't another program that you can go through that teaches you the mechanics of what you need to do to build an org, coaches you through, "What's your mission statement? What's your vision statement?" Things that you could do on your own but are so much more helpful to do as a part of a team. And the 50CAN team held a high bar. We had to earn the right to be a CAN. That was the thing that I was the most stressed about: "Are we going to demonstrate to 50CAN that this is worth taking a risk on?" And then once we got the green light to launch, that's when I was like, "Okay, we got this."

Marc Porter Magee: Just as the fellowship opened new doors in New Mexico, it played the same vital role in Hawaii. I had been fortunate to meet Terry George, then the president of the Castle Foundation, at a Philanthropy Roundtable event. We got to talking and he encouraged me to explore a role for 50CAN in Hawaii. That led to a listening tour with community groups and educators across Hawaii. Six months later, with a leadership gift from the Castle Foundation, we were able to support an incredibly talented local leader named Takashi Ohno as a fellow so he could build an education advocacy plan for the Aloha State.



David Sun-Miyashiro
ED, HawaiiKidsCAN, 2017-present

David Sun-Miyashiro: Takashi had used the 50CAN fellowship to create the blueprint for what became HawaiiKidsCAN and he decided that what made sense for him was to recruit someone to step into the ED role. He contacted me and asked if I wanted to learn more. It was the first time in my professional life that I saw how all my threads—my teaching experience, my nonprofit experience, my political experience—could be woven together into one job. It felt like an unexpected blessing that it came across my radar. In Hawaii, there really weren't a lot of similar models to look at, so it was difficult to conceptualize what the actual role would be. There was a very small community of folks who were even thinking about doing this kind of work. But the smartest thing 50CAN did was sending me to go to visit a few of the other EDs in the network. After that I was all in.

“I found the fellowship to be incredibly helpful, partially because there really isn't another program that you can go through that teaches you the mechanics of what you need to do to build an org, coaches you through, ‘What's your mission statement? What's your vision statement?’ Things that you could do on your own but are so much more helpful to do as a part of a team. And the 50CAN team held a high bar.”

- Amanda Aragon

ConnCAN Joins 50CAN

Marc Porter Magee: After the StudentsFirst merger was completed and these new fellowships were succeeding, we started looking around in 2017 for other opportunities to grow by partnering with other successful state campaigns. The most obvious one was the original CAN in Connecticut. ConnCAN had been operating independently under the leadership of Jen Alexander. I reached out to Jen and we started talking about what a possible partnership might look like and what it would take for it to be a win-win for both sides. As this conversation was going on, Jen decided it might be the right time to pass the baton, so then the conversation became: could we do a merger and a leadership transition at the same time?

Alex Johnston: With the announcement of the leadership transition at ConnCAN, the logic of being part of the larger 50CAN network was just so clear. The level of engagement that would have been required by the board to run its own search process was really high and 50CAN was so well positioned to run it on behalf of the ConnCAN board. And so I think people just looked at it and were like, “Yeah, this makes sense.” And it also then allowed ConnCAN to run on a leaner footprint, which was important.

Marc Porter Magee: It was great that ConnCAN wanted to join the 50CAN network but it also created a lot of pressure. I had to step in and run a search process. How do you find someone who can step into the shoes of Alex Johnston and Jen Alexander?



Subira Gordon
ED, ConnCAN, 2018-23

Subira Gordon: When I saw the ConnCAN job opening and that it was now going to be part of 50CAN, I was intrigued. My interest was not only in being a part of a larger national network, but also in the opportunity to then learn from others and broaden my expertise. The brand recognition of ConnCAN was also interesting as it made it feel like I wasn't going to jump to this obscure thing that no one had heard of. Everyone in the legislature knew about the organization. After making the change and joining ConnCAN, I had the realization in switching from inside the legislature to outside the legislature how valuable it was as an advocate to know precisely which levers of change had to be pulled for the things we were most interested in changing.

Marc Porter Magee: When Subira took the job in September 2018 I knew that ConnCAN joining 50CAN would work. If there was one thing we had learned over the years it was that it all starts with a great ED. She quickly got to work on a whole new generation of policy ideas and in the next two years secured a string of big wins in a state whose informal nickname is “The Land of Steady Habits.”

Pandemic Closures, Believing in Better and the New Reality

2020-2025



Marc Porter Magee: It was clear in talking to education leaders in the first week in March 2020 that we were only days away from schools being closed. And what a lot of people were saying to each other in the ed reform space was: this will be hard on the staff, people's kids will be home, just ease up on the work for a while. My wife was the superintendent of a network of Catholic schools at the time and I saw her working basically around the clock for her students to make sure they had what they needed in this crisis. I just had this moment of clarity where I thought: we needed to work just as hard for the kids we represented.

Derrell Bradford: The thing I remember most about those early days was the sense of urgency. That came from Marc. The idea was that this was an emergency and we needed to rebuild all our plans from the bottom up to meet the moment. It had a profound effect on everything at 50CAN, up to and including our new policy vision which grew out of this mindset. We rethought education funding and measurement, adopted tutoring and summer learning as key goals, rewrote our strategic plan. It felt like almost overnight we were a very different organization.

Jonathan Nikkila: I remember getting pulled into an all-staff 50CAN meeting on Monday, March 16 when schools had just closed. I told my boys: "Okay. I have an important phone call. You can't disturb me. If it's an

emergency, let me know.” They came in within 10 minutes and they put a note on my desk asking if they could have the candy bars that were on top of the refrigerator. And I said, “This is not an emergency, guys. This is not the definition of an emergency.” We had staff suddenly home with young kids, with babies, trying to keep the work going. A lot of people had gotten Covid. It got pretty tense. There were definitely some tears. But it was a turning point for us. I think we had a much stronger sense of purpose and we were much more clear about what it was we were trying to accomplish as an organization.

Lori Armistead: I remember talking to Joe Williams and saying, “I think now is the time. I think that this is the most visibility into the classrooms that has ever existed. This is our moment of opportunity.” But it was clear that the policy agenda was not meeting this moment in time. When I realized that Marc and Derrell were thinking along the same lines, these streams of thought came together really quickly and we were pushing each other to think bigger and bolder.

Derrell Bradford: What the moment required was a whole new policy vision we could all rally around. The central idea was that returning to normal wasn’t good enough. We had to believe that better than normal was our goal. That led us to our “Believe in Better” policy framework, organized around five promises to kids.

Jonathan Nikkila: I remember David embraced our new Believe in Better policy framework really fast and then Amanda organized her new goals under the Believe in Better buckets. I was like, “Oh, okay. I guess this is going to work.”

David Sun-Miyashiro: At first I was in shock when they indefinitely suspended Hawaii’s legislative session. We knew we needed to do something but there wasn’t even a way to talk about passing new bills. Something in me clicked and I said to myself, “All right. Let’s stop planning for the best-case scenario and start thinking about the worst.” We asked parents: What do your kids need to keep learning if we don’t reopen schools this year? And the big answer was connectivity. So, we raised money to outfit vans with WiFi routers and drove them into rural neighborhoods to get kids online.

Anna Marcucio: We were just finishing up a new strategic plan when schools shut down. By summer 2021 our board was saying, “We need to figure out how to get kids back on track. And that needs to be our singular focus right now.” After 18 months of conversations with state leaders about what they needed to accelerate student learning, we refined our investment strategy to focus on implementing evidence-based policies—including literacy and high-dosage tutoring—while relying on national

partners like 50CAN to advance policy advocacy at the state level.

“What the moment required was a whole new policy vision we could all rally around. The central idea was that returning to normal wasn’t good enough. We had to believe that better than normal was our goal.”

- Derrell Bradford



Sunny Larson

Bloomberg Philanthropies, 2015-present

Sunny Larson: Both personally and professionally, I experienced this big shift. I had a kid who was about to turn four and one who was in first grade. And then from a philanthropy perspective, I think it really did push us to step up and do more. When it was safe to return to schools, and we had vaccines, and we had protocols, how many places were very slow in opening, much slower than they actually needed to be? I think that, in particular, was just really galvanizing for us. One new idea we developed was the Summer Boost summer learning program, which was born from the personal experience of seeing kids fall behind. From the inception of the idea to actual grants out the door was just a matter of a few months.



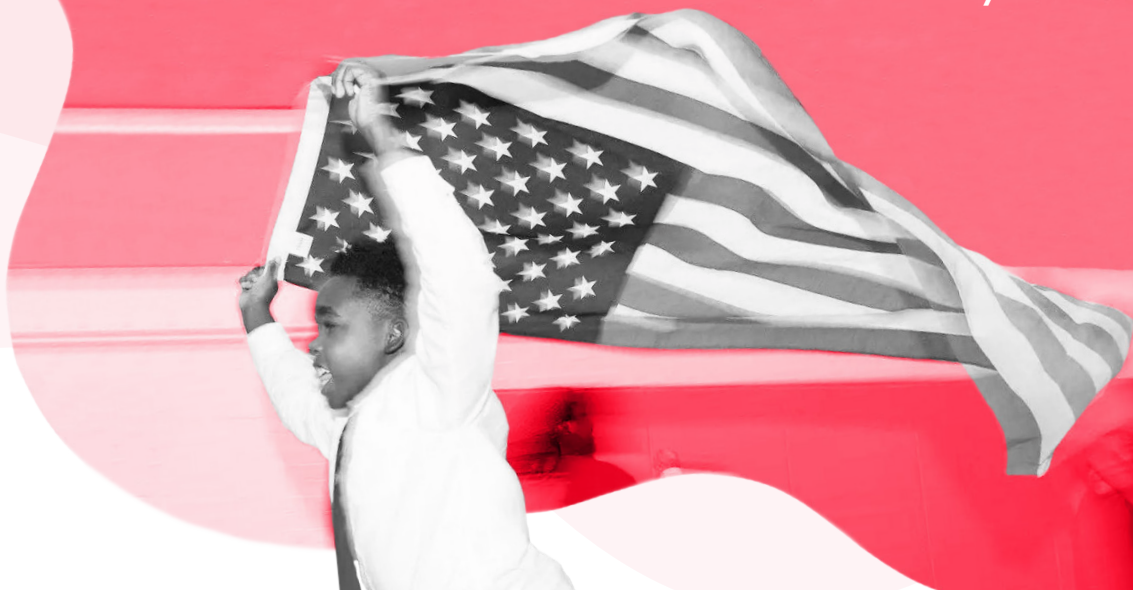
Kenna Little

VP of Finance & Operations, 50CAN,
2021-present

Kenna Little: We were excited when Sunny reached out about the idea of Summer Boost. We had seen the need for new programs to catch kids back up and had already started to advocate for more summer opportunities. Through the “Build” initiative we had launched in 2019, we had already shown we could quickly incubate new ideas and provide the financial and operational infrastructure to take them to scale. But we had to move quickly. I had previously served as the CFO at a school so that had helped me think through what it would take from the schools’ perspective to get a program like this up and running in just a few weeks. There were a lot of late nights and weekends on all sides but it was so rewarding when it all came together. Now 35,000 students a year are getting free, high-quality summer programming they would not have had without Summer Boost.

What We Learned and Where We Go Next

2026 and Beyond



Michelle Rhee: When I look back on the last 15 years, one thing I'm struck by is how much of the whole ed reform movement is fueled by the belief that we should be able to run school systems that actually do educate all kids. And if we're holding ourselves accountable to that belief, then you've got to follow this thing all the way through to results. Back in the day, we just seemed to have so many people who thought, "In order for our country to live up to its potential and its ideals, we have to do this." We need a new generation of people who feel that same passion to live up to our potential over the next 15 years.

Hanna Skandera: One of the most important lessons I have taken from the past 15 years is that without grass-roots ownership, even the strongest policy wins will not endure. You can pass extraordinary legislation, but it will fade without true community investment. Ensuring sustainability requires recognizing that parents must be empowered to make choices. When families are given meaningful options, they will fight to protect them, and that advocacy is what ensures long-term durability.

Jonah Edelman: I think one key for the longevity of the education advocacy campaigns that have lasted has been strategic adaptation. You can't stay the same. You

can't be hidebound. You can't be set in your ways and continue to achieve a significant amount of impact, let alone continue to exist.

Kenna Little: That idea of adaptation really resonates with me. I came into my job at 50CAN as someone who was very structured in their approach to the work. I've come to see how valuable it can be to be nimble as well. You never know where the next opportunity will come from and you will miss it—and the chance to make a difference for kids—if you aren't willing to drop everything and seize the moment.

Sunny Larson: I have definitely taken away the fact that something like the pandemic can erase many years of hard-earned gains very quickly. If ed reform is like pushing a boulder up a hill, the pandemic showed us all just how steep that curve was and how quickly the boulder can roll back down to the bottom. Now that we're seeing academic recovery finally coming together after the pandemic, it has also driven home the importance of embracing ideas like using summer time more effectively and leveraging high-dosage tutoring to drive achievement. Both these things have been around for a long time but neither was necessarily central to the reform playbook. Our response to the pandemic changed that.

Amanda Aragon. One of the most valuable things about pausing and looking back on what has happened since 50CAN launched is coming to the realization that education advocacy is a long game. There might be short sprints of success but, overall, changing a huge public institution like any state's education system is a marathon. It is also clear now how important it is to build this movement one state at a time and create a support network between states so you aren't doing it alone. The 50CAN model is so unique in the way it doesn't ask us to give up on local autonomy to get access to robust support from really smart people who really care about our mission. I think it's really interesting to be here at 15 years, having gone through all of these shifts, and realize that we have come out of this journey ready to take on so much more. I can't wait to see what we do next.

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