

Family and Community Collaboration in Practice: Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District

This profile describes Cleveland Heights-University Heights (CH-UH) City School District's innovative and successful approaches to promoting authentic family and community collaboration (FCC). It explores challenges to CH-UH's efforts to demonstrate a district-wide commitment to FCC and collaboratively make decisions with families and community members. To achieve FCC, CH-UH used a few key strategies:

Investing in dedicated staff to lead FCC initiatives

Creating specific staff positions that focus on supporting and empowering families demonstrates that CH-UH considers FCC a top priority, worthy of an investment of both resources and time. Two dedicated staff build the district's capacity for FCC by becoming trained in evidence-based practices; leading initiatives; planning events; and connecting district leadership, families, and community groups.

Empowering citizen task forces to co-create district plans

CH-UH creates citizen-led task forces to serve as ongoing opportunities for community members to work with district staff to address district problem areas. CH-UH supports power sharing by encouraging task forces to contribute to important district planning and decision-making. The task forces reflect how CH-UH values the community's participation and is committed to making shared decisions that serve all children and families.

Ensuring the missions of community partners match district goals

In developing and maintaining partnerships with community-based organizations, CH-UH staff try to ensure that all community partner organizations value equity in their services and have missions that align with schools' goals for students. Through these partnerships, CH-UH collaborates with community organizations on initiatives that mutually benefit the district and its community partners, such as the Heights Wellness Center.

Using feedback loops to support two-way communication

At both district and school levels, CH-UH recognizes the need to communicate with families and the public about what is happening in the district. CH-UH frequently seeks community feedback about their services so they can improve. CH-UH uses surveys and community events to collect information from families and shares results with respondents so they see how their feedback informs district activities.



This profile explores how Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District implements these strategies to overcome challenges, with specific examples to guide other districts in strengthening trust and building capacity to authentically collaborate with families and communities.



INTRODUCTION

Cleveland Heights-University Heights (CH-UH) City School District serves students in three inner-ring suburbs of Cleveland, OH. As a small progressive district near major health and arts resources, CH-UH strives to foster strong partnerships with community resources. CH-UH's family and community collaboration (FCC) goals are guided by multiple task forces that prioritize equity and offer leadership opportunities for families and community members.

The district embraces the racial and ethnic diversity of the community it serves, even as the student body does not fully reflect the entire community. Ohio state policy guiding school choice and vouchers has expanded in recent years, such that approximately 45 percent of students in the neighborhoods surrounding CH-UH attend private schools, many of which are Catholic or Orthodox Jewish. The students living in CH-UH zones who do attend the public schools are disproportionately Black and have lower incomes than students who attend private schools.

District details

The Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District (Heights) serves students in 10 square miles of suburban Cleveland, OH. All Heights schools are Title I eligible and provide free or reduced lunch to all students. The district's proximity to multiple hospital systems supports partnerships with health care providers, while nearby institutions like Severance Hall, Cain Park, and Playhouse Square are reflected in the district's focus on music and the arts.

More than 2,300 students, employees, and community members participated in a survey to inform the district's 2021-2026 strategic plan. The plan has three key themes: measurements that matter, equity, and telling the district's story. The goals include:

- Student outcomes: Every student graduates ready to pursue college and career.
- Educational approach: Provide an excellent education to each student in every District school and classroom.
- **Family and community engagement, partnerships, and communication:** Welcome family and community members as equal partners in student learning.
- Valued professionals and a culture of excellence: Attract and retain highly qualified and dedicated staff members who have experience working with diverse communities.
- Operational resources: Ensure that the District has the necessary finances and infrastructure to meet its student outcomes goals.

In addition to these goals, Heights is guided by its mission, vision, and core values:

- **Mission:** Our schools provide a challenging and engaging education to prepare all our students to become responsible citizens and succeed in college and career.
- **Vision:** The Cleveland Heights-University Heights Schools educate students by embracing diversity, ensuring equitable experiences, and fostering outstanding teaching and learning to develop academically prepared critical thinkers who contribute positively and compete successfully in the world.
- **Core values:** Excellence, Equity, Integrity, Trust, and Respect.

CH-UH FCC initiatives are spearheaded by two full-time staff: a family engagement specialist and a supervisor of community and school partnerships (see page 4). CH-UH is a member of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), an evidence-based framework that promotes engagement to support student success and child development. NNPS fosters opportunities that connect participating schools, families, and communities to training and action plans.

To fund its FCC initiatives, including FCC staff positions, CH-UH relies on primarily state and federal sources. Though the district aims to avoid reliance on one-off grants so that programming can be more sustainable, CH-UH has leveraged grants from the Ohio Department of Education and the School-Based Health Alliance to support its family engagement frameworks, community partnerships, and services. CH-UH has also used funding from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to expand its capacity for FCC since the COVID-19 pandemic began. But this funding ends in 2024, so staff are working on plans to sustain efforts after ESSER concludes.

“The more that we work together collectively and understand assets, needs, and opportunities, the better we are able to strategically solve problems together so that both of our entities are strong.”

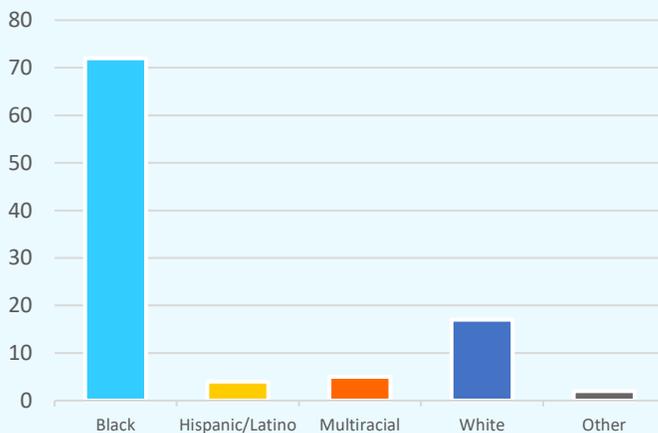
– Heights superintendent

District characteristics (2021-2022)

4,900
Students

11
Schools

Percentage of students by race/ethnicity



1%

English Language Learners



100%*

Free and Reduced Lunch



20%

Special Education



100%

Title I eligibility



88%

Graduation rate

*All CH-UH students receive free or reduced lunch through the Community Eligibility Provision, a federal program that provides meals to all students in a qualifying low-income school district, without requiring individual families to apply or demonstrate eligibility.

Investing in dedicated staff to lead FCC initiatives

As part of the district's 2016 strategic plan, CH-UH hired a specialist dedicated solely to advancing family engagement and community partnerships. In response to a recommendation from a citizen-led task force, CH-UH also created a new staff role to focus specifically on strengthening partnerships with community organizations. As staff in a relatively small district, these FCC positions are deeply engaged in both planning and executing FCC events and partnerships. By investing in staff positions, CH-UH demonstrates a commitment to FCC and increases the district's capacity to engage with families.

The family engagement specialist and the supervisor of community and school partnerships report directly to the CH-UH superintendent. Their involvement in leadership discussions allows them to elevate FCC as a district priority and serve as important bridges between district leadership, families, and community groups. Their access to funding and relationships with district leaders provide the power and resources they need to lead district-wide initiatives.

Family engagement specialist's role

Creating a staff position that focuses on family engagement has enabled CH-UH to enhance its approach to FCC over time and stay accountable to FCC goals. It also ensures that someone has time and support to participate in **FCC trainings, attend conferences**, and use evidence-based FCC frameworks and resources — common challenges for districts when FCC is only a small component of many people's job descriptions. The family engagement specialist brings professional development resources directly to principals and parent-teacher-student associations (PTSA's) to **spread best practices throughout the district**. The specialist also plans district-wide events like the biannual Parent University, which provides targeted instruction and parent workshops about school transitions (e.g., kindergarten, entering middle school).

Community and school partnership supervisor's role

CH-UH's new supervisor of community and school partnerships focuses on providing students with the wraparound supports they need to succeed in school through strengthening relationships with community organizations. The supervisor of community and school partnerships also manages the district's Community Learning Centers (known outside of Ohio as "community schools") and the cloud-based post-secondary planning system. In managing community partnerships, the supervisor fields calls from vendors seeking to sell services to the district and handles memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with community partners providing services for free. Importantly, the supervisor also manages high-level strategy for aligning district partners' goals with the district's (see page 6).

"I felt it was really a hinge point when [the family engagement specialist] joined. The district is putting their money where their mouth is, and they're committing to this work."

— Heights principal

PROMISING PRACTICES: Embed FCC in leadership staff positions

How other districts can *commit to FCC* through strategic staff positions

- + **Create district positions** that focus on FCC and ensure a strong connection between these staff and district leadership.
- + Invest in **training and professional development** for specialized staff so they can be guided by research-based best practices.

Empowering citizen task forces to co-create district plans

CH-UH shows it values the community's knowledge and expertise by creating **citizen-led task forces** that support district strategic growth areas. These task forces are created by the superintendent and follow a specific plan to ensure their success. The district recruits members for each task force on its website and encourages community members to help create plans for specific issues, alongside the superintendent and relevant district staff.

Each task force meets regularly and must **identify the problem** they are trying to solve, learn about the problem together through **reading the latest research**, and then **make recommendations** to the district on how to help solve that problem. The resources and strategy behind much of CH-UH's FCC work are grounded in Dr. Joyce Epstein's framework on the Six Types of Parent Involvement (School-Family-Community Partnership Model). This foundational research-based framework offers resources for the task forces to use and connections to other districts via the National Network of Partnership Schools. Task forces may also review data from needs assessments and surveys of families and the broader CH-UH community.

Task forces vary in size, focus, and duration, although many have no more than a dozen members and do not last more than a year. As of 2023, active task forces included family engagement, discipline, early childhood, grading, community learning centers, college and career readiness, kindergarten readiness, and equity.

The **Equity Task Force**, in particular, shaped CH-UH's approach to FCC. The Board of Education drafted and adopted the district's first educational Equity Policy in 2016 that helped establish the district's equity goals. The task force's original charge was to create a mission and vision for itself and serve as a resource as the district continues to advance equity. Years later, the Equity Task Force continues to examine how the district can achieve its equity goals and provide high quality education for all students, especially students of color.

“We really lean on informed decision-making and building our capacity to make those critical choices. We invite families and community members to be on task forces.”

– Heights family engagement specialist

PROMISING PRACTICES: Task forces with families and partners

How districts can foster *shared decision-making* between district and community members

- + **Use equitable outreach strategies** (e.g., advertise broadly, in multiple languages and formats) to ensure the task forces are open to all families and community members.
- + **Tie every task force's goal to a concrete issue or challenge** and keep the task force's objective front and center to maintain focus.
- + Provide the task forces with **district data and recent research** from the field to ensure decisions are based on evidence.
- + **Set a clear timeline for all task forces.** Establish meeting times and deadlines so members can plan ahead and make timelines to achieve their goals.

Ensuring the missions of community partners match district goals

In 2023, CH-UH began working to ensure that every community partner has goals that align with those of the district. A district team that includes the superintendent, assistant superintendent, student services director, and the community and school partnership supervisor will evaluate potential and existing partners on key aspects that include:

- Partners **adhere to equity practices**. These practices are in line with the district Equity Policy's call to create a "barrier-free environment where all students, regardless of their race, class or other personal characteristics, have the opportunity to benefit equally from their education." Partners must ensure they work to improve equity and remove barriers whenever possible.
- Partners **communicate regularly** with the district through planned update meetings. Clear MOUs support how each organization provides services in the district, but CH-UH's expectations go beyond services. Regular communication is key to troubleshooting challenges and planning services over time. CH-UH requests that some partners attend weekly meetings to ensure open channels of communication and confirm that everyone understands what is going on across the district and community.
- Partners **reflect the students** they will serve. CH-UH staff examine the demographics of service providers, managers, and executive boards to determine whether staff share similar lived experiences as students. For example, CH-UH expects organizations that provide mental health services to have leaders who have experience with mental health challenges. Organizations that lack racial diversity or do not support LGBTQ+ groups would not align with CH-UH's goals and expectations for community partners.
- The **relationship is mutually beneficial**. Most of CH-UH's community partners provide services at no cost to the district. However, CH-UH still aims to reciprocate by supporting these partners in their own goals. Many community partners include philanthropy in their strategic goals, so serving the local school district aligns with their organization's strategy. CH-UH also strives to support partners directly, such as through helping with grant writing to fund services or recruiting students for enrollment in a program.
- Partners identify how **goals support school action plans**. Many partners serve students in one or more school sites. As CH-UH continues to grow its partnerships, the district plans to talk with partners about how their work connects to what each school is doing. For example, partners should be able to articulate how their services support schools' goals for attendance, behaviors, or key academic outcomes. Through connecting partners' and schools' goals, CH-UH hopes to build a stronger shared vision on every campus.
- District staff and organizations **evaluate the effectiveness** of services. CH-UH plans to encourage partners to collect data and learn whether their services are meeting their goals and students' needs. CH-UH has surveyed families and students about some community partners, but district staff plan to expand this practice to all partners and schools to ensure the time and energy put into the services are worth the effort.



This mural covers a wall at Noble Elementary School. Throughout the district, Heights supports arts and music programming through partnerships with community groups and school-based programs.

Partner highlight: MetroHealth System

One of CH-UH's most successful collaborations is with the **MetroHealth System**, a local health care provider and hospital system. The partnership has grown over time, working to advance the district's goal of providing **wraparound services** (e.g., health care, food) to all students and families. The MetroHealth System's work with the district began with a mobile clinic that traveled to different schools and expanded in 2022 to include a permanent Heights Wellness Center at Heights High School. As of 2023, all students, families, and staff in the district can visit the Heights Wellness Center or the MetroHealth System's mobile clinic, which continues to visit school sites each week.

The MetroHealth System and CH-UH create the Wellness Center. This work included conducting needs assessments for students and families, mapping out available services in the community, and conducting surveys and focus groups with the CH-UH community. Like many school health programs, the Wellness Center relies on a **mix of funding**, including capital funding from the state, insurance funds for patient services, and philanthropic support and grants for operations. CH-UH students, families, and staff tend to pay for services using Medicaid or private insurance, though MetroHealth System does still serve patients who cannot pay at all. With MetroHealth System providing direct services as it would in any location, the school-based health center creates a **sympiotically beneficial program** for both education and health systems.

Staff from both CH-UH and the MetroHealth System say the Center's goal is to address the **social determinants of health** for students, families, and staff so that they can be well and successful at school. Rather than replace other medical systems in the area, the center aims to **fill in gaps** and coordinate care for anyone when needed. In addition to offering wellness visits, mental health screenings, and testing for health conditions (e.g., strep throat, sexually transmitted infections), the center connects students and families to other resources they need, like the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), sports equipment to join school teams, and housing assistance. A MetroHealth System staff described **trust as critical** to offering successful services, so the organization attends community and school events to strengthen relationships with community members and encourage more people to seek health services.



followed the **National School-Based Health Alliance's framework** to

The Heights Wellness Center is located at Heights High School but is run entirely by the MetroHealth System. The center offers students, families, and staff all the services of a primary care doctor's office, including checkups, urgent care, lab work, mental health screenings, and warm handoffs to other providers.

“It’s about relationship building. Anything that we do, students and families aren’t going to trust us unless they can build a relationship with us.”

– MetroHealth System staff

Using feedback loops to support two-way communication

CH-UH staff work to carefully understand the needs of the community, note areas of success and needed growth, and then communicate what they learned back to families and community partners so they understand how their feedback is being used. These **feedback loops** promote district accountability and trust.

One way CH-UH collects data from their families and community partners is through **surveys**, conducted as needed. Schools have experimented with **different levels of anonymity** in surveys, weighing the benefits and drawbacks of asking people to provide their information on surveys. Asking people to give their name or email so they can be contacted may limit their willingness to be honest with their responses. However, without contact information, staff cannot communicate findings to respondents.

“Communicate, communicate, communicate. Listen, listen, listen. We make sure that we are intentionally inviting people to the table *before* decisions are made.”

– Heights superintendent

To address these concerns, district leaders create **outreach plans** and clearly explain their goals for each survey. If a survey asks for respondents’ contact information, it also explains how that information will be used to share findings with respondents. In addition, CH-UH tells respondents when they can expect to get **data updates** and learn how their input informed district decisions. Future surveys build on the results of previous data collection, creating ongoing feedback loops that support district accountability.

As part of the outreach plan, CH-UH **disaggregates data** by subgroups to better understand how subpopulations are being served. Disaggregating data — whether by race, age, gender, disability status, or other important demographic variables — can help identify areas for success and improvement. Disaggregating data can also show the district whether any community groups are left out of data collection, so staff can design plans to seek input from those groups. In addition, sharing disaggregated data can help highlight successes. For example, one school shared grade-level results of a school-wide initiative to increase attendance, identifying the groups that were succeeding and those who needed more support. Celebrating positive trends and communicating them to families and community partners are critical to building feedback loops that encourage trust and strengthen relationships with families.

PROMISING PRACTICES: Collecting and sharing data

Considerations for using data to inform *two-way communication* with families

- + **Determine anonymity level when asking for feedback.** Anonymity can lead to more honest responses, but it limits options for targeted follow-up.
- + **Plan to provide data updates.** Tell participants how and when results will be available (e.g., every month on website, email report at the end of the semester). Ensure staff have the capacity to analyze the data for those updates.
- + **Disaggregate data to understand what is working and for whom.** When possible, analyze data by student subgroup (e.g., students with disabilities, Black students) to understand how specific initiatives affect groups differently.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Though CH-UH is unique in many regards, other districts can learn from a few key innovative strategies and evidence-based practices, and customize them for their own local contexts.

- **Investing in dedicated staff to lead FCC initiatives**
Districts can create specific staff positions to focus on family engagement and building community partnerships, rather than distributing these responsibilities across many staff roles. Funding these positions demonstrates that FCC is a top priority and strengthens the district's ability to build relationships with families and community groups.
- **Empowering citizen task forces to co-create district plans**
To be successful, task forces must share decision-making power with district staff. Districts can use task forces to collaborate with families to tackle specific, defined challenges; develop recommendations; and implement plans.
- **Ensuring the missions of community partners match district goals**
District staff can work with community organizations' leadership to ensure there is a shared vision of serving students. When districts and partners are on the same page, they can align goals to create initiatives, such as wellness centers, that meet the needs of both groups.
- **Using feedback loops to support two-way communication**
Intentional survey design is critical to gathering data in a way that builds trust and supports communication. Sharing data with survey respondents and broader community members helps strengthen relationships between the district and families, especially when districts share celebrations of growth and acknowledge areas for improvement.

About Connected & Engaged

This initiative investigates common barriers to achieving authentic partnerships between school districts and families and offers research-based strategies to address those challenges. This initiative aims to support school districts, community-based organizations, and caregivers as they consider their own challenges and work to nurture and promote a connected and engaged school community.

About FHI 360

FHI 360's U.S. Programs work to improve the well-being of all Americans throughout their lifetimes by focusing on the three main drivers of success — health, education, and employment. Our projects **promote equity** to ensure that people from diverse backgrounds and experiences are empowered to reach their full potential and live productive and healthy lives.

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