

Systemic Supports for Family and Community Collaboration: Equitably Funding Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For family and community collaboration (FCC) with school districts to be effective and authentic, engagement activities require teacher time, dedicated staff positions, specialized training, and ongoing communication — all elements that rely on substantial funding.¹ Yet throughout the United States, many school districts struggle to fund these core services. School districts that serve communities of color and low-income areas are especially underfunded,² making it even more challenging for them to build strong partnerships with their families and communities and sustain collaboration in the long term.

Without adequate baseline funding, teaching, and learning cannot occur — much less FCC. State and federal governments must address resource inequities that limit districts' capacity for FCC. Until this reform is achieved, school district leaders should continue to build partnerships with community organizations and philanthropic organizations to fund essential components of FCC.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For states and school districts to improve funding infrastructure for FCC, it is critical to tackle much broader issues in funding equity. Our recommendations for state and district policymakers include:

- **Revise funding formulas to increase resources for high-needs districts.** Correct decades of funding inequities by increasing resources for students from low-income households and multilingual students, districts in impoverished areas, and social support programs.
- **Leverage existing federal funding streams to support family and community engagement,** such as Title I and the Statewide Family Engagement Centers program. States can use these existing funds to pay for their FCC initiatives.
- **Braid state and federal funds to cover necessary components of FCC,** like teacher time and communication technology. By combining sustainable funding from state and federal sources, school districts can better integrate families and communities into decision-making and invest in evidence-based FCC strategies.
- **Engage foundations and philanthropic organizations to fill in gaps in public funding.** Though private funds cannot guarantee systemic, sustainable, or equitable school resourcing, they can offer financial support, technical assistance, and connections to broader funding networks.

This policy brief was developed as part of the FHI 360 *Connected & Engaged: Supporting Family and Community Partnerships with School Districts* initiative. This brief is one of a series that highlights policies, strategies, and programs that can be implemented at the local, state, or federal levels to promote successful FCC in all school districts — especially those serving students from marginalized groups and communities. To explore the other policy briefs in this series, visit the [Connected & Engaged](https://connectedandengaged.fhi360.org) website.

INTRODUCTION

To make family and community collaboration (FCC) infrastructure possible for all schools — not only well-resourced schools in affluent districts — every state’s funding formula must equitably cover all districts’ core services. Basic services include safe facilities; fair salaries and benefits for educators, support staff and counselors; high quality learning materials; and professional development. These core services are critical to student learning and help create optimal conditions for families and communities to collaborate with schools to support student growth. When implemented well, FCC improves many student outcomes, including attendance, academics, and social-emotional learning.³

For FCC activities to be successful and ongoing, school districts need money to cover teacher time, invest in training and materials, and create welcoming learning environments. Funding is therefore part of the foundation of school districts’ ability to build and maintain strong relationships with families and communities.

To establish adequate funding, state education agencies must holistically evaluate the funding that each district receives from federal, state, *and* local sources and redistribute more state funding to districts serving the most students from marginalized populations (e.g., students of color, multilingual students, students from low-income households). Some federal funding streams already prioritize students with the greatest needs, but states can more boldly commit to implementing equitable funding formulas and supporting FCC in every district.

Current Challenges to Equitable Funding for Family and Community Collaboration

The barriers to equitable funding in the United States are complex. Many school districts lack the financial resources needed to provide basic services, including FCC, due to a combination of decreasing funding, state-specific financing decisions, racial wealth inequities, and lack of guidance for equitably allocating funds. To understand the types of policy changes needed to support systemic FCC throughout the country, it is critical to understand the systemic funding challenges that school districts currently face.

Declining funding limits school district capacity for FCC

Education funding has decreased in recent decades, which has limited available resources for many district priorities, including FCC, and hampered student achievement.⁴ As of 2022, the average expenditures for K-12 schools were the lowest they have been in the United States in at least 20 years.⁵ About half of students attended school districts with inadequate funding (not enough funding to achieve average test scores in the United States) in

“State decision makers are best positioned to establish the goals for schools and to provide overall guidance on spending patterns and operational practices. But local decision makers are better positioned to determine how the goals are to be achieved, i.e., the details of operational implementation.”⁴³

- *Eric A. Hanushek, economist*

2020.⁶ In a handful of states (Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, Nevada, North Carolina, and Texas), over 90 percent of students attended school in districts with inadequate funding.⁷ When the majority of students attend schools that cannot afford basic services, integral parts of education such as meeting students' needs and working with families become nearly impossible to implement.

The majority of school district funding comes from state and local sources, which creates huge variation among states in how districts are funded. Funding formulas have changed over time: While the federal government provided more than 80 percent of school funding in the 1920s, now it is state and local governments covering over 90 percent of school funds.⁸ This means that education formulas can — and do — vary substantially among states, giving the federal government less influence over school financing.

The federal and state policy decisions that called for reducing K-12 funding throughout the past decades often cited previous research stating that money does not matter for student outcomes. However, newer studies with more modern statistical approaches have found these old conclusions to be incorrect.⁹ More recent statistical models have incorporated more nuanced and accurate variables that clarify for whom and in what contexts money matters for student outcomes rather than oversimplifying how money impacts achievement. While schools lack sufficient funding from federal and state governments, community-based organizations (CBOs) sometimes step in to fill in the gaps, such as through providing human resource support (e.g., nurses, tutors) and services (e.g., meals, summer programming).¹⁰ Though building partnerships between districts and CBOs is heralded as a best practice in FCC, these partnerships cannot compensate for systemic inequities in school funding.¹¹

Funding disparities limit low-income districts' FCC capacity

On average, school districts serving higher populations of students from low-income households and students of color receive less funding than school districts serving more students from high-income households or white students.¹² Families and communities with low incomes also tend to face additional barriers to engaging with schools, including less flexible work schedules, limited transportation, and language challenges. As a result, school districts serving students and families with the highest needs tend to be the least able to adequately fund FCC initiatives.

Many education funding disparities are driven by regressive tax systems that rely heavily on property taxes and thereby favor districts with high property values (see Box: How the racial wealth gap fuels education funding inequity). Districts in low-wealth areas have smaller pools of property taxes to pull from, resulting in fewer dollars for schools in those areas. Since the Great Recession,

How the racial wealth gap fuels education funding inequity

On average, households of color earn only half what white households earn, and also report less than 20 percent of the wealth of white households.⁴⁴ The racial wealth gap is a result of public and private discrimination against racial minorities, both throughout America's history and in the present day.⁴⁵ Until only decades ago, Black Americans were excluded from wealth-building opportunities, including homeownership, participation in public programs, and fair wage employment.

Homeownership is one of the most common forms of wealth in the United States. After decades of redlining and other discriminatory housing policies, neighborhoods home to communities of color tend to have lower property values than predominantly white neighborhoods. As such, this wealth gap contributes to inequities in education funding.

Until the racial wealth gap is addressed, educational equity will be virtually impossible in the United States.

funding at high-poverty schools has recovered even more slowly than funding at low-poverty schools, further widening disparities even as the economy recovered.¹³

Many states attempt to use state funding to correct for regressive local funding patterns. However, there is no “right way” for states to do this, as each state works with a different combination of tax revenue streams, policy landscapes, and student populations. In general, states with the lowest levels of local funding tend to have the most progressive state funding schemes to correct for it, sometimes in response to court mandates.¹⁴ Federal funding makes every state’s funding formula appear more progressive but is still not enough to outweigh disparities at the community level.

In 43 states, average funding is less adequate for Black and Hispanic students than white students by wide margins.¹⁵ One analysis of 3,000 school districts (which serve two thirds of American students) found that the districts serving the most students of color receive 16 percent (\$2,700) less local and state funding per student than districts with the smallest populations of students of color.¹⁶ Despite variation by state, a similar trend held for districts serving the highest populations of multilingual students (14 percent, \$2,200 less per student).¹⁷ Thus, districts that might require a more diverse approach to their FCC efforts to reach all families have less funding to accomplish that goal.

In districts serving more marginalized groups and families with low incomes, inadequate school funding can impact student outcomes more severely.¹⁸ Students from marginalized groups tend to need more supports than other students, including instructional supports and specialized services. When schools do not have enough funds to meet students’ basic needs, finding adequate time and resources for FCC services becomes even more challenging.

Some states defy these trends by designing funding formulas that allocate *more* money to districts serving more students from marginalized groups.^{19, 20} These states with the most progressive funding formulas also tend to be the most economically segregated — with higher concentrations of poverty in specific areas — which makes it easier for states to target funding at those districts.²¹ However, in many states there are still significant gaps between per-pupil funding in high-poverty districts and low-poverty districts that exacerbate inequality.^{22, 23} Together, these varied approaches that do not always provide resources to students with the highest need point to a systemic need for more consistent guidance and standards that ensure all states and localities allocate more funding to districts serving marginalized populations.

Policy and Program Solutions to Equitably Fund FCC

Equitable funding is a baseline for systemic collaboration among school districts, families, and communities. While adequate funding does not guarantee authentic engagement, FCC is impossible without a strong foundation of resources.

There will be no single solution for funding FCC in every school district given the complexity of school financing and the variation of funding formulas among states. Further, it is highly unlikely comprehensive school finance reform can happen as long as economic segregation and the racial wealth gap persist (see Box: How the racial wealth gap fuels education funding inequity).

Despite these challenges, policy changes and programmatic reform can get districts closer to the ideal of systemic, authentic FCC. Here, we offer insights and benchmarks that all states and school districts can work toward to fund basic services and create infrastructure to support FCC.

Revise funding formulas to increase resources for high-needs districts

Governments at all levels must reform funding strategies to improve student outcomes, address inequities, and support FCC.^{24, 25} Most critically, state education agencies (SEAs) must increase funding for districts that currently have inadequate funding. While some states may have capacity to expand tax bases or shift budget priorities to increase funding for all schools, it is likely more feasible for SEAs to focus on how existing funds are allocated among districts — and target underfunded districts specifically.

For decades, scholars have researched approaches for optimally allocating education funds. For most states, a combination of strategies will be necessary to eliminate funding deficits for districts serving lower-income communities and predominantly students of color. Here, we highlight a few top recommendations:

- Researchers from the Education Trust recommend that states adjust funding formulas to increase weights for students from low-income households and multilingual students, fill in funding gaps for districts with low property tax revenues, and transparently share information about how district budgets work.²⁶
- Authors from the Center for American Progress call for increasing funding for core education services, providing additional resources for students from low-income households, strengthening outcomes-based accountability processes, and fully funding social support programs.²⁷
- Research from the Learning Policy Institute recommends that SEAs begin all reform efforts by developing clear goals

How do we define *equitable funding*?

Throughout this brief, we consider equitable funding to describe an allocation in which every school has the financial resources it needs to create safe, productive learning conditions for every student. This requires allocating more funding to schools serving students with higher needs, such as students from low-income families, multilingual students, and students with disabilities.

Equitable funding can be achieved in many ways, through a combination of federal, state, and local policy decisions. We recognize funding formulas may look different across states and communities, reflecting the diversity of the United States. However, the goal of every education system must be to provide sufficient financial resources for every educator to meet every student's needs.

and standards for education systems and then increasing funding from multiple state tax sources to mitigate inequities caused by high reliance on local sales taxes and to ensure greater stability when the broader economy fluctuates.²⁸

- Economist Eric Hanushek recommends that states ensure some autonomy for districts to make their own decisions about funding use. The diversity of needs and conditions within states means that few solutions are likely to work uniformly for every district. Instead, he argues, states should create clear guidelines and funding goals, then support districts to operate and use available funds to meet their own needs.²⁹
- Authors from the Shanker Institute recommend that states develop research-based cost targets based on student demographics and then “audit” those funding targets over time. They also recommend expanding federal monitoring and guidance for funding adequacy.³⁰
- Authors from Bellwether document examples of successful state reforms that leverage a combination of diverse coalitions of advocates, champions within political leadership, research on education finances, economic factors, and judicial mandates to spur action.³¹

Leverage existing federal funding streams to support FCC

Though state and local funding provides the bulk of school budgets, some federal programs direct financial support toward students from low-income households. School districts, SEAs, and local education agencies (LEAs) should leverage these programs as much as possible to carve out specific funding and programs for FCC.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provides Title I funding to high-needs schools, requires specific investments in family and community engagement (see Box: How does family engagement fit into Title I?). Title I (Part A) stipulates that at least 1 percent of funding must be used to support family and community engagement. Two sections specifically identify capacity building and training as required activities to be funded.³² Over 58,000 schools in the United States received Title I funds in 2021, meaning over 60 percent of schools can leverage this funding to build capacity for in-service teachers and administrators.

The U.S. Department of Education also funds family engagement through the Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFEC) program. Rather than fund school districts directly, the SFEC program funds technical assistance organizations that assist SEAs and LEAs in implementing FCC practices.³³ As of 2022, 20 organizations were awarded five-year grants of up to \$5 million.³⁴ Grantees vary in focus, but common goals include building capacity of SEAs and LEAs, creating resources for populations with distinct needs (e.g.,

How does family engagement fit into Title I?

Title I provides clear mandates for family and community engagement at all schools that receive funding. Even districts that do not leverage large amounts of Title I funding could learn from the goals and standards outlined by this legislation.

- **ESSA Section 1118 (a) (3) (D):** Funds may be used for “supporting schools and nonprofit organizations in providing professional development for local educational agency and school personnel regarding parent and family engagement strategies.”
- **ESSA Section 1118 (e):** Schools “shall educate teachers, specialized instructional support personnel, principals, and other school leaders, and other staff, with the assistance of parents, in the value and utility of contributions of parents, and in how to reach out to, communicate with, and work with parents as equal partners, implement and coordinate parent programs, and build ties between parents and the school.”

multilingual families, grandparent caregivers), and supporting state-level political advocacy.³⁵ The National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement refers to engagement centers as a “cornerstone for success,” adding that they are “imperative to supporting students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.”³⁶ The SFEC program is a great example of how states can leverage federal funds and relationships with third-party organizations to build capacity for FCC at district and school levels.

Federal funding streams that were created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic also offer opportunities to increase capacity in FCC (see Box: How has COVID-19 funding impacted schools?). For example, some districts have used ESSER funds to increase the number of family liaisons, offer more professional development in FCC, and invest in technology that supports communication with families. However, states and districts must use caution in leveraging this one-time support to implement FCC initiatives that require ongoing, sustainable investments.

Braid state and federal dollars to support each component of FCC

To fund all of the various components of FCC, districts should integrate FCC into their strategic plans and consider pulling from multiple funding streams to make programs more sustainable over time. Braiding multiple resource streams can help districts maximize their capacity to fund each element of FCC, such as teacher time, professional development days, technology, and leadership positions.

Planning for FCC can happen within existing district activities. For example, as referenced in the previous section, many districts are required to develop family engagement plans in compliance with Title I funding rules. To take advantage of requirements like these, districts should engage families and communities in the process of determining the vision for FCC and integrate those FCC goals into strategic plans and equity plans.³⁷ When possible, districts should also appoint senior or cabinet-level positions that are dedicated to FCC, signaling throughout the district that FCC is a top priority that merits attention and investment.³⁸ In many cases, districts can pull from multiple funding streams to cover these staff positions.

Braided funding can also be used to cover school districts’ communication with families. School districts are already federally obligated to communicate with students and families in a language they can understand, but sometimes this requirement does not permeate throughout all district policy. Beyond translating websites and newsletters into all languages spoken throughout their communities, districts can train and compensate cultural liaisons, build partnerships with CBOs, and invest in technology that

How has COVID-19 funding impacted schools?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government offered significant financial support to schools as part of the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. These funding streams included the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund and American Rescue Plan (ARP) ESSER Fund. Together, over \$189 billion was made available to SEAs. SEAs were instructed to disburse funds to local education agencies in the same proportion that they allocate Title I funds, so that schools serving more students from low-income households received higher funding amounts.⁴⁶

While these funds created a huge infusion of resources for schools, the one-time nature of the awards prevents this infusion from reversing the long-time downward trends in education funding.

supports multidirectional communication between families and educators.³⁹ Federal, state, and grant funds can be combined to support these communication strategies over time.

Districts can also use federal and state funds to cover educators' time for FCC through integrating FCC into contracts, offering stipends and incentives for FCC activities, and creating dedicated staff positions to lead FCC work.⁴⁰ Teacher time is critical for FCC; without the time and capacity to engage with families, educators cannot build strong partnerships.

Engage foundations and philanthropic organizations to fill in gaps in public funding

Foundations sometimes step in to fill gaps left by federal and state governments. The Flamboyan Foundation, for example, funds professional development and capacity building for educators in Washington, D.C., public schools.⁴¹ The Heising-Simons Foundation provided initial funding to create the National Association of Family, School, and Community Engagement and continues to support the group's operations.⁴² Foundations can support family and community engagement by supporting the priorities outlined in this brief. However, relying on CBOs and foundations to plug funding holes is not sustainable. States can nurture environments that support public-private partnerships with CBOs and foundations, but systemic improvements will require larger, more strategic coordination between government funders and agencies.

Conclusion

Funding is critical to creating the capacity for districts to support student learning. FCC should be integral to every district's approach for meeting students' needs, but FCC is only possible when districts can dedicate the time and financial resources needed to maintain strong partnerships with families. Funding disparities among school districts — specifically the systematic underfunding of schools serving students of color — prevent some school districts from achieving FCC. State and federal legislators must address resource inequities through reforming state funding formulas and increasing federal support for FCC. Until then, district leaders should strategically use existing funds to build infrastructure for FCC and partner with community groups and philanthropic organizations to fill in gaps. Achieving funding equity must be a top priority for education reform in the coming decade in order to build and sustain long-term partnerships between families and schools.

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