



What We Heard During Consultation

STRATEGIC PLAN

2023-2028

Strategic planning elements

In December 2022, Level's Board of Directors agreed on a process to develop our second strategic plan. The process was led by Shelan Markus, Level's executive director, with guidance from a highly engaged Strategic Planning Committee comprised of Level Board members Fallon Melander, Susan Spence, and Brittany Twiss. Additional advice and assistance were provided by Karen Cohl, an external consultant with expertise in access to justice and strategic planning.

The process began with a consultation phase, an essential element which took place from January through March 2023. The consultation involved :

- Individual and group interviews with 18 people familiar with Level's work, including partners, elders, knowledge keepers, program advisory board members, program facilitators, volunteers, mentors, law student mentees and social justice fellows, speakers, and funders.
- Two focus groups, in Winnipeg and Ottawa, with 41 youth from the Indigenous Youth Outreach Program.
- Interviews with Level's nine Board members, Executive Director, and two program managers.
- Interviews with six additional experts to broaden our understanding about trends in access to justice; equity, diversity, and inclusion; legal education; technology; and charitable giving.

The consultation was confidential in that comments were not attributed to any particular individual or group. This was done to encourage full and frank input.

We convened a day-long, in-person strategic planning session in April 2023 with all Board members, full-time staff, and our consultant. The purpose was to discuss themes from the consultation and to brainstorm about strategic directions and priorities. The resulting strategic plan was approved by the Board in October 2023 and launched in November 2023.



Level Board and staff at the strategic planning retreat, April 2023.

What we heard during consultation

What people value most

When asked what they value most about Level, many people made positive comments about their interactions with the charity. They appreciate Level's responsiveness, openness, respect, flexibility, and strong ties to the communities it serves.

Others highlighted the Indigenous Youth Outreach Program for working at the grass roots level to get young people thinking positively about the law and the role they can take to improve law and society. Level's new Black Youth Justice Program and an Environmental Justice Program are seen as positive developments.

People familiar with the law student programs value the fact that Level helps students to envision alternative ways for learning and working in law. Others commented on the high quality of workshops and speakers in Level's programs for legal professionals.

The legal world is elitist but Level and everyone I met there is welcoming and validating of untraditional experiences.

– External consultation participant

In high school I got to participate in a mock trial Level operated. That opened my eyes about criminal law and helped me see that I wanted to help others in need.

– External consultation participant

It is good to ignite a passion in the law students' hearts.

– External consultation participant

Indigenous youth perspectives

Students from grade 5 (Ottawa) and grade 7 (Winnipeg) provided feedback on their experience in the Indigenous Youth Outreach Program. They are enthusiastic about the program, especially the mock trial and sentencing circle. Some said that the program has inspired an interest in being a court artist, court clerk, or lawyer.

Grade 7 students in the Indigenous Youth Outreach program said they were thankful for the lawyers who spent time with the class.
(Winnipeg focus group)

Vision and Mission

While the previous vision and mission resonate well, some consultation participants challenged Level to make those statements more aspirational, ambitious, and clear.

Growth

There is interest in having Level expand to be more national in scope, serve more people, and reach out to more northern and rural communities.

Learning

Some people would like Level to increase awareness of what the charity has to offer and the knowledge it has gained. For example, Level could “speak truth to power” by bringing what it has learned from Indigenous and Black youth to lawyers and law schools.

Programs

Many individuals provided feedback on how to build upon the success of IYOP. Suggestions included expanding into additional communities, personalizing content, recruiting more volunteers with on-the-ground experience in criminal law, prioritizing restorative justice, and monitoring student progress after the program. In addition, Level was encouraged to continue actively engaging with program advisory boards for Indigenous and Black youth programs.

Some individuals recommended that Level recruit more social justice mentors in the Blazing Trails Mentorship Program for law students. Others proposed that Level share knowledge from social justice research and reports produced by law students in the Social Justice Fellowship Program.

Measuring Success

Level was encouraged to measure success through numbers (volunteer hours, number of student participants, etc.) and success stories. “Story telling is powerful.”

Strengths, opportunities, and risks

Consultation input – including interviews with external experts – and Level’s own internal assessments have highlighted strengths, opportunities, and risks.

Strengths

Level has a strong track record in fulfilling a niche in equity and access to justice. Level's work is relevant and necessary, with close partnerships with community and national scope. Level adapts and innovates to meet the needs of the community it serves.

Opportunities

Equity-seeking groups

Access to justice and opportunity remains a challenge for Indigenous people, racialized communities, and other equity seeking groups, especially in remote areas. Level's programs for Indigenous and Black youth are a step in the right direction towards building empathy and promoting social justice. Expanding to other groups can come later, but for now Level should stick with its current focus.

Experiential education and social justice

Level should continue its focus on experiential education which is a powerful way of building empathy and understanding. Level needs to think about how to remain unique and relevant for law students interested in exploring social justice careers.

Environmental Justice

The new Environmental Justice Program is innovative and attractive to youth who are passionate about environmental justice. The program ties well into Level's engagement with Indigenous communities and the Indigenous Youth Outreach Program.

Funding

Level's programs cover topics like Indigenous rights, social justice, and the environment. These topics have broad appeal among current and potential funders such as foundations, governments, law firms, and corporations. Many law firms are interested in showcasing their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Risks

Expansion

It is more important for programs to remain meaningful than trying to reach as many people as possible. Expansion should only be considered if program integrity can be upheld.

Technology

Level prioritizes impactful and transformative programs that foster relationships. While there are benefits to virtual versus in-person approaches, their effectiveness must be assessed in the context of Level's vision, mission, values, and programs.

New partnerships

To enhance programs like the Environmental Justice Program and expand existing ones, it is crucial to establish new partnerships with sufficient resources.