



## The People's Agenda

Newark

*January 2021*

For the past year, residents and news organizations in three New Jersey cities, including Newark, have gathered to break bread, listen to each other and discuss priorities and concerns in their communities as part of a project called Voting Block.

This was the second time the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University has coordinated Voting Block, a project intended to amplify underrepresented voices. The 2019-2020 program was focused in Paterson, Newark and Camden. In each city, small groups of residents shared meals and discussed issues that mattered to them. The dinners connected people of diverse ages, ethnicities, religion, political leanings and priorities – people who otherwise might never connect. It also connected journalists to community members they might not ordinarily cover.

Although Voting Block began with in-person meals, it pivoted to virtual dinners due to the pandemic, with local restaurants delivering meals to neighbors' doorsteps so they could join the conversation from the safety of their homes. In many ways, the new format evoked more honesty and empathy as participants grappled with illness, job loss and schooling for their children.

In Newark, Mayor Ras Baraka and Congressman Donald Payne Jr. joined us for our third dinner. Topics included education during the pandemic, economic development, affordable housing, mental health, and transportation. There was disagreement and unexpected common ground. Accusations turned into opportunities to see others' perspectives and pledges to help each other do better and make life better for those around them.

Journalists also participated in the conversations, fielding complaints about their coverage while at the same time seizing the opportunity to address those complaints by listening to new points of view, connecting to new sources and building lasting relationships. Journalists and residents themselves produced stories based on the conversations they had and the connections they made.

Throughout Voting Block, we knew that one of the outcomes we wanted for the project was the creation of a **People's Agenda**: an agenda that we could present to lawmakers that was built entirely upon what Newarkers said they wanted to see happen in their city.

On behalf of those residents and Voting Block, we respectfully ask you to consider these priorities as you continue to lead our city through the second wave of the pandemic and beyond.

## ▲ The People's Agenda ▲

The following items were compiled from Voting Block participants and residents of Newark.

### EDUCATION

*Three main themes emerged from the voters who cited education-related issues as their main priority: the lack of access to technology, the proper measurement of student achievement during the pandemic, and education in Newark's history.*

"With the state not looking to administer the state-level assessments that provide districts and families information about students' performance and achievement, gains and declines, I feel like the lack of data critical for advancing school equity will be lost. Losing all this data may make it a challenge to understand and address the disruption during the COVID-19 crisis that occurred in our students, especially for those who are historically underserved. Blended learning has been an overlooked necessity for years. Now as students are forced into virtual learning scenarios and hybrid situations, school administrators need to figure out how to accommodate different learning styles of students with different resources, so they don't get left behind." —Stacy R.

"We fought long and hard for local control and we finally get it and then this situation happened and I'm sure it affected a lot of our children's grades and efficiency in the classroom. Is this something we'll have to worry about again in the view of the state?" —Elijah G.

"The year was so crazy for our students here where a lot of them fell through the cracks where they didn't have devices or the internet. Some are homeless. Some are immigrants whose parents don't speak English. Is the city or state doing anything to fix those issues from last year so we don't have those children, even those who do better in the classroom because virtually doesn't work for everyone? Unlike suburban parents, our parents can't afford to pool their resources, hire a tutor and teach in a bubble. How can we use this moment to reimagine what education looks like and get kids acclimated to the way the world looks? Nothing beats the in-person system. We need the community." —Isaiah L.

"Young people don't respect the history of the city and the disenfranchised people already here who are striving to do better with what they have. How do you mesh the two and get them to understand we've got to co-exist? We need to highlight all the positive things that have happened in the history of Newark. We have a history of arts, activism, sports that needs to be highlighted. We've always been inviting and welcoming to people, but we fear outsiders are going to come in and do things we don't want to happen." —Aaron F.

"In Governor Murphy's bill earlier in the pandemic he had spoken about resources and training for staff and parents to assist in the gap in the technology area. The superintendent in his reopening plan talked about scrutinizing technology experience when hiring new employees. Has he addressed teaching new tech to the current employees? With the new monies allocated through that new bill, if the city is getting any of that money, does the city have any plans to assist parents in the learning gap for tech knowledge and tech information so they can help with their children's education?" —Stacy R.

## **QUALITY OF LIFE**

“Since we’ve been going through the pandemic I was seeing a lot of extra litter everywhere with the masks and gloves. What are we doing to beef up the cleaning of the city and what can we do to help besides clean up in front of our places? Are there any new programs that are being developed as far as litter like in the West Ward? Could we designate people or get people to volunteer to clean up on all blocks?” —Amina H.

## **AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

“Can there be a moratorium on rental increases and moratoriums on evictions to hold the line until things get more normalized and people get back to work and do what they’re supposed to do to pay their rent? We had an issue even before COVID. What is the process behind housing development in the city of Newark and the availability of affordable housing and rental assistance?” —Vanessa L.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

“About 50% of the folks who live here don’t drive or don’t have cars so when we talk about transportation, if we’re not prioritizing what our community calls alternatives we’re missing the mark. There’s a huge disadvantage for folks who need to get to school, who need to get to work and need to take advantage of our corridors. People should be able to walk down the street in an environment they feel safe and comfortable in. Everybody should be able to walk everywhere they need to go. Part of the culture shift has to be mandated so when possible, like on University Avenue where they put in speed bumps, we have to control the way drivers engage our streets to help shift culture, slowing them down and also providing amenities for pedestrians.”  
—Bryan E.

“We need a quarter of a cent sales tax and participatory budgeting practices to support transportation and public art projects among others.” —Isaiah L.

## **EMPLOYMENT**

“The available positions that are being presented many times offer low wages, minimal hours, high risk or they’re out of the city, which presents obstacles around transportation. Those positions that supply higher wages and benefits typically do not go to Newark residents. And there are excuses made around training, education, and certification. How do we ensure those positions that can offer quality of life go to qualified Newark residents?” —Laura C.

## **MENTAL HEALTH**

“That sense of community and community-based sense of safety and healing. How do we broaden these programs to offer direct support and healing for our fellow community members? We need those resources. At the end of the day what can we do to heal each other and help each other ensure safety in our community? We need to be a trauma-informed city. Police officers need to be trained on trauma practices. City hall and school board employees need to know how to identify trauma and how to respond to it.” —Jessica L.