

## Getting to Yes: How to Generate Consensus for Targeted Universalism



*I* imagine you're a member of a cross-sector group focused on improving education outcomes. Student achievement is clearly uneven along racial lines, but you and your colleagues are unsure of what can be done to increase equity.

Or maybe you're on the school board. You agree with parents that more needs to be done to support specific populations within the district, but others on the board want to avoid actions that may be viewed as special treatment.

How can you move your colleagues to make decisions that invest in those with the greatest need without sacrificing community-level goals or appearing to favor one group over another?

Our team at FSG is often faced with this situation when we work with clients. One approach for persuading others is "targeted universalism," **an approach to change management that simultaneously aims for a universal goal while also addressing disparities in opportunities among sub-groups**. We recently used a set of specific methods to clarify the essential elements of targeted universalism with community stakeholders.

## The Challenge

FSG, along with our partners at **PolicyLink** and the **Society for Organizational Learning (SoL)**, is supporting the launch of a long-term community initiative in Staten Island, New York, that is dedicated to reducing disparities and improving outcomes for PK–12 students: the Equity Alliance of Staten Island (EASI).<sup>1</sup> While the local parents, educators, and community advocates involved in EASI emphasized the importance of equity throughout the project engagement, members of the initiative did not initially define how they would achieve more equitable outcomes for youth across Staten Island. Ultimately, the Steering Committee (SC) agreed to use data to identify the highest-need student populations and focus resources on students that the community could support the most.<sup>2</sup>

In early 2018, we co-facilitated a leadership workshop for Staten Island school district leaders, public officials, activists, and youth who comprised the initiative’s membership. In partnership with SoL and PolicyLink, we introduced EASI’s SC to a multi-model approach for achieving more equitable, population-level outcomes. This approach incorporated three key frameworks:

1. **Systems thinking**, which offers a disciplined way of perceiving the interdependencies between stakeholders and provides a set of tools for seeing the source of problems.
2. **Collective impact**, which offers a practical set of processes and structures to foster collaboration. It is a cross-sector framework that allows a systems-thinking orientation to unfold, take hold, and endure.
3. An **equity** framing, which enhances the interpretation of data and events while also helping to clarify priorities by illuminating the interplay of race, class, gender, and power within the community.

After the workshop, participants expressed an interest in dismantling barriers that have historically prevented all Staten Island youth from achieving meaningful academic success. In order to dismantle these barriers, the FSG team introduced the SC to the concept of targeted universalism (TU) (see *sidebar*) as a potentially useful method for choosing the target population for their PK–12 initiative. Reactions to our suggestion were mixed as SC members questioned whether TU was the best available approach for arriving at a population selection. Their choice would need to align with their commitment to equity as well as the interests of a diverse, cross-island community that includes perspectives from across the racial, economic, and political spectra. At first, SC members expressed concerns that TU seemed to favor some groups.

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1 This work was supported by funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Staten Island Foundation.

2 In the context of collective impact, a steering committee is a group of community members who drive the strategic and operational priorities for the initiative.

## WHAT IS TARGETED UNIVERSALISM?

Originally developed by professor and critical race scholar **john a. powell**, targeted universalism (TU) is an inclusive approach for implementing population-level interventions.<sup>3,4</sup> TU focuses on elevating the disparate experiences of marginalized populations as an essential step in the development of contextually relevant strategies for achieving universal goals. Sharing disaggregated student data by geography, race, language proficiency, and other key identifiers has proven to be a promising method for elevating a shared understanding of equity with stakeholders from across Staten Island.

Historically, we have seen that *universal* approaches can sometimes deepen inequities—the political adage “a rising tide lifts all boats” only applies when all are equipped with adequate boats to begin with. For instance, the post-World War II GI Bill was ostensibly created to improve the general population. However, as banks generally wouldn’t make loans for mortgages in black neighborhoods, it ultimately exacerbated inequality by exclusively offering mortgage assistance to a specific group of Americans.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, *targeted* approaches ensure that groups that have been systemically excluded from opportunity receive appropriate resources to account for inequities. Examples include the Americans with Disabilities Act and inclusive college admission policies. However, targeted approaches are sometimes critiqued for favoring specific population segments and can reduce buy-in or deepen stereotypes.

TU offers a blended method. Through this approach, **universal goals** (e.g., 100% math proficiency among all eighth-grade students; the improvement of employment outcomes for young adults) can be achieved by deploying **targeted approaches** that address the varying needs and circumstances of each group (e.g., provide ESL-specific math tutoring; identify opportunity youth facing structural barriers and pair them with local mentors to help them access available employment options).

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3 <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/our-faculty/faculty-profiles/john-powell/>

4 <https://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/targeteduniversalism>

5 <https://blog.nationalequityproject.org/2011/06/17/systems-thinking-and-racial-equity/>

## Developing Consensus

To address the SC’s concerns about potentially favoring one or two groups at the expense of the majority, our team sought to clarify the essential elements of TU. A two-month process of socializing the concept led to some useful insights on what works:

► **Insight 1: Help everyone understand local disparities by disaggregating data.**

Through the analysis and presentation of disaggregated data, the group began to recognize the need for improved services, programs, and policies that would reduce disparities in educational outcomes and opportunities for all youth on Staten Island.




We first shared general data on Staten Island’s common education performance indicators during a monthly meeting of the SC. We then also shared student proficiency rates disaggregated by race and ethnicity, community district, disability status, and other relevant identity markers.

Community members reflected that regular engagement with the data led to improved understanding of the disparities, thereby increasing their willingness to act on them.

► **Insight 2: Clarify options, including an overview of how targeted universalism can be used in practice.**

When we first introduced the concept of targeted universalism to the SC, we described the approach and presented a few alternatives for how a population could be selected (*Figure 1*).

FIGURE 1. PROS AND CONS OF EACH APPROACH

POPULATION FOCUS	PROS	CONS
 Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive of all students and community districts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potentially limited capability for reducing disparities</li> <li>• May sacrifice depth for breadth</li> </ul>
 Targeted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus resources on communities disproportionately affected</li> <li>• Retains a focus on equity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not directly impact all students in the borough</li> </ul>
 Targeted Universalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents opportunities to focus on disparities</li> <li>• Higher potential for inclusive buy-in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential to spread resources beyond highest need student populations, possibly sacrificing depth for breadth</li> </ul>

The advantages and limitations of a universal or targeted approach seemed apparent to SC members; however, the concept of targeted universalism caused confusion, especially for SC members who wanted to understand the merits of TU relative to an approach that targets a specific sub-group.

To further explain the benefits of TU, we developed another graphic (Figure 2) to clarify the differences between a targeted and a targeted universalist approach, including the population focus, public messaging, and the **five-step approach** associated with each choice.<sup>6</sup>

The SC co-chairs noted that a series of conversations with our team (which included an overview of Figure 2) were especially helpful in deepening their understanding of the available choices. Equipped with disaggregated student data and the initiative’s long-term vision of a more equitable future for Staten Island,

FIGURE 2. TARGETED APPROACH VS. TARGETED UNIVERSALISM



STEP	TARGETED APPROACH	TARGETED UNIVERSALISM
1. Establish a universal goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>100% proficiency in Staten Island 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading</li> </ul>	
2. Measure the overall population performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>47% of Staten Island 3<sup>rd</sup> graders are proficient in reading</li> </ul>	
3. Measure the performance across population segments*	White: 63% Asian: 60% <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block; margin-left: 20px;">             Black: 32%              Latinx: 32%           </div>	White: 63% Asian: 60% <div style="display: inline-block; margin-left: 20px;">             Black: 32%              Latinx: 32%           </div>
4. Identify the influential barriers to progress for each population segment*	White Asian <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block; margin-left: 20px;">             Black              Latinx           </div>	White Asian <div style="display: inline-block; margin-left: 20px;">             Black              Latinx           </div>
5. Implement targeted strategies to better support each group in achieving the goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No resources allocated directly toward improving reading proficiency for white and Asian students</li> <li>Collective approach would focus only on black and Latinx students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Specific strategies implemented to support each group in achieving the goal based on their unique needs</li> <li>Examples: Common Core materials for all Gr 1–2; Reading tutorials for ELL students</li> </ul>

\* In a targeted approach, the collective would develop and implement strategies to solely address the needs of the boxed population segments.

6 Figure 2 features illustrative data on student reading proficiency.

the team felt confident moving the deliberations forward and recommending a population selection. The co-chairs suggested that the initiative's membership make a commitment to targeted universalism. This would allow the group to improve the conditions of wellbeing for all Staten Island students with a *specific commitment* to dismantling historical barriers for black and Latinx students, and this recommendation was adopted after additional group discussion noted below.

► **Insight 3: Make space and time for difficult conversations, and allow representative voices from the community to discuss concerns, opportunities, and trade-offs associated with population-level outcomes.**

As a next step, the SC created space for a loosely structured, full committee discussion on whether to move forward with either targeted universalism or purely targeted goals relative to the initiative's population focus.

Some members expressed concern that neither option was appropriate, as they worried that a focus on specific student populations would lessen the potential for all students to benefit from the initiative's efforts.

These concerns waned when parents, community organizers, and other advocates shared stories highlighting the extended history of inequitable access to in-school resources, mentorship, financial aid, transportation, and other comprehensive supports for marginalized student groups. These accounts illustrated the need for targeted approaches to improve the overall wellbeing and landscape of opportunities for black and Latinx students across the island.

One SC co-chair remarked that the available disaggregated data on math and ELA proficiency rates across grade levels highlighted the widening disparities in education outcomes for black and Latinx students. She also shared that her recommendation of TU was connected to a shared commitment between EASI and the school district to take actionable steps towards advancing equity on Staten Island. The other co-chair offered a stirring reassertion of her commitment to placing equity at the forefront of the group's work, adding that targeted universalism inherently connected to the collective's mission of "living into our vision of a better future for Staten Island by embracing equity in all that we do."

Eventually, several SC members charged the full group to remember their collective commitment to advancing *equitable outcomes for all* and to focus on the nuanced differences between the two approaches, with one stakeholder noting that "targeted universalism could give us the best chance to work with all students while elevating more supportive conditions for students of color."

This frank, inclusive dialogue was foundational in reaching a shared understanding of community context and the distinctions between approaches. People needed space to hear and comprehend how others in the community perceived the opportunities, challenges, and trade-offs associated with the decisions before them.

## *P*erhaps our most important affirmation from the project was that putting equity

into practice takes time, patience, and iteration. Since equity is still a concept that many aren't exposed to often, conceptual education and navigation of stakeholder concerns are central to the work. It's also key to understand that temporary discomfort comes with the process of introducing equity approaches like TU—there are no short-cuts around the initial unease that they can cause.

While one path to achieving more equitable outcomes via targeted universalism won't perfectly mirror another, the insights above suggest practical steps that others can take when introducing approaches like targeted universalism with the goal of producing more equitable, population-level outcomes.

This includes:

- Supporting community members in better understanding local disparities;
- Clarifying the available options for selecting a focal population; and
- Providing space for inclusive conversations as an essential step towards a shared understanding of the path forward.

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### ABOUT FSG

FSG is a mission-driven consulting firm supporting leaders in creating large-scale, lasting social change. Through strategy, evaluation, and research we help many types of actors—individually and collectively—make progress against the world's toughest problems.

Our teams work across all sectors by partnering with leading foundations, businesses, nonprofits, and governments in every region of the globe. We seek to reimagine social change by identifying ways to maximize the impact of existing resources, amplifying the work of others to help advance knowledge and practice, and inspiring change agents around the world to achieve greater impact.

As part of our nonprofit mission, FSG also directly supports learning communities, such as the Collective Impact Forum, the Shared Value Initiative, and Talent Rewire to provide the tools and relationships that change agents need to be successful.

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