

Nothing About Us Without Us: The Struggle For Public Education

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Abstract

This practicum thesis explores how grassroots organizing functions as both a sociological method and a democratic practice, grounded in my year-long participation with the Public School Strong campaign in Tennessee (Public School Strong 2023). In response to legislative threats like HB 793 and broader efforts to privatize public education, I engaged in a range of organizing activities—including strategic planning, school board monitoring, and coalition coordination—to understand how ordinary people build and sustain collective power under pressure. Rather than conducting research from a distance, I participated directly in the work, using field notes and critical reflection to analyze the emotional, relational, and strategic dynamics that shape movement-building over time. Drawing from applied sociology and using the insights of scholars such as William Barber (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016), Tamara Draut (Draut 2016), Kathleen Blee (Blee 2012), and George Goehl (Goehl 2020) as interpretive frameworks, this thesis examines how moral framing, decentralized leadership, and coalition infrastructure support resistance in politically hostile environments. I argue that organizing is not only a tactic for responding to harm but also a generative site of knowledge production, care work, and democratic renewal. Through the lens of Public School Strong, I show how acts like attending meetings, coordinating logistics, and supporting vulnerable speakers embody a relational form of power often overlooked in traditional political analysis. Ultimately, this work demonstrates that organizing offers not just a context for sociological inquiry, but a method of practicing sociology in the world—one grounded in participation, emotional labor, and the collective reimagining of what democracy can be.

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Glossary

- Chilling Effect – The discouraging impact of a law or policy that causes individuals—especially those from marginalized communities—to self-censor, withdraw from public engagement, or avoid institutions due to fear of surveillance or retaliation.
- HB 793 / SB 836 – House Bill 793 and Senate Bill 836; proposed Tennessee legislation requiring public schools to collect and potentially report the immigration status of enrolled students.
- ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) – A federal agency under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security responsible for immigration enforcement, including deportation and detention operations.
- KCEC (Knox County Education Coalition) – A grassroots coalition based in Knox County that organizes around education justice and the defense of public schools.
- Moral Framing – The strategy of presenting political or policy issues through the lens of shared ethical values like fairness, dignity, and care, rather than through technical or partisan language.
- Moral Fusion Politics – A cross-issue organizing framework developed by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II that emphasizes unity across race, class, and cause by grounding campaigns in shared moral values and human dignity.
- PSS (Public School Strong) – A statewide grassroots campaign defending public education in Tennessee through visibility, public action, and coalition organizing.
- Power Mapping – A strategic organizing method used to identify key decision-makers, their influencers, and potential pathways for applying political or social pressure

- Relational Organizing – A community organizing approach that builds political and campaign strength through ongoing, trust-based personal relationships rather than purely transactional or short-term mobilization tactics.
- Resolution – A formal statement or policy adopted by a governing body (such as a school board) that expresses collective opinion or intent on an issue, often used as a tool of advocacy or public stance.
- SOCM (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment) – A grassroots membership organization in Tennessee that focuses on environmental, economic, and social justice through community organizing and leadership development.
- TIRRC (Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition) – A statewide, immigrant-led organization advocating for the rights and inclusion of immigrant and refugee communities in Tennessee.
- TN4All (Tennessee for All) – A progressive advocacy organization in Tennessee focused on education equity, economic justice, and immigrant rights, offering research, messaging, and campaign coordination support.
- Voucher Programs – State-funded initiatives that provide public money to families to use toward private or charter school tuition, often criticized for undermining public education systems and exacerbating inequality

Introduction: My Experience in Local & Statewide Organizing

I. Entering the Movement: Personal and Political Context

A. How I Entered the Field

When I began my practicum in applied sociology, I was searching for a space where theory could be tested through collective struggle. In Tennessee, public education had become a frontline of political conflict, particularly for schools serving immigrant and working-class communities. HB 793—a bill aiming to require schools to report students’ immigration statuses—combined many of the structural issues I cared about: racialized surveillance, educational exclusion, and the erosion of democratic protections. I didn’t want to analyze these dynamics from a distance. I wanted to join the fight and understand, from within, how communities build power in response to harm.

My entry point was the Knox County Education Coalition (KCEC), a grassroots hub working to protect public education and resist privatization (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Through KCEC, I connected with Public School Strong (PSS), a decentralized statewide campaign supporting local chapters like ours (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Public School Strong 2023). These networks became the foundation of my fieldwork and political education. While I started out unsure of my role, I kept returning to meetings, events, and planning calls—learning that capacity grows through repetition, relationships, and presence. Over time, what had once felt overwhelming began to reveal structure: an ecosystem of local leadership, shared tools, and evolving strategy rooted in place.

B. The Local Political Climate

Tennessee’s political landscape during my practicum was defined by coordinated attacks on public education and immigrant communities. Lawmakers pushed school privatization while

introducing bills like HB 793, which weaponized public institutions for immigration enforcement and threatened protections under *Plyler v. Doe*. The policy process left little room for public input—hearings were rushed, public comment periods truncated, and testimony from civil rights advocates often dismissed. Local school board meetings became battlegrounds for trust and safety: Would districts protect their students, or comply with state-led surveillance?

Despite these repressive conditions, organizing happened quickly and with resolve. The Education for All campaign united over sixty-five organizations across Tennessee, including groups such as the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition 2001), Tennessee for All (Tennessee for All 2022), Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972), and the Knox County Education Coalition (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). These groups pushed back through coordinated messaging, public storytelling, and collective action. Even when legislative outcomes fell short, the organizing itself became a counterforce—affirming community values, challenging legitimacy, and modeling democratic alternatives. What struck me most was not just the urgency of the response, but the consistency and care that sustained it.

C. First Steps into Organizing

My first months in the Public School Strong campaign gave me a front-row seat to grassroots organizing as lived experience (Public School Strong 2023). I didn't enter with a formal research design—I entered through action: attending strategy meetings, supporting logistics, and learning from seasoned organizers. Communication was informal—group chats, rotating Google Docs—but anchored in trust and care. Power didn't come from titles or résumés;

it came from presence. As I explore in Chapter 1, organizing unfolded relationally, built on repetition, responsiveness, and a shared willingness to act (Public School Strong 2023).

II. Applied Sociology as Praxis

A. Moving Beyond Observation

This practicum was not a traditional research placement—it was an immersive, participatory experience rooted in shared responsibility. I wasn’t studying movement work from afar; I was contributing to its day-to-day function, from planning events and drafting messaging to managing logistics and supporting nervous speakers. These roles revealed how movements are sustained through collective care, flexibility, and dependable labor. The sociology I practiced didn’t live only in field notes—it lived in carpools, spreadsheets, and hallway check-ins that quietly held campaigns together. Being embedded in these tasks shifted my relationship to knowledge production: I was both learning from and shaping what unfolded, translating experience into insight through active participation.

Field notes became my main tool for reflection, not as formal data but as a way of paying attention. I paid attention to whose voices shaped the room, how authority was exercised, and what dynamics unfolded in moments of silence or conflict. I noticed how hallway conversations sometimes held more weight than formal meetings, and how emotional authority often mattered more than titles. Preparing for large events like the April 2 town hall raised sociological questions in real time—about access, legitimacy, and whose stories were seen as persuasive. These weren’t abstract debates; they were felt realities, embedded in choices like speaker order, room layout, and messaging tone.

B. Applied Sociology in Practice

Practicing sociology in this context meant being both a contributor and a critical

participant—thinking from within the work, not above it. I wasn’t conducting a study with clean variables; I was immersed in a dynamic political process where roles, outcomes, and emotions shifted constantly. My learning emerged through embedded action—co-writing talking points, organizing carpools, and adapting to changing conditions. Knowledge in this setting was collective and relational, formed in chain messages, side conversations, and shared exhaustion. What may have looked like small contributions—responding to emails, calming a speaker—were part of a larger, relational sociology that held the campaign together.

These experiences taught me that theory must remain flexible. We didn’t always choose tactics based on ideal strategy—we chose what our people had energy for, what aligned with local culture, or what simply felt right in the moment. These weren’t shortcomings; they were adaptations. Applied sociology, as I came to practice it, was a reciprocal process—interpreting the world as we tried to change it, and letting that process reshape what we thought we knew. Throughout this thesis, I draw on the work of Goehl, Barber, Blee, and Draut from my own analytical lens—not as organizational positions, but as tools for sociological reflection (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016; Blee 2012; Draut 2016; Goehl 2020).

III. Key Themes and Organizing Questions

A. Major Themes Running Through the Practicum

As I moved through organizing spaces, a set of questions repeatedly grounded my work. How do grassroots campaigns sustain themselves in a political environment where threats are constant and wins are rare? I learned that sustainability required more than passion—it relied on intentional structure, relational accountability, and shared leadership. It showed up in how volunteers were welcomed, how debriefs happened after hard meetings, and how burnout was met with care rather than blame.

Another guiding question was: what does it take for organizations with different cultures and capacities to collaborate effectively? Working alongside groups like KCEC, SOCM, and Tennessee for All exposed me to very different approaches (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). These differences didn't weaken the coalition, but they did require constant negotiation. Timelines didn't always match, messaging varied, and assumptions about decision-making clashed. What kept the work intact was a shared ethic of respect and adaptability.

A third question emerged from the campaign's intersectional nature: how can education justice and immigrant justice be fully integrated? HB 793 forced these movements to converge, but full integration was still uneven. Language access, leadership representation, and outreach strategies didn't always reflect the communities most impacted. This raised deeper questions about centering immigrant voices in education spaces and redistributing power to reflect the full complexity of those served.

Finally, what does organizing teach us about democracy under threat? I watched people testify in spaces where their presence was barely acknowledged, not because they expected to win, but because participation itself was resistance. These experiences reframed my understanding of democracy as something enacted from below through collective defiance and care. I return to these questions in the final chapter to reflect on how this work reshaped my understanding of grassroots strategy, collaboration, and democratic participation.

Chapter 1: Public School Strong – The Campaign at the Center

I. Introduction to Public School Strong

Public School Strong (PSS) is a decentralized, people-powered campaign formed to defend public education across Tennessee in the face of growing legislative threats (Public School Strong 2023). Emerging in response to efforts like school voucher expansion and anti-immigrant proposals such as HB 793, PSS brought together educators, families, students, and advocates around shared values of inclusion, safety, and justice (Public School Strong 2023). Rather than operating as a formal organization, PSS functions as a flexible statewide network supported by anchor groups like the Knox County Education Coalition, Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment, and Tennessee for All (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). These groups offer guidance and shared resources—such as messaging templates, flyers, and talking points—while local chapters retain autonomy to adapt strategies to their own contexts. This structure allowed for cohesion without centralization, giving local teams space to lead while remaining part of a broader movement.

One of the most striking features of PSS was how intentionally it lowered barriers to entry. Outreach tools—like flyers, T-shirts, and online reporting forms—were not just promotional; they were gateways into the work (Public School Strong 2023). Visibility became a form of organizing: wearing a blue PSS shirt to a school board meeting signaled both solidarity and moral clarity (Public School Strong 2023). This collective presence helped new participants feel immediately welcomed and emboldened in spaces that often feel inaccessible. From my earliest moments with KCEC, I noticed how these signals of shared identity built trust and

momentum (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Participation didn't require professional expertise—only presence and a willingness to contribute.

The campaign's motto, "We protect us," reflects a proactive approach grounded in grassroots responsibility. PSS did not wait for institutional permission or recognition—it moved forward through visible, community-led action (Public School Strong 2023). At the heart of this work was relational infrastructure: quiet but essential practices like checking in with nervous speakers, offering reassurance during tense meetings, or following up after public events (Public School Strong 2023). These acts of care were not peripheral to the work—they were the work. They made participation sustainable and fostered a culture of mutual accountability. While I explore these dynamics in greater depth in Chapter 3, what stood out even in early encounters was the role of emotional labor in holding the campaign together.

Another defining element of PSS was its commitment to moral framing. Drawing on movement traditions like those articulated by Rev. Dr. William Barber in *The Third Reconstruction*, the campaign emphasized public education as a moral issue—not just a policy debate (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016; Public School Strong 2023). This approach, as I interpret it, helped unify a diverse base around common values. By centering narratives of belonging, care, and democratic responsibility, PSS moved people to action not through fear or technocratic reasoning, but through shared ethical commitments (Public School Strong 2023). Rather than abstracting harm into policy critiques, messaging grounded in lived experience allowed communities to see themselves as central to the fight.

Over the course of my practicum, Public School Strong became more than a campaign—it became a model for how grassroots power can be cultivated through care, consistency, and community connection. Its decentralized structure invited participation at every level and created

space for people to step into leadership by doing. What I witnessed was not organizing reserved for the charismatic or experienced, but a distributed practice of shared responsibility. Power, in this context, was built through small, repeated acts: showing up, checking in, helping others be heard. These small acts—quiet as they often were—sustained momentum and reminded me that organizing is not a spectacle of urgency, but a steady discipline of presence.

II. Strategic Framework and Core Actions

A. The Ladder of Engagement

Public School Strong (PSS) operates through a flexible organizing model often referred to as a “ladder of engagement.” (Public School Strong 2023). This approach invites new participants to join in small, accessible ways and gradually deepen their involvement through trust, repetition, and relational connection. Actions might include attending a Zoom orientation, wearing a campaign shirt to a school board meeting, completing a report form, assisting with logistics, or eventually taking on facilitation or strategy roles. Participation grows not through pressure but through encouragement, and the model adapts to each individual’s pace and capacity.

My own path followed this arc. I began by attending a virtual orientation and showing up at school board meetings, gradually taking on more responsibility as I grew familiar with the campaign’s values and methods. These small early acts—showing up, listening, documenting—were treated not as peripheral, but as foundational to the work. Over time, I moved into coordination roles, but this shift was relational rather than formal, shaped by presence, accountability, and shared purpose. This process mirrored the ladder of engagement described by George Goehl, but with greater emphasis on emotional grounding and relational pace (Goehl 2020).

This method aligns with George Goehl’s organizing principles of base-building through trust and political education (Goehl 2020). While Goehl’s model outlines a more structured progression, PSS emphasized adaptability and emotional grounding (Goehl 2020; Public School Strong 2023). Agitation here was less about provocation and more about invitation—calling people in rather than calling them out. Power was redefined not by title or visibility, but by consistency and the ability to hold space for others. My reflections on this process are informed by Goehl’s framework, which I draw on analytically rather than as a campaign directive (Goehl 2020).

B. Statewide Infrastructure

Though decentralized, PSS maintained a lightweight but sturdy infrastructure to connect local campaigns across Tennessee’s 95 counties (Public School Strong 2023). Standardized tools—such as messaging templates, report forms, and graphic designs—were offered to chapters, who could then tailor them to local needs. This mix of coherence and flexibility helped reinforce a shared political vision without enforcing uniformity. Coordination across counties was supported by groups like SOCM and Tennessee for All, who hosted monthly calls, shared legislative updates, and provided digital resources (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). While I did not join statewide calls directly, the tools they produced were regularly shared in local meetings, shaping our outreach and messaging efforts. These resources also provided emotional reinforcement. Seeing coordinated activity across counties reminded us that we were part of a broader movement, helping sustain morale during moments of fatigue or frustration. Crucially, this infrastructure relied more on mutual accountability than central authority. Trust and respect carried the system, not hierarchy. Contributions of all sizes—editing a flyer, organizing carpools, forwarding a call-to-action—

were recognized as vital. This ethic helped resist the creeping professionalization that can fracture movements, and instead fostered a culture of interdependence.

C. Signature Tactics

PSS's core tactics—organized presence, coordinated pressure, and community-centered town halls—were simple but strategically powerful (Public School Strong 2023). School board meetings were a foundational arena: participants wore matching blue shirts, sat together, and documented proceedings (Public School Strong 2023). These tactics not only made power visible—they also shifted public space. Our coordinated presence disrupted the default silence around harmful policy proposals and created safer space for families to speak out. When HB 793 gained momentum, the campaign responded with coordinated pressure across counties—through public comment, petitions, and school board resolutions. Tools were shared widely, but never imposed. Each county adapted based on capacity and context, maintaining alignment while respecting difference. The use of moral framing—emphasizing dignity, inclusion, and justice—anchored campaign messaging across regions (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016; Public School Strong 2023).

One of the most impactful strategies, particularly in Knox County, was the use of town halls as alternative forums for democratic participation. These events invited community members to speak in their own voices, on their own terms. While I take up the April 2 town hall in greater depth in Chapter 3, it's important to note here that these gatherings modeled the campaign's ethos: relational, participatory, and emotionally grounded. Together, these tactics reflected the campaign's broader strategic logic. They prioritized consistency over spectacle, and care over charisma. Small acts—passing a flyer, offering support to a nervous participant, coordinating carpools—became powerful mechanisms of belonging. Organizing, I came to

understand, was not defined by scale or status, but by the everyday labor that sustains people's ability to stay in the work. That ethic of care became the campaign's strongest infrastructure—and one of its most enduring legacies.

III. Local Implementation in Knox County

A. Local PSS Team

In Knox County, Public School Strong (PSS) operated less as a formal organization and more as an evolving network of educators, parents, students, and advocates committed to defending public education (Public School Strong 2023). This local formation took shape alongside the Knox County Education Coalition (KCEC), which served as the primary organizing hub (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). What made the Knox team distinctive was its accessibility—there were no formal titles or rigid roles. Participation was rooted in presence, not credentials. If you showed up, you were part of the team. This challenged conventional ideas of leadership and showed me that coordination and power could emerge through consistent relationships rather than hierarchy.

KCEC's strategy meetings—where legislative updates, campaign planning, and reflection unfolded—became my entry point (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). These meetings didn't follow formal protocols; they unfolded through shared Google Docs, long text threads, and rotating roles. One week someone would facilitate, another week they'd check in on new volunteers. Leadership moved informally and relationally, distributing labor in ways that supported sustainability and reduced burnout. The environment emphasized dependability, care, and a collective willingness to meet the needs of the moment. Occasionally, statewide partners like SOCM would join to share broader context, but the pulse of the work was deeply local—

grounded in firsthand knowledge and lived experience (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972).

This structure reshaped my understanding of what organizing looks like on the ground. It revealed that effective strategy doesn't always come from top-down planning—it grows through accumulated trust, flexibility, and a culture of care. This approach enabled the team to respond quickly to local events, support each other emotionally, and model a horizontal style of power-building.

B. Events and Mobilization

As I became more embedded in the campaign, I began participating in broader mobilizations and training sessions that amplified the visibility and momentum of the work. Events like the February 17 training prepared community members to attend and speak at school board meetings. These sessions offered more than logistics—they created supportive space to process the emotional vulnerability that comes with public participation, especially for those from marginalized backgrounds. Organizing was never framed as neutral or purely technical; it was relational labor that demanded courage and community support.

Throughout the spring, I joined in various actions that strengthened the campaign's public presence—whether through turnout at school board meetings, helping develop flyers, or assisting with local coordination for key moments like Lobby Day and the April 2 town hall. While I discuss those events in depth in Chapter 3, what stood out at this stage was how visible, collective participation functioned as both strategy and affirmation. The campaign didn't just push back on policy—it made space for people to feel ownership of their public schools and see themselves reflected in resistance (Public School Strong 2023). Even as my responsibilities grew—from logistical planning to supporting newer participants—leadership emerged gradually.

No one was assigned a title; instead, people took initiative as they felt ready. This made the work adaptive and resilient. It also allowed new organizers—including myself—to build confidence through action rather than expectation.

C. Tactical Successes and Challenges

The Knox County team achieved several local wins, particularly in shaping the narrative around HB 793 and public education. Our consistent presence at school board meetings helped normalize public dissent. Over time, board members began responding more directly to comments and acknowledging concerns raised by the campaign. Even without legislative victories, the tone in public forums shifted. The coordinated presence—signaled through matching blue shirts and visible solidarity—made it harder for silence to go unnoticed or unchallenged (Public School Strong 2023). The April 2 town hall was one of the campaign’s most powerful tactics, bringing together educators, students, immigrant families, and local leaders. While I explore the planning and outcomes of this event fully in Chapter 3, what bears noting here is that it reflected the deeper strategy of Public School Strong: centering care, connection, and courage (Public School Strong 2023). The event wasn’t just impactful because of who showed up—it mattered because of how the space was created and held.

Still, the campaign faced significant challenges. Volunteer energy ebbed and flowed. Without full-time staff, coordination often fell to a small core who risked burnout. Communication could lag between events, and participation from more rural parts of the county was inconsistent. These difficulties weren’t signs of failure—they revealed the realities of sustaining grassroots work amid relentless political pressure and limited capacity. Organizing is not a sprint or a clean arc of progress. It’s an ongoing commitment to care, consistency, and staying in the work even when outcomes are uncertain. Over time, I came to understand that the

real infrastructure of the campaign wasn't just digital toolkits or turnout numbers—it was emotional and relational. What sustained momentum wasn't a single event, but the daily labor of people texting reminders, calming nerves, or staying after meetings to clean up and check in. Power, in this sense, was practiced through presence. And in the Knox County campaign, that presence—repeated, relational, and rooted in care—became both strategy and survival.

IV. Framing the Fight – PSS Against HB 793

A. Why HB 793 Became a Flashpoint

HB 793 became a defining flashpoint for Public School Strong (PSS) because it targeted the core of what public education is meant to protect: safety, accessibility, and inclusion (Public School Strong 2023). The bill's proposal that school systems track and report students' immigration statuses threatened constitutional protections affirmed in *Plyler v. Doe* and reignited fears that schools could be weaponized against immigrant communities. Yet PSS's response did not frame HB 793 narrowly as an immigration issue—it identified the bill as a broad threat to the public education system itself (Public School Strong 2023). This strategic framing allowed the campaign to expand its reach. While organizations like the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition 2001) led direct advocacy, PSS engaged a wider base by situating HB 793 as a violation of shared community values—trust, dignity, and democracy (Public School Strong 2023). At local meetings, organizers emphasized collective stake: this was not about “helping others,” but about defending the public good. By positioning HB 793 as a danger to all students' sense of safety and belonging, PSS invited broader participation from parents, educators, and students—many of whom might not have seen themselves as directly affected (Public School Strong 2023).

PSS’s distributed structure enabled a rapid and coordinated statewide response. Local teams adapted talking points, wrote resolutions, organized testimony, and maintained visibility across school board meetings (Public School Strong 2023). This responsiveness emerged not from top-down commands, but from the strength of shared tools, relational trust, and a unified moral compass. Strategy documents and messaging drafts circulated quickly, not because someone gave orders, but because decentralized teams were already aligned in purpose. In this moment of statewide urgency, PSS demonstrated the power of organizing infrastructure built on autonomy, mutual accountability, and collective care (Public School Strong 2023).

This model of defensive organizing—locally rooted, morally principled, and relationally connected—helped the campaign not only resist harmful policy, but embody an alternative vision. While the legislative outcome did not change, the campaign succeeded in reframing public discourse, strengthening cross-county relationships, and affirming the values that hold communities together under pressure.

B. Narrative Power

A core strength of PSS’s strategy was its disciplined use of storytelling to reframe HB 793 as a moral crisis rather than a technical policy issue (Public School Strong 2023). Rather than relying solely on legal arguments or abstract data, the campaign elevated personal experiences—particularly those of immigrant students, families, and educators—to highlight the lived harm the bill would cause. This approach reframed the debate from “Is this policy legal?” to “Is this who we are as a community?” In campaign meetings and statewide trainings, storytelling was taught as an intentional organizing practice. Participants were encouraged to frame personal experience in terms of shared values—justice, belonging, and care—and to speak from their own truths, rather than adopt expert-driven scripts. Stories were not used as emotional

decoration—they were organizing tools designed to build resonance, bridge difference, and activate solidarity. Vulnerability, when directed with purpose, became a form of strength (Public School Strong 2023).

One statewide Solidarity Training I attended in April 2025 emphasized this point directly. We practiced not just telling stories, but framing them: connecting individual fears or hopes to collective responsibility. This shifted storytelling from catharsis to strategy. Rather than reinforcing a sense of isolation, personal narratives became a way for people to recognize their shared stake and see themselves as part of the fight.

What I came to understand through this process is that narrative is not supplemental to organizing—it is organizing. It shapes who feels included, who takes action, and what is seen as possible. By centering lived experience, PSS disrupted dominant narratives that cast immigrant families as outsiders, instead affirming their role as integral members of our public schools and communities (Public School Strong 2023). This reframing allowed the campaign to move people—not just intellectually, but emotionally. In doing so, it expanded participation, deepened commitment, and turned storytelling into a vehicle for democratic practice. As I explore more fully in Chapters 3 and 4, the strategic use of narrative helped make HB 793 not only a policy battleground, but a public test of shared values.

V. Reflections on Organizing Through a Campaign

A. What I Learned from the PSS Model

Working within Public School Strong (PSS) offered a firsthand view of what grassroots organizing can look like when it is intentionally decentralized, relational, and value-driven (Public School Strong 2023). The campaign functioned without formal hierarchy or rigid roles. Instead, it was held together by shared materials, consistent visual identity, and a web of mutual

accountability. Anyone willing to contribute could find a place in the work. This openness lowered barriers to participation but also introduced challenges: follow-up sometimes lagged, and coordination between counties was uneven. Still, this flexibility reflected a deeper commitment to building power from the ground up, distributing leadership across communities, and trusting ordinary people to lead.

One of the most enduring lessons I took from the PSS model was the value of consistency, culture, and repetition (Public School Strong 2023). The campaign wasn't sustained by one-time mass actions—it relied on repeated presence and intentional rituals. Matching blue shirts, coordinated talking points, and routine turnout created a sense of collective identity. These rhythms helped build a shared culture that affirmed participants and projected legitimacy. Over time, that culture became a quiet but powerful infrastructure, enabling the campaign to persist even amid legislative setbacks and emotional fatigue. I also came to appreciate how visual solidarity and message discipline serve as organizing tools. These weren't aesthetic choices—they signaled seriousness and clarity, and made the campaign harder to ignore. PSS showed that in grassroots work, influence is often built through symbolic repetition and structured visibility (Public School Strong 2023). Even when our numbers were small, shared visuals and language projected cohesion. Visibility, when rooted in values and backed by coordination, became a form of power.

B. Theoretical Connections

Throughout my practicum, several theoretical frameworks helped me interpret what I was experiencing. George Goehl's *Fundamentals of Organizing* offered a foundation—particularly his emphasis on base-building through relational trust and escalating participation (Goehl 2020). The campaign's ladder of engagement mirrored this model, but also complicated it. In contrast to

a linear progression, leadership in PSS was fluid and situational (Public School Strong 2023). People stepped into roles based on need, not title. This flexibility was empowering, but it also raised questions about sustainability and uneven labor distribution. Goehl’s framework helped me name these tensions—not as failures, but as real-time challenges of democratic organizing (Goehl 2020).

Rev. Dr. William Barber’s *The Third Reconstruction* helped illuminate how PSS framed its mission in moral terms (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016; Public School Strong 2023). Barber argues that movements win by shifting moral narratives, not simply technical arguments (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). PSS embodied this by grounding its messaging in dignity, safety, and shared responsibility (Public School Strong 2023). We opposed HB 793 not only because it violated constitutional precedent, but because it violated the ethical belief that all children deserve to learn without fear. This framing expanded participation, built coalition strength, and gave the campaign emotional resonance. My use of Barber’s framework here reflects my own analysis, not the formal stance of the organizations involved (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016).

Tamara Draut’s *Sleeping Giant* further sharpened my understanding of power within the campaign (Draut 2016). Draut’s focus on working-class, often unseen labor clarified the role of logistical leadership—especially by women and caregivers—whose work sustained the campaign behind the scenes (Draut 2016). In Knoxville, that looked like printing flyers, managing carpools, prepping food, and calming nervous speakers. This labor was political, not peripheral. Draut’s lens helped me recognize it as such and deepened my appreciation for how movements build power through relational and often invisible forms of work (Draut 2016). These frameworks didn’t just help me understand what I saw—they shaped how I showed up. They

encouraged me to notice where structure emerged, where values translated into practice, and how tension, care, and accountability intersected in organizing spaces. PSS didn't just confirm theory—it challenged and expanded it (Public School Strong 2023).

C. Why PSS is Central to My Practicum

Public School Strong was not just one part of my practicum—it was the central structure through which I engaged the work of organizing. It connected school board meetings, legislative advocacy, community forums, and coalition strategy into a single campaign ecosystem (Public School Strong 2023). Whether I was editing talking points, coordinating logistics, or supporting group facilitation, I was participating in a relational model of organizing that grounded and shaped my sociological learning. Even seemingly mundane tasks—sending reminders, updating spreadsheets—were part of a broader political commitment and shared organizing rhythm. This embedded engagement allowed me to practice sociology as participation, not observation. I didn't just study organizing—I contributed to it. And in doing so, I encountered questions that weren't hypothetical: What sustains people in difficult work? How is power shared and held? What emotional and structural conditions make democratic participation possible? These questions arose not in theory alone, but in action. PSS gave me a living model of participatory sociology—where meaning is produced collectively, and where the labor of organizing is itself a form of knowledge generation (Public School Strong 2023). In this setting, I learned to navigate complexity, lean into discomfort, and practice accountability not as performance, but as ongoing commitment. The campaign shaped not only my practicum—it shaped my understanding of power, purpose, and what it means to do sociology in the world. The next chapter explores how these dynamics shaped our strategic framework and major organizing events.

Chapter 2: The Network – Working with KCEC, SOCM, and Tennessee for All

I. Overview of the Coalition Ecosystem

A. Coalition-Based Organizing in Tennessee

The organizing landscape I encountered during my practicum was shaped by a dynamic, responsive coalition ecosystem. Rather than operating through permanent alliances or rigid structures, organizations in Tennessee often collaborated through time-sensitive, threat-based coordination. These alignments were not formalized through shared offices or joint staffing; instead, they were sustained by relationships, mutual goals, and the urgency of collective survival. Groups like the Knox County Education Coalition (Knox County Education Coalition 2018), Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972), and Tennessee for All (Tennessee for All 2022) exemplified this model. While each continued its own work between crises, they often coalesced during high-stakes moments—especially legislative threats to public education and immigrant communities.

Each group played a distinct but interdependent role within the network. KCEC, deeply embedded in Knoxville’s civic landscape, focused on local engagement, school board pressure, and parent-led visibility (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). SOCM, as a longstanding grassroots organization, coordinated statewide communication infrastructure, hosted briefings, and supported cross-county organizing (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). Tennessee for All brought a more technical and policy-oriented dimension, offering legislative summaries, narrative framing, and public-facing materials that helped translate internal strategy into accessible language (Tennessee for All 2022). These complementary strengths allowed the coalition to remain agile and impactful without requiring uniformity. During the HB 793 response, for example, shared tools like messaging templates and report

forms enabled each group to mount localized actions that still felt part of a unified statewide push.

Reflecting on these dynamics, I found strong resonance with Kathleen Blee's *Democracy in the Making*, which describes how coalitions often arise from shared moral urgency rather than institutional efficiency (Blee 2012). Coalition organizing in Tennessee was rarely seamless, and the absence of centralized command sometimes produced confusion or pacing challenges. Yet what the coalition lacked in tidiness, it made up for in responsiveness. When school boards began the conversation of HB 793, organizers mobilized almost immediately. Messaging drafts, social media posts, and turnout plans circulated quickly—not because someone at the top issued directives, but because people across the network recognized a collective threat and moved together in response.

What emerged was a form of moral infrastructure grounded not in rules or roles, but in shared purpose, trust, and distributed leadership. Volunteers showed up not out of obligation, but out of recognition that their participation mattered in real time. In this way, the coalition demonstrated that organizing power does not require institutional merger or bureaucratic perfection. It can emerge through aligned intentions, mutual respect, and the willingness to act in concert even without consensus on every detail. That ethos defined much of the coalition work I witnessed during my practicum, and it showed me that durable organizing is often less about creating new structures and more about tending to the relationships that allow existing ones to move together in moments of need.

B. Direct Involvement

My role during the practicum was not confined to a single organization; instead, I moved fluidly between KCEC, SOCM, and Tennessee for All, occupying a liminal space shaped by

trust, flexibility, and mutual responsiveness (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). At KCEC, I contributed to local outreach, helped coordinate messaging, and participated in ongoing meetings centered on Knoxville's particular political landscape (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). At the same time, I regularly engaged with SOCM's statewide infrastructure—using their report forms, adapting their action templates, and incorporating their messaging updates into our local organizing (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). Tennessee for All brought a different kind of engagement: their materials focused on legislative analysis, framing strategies, and policy messaging that helped us bridge the gap between immediate grassroots concerns and broader public narratives (Tennessee for All 2022).

This in-between positioning was not incidental—it became a meaningful part of how I contributed to the coalition ecosystem. Rather than being tasked with formal responsibilities, I stepped into roles as needed, often acting as a connective thread between overlapping campaigns. I helped align messaging across teams, shared updates between meetings, and provided informal feedback on how decisions were landing in different organizing spaces. This kind of cross-organizational labor was not glamorous, but it was vital. Being able to move between different political cultures—between the relational focus of KCEC, the coordination infrastructure of SOCM, and the policy strategy of Tennessee for All—meant that I often found myself translating across organizing languages and making sure that no one was left out of the loop (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; SOCM 1972; Tennessee for All 2022).

In a decentralized coalition, such connective work is not peripheral—it is what allows the coalition to function. Through this experience, I came to understand that coalitional labor is fundamentally relational. It's not just about moving information or managing logistics—it's

about noticing where gaps might form, where relationships need tending, and where coordination risks breaking down. Often, my contributions were subtle: noticing who hadn't spoken in a meeting, checking in with volunteers after emotionally difficult events, or reminding organizers that another group had already created a tool they could adapt. Over time, these small acts of attentiveness and care helped build trust and cohesion. When people came to rely on me to carry information, smooth tensions, or maintain continuity across spaces, I realized that even without a title, I was holding real responsibility.

Being embedded across multiple organizations also taught me that leadership in coalition spaces doesn't always look like giving speeches or making decisions. Sometimes, it looks like listening closely, showing up consistently, and helping others stay connected to the work and each other. The coalition's ability to stay grounded in shared values—despite differences in style, focus, or approach—depended on this kind of behind-the-scenes labor. In a decentralized movement, infrastructure is often embodied by people, and what sustains it is trust built over time. My practicum gave me the chance to practice that kind of leadership—not as authority, but as accountability—and to see how small acts of connection can become the glue that holds a movement together.

II. Knox County Education Coalition (KCEC)

A. Who They Are

The Knox County Education Coalition (KCEC) is a local education justice network rooted in community, not bureaucracy (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Unlike a traditional nonprofit, KCEC does not have paid staff, a board of directors, or a formal organizational structure (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Instead, it exists as a coalition—an evolving circle of parents, educators, students, and community members aligned

by shared purpose rather than institutional affiliation (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Formed in 2018 in response to persistent school funding cuts and harmful education policies, KCEC has since become one of the most consistent forces for education justice in Knoxville (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). What distinguishes the coalition is not its size or formal influence, but its capacity to bring together people who might otherwise feel excluded from traditional policy spaces and offer them a role in shaping public education from the ground up (Knox County Education Coalition 2018).

KCEC's campaigns reflect both its responsiveness to local concerns and its connection to statewide movements (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Past efforts such as Stop the Scam, Fee-Free Schools, and its participation in Public School Strong illustrate the coalition's ability to balance rapid response with a longer-term vision for education equity (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; (Public School Strong 2023). These efforts have targeted voucher schemes, hidden public school fees, and threats to immigrant students, while also cultivating narratives that position public education as a democratic right. As I observed during my practicum, KCEC was uniquely positioned to respond to urgent school board votes one week and host planning sessions about systemic reforms the next (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). This duality—acting in the moment while building toward the future—allowed the coalition to remain relevant and resilient, even in an increasingly hostile political climate (Knox County Education Coalition 2018).

The group's informality was one of its greatest assets but also one of its most consistent challenges. By removing barriers to participation, KCEC created a space where people could get involved regardless of experience or background (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). First-time attendees were often invited to share ideas, contribute to planning, or take on simple

but meaningful tasks. This openness was key to cultivating community trust and participation, especially among parents and educators. However, the absence of a formal structure also made it difficult to manage logistics, distribute responsibilities evenly, or maintain momentum between campaigns. As meetings grew in urgency and complexity, the coalition's ability to adapt often relied on the informal leadership of a few consistent organizers. Still, it was this improvisational, relationship-driven mode of operation that made KCEC a powerful example of grassroots organizing grounded in care and mutual accountability (Knox County Education Coalition 2018).

B. Direct Involvement

My involvement with KCEC centered on supporting both strategic planning and the day-to-day logistics that held the coalition's work together (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). One of the most impactful experiences I had was helping organize the April 2 town hall, which brought together community members across lines of race, immigration status, and political role to speak out against HB 793, voucher scams, and school privatization. I helped design outreach plans, develop speaker guides, print flyers, and coordinate event logistics. On the day of the event, I staffed the check-in table, adjusted seating to accommodate families, and helped keep the flow of the program on track. These responsibilities gave me a first-hand understanding of how political events are constructed—not only as opportunities for visibility, but as spaces for emotional safety, relational repair, and public courage. What looked like a seamless public gathering was actually built from dozens of quiet, behind-the-scenes actions.

In addition to event planning, I played a consistent support role in the coalition's messaging work. This included reviewing talking points about school privatization and HB 793, supporting the development of narrative strategies that exposed the billionaire-funded interests behind voucher programs, and offering suggestions for how to better connect campaign messages to

local concerns. I also attended frequent planning meetings where we discussed the framing of public comment testimony, coordinated turnout for school board actions, and debriefed legislative developments. In those spaces, I saw how strategic decision-making was not confined to policy documents—it lived in every conversation about timing, audience, and tone.

My participation was never flashy, but it was foundational: helping others prepare for testimony, relaying updates, and pitching in wherever the work needed doing. Over time, I came to see my role not as a distinct assignment, but as part of an ecosystem—one where many small, relational acts sustained the broader organizing effort. Whether I was printing materials, prepping for a meeting, or checking in with a nervous speaker, each task contributed to a wider campaign grounded in trust and mutual care. KCEC didn't need me to be an expert (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). It needed me to be consistent, attentive, and responsive. And through that embedded participation, I learned that what makes a coalition work isn't just strategic brilliance—it's continuity, shared commitment, and the willingness to do the invisible work that allows others to step into visibility and power.

C. KCEC's Political Identity and Challenges

KCEC's political identity is shaped by its community-based roots and the diversity of experiences its members bring to the work (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Its organizing culture is multiracial, intergenerational, and grounded in the daily realities of Knoxville's schools and neighborhoods. The coalition is unapologetically values-driven, viewing public education as a public good and organizing around the principle that all children—regardless of immigration status, zip code, or language—deserve equitable, fully funded schools. Yet its identity is also flexible, constantly evolving in response to who is in the room, what resources are available, and which threats are most immediate. That flexibility is both strategic

and necessary, allowing the coalition to respond quickly to political shifts and legislative surprises. At the same time, it comes with trade-offs: without formal structure or paid capacity, the coalition must continuously adapt to prevent burnout and disconnection.

One of the clearest tensions I observed was the pressure placed on a small number of consistent organizers to keep everything moving. These individuals often served as de facto anchors for meetings, messaging, and coordination, even as they balanced their own professional and caregiving responsibilities. While others cycled in and out of participation depending on time and energy, this core group bore much of the emotional and strategic weight of the campaign. I saw how this dynamic could lead to exhaustion, particularly during periods of sustained urgency—such as the push against HB 793—when multiple campaigns overlapped. The coalition’s decentralized nature offered accessibility, but it also meant that capacity often became unevenly distributed. That imbalance didn’t reflect a lack of commitment; it reflected the structural limitations of grassroots work without institutional resources or full-time support. KCEC also had to navigate internal differences in organizing philosophy (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). While some members prioritized direct action and public confrontation, others emphasized institutional engagement, believing that long-term change required building relationships with policymakers and crafting persuasive resolution language. These differences didn’t fracture the coalition, but they did shape how decisions were made. Strategic disagreements were typically resolved through relational negotiation—ongoing conversations, trust-building, and a willingness to try multiple approaches (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). This taught me that disagreement is not something to be avoided in coalition work—it is something to be managed, worked through, and held with care. The

coalition's ability to hold those tensions while continuing to act collectively reflected a kind of grassroots democratic resilience that I found deeply instructive.

What I ultimately learned from working within KCEC is that political strength doesn't always look like efficiency, polish, or control. Sometimes it looks like messiness, improvisation, and holding each other accountable through the uncertainty (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). The coalition's power came from its refusal to disengage—from its members' decision to keep showing up, even when energy ran low, when meetings got tense, or when campaign results were inconclusive. That persistence—the collective will to stay in the fight—is what defines KCEC's political identity (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). And it's what makes the coalition not just a local education group, but a living example of community-based resistance sustained by trust, adaptation, and shared purpose (Knox County Education Coalition 2018).

III. SOCM – Statewide Organizing for Community Empowerment

A. Organizational Background

Statewide Organizing for Community Empowerment (SOCM) is one of Tennessee's most longstanding and multifaceted grassroots organizations, with a legacy of advocacy that spans environmental justice, economic equity, and democratic participation (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). What distinguishes SOCM is not only the breadth of its issue areas but its deep commitment to political education as the bedrock of organizing (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). Rather than orienting around short-term wins, SOCM cultivates long-term leadership through trainings, power analyses, and collective reflection (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). This emphasis on capacity-building reflects a broader theory of change: that

sustainable movements are built not just on moments of resistance, but on relationships, skills, and a grounded understanding of how power operates.

In the context of the Public School Strong (PSS) campaign, SOCM played a foundational role in weaving local actions into a coherent statewide strategy (Public School Strong 2023; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). While PSS is intentionally decentralized to support local autonomy, SOCM functioned as a connective hub—facilitating legislative updates, training volunteers, and offering behind-the-scenes infrastructure that kept the campaign aligned without centralizing control (Public School Strong 2023; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). What I witnessed was not a command center but a support system, designed to reinforce local leadership while ensuring that smaller counties weren't left behind. SOCM's organizers served as a quiet but crucial force—linking people, messages, and momentum across vastly different geographies (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972).

One of SOCM's most strategic contributions was its commitment to rural outreach (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). In a state where political discourse is often driven by urban centers like Nashville or Memphis, SOCM ensured that voices from smaller counties and under-resourced communities remained central to the organizing narrative (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). This was not symbolic inclusion—it was tactical clarity. Legislation like HB 793 threatened students across Tennessee, and SOCM's work ensured that resistance was not confined to metropolitan pockets (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). I came to appreciate how essential this rural grounding was—not just in messaging, but in shifting who gets to be seen as a stakeholder in public education and immigrant justice. SOCM's approach demonstrated that

effective statewide organizing must be geographically inclusive and grounded in local experience (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972).

B. Trainings and Capacity-Building

One of the most formative elements of my practicum was participating in SOCM-led and co-facilitated trainings, which introduced me to a model of organizing that was simultaneously strategic and accessible (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). I first encountered SOCM's approach during a Public School Strong orientation session, where the emphasis was on lowering the barriers to entry: explaining how showing up visibly at a school board meeting, submitting a standardized report form, or joining a messaging team were all valid and valuable forms of participation (Public School Strong 2023; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). This framing helped demystify organizing for new volunteers, reinforcing the idea that movement-building isn't reserved for professionals—it belongs to everyone.

As the campaign against HB 793 intensified, I joined a lobbying training led jointly by SOCM and Tennessee for All in preparation for the March 11 Lobby Day (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). The session introduced participants to values-based messaging, legislative targeting, and role-based team structures for meetings with lawmakers. My group was tasked with preparing arguments for a swing legislator, and we worked to articulate our message around themes of student safety, institutional trust, and the moral cost of criminalizing school spaces. While I collaborated with my group to ask clarifying questions and help refine talking points, I did not directly participate in the lobbying meetings themselves. Instead, I chose to observe the live legislative session on HB 793 in the House chamber, while other teams met privately with lawmakers. Practicing those conversations

in advance still made the experience of entering the Capitol more purposeful, and I saw how these trainings helped even the most nervous first-time advocates walk into high-stakes political spaces with clarity and resolve.

Beyond event-based preparation, SOCM offered ongoing political education that deepened my understanding of organizing as a long-term process (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). A particularly meaningful experience was a book group discussion of George Goehl's *A Guide to Fundamental Organizing*, where we examined the organizing arc from listening to agitation to leadership development (Goehl 2020). Goehl's concepts mirrored what I was witnessing across campaign spaces in Knoxville—volunteers who started by observing were later leading breakout groups, preparing testimony, or guiding event logistics (Goehl 2020). These discussions helped us connect our immediate decisions to broader theories of change, reinforcing that effective organizing is not just reactive—it is developmental, relational, and iterative.

SOCM also offered concrete strategic tools through power-mapping exercises and legislative briefings (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). In one session, we created detailed maps of key decision-makers, identifying not only their formal authority but their relational ties—such as community affiliations, donor relationships, or ideological leanings. This helped our team better understand where influence could be applied and which actors might be persuadable. Legislative briefings, meanwhile, broke down complex committee processes and helped clarify when public pressure would be most effective. These tools moved our strategy from reactive to proactive, allowing us to target our efforts with greater precision.

On statewide calls, organizers would break down committee assignments, explain procedural pathways, and help teams time their advocacy efforts for maximum impact. These tools were not abstract—they were immediately applicable. Our team in Knox County used SOCM’s resources to plan the rollout of petitions, coordinate public comment, and track shifts in local board sentiment (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). SOCM didn’t just mobilize people for one action—it prepared them to think and act strategically across an evolving political terrain (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). That preparation was essential for sustaining momentum, especially in a context defined by rapid-fire legislative threats and limited grassroots capacity.

C. What SOCM Offers the Movement

SOCM’s most critical contribution to the Public School Strong campaign—and to Tennessee’s broader organizing infrastructure—is its long-term investment in building durable grassroots power (Public School Strong 2023; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). While many groups focused on reactive mobilization, SOCM prioritized proactive capacity-building, equipping community members with the skills, information, and relationships needed to respond strategically (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). Its guidance helped turn isolated county-level actions into a unified, statewide resistance. This was evident during the HB 793 fight, where local teams from very different communities were able to act in alignment—drawing from shared toolkits, language, and legislative analysis developed by SOCM staff and volunteers (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972).

What impressed me most was SOCM’s ability to bridge organizing cultures across rural and urban divides (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). In legislative

strategy calls, I heard directly from rural chapters where PSS messaging had to be carefully adapted to resonate with more conservative school boards (Public School Strong 2023). SOCM didn't treat these differences as liabilities—it treated them as strategic factors, helping each team customize their approach while still moving in sync (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). That capacity for strategic contextualization was crucial in a campaign like PSS, where central coordination had to coexist with local flexibility (Public School Strong 2023).

SOCM also brought consistency to a movement ecosystem that could otherwise feel fragmented (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). Through regular check-ins, digital resource hubs, and quiet but persistent follow-up, SOCM helped ensure that organizing teams didn't lose momentum between major events (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). This behind-the-scenes labor was especially valuable in times of heightened urgency—when new bills dropped, when rapid response was needed, or when the emotional toll of organizing made re-engagement difficult. SOCM didn't control the campaign, but it anchored it—making it possible for local energy to sustain itself within a broader structure of shared purpose (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). For me, the most lasting lesson from working alongside SOCM is that movements require more than passion—they require scaffolding (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). They require people who will stay with the work after the rallies end, who will coach new leaders into confidence, and who will build the kind of infrastructure that allows resistance to not only emerge, but endure. SOCM modeled that ethic consistently: not just mobilizing, but preparing; not just reacting, but strategizing; not just amplifying, but connecting (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment 1972). That ethos reshaped how I understand

organizing as both a sociologist and a participant. It affirmed that movement-building is not a moment—it is a method. And it reminded me that behind every visible campaign is a network of people doing quiet, intentional work to hold it all together.

IV. Tennessee for All

A. Who They Are

Tennessee for All (TN4All) is a policy-driven, left-aligned organization committed to building a multiracial democracy in Tennessee through legislative advocacy, narrative strategy, and coordinated alignment with grassroots movements (Tennessee for All 2022). Unlike more decentralized, volunteer-led groups like KCEC or SOCM, TN4All operates with a sharper institutional focus on policy outcomes and structural change (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). Its core strength lies in exposing the political, financial, and ideological forces behind harmful legislation—tracking votes, identifying corporate actors, and providing research-based tools that equip organizers to confront power directly.

Throughout my practicum, TN4All's impact was most visible in moments of urgency and strategic alignment (Tennessee for All 2022). When HB 793 advanced rapidly through the legislature, TN4All circulated a narrative breakdown within hours—clarifying not only the bill's technical implications but also its broader moral stakes (Tennessee for All 2022). This framing helped local coalitions like KCEC craft testimony, design flyers, and communicate with clarity and confidence (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Their role was not to lead direct actions, but to ensure those actions were backed by cohesive messaging and timely information. Their synthesis of legal analysis into accessible language enabled community members to engage deeply without requiring policy expertise. What distinguished TN4All within the coalition was

its focus on political clarity over public mobilization (Tennessee for All 2022). While they did not host rallies or plan local events, they were indispensable in supporting those who did—providing talking points, background research, and press guidance that elevated campaigns like Public School Strong (PSS) across the state (Public School Strong 2023).

In a network where many partners emphasized relational organizing, TN4All offered complementary strengths: coherence, framing, and accountability (Tennessee for All 2022). They helped not only define what we were resisting, but articulate a shared vision for what we stood for. That role illuminated an important truth for me: movements need both presence and perspective. TN4All's work made the campaign legible to external audiences—journalists, lawmakers, and potential allies—while also giving internal actors the confidence that their efforts were part of a larger, strategic fight (Tennessee for All 2022). Their contributions showed that policy research, when done in partnership with grassroots campaigns, is not separate from organizing—it is a vital tool of it.

B. Strategic Events I Took Part In

Rather than leading direct actions, Tennessee for All provided the strategic backbone that allowed events like the February statewide town hall, March 11 Lobby Day, and April 2 Knoxville town hall to be impactful (Tennessee for All 2022). Their contributions—timely bill breakdowns, narrative framing guides, and coordinated talking points—helped ensure our public-facing actions were grounded in clear, morally compelling messaging. These materials shaped how we framed testimony, designed flyers, and communicated with press and policymakers. I integrated TN4All's framing into every major event I helped coordinate, from drafting scripts for public comment to helping speakers connect personal experience with broader campaign values (Tennessee for All 2022). What stood out was their ability to blend policy expertise with

emotional resonance. TN4All’s work helped translate grassroots energy into coherent, persuasive public narratives—an essential link between on-the-ground organizing and broader political influence (Tennessee for All 2022).

C. Strengths and Organizational Style

Tennessee for All brought a unique set of strengths to the organizing ecosystem: strategic discipline, policy fluency, and values-driven messaging (Tennessee for All 2022). Their ability to translate dense policy into emotionally resonant frameworks allowed local campaigns to move quickly and coherently. Their outputs—bill summaries, vote trackers, and media guides—made it possible for educators, families, and organizers to act without having to decipher every legislative detail themselves. This translation function was crucial for a campaign like PSS, which depended on rapid mobilization across dozens of counties (Public School Strong 2023). Internally, TN4All’s style was more structured and outcomes-oriented than that of groups like KCEC or SOCM (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). Their meetings followed agendas, tracked deliverables, and emphasized timelines. While this sometimes created cultural distance from more relational or improvisational organizing spaces, I came to see this contrast as a strength. Their clarity and consistency helped stabilize the coalition during moments of chaos—when new amendments appeared suddenly, when a resolution was added to a board agenda, or when media attention surged unexpectedly. TN4All brought calm, discipline, and direction to what might otherwise have been reactive moments (Tennessee for All 2022). Perhaps most importantly, TN4All played a crucial role as a bridge between grassroots organizing and institutional power (Tennessee for All 2022). They helped elevate local campaigns by amplifying them through legislative briefings, press outreach, and policymaker

engagement. In doing so, they translated community concerns into political pressure—helping ensure that voices from Knoxville, Memphis, or Sevier County weren’t ignored by lawmakers in Nashville. I saw how their presence added legitimacy and visibility to campaigns like Public School Strong, especially in arenas where bottom-up movements are often marginalized or misunderstood.

Their contribution reminded me that strong coalitions are built not on sameness, but on complementary capacity. TN4All’s role was not to mobilize masses or deepen local relationships—it was to strengthen the strategic spine of the movement (Tennessee for All 2022). They helped make sure our passion didn’t outpace our planning, and that our resistance wasn’t just loud, but legible and lasting. In doing so, they echoed aspects of Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II’s moral movement framework, translating technical policy critiques into language that affirmed dignity, equity, and public good (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). Barber argues that to transform public policy, we must first reframe the conversation using language that highlights human dignity and justice (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). Even in its policy-focused work, TN4All helped make clear not just what we were fighting against, but why our resistance was grounded in widely held moral values (Tennessee for All 2022). Ultimately, TN4All showed me that organizing is not just about showing up—it’s about showing up with clarity (Tennessee for All 2022). Their policy expertise, framing discipline, and narrative strategy offered a model for how research and messaging can serve not just advocacy goals, but democratic transformation.

V. Coordination, Tensions, and Takeaways

A. How These Groups Worked Together

Despite their different sizes, styles, and areas of focus, KCEC, SOCM, and Tennessee for All collaborated consistently throughout the practicum to resist harmful legislation and defend public education (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). One of the clearest forms this coordination took was through joint trainings. SOCM led statewide Public School Strong orientations and lobbying prep sessions that brought together organizers from multiple counties, while Tennessee for All contributed critical framing guidance and policy briefings (Public School Strong 2023; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). These sessions established a shared foundation across organizations, ensuring that even when groups operated from different contexts, they were grounded in the same values, strategies, and information. I saw this most clearly during Lobby Day prep, where SOCM provided training structures, TN4All shared targeted talking points and legislative breakdowns, and KCEC organized volunteer turnout and transportation (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022).

Another major point of collaboration was shared messaging. Campaign materials—infographics, email templates, legislative summaries, and social media content—were distributed regularly through shared drives, email lists, and cross-organizational planning calls. I used many of these resources while supporting outreach for the April 2 town hall, adapting TN4All’s HB 793 explainer for our event flyer and using SOCM’s guide to frame our outreach emails (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022).

This shared media infrastructure allowed smaller, locally focused groups like KCEC to amplify their impact by drawing from the work of statewide partners (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). More importantly, it created message discipline across the coalition: by using consistent language and frames, the campaign reinforced key narratives—like defining HB 793 as a threat to all students, not just immigrants—across county lines and political contexts.

Strategic meetings, both planned and emergent, provided another vital form of collaboration. These calls created space for coalition partners to coordinate rapid responses to new developments, such as when school boards introduced surprise resolutions supporting vouchers. I participated in several of these meetings through KCEC, where we joined SOCM and TN4All organizers to plan public comment strategies, outreach efforts, and post-action messaging (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). These gatherings weren't always seamless—miscommunications and differing priorities sometimes surfaced—but they reflected a commitment to shared purpose and responsiveness. Over time, I came to understand that collaboration in this context wasn't about perfect harmony—it was about maintaining movement through trust, communication, and adaptation in real time.

This flexible, layered coordination became one of the campaign's greatest strengths. It allowed each group to retain its identity and strategic approach while moving forward together with urgency and mutual respect. What made the coalition work wasn't that everyone used the same method or moved at the same speed—it was that they showed up for each other, again and again, in the face of escalating political threats. In a high-stakes environment, where new legislation could drop any week, this level of coordination was essential. It taught me that real

power often lies not in centralization, but in the everyday practice of working together across difference.

B. Key Tensions I Observed

While the coalition's collaboration was strong and grounded in shared values, I observed several tensions that revealed the complex reality of working across multiple organizations. One of the most consistent challenges was the difference in pacing between grassroots and policy-focused groups. KCEC, with its deep local ties and emphasis on relationship-building, often moved at a slower, more deliberative pace (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). In contrast, TN4All operated on a faster tempo dictated by legislative calendars, media cycles, and rapid-response needs (Tennessee for All 2022). This mismatch occasionally created friction—like during the April town hall planning, when key legislative updates from TN4All arrived too late to integrate into KCEC's materials (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Tennessee for All 2022).

Burnout also emerged as a serious issue, especially among local organizers carrying the weight of daily campaign operations. I saw the same KCEC members writing scripts, designing flyers, setting up spaces, and managing communications—all while juggling jobs, families, and other organizing commitments (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). While SOCM and TN4All offered valuable tools and guidance, they couldn't always step in to support the localized labor needed for events and outreach (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). This uneven distribution of work created stress points that weren't always visible in strategy meetings or shared documents. These moments highlighted how alignment in messaging can mask the behind-the-scenes exhaustion that sustains grassroots organizing.

Differences in messaging strategy also surfaced at key moments. TN4All often led with legal and constitutional analysis, while KCEC prioritized moral narratives grounded in lived experience, especially through the lens of Rev. Barber’s *The Third Reconstruction* (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016; Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Tennessee for All 2022). SOCM worked to bridge these differences by convening strategy calls and distributing shared talking points, but tensions remained (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). I recall one school board meeting where a speaker’s story diverged from the coalition’s core narrative, prompting a careful internal discussion about message clarity versus personal authenticity. These moments underscored how difficult it is to land unified messaging that honors emotional truth, political complexity, and strategic coherence all at once.

Despite these tensions, what stood out was the coalition’s ability to keep moving forward. There was no expectation of perfection, only a deep commitment to collective process. Communication breakdowns and pacing mismatches didn’t fracture the movement—they were acknowledged and worked through, often with patience and grace. The willingness to stay in conversation, even when frustrated or stretched thin, was itself a sign of trust. These tensions didn’t weaken the coalition—they revealed what it takes to build something resilient under pressure.

C. What I Learned About Coalition Work

Working inside this coalition taught me that strong partnerships don’t require total alignment—they require commitment, flexibility, and care. Coordination often looked messy from the outside: overlapping messages, last-minute edits, open-ended group chats, and shifting responsibilities. But beneath that surface was a foundation of trust that allowed the work to continue even when the process felt chaotic. That trust was built not through formal contracts or

strategic plans, but through consistent presence, mutual respect, and a shared sense of urgency. Over time, I realized that coalition organizing isn't sustained by perfection—it's sustained by people who keep showing up and adapting together, even when the work feels overwhelming or uncertain.

Coordinating a decentralized campaign like Public School Strong meant embracing improvisation (Public School Strong 2023). There was no master calendar or central playbook—just an evolving understanding of what was at stake and a collective will to act. Organizers communicated constantly, held space for logistical problem-solving and emotional processing, and found ways to move forward even when roles were undefined. This realization aligned with Kathleen Blee's insight that activist groups often come together through the act of doing, rather than starting with a unified vision (Blee 2012). Public School Strong wasn't built on identical plans or perfectly aligned strategies—it was built through shared participation, like consistently showing up at school board meetings and taking action side by side meetings, reacting to the same threats, and planning responses together in real time (Public School Strong 2023).

Ultimately, coalition work revealed itself as a form of living democracy—not the polished version we imagine in textbooks, but a democratic practice rooted in disagreement, relational care, and collective resolve. Power began to take shape not only in formal spaces like meetings or events, but in informal moments: flyer edits, late-night text threads, shared rides to the Capitol. These seemingly mundane acts of coordination were, in fact, the glue that held the campaign together. What I learned is that organizing isn't just about opposing injustice—it's about learning how to build with others through contradiction and complexity, toward a world that reflects our shared values. That lesson will stay with me long after this practicum ends.

Chapter 3: Mission, Strategy, and Organizing in Action

I. Understanding Power: Strategy and Mission in Practice

A. Goehl's Theory: Building Collective Power

One of the most grounding theoretical frameworks I carried with me throughout this practicum was George Goehl's understanding of collective power (Goehl 2020). Rather than viewing power solely as the ability to change policies or dominate political narratives, Goehl frames it as the shared capacity to take purposeful, coordinated action. He describes organizing as the intentional process of building this kind of power—power rooted in community values, aimed at giving people agency over the decisions that shape their lives (Goehl 2020). In this view, power is not something granted by institutions or held exclusively by elites; it is something that communities build when they organize, build relationships, and take aligned action on behalf of shared values. This reframing helped me understand organizing not as a tool to access someone else's power, but as a process of building our own. Throughout my practicum, I came to see power not as a fixed resource but as a muscle developed through practice, commitment, and collective participation.

A central distinction in Goehl's theory is between individual and collective action. I witnessed many powerful moments of individual courage—parents speaking at school board meetings for the first time, teachers testifying about the harm of voucher policies, students attending protests in their campaign shirts (Goehl 2020). But these moments gained power when they were connected to a broader campaign. They mattered not only because of their content, but because they were situated within a shared story and a coordinated strategy. Goehl emphasizes that organizing builds power through consistent practice, shared purpose, and clear structure. People are more likely to step into action—and take meaningful risks—when they know they're supported by a strong collective (Goehl 2020). That insight resonated deeply as I watched how

Public School Strong transformed individual contributions into unified pressure (Public School Strong 2023).

Relationship-building, in Goehl's framework, is not an accessory to organizing—it is the foundation of it (Goehl 2020). Organizing isn't just about rallying people around a specific objective—it's about building and maintaining relationships strong enough to handle conflict, navigate tension, and support long-term participation. As Goehl emphasizes, a movement's base isn't just a contact list; it's a network of trust developed through shared struggle and ongoing accountability (Goehl 2020). This was a principle that shaped how we approached engagement throughout the campaign especially evident in the Public School Strong campaign, where organizing often required collaboration across counties, cultures, and organizational styles (Public School Strong 2023). The success of our actions—whether lobbying legislators, hosting town halls, or turning out at board meetings—depended on whether people trusted one another enough to show up and follow through. The most effective work I witnessed didn't come from perfect plans. It came from the strength of relationships that allowed those plans to be adjusted, expanded, or reimaged in real time.

Goehl's theory helped me make sense of organizing not just as resistance, but as proactive capacity-building (Goehl 2020). When communities organize, they create new pathways to act in the world—ways that would not exist without relational infrastructure and shared vision. This approach reframed how I understood power: not as something to seize, but as something we build together through shared effort. One-on-one check-ins, ride-sharing, food preparation, and text threads may seem like peripheral acts, but under Goehl's lens, they are central to organizing (Goehl 2020). These small, consistent gestures are what make larger collective action possible. This understanding stayed with me throughout the practicum and

shaped how I interpreted everything from turnout to messaging to the emotional rhythms of campaign life.

B. How Public School Strong and Coalition Groups Defined Strategy

The mission at the heart of the Public School Strong (PSS) campaign was direct and non-negotiable: defend public education and immigrant families from politically motivated threats (Public School Strong 2023). This clarity of purpose anchored the campaign's strategic choices, ensuring that every action, message, and intervention reflected the moral urgency of that mission. Rather than casting a wide or vague net, PSS remained sharply focused on specific policy threats like HB 793 and voucher expansion (Public School Strong 2023). The goal wasn't to raise awareness in the abstract—it was to protect schools, communities, and the democratic values they embody. This alignment between mission and strategy gave the campaign coherence even as its organizing was decentralized across Tennessee's counties.

The strategy that flowed from this mission emphasized visibility, narrative control, and moral agitation. PSS organizers showed up at school board meetings in matching shirts, submitted standardized report forms after public events, and tracked board member comments over time. These practices made the campaign legible, repeatable, and accountable. Agitation was central—but it was never about conflict for its own sake. Instead, it was about naming harm publicly, drawing lines around moral responsibility, and calling institutions to their higher obligations. Storytelling played a crucial role in this effort. Rather than relying on statistics or policy white papers, PSS elevated the voices of those most directly affected—parents, students, and educators—whose lived experience carried undeniable weight and helped shift the political narrative (Public School Strong 2023).

Target selection was another key strategic component. School boards were prioritized because they were both accessible and consequential—they shaped local decisions and offered public platforms for framing the issues. Legislative committees were also targeted, especially those overseeing education or immigration policy, as their actions determined the trajectory of bills like HB 793. Beyond government bodies, the campaign engaged with media as a battleground for public opinion. Coordinated op-eds, talking points, and digital content allowed PSS teams to shape how the campaign was understood beyond organizing spaces (Public School Strong 2023). By defining the terms of debate, the campaign created room for resistance—not only through protest, but through cultural and discursive intervention.

What impressed me most was the campaign’s ability to maintain coherence while allowing local flexibility. In one county, the strategy might focus on turning out rural families for a town hall. In another, it might center around direct engagement with a swing vote on a school board. But across these variations, the campaign maintained unity through shared tools, language, and visual identity. This capacity for strategic pluralism—many tactics, one mission—helped the coalition scale without losing focus. It also revealed something essential about how decentralized movements can operate effectively: not by enforcing uniformity, but by offering a strong enough center of gravity that allows for local adaptation without drifting off course.

C. The Organizer’s Mindset

One of the most transformative lessons I took from my practicum was learning how organizers hold both strategy and care, urgency and sustainability. Through this work, I came to understand that effective organizing requires a mindset that balances strategic disruption with broad inclusion. Goehl emphasizes that true victories aren’t just about achieving policy goals—they’re about building people’s capacity, developing new leaders, and ensuring no one is left out

of the process (Goehl 2020). This means designing actions that challenge existing power structures while remaining welcoming and participatory for those just stepping into the work. In every planning meeting, whether for a school board turnout or a town hall, organizers had to ask: Who will feel welcome here? Who might feel excluded? How can we make this space both emotionally safe and politically effective? These questions were not rhetorical—they shaped everything from the choice of speakers to the layout of a meeting room.

Planning for escalation was a regular part of the work, but it was always done with care. We knew that polite appeals alone would not shift policy or power, especially when lawmakers and school board members appeared unmoved by community testimony. But we also knew that confrontation carried risk—especially for immigrant families, first-time speakers, or young people. I watched how experienced organizers prepared for these moments, developing contingency plans, supporting nervous speakers, and making sure that no one felt alone. Escalation, in this framework, was not about spectacle—it was about visibility, pressure, and clarity, all grounded in relational trust. It was not enough to call out injustice; we had to create conditions where people felt held while doing so.

At the same time, organizers understood that no strategy could succeed if burnout hollowed out the base. Emotional sustainability was not a luxury—it was a necessity. This was evident in how people shared food, gave each other rides, or gently encouraged someone to take a break. These moments of care weren't peripheral to the work; they were central to its effectiveness. In a campaign marked by urgency and high stakes, it was the invisible labor—checking in on each other, holding space after difficult meetings—that allowed us to keep going. Organizing spaces that failed to account for emotion and exhaustion risked becoming extractive, no matter how righteous the cause.

What I ultimately learned is that the organizer’s mindset is one of both structure and softness. It’s about holding contradictions without letting them paralyze action—about planning thoroughly and still being able to pivot, about naming harm and still making room for joy. This mindset cannot be taught in a single training; it’s cultivated through practice, reflection, and community. It is what allowed Public School Strong to not only respond to political threats, but to build a campaign culture that invited people in and helped them grow (Public School Strong 2023). And it is what I carry forward most clearly from this chapter of the work: organizing is not just what you do. It’s how you do it, and how you carry others in the process.

II. On-the-Ground Actions: Bringing Strategy to Life

A. The April 2 Town Hall

The April 2 town hall hosted by the Knox County Education Coalition (KCEC) was a defining moment of public engagement during my practicum (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Designed to resist vouchers, HB 793 and the statewide push for school privatization, the event brought together immigrant families, educators, faith leaders, and local officials for a coordinated night of political education and grassroots action. Planning began in early March, led by a small working group that included Lance, Jennifer, Amanda, and Ryan and myself—organizers with long-standing ties to Knoxville’s education and immigrant justice communities. Each person brought specific strengths: Lance helped craft the narrative arc of the evening, Jennifer and Amanda organized turnout and food coordination, and Ryan, a former teacher, led facilitation planning and helped identify speakers who could authentically speak to both personal experience and policy impact.

The town hall followed a three-part structure designed to maximize both clarity and participation. We began with an educational segment that included a presentation on the details

and implications of vouchers and HB 793, framed in the broader context of public school defunding and immigration surveillance. This segment used slides, handouts, and brief testimonials to build a shared understanding of the threats at hand. From there, attendees broke into small group discussions facilitated by trained volunteers using printed prompts that we had developed collaboratively in KCEC meetings (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). These breakout sessions allowed participants to reflect on the policies through a personal lens, identify local concerns, and generate messages that could be used in public comment, media outreach, and school board testimony. The event closed with a collective debrief where facilitators shared highlights from each group, and we invited attendees to take immediate next steps—signing petitions, joining the Public School Strong campaign, and committing to attend upcoming school board meetings (Public School Strong 2023).

My role in the town hall was primarily logistical, but it involved constant multitasking and coordination in the days leading up to and during the event. I helped draft and revise the program agenda, formatted and tweaked materials for the breakout groups, and distributed flyers across Knoxville, including at UTK's student union, a neighborhood food pantry, and community spaces in East Knoxville. I also helped plan outreach calls and draft emails to local leaders and school board members, encouraging them to attend and engage with the event's message. On the day of the event, I arrived early to set up tables, organize the sign-in system, and direct volunteers as they arrived. Throughout the evening, I checked in attendees, guided speakers to the front, and managed time transitions between segments. These behind-the-scenes tasks may have seemed small, but they were critical in making the event feel seamless and welcoming.

The town hall's success was measured both in attendance and in the emotional depth of participation. Over 60 people filled the space, representing a wide cross-section of the community, including people who had never attended a political event before. During the breakout sessions, I observed how conversations moved from tentative questions to passionate statements, especially when facilitators asked participants to consider how HB 793 could affect real students and families in their schools. The discussion prompts, which asked things like “What would you say to a school board member about your child’s right to feel safe at school?” helped root the policy in lived experience. Several participants shared that they hadn’t realized how deeply connected education policy and immigration enforcement had become, and many expressed interest in staying involved beyond the event. This showed that our approach—merging political education with shared storytelling—helped make deeper participation more accessible. Goehl emphasizes that when movements consistently return to common stories and practices, it strengthens trust and unity, which are essential for sustaining long-term organizing (Goehl 2020).

At the same time, planning the town hall exposed important lessons about organizing limitations and the emotional weight of coalition work. The short timeline—just over three weeks—made it difficult to secure all the speakers we hoped for, particularly from undocumented families who faced real risks and needed more relationship-building to feel safe in public spaces. We struggled to confirm child care and translation services in time, and we had to make real-time adjustments to our printed materials when a planned speaker canceled the day before the event. While none of these issues derailed the evening, they pointed to structural constraints in grassroots work: the limits of volunteer capacity, the challenges of coordinating across organizations, and the ongoing need for trust-based outreach that cannot be rushed.

Despite these obstacles, the town hall left a lasting impact. It generated new energy for the campaign, led to follow-up meetings and advocacy actions, and demonstrated that public storytelling—when grounded in relational work—can shift both the emotional and strategic terrain of organizing.

B. School Board Meeting Engagement

Attending Knox County school board meetings became one of the most routine but foundational parts of my practicum experience. These meetings functioned as both political flashpoints and organizing touchpoints, where campaign visibility and narrative power could be exercised in real time. Public School Strong (PSS) encouraged volunteers to attend wearing blue campaign shirts and to sit together, creating a visible, cohesive presence that signaled public education advocates were organized and paying attention (Public School Strong 2023). I made it a personal goal to attend as many board meetings as possible throughout the spring semester—not just to observe, but to participate in a subtle form of protest through presence and documentation.

My role at these meetings was not to speak at the microphone but to track everything unfolding: who was in the room, who spoke during public comment, how board members responded, and which issues were dismissed or deflected. After each meeting, I filled out a standardized PSS report form that documented not only the votes and statements made, but also the emotional temperature of the room—moments when the board became visibly tense, when the audience reacted strongly, or when speakers expressed fear, frustration, or hope (Public School Strong 2023). These forms were submitted to a central repository and often used to inform statewide messaging and advocacy strategies. I also stayed afterward when possible to talk with other attendees—parents, teachers, and students—building relationships and collecting

informal insights that never made it into the official record but often shaped the campaign's next moves.

Over time, I witnessed key moments that revealed both the potential and the limits of school board engagement. In one meeting, a coalition of parents organized public comment around the dangers of expanding voucher programs, tying their remarks to the specific impacts on Knox County schools. The testimonies were powerful and well-coordinated, but several board members responded dismissively, with one questioning the accuracy of the statistics cited. In another session, the issue of ICE presence in schools emerged when a parent raised concerns about how HB 793 might turn educators into de facto immigration agents. The board refused to formally engage with the question, claiming it was a “state matter,” even though the fear was being felt locally. While it was frustrating to watch these moments play out, they also underscored the importance of steady, public pressure. Repeating our concerns made it increasingly difficult for board members to dismiss them. This approach aligned with Goehl's idea that collective power is built through sustained, coordinated efforts by organized people over time (Goehl 2020).

The emotional dynamics of school board spaces were striking. Formality and decorum were tightly enforced, which often meant that emotional expression—particularly from immigrant families or working-class parents—was subtly policed or dismissed as inappropriate. Speakers who trembled or raised their voices were sometimes cut off, while board members who spoke with clear hostility were rarely checked. In this context, even silent actions—like standing while a harmful vote was taken, or nodding visibly while a parent testified—became meaningful forms of resistance. The tension in the room was palpable during votes or discussions on hot-button issues like HB 793 or book bans, and I could feel how these public spaces were never

neutral. They were battlegrounds, shaped by power dynamics, narrative framing, and who felt entitled to speak. Being part of a collective campaign presence gave me the courage to keep showing up, and to support others in doing the same.

While these meetings rarely produced immediate policy changes, they served a critical function in the campaign. They helped make visible the growing coalition of public school defenders, built public pressure that accumulated over time, and served as a space for first-time participants to witness civic engagement firsthand. I came to understand that political change doesn't always happen at the podium. Sometimes, it happens in the side conversations afterward, in the quiet note-taking that leads to strategic planning, or in the trust built when one parent sees another standing beside them in solidarity. The school board meetings were rarely empowering in themselves, but they were the raw material out of which more powerful organizing moments—like town halls, resolutions, and mobilizations—were built.

IV. Lessons from Strategic Wins and Setbacks

A. What Worked

One of the clearest successes of the Public School Strong (PSS) campaign was its consistent use of community forums and town halls to build engagement and shift public discourse (Public School Strong 2023). Events like the April 2 town hall in Knoxville didn't just educate attendees about HB 793 or vouchers—they created spaces for collective processing, relationship-building, and visible solidarity. These events offered an accessible entry point for people who might not feel comfortable attending a protest or speaking at a school board meeting. I saw this play out in real time when a first-time attendee who had come just to listen ended up volunteering to help distribute flyers for our next action, saying, “This made me feel like I’m not the only one who cares.” That transformation—from isolated concern to participatory action—

was a direct result of the intentional, relational design of our forums, which centered care and belonging as conditions for engagement.

Another major strength of the campaign was the depth and functionality of its coalitional partnerships, particularly between the Knox County Education Coalition (KCEC), Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM), and Tennessee for All (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). Each group brought distinct strengths—KCEC provided local organizing power and community relationships, SOCM offered statewide infrastructure and legislative updates, and TN4All contributed policy analysis, media capacity, and communications framing (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). These roles were not siloed but constantly in conversation, often through informal backchannels like text threads, shared Google folders, and regular check-ins. When HB 793 gained traction, this coalition model allowed us to move quickly: SOCM alerted local teams about its advancement, KCEC mobilized turnout at school board meetings, and TN4All supplied rapid-response talking points and press templates (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022).

A third key success was the campaign's use of coordinated statewide messaging. Despite the decentralized nature of PSS, local teams were unified by common visuals, shared scripts, and a consistent moral frame (Public School Strong 2023). The use of report forms, branded signage, and repeated language like “We Protect Us” or “Public Schools Belong to the People” gave the campaign coherence across geographic and political differences (Public School Strong 2023). In Knoxville, this meant our flyers and shirts matched those in Shelby, Blount, and Williamson

counties—even if the specific focus of our meetings varied. This consistency helped create a recognizable identity that reinforced legitimacy and helped media, school boards, and new volunteers understand that we were part of something bigger than a local initiative. The messaging strategy made it possible to feel part of a movement even when we were organizing from small, local spaces.

These strategic strengths worked in tandem to build a culture of participation that didn't depend on professional organizers or formal institutions. People stepped in where they were needed, took ownership of tasks, and learned by doing. The success of the April 2 town hall wasn't just in its turnout—it was in how that event served as a springboard for later actions, including Lobby Day and coordinated school board campaigns. These wins didn't happen by accident; they were built through layered strategy, trusted partnerships, and a movement culture that prioritized participation, clarity, and care. Through these experiences, I saw what it means to organize not just for reaction, but for resilience.

B. What Struggled

While the campaign achieved several strategic victories, there were persistent struggles—particularly in generating consistent media coverage, especially outside of major metropolitan areas. In Knoxville, we were occasionally able to get town halls or public comment campaigns mentioned by local press outlets, but in more rural counties, coverage was far more limited or nonexistent. This disparity affected the campaign's ability to publicly frame the stakes of HB 793 and voucher expansion in communities that were already politically marginalized. Even when parents or educators gave powerful testimony, their voices often failed to reach beyond the meeting room or the livestream archive. One organizer from a neighboring rural county told us

bluntly, “If the press won’t cover it, it’s like it didn’t happen.” That lack of visibility made it harder to build momentum and recruit new supporters in disconnected or skeptical districts.

Another ongoing challenge was maintaining momentum after major events. While town halls and Lobby Day created powerful surges of energy, sustaining that engagement proved difficult in the weeks that followed. Volunteers who were highly active in the lead-up to the April 2 town hall often needed to step back afterward to recover, and many new participants were unsure what their next steps should be without another major event on the horizon. Even though organizers tried to follow up through calls, emails, and Slack threads, participation dropped off temporarily—a natural, but still challenging, cycle in grassroots organizing. This pattern raised an important structural question: how do we sustain energy between big moments, especially when the threats are ongoing but less immediately visible?

Burnout was also a visible issue within our core organizing group. Many of us were students, caregivers, educators, or working multiple jobs, and the cumulative weight of legislative threats, emotional labor, and volunteer logistics often fell on the same few shoulders. Without paid staff or dedicated funding, PSS relied on the willingness of people to consistently show up—but that consistency came at a cost (Public School Strong 2023). There were moments when tension emerged in meetings, not because of ideological disagreement, but because people were exhausted and stretched too thin. I remember a late-night planning call in April where one organizer said, “I’m trying to care about this message doc, but I haven’t slept in three days.” It wasn’t a complaint—it was a reflection of the emotional toll this work takes when support systems are informal and capacity is always limited.

Finally, one of the most difficult aspects of the campaign was attempting to reach more conservative or politically skeptical communities, especially in districts where voucher programs

had strong support or where immigration policy was framed in punitive terms. In these contexts, PSS messaging often struggled to gain traction, even when framed around values like parental involvement or educational equity (Public School Strong 2023). Organizers debated how much to adapt our language versus how much to challenge dominant narratives head-on. There was no easy answer. In some school board districts, softening our message helped us get a resolution on the agenda; in others, it diluted the moral clarity that made our campaign compelling. These moments exposed the friction between pragmatism and principle—a recurring tension in any organizing work that seeks to build bridges without sacrificing integrity (Public School Strong 2023).

C. Theory in Action

One of the most powerful realizations of my practicum was how closely the strategies and rhythms of the campaign aligned with the core insights of community organizing theory. George Goehl’s framework, which emphasizes the value of building from small, consistent actions into larger, more impactful collective efforts, was reflected throughout the sequence of events I participated in (Goehl 2020). The April 2 town hall did not emerge from nowhere—it was the result of months of consistent school board engagement, onboarding calls, and one-on-one relationship-building. That event, in turn, became a springboard for the March 11 Lobby Day at the Capitol and the broader push for school board resolutions against HB 793. Each step built upon the last, creating a ladder of engagement that made room for new participants and deepened the investment of those already involved.

Goehl’s emphasis on relational organizing—on listening, agitation, and building power from the ground up—was also visible in how roles were distributed across the campaign (Goehl 2020). No one started as a “leader.” Instead, people began by attending a meeting, helping set up

chairs, or wearing a shirt to a school board session. Over time, those small acts built trust and confidence, allowing people to step into more visible or strategic roles. I saw this with my own progression—from observer, to note-taker, to co-facilitator, to someone helping plan event logistics and narrative framing. That trajectory was not unique to me; it reflected a larger organizing culture that prioritized development, participation, and the idea that leadership is learned in motion, not assigned from above.

Tamara Draut's *Sleeping Giant* offers another framework that deeply resonated with my experience—specifically her analysis of how ordinary people become extraordinary organizers through direct engagement in campaigns that affect their lives (Draut 2016). Many of the most consistent leaders in our local chapter of Public School Strong were not professional advocates, but parents, teachers, and community members who had never spoken at a political event before this year (Public School Strong 2023). Their commitment was not abstract. It was rooted in lived stakes—children attending underfunded schools, immigrant students facing surveillance, families navigating the consequences of austerity and criminalization. Draut argues that the new working class is the engine of grassroots movements, and that its strength lies in the everyday leadership of people whose labor and love are often taken for granted (Draut 2016).

Kathleen Blee's *Democracy in the Making* further illuminated how group identity is forged not just through shared ideology, but through shared action (Blee 2012). I saw this unfold repeatedly in PSS spaces, where participants formed a sense of belonging not because they had the same political background, but because they were consistently engaged in the same public acts: attending meetings, submitting report forms, distributing flyers, telling their stories (Public School Strong 2023). Over time, that repetition created a collective identity rooted in visibility, care, and mutual accountability. Blee's research on how activist groups cohere through practice

rather than preexisting alignment helped me make sense of how our coalition held together across so many counties, organizations, and political cultures (Blee 2012). What unified us was not perfect consensus, but sustained participation in a shared project—defending public education as a common good.

These theoretical frameworks didn't just help me interpret the campaign—they helped me locate my own role within it. I understood that the labor I was doing—taking notes, shaping messaging, facilitating breakout sessions—was not auxiliary. It was part of the connective tissue that held the movement together. Goehl, Draut, and Blee each offered language for what I was living: that organizing is not the work of heroes, but of collectives; that leadership is not bestowed, but built; and that democracy is not given, but made—again and again—through acts of solidarity and struggle (Blee 2012; Draut 2016; Goehl 2020). These insights affirmed the core argument of my practicum: that applied sociology is most powerful when it emerges from inside the work, not outside it.

V. The Emotional Toll of Organizing

What I didn't fully anticipate was the emotional intensity of this work. Organizing against HB 793 wasn't just intellectually demanding—it was emotionally exhausting. There were nights I went to bed overwhelmed by what we were up against, unsure if our efforts would matter. There were meetings where the weight of people's fear and frustration was palpable. I felt anger at political cruelty, helplessness in the face of institutional inertia, and grief when directly impacted families described their fears for their children.

There was also emotional labor in holding space for others—checking in with new speakers, calming anxieties before public events, or mediating tense strategy calls. Sometimes, I absorbed more than I realized. The role of an organizer is often to steady the group, to keep things

moving—but that can come at the cost of one's own emotional processing. I learned that being present for others also required me to be honest about my own limits, to take breaks, and to ask for support when needed.

Yet this emotional labor was also a source of connection. Sharing in people's fear made our wins feel more meaningful. Bearing witness to vulnerability deepened my own commitment. The exhaustion wasn't a sign of failure—it was evidence that I was invested, that I cared, and that I was growing through the discomfort. Organizing isn't just a technical practice—it is an emotional one, and its demands are real. But so are its rewards: the joy of collective action, the pride in hard-earned trust, and the deep sense of meaning that comes from fighting for something bigger than yourself.

Still, the emotional toll was compounded by structural limitations. In many parts of the state—especially more rural counties—volunteers carried enormous responsibility without the support of robust infrastructure or paid staff. Burnout became a real risk not because people lacked passion, but because the demands of the work outpaced the capacity of the teams doing it. Organizing across geographies revealed how unequal the terrain really was—and how vital it is to invest in care, capacity, and sustainability for those holding the line in harder-to-reach places.

VI. Reflection: Strategic Organizing as Applied Sociology

A. Learning Applied Sociology Through Organizing

Participating in grassroots organizing over the course of my practicum transformed applied sociology from a theoretical discipline into a living, breathing method. I didn't just read about group formation, power dynamics, and coalition-building—I observed them unfold in real time and, in many cases, participated in shaping them. I watched as coalitions like KCEC and SOCM navigated moments of disagreement, clarified shared purpose, and recalibrated strategy

when capacity waned or external conditions shifted (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972).

These processes weren't clean or linear; they were marked by informal negotiations, emotional undercurrents, and quiet moments of relational labor that rarely show up in official meeting notes but are essential to understanding how organizing groups cohere and persist. What emerged was a textured, dynamic picture of collective action as it actually happens, full of contradiction, compromise, and creativity.

Being embedded in these spaces allowed me to see how sociological concepts like social capital, collective identity, and moral framing play out not in abstract, but in highly contextual and emotionally charged environments. For example, I witnessed how trust was earned slowly, through repeated acts of presence—showing up on Zoom calls, taking meeting notes, remembering to follow up on a task—not just by holding the “right” political values. These small acts created the conditions for people to listen to one another, disagree without disengaging, and coordinate across differences of race, class, immigration status, and geography. In Kathleen Blee's terms, I observed “democracy in the making” as participants developed shared identity through participation rather than preexisting ideological unity (Blee 2012:5).

I also witnessed how concepts about power and coalition-building came to life through deliberate strategic action. Goehl emphasizes that power grows through sustained relationships, thoughtful planning, and consistent action over time (Goehl 2020). This wasn't just theory—it was something we embodied. Our efforts moved in a clear sequence: showing up at school board meetings, organizing a town hall, lobbying legislators, and then launching school board resolution campaigns. Each step was intentional, designed to strengthen our organizing base and deepen collective commitment. Similarly, Rev. William Barber's theory of moral fusion politics

came to life every time a parent stood up at a school board meeting and grounded their comment not in data, but in the moral question: “What kind of schools are we becoming?” (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016) These moments revealed how moral clarity could cut through bureaucratic deflection and call people into deeper alignment with public values.

These experiences clarified that applied sociology is not only a way of analyzing the world—it is a way of engaging with it. My field notes became more than records of events; they were reflective tools through which I tracked emerging power dynamics, forms of informal leadership, and how emotion shaped participation. I observed how conflict was sometimes avoided and other times generative, and how cohesion was not automatic but had to be cultivated through shared work, care, and political clarity. Organizing offered a front-row seat to the very dynamics sociologists write about—but with the added complexity of being inside the process, accountable to outcomes, and implicated in the choices being made. What I learned was that theory and practice are not separate modes of inquiry—they are interdependent, and their intersection is where the most transformative learning occurs.

B. Own Organizing Growth

When I entered this practicum, I did so with the intention of learning from the work—not leading it. In the earliest meetings, I stayed quiet, uncertain of the group dynamics and unsure of how my presence would be received. I began by observing: who facilitated, who followed up, who took the notes no one else volunteered to write. My initial contributions were small—setting up chairs at meetings, distributing flyers, wearing a Public School Strong (PSS) shirt at board meetings—but each act taught me something about what it means to show up in movement spaces with humility and consistency (Public School Strong 2023). Over time, I realized that

these “small” tasks were not peripheral. They were foundational to the culture of trust that made deeper organizing possible.

As the campaign evolved, so did my role. I moved from passive support to active coordination, especially around the April 2 town hall. I helped draft the agenda, format discussion materials, manage event logistics, and support speakers throughout the evening. I also worked on messaging strategy—reviewing talking points for Lobby Day, helping frame HB 793 in moral and educational terms, and contributing to debriefs that informed future communications. These tasks gave me a new understanding of what leadership looks like in grassroots organizing. Leadership in our campaign wasn’t defined by being the most visible or outspoken. It was rooted in consistency, responsiveness, and a willingness to show up when others needed support. Goehl underscores that leadership isn’t assigned—it emerges when people choose to step forward and take responsibility (Goehl 2020). Through this process, I learned that effective organizing is built at the speed of trust. There were moments when I wanted to move faster—build more momentum, schedule more events, escalate public pressure—but I quickly realized that sustainable progress depended on the pace of relationship-building. Trust could not be rushed, especially in a campaign that involved immigrant families, working-class parents, and educators already carrying heavy emotional and material burdens. The organizers I respected most were the ones who moved with clarity and care—who knew when to push and when to pause, when to plan and when to listen. From them, I learned that accountability doesn’t mean control; it means showing up, following through, and being willing to adjust your role to fit the needs of the group. That flexibility was not a weakness—it was a strategy of care and endurance.

This transformation—from supportive participant to strategic planner—did not happen overnight, and it was never about becoming the “leader” of any space. It was about learning how to listen deeply, contribute meaningfully, and understand my actions as part of a broader ecosystem of resistance. I grew into this work through experience, reflection, and feedback—not just from my field notes, but from watching how others navigated power, fatigue, and care. Organizing taught me how to hold tension, how to make decisions collaboratively, and how to see strategy not just as a plan on paper, but as a series of relationships in motion. These lessons echo Tamara Draut’s argument that movements are not driven solely by charismatic leaders, but by countless everyday people who transform their lived struggles into collective political action (Draut 2016). The campaign against HB 793 offered a high-stakes opportunity to apply all that I had been learning—from coalition maintenance, to public messaging, to the emotional infrastructure required for sustained resistance. It was through this case that the abstract became urgent, and the sociological became personal. That campaign, and the organizing it demanded, is where I now turn to examine not just what we did, but how and why it mattered. It became the focal point for both my applied learning and my evolving commitment to collective, justice-centered social action.

Chapter 4: Framing the Fight – PSS Against HB 793

I. Understanding HB 793/SB 836

A. What the Bill Proposed

House Bill 793 and its Senate companion SB 836 proposed a radical shift in how public schools in Tennessee would handle immigration-related information. These bills aimed to require school districts to collect and potentially report the immigration status of enrolled students—a move that directly contradicted decades of legal precedent protecting access to education for undocumented youth. Since the Supreme Court’s 1982 decision in *Plyler v. Doe*, public schools have been legally obligated to provide education to all children, regardless of immigration status. HB 793, in essence, sought to turn schools into extensions of the immigration enforcement system, undermining their role as safe havens for vulnerable students.

The bill’s language was deliberately vague, offering no clear guidance on what documentation would be required, how data would be stored, or whether families could refuse to disclose status without penalty. It described its intent as “transparency,” but omitted any safeguards or implementation protocols. This ambiguity created widespread anxiety among immigrant families and educators. Many feared that schools would begin demanding birth certificates, Social Security numbers, or proof of legal residency—documents that undocumented families either could not provide or were afraid to submit. The absence of data protections and the lack of anti-profiling language made the bill’s discretionary enforcement all the more dangerous, especially in regions where anti-immigrant sentiment was already high.

The Senate version of the bill went even further by introducing the possibility that undocumented students could be charged tuition to attend public K–12 schools. This proposal attempted to reclassify public education as a privilege rather than a right, reframing it as a

commodity to be earned rather than a guarantee for every child. If enacted, this provision would have violated both the spirit and likely the letter of *Plyler v. Doe* , establishing a discriminatory two-tiered system in which children’s educational access would be determined by immigration paperwork and economic resources.

HB 793 did not emerge in a vacuum. It was part of a broader legislative agenda in Tennessee marked by voucher expansions, anti-trans legislation, and attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs . Taken together, these efforts reflect a coordinated political project aimed at consolidating conservative power by undermining public institutions, targeting marginalized communities, and advancing privatization. In this context, HB 793 must be understood not only as an immigration policy but as part of a larger strategy to redefine the role and purpose of public education itself.

B. Legal, Ethical, and Strategic Concerns

HB 793 immediately raised red flags for legal scholars and education advocates alike. It threatened to violate federal law and constitutional precedent, particularly *Plyler v. Doe*, which guarantees equal access to public education regardless of immigration status. It also risked breaching the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which restricts the disclosure of student records . The bill’s vagueness—coupled with its demand for immigration-related information—left school districts vulnerable to legal challenges and parents at risk of exposure.

Equally troubling were the bill’s ethical implications. For many families, schools are one of the only institutions they can access without fear. The prospect of educators collecting and possibly reporting immigration data jeopardized this trust. Teachers—often among the most trusted adults in children’s lives—would have been forced into roles that conflicted with their

moral responsibilities. Even for mixed-status or legally residing families, the bill sent a chilling message: that certain children could be surveilled, excluded, or made to feel unwelcome in the very spaces meant to nurture them.

The anticipated consequences extended beyond the classroom. Organizers predicted—and parents confirmed—that the bill would likely lead to lower school enrollment, decreased parent engagement, and higher levels of fear among immigrant communities. One parent at a listening session I attended asked, “Will signing my kid’s report card now count as outing my family?” This type of fear, even if legally unwarranted, would have real-world consequences—pushing vulnerable families further into the shadows and damaging the fragile trust that schools work so hard to build.

From a strategic perspective, HB 793 represented a dangerous precedent. If public schools could begin collecting immigration data, it raised the question: what other public institutions would be next? The bill served as a test case for normalizing status-based surveillance under the guise of transparency. Organizers understood that HB 793 was not just a threat to education, but to democracy itself—an attempt to erode the norms of equal access and to institutionalize a culture of fear.

C. How Organizers Framed the Bill

Recognizing that legal arguments alone would not sway a conservative-majority legislature, organizers across Tennessee pivoted toward public narrative and moral clarity. Rather than present HB 793 merely as a technical policy or a threat to immigrant communities, they reframed it as a broader attack on the foundational promise of public education. The campaign’s central message—“No child should be denied an education”—quickly became a

unifying moral anchor. It appeared in school board testimonies, press releases, flyers, and Lobby Day scripts.

The line was simple, emotionally resonant, and difficult for opponents to refute publicly, even if they privately supported the bill's intent. By shifting the conversation from legislative details to shared ethical commitments, organizers opened the door to broader coalitional support and mobilized communities who may not have otherwise seen themselves as directly impacted. Storytelling became the campaign's most powerful tool in this moral reframing. Parents gave voice to the fear of sending their children to school, unsure whether questions about immigration status would lead to exposure. Teachers described the impossible moral bind of being asked to act as enforcers rather than caretakers. These stories were not collected as soundbites—they emerged from deep organizing infrastructure: one-on-one meetings, listening sessions, and community debriefs that honored people's fears while equipping them to speak publicly. Organizations like KCEC, SOCM, and Tennessee for All supported this storytelling with careful preparation, safety protocols, and message coaching (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). These narratives didn't just inform the public; they embodied the campaign's moral framework by putting human dignity at the center of the fight.

This strategy was grounded in Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II's framework of moral fusion organizing, which focuses on uniting people around common moral principles—such as justice, dignity, and care for the broader community—rather than strict political agreement (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). Barber contends that when people become morally aware of injustice, they are compelled to take action and refuse to accept it for long. The Public School Strong campaign modeled this philosophy by inviting teachers, pastors, parents, and students to consider

not whether undocumented children "deserved" access to school, but what kind of society we create when we withhold education based on immigration status (Public School Strong 2023).

That framing allowed the campaign to bridge divides and bring people together who may not have otherwise stood on the same side of an immigration debate. It made the political personal—and the personal political—without requiring unanimity on every issue.

In the end, although HB 793 passed, the campaign left behind more than a trail of opposition—it left behind a roadmap for future organizing. Through its use of strategic storytelling, symbolic consistency, and a values-driven message, the campaign shifted public discourse and demonstrated the power of relational organizing in the face of harmful policy. The coalition that formed in resistance to HB 793 continues to shape public education advocacy in Tennessee, not just by reacting to future threats, but by advancing a proactive vision of what schools should be: places of safety, belonging, and shared responsibility. The moral clarity that guided this campaign endures, not only as a lesson in messaging, but as a statement of purpose for future fights to come.

II. The Timeline of Resistance

A. Early Warning Signs

The first indication that HB 793 would become a major organizing flashpoint came in early January 2024, when advocacy groups like the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC), Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM), and Tennessee for All circulated internal legislative alerts (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; ; Tennessee for All 2022; Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). These organizations routinely monitor policy developments, and their early analysis flagged HB 793 as more than just another anti-immigrant proposal—it

was seen as a strategic escalation in a broader campaign to reshape public education through surveillance and exclusion. Rather than dismissing the bill as fringe, they understood it as a potential turning point, one that could normalize immigration status tracking within schools and erode protections long secured under *Plyler v. Doe*. The urgency they communicated rippled outward, reaching education justice circles including the Knox County Education Coalition (KCEC), where I was active (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). For many of us, this warning reshaped our priorities for the spring legislative session and initiated a rapid pivot in strategy and planning.

At the same time, community fear was already rising. In Knox County and other parts of the state, rumors circulated about Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) appearing near schools—even when unverified. These stories reflected the ambient anxiety immigrant families were already living with, and they signaled just how quickly trust could break down in the face of perceived state surveillance. Parents began calling schools to ask whether their children’s information would be shared with federal authorities; some even considered keeping their kids home. This climate of fear operated as a preview of the bill’s likely real-world impact. Even before HB 793 had moved out of committee, it was already shaping behavior, undermining confidence in public institutions, and threatening access to education. For organizers, this was not a theoretical concern—it was a lived crisis demanding a strategic, rapid, and relational response.

School board meetings became one of the first public arenas where concern over the bill was expressed. As early as February, parents and educators began using public comment periods to raise questions about how districts planned to protect undocumented students. At the same time, Public School Strong (PSS) supporters signaled their opposition visually—wearing blue

shirts to school board meetings in a quiet but coordinated show of resistance (Public School Strong 2023). While these actions were not always formally organized, they reflected a shared intuition that HB 793 posed a serious threat. Many educators and families who had previously focused on resisting voucher expansion or protecting school funding began to connect those fights to the new threat posed by HB 793. This growing understanding—that attacks on immigrant students and attacks on public schools were part of the same political project—helped build the foundation for more intersectional and coalition-based organizing.

As this realization spread, it began to reshape strategy within our organizing spaces. At KCEC, HB 793 became a standing item in weekly planning meetings (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Meanwhile, SOCM hosted a statewide virtual briefing to unpack the legal, logistical, and psychological implications of the bill (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). These sessions did more than disseminate information—they sparked alignment across counties and organizations, building early trust and coordination. That this work was happening in January and February—before the bill had even cleared its first major hurdle—was a strategic success. In a statehouse where harmful legislation often moves quickly and with little public attention, this early preparation allowed us to be proactive rather than reactive. We couldn't stop the bill from being introduced, but we made sure it wouldn't move forward without resistance.

While the broader coalition was steering the statewide campaign, much of my day-to-day organizing took shape within KCEC (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). The next section turns to that local anchor—how it functioned, what my role entailed, and what I learned from being embedded in its grassroots work.

III. Role of the Organizations in the Fight

A. Knox County Education Coalition (KCEC)

The Knox County Education Coalition (KCEC) played a central role in shaping the local resistance to HB 793 (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). As a community-rooted coalition focused on education justice in Knox County, KCEC served as a critical bridge between statewide organizing and local action (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). When news of HB 793 broke, KCEC was one of the first groups to begin strategizing around how the bill could be confronted at the school board level (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). Drawing on relationships built over years of campaigns around vouchers, school fees, and funding equity, KCEC activated a network of educators, parents, and community allies to pressure the Knox County Board of Education to take a public stance (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). The group began working on a formal board resolution that would oppose HB 793 on the grounds that it violated students' rights and undermined public education as a universal good. Throughout March, I participated in weekly KCEC planning calls where this resolution was discussed, edited, and connected to broader campaign messaging (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). These meetings were collaborative but fast-paced, often requiring members to juggle legal consultation, communications planning, and outreach in real time. I helped draft talking points for use in outreach to board members, focusing on the moral and educational implications of the bill while avoiding overtly partisan language. The goal was to persuade at least some board members who might be on the fence—not necessarily to turn them into movement allies, but to demonstrate that taking a stand against HB 793 aligned with their responsibility to protect all students. Even board members who were not typically sympathetic to

immigrant rights could be swayed by arguments about student safety, federal law, and community cohesion.

In tandem with this work, KCEC also advocated for a clear, district-level policy to protect families from ICE intrusion on school grounds (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). This demand—summarized in the rallying cry “No ICE without a warrant”—became a local touchstone during the HB 793 fight. Parents and educators were especially concerned that even the perception of collaboration between schools and immigration enforcement would cause long-term damage to community trust. KCEC organizers pushed for the district to adopt a formal protocol clarifying that no school staff would share immigration information or allow ICE officers into school buildings without a signed judicial warrant (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). This demand was grounded in existing legal precedent and model policies from other districts across the country. By pairing a defensive stance against HB 793 with a proactive demand for local ICE protections, KCEC helped frame the issue not only as a state-level legislative threat, but as a site of local accountability and policy change (Knox County Education Coalition 2018).

KCEC’s approach reflected the coalition’s broader strategy of combining insider and outsider tactics—working both within institutional channels and through grassroots mobilization (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). While some members lobbied individual school board members or provided legal research, others organized speak-outs, supported community engagement at the April 2 town hall, and coordinated with Public School Strong teams across the state (Public School Strong 2023). This flexibility was essential, given the coalition’s volunteer-based structure and the urgency of the political moment. KCEC was not the largest or most well-funded organization involved in the fight, but its deep local roots and commitment to centering

immigrant voices made it an indispensable part of the resistance to HB 793 (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). It provided not only logistical and strategic capacity, but also moral clarity in a moment of statewide uncertainty.

B. Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM)

Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM) was a crucial partner in the resistance to HB 793, serving as both a strategic backbone and a training hub for organizers across Tennessee (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). With decades of experience in grassroots organizing, political education, and movement building, SOCM offered infrastructure that helped local campaigns scale up and coordinate beyond county lines (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). As soon as HB 793 appeared on the legislative docket, SOCM staff began hosting briefings and power mapping sessions to help community leaders understand who was behind the bill, what institutional interests were at play, and where pressure could be most effectively applied (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). These sessions were not abstract lectures—they were hands-on organizing labs designed to turn information into action. The clarity and urgency with which SOCM approached this bill helped orient many smaller coalitions toward rapid response and united messaging (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972).

I participated in several SOCM trainings during this time, including one focused on legislative lobbying and another on power mapping—a tool for identifying key decision-makers, their influences, and the levers available for movement pressure (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). These sessions grounded me in practical skills that I immediately applied in the field: writing follow-up emails to legislators after Lobby Day, helping

prepare speaker lists for school board meetings, and identifying which local officials might be persuadable on a school board resolution. The training model emphasized relationship-building as central to power—not just confronting those in authority, but understanding how coalitions could build enough trust and alignment internally to move together strategically. SOCM’s long-term view of organizing helped counterbalance the frantic pace of legislative crisis work, reminding all of us that even emergency response efforts should contribute to broader capacity-building (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972).

In addition to training and strategy, SOCM played a key role in bridging urban and rural organizing efforts during the HB 793 fight (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). While Knoxville, Nashville, and Memphis had more established immigrant justice and education advocacy networks, SOCM maintained strong relationships in smaller counties like Maury, Cocke, and Putnam—places that are often overlooked in statewide policy fights (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). Through regular calls and digital coordination, SOCM connected these more isolated teams to shared messaging, legal resources, and planning materials, ensuring that the campaign against HB 793 had a truly statewide footprint (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). This rural engagement was critical for disrupting the narrative that opposition to the bill came only from progressive urban centers. By amplifying resistance from across Tennessee, SOCM helped shift the narrative from partisan backlash to a cross-regional defense of children and schools (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972).

SOCM also contributed significantly to movement framing and policy education during this time (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972). They collaborated with TN for All and TIRRC to produce briefing documents that outlined the legal,

ethical, and educational implications of HB 793 in plain language, making the information accessible to organizers, parents, and students (Tennessee for All 2022; Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001).

C. Tennessee for All and TIRRC

In contrast to KCEC's relational grassroots energy and SOCM's emphasis on statewide infrastructure and political education, Tennessee for All contributed primarily through policy analysis, narrative framing, and strategic clarity (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). Their role sharpened the campaign's public message and helped ensure our organizing efforts were backed by timely research and legislative insight. Tennessee for All (TN4All) and the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) brought critical legal, policy, and communications capacity to the campaign against HB 793 (Tennessee for All 2022; Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). Both organizations operate at the intersection of grassroots advocacy and policy research, and they were among the first to offer detailed public analysis of the bill's implications. TN4All quickly framed HB 793 within a broader narrative of education privatization and state surveillance, linking it to ongoing voucher campaigns and the defunding of public schools (Tennessee for All 2022). TIRRC, with its long-standing focus on immigrant rights, immediately recognized the bill as an escalation in anti-immigrant policymaking (Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). Together, these organizations helped elevate HB 793 from a concerning legislative proposal to a focal point for statewide resistance. Their early warnings and policy memos provided the scaffolding for local coalitions to take action with confidence and clarity.

One of the most impactful contributions from TN4All and TIRRC was their development of a resolution template for local school boards (Tennessee for All 2022; Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). This document, vetted by legal experts, allowed education advocates to present a ready-made motion opposing HB 793 that school boards could adopt with minimal redrafting. The resolution cited constitutional protections, federal education law, and the moral obligation of schools to serve all children. It also included carefully chosen language that avoided partisan triggers, making it more likely to succeed in politically mixed districts. I personally used this template when working with KCEC to draft our version of the resolution for the Knox County Board of Education (Knox County Education Coalition 2018). In addition to legal tools, TN4All and TIRRC also provided high-quality messaging frameworks and social media content that made it easier for local groups to stay on message (Tennessee for All 2022; Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). These resources emphasized emotional resonance and community-centered language—shifting the conversation from immigration control to education access and safety. Sample talking points, op-ed templates, and visual graphics helped unify the campaign across counties and ensured that even newly activated supporters had consistent language to draw from. Their strategic communications work made a noticeable difference during Lobby Day and at the April 2 town hall, where many speakers echoed themes that originated in TN4All and TIRRC materials (Tennessee for All 2022 Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001).

Perhaps most importantly, these two organizations connected the HB 793 fight to the larger architecture of anti-immigrant and anti-public education policymaking in Tennessee. They tracked bill sponsors, analyzed political donations, and illuminated how legislation like HB 793 was not an isolated event, but part of a coordinated agenda driven by national actors such as the

American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) (American Legislative Exchange Council [ALEC] 1973). By naming this broader context, TN4All and TIRRC helped local organizers understand that defeating the bill was about more than this legislative cycle—it was about resisting a long-term project to criminalize vulnerable communities and dismantle public institutions (Tennessee for All 2022; Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). Their ability to zoom out while remaining deeply responsive to local needs made them indispensable partners in the campaign.

IV. Messaging Battles and Public Narrative

A. Winning the Framing War

One of the most strategic victories in the resistance to HB 793 was the campaign’s success in reframing the bill from an “immigration issue” into a fundamental threat to public education. Organizers across the state, particularly those affiliated with Public School Strong, KCEC, TN4All, and TIRRC, emphasized that the bill was not just about undocumented students—it was about the future of inclusive, accessible public schools in Tennessee (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Public School Strong 2023; Tennessee for All 2022; Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). The repeated messaging point, “This is about public schools—not politics,” appeared in flyers, public comments, op-eds, and legislative meetings. This reframing served two purposes: it redirected attention away from polarizing immigration discourse, and it made it harder for opponents to dismiss concerns as niche or partisan. By rooting the conversation in a shared belief in public education, organizers expanded their audience and attracted unlikely allies.

Personal storytelling played a central role in this strategy. Organizers knew data points and legal precedent would not move hearts, especially in a statehouse often resistant to civil

rights arguments. Instead, the campaign leaned heavily on lived experiences—particularly from immigrant families, educators, and students—to illustrate the trauma and fear that HB 793 would provoke. Parents shared how their children were already afraid of being asked about their “papers” at school, while teachers described the emotional toll of potentially betraying student trust. These stories were raw and deeply personal, delivered not by professional advocates but by directly impacted individuals. Their emotional weight created moments of tension and pause—even among political opponents—because they made the human cost of the legislation impossible to ignore.

The use of moral and emotional framing was a deliberate choice rooted in Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II’s concept of moral fusion politics (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). As Barber writes, “we became, as Dr. Cornel West says so well, not optimists who deny reality but prisoners of hope who work to change reality” (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016:2). This framework calls organizers to ground their demands in enduring moral values, even amid hardship and uncertainty. The campaign against HB 793 followed this model closely. Instead of partisan language, organizers asked moral questions: Should any child fear going to school? Should public institutions discriminate based on legal status? Should schools be sites of care or sites of policing? These questions reframed the stakes of the debate and opened space for broader coalitional support. Faith leaders, educators, and even some school board members who might not have previously spoken out on immigration issues began to voice concern—not because they changed their politics, but because the campaign changed the terms of the conversation.

The result of this moral framing strategy was a far more inclusive and resonant campaign than many anticipated. While HB 793 ultimately advanced in the legislature, it did so under much more scrutiny and resistance than its sponsors likely expected. The public narrative around

the bill shifted from one about technical data collection and border security to one centered on fear, dignity, and the collective right to education. That shift was a win in its own right. It laid the groundwork for future campaigns by demonstrating that effective and consistent reframing can reshape how communities understand and resist legislative threats. In the fight against HB 793, messaging was not just a support tactic—it was a central front of the campaign.

B. Challenges in the Narrative Arena

Despite successes in shifting public discourse, the campaign faced significant narrative challenges—especially in countering the right-wing framing that dominated early media and legislative discussion. Supporters of the bill relied on coded language like “resource protection,” “school transparency,” and “taxpayer fairness” to justify their stance, casting undocumented students as burdens on the education system. These talking points exploited long-standing anti-immigrant tropes and public anxieties about scarcity and accountability. By framing the issue as one of fiscal fairness rather than harm to children, proponents disguised the discriminatory nature of the bill in neutral bureaucratic language.

This strategy was reinforced by uneven media coverage across the state. While some progressive outlets and independent journalists provided accurate reporting, many mainstream sources relied on “both sides” narratives that flattened the moral stakes. Headlines often labeled HB 793 as an “immigration policy debate” or a “controversial student data bill,” avoiding direct acknowledgment of its harm or the communities it targeted. This diluted the urgency of the campaign’s messaging and enabled the bill’s sponsors to present themselves as reasonable reformers. In regions where local media echoed right-wing frames, organizers faced an uphill battle in mobilizing public pressure.

Another challenge was the emotional toll of defending the narrative, especially when school board resolutions failed. In some counties, boards refused to consider the resolutions, citing jurisdictional boundaries or concerns about politicization. These rejections, often delivered with bureaucratic indifference, were demoralizing for families and youth who had invested time and energy in advocacy. In Knox County, I witnessed firsthand how board members, though privately sympathetic, expressed discomfort with taking a public stance. Their refusal to act stalled local progress and emboldened opponents who could now claim the absence of institutional dissent.

Organizers also contended with online harassment and disinformation. After Lobby Day and the April 2 town hall received wider attention, social media platforms were flooded with comments questioning the legal status of parents, attacking student speakers, or misrepresenting the bill. Though many attacks came from anonymous or fringe accounts, they had a chilling effect on newer volunteers and families. Managing these digital spaces, supporting targeted individuals, and staying focused on messaging required a great deal of behind-the-scenes labor. These narrative battles underscored the risks of visibility in hostile environments and reinforced the need for rapid-response infrastructure in grassroots organizing.

C. Visual & Symbolic Organizing

Visual and symbolic organizing emerged as one of the most powerful tools in the campaign against HB 793. The blue “Public School Strong” shirts became a recognizable symbol at school board meetings, legislative hearings, rallies, and town halls (Public School Strong 2023). Their consistent presence projected a unified visual identity: parents, students, and educators standing together in defense of inclusive education. This simple but striking branding helped unify decentralized efforts and made participants feel part of a statewide movement.

Organizers used these symbols tactically at local meetings. Clad in blue shirts and holding signs like “No ICE in Our Schools” or “Stop HB 793,” groups often filled the front rows, ensuring a visual statement even when speaking time was limited or denied. Speakers—including students and teachers—often referenced the campaign’s moral messaging or held printed copies of the resolution. This combination of silent presence and symbolic clarity disrupted the expected flow of school board proceedings, often prompting acknowledgement from board members even when they refused to engage substantively.

The symbolic impact extended to major events like the March 11 Lobby Day and the April 2 town hall. At the Capitol, signs from Tennessee for All and TIRRC reading “Education Not Deportation” and “All Children Deserve Safety” lined the hallways (Tennessee for All 2022; Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). Children read poems and gave testimonies that transformed the space into a venue for public conscience. These visuals empowered participants, especially those from marginalized communities who are often excluded from policy spaces. Photos from the events circulated online and in press materials, extending the reach of the campaign’s visual narrative (Public School Strong 2023).

Symbolism also infused campaign communications. Flyers, social media graphics, and email headers employed recurring imagery—schoolhouses, broken chains, blue-themed visuals—to evoke urgency and hope (Public School Strong 2023). This consistent visual storytelling built emotional resonance and brand recognition across counties. It enabled a dispersed campaign to maintain cohesion and convey its values instantly. In a fight where time and access were limited, symbolic organizing became a form of power in itself: unifying across geography, overcoming fear, and asserting visibility in spaces where silence once reigned.

V. Strategic Wins, Losses, and Lessons

A. Tactical Successes

Despite the hostile political environment and the advancement of HB 793 through multiple stages of the legislative process, the campaign opposing the bill achieved several meaningful tactical victories. Local mobilizations, particularly in Knoxville, Memphis, and Nashville, transformed typically low-attendance school board meetings into high-visibility political stages. Parents, students, and educators showed up in blue Public School Strong shirts, filling meeting rooms, submitting coordinated public comments, and distributing printed materials outlining the bill's dangers (Public School Strong 2023). These actions disrupted the normal proceedings of school governance and placed visible political pressure on officials to take public stances. Even when resolutions failed or public comment was limited, the presence of coordinated, vocal opposition ensured that HB 793 could not advance quietly. It had become a publicly contested issue, not a procedural footnote.

Another major success was the consistency and coherence of messaging across vastly different constituencies. Thanks to the strategic work of TN4All, SOCM, and other coordinating bodies, grassroots organizers across the state echoed the same moral framework: that HB 793 was not simply an immigration bill, but a direct threat to the future of inclusive public education (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). This message appeared in flyers, speeches, op-eds, school board testimony, and online graphics. It unified a geographically dispersed network of campaigns under a shared narrative and made the opposition easier for media, legislators, and the broader public to understand. The use of centralized messaging templates and rapid-response communications helped even newly

activated volunteers articulate the stakes clearly and effectively. This coherence prevented the dilution of the campaign's moral clarity, even as tactics varied by county.

The campaign also succeeded in forging deeper relationships across organizational and cultural lines. Lobby Day, the April 2 town hall, and ongoing strategy meetings created new bonds between immigrant families, teachers unions, student organizers, and faith leaders. These connections didn't just serve short-term goals; they built long-term infrastructure that will benefit future organizing efforts around education justice, immigration enforcement, and racial equity. In spaces where these groups had previously worked in parallel, the HB 793 campaign created opportunities for shared labor and trust-building. I saw this relational organizing pay off in real time—when one organizer couldn't attend a meeting, another stepped in without hesitation; when new volunteers were overwhelmed, experienced leaders made time to check in. This culture of mutual support is, in itself, a form of power.

B. What Fell Short

Despite the campaign's many strengths, it did not succeed in halting HB 793's progression through the state legislature. The bill advanced out of committee and toward a floor vote despite overwhelming public opposition, including thousands of calls and emails, in-person lobbying, and compelling public testimony. This outcome revealed the harsh reality of organizing within a political system where legislative supermajorities operate with impunity. Hearings often felt performative, with little meaningful engagement from lawmakers. Emotional testimony from immigrant parents and teachers was met with blank stares or polite deflection. For many first-time participants, especially those who shared personal stories or lobbied for the first time, the lack of response from decision-makers was disheartening. The limits of grassroots power in such an asymmetrical political landscape became painfully clear.

Another area where the campaign fell short was in its ability to manage the tension between visibility and safety. While public testimony and symbolic protest created momentum, they also exposed vulnerable families to surveillance and backlash. Some undocumented parents who initially participated in meetings or events later withdrew, concerned about drawing attention to themselves or their children. Organizers worked diligently to mitigate these risks through safety protocols and Know Your Rights trainings, but the emotional toll remained significant. For many, just showing up required courage—and when their presence was ignored or their requests were denied, it deepened a sense of isolation and fear (Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). In trying to make the invisible visible, the campaign was constantly forced to weigh the value of public action against the need to protect its most impacted members.

The post-mobilization phase of the campaign also revealed a structural weakness common in crisis-driven organizing: burnout. Lobby Day and the April 2 town hall generated powerful momentum, but sustaining that energy proved difficult without immediate legislative wins. Volunteers who had poured hours into planning, outreach, and emotional labor needed time to recover, and new participants often struggled to understand what came next. As the legislative calendar dragged on and no major victories materialized, engagement dropped, and communication gaps widened. While organizers did their best to follow up, the absence of formal infrastructure and paid staff meant that much of the responsibility fell to a small core group already stretched thin. This highlighted the urgent need for long-term capacity-building and the creation of organizing rhythms that can endure beyond moments of crisis.

C. What This Campaign Taught You

The HB 793 campaign offered one of the clearest demonstrations of how quickly movements can scale in the face of political threat—and how much pressure that acceleration puts on organizers, both personally and structurally. For me, it was a crash course in navigating uncertainty, improvising under pressure, and holding tension without losing clarity. I watched parents become public speakers, educators become policy advocates, and quiet volunteers step into leadership roles when the stakes demanded it. I also saw how much of this work rests not on formal titles or official plans, but on the willingness to act, to listen, and to show up for others. In moments of crisis, leadership is less about charisma and more about presence. That lesson reshaped how I understand what it means to organize.

One of the most enduring lessons was the necessity of pairing legal knowledge with moral clarity and emotional resonance. While it was important to reference FERPA, *Plyler v. Doe*, and constitutional protections, it was the stories that moved people to act). A child afraid to go to school, a teacher forced to choose between the law and their students, a parent describing sleepless nights—these moments grounded our arguments in lived experience. This taught me that effective organizing must bridge the gap between policy and humanity. Facts alone rarely inspire action. It is narrative—when rooted in values and made accessible—that galvanizes people across political and demographic divides.

Perhaps the most sobering takeaway was that even the best-organized campaigns cannot always prevent unjust laws from advancing. HB 793 moved forward despite our efforts, and that reality forced me to confront the difference between moral power and legislative control. Yet the campaign did not fail. It created leaders, shifted narratives, and left a record of collective dissent that will shape how future legislation is received. Resistance matters—not only because it might

win, but because it builds the capacity to fight again. I came to see organizing not as a linear path to victory, but as a recursive process of building, defending, and rebuilding movements that can weather defeat and still grow stronger.

This experience changed how I view applied sociology. It is not simply about analyzing power structures from the outside—it is about stepping into them, testing theories in the field, and learning through action. Organizing showed me the sociology of the everyday: how people navigate fear, build solidarity, and act with courage even when outcomes are uncertain. It also revealed how deeply moral conviction can move people to action, and how sociological thinking can help clarify strategy, messaging, and coalition dynamics. From this campaign, I carry forward not just new skills, but a renewed sense of what it means to commit to the long game of justice—and to the everyday work of making resistance possible.

VI. HB 793 as a Case of Moral Organizing in Crisis

A. Connection to Literature

The campaign against HB 793 served as a powerful case study in moral organizing during a time of political crisis. At its core, the movement embodied the principles of moral fusion politics as outlined by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II in *The Third Reconstruction* (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). Rather than isolating immigration status as a niche concern, organizers strategically wove it into a broader moral argument about the role of public education in a democratic society. This approach allowed the campaign to build bridges across communities, pulling in not only immigrant justice advocates but also educators, parents, students, and faith leaders who shared a commitment to public institutions and inclusive values. By centering the message “No child should be denied an education,” the coalition reframed HB

793 from a polarizing policy debate into a question of shared ethics and community responsibility.

Barber's framework emphasizes that successful resistance must appeal to widely held moral convictions rather than narrow political identities (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). He writes, "Never become a nation that's unable to repent when you have mistreated the vulnerable. Never become so arrogant in your wealth that you refuse to lift the poor... Do justice. Love mercy. And walk humbly before your God" (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016:11). I saw this in the way campaign leaders avoided partisan language and instead asked fundamental questions about fairness, safety, and the purpose of public schools. The result was a campaign that resonated beyond traditional advocacy spaces, engaging people who might not have previously seen themselves as part of the immigrant justice movement. The use of moral clarity as a strategic tool created space for people to act from their conscience, rather than from ideological alignment. This tactic was not only unifying—it was disarming, allowing organizers to challenge the moral legitimacy of HB 793 in public discourse and to invite others into a collective stand against fear and exclusion.

George Goehl's *Fundamentals of Organizing* provides another critical lens for understanding the campaign's trajectory (Goehl 2020). He emphasizes that effective organizing often begins with modest, relational actions that build trust and momentum over time, eventually escalating into larger strategic efforts (Goehl 2020). That model played out clearly in the resistance to HB 793. The campaign began with one-on-one conversations, informal planning calls, and early public comment sessions before building toward larger actions like Lobby Day and the April 2 town hall. Each step was intentional, building momentum without leaving people behind. Rather than rushing to confrontation, organizers made space for community members to

learn, participate, and build trust in the organizing process. This cumulative approach to power-building grounded the campaign in community relationships, ensuring that growth was not just tactical, but also relational and sustainable.

Kathleen Blee's *Democracy in the Making* is particularly relevant for understanding the coalition dynamics that emerged during the HB 793 campaign (Blee 2012). As she writes, "the many efforts that fizzle, dissolve, or become something else shows how fraught the process of organizing for change can be" (Blee 2012:6). This insight captures the messy, adaptive nature of the coalition's development, as different groups came together under shifting conditions and imperfect alignment. That was precisely the experience in this campaign. Groups like KCEC, SOCM, TN for All, and TIRRC entered the fight with different cultures, resources, and strategic orientations, yet found common ground through collaboration (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All; 2022 Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). The campaign's strength did not come from seamless coordination, but from a willingness to keep working through tensions, adapt in real time, and share labor in pursuit of a common goal. It was a living example of Blee's theory that collective identity and trust are built through action—not presumed at the outset, but forged in the process of showing up (Blee 2012).

Tamara Draut's *Sleeping Giant* also helps illuminate the often-unseen leadership that drove this campaign (Draut 2016). Draut emphasizes that working-class people often step into organizing roles not because of formal training, but out of urgency and necessity. As she puts it, "people who, when they go to work or when they act as citizens, have comparatively little power or authority" are often the ones who rise to lead movements for justice (Draut 2016:5). This was evident throughout the HB 793 resistance, where parents, educators, and students became

organizers through action, not credentials. Many of the campaign's most committed participants were parents, teachers, and students who had no previous experience in political advocacy, but who felt compelled to act because the threat was personal and immediate. These individuals took on critical roles—speaking at town halls, coordinating childcare, printing flyers at the last minute—not because they saw themselves as movement leaders, but because the moment demanded their courage. Their participation exemplified Draut's argument that the new working class is not passive—it is politically latent, waiting to be activated by urgent and moral struggles that affect their daily lives (Draut 2016).

B. Final Reflection

HB 793 was more than a bad piece of legislation. It was a test of what kind of public institutions we are willing to defend, and who we believe those institutions should serve. The bill threatened to transform schools from places of inclusion and learning into tools of surveillance and exclusion. For immigrant communities, it signaled a dangerous new phase in the normalization of policy-driven discrimination; for educators, it presented an ethical crisis over whether they could remain trusted figures in students' lives. And for all of us involved in the campaign, it revealed how quickly democratic values can be undermined if we do not actively defend them. The bill became a symbolic line in the sand—one that forced communities to decide whether they would stand by as fear became institutionalized, or whether they would speak out for dignity, trust, and educational equity.

What emerged in response was not simply a reactive coalition—it was a generative moral movement. It taught us how to build relationships in urgency, how to coordinate across difference, and how to center voices that are often ignored in public policy debates. The campaign's strength lay not in the precision of its strategy, but in the courage of its participants:

immigrant parents who risked visibility to speak truth, educators who defended their classrooms as sanctuaries, and young organizers who turned moral clarity into action. These were not symbolic gestures. They were acts of resistance that made the bill's path through the legislature more contentious, more public, and more politically costly than it otherwise would have been. Even when legislation advances, how it advances matters—and this campaign ensured that HB 793 did not pass quietly or without public contestation.

In many ways, the resistance to HB 793 became a proving ground for broader movement work in Tennessee. It showed us what's possible when organizations coordinate without ego, when messaging is rooted in values rather than technical policy, and when coalitions are built not on abstract alignment, but on shared acts of care and courage. The infrastructure formed during this campaign—both emotional and strategic—will remain essential as new threats to public education, immigrant rights, and democratic inclusion continue to emerge. From this experience, I learned that victories do not always look like blocked bills or changed votes. Sometimes they look like expanded capacity, deeper solidarity, and a new generation of leaders ready to hold the line.

Ultimately, HB 793 forced us to ask: What kind of public do public schools serve? And what kind of society are we building when we allow surveillance, fear, and exclusion to creep into spaces meant for learning and growth? The campaign against the bill did not just provide answers—it created the conditions for a new conversation about who belongs, who decides, and how we protect the commons. In that way, it was not only a fight against a policy—it was a public declaration that our schools, our communities, and our democracy are worth organizing for. That declaration, shaped by moral organizing in crisis, will continue to guide the work ahead.

Chapter 5: Literature Meets Lived Experience

I. Theoretical Anchors Revisited

A. The Fundamentals of Community Organizing – George Goehl

George Goehl's *Fundamentals of Organizing* provided one of the most grounding and practically relevant frameworks for understanding my work throughout this practicum (Goehl 2020). At the heart of Goehl's model is the idea that power is built through relationships—not through sweeping ideological declarations or top-down directives, but through consistent, intentional connection (Goehl 2020). He stresses that organizing grows through small, deliberate actions that build momentum over time, eventually escalating into larger collective efforts (Goehl 2020). This principle was vividly reflected in the way our campaign unfolded, particularly around the April 2 town hall and the broader resistance to HB 793 (Goehl 2020). We didn't start with a mass mobilization. We started with small group meetings, one-on-one calls, and the quiet coordination of logistics: printing flyers, drafting talking points, distributing sign-up sheets. These small but deliberate actions laid the groundwork for large-scale events and public confrontation.

My own role in the April 2 town hall planning exemplified Goehl's concept of building power from the ground up (Goehl 2020). I wasn't the public face of the event, nor did I hold a formal title, but I was immersed in the essential labor that made the event possible. I drafted and formatted the agenda, printed materials for breakout groups, organized childcare and food distribution, and worked with others to adapt messaging that could resonate with our diverse audience. None of these tasks were glamorous, but every one of them was a building block in our campaign's ability to act powerfully and cohesively in public. Goehl's framework validated this

kind of labor as strategic—not supplemental. He argues that those most directly affected by injustice should also be the ones empowered to shape the solutions. The strength of our organizing didn't emerge from a singular action; it was the cumulative result of consistent, relational effort (Goehl 2020). Goehl also teaches that effective organizing must disrupt the status quo—not for its own sake, but to expose what is broken and to create space for something new (Goehl 2020). Goehl argues that disruption is essential when institutions are designed in ways that deny people the dignity and resources they need to thrive. That understanding of disruption was central to our resistance to HB 793. The bill sought to normalize surveillance and exclusion in public education, and our coordinated presence at school board meetings, Lobby Day, and town halls disrupted that narrative by asserting a counter-vision: that schools should be places of safety, dignity, and belonging (Goehl 2020). In this way, our organizing did more than oppose a bill—it revealed the values underlying both the threat and the resistance. Goehl argues that organizing transforms institutions not by making demands alone, but by cultivating new practices of power from below (Goehl 2020). Through our slow, strategic work across Knoxville and the state, I saw that principle come to life.

B. Sleeping Giant – Tamara Draut

While Goehl's model emphasized the strategic accumulation of power through relationship and escalation, Tamara Draut's *Sleeping Giant* centered my attention on who was showing up—and why (Draut 2016). Draut offers a compelling analysis of how working-class people, often excluded from traditional political power, become the unexpected drivers of transformative grassroots movements (Draut 2016). Her framework helped me make sense of who showed up to fight HB 793—and why (Draut 2016). This was not a campaign led by seasoned activists or policy insiders. It was led by everyday people: parents attending 'Meet the

Superintendent’ meals at Salsarita’s, teachers squeezing in organizing calls between grading papers, and volunteers stepping up to speak at school board meetings despite never having done so before. These were the “ordinary people doing extraordinary things” that Draut describes—motivated not by ideology alone, but by necessity, community, and love for their children and schools (Draut 2016:3). Throughout the campaign, I witnessed the emergence of leadership in the most unassuming places. One parent who had initially come to a town hall “just to listen” ended up helping coordinate food for the next event. A volunteer who nervously read a public comment at one school board meeting returned weeks later to organize carpooling for Lobby Day. At a coalition planning meeting, a young organizer who had never led a breakout group before facilitated a storytelling circle with grace and confidence. These were not isolated moments; they were part of a larger pattern. Draut argues that working people are often underestimated as political actors, but when the stakes are clear and organizing is accessible, they rise—not as passive participants, but as leaders shaped by direct experience (Draut 2016). As she notes, “racism is used to divide the working class, keeping struggling people of all races from achieving full economic freedom” (Draut 2016:xvi). That pattern defined the PSS campaign, where public education became a unifying issue across lines of race, class, and geography (Public School Strong 2023).

The HB 793 fight also revealed the structural conditions Draut critiques: how neoliberal policies erode public goods and isolate people from collective power (Draut 2016). Many of the families I worked with were already navigating underfunded schools, rising costs of living, and workplace precarity. Organizing offered not just a response to HB 793, but a pathway toward reclaiming agency in a political landscape that routinely renders working-class voices invisible. What Draut calls “a working-class agenda [that] is vital for repairing the destruction caused by

decades of misguided policies” unfolded in real time: in the co-creation of flyers, in late-night planning calls, and in conversations held in parking lots after school board meetings (Draut 2016:16). These were not glamorous or widely televised actions, but they were acts of resistance rooted in care, dignity, and collective determination. Finally, Draut’s emphasis on reclaiming democracy from elite capture resonated deeply with our efforts to expose the ideological underpinnings of HB 793 (Draut 2016). This was never just about a single bill—it was about who public institutions are designed to serve, and who gets to make decisions about them. The campaign directly confronted efforts to shift power away from communities and toward privatized, surveillance-oriented models of education. In doing so, our organizing not only echoed Draut’s analysis—it embodied it (Draut 2016). We saw firsthand how people excluded from formal political power were building an alternative: a grassroots democracy rooted in participation, protection, and public good.

C. Democracy in the Making – Kathleen Blee

If Draut helped me recognize the rise of working-class leadership, Kathleen Blee gave me language for how coalitions functioned in practice: unpredictably, collaboratively, and often messily (Blee 2013; Draut 2016). Her book *Democracy in the Making* provides a valuable lens for understanding how activist groups form and function, not through pre-determined structures or rigid plans, but through the unpredictable and often chaotic process of doing political work together (Blee 2012). This theoretical insight was confirmed daily throughout my practicum. The resistance to HB 793—and the broader campaign to defend public education—was not spearheaded by a single organization with a clear blueprint. It was a constantly evolving coalition that included SOCM (Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972), KCEC (Knox County Education Coalition 2018), TN for All (Tennessee for All 2022),

and TIRRC (Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001), each bringing different capacities, organizing styles, and internal cultures. The campaign was not launched with a central command—it was built in motion, through shared crisis, collaborative experimentation, and the slow accumulation of trust.

Blee writes that movement groups often cohere not because of ideological alignment, but through the process of participating in joint action (Blee 2012). As she observes, “False starts, quick reversals, tentative moves, and radical shifts in direction... characterize virtually every grassroots effort” (Blee 2012:5). This dynamic was evident in the HB 793 coalition, where alignment emerged not from a shared political doctrine but from the evolving work of organizing together. That insight felt especially true as I navigated overlapping roles across multiple organizations. There was no single meeting where we all decided, “Here is the plan.” Instead, plans emerged out of text threads, Google Docs, back-to-back Zoom calls, and emotional debriefs after public events. The relationships between organizers were not always smooth—there were moments of tension, miscommunication, and differing priorities—but these were not signs of failure. They were evidence of the very dynamism that Blee describes: a democratic process unfolding in real time, shaped by urgency, imperfection, and collective learning (Blee 2012).

This was particularly visible in the role I played as someone working between groups. Because I was not embedded full-time in any one organization, I often moved between spaces—attending different SOCM trainings, analyzing TN for All policy reviews, and coordinating outreach through KCEC (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). At first, I worried that this liminal position would make my contributions feel fragmented or peripheral. But over time, I

realized that being “in between” allowed me to serve as a connector—helping ideas travel between coalitions, noticing where duplication was happening, and stitching together relationships across organizational lines. Blee’s work helped me understand that this kind of informal bridge-building is not a byproduct of disorganization—it is a vital function in grassroots coalitions, especially those forming in the midst of political crisis (Blee 2012).

Blee also emphasizes that democratic capacity is often built through small, seemingly mundane acts (Blee 2012). As she notes, “grassroots activism is shaped by its low periods as well as its high moments,” making even routine or seemingly insignificant actions essential to the life of a movement (Blee 2012:11). I saw this unfold constantly—how campaigns cohered not just through high-profile events, but through the quiet work of coordination and care. The resistance to HB 793 was held together as much by behind-the-scenes spreadsheets and reminder texts as it was by public comment or Lobby Day. And those mundane acts—many of which I participated in—were not outside the political process. They were the democratic process: a lived experience of collective action shaped by attention, trust, and persistence.

D. The Third Reconstruction – Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II

Bringing many of these themes together, Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II’s *The Third Reconstruction* offered a unifying vision—one that grounded our work in a moral and strategic framework that transcended identity and issue silos (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). His model of moral fusion politics—the deliberate linking of race, class, immigration, education, and labor into a single, values-based movement—was not just an abstract theory during my practicum; it became the central strategy guiding the campaign against HB 793 (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016).

Barber argues that movements become powerful not by avoiding moral clarity, but by leaning into it—by making bold, values-driven claims that transcend partisan language (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). As he puts it, “When you’ve devoted your entire life to those people—when in fact you are those people—then the freedom movement is not a matter of history or social theory. It is a matter of life and death” (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016:6). That depth of moral commitment shaped how our campaign framed HB 793—not as a partisan issue, but as a question of justice and collective responsibility. The HB 793 campaign embodied this approach. Rather than narrowly opposing the bill on legal or procedural grounds, organizers consistently emphasized the broader moral stakes: that no child should fear going to school, that schools are for learning not surveillance, and that all families—regardless of status—deserve safety and dignity.

What made this framing powerful was that it emerged not from abstract principles, but from lived experience. Parents told stories of their children crying on the way to school. Educators shared their fear of being forced to betray student trust. Faith leaders spoke about their sacred duty to protect the vulnerable. These voices grounded the campaign in moral urgency and gave substance to Barber’s insistence that movements must be anchored in the suffering and courage of real people (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016).

Barber also emphasizes the importance of narrative discipline in movement work—the need to clearly define what is at stake and who the fight is for. As he recounts, “Conversations that started when someone stopped by the house inevitably led to a community meeting where others with a similar concern would gather to discuss what could be done” (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016:5). In our campaign, this meant consistently reframing HB 793 not as an “immigration issue” but as a public education crisis. It meant refusing to let opponents define the

terms of debate around “transparency” or “taxpayer fairness,” and instead asserting the moral and democratic purpose of schools. This was not easy. It required consistent messaging, emotional labor, and the willingness to repeat the same moral argument across a dozen different venues. But it worked: by the time the bill neared a floor vote, even legislators who supported it had to answer questions rooted in our moral framing.

Finally, Barber’s call for fusion politics taught me that coalitions must stretch beyond comfort if they are to meet the moment (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). The HB 793 fight brought together immigrant justice groups, public education advocates, rural organizers, and progressive faith networks. These groups did not always share language, strategy, or political culture. But by organizing around shared values—not just shared identities—we were able to build something broader than any one group could sustain alone. In this sense, the campaign was not just resisting a bill. It was modeling a new kind of movement: one that refused to choose between immigrant safety and public education, between policy analysis and storytelling, between local fights and statewide strategy. Barber’s vision of moral fusion became the ethical compass of our organizing—and it gave us the courage to act as one (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016).

II. Lived Experience: Field Reflections Through a Theoretical Lens

A. Power-Building in Practice

One of the most enduring insights from George Goehl’s *Fundamentals of Organizing* is that power is built relationally—through trust, consistency, and collective action—not just through numbers or media attention (Goehl 2020). During my practicum, I came to understand this not as a theoretical proposition but as a lived reality. The campaign against HB 793 offered countless examples of how quiet, behind-the-scenes labor contributed to public moments of

visible power. I saw firsthand that organizing is often not about the person at the podium—it's about the people checking in volunteers, crafting message scripts, arranging childcare, or printing flyers at midnight. That was the kind of work I found myself doing, and it showed me that power doesn't just emerge from strategy—it emerges from relationships built over time. My work helping to plan the April 2 town hall is a clear example of how Goehl's theory came to life (Goehl 2020). While I wasn't the one giving the main presentation or anchoring a breakout group, I helped create the conditions that made that event possible. I designed and distributed flyers, confirmed logistics, co-created the discussion prompts used in the breakout groups, and helped recruit speakers through personal outreach. Each of these tasks involved a layer of trust—trust that someone would follow through, that voices would be respected, and that the event would reflect our shared values. This accumulation of trust wasn't glamorous, but it was essential. Goehl emphasizes that power doesn't come from bold statements alone—it is built through relationships, trust, and collective action rooted in shared values (Goehl 2020). The strength of the town hall didn't come from its size alone. It came from the scaffolding of relationships that held it together.

Goehl's framework also helped me understand that public actions are not spontaneous (Goehl 2020). They are the result of dozens of small relational commitments made over time. The emotional tone of a school board meeting, the decision of a parent to speak in public, or the willingness of a teacher to wear a campaign shirt all reflected prior conversations, reassurances, and moments of encouragement. I learned that organizing is not just about mobilizing people—it's about sustaining people. Goehl stresses that strong movements grow by starting small—through consistent, intentional efforts that gradually build the capacity to take on larger actions (Goehl 2020). The presence of Public School Strong members at repeated meetings, our follow-

up with first-time participants, and the care we took to provide food, child care, and translation were all foundational steps that helped our campaign grow in strength and scale (Public School Strong 2023).

This labor—often invisible—is also deeply gendered, racialized, and undervalued. The majority of behind-the-scenes work in our coalition was done by women, many of them women of color, parents, or educators who were already overextended. I saw how expectations often fell unevenly: that those who were most impacted by the legislation were also asked to carry the heaviest organizing load. It made me reflect on who gets recognized as a “leader” and who is simply assumed to make things run smoothly. Goehl’s model urges us to recognize that movements grow through the accumulation of small, collective actions—not just through dramatic moments or charismatic leadership (Goehl 2020). That perspective shifted how I evaluated both my own contributions and those of others. I began to see the flyer printer, the snack coordinator, and the text-banking volunteer not as peripheral helpers, but as essential movement-builders and leaders in their own right.

Ultimately, my experience affirmed that relational organizing is slow, human, and hard to quantify—but it is the most durable form of power-building we have. It does not depend on charismatic figures or massive budgets. It depends on follow-through, shared risk, and moral clarity. I learned that the ability to hold space, respond to emotion, and make people feel seen is not an accessory to organizing—it is the work. In the campaign against HB 793, what looked like spontaneous mobilization was actually the result of deliberate relationship-building that made collective action feel possible. Goehl emphasizes that meaningful, powerful action in the world depends on organizing through relationships rather than individual effort or abstract messaging (Goehl 2020). That lesson is one I will carry with me long after this practicum ends.

B. Group Formation, Messiness, and Fluid Roles

Kathleen Blee's *Democracy in the Making* argues that activist groups often emerge not from pre-existing ideological alignment but from the lived experience of taking action together—a concept that perfectly captures the dynamics I observed during my practicum (Blee 2012). The resistance to HB 793 was not led by a single, unified organization. Instead, it was shaped by the collaboration of multiple grassroots groups—KCEC, SOCM, Tennessee for All, and others—each with their own histories, internal cultures, and organizing styles (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). Blee writes that activist groups rarely emerge from a fully formed plan, but instead develop through the often messy process of collective action (Blee 2012). As she notes, “False starts, quick reversals, tentative moves, and radical shifts in direction... characterize virtually every grassroots effort” (Blee 2012:5). I saw that truth come alive in real time as people from different political geographies and institutional affiliations found ways to organize together, even when their approaches were not always aligned.

Coalition work, in practice, was inherently messy. Our planning meetings often included people with different assumptions about decision-making, different organizational priorities, and different comfort levels with formality. There were times when tasks were duplicated, communication faltered, or decisions were made ad hoc because no one held formal authority. But this unpredictability was not a flaw; it was an opening Blee observes that grassroots campaigns often evolve organically, shaped by shifting practices and ideas rather than rigid plans (Blee 2012). As she notes, “Even if practices and ideas shift over time, the weight of tradition makes frequent and drastic changes less and less likely” (Blee 2012:7). The campaign's

structure—loose and responsive—made it possible for people to jump in as needed, to shift roles quickly, and to respond to emerging needs with creativity rather than rigidity.

My own role exemplified this flexibility. At various times I functioned as a facilitator, event coordinator, notetaker, strategy consultant, and informal liaison between groups. There was no job description or formal chain of command—only mutual accountability grounded in trust. This relational approach enabled quick pivots and collaborative responsiveness, even when capacity was stretched thin. Blee affirms this kind of improvisational dynamic, emphasizing that grassroots activism is an ongoing process shaped by participation rather than predefined strategy (Blee 2012). As she writes, “For them, grassroots activism is continuous” (Blee 2012:17). In our campaign, identity was forged in the doing—through the long text threads, shared Zoom calls, and follow-up debriefs after high-stakes public events. In our campaign, identity was forged in the doing—through the long text threads, shared Zoom calls, and follow-up debriefs after high-stakes public events.

The informality of our coalition also revealed key tensions when we interfaced with more institutional players. Groups like TIRRC and Tennessee for All often brought important legal tools and communications capacity to the table, but these resources sometimes clashed with the pace or process norms of more localized efforts (Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001; Tennessee for All 2022). That friction was real, but it wasn’t necessarily detrimental. It forced constant negotiation between structure and responsiveness, between polish and experimentation. Blee highlights the critical role of everyday tasks in building grassroots power, reminding us that movements are shaped just as much by routine work as by big events (Blee 2012). As she notes, “Because grassroots activism is shaped by its low periods as well as its high moments, observations were made at every group event, no matter

how routine or seemingly insignificant” (Blee 2012:11). I experienced that firsthand, especially in the small moments: drafting sign-up forms, managing calendars, and checking in with tired volunteers.

Ultimately, Blee’s framework helped me understand that democratic organizing is not linear—it is iterative and emergent (Blee 2012). Our campaign did not succeed because it was seamless; it succeeded because people kept showing up, adjusting, and making decisions together. It was the living embodiment of Blee’s insight that collective capacity isn’t something discovered in advance—it’s built through shared struggle and reflection (Blee 2012). As she writes, “Culture is central to activism because activist groups are more than vehicles through which people assert political claims... They also are venues in which people work collectively to understand their world, decide what is just or unjust, and express their values” (Blee 2012:30). In the face of political urgency, we chose to act first and organize as we went. That messy, adaptive process wasn’t a barrier to democracy—it was the democracy.

C. Moral and Strategic Framing

One of the most powerful lessons from this practicum was how effective organizing requires both moral clarity and strategic discipline. Our campaign against HB 793, and the broader resistance to voucher expansion and public education attacks, exemplified the necessity of framing political issues in ways that resonate emotionally while also advancing tangible goals. The theoretical insights of Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II and Tamara Draut guided much of my understanding of this dual necessity (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016; Draut 2016). Barber’s concept of moral fusion politics offered a framework for uniting diverse constituencies under a shared set of values, while Draut’s *Sleeping Giant* emphasized the role of ordinary people in reclaiming democratic control through movement work (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016;

Draut 2016). As Barber writes, “Douglass knew what I was now learning in the struggle for justice: we always need all the friends we can get” (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016:26). This framework became a guiding principle in our messaging and organizing, reminding us that broad-based coalitions are essential to confronting interlocking injustices.

Throughout the campaign, we deliberately framed HB 793 not as a technical data policy or an immigration debate, but as a moral crisis that threatened the foundational promise of public schools. Rather than cite policy statistics alone, we told stories. We asked questions like, “What kind of schools are we becoming?” and “Should any child be afraid to go to school?” These questions cut through partisanship and appealed to values of dignity, safety, and community care. Barber teaches that moral arguments have the power to transform political conversations into public mandates (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). As he reflects, “They stood up and raised their voices in moral dissent because they knew that slavery was wrong” (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016:20). This conviction—that truth-telling rooted in moral clarity can drive political change—remained central to how we framed and fought against HB 793. We saw this play out as the message “No child should be denied an education” became a rallying cry—one that spoke to conscience rather than ideology.

At the same time, the campaign was deeply strategic about how and when those messages were deployed. Materials were adapted for different audiences—faith-based communities, school boards, rural parents, and urban activists—without diluting the central message. We used emotionally resonant language during public comment, visually cohesive branding in blue shirts and flyers, and careful legal framing when speaking with officials. Organizers avoided partisan jargon and instead emphasized shared responsibilities: that schools belong to the public, and that protecting children should be a universal value. Draut underscores the importance of framing

political engagement in accessible, inclusive terms that reflect the realities of working people (Draut 2016). As she argues, “A working-class agenda is vital for repairing the destruction caused by decades of misguided policies” (Draut 2016:16). In our case, this meant asserting the power of grassroots messaging to challenge elite narratives—like the portrayal of HB 793 as “transparency” or “taxpayer fairness.”

This framing work was not without its complications. Different audiences responded to different messages. In some conservative-leaning counties, moral language about children’s well-being was more effective than legal arguments about constitutional rights. In more progressive districts, tying HB 793 to a broader pattern of racialized state surveillance sparked stronger engagement. Messaging had to be nimble, and that often meant ongoing experimentation and adaptation. But what held it all together was a commitment to clarity—not just about what we opposed, but about what we were for: public schools that serve every child, communities where families feel safe, and institutions built on care, not control.

Reflecting on this aspect of the campaign helped me see that framing is not just about language—it’s about power. Who gets to define the problem often determines whose solution is considered valid. By anchoring our campaign in moral clarity and lived experience, we made space for new voices to shape the conversation. Students, immigrant parents, and first-time speakers were able to articulate their truths in ways that reshaped what was politically possible. And that, ultimately, is what moral organizing is about—not just winning an argument, but shifting the terms of debate so that people can see themselves in the movement and feel called to act.

III. Where Theory and Reality Diverged

A. Moments That Didn't Fit the Textbooks

Despite the grounding that theory provided throughout this practicum, several moments revealed how lived organizing work can diverge sharply from what the literature prepares us for. One of the clearest examples was Lobby Day at the Capitol. Lobbyers entered the space with carefully crafted talking points, legal documentation, and powerful personal stories. Organizers had trained speakers to open with moral language and avoid confrontational tones, echoing the strategic advice of authors like Goehl and Barber (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016; Goehl 2020). But once inside the halls of legislative power, it became clear that many lawmakers were not prepared to listen—at least not in the way we had imagined. Some legislators barely looked up from their phones; others gave curt, scripted responses that betrayed no engagement with the urgency of our concerns. The disconnect between the preparation we brought and the indifference we met was jarring.

This experience revealed how the dynamics of institutional power are often colder and more performative than theoretical models imply. Literature on community organizing tends to emphasize relationship-building and moral suasion as tools to influence decision-makers. While These strategies can be effective in some contexts, but our Lobby Day showed the limits of engagement when operating within a legislature structurally insulated from grassroots pressure. As Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II writes, “While realism cannot determine the goals of our faith, it must shape our strategy in movements of moral dissent” (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016:22). We came prepared to persuade; instead, we encountered institutional performance. That emotional disconnect—the gulf between moral clarity and political stonewalling—is a reality that few frameworks fully account for. Another unexpected tension came from internal

hesitation among presumed allies. In Knox County, we approached school board members who had previously signaled support for public education and immigrant students. We offered them a resolution that was both legally sound and morally grounded. Kathleen Blee’s work highlights the messiness and improvisation in group formation, but it pays less attention to how liberal allies can quietly obstruct momentum out of self-protection rather than ideological difference (Blee 2012). As she observes in one case, a group “regarded the people who were needed to sustain its radical vision... as too poor and isolated to join the group” (Blee 2012:19). In our case, negotiating institutional support often meant confronting avoidance rather than opposition—subtle forms of resistance that constrained participation and progress.

Perhaps the deepest theoretical gap I encountered involved the emotional toll of organizing under threat. While authors like Goehl and Draut offer robust insights into power-building and working-class leadership, there is far less attention in the literature to the affective dimensions of grassroots work (Draut 2016; Goehl 2020). During the height of the HB 793 campaign, I saw organizers weep from exhaustion. I watched parents retreat from advocacy after enduring online harassment. I felt myself strain to balance support roles, coalition coordination, and my own academic obligations. These experiences drove home that movements are not only intellectual or strategic—they are emotional, embodied, and often overwhelming. Goehl reminds us that while organizing is about building power, it also comes with emotional weight—heartbreak, exhaustion, and the personal cost of deep engagement (Goehl 2020). That truth shaped our daily reality more than any textbook prepared me for.

B. Limits of Strategy Alone

Throughout my practicum, the organizing models I leaned on—particularly those offered by Goehl, Barber, Draut, and Blee—emphasized the importance of strategic clarity, moral

framing, and building relational power (Barber 2016; Blee 2012; Draut 2016 Goehl 2020). But in practice, I learned that strategy alone is not enough. Knowing how to frame an issue, escalate pressure, or refine talking points doesn't fully capture the emotional, psychological, and relational terrain that organizers must navigate in real time. What sustained our campaign wasn't just the plan—it was the people. And sustaining people is a different kind of labor than organizing strategy typically centers.

Burnout, fear, and emotional safety became persistent themes behind the scenes, even in moments that appeared successful externally. After the April 2 town hall, which many regarded as a peak moment of public engagement, several core volunteers quietly stepped back—not from apathy, but from sheer exhaustion. Some had spent weeks organizing on top of caregiving and full-time work. Others were drained from supporting families through the trauma of public storytelling. Our strategy had unfolded as planned, but that did not mitigate the personal cost. As Tamara Draut points out, exploitative systems often strip people of their humanity, leaving them feeling “invisible” and “unappreciated” even as they carry the weight of the work (Draut 2016:44). This was not a strategic failure—it was a human reckoning. This disconnect also underscored how often emotional labor is racialized, gendered, and made invisible. Much of the care work that held our coalition together—coordinating food, translating flyers, comforting nervous speakers—was performed by women, particularly women of color. This labor was essential to the campaign's success, yet it was rarely acknowledged in formal evaluations of strategy or outcomes. Without that steady, behind-the-scenes work, even the best plans cannot succeed. Goehl emphasizes that real power grows through consistent, mutual support—through the act of showing up for one another over time (Goehl 2020). Strategy may chart the course, but it is care that keeps the movement going.

Ultimately, I came to see that building power means more than shifting public narratives or securing policy wins. It means creating spaces where people can return—not just as activists, but as whole people. Where their grief is honored, their boundaries respected, and their labor valued. That requires more than a sharp analysis or polished plan. It requires a culture of organizing rooted in care, trust, and shared resilience. Theories of power and strategy can guide our external action—but they will not carry us through unless we also know how to tend to each other internally.

D. Returning to the Guiding Questions

As I reflect on the totality of this practicum, I return to the four guiding questions that shaped my experience from the beginning. These questions emerged not from abstract theory, but from the lived contradictions, challenges, and breakthroughs I witnessed while organizing on the ground. They continue to shape how I think about applied sociology, movement-building, and the future of grassroots power.

First: *How do grassroots campaigns sustain themselves in environments where political threats are constant and wins are rare?* I learned that sustainability is not rooted in urgency alone, but in rhythm, care, and consistency. Campaigns like Public School Strong thrived when volunteers were seen, supported, and given ways to contribute without burning out (Public School Strong 2023). It was not the presence of formal infrastructure that sustained the work, but the presence of people—checking in, showing up, and holding each other through setbacks

Second: *What does it take for organizations with different structures and organizing cultures to collaborate effectively?* The coalition I worked within was far from perfect, but it was held together by mutual respect and the willingness to stay in the work despite misalignment. KCEC, SOCM, and Tennessee for All each brought distinct strengths—and tensions—but it was

our ability to adapt, share tools, and remain in dialogue that made collective action possible (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022).

Third: *How can education justice and immigrant justice be fully integrated—not just aligned in rhetoric but in leadership and structure?* HB 793 forced these movements into proximity, but full integration is still a work in progress. Language access, leadership development, and deep relational organizing across immigrant and non-immigrant communities are essential if we are to move from solidarity statements to shared strategy. This practicum revealed both the urgency and the difficulty of doing so in ways that are honest, representative, and grounded in community needs.

Finally: *What does organizing teach us about democracy under threat?* It teaches us that democracy is not guaranteed by institutions alone—it is practiced in rooms full of nervous speakers, in school board meetings, in town halls where people find the courage to speak. I saw that even when legislative victories were elusive, the act of participating—testifying, resisting, convening—was itself a democratic act. In moments of disenfranchisement, organizing becomes the infrastructure of hope.

These questions do not have final answers, but they now live in me differently—no longer as abstract prompts, but as embodied practices. This thesis is not the end of that inquiry. It is a record of what I learned by stepping into the work, and an invitation to keep learning by continuing to do so.

V. Bridge to Conclusion

The campaign against HB 793—and the broader effort to defend public education in Tennessee—taught me more than I could have imagined when I began this practicum.

These experiences showed me that movements are not built in the abstract, but in real time, through everyday acts of solidarity, courage, and coordination. Organizing is sociology in action: messy, hopeful, frustrating, strategic, and deeply human. The relationships I formed, the decisions I helped make, and the tensions I navigated all became part of a larger story: one of ordinary people confronting extraordinary threats with moral clarity and collective purpose.

This practicum didn't just deepen my understanding of power, strategy, and coalition—it reshaped my understanding of myself. I found that my voice grew stronger through action, that leadership could be quiet and relational, and that justice is not a fixed destination—but a daily practice we choose again and again. The sociological frameworks I studied gave me tools to analyze what was happening—but it was the work itself that gave those tools meaning. Organizing is not a detour from scholarship—it is where theory becomes tangible, where new knowledge is forged in the crucible of lived experience. As I move forward—whether as an organizer, scholar, advocate, or bridge-builder—I carry with me the lessons of this campaign: that moral framing can shift public discourse; that small, consistent actions can generate durable power; and that even when institutions fail to listen, people can still find each other, speak out, and build something stronger together. In a time of deep polarization and rising authoritarianism, this kind of grassroots, values-based organizing is not only possible—it is essential. And it is where I have come to understand the practice of sociology at its most urgent, relational, and alive.

Conclusion: Lessons from the Ground

I. Final Reflections on Applied Sociology in Practice

A. Engaged, Not Detached

One of the most transformative realizations from this practicum was that applied sociology is not a detached, observational discipline—it is a participatory one. Practicing sociology in grassroots spaces requires intention, humility, and collaboration. I wasn't studying a social world from the outside; I was immersed in it, learning and contributing in equal measure. The line between “student” and “organizer” blurred not because I abandoned analysis, but because organizing demanded it. Each meeting, breakout group, and revised messaging plan became part of a feedback loop between lived experience and sociological reflection. My fieldwork unfolded through deep engagement rather than formal interviews or passive observation. Planning calls, Lobby Day briefings, and emotionally charged school board meetings all became sites of relational and analytical labor. My field notes tracked not just what happened, but why it mattered—capturing shifts in group dynamics, messaging debates, and subtle expressions of power. In these moments, theory became a method of making sense of experience in real time. I saw how leadership emerged informally, how trust was tested, and how political identity was negotiated through action.

One of the most underappreciated dimensions of this work was emotional labor—holding space for others' fears, staying present through tension, and recognizing when care work was central to political work. This was especially true during vulnerable moments: a parent speaking through tears, a student preparing to testify, or an organizer navigating burnout after weeks of high-stakes mobilizing. These experiences were not distractions from organizing; they were organizing. Emotional labor shaped how coalitions formed, how strategies were sustained, and

how people stayed in the fight when outcomes were uncertain. Applied sociology, I came to understand, must take seriously the emotional dimensions of participation—not just as background noise, but as a source of meaning and insight.

What this experience taught me is that proximity does not diminish rigor—it deepens it. Applied sociology at its best is relational, reflexive, and accountable. It doesn't just describe the world; it moves through it, asks questions from inside the work, and generates insight through participation. That, I've come to believe, is what it means to practice sociology with integrity—not from the sidelines, but in the struggle, where power, emotion, and meaning constantly collide.

B. Organizing as Sociological Work

Through this practicum, I came to understand that organizing is not separate from sociological inquiry—it is sociological work. The daily practices of coalition-building, leadership development, and strategic adaptation revealed complex social processes in motion. I didn't just study inequality—I watched it unfold in real time. I saw how race, class, immigration status, and ideology shaped who spoke, who was heard, and whose knowledge counted. Meetings, public comment sessions, and breakout groups became ethnographic spaces where power was not just discussed—it was negotiated, challenged, and reshaped.

The sociological imagination—C. Wright Mills' idea of linking personal troubles to public issues—was present everywhere. Parents connected their fear of HB 793 to histories of exclusion and family separation. Teachers linked their exhaustion to austerity, and students framed their testimony as part of a broader political struggle. These insights were not drawn from textbooks—they were produced in the work itself. I learned that participants often arrived at

sociological truths through experience, not theory, and that part of organizing is helping make those connections visible and actionable.

In this way, organizing became both a method and an object of sociological study. It was where structure met agency, where identity met institution, and where people began to see themselves not just as shaped by systems, but as capable of reshaping them. To organize, I learned, is to do sociology with your sleeves rolled up—to ask critical questions, respond in real time, and create meaning through collective practice.

II. Major Lessons from the Practicum

A. Movement Power is Built in Relationships

One of the most enduring lessons of this practicum was that movement power is not built through charisma, ideology, or even strategy alone—it is built through relationships. Every key moment of the HB 793 campaign, from Lobby Day to the April 2 town hall, grew out of sustained relational labor: follow-up calls, one-on-one conversations, informal check-ins, and shared planning. These connections didn't emerge overnight—they were built through mutual accountability, trust, and collective care, often long before public actions unfolded.

This was especially true in the coalitional work that defined our resistance. KCEC, SOCM, and TN for All often differed in tactics, timing, and language (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022). What allowed us to move together was not uniformity—it was trust, built through doing. Late-night messaging edits, shared facilitation, child care support, and consistent follow-through made disagreement survivable and progress possible.

Relational power extended beyond organizers into the wider community. A parent didn't speak at a school board meeting because they read a policy brief—they did so because someone

they trusted invited them and promised to stand beside them. When educators wore blue shirts to meetings, it was often because a colleague had handed them one and said, “We’re in this together.” These weren’t symbolic gestures—they were personal invitations into collective action.

I came to see that making flyers, sending reminders, and arranging carpools weren’t “extras”—they were the work. They signaled care, commitment, and trust, and they held the campaign together. What made our organizing powerful was not spectacle—it was the quiet consistency of people showing up for each other. In moments of uncertainty, it was the relationships—not the plans—that sustained the effort.

B. Moral Framing Changes the Game

One of the campaign’s greatest strengths was its moral clarity. From the start, we framed HB 793 not just as bad policy, but as a threat to shared values. Phrases like “No child should be denied an education” and “Education, not surveillance” helped ground our strategy in a vision of justice rather than technical rebuttals. We weren’t trying to out-argue opponents—we were asserting what kind of community we wanted to be.

This strategy reflected Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II’s theory of moral fusion politics, which emphasizes organizing across race, class, and issue lines using shared values as the anchor (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove 2016). Our coalition included not only education and immigrant rights groups, but also union members, faith leaders, and parents who may never have organized around immigration before. What moved them wasn’t data—it was the question: “Should a child be punished for who their family is?”

This framing gave people permission to speak from the heart. Stories shared in public were not talking points—they were testimonies. A mother describing her child’s fear, or a

teacher explaining the erosion of trust, became moral indictments of a policy that targeted the most vulnerable. These narratives didn't just inform—they inspired. And they helped people with little organizing experience participate with conviction and clarity.

While not every official was persuaded, moral framing helped us stay grounded, especially when momentum waned. We didn't need complex arguments—we needed to return to the truth of what HB 793 represented. In that way, moral framing didn't just shape our messaging; it became the emotional core of our campaign and the compass that helped us stay aligned under pressure.

C. Crisis Creates Opportunity

HB 793 was a crisis—but it also created an organizing opportunity that might not have existed under normal conditions. The immediacy of the threat galvanized people who had never considered themselves activists. Teachers became organizers. Parents spoke publicly for the first time. Concerned community members joined planning meetings after seeing a flyer or hearing a conversation. This urgency shifted the pace of organizing. Instead of methodical recruitment or slow coalition-building, people were politicized by the stakes. Many got involved not because of ideology, but because they saw the bill as a threat to their students or neighbors. And those personal stakes made their involvement powerful. This reflected what Tamara Draut describes as the potential of the new working class—where leadership arises not from formal credentials, but from lived experience and necessity (Draut 2016). She emphasizes that organizing empowers everyday people to step into action and claim their agency in the face of injustice (Draut 2016). The urgency of the moment allowed latent leadership to emerge, grounded in care and courage rather than titles or training.

The crisis also revealed tensions: around pacing, messaging, and capacity. These tensions weren't failures—they were signs of growth. They forced organizers to stretch, adapt, and deepen their collaboration. The campaign's success depended on readiness—on the fact that earlier work on vouchers, school fees, and immigrant rights had already built some of the infrastructure we needed. When the moment arrived, we didn't have to start from zero. This experience showed me that crisis is not an interruption of organizing—it is organizing. It is where theory is tested, alliances are built, and momentum either fractures or takes off. The HB 793 fight reminded me that crises open space for transformation—but only if we're prepared to meet them with clarity, relationships, and resolve.

D. Messiness is a Feature, Not a Flaw

One of the most important lessons I took from this practicum is that messiness is not a sign of failure—it is a feature of real organizing. Coalitions like the one resisting HB 793 were essential, but never seamless. KCEC, SOCM, TN4All, and TIRRC all had different internal structures, approaches, and priorities (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972; Tennessee for All 2022; Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition [TIRRC] 2001). That diversity created friction—but also flexibility and strength.

Kathleen Blee's *Democracy in the Making* gave me language for this experience (Blee 2012). She notes that activist groups often form not through detailed plans but through improvisation, shared labor, and evolving needs (Blee 2012). That was our reality. There was no roadmap for HB 793. We made decisions, shifted strategies, debated language, and occasionally had to rework things on the fly. But we kept going, because the work was grounded in trust and shared purpose.

Messiness also showed up emotionally. Fear, grief, and frustration often entered our meetings, especially among those directly affected. Sometimes people talked past each other. Sometimes we didn't get things right. But rather than seeing this as dysfunction, I came to see it as evidence of a real democratic process. We weren't performing unity—we were practicing it. That meant conflict, discomfort, and growth. Eventually, I learned to stop expecting meetings to be perfect. Instead, I looked for integrity, listening, and momentum. My job wasn't to erase the mess—it was to help hold it. That's what makes organizing human. The power of the HB 793 campaign didn't come from polish. It came from people showing up through uncertainty, adapting when plans broke down, and staying in the work because the stakes were too high to walk away.

III. Takeaways for Future Movements and Organizers

A. Center Those Most Impacted

If one principle grounded the HB 793 campaign, it was this: those most impacted must be at the center of the work. From initial planning calls to the April 2 town hall, families carrying the moral and strategic weight of our organizing. Their stories shaped our message, their needs set our priorities, and their presence infused the campaign with urgency. I learned that effective advocacy isn't about speaking for people—it's about building the conditions where they can speak for themselves, safely and powerfully.

This wasn't always simple. Safety concerns, fear of retaliation, and logistical barriers often made public participation difficult. Many families hesitated to attend events, not due to apathy, but because the risks were too high. In response, organizers created accessible options: anonymous comment submissions, transportation and childcare support, and trust-building

through repeated outreach. These accommodations weren't optional—they were essential to a culture of organizing grounded in respect and accountability.

When impacted community members did step forward, the effect was transformative. At the town hall, a mother spoke of her son's fear of being questioned at school. Her voice shook, but her words pierced through policy abstraction. In that moment, HB 793 was no longer theoretical—it was urgent, personal, and heartbreaking. That shift in the room happened because organizers had made space for her to be heard with dignity and care.

Centering those most impacted also reshaped how we understood leadership. It wasn't defined by experience or credentials, but by proximity to the issue. Supporting that leadership required humility and a willingness to follow. As Tamara Draut argues, the strength of the new working class comes from people stepping into leadership not as trained professionals, but out of necessity and lived reality (Draut 2016). She emphasizes that those most affected by injustice are fully capable of leading when they're given the tools, trust, and space to do so (Draut 2016). In practice, this meant shifting our guiding question from “What should we do?” to “What do families need to feel safe, seen, and powerful?”

This lesson will guide me in all future organizing. Campaigns that fail to center impacted voices risk becoming disconnected or even harmful. But when we build from the ground up—listening first and acting with care—we create movements that are more strategic, resilient, and just. Centering is not a value—it's a necessity.

B. Build Strategic Visibility

Another core takeaway was the power of visibility—not as performance, but as strategy. From blue Public School Strong shirts to coordinated testimonies, every visible element of the

campaign was crafted to communicate unity, strength, and moral clarity (Public School Strong 2023). In a state where immigrant communities are often rendered invisible and institutions resist accountability, showing up consistently became a powerful form of resistance. Visibility took many forms: packed school board meetings, testimony from parents, flyers at grocery stores, and op-eds in local papers. These actions didn't always sway votes, but they disrupted silence and forced public recognition of who was being harmed—and who was fighting back.

What made this visibility strategic was the coordination behind it. Statewide messaging templates, visuals, and talking points allowed local groups to align without duplicating effort. In Knoxville, we adapted these resources for flyers, town hall materials, and board resolutions, ensuring our work was grounded in a shared narrative while tailored to our context. Visibility also generated emotional momentum. Seeing a room full of people in blue, hearing familiar slogans, and witnessing courageous testimony helped newcomers feel less alone and more empowered to participate. Several attendees told me the town hall gave them the courage to get involved—simply because they realized they weren't the only ones who cared.

At the same time, we were careful. For undocumented families, visibility can carry risk. We worked to create a spectrum of participation, offering roles that ranged from public speaking to behind-the-scenes support. This flexibility allowed people to engage in ways that felt meaningful and safe. Moving forward, I understand that visibility is not just about being seen—it's about showing up with intention. It means building moments that communicate not only dissent, but belonging and dignity. And it requires ensuring that the people most impacted are not hidden from view, but elevated with care and power.

C. Sustain the Movement Beyond the Moment

One of the most enduring lessons of this practicum is that organizing doesn't end with a single event or campaign—it is a long-term, relational process. HB 793 mobilized energy and participation, but that momentum could not last on urgency alone. After the town hall and Lobby Day, we faced a common challenge: how to turn reactive action into durable infrastructure. Many people joined the campaign because the threat felt immediate. But when the news cycle moved on and the legislative session slowed, engagement waned. This was not a failure—it was a predictable part of crisis-driven organizing. What mattered was our response. Groups like KCEC, SOCM, and TN4All shifted gears, hosting follow-up events, offering political education, and investing in leadership development to keep people involved (Knox County Education Coalition 2018; Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment [SOCM] 1972) (Tennessee for All 2022).

Sustainability required both emotional and logistical care. That meant making space for rest, while also training new facilitators, creating toolkits, and documenting lessons. As momentum slowed, we asked not just “What’s next?” but “What do we need to keep going?” That question guided our follow-up meetings, new resolutions, and broader outreach strategies. Political education played a central role. The town hall functioned as a learning space as much as a mobilization event. Breakout groups, flyers, and shared messaging helped participants connect their personal experiences to larger political structures. When people understood the system they were resisting—and how their voice fit into a strategy—they were more likely to stay engaged. The lesson I carry forward is this: sustaining movements means building capacity, not just intensity. It means turning action into structure, emotion into education, and urgency into endurance. The HB 793 campaign planted seeds—relationships, tools, values—that will outlast

any one legislative session. To organize is to build a movement that can keep breathing, growing, and evolving over time—even when the spotlight fades. But sustaining that growth was not easy. Many local teams operated with minimal capacity, especially in rural areas where access to organizing infrastructure was limited. The decentralized nature of the campaign created both strength and strain—some counties surged with momentum, while others struggled to maintain engagement without paid staff or established networks. Volunteers gave what they could, but uneven resources meant that not every team could follow through at the same pace or depth. Recognizing and addressing this unevenness is essential to building long-term movement resilience.

IV. Closing Personal Reflection

A. Own Transformation

When I began this practicum, I imagined myself primarily as an observer—someone who would take notes, analyze events, and make theoretical connections. But I quickly learned that organizing does not allow for passive engagement. The urgency of HB 793 and the vulnerability of the communities under threat demanded that I move beyond the sidelines. The line between student and organizer blurred immediately—not because I intended to become a leader, but because the work needed more hands, hearts, and voices.

I found myself stepping into roles I hadn't anticipated: facilitating breakout groups, helped design flyers, coordinating town halls, and helping prepare speakers. These weren't just logistical tasks—they were political acts that shaped how our campaign functioned and how others participated. In those moments, I came to understand that leadership isn't always loud or centralized. It often looks like dependable behind-the-scenes labor, quiet facilitation, and the consistent act of showing up.

This transformation wasn't about mastering organizing—it was about growing into it. I learned how to contribute without controlling, how to support without centering myself, and how to remain grounded in relationships and responsibility. I began to see myself not just as a student of sociology, but as a practitioner of it—someone committed to engaging theory through action, and action through reflection.

B. What Comes Next

As I move forward, I carry this practicum not only as an academic experience but as a foundational shift in how I understand my role in the world. I now see myself as someone who bridges theory and action—who brings the tools of sociology into organizing spaces, and the insights of organizing into academic ones. I no longer treat those realms as separate. They are two parts of the same project: understanding and changing the world. I intend to stay engaged in public education defense, immigrant justice, and coalition-based work—whether through institutional roles or grassroots campaigns. The skills I've gained are practical and transferable, but more importantly, I've internalized the value of relational infrastructure: trust, care, presence, and accountability.

This practicum didn't give me all the answers—but it helped me live into the questions that first brought me to this work. How do grassroots campaigns sustain themselves in a climate of ongoing threat? What kinds of infrastructure and relationships make cross-organizational collaboration possible? How can movements fully integrate immigrant justice and public education, and what do those struggles reveal about democracy under siege? I don't believe there are simple answers—but I do believe these are the right questions. And I now understand that asking them while embedded in the work—while organizing, reflecting, and growing in community—is how meaningful knowledge is produced. What this experience gave me is not

just clarity about what needs to change, but conviction that I want to keep showing up for that change. Not from the sidelines, but from within the mess and the hope of building power together.

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Vita

Francesca Isabelle Gerbic earned her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, with a concentration in Inequalities in Race, Class, and Gender. In 2025, she completed her Master of Arts in Applied Sociology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her graduate practicum focused on grassroots organizing, public education advocacy, and immigrant justice across Tennessee. During her time at UTK, she contributed to research-informed activism through her involvement with the Public School Strong campaign and the Knox County Education Coalition. Her work centers on the intersections of education policy, community power, and applied sociological practice. Francesca plans to continue her work in education, advocacy, and community-based research through teaching and organizing.