

Family and Community Collaboration in Practice: Tuscaloosa City Schools

This profile describes Tuscaloosa City School's innovative and successful approaches to promoting authentic family and community collaboration (FCC). It delves into Tuscaloosa's efforts to overcome challenges related to building trust with families and creating staff capacity to maintain strong relationships. To achieve FCC, Tuscaloosa used a few key strategies:

Facilitating parent-teacher collaboration for academic improvement

It can be challenging for schools to support partnerships between caregivers and educators outside of the context of individual student needs. Tuscaloosa facilitates these collaborations through the Parent Teacher Leadership Academy (PTLA), a year-long training program run by the nearby University of Alabama, where school-based teams made up of staff and caregivers design and launch projects to improve academic outcomes.

Co-locating service providers and district support staff

Even when district staff refer students and families to community-based services, logistical barriers often get in the way. Providing a physical space in the school district for community partners to operate allows families to obtain multiple services in one place, such as mental health counseling, food, and disability supports. Co-location also supports synergy among partners, as they can learn from one another and combine forces.

Communicating specific requests to community partners and parents

For community partnerships to be successful in promoting FCC, district staff should regularly share specific opportunities for partners to support students. Tuscaloosa reaches out with specific requests for partners — Spanish-speaking volunteers, gift cards for Teacher Appreciation Day, winter coats — to highlight clear ideas for how they can support the district.

Providing administrative support to teachers for FCC

School and district leaders can provide critical guidance to support teachers' collaboration with students, their families, and community organizations. Guidance can come in many forms, such as training teachers on how to have difficult conversations, setting high expectations for communication, and modeling outreach to community partners.





Photo courtesy of Tuscaloosa City Schools

INTRODUCTION

Tuscaloosa City Schools (Tuscaloosa) is located in western Alabama, approximately 60 miles from Birmingham. One of the key goals in the district's 2021-24 strategic plan is improving stakeholder engagement. Thanks to new initiatives and a strong network of local partners, Tuscaloosa has increasingly fostered opportunities for collaborative decision-making by teachers, families, and community organizations.

Tuscaloosa uses funding from multiple sources to support FCC efforts, as the staff who conduct FCC activities are spread across district and school departments. Tuscaloosa leadership strategizes to braid federal, state, and local funding sources together to cover costs for staff positions, professional development, and other important FCC resources. Outside of these funding sources, Tuscaloosa relies on community members' volunteered time and donated resources to support its FCC goals.

District details

Tuscaloosa City Schools (Tuscaloosa) is in Tuscaloosa, AL, a city of approximately 100,000 people, a majority of whom are Black (67 percent). The city is the fifth largest in the state and is home to the University of Alabama, which is a major partner for Tuscaloosa and has 40,000 students. Tuscaloosa serves 10,200 students, 47 percent of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch. In addition to the University of Alabama, other major local employers include local automotive manufacturing, health services, and the city and county school districts.

Tuscaloosa has ramped up FCC as part of its 2021-2024 strategic plan. Highlights of the plan include:

- **Vision:** Create and support a culture of high expectations for each and every student to achieve personal, academic, and career excellence.
- **Mission:** Be a premier, innovative school system where each and every student graduates and is fully prepared for life and career success.
- **3 Es:** Students should graduate from high school and transition into either **Enrollment** in a post-secondary education opportunity, **Employment** in a job, or **Enlistment** in military service.

The strategic plan focuses on four pillars:

- Student success (especially literacy and math).
- Stakeholder engagement with community and education partners.
- Creating a safe and supportive learning environment.
- Ensuring organizational effectiveness.

Among other aims, Tuscaloosa has set goals to serve 70 percent of elementary students through summer learning and to narrow the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities.

One of Tuscaloosa’s largest partners is the University of Alabama. This partnership takes many forms. Schools often ask for volunteers from faculty and staff for special events, such as career days or STEM fairs, where they may demonstrate to the students what an engineer or a geologist looks like, what they do, and how they got to where they are. University staff also support schools by providing gift cards or gifts for regular awards such as student of the month or regular celebrations such as Teacher Appreciation Week. Tuscaloosa also participates in a training run by the university, the Parent Teacher Leadership Academy (see page 4).

One unique and successful aspect of Tuscaloosa’s approach to FCC is that they see it as a shared responsibility of all district staff. While there are dedicated positions that focus on specific aspects of FCC-related goals, such as having a McKinney-Vento coordinator to address families’ experiences of homelessness, all staff feel accountable to work with families and community partners. Indeed, much of the work with families, community partners, and students occurs at the school level. Principals train teachers on best practices and focus on school-led community partner initiatives.

I don't believe we just have to keep our doors open. I think that's a flawed thought. We have to invite people to the open doors, and then welcome them in the door.

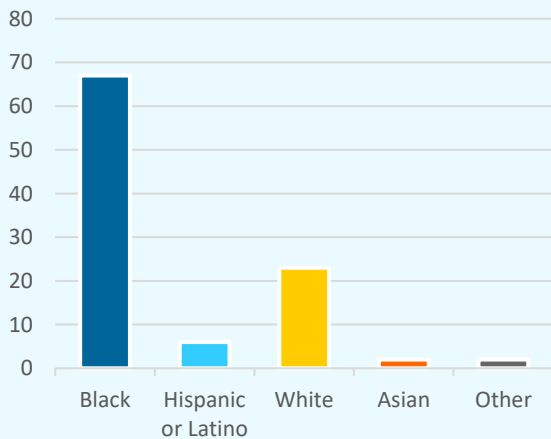
– Tuscaloosa superintendent

District characteristics (2021-2022)

10,200
Students

21
Schools

Percentage of students by race/ethnicity



5%
English Language Learners

47%
Free and Reduced Lunch

11%
Special Education

13 schools
Title I eligibility

91%
Graduation rate

Facilitating parent-teacher collaboration for academic improvement

One of Tuscaloosa’s most successful initiatives to facilitate collaboration between families and teachers is the Parent Teacher Leadership Academy (PTLA). The program began in 2007 as a partnership between the University of Alabama (an integrated team consisting of the College of Education, the Community Affairs Department, and the College of Human Environmental Sciences) and several local school districts, including Tuscaloosa. From the beginning, PTLA aimed to “utilize research-based practices to provide professional development to parent and teacher leaders who use their knowledge to support students’ achievement through strong family-school partnerships.”

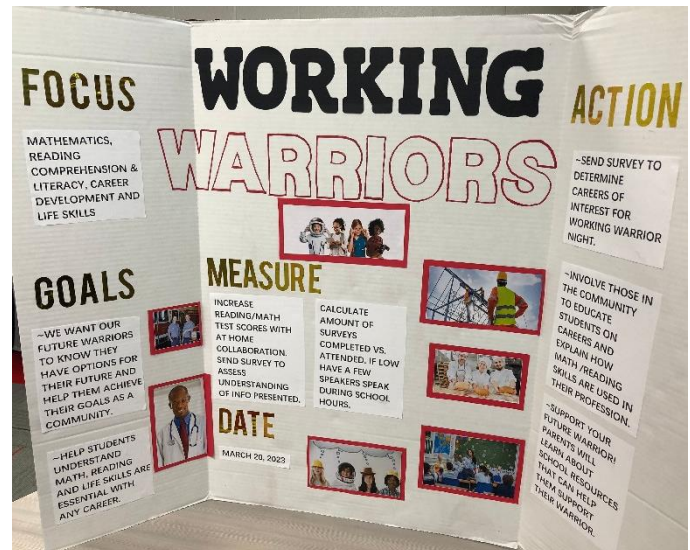
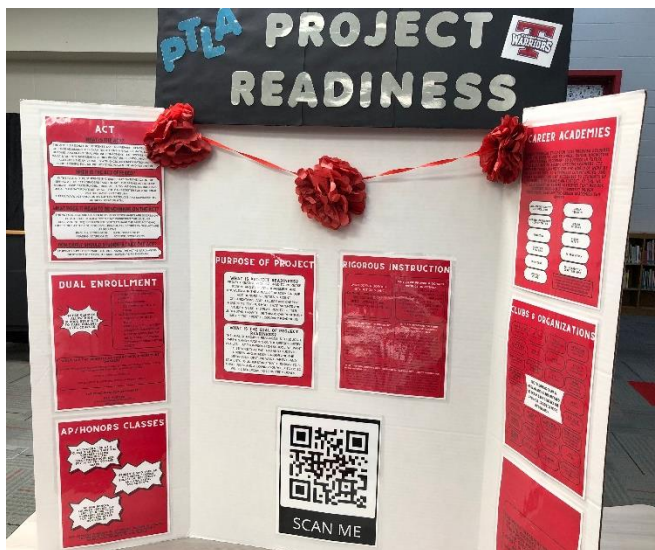
How PTLA is structured to support collaboration and learning

PTLA is run by a director, who is based out of the University of Alabama and supported by a program coordinator, and facilitators who support the work of the school-based teams. Principals of the participating schools nominate two teachers and two caregivers to participate in the PTLA each spring, with year-long cohorts beginning every September. Principals help their teams identify a goal and a potential project to plan and manage, and then teams work throughout the year to implement and refine them. Each project must **focus on an academic goal** related to math, literacy, or social-emotional learning (SEL).

PTLA teams attend six evening sessions throughout the school year to receive instruction on important aspects of designing a project (e.g., a classroom reading intervention, family STEAM night). Sessions last just over two hours. Topics include the fundamentals of FCC, tips for building community partnerships, how to write grants, how to measure project outcomes, and lessons from other district superintendents.

“I feel like what PTLA does for us is gives us a risk-free environment to try out stuff. It also connects us with community partners.”

– Tuscaloosa principal



PTLA teams create posters to summarize their projects at the end of each cohort year. Each poster details the project’s goals, activities, and measurement plan. Teams share the posters with other PTLA project teams to get feedback from peers and other districts. (Photos courtesy of the University of Alabama, PTLA)

PTLA also serves school districts surrounding Tuscaloosa, some of which are over an hour drive away. Tuscaloosa teams sometimes travel to “**on the road**” sessions in other districts, so those teams are not always the ones traveling. By including multiple districts, PTLA facilitates collaborative learning, allowing school teams to **learn from other districts**.

Tuscaloosa uses professional development funds to pay for the school teams to participate in PTLA. This funding covers university staff time, meeting spaces, food, and small grants for school teams. Tuscaloosa parents and teachers can apply for PTLA grants of up to \$1,000 for their projects, allowing them access to both funding and opportunities to practice grant-writing skills.

By the end of the school year, all teams have piloted their ideas in their schools and shared their progress with the rest of the cohort. Each team must create a professional poster that demonstrates the need for their project, the related school improvement goal, key community partners, a timeline, and the project’s impact for their school. These posters are featured in a culminating “graduation” every April that brings all PTLA districts together to celebrate the projects.

How research informs PTLA

PTLA organizers at the University of Alabama rely on research to structure and improve the program. PTLA grounds the program in Dr. Karen Mapp’s **Dual Capacity-Building Framework**, a research-based set of goals and necessary conditions for schools to effectively foster family engagement. In doing so, PTLA aims to facilitate family collaboration rather than mere parent involvement.

PTLA also monitors progress toward its goals of increasing leadership capacity for both teachers and parents. All participants take a leadership capacity survey at the beginning and end of the year-long program. The PTLA director works with other university partners who **analyze survey data** to understand the PTLA program’s overall impact on parents and teachers. PTLA aims to use the data to improve its sessions and supports over time.

“The model of bringing small groups together, having them intentionally engaged with one another but also engaged across other schools and districts, is really powerful. The idea generation can be really strong within that.”

– Tuscaloosa parent and PTLA participant

PROMISING PRACTICES: Supporting parent-teacher collaboration

How other districts can *build partnerships* between teachers and families

- + Empower principals to identify teachers and parents who may have interest and capacity in collaborating on a specific project. Strive to include a **diverse set of voices and perspectives** each year.
- + Set collaboration goals for teachers and families around specific **academic learning outcomes** for students (e.g., math, literacy, SEL).
- + Work with community partners to provide families and teachers with **time, space, and food for meetings**. These components support informal relationship-building among families and teachers, so they get to know one another as people.
- + Provide free **child care** to reduce barriers for parents to attend.

Co-locating service providers and district support staff

Tuscaloosa has invested in creating a physical space to support families and foster connections between the district and community partners. The New Heights Community Resource Center opened in January 2023 in a vacant district-owned space adjacent to Stars Academy, an alternative school for students who have experienced disciplinary action. The center is staffed by a mix of social workers and local partners. The goal of New Heights is to provide resources and services that support all Tuscaloosa families and reduce barriers to students' success in school.

Designing a physical space for services

New Heights staff focus on five service areas: mental health, health care, academic supports, youth prevention, and homelessness prevention. Tuscaloosa social workers and educators developed these pillars to encompass the services students most often need to reduce chronic absenteeism, increase academic achievement, or improve behavior.

To build partnerships with community organizations to meet students' needs, Tuscaloosa staff held **interest meetings** with local nonprofit agencies that work in these areas. While not all nonprofit partners choose to maintain a space at New Heights, 10 community partners do occupy offices there. **Tuscaloosa does not charge nonprofits rent**; rather, the district asks that co-located partners chip in small fees to cover utilities and invest the savings on rent into their services for families.

Co-locating service providers is key to Tuscaloosa's strategy, as it allows for students and families to access multiple supports in one place and during the school day (without attendance penalties). Co-location removes barriers that families face in navigating logistical hurdles to accessing services, while also building **connections across service silos**.



Multiple community-based organizations are co-located at the New Heights Community Resource Center. These organizations provide services in a wide range of areas, including mental health, housing rehabilitation and disability modifications, literacy, and parent education.

“It's important not only for our community to see what's here and our kiddos to see ‘all these people are invested in us,’ but also for our community partners to see what's out there and begin to work together more.”

– New Heights staff

New Heights partners include organizations that offer tutoring, alcohol and drug education, support for English Learners, suicide prevention services, and disability rights and home modifications. New Heights also works to **meet immediate basic needs** that families might have, such as food, clothing, school supplies, and on-site counseling. Providing affordable offices for local community partners allows partners to coordinate and learn from one another, making the sum of their services greater than the individual parts.

Building community trust

Support from the community of New Heights’s surrounding neighborhood has also been critical for Tuscaloosa. New Heights is in the Western Cluster of Tuscaloosa, in a majority-Black neighborhood and adjacent to Stillman College, a historically Black college. Schools in this area serve families with higher needs and lower incomes, as well as parents who face logistical, economic, or other barriers to family engagement. One staff member said, “It’s important to us that we didn’t just come in and say, ‘This is what we’re doing here, and this is what’s been decided,’ but get input from our students, their families, and the surrounding community.”

“Yes, we are invested in raising our literacy proficiency. But our district gets that we can’t do that if we’re not addressing basic needs.”

– New Heights staff

To strengthen these relationships with local families and residents, New Heights staff plan to host **open events for families outside of Tuscaloosa**, such as town halls for the local councilperson and events with the local school board district representative. Further, many of the community partners employ individuals who share some characteristics with the people they serve, such as cultural heritage or experience with disabilities or mental health needs.

Using data to inform service delivery

New Heights is developing a **data dashboard** to share student outcomes and progress with community partners. While Tuscaloosa is heavily focused on improving literacy and math proficiency rates across all schools, staff see attendance and behavior as important “leading indicators” of academic success. Students who attend the neighboring alternative school, Stars Academy, often spend only a few weeks there before returning to their schools of origin. Thus, New Heights plans to design supports that not only will help students immediately, but also set them up for long-term success. To do this, New Heights staff aim to improve students’ academic outcomes, behavior, and attendance in their home schools, and reduce the frequency that students return to Stars Academy multiple times.

PROMISING PRACTICES: Physical space for collaboration

How districts can *create infrastructure* to expand the district’s capacity to serve families

- + Identify community organizations that serve students’ **most pressing needs**. By listening to students and families about their specific needs, districts can prioritize finding partners that can offer supports in those areas.
- + Hold meetings to facilitate relationships between families and multiple community partners at the same time and place. Organizations offering similar supports (e.g., literacy programs, tutoring) can better coordinate services for a family in need when **all groups can work together on site**.
- + **Share data** across partners so that all organizations can track their progress in supporting families and students.

Communicating specific requests to community partners and parents

Tuscaloosa strives to offer families and community partners specific and actionable examples of how they can engage with the district. Both district-level and school-level staff shared strategies for communicating with local organizations and families to overcome challenges such as limited capacity and funding for activities, or limited staffing. Partnerships with the University of Alabama, local churches, nonprofits, and other volunteer groups all support Tuscaloosa’s mission to improve student outcomes. By **acknowledging the expertise and assets available in the community**, Tuscaloosa expands its own capacity to serve students.

One example of a purposeful partnership is Reading Allies, a literacy tutoring program for elementary grades. This program is run and supported in partnership with the University of Alabama Honors College and The Tuscaloosa Rotary Club. Reading Allies not only recruits community volunteers, but also trains them to facilitate personalized lessons for students in one-on-one tutoring sessions. Tuscaloosa advertises the program as one of many specific ways families or other community members can support schools.

In another example, one Tuscaloosa school hosts an annual event to celebrate the cultural and ethnic heritage of students and families in the community. The school invites community partners and parents to attend, host tables, and donate food. While the annual event has a clear structure that offers specific ideas for families and community members to participate, it also fosters creativity for designing new ways to contribute.

These are all examples of what Tuscaloosa aims to be “**clear avenues for people to engage.**” District staff present specific ideas for how partners can support Tuscaloosa in working toward its goals, rather than only sharing broad needs. The superintendent said, “We’ve got to identify clearly what that path looks like for volunteers. People say, ‘I want to help with a school,’ but if we don’t clearly give the avenue for that, you turn them away.”

How data inform community partnerships

According to Tuscaloosa staff, **transparency with data** is critical to both building trust with partners and formulating specific requests to different groups (e.g., churches, tutoring organizations, mental health care providers). The district relies on academic, attendance, and behavior data to determine how community groups can best support students. The superintendent holds **regular meetings** with community, government, and industry partners to maintain ongoing relationships and update partners on the district’s progress and

Principal, Dr. Jerry Collins

FALCONS
CENTRAL ELEMENTARY

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- Parent Teacher Association
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters
- Boys II Men/L.A.D.I.E.S
- SOAR Reads
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SCAN ME

VISIT

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In response to feedback that families didn’t know how to best support the school, Central Elementary School designed a flyer to advertise specific volunteer and engagement opportunities. The flyers are posted in many local businesses and churches.

needs. These meetings also help Tuscaloosa staff stay abreast of services in the community, government funding and programs, and volunteer interest.

According to the superintendent, “We don't hide behind [our data]. We say here it is. Here's where it's improving — the bright spots. Here's where we're not making as much progress, and here's what you can do to help.” Tuscaloosa plans to share data around their top priorities, which include literacy proficiency, promoting STEM opportunities, and increasing dual-enrollment opportunities for high school students.

School-specific community partners

School staff also have strategies for building partnerships with community partners. Principals brainstorm specific ideas for how partners can **volunteer their time** (e.g., attending career day, teaching a workshop) or **offer financial support** (e.g., prizes, supporting field trips). Importantly, principals **space out requests** to avoid overburdening any one partner, unless it is for continued support (e.g., an adopt-a-school program). With these strategies, Tuscaloosa schools have gotten local businesses to donate gift cards for Teacher Appreciation Week, attend school events, and form long-term supportive relationships.

To maintain relationships over time, Tuscaloosa staff recommended **demonstrating appreciation for community partners**. Even with limited budgets, schools find creative ways to reciprocate support for local organizations. For example, one Tuscaloosa principal recognizes community partners by thanking them on social media and school signage, encouraging teachers to frequent local businesses that partner with the school, and offering small gifts like school T-shirts and hats.

“I think there's a vulnerability to say, ‘We need help in this area’ — especially when it's outside your circle, it's somewhere in the community. ... That's when that partnership really starts to take off, when those pretenses are down.”

– Tuscaloosa
community partner

PROMISING PRACTICES: Partnerships with families and partners

How districts can *build relationships* among community partners, families, and schools

- + Take advantage of **every connection** to get community members engaged with specific volunteering opportunities (e.g., caregivers can ask their employers to support career day or ask local businesses for gift cards for Teacher Appreciation Week).
- + **Share data transparently** to alert the community to district needs and design specific pathways for them to address those needs (e.g., in response to low literacy scores, suggest volunteers to tutor in reading).
- + **Demonstrate appreciation** for caregivers and community partners to encourage ongoing relationships and support.

Providing administrative support to teachers for FCC

Tuscaloosa district and school leadership often have more experience working with community partners than educators — especially newer educators. Educators have the most frequent contact with families, but often lack training or professional development in how to do so most effectively.

However, these skills can be taught. Training teachers, particularly new teachers, can build leaders who can improve FCC for the rest of their career. Tuscaloosa works to ensure school-level leaders know these skills and encourages schools to support their teachers as much as possible.

Tuscaloosa principals have strategies for helping teachers work with families and community members. They **set expectations** for all teachers to communicate with families regularly, not just when it is time for parent-teacher conferences or report cards. Teachers **communicate positive news** to families, building a relationship before any negative communication needs to occur.

When families do need to be called for a problem, principals **coach teachers on having difficult conversations**. For example, one Tuscaloosa principal tells her teachers, “I approach them with respect... One of the best ways to break down walls is to say, ‘I need your help.’” Her teachers use these strategies, but she knows they may need additional support — especially if they are new to the field. When a teacher worries about an upcoming call with a family, this principal joins the meeting and **models how to effectively communicate** negative news. With experience, these teachers improve their relationships with families and administrative support is needed less often.

District and school leaders also coach educators on how to build bridges with community partners. One principal said, “Any type of participation we get, we grab on to it.” This means that when partners reach out to a teacher or new connections are found, principals help teachers act on the opportunity. One principal said they use all potential connections — teachers’ suggestions, parents’ employers, nearby restaurants — and “stretch our tentacles out” to form relationships. Principals also **train teachers (and students!) on identifying partners and asking for help** if partners have yet to step up. With this support from principals, Tuscaloosa teachers learn how much partners can increase their capacity to serve students and gain the skills to build relationships with community partners to meet needs.

“Don’t miss an opportunity. The little opportunities, even these little things, they can make a big difference.”

– Tuscaloosa language specialist

PROMISING PRACTICES: Administrative support for teachers

How other school and district leaders can *build the capacity* of teachers

- + **Set clear and high expectations** for teachers’ collaboration with families and community partners. All teachers should have consistent guidance from school leaders on how frequently to communicate with families and community partners.
- + Provide **training for difficult conversations**, particularly for new teachers. Leaders can model what difficult conversations can look like, help teachers prepare for meeting with families, and provide strategies for defusing tension.
- + **Demonstrate how to ask for community support**. Teachers may not know when and how community partners can support instruction. Provide examples and guidance about asking partners for their time or resources.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Though Tuscaloosa 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.

- **Facilitating parent-teacher collaboration for academic improvement**
Districts should create opportunities for families and teachers to work together toward school improvement goals. Districts and schools must provide time, resources (e.g., meals, child care), and training to build these teams' capacity. Tying each project to an academic goal also ensures that families and teachers are working together toward advancing student outcomes.
- **Co-locating service providers and district support staff**
Providing a physical space for community partners to collaborate and meet with families serves dual benefits of removing barriers for families to access services and promoting synergies among partners. These spaces benefit both families and communities, as the space can be open to individuals outside of the school district. In addition to meeting immediate and basic needs, co-located service providers can better sustain ongoing support with students so they can succeed at school.
- **Communicating specific requests to community partners and parents**
Using data to identify specific needs and communicate them to partners can ensure that community resources are being used to support student outcomes. Offering specific pathways for families and community organizations to engage also makes it easier for people to know how to help and more likely that they will follow through on good intentions.
- **Providing administrative support to teachers for FCC**
District and school leadership can support teachers in learning how to communicate and build relationships with families and community partners. By communicating expectations, modeling best practices, and training teachers, districts build capacity for continued leadership.

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.

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