

Framing Stories of Success



Success stories—of programs, people, and policies—are a key feature of social change communications

Often these stories zoom in on one individual or event. “Portrait,” or “hero” stories are very common in advocacy communications, but their focus on a single event or larger-than-life personality can undermine grassroots efforts. By isolating an event from the complex historical and political context that led up to it, such stories typically fail to help the public understand the bigger systemic and structural roots of a social issue. They also feed the perception that only exceptional individuals can or should be involved in civic efforts.

The alternative is “landscape” stories. Landscape stories zoom out, widening the lens to make room in the narrative for context, history, and social systems—the big picture. They can be just as compelling and memorable as a hero story but with the added benefits of building audiences’ knowledge about social issues and their sense of themselves as participants in civic life. They explore the real roots of a social problem, show who or what is responsible for it, and explain the large-scale, collective solutions that can fix the problem, and how. Landscape stories make better social-change narratives.

Telling stories that spark people’s will to participate in social change calls for different techniques than the usual case study or advocacy profile. Landscape stories:

- Start with the solution to a problem and share a collective vision.
- Show cooperation, coordination, and the many people it takes to make social change.
- Get “under the hood” of a social issue to reveal how particular systems or structures produce the conditions that need to be changed.
- Explain how ordinary people come to do extraordinary things.

The following contrasting examples tell the same story twice: once in portrait and once in landscape form. Compare how the fight for Denison High School in Jackson City unfolds in each version. How might you, as a strategic framer, use the landscape story elements to “widen the lens” on a success story your organization tells?



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Portrait Story: The Triumphant Hero

The story below illustrates typical elements in a hero story:

- A strong leader dominates the action.
- The root causes of the problem are absent.
- There is little to no role for other people.
- The process—*how* the work got done and by whom—is left unsaid.

At a recent school board meeting, Marcus Bradshaw was a striking figure as he worked the room, greeting parents and other community members assembled to speak up for their children’s education. Bradshaw, the leader of the movement to save Denison High School in Jackson City, is a living legend among education activists. They credit his leadership and vision for the successful campaign to keep the 40-year-old school open in the historic Dixon Heights neighborhood.

In 2011, Jackson City Public Schools officials announced that Denison, deemed a “failing school,” would close its doors, leaving neighborhood families no choice but to send their children to schools in other neighborhoods. Bradshaw was outraged: After years of neglect by the city, why was their neighborhood school chosen for closure instead of reinvestment? Why weren’t predominantly white neighborhoods being forced to send their kids to schools clear across the city? Why were Black neighborhoods facing the closure and privatization of their local schools, the center of their communities?

But unlike others also angered by the announcement, Bradshaw channeled his outrage into action. A natural leader, Bradshaw had honed his activism skills as a community organizer for years. When the Denison news broke, Bradshaw was ready. He organized meetings, a sit-in at the mayor’s office, a 34-day hunger strike, and even a march on Washington. His deep roots in the community helped get neighbors and other allies on board. After a years-long effort, victory arrived: school officials had buckled under the pressure campaign and were proposing a \$14 million investment in Denison to turn it into a leading high school with a cutting-edge arts-based curriculum. The school would not only stay open, it would become a model for school reform and a symbol to others of what one man’s determination can accomplish.



Landscape Story: The Engaged Community

Below, the story about Denison is retold, focusing on the many “landscape-oriented” choices available to social-change storytellers.

Denison High School, a predominantly Black school in a predominantly Black neighborhood on the city’s East Side, had been neglected and mismanaged by Jackson City Public Schools (JCPS) for years. Rather than investing in improvements, JCPS officials declared Denison a “failing school” and announced its closure.

Denison was like many other schools on the list for closure: under-resourced and located in a Black community. The school’s curriculum, classroom technology, and building infrastructure were all outdated, and as the student population shrank, per capita funding shrank, too, compounding the problems. Lacking the resources other schools in the city had—from functioning computers to updated textbooks to a usable gym—students’ education suffered. But closing the school was not a viable solution, either: it would force students to compete in a lottery system for enrollment in other city schools and to commute long distances across the city each day. Local officials in favor of school choice expansion saw the closure of Denison as an opportunity to push for more private schools to open in the area Denison had served. Some private schools often receive public dollars but have little public oversight and fewer regulatory standards requirements than public schools. Opening a private school to replace Denison was no guarantee students would receive a better education.

Today, thanks to investments made as a result of community action, Denison High School is a cutting-edge, open-enrollment public school for the arts. Its infrastructure and amenities have been upgraded and are now a model for other schools in Jackson City. Enrollment is increasing every year.

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Story Element: The Problem

What serious challenge needed to be addressed?

Story Element: Context

What’s the size and scope of problem? What’s the background?

Story Element: The Solution

What fixes are appropriate?
How can progress be made?



To reach this point, parents, students, educators, community organizers from racial justice advocacy groups, and other allies strategized, mobilized, and stayed committed to a long-term fight. How the Dixon Heights and Anniston Park communities organized and won offers lessons for other communities who want to support their public schools.

Sharon Reynolds remembers the first meeting of parents and community members and how daunting it felt to take on school officials: “We first had to get people comfortable talking, but once we got to that point, we were able to channel the conversation towards ideas about what our next steps should be ... and there were a lot of them.” By the end of that meeting the Coalition to Revitalize Denison had been formed. Its first move was to get parents and educators to turn out to an initial rally. The teachers’ union used their resources to help organize canvassing drives throughout the neighborhood to identify allies and collect signatures, and dozens of volunteers participated. The group also organized through social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to increase circles of engagement and build citywide and national awareness of the fight.

Most people say it was Marcus Bradshaw who really got the ball rolling for the Coalition to Revitalize Denison. He saw a familiar pattern unfolding: a long-term disinvestment in a local community school used to justify privatizing education by opening a private school in its place. He knew he wasn’t the only community member upset by Denison’s potential closure and recognized that the community would need to work together if there was any hope of pushing the city to keep the school open, so he called a meeting and called on his circle to turn to *their* circles to get people there.

The community activists were not immediately heard by public officials; and not all of their demands for the reopened Denison could be met. Compromises had to be made.

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Story Element: The Collective

What groups of people came together?

Story Element: The Process

What work was done and what did everyone contribute?

Story Element: The Leader

Who catalyzed the team and brought people together?

Story Element: The Lessons Learned

What obstacles were overcome? What trials-and-errors were encountered?



Despite setbacks, the Coalition kept organizing, mobilizing, and speaking out. Their direct actions culminated in a 34-day hunger strike by activists that received national attention. Consistent public pressure and bad press led Jackson City Public Schools to reverse its decision to close Denison. JCPS invested \$14 million to reopen Denison High School as an open-enrollment school with a performing arts curriculum.

Today, families living nearby can enroll their children in a high school in their own neighborhood. Parents don't have to worry about their children's commute to far-flung schools. Students don't have to attend private charter schools to take Advanced Placement or honors classes. Denison student Nia Taylor said she was fascinated by the story of the hunger strike that helped save the school. "We value our education more because of what people sacrificed," she said.

The Coalition to Revitalize Denison knows the work isn't done. "In order to get this completely renovated school where they've invested more than \$14 million ... look what we had to do," Bradshaw said. "We had to risk our lives." For Bradshaw and his fellow activists, Denison is just one step towards racial and education justice in Dixon Heights and beyond.

● **Story Element: The Climax**

What changes were achieved? How did the victory happen?

● **Story Element: The Epilogue**

Where do things stand now?
What's better than it was?

● **Story Element: The Takeaway**

What can we learn from this story?

To learn more about grassroots, community-based organizing for equitable and just school systems, visit [Journey for Justice Alliance](#).