



Equitable Philanthropy Case Study: The 1954 Project Approach

By Britt Savage, Lyell Sakaue, and Nicole Austin-Thomas

The darkened banquet hall was quiet and still when philanthropist Liz Thompson stepped into the spotlight before a crowd of fellow donors and Black nonprofit leaders. The cofounder of The 1954 Project, an education initiative, played archival recordings that crackled with the voices of people who had been formerly enslaved.

She was using history to showcase a remarkable example of Black leadership. “Enslaved Africans learned to read, write, and teach under the threat of death fully committed to the generations that they would never meet,” says Thompson. “It is that depth of resolve that sets the stage for the importance of education in our community today.”

Investing in Black leaders and organizations is a powerful opportunity for impact, particularly because we have seen over and over again that such leaders have been able to achieve significant results with a fraction of the resources of white counterparts. To upend the chronic underinvestment in Black-led organizations, The 1954 Project seeks to radically redesign how philanthropy connects with Black leaders in education.

This case study provides an overview of the ways The 1954 Project has invested in Black leaders as it explores how philanthropy can evolve to overcome race-based barriers to capital. The 1954 Project is early on its path, yet other funders can learn from its progress to better understand what the work of equitable philanthropy entails.¹

What Is The 1954 Project?

Launched in 2020, The 1954 Project was established as a key initiative of the Cleveland Avenue Foundation for Education Group (CAFE Group), a 501(c)3 founded by Liz and her husband Don Thompson. The name is meant to draw attention to a consequence of the 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision: when Black children were integrated into white schools—and not the other way around—tens of thousands of Black teachers lost their jobs. The disparity still exists today, when 15 percent of all public school students are Black but only 7 percent of teachers are Black.² The 1954 Project aims to honor Black educators from the past and the longstanding legacy of diverse Black leaders fighting for educational equity for all students.

Black leaders have always come together to meet community needs. The concept of mutual aid—pooling and sharing resources within a community—is rooted in communities of color dating back at least to the 1700s in the United States.³ In the context of education, enslaved Black leaders shared the transformative ability to read with others, even when illegal and punishable by death. Since then, countless Black parents, educators, and

1 The Bridgespan Group has provided advisory services to The 1954 Project. However, it has not directly been involved with much of the work described in this case study.

2 Katherine Schaeffer, [“America’s Public School Teachers Are Far Less Racially and Ethnically Diverse Than Their Students.”](#) Pew Research Center, December 10, 2021.

3 Michael Barga, [“African Union Society \(Founded 1780\).”](#) VCU Libraries. (2016); Tyesha Maddox, [“The History and Politics of Mutual Aid in America.”](#) Villanova University (2022).

community leaders have found creative ways to educate Black children—encompassing imparting academic skills as well as affirmation of their identities and values—despite persistent structural barriers.⁴ This includes the Black independent schools movement,⁵ Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools program, and the learning that occurs within families and communities every day. The mantra of lifting as you climb has long been a central part of the Black American experience.

By centering the unique assets and deep reservoir of talent in the Black community, The 1954 Project enables Black educational leaders to create a better, more inclusive education system. In its first two years, The 1954 Project has provided 10 Luminaries (its signature grantees) and 11 Finalists with operating support grants totaling \$10.8 million, customized capacity-building supports, and membership to a network of peers.

The initiative invests in leaders whose work addresses one or more of the following three key areas:

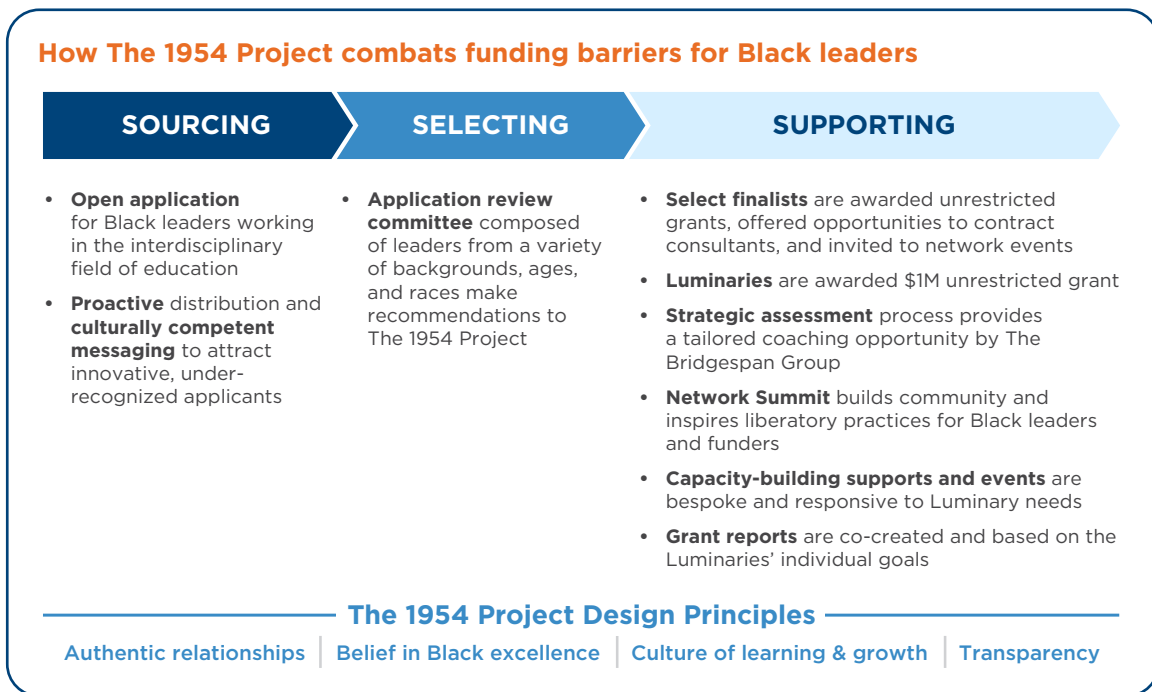
- **Innovation in teaching and learning** that seeks to create more effective, equitable, and culturally affirming teaching and learning models to better serve all students.
- **Diversity in education** that strives to increase the number of Black educators and leaders through innovative initiatives.
- **Pathways to economic mobility** that strengthen the education-to-career path to increase economic mobility for Black students and families.

4 Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching*, Harvard University Press (2021); James A. Banks, *Race, Culture, and Education: The selected works of James A. Banks*, Routledge Press (2006); Vanessa Siddle Walker, *The Lost Education of Horace Tate: Uncovering the Hidden Heroes Who Fought for Justice in Schools*, New Press (2018).

5 Raven Moses, [“Charter Schools and the Black Independent School Movement,”](#) African American Intellectual History Society, October 23, 2017.

Intentionally Addressing Racial Barriers to Capital

For the past two years, The 1954 Project has worked to define *how* it operates as a small team with a big goal. Throughout, it has never lost sight of *why* it operates: to benefit students and communities and catalyze long-term investment in Black educational leadership. Accordingly, The 1954 Project continues to pay attention to how all the details of its approach address the how and the why.



Design principles

When analyzing The 1954 Project's work, we found four themes that emerged as design principles consistently shaping its approach to supporting Black leaders:

- **Belief in Black excellence.** The 1954 Project starts with a fundamental belief in the unique assets of Black leaders, rejecting the deficit-based narrative that many Black leaders encounter. It recognizes the strengths that exist in the Black community and respects lived experience as a valuable source of knowledge.
- **Authentic relationships.** The 1954 Project recognizes that when people work collectively and feel fully seen, they do their best work. So the organization builds balanced, reciprocal relationships with the leaders it supports, rather than reinforcing power imbalances between donors and leaders. The 1954 Project also believes that it is critical to build a broader coalition of values-aligned actors grounded in joy and love for the Black community, all of whom have a role to play.
- **Culture of learning and growth.** The 1954 Project acknowledges that it will need to learn and adapt along the way. It is committed to responding to feedback and making improvements and adjustments every year.

- **Transparency.** In everything The 1954 Project does, it strives to be clear, open, and honest. Transparency is a pillar of anti-racist values and helps to hold The 1954 Project accountable as well as to open avenues for feedback and learning.

Activities: Key steps and rationale

Guided by these design principles—and informed by the four race-based barriers to capital (see below)—The 1954 Project sought to accelerate and amplify the impact of Black-led organizations through grantmaking and related activities. Collectively, these activities are the funder’s attempt to rethink philanthropic norms and create practices that do not contribute to the funding barriers Black leaders face, but instead overcome them.

Race-based barriers to funding

Bridgespan and Echoing Green identified four major barriers leaders of color face across the full arc of their fundraising efforts. These barriers represent ways that unconscious bias can work its way into institutional processes and be internalized by philanthropic professionals. Funder norms can fuel these barriers unless they are actively addressed, ultimately undermining a funder’s best intentions for equity.⁶



Across all stages, repeated interactions with bias can cause leaders to adopt mindsets and behaviors that further limit their fundraising

Source: The Bridgespan Group

6 Cheryl Dorsey, Peter Kim, Cora Daniels, Lyell Sakaue, and Britt Savage, [“Overcoming the Racial Bias in Philanthropic Funding.”](#) *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, May 4, 2020.

Sourcing

To break through the barrier that Black leaders face of **getting connected**, The 1954 Project chose to use an open application process, an approach that supports its goal to be accessible to Black leaders who may be lesser known or disconnected from typical funding networks. To ensure appropriate candidates apply, The 1954 Project provides clear eligibility guidelines and includes an eligibility pre-application form to reduce the number of ineligible organizations going through the full application process.

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Given the diversity of the applicant pool, The 1954 Project also puts significant thought into culturally competent communication. This helps with **building rapport** with potential grantees—the Luminaries. In every touchpoint, The 1954 Project presents itself as a partner, not an arbiter of “winners and losers,” and emphasizes the importance of racial identity. A Finalist said that The 1954 Project’s authenticity was key to unlocking her own: “Knowing why 1954 was giving the money made me feel like I could really tell my story.”

Despite the more than 400 applications the open process yields, The 1954 Project responds to every applicant who does not progress, even those who did not complete their applications, and encourages leaders to continue their work in the community. This practice requires additional staff time but treats every applicant in a way that reflects the funder’s overall guiding principles.

Some Finalists shared that the human component of The 1954 Project’s sourcing and application process signaled this was a space to reflect and share. “It was the most respectful application process. There was value added at every step. It is [because of] the people. I trust Acasia and the team,” one Finalist said, referring to Acasia Wilson Feinberg, founding executive director of The 1954 Project.

Selecting

To directly address the barrier that Black leaders face in **securing support**, The 1954 Project assembles a 25-person, predominantly Black application review committee to collaboratively select each Luminary cohort. The committee includes college students; leaders from the education field, the business world, and the nonprofit and philanthropy sectors; 1954 staff members; and advisory board members. In selecting committee members, The 1954 Project relies on referrals from trusted members of its network to ensure each member shares the organization’s core values.

Each round of the application is reviewed by a different subset of the committee as well as the Leadership Council, which is made up of Black leaders from the business and social sectors who help drive the vision and strategy of The 1954 Project. The process ensures every application is reviewed by multiple people at each stage and includes a

mix of rubric-based scoring, in-depth research, and interviews to develop a well-rounded understanding of prospective Luminaries. The 1954 Project chose this holistic approach because it hypothesizes that a diverse coalition of engaged participants will lead to the strongest outcomes by helping to mitigate bias.

The application review committee has appropriate guardrails and training throughout, and reviewers can make recommendations regardless of their prior experience with philanthropy. This de-centers staff at The 1954 Project as the experts, instead drawing upon the diverse experiences and holistic review of the committee to identify Luminaries doing exceptional work in education, guided by the design principles of The 1954 Project.

Supporting

The 1954 Project has devoted a lot of attention to **sustaining relationships** with Black leaders. Because building and maintaining authentic relationships with funders has historically been an uphill journey for leaders of color, The 1954 Project aims to facilitate alternative experiences that lead to thriving, trusted relationships. A few practices and programs The 1954 Project uses include:

Awards to Finalists. After eligible organizations make it through the first round, less than 20 semi-finalists move on to the second round of the application, which includes an interview. Some organizations that make it past the second round, but aren't selected as Luminaries, also receive financial and non-financial supports. The 1954 Project has experimented with different structures for this award and continues to refine its approach. To date, the organization has supported 11 Finalists across the two cycles with \$800,000 in general operating funds, as well as funded opportunities to contract with consultants and curated events to engage funders and peers. This support allows The 1954 Project to **nurture and bring together more Black leaders** within a cycle. Finalists agree that, although it was disappointing not to be named a Luminary, being a Finalist is still a powerful forward push to their work because of the relationships, coaching, knowledge sharing, and networking that come with it.

“You think of an award as a one-time thing, and you think of a network as a lifetime family,” says finalist Verneé Green, CEO of Mikva Challenge, which uses civic engagement programs to help young people nationwide be empowered, informed, and active citizens who promote a just and equitable society. She continued: “I wasn't expecting a network—I was expecting to win a prize and get some money. But this is really about making the work we do better and stronger, because I am standing in community with other leaders across the country who will help advance the critical mission of our work. I am not doing that by myself now.”

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Mikva Challenge

Unrestricted funding. Luminaries receive \$1 million in unrestricted funds, paid over three to four years. The luxury of such multi-year funding—a rarity for many Black leaders—gives leaders time to do the work and dream, sparing them from the grind of fundraising. The 1954 Project felt multi-year grants were critical to signaling their **trust in leaders**, as they believe that the nonprofits doing the work should decide how their funds will be spent. In an illustration of the barriers to capital that are rampant across the sector, some Luminaries shared that this was one of the largest unrestricted grants they have ever received.

Strategic assessment. The 1954 Project has sought to co-create the Luminary experience rather than devising a prescriptive set of supports that may not be responsive to awardees' needs. As one example, the first cohort of Luminaries expressed a desire for external feedback on how they are perceived in terms of strengths and areas to improve, lamenting that funders don't often provide transparent feedback. In response, The 1954 Project partnered with The Bridgespan Group to pilot a strategic assessment process. The process, which is customized to each Luminary's unique needs and stage of development, includes a series of meetings to help Luminaries reflect on where to prioritize their time and how to communicate their work to external stakeholders. Luminaries shared that they found the assessment methodology valuable "to learn the questions funders don't ask but are thinking."

The 1954 Project offers the strategic assessment after the grant award has been made so that it can support Luminaries in navigating their challenges rather than judge and penalize them. The funder emphasizes that the process is not an indirect way for them to push a certain agenda—Luminaries are encouraged to see the process as a **space for constructive and engaging discussions**. In feedback, Luminaries noted that they valued the thought partnership and felt positioned to translate recommendations they received into actionable steps. The first cohort of Luminaries mentioned that the assessment has helped them frame questions around strategy and operations, sometimes with their own staff. For one Luminary, that has meant discussions with the leadership team about the strategic direction of the organization: "The assessment has allowed me to have the conversation with my staff that I needed to have."

Network Summit. The annual Network Summit brings together Luminaries, Finalists, donors, and other members of The 1954 Project community for an in-person multi-day convening hosted at the CAFÉ Group. (It was on the last day of the 2022 Network Summit that Liz Thompson played the archival recordings.) For Luminaries and Finalists, the summit creates a space to foster **peer-driven community building**. There are sessions facilitated by The 1954 Project and sessions without any donors in the room to ensure leaders of differing comfort levels still have an outlet to be candid and honest. Donors in attendance are encouraged to shift their thinking and practices to become more equitable.

The 1954 Project intentionally designed this summit as a joyful, liberatory space. One Luminary shared how different the experience was compared to typical grantmaking conferences. At the Network Summit, she was able to be herself rather than "mask" her identity to funders.

“Wearing a ‘mask’ in funding environments means telling people what they want to hear and not the real truth,” the Luminary shared. “It’s a well-informed mask that can report on metrics and results in a way that doesn’t reflect the actual goal of true liberation for our children. If we had the space to be ourselves, it would look like what’s happening here. This week [at the Summit], we received the invitation to take off the mask, to say, ‘I don’t know, there are pieces we are grappling with and we need your funding to find those solutions,’ and also to have the freedom to grapple with things we don’t want the outside world to see. ... Liz has created an opportunity for us to lean into our power.”

Capacity-building supports and events. The 1954 Project also offers bespoke supports, including connections to potential board members, one-off events and speaking opportunities, and other expertise based on the needs of the Luminary. This comes from The 1954 Project’s **commitment to supporting beyond a financial contribution**; it considers the range of resources at its disposal to address the unique needs of each Black leader. In addition to individualized offerings, The 1954 Project is working toward a menu of capacity-building supports that are offered at a specific time in its funding cycle. For example, in year two of the grant, The 1954 Project engages a production company to produce a short video for each organization, including on-site interviews with constituents and leaders, to share the impact of its work with donors.

Reporting. The 1954 Project works with Luminaries to define success for the duration of the grant cycle, rather than asserting The 1954 Project’s own definition of success. This approach sets the tone for partnership from the outset. Complex reporting requirements can pull leaders away from the day-to-day work. So, instead of structured grant reports, The 1954 Project offers **free-form ways for each organization to track its own success** and create an individualized plan. The plans adapt to the style that best fits the needs of each Luminary, providing opportunities to share in writing and at an annual meeting. Luminaries also do not need to meet funder-set milestones to get the next year of funding. The 1954 Project uses the information that is shared, such as areas to grow, to inform the specific capacity-building supports it will offer the Luminary.

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Implications for Philanthropy

The 1954 Project’s experience reinforces the truth that there is no lack of talented Black-led nonprofits. That too many of these organizations have been overlooked and undervalued by philanthropy shows that the onus is on funders to improve. Over these

first two years, The 1954 Project has begun to learn what it takes to better support Black leaders. Ultimately, The 1954 Project hopes that its reflections can contribute more nuanced insights and examples for fellow funders pursuing equitable philanthropic practices. Here are some early lessons.

Ensure Black leaders are valued and feel heard as part of the grantmaking process

Many Black leaders have shared they do not feel welcome or a sense of belonging in philanthropic spaces. Too often, they must navigate how much of their authentic selves to bring to funder interactions and grapple with how explicit to be about the role of race in their work. Leaders have expressed how helpful it is that The 1954 Project proactively signals that it values Black leaders' perspectives—not only by virtue of explicitly being an initiative for Black leaders, but also through the language used, the collaborative ways of engaging, and other micro-decisions that add up to a unique felt experience.

Consider that The 1954 Project follows up with all leaders who enter the application process—whether they proceed or not—to acknowledge their application and encourage them to continue their important work. This simple act demonstrates the nonprofit leader's time is just as valuable as the funder's and helps to embed the process with respect, making the power imbalance between funder and nonprofit more palatable.

Similarly, the funding provided to Finalists not only provides well-deserved compensation for their time spent applying to and engaging with The 1954 Project (e.g., at convenings), but also communicates that their contributions to the field are valued. Black leaders are often asked for their input or feedback, or to participate in conversations, without compensation for their time. These actions by The 1954 Project are a shift away from such extractive practices in philanthropy and serve as signals to leaders who have felt consistently underacknowledged.

The ways The 1954 Project holistically defines education—inviting applicants with a wide array of backgrounds, experiences, and approaches—also ensure Black leaders feel seen and valued. The 1954 Project acknowledges not only the current Black leaders in the field, but also the long history of what education has meant to Black Americans. In the Black community, education has never been limited to formal classrooms and teachers. However, in working with many donors, Black leaders feel like they can only tell part of their story, as their full history is often ignored.

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The 1954 Project addresses this dynamic by defining its grantmaking areas in a broader context, including organizations that operate both in schools and across communities. In doing so, it honors the lived experience of the Black community. To truly ensure leaders feel heard in a grantmaking process, funders will need to listen to leaders who have experienced and fought inequity and are continuing the legacy of previous generations. That often means defining the problem and solutions in more expansive, nuanced, and interdisciplinary ways.

By actively listening to and affirming leaders at every step of the process, The 1954 Project has unlocked more transparent, vulnerable, and meaningful relationships. Other donors might explore different ways of ensuring that Black leaders are valued and heard in their grantmaking process, with tactics that are tailored to their positionality and body of work, but with the same intention and desired result as The 1954 Project.

Select leaders by identifying how to support them, rather than by filtering out “bad” applicants

Some donors select leaders by finding reasons not to give, which leads to overly detailed selection criteria that rely too much on quantitative data alone. Instead, The 1954 Project approaches this process holistically, leveraging the power of diverse viewpoints—including students more proximate to the work.

The 1954 Project curates a group of reviewers who share a fundamental belief in the gifts of Black leaders for its selection process. All reviewers must have a track record of being a trusted advocate of Black leaders, confirmed through direct relationships with The 1954 Project team members or recommendations from trusted individuals (e.g., former Luminaries). Funders who may not be comfortable with the approach of a committee of reviewers could try screening for this mindset when hiring staff, determining which re-granting intermediaries to fund, or seeking outside expertise (and compensating them for their time).

Reviewers are encouraged to approach the process with asset-based and growth mindsets—keeping in mind that how an applicant scores does not take away from how important the applicant’s work is.

The training provided to reviewers reinforces the values of The 1954 Project and opens with a session with Liz Thompson that contextualizes the organization’s work in the larger historical arc of Black educational efforts that inspired her initiative. The reviewers are encouraged to approach the process with asset-based and growth mindsets—keeping in mind that how an applicant scores does not take away from how important the applicant’s work is. The evaluation process is about finding organizations The 1954 Project is best positioned to support—not choosing whose work is worthwhile—and the learning that occurs during the process is just as important as the result.

In the first round, after quantitative rankings are sorted based on a rubric, the college student reviewers are also invited to share their top applicants—regardless of ranking—whom they found particularly inspiring and exciting. This tactic emphasizes that quantitative data, while helpful, also has limits, and therefore a more holistic approach is often needed.

By using an asset-based and holistic approach for due diligence and selection, The 1954 Project ensures it will not overlook or undervalue the vast diversity of strengths of Black educational leaders, resulting in a portfolio that includes a broader and more inclusive set of leaders.

Draw on all your assets to support Black leaders

Liz Thompson believes we all have gifts we can bring to this work. The 1954 Project values the assets each leader brings and emphasizes that everyone has a role to play. That means recognizing funders cannot achieve their goals without the ideas leaders bring to the table. It also means recognizing that philanthropy has more assets to offer than simply money. Even beyond capacity building, there are many types of resources funders can tap into, including social capital, time, talent, knowledge, physical space, and more. The 1954 Project draws significantly on the social capital of its principles and staff to support each Luminary with whatever is needed.

One example of this is the way The 1954 Project helps Luminaries find new funders, potential board members, or other helpful connections. The 1954 Project does not merely make email introductions and pass along invites to Luminaries; instead, Liz Thompson or Acasia Wilson Feinberg often accompany Luminaries to meetings or conferences, to better serve as a champion and help Luminaries navigate environments that might feel unfamiliar. When needed, they also nudge those connections to ensure they follow up on commitments.

This type of relationship building requires knowing the unique assets and needs of each leader. When extending an invitation to an event or opportunity, The 1954 Project team's first thought is, "Who can benefit from this opportunity?" It's notable that the team can quickly answer that question. However, for this sharing of social capital to be done equitably across a full cohort, it must be thoughtful and proactive, not limited to the leaders who think to make asks. The 1954 Project encourages other funders to reflect on what assets they bring—including the principles, staff, and members of their network—and what that can mean for the leaders they support.

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The 1954 Project opened up the last day of the Network Summit to fellow funders to jumpstart community building between funders and Black leaders. "It was a relief to be in a safe space with funders and be able to share how it feels as a Black leader trying to get the money needed to do the work on the ground. It was also good to hear from funders

other ways we can better communicate with funders about that work,” says Finalist David Merritt, founder and president of Give Merit, which works to prevent young people in Detroit from dropping out of high school. “I am excited about what this means as we try to change the viewpoints and industry standards in philanthropy.”

Questions for Future Exploration

For the 1954 Project, this is just the beginning; the work is not done, and it is not all figured out. The funder plans to continue to adapt, learn, and reflect on how best to support Black leaders and collaborate with others committed to equitable philanthropy. Their learning questions for further exploration include:

- Given The 1954 Project’s commitment to transparency and feedback, how can it provide meaningful feedback to Black leaders who aren’t selected as Luminaries or Finalists, despite operational constraints? How else can it support Black leaders who are not members of the Network Summit?
- How might The 1954 Project continue to innovate to provide robust support to network members? What is the right balance of standardization versus bespoke support to continue to meet each leader’s specific needs?
- How might The 1954 Project leverage the knowledge and data it has gained regarding Black leaders to contribute to the education and social sectors? In what ways could its findings change practices in education philanthropy?
- In what ways should the 1954 Project measure and evaluate its impact?

Final Thoughts: Recipes for Success

We hope that understanding the work and lessons of The 1954 Project can provide inspiration for others. While this case study summarizes what supporting Black leaders can look like, there is no single answer. The steps outlined here are not a formula for success to be precisely followed, as each funder’s approach can and should look different based on their positionality and what they uniquely bring to this work.

One Luminary, William Jackson, founder of Village of Wisdom, which works with Black families to eliminate racial injustice in schools, likens it more to a family recipe. That is because sometimes the best family recipes are passed down in pieces, over a pot in the kitchen from one generation to the next. It might take years before the next generation earns the trust to learn what the right combination of “a pinch of this” or “a dab of that” or the secret ingredient might be.

Indeed, much of what brings The 1954 Project to life cannot be captured on the page, as it is more intangible and a product of the people and relationships that drive the work. For instance, Liz Thompson often says that love is her not-so-secret ingredient. It is a sentiment that staff and Luminaries and anyone who meets her confirm is felt throughout every conversation and event. Her mantra: “Radical love is not soft, nor is it superficial. Radical love holds you accountable, makes you stronger, makes you better.”

Thompson’s “love factor” indicates that while tactical or process changes are necessary, they aren’t the whole recipe. Truly supporting Black leadership requires a shift in mindset, deep reflection, and learning in ways that enable funders to show up differently in face of the norms and power dynamics that have long dominated philanthropy. It will also require working to earn the trust of leaders to build authentic relationships.

Though these efforts can take time, the important thing is to just get started. In the words of James Baldwin from *Notes of a Native Son*, “Those who say it can’t be done are usually interrupted by others doing it.”

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