

FINAL
REPORT
MAY 2023

CONNECTED AND ENGAGED

Understanding Opportunities for Family
and Community Collaboration



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Connected and Engaged: Understanding Opportunities for Family and
Community Collaboration

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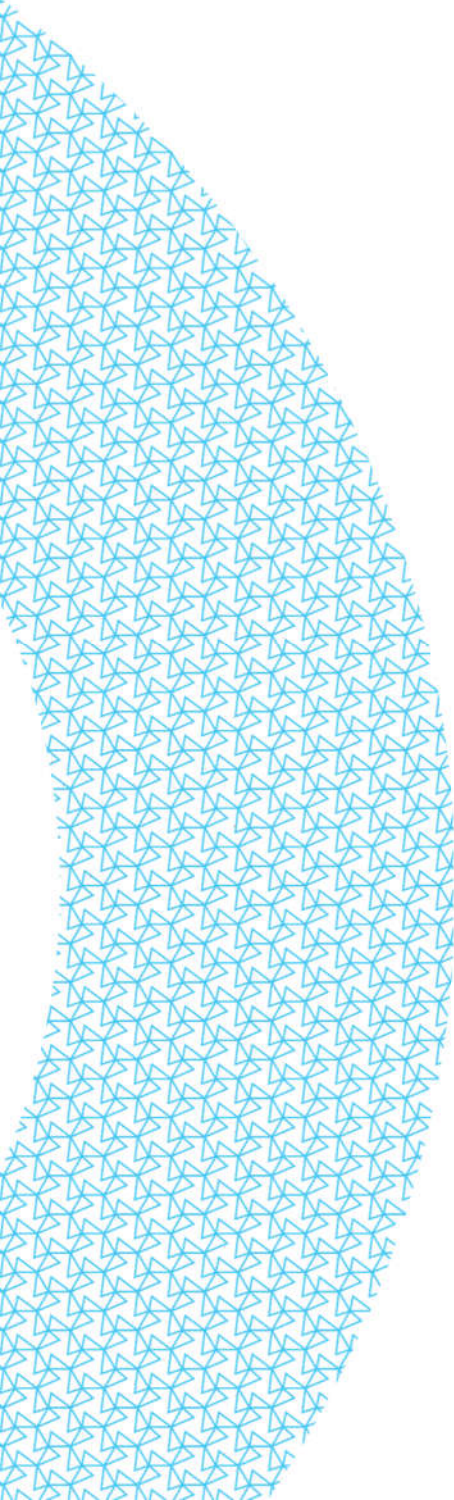
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FHI 360 advances equity, health and well-being through data-driven, locally led solutions — so that humanity thrives. We are working to create a world where opportunity is within reach for all people.

The U.S. Education team at FHI 360 uses multidisciplinary approaches to address critical issues in education, youth development, and community engagement in the U.S. Our work is informed by the core values of equity, excellence, collaboration, and democratic participation. We are guided by a vision of schools, families, youth, and community members working in partnership to develop, promote, and sustain effective programs and services.

FHI 360's *Connected & Engaged: Family and Community Collaboration with School Districts* initiative aims to better understand opportunities for engaging families and the school district community in authentic and sustainable ways. Through the development of an online guide, district profiles, strategy spotlights, video spotlights, policy briefs, and other resources, FHI 360 highlights the ways innovation and capacity building can lead to authentic family and community collaboration.

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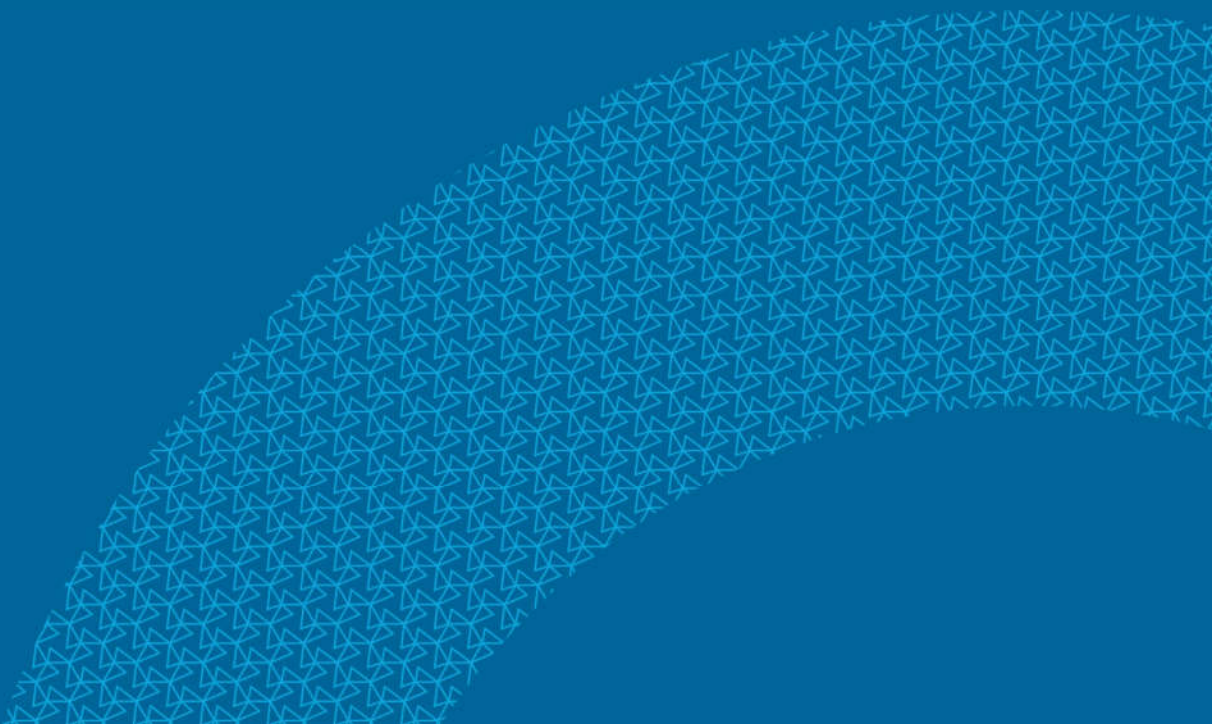
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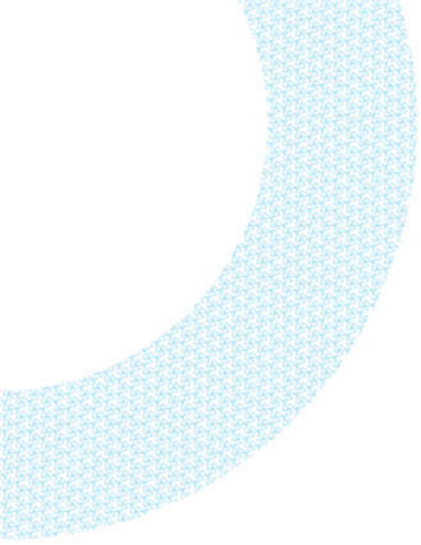
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Contents

Introduction	1
Why Family and Community Collaboration?	1
Leading Frameworks	2
A Path Forward: The Creation of a Web-Based Guide	3
Sharing Research in Actionable Ways	4
Methods	7
Research Methods: A Multi-phased Iterative Approach	7
Limitations	9
Strengthening Opportunities for FCC	10
Fostering Collaborative Decision-Making	11
Building Trust	13
Strengthening Commitment and Values	15
Developing Capacity and Infrastructure.....	17
Moving Forward	19
References	20
Appendices	25



We define family and community collaboration as:

“a mutually collaborative working relationship with the family [and community] that serves the best interests of the student, in either the school or home setting, for the primary purpose of increasing student achievement.”

— Grant & Ray, 2019

INTRODUCTION

FHI 360’s Connected & Engaged: Family and Community Collaboration with School Districts initiative identifies four key opportunities for districts to use research-based strategies to foster authentic family and community collaboration (FCC). This report serves as a compendium of our online guide and related resources and is intended to support practitioners, researchers, and funders as they consider their own FCC practices and work to successfully nurture and promote a connected and engaged school community.

Why Family and Community Collaboration?

Years of research and practice demonstrate that when families and educators partner to support learning and development, children are more likely to have better attendance, succeed in school, graduate on time, and stay on the path to college or a career (Weiss et al., 2018; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Families and schools also benefit from these partnerships. Meaningful collaboration improves family attitudes toward school; increases families’ understanding of their child(ren)’s educational needs and how they can help address those needs; and improves standardized test scores, standards attainment, and school safety (Grant & Ray, 2019).

Evidence also shows that some strategies are especially effective at improving FCC and influencing student outcomes. Below are a few examples of high-impact strategies.

- The transformative school-community collaboration framework, which emphasizes democratic and empowering structures within out-of-school programs, significantly reduced the likelihood of student absenteeism in one study (Kim & Gentle-Genitty, 2020).

- A community school approach, where parents and community-based organizations (CBOs) were key partners with district staff, improved math and reading scores for a 3rd grade cohort by 27 and 16 percentage points, respectively, over a two-year period (Provinzano et al., 2020).
- A parent-teacher home visit program strengthened relationships between teachers and the families of high school students, resulting in a graduation rate that was 3.7 percentage points higher for students in the home-visit cohort than for the entire graduating cohort. Chronic absenteeism for the home-visit cohort was 4 percentage points lower than for the entire graduating cohort over a three-year period (Soule & Curtis, 2021).

Thus, school districts must not only see strengthening family, community, and school collaboration as essential to their work, they must select evidence-based strategies to ensure the greatest outcomes.

Leading Frameworks

FHI 360’s Connected & Engaged: Supporting Family and Community Collaboration with School Districts initiative provides educators with actionable steps to overcome barriers to sustainable partnerships with families and communities. Three family engagement frameworks guided this study: the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships, the Family Leadership Design Collaborative, and the School-Family-Community Partnership Model.

DUAL CAPACITY-BUILDING FRAMEWORK FOR FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships outlines challenges and identifies process and organizational conditions necessary for successful partnerships (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). The framework’s four Cs (capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence) describe a pathway for building educators’ and families’ capacity in improving student achievement.

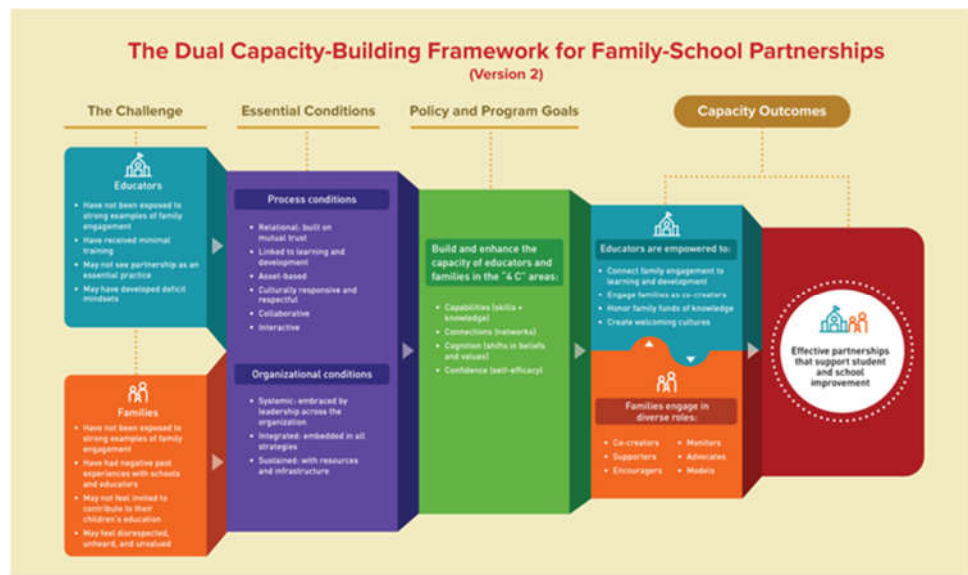
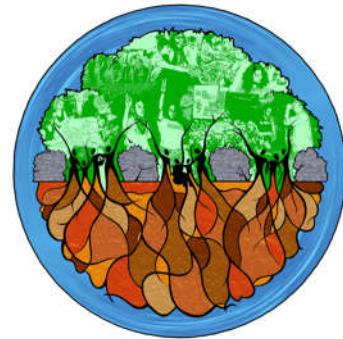


Image from: Mapp, K. L. & Bergman, E. (2019). Dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships (Version 2). Retrieved from: www.dualcapacity.org

FAMILY LEADERSHIP DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

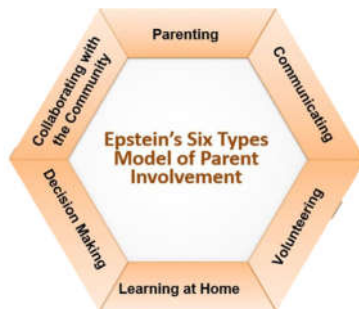
Four principles are central to the Family Leadership Design Collaborative Framework:

- Creating ongoing transformative possibilities.
- Enacting solidarities in collective change-making.
- Refusing and disrupting normative power dynamics.
- Beginning with family and community ecologies.



Ishimaru & Bang, 2016

These principles address the “isms” (e.g., racism, colonialism) that reduce educational inequities, center family and community needs, and focus on placing the power between communities and schools (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016).



Epstein et al., 2018

SCHOOL-FAMILY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP MODEL

The School-Family-Community Partnership Model, also known as the Framework of Six Types of Involvement, emphasizes the idea of interdependence between schools and families in service to students. The six types of involvement are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community.

These frameworks share central components, including capacity building, empowerment, and interdependence, yet each framework has a distinct approach. District leaders can choose the framework that makes the most sense for their context to strategically plan FCC initiatives.

A Path Forward: The Creation of a Web-Based Guide

While there are good examples of what strong district-wide FCC looks like, these are exceptions rather than the norm. There are even fewer examples where districts forge strong collaborative partnerships with marginalized families. While evidence-based FCC strategies exist, a myriad of challenges often get in the way of implementing sustainable approaches that improve student outcomes.

FHI 360's Connected & Engaged: Family and Community Collaboration with School Districts initiative highlights opportunities for districts to use research-based strategies to foster authentic FCC. Through the development of an online multimedia guide, we aimed to support school districts, CBOs, and caregivers with actionable and engaging resources they can use to improve FCC practices and promote a connected and engaged school community.

Our rationale for this online guide was to better understand key opportunities where districts, regardless of their unique contexts and situations, can improve FCC. Through this work, we aimed to help build districts' capacity to create strong partnerships with families and communities that make everyone feel valued, respected, empowered, and included in the education process. Our goal was not to create a new framework or model but rather to share concrete approaches for addressing problems that get in the way of achieving the end goal of those models.

Sharing Research in Actionable Ways

This report serves as a compilation of our findings and dissemination materials provided on our online guide. The online guide also contains a set of policy briefs, profiles of three districts demonstrating exemplary strategies, videos highlighting solutions in action, and a library of essential resources identified through a literature review. Our online guide and its various resources are described below.

ONLINE GUIDE: The online guide presents our study findings in a digestible format designed to help practitioners use this research to achieve their own goals for improving trust, communication, mindsets, and capacity with the people in their community. The guide is actionable in that it provides practitioners with aligned strategies and resources for customizing and adapting best practices and lessons learned in their own communities.

Family and Community Collaboration


Introduction Overcoming the Challenges Collaboration in Action Innovative Strategies Policy Solutions

Home

Introduction

About This Initiative

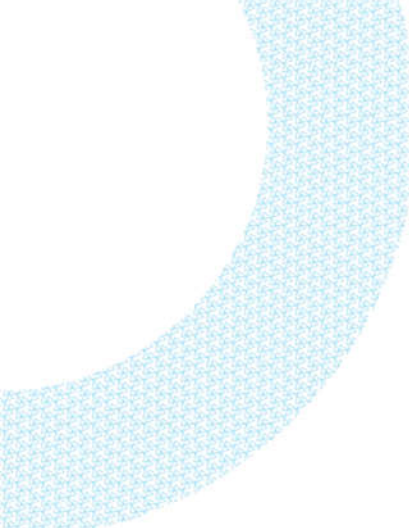
Research affirms that student outcomes improve when schools engage families as valued partners. Despite the strong evidence base and motivation from families and communities to collaborate with



Introduction

- Rationale for Family and Community Collaboration
- Leading Frameworks

<https://connectedandengaged.fhi360.org/collaboration-introduction/>



DISTRICT PROFILES: The profiles offer tangible strategies and actionable information that other districts seeking to improve FCC can replicate and customize for their own contexts. By including key data about three bright spot districts (e.g., community demographics, how FCC is funded), educators can identify commonalities and differences between the example districts and their own. The profiles can be used as a starting point for planning ongoing conversations, designing sustainable systems and strategies, and implementing cycles of continuous improvement. A copy of the profiles appears in the appendices.


STRATEGY SPOTLIGHTS: Exploring specific evidence-based strategies for FCC can help other districts identify strategies they can use in their own contexts. To highlight a few innovative strategies that are working across different districts in the U.S., we created five spotlight reports. Each spotlight summarizes key strategies and provides relevant district examples. A copy of the strategy spotlights appears in the appendices.

DISTRICT PROFILE


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 leverages these strategies to establish strategies, set goals, measure progress, and evaluate results to guide other districts in implementing and building capacity to authentically collaborate with families and communities.


FAMILY AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATION IN PRACTICE | 1

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT


Family and Community Collaboration Spotlight: Working Together to Improve Student Attendance

Key Strategies

Districts can collaborate with families and communities to support student attendance by:

- **Collaborating with families** to identify barriers to attendance.
- **Building partnerships with community groups** to address barriers to school attendance, like students' transportation and housing.
- Using student attendance interventions as opportunities for **wholistic assessments and service referrals**.


Being present most days that school is in session is critical to positive student outcomes and academic success, yet chronic absenteeism is a challenge in many schools. Districts across the country have attendance intervention processes in place to address this challenge. Districts can use these interventions as opportunities for increased family and community collaboration (FCC) and address the root causes of absenteeism. Asking families what they need, incorporating their perspectives, and providing additional resources allows for schools, districts, families, and communities to work together to create and support an attendance plan for each student.



Strategies in Action

East Side Union High School District's Student Attendance Review Board

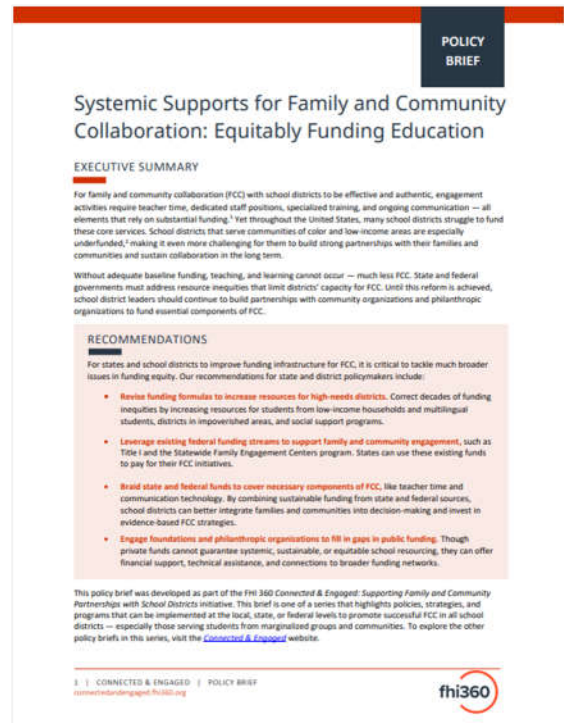
An example of a supportive attendance process can be seen in East Side Union High School District (East Side), a district in San Jose, CA, with a population of over 20,000 students. This district has a holistic, family-focused Student Attendance Review Board made up of faculty, caregivers, and community partners. The goal of East Side's Student Attendance Review Board is to support students and families struggling with chronic absenteeism and truancy.

1 | CONNECTED & ENGAGED | STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT
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VIDEO SPOTLIGHTS: Short videos complement the written materials and can make it easier to meaningfully engage with and interpret new information. We use videos to highlight key takeaways from district profiles as well as innovative strategies we feel can be applied various district contexts. The videos can be found on our website (<https://connectedandengaged.fhi360.org/>) or on our YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/@FHI360_connectedandengaged).



POLICY BRIEFS: Throughout our interviews and visits to school districts, we discussed systemic limitations at district, state, and national levels that impede FCC efforts. For example, practitioners referenced how inequitable and inadequate funding and teacher shortages make it hard to find the time and resources for FCC. We heard from district staff who strive to foster FCC but struggle to put the available research into practice. Family advocates told us about the disconnects between families and the governing bodies who set education policy and laws. We also heard from families and students whose experiences with schools suffered because there were so few teachers of color who could connect with shared experiences. To help policymakers and education leaders become better prepared to address these policy challenges, we produced a set of policy briefs that provide evidence and actionable recommendations around four key areas that influence FCC: equitable education funding, a strong educator workforce, bridges between research and practice, and school governance. A copy of the policy briefs appears in the appendices.





METHODS

This research prioritized family and community members' voices in highlighting strategies for districts and instructional leaders. To achieve this goal, we used existing literature, interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies to explore effective engagement strategies, identify districts with exemplary practices, and determine which types of decisions benefit from engagement. Additionally, we established an advisory board composed of national experts to provide feedback and guidance throughout the process.

Research Methods: A Multi-phased Iterative Approach

From the outset, we wanted to ensure that our study was grounded in voices from the field. We began with a landscape analysis to identify frameworks, tools, resources, and research to understand existing best practices, remaining gaps, and current challenges in the family engagement space. After conducting a comprehensive scan of existing research and resources on FCC, we organized key findings into a few easy-to-understand categories that drove the development of interview questions. During key interview and community conversations, we asked practitioners, researchers, content experts, district personnel, and caregivers to provide their insights into how FCC was implemented, the challenges and obstacles faced during implementation, and potential solutions or strategies to overcome these barriers.

Insights from key interviews and community conversations allowed us to refine our landscape findings and identify four key opportunities for strengthening district-level FCC. We then identified district bright spots that exemplified one or more of these

opportunities to gather real-world stories and perspectives on the strategies and approaches districts took to achieve specific goals. In addition, we relied on an advisory board of national experts, researchers, educators, and community members to provide a critical lens throughout our multi-phased study approach. Though quarterly meetings and specific requests, our advisory board provided feedback, direction, and unique perspectives to ground our work. Each methodology provided new insights and directions for research and built upon learning from the previous phase. The following section provides additional detail on each phase of our study.

A MULTI-PHASED APPROACH



PHASE 1: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

We reviewed 132 resources, including a mix of theoretical frameworks, academic articles, community-based organizational models, national associations, and technology-based tools. The goal of this landscape analysis was to identify FCC practices aligned with relevant issues, such as racial equity and social justice, student voice, district and community capacity, and collaboration. To gather information for analysis, multiple readers extracted pertinent details from each article by summarizing and copying relevant content into an Excel spreadsheet. This information consisted of bibliographic information such as authors, year, abstract, publication type, key terms; intended audience (e.g., district leaders, community organizations); frameworks and methods used; stated FCC challenges; and strategies for overcoming them.

PHASE 2: INTERVIEWS WITH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THOUGHT LEADERS

We interviewed educators (2), FCC practitioners (9), and researchers (4) who were identified from the landscape review or recommended by our advisory board. To tailor the interview protocols for each participant group, we referred to findings from our literature review in Phase 1. Interviews lasted about an hour, and transcripts were uploaded for cleaning and coding. Participants received \$75 for their time. We analyzed interview data using multiple coding steps that included discussing the coding procedure among the research team, developing initial codes from the data, and then coding each transcript by two reviewers to determine reliability and trustworthiness in the findings.



PHASE 3: COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

The research team used ResultsLab’s Community Insights Network of caregivers and K-12 practitioners to recruit 25 principals and teachers and nine caregivers who could speak to challenges and solutions for FCC, particularly individuals who could speak to challenges faced by marginalized groups. We conducted 10 focus groups to ask questions about recent challenges districts faced in collaborating with families, useful partnerships with CBOs, and other open-ended prompts to encourage participants to share their personal experiences. Each focus group lasted about an hour, and participants were compensated \$75 each for their time. The team used the same coding procedures utilized in Phase 2.

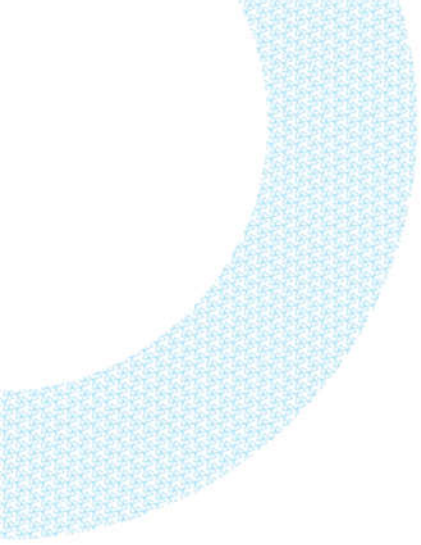
PHASE 4: DISTRICT BRIGHT SPOTS

To identify districts engaged in authentic FCC, we put out a national call for recommendations. We used a brief online survey to collect detailed information about the recommended districts’ strengths, strategies for FCC, and community partners. After reviewing all the recommended districts, we conducted screening calls with districts that met initial criteria. Ultimately, we identified three districts to profile that demonstrated exemplary practices and varied in size, geography, populations served, and FCC stories.

For each identified district, we conducted on-site interviews with district and school administrators, teachers, family members, students, and staff from CBOs to gather information about how districts achieve FCC goals. After analyzing participants’ insights, we identified successes districts experienced, challenges they overcame to achieve those successes, and key strategies that ultimately helped them achieve their outcomes.

Limitations

While this research provides valuable insights to support FCC at the district level, it is important to acknowledge potential study limitations. This study focused specifically on the U.S. K-12 public education system, but more research is needed on the larger global context as well as on early childhood and private school systems. Additionally, while the participants from phases 2-4 were from a variety of backgrounds, districts, and locations, the sample is not nationally representative, nor does it reflect a complete understanding of FCC.



STRENGTHENING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FCC

“Systems are really not designed for family-community engagement, because ... people haven’t seen what it really looks like when it’s really strong practice. Really strong practice tends to happen in small, isolated pockets and, because people haven’t seen what it looks like, people haven’t been trained on how to do this work.”

— Researcher

Many district leaders have a vision of what FCC could look like and a desire to get there, but they struggle to authentically partner with families and CBOs in ways that foster connected and engaged communities.

After reviewing the literature on family engagement and talking with district staff, parents, and community members, we identified four key opportunities where districts can engage to strengthen FCC practices. These opportunities are evident across many implementation frameworks and research models. Throughout this section, we have included quotes from study participants and a series of checklists that highlight key strategies within each opportunity.

FOUR KEY OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE FCC

Four Key Opportunities to Improve Family & Community Collaboration	
 <p>Fostering Collaborative Decision-Making</p> <p>Districts, families, and community organizations must create a common vision and make shared decisions around topics that matter to children’s learning and wellbeing. Districts often struggle to share power.</p>	 <p>Building Trust</p> <p>Developing shared trust and respect is critical to creating an environment that nurtures and supports authentic collaboration. Many districts struggle to find the time and space to build trust with families, students, and community groups.</p>
 <p>Strengthening Commitment and Values</p> <p>Collaboration must be prioritized and championed by district leaders and embedded throughout district policies and practice. All levels of district staff must value family and community voices and elevate diverse perspectives.</p>	 <p>Developing Capacity and Infrastructure</p> <p>Districts must provide the funding, staff time, and resources needed to support long-lasting engagement efforts. This is often not easy given competing priorities and capacity shortages.</p>

To seize these opportunities, districts must understand how to collaborate in equitable, meaningful, and sustainable ways — especially with their most marginalized families. Throughout the sections of this guide, we offer strategies to foster authentic FCC based on our interviews with practitioners, focus groups with families, and review of published resources.



“[COVID] really exposed the fact that we do not have a shared vision in our community. So how could we possibly, as a community, support the schools in the right way, when we can’t even come together as a community and agree on what is best for the kids?”

— Parent

Fostering Collaborative Decision-Making

Families, communities, and districts are united in their interest in improving student outcomes. An essential element of this work is collaborative decision-making, an ongoing process built by and for families, students, communities, and districts.

Collaborative decision-making goes beyond traditional one-way feedback loops, in which districts do the thinking and planning and share with parent leaders for surface level feedback. Instead, true collaboration requires districts to ensure that family and community voices are not only heard but are also reflected in decisions that impact their children. At the same time, families and communities must also have opportunities to confirm that districts’ decisions reflect and honor their perspectives.

BARRIERS TO FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING

Creating the opportunities and processes to support collaborative decision-making is challenging for many districts. District leaders may not be accustomed to sharing power with families and community groups, and families and communities may lack key information and opportunities to actively engage.

FCC CHECKLIST

My district does the following to foster collaborative decision-making:

- ✓ Sets regular meetings with families, community members, and organizations to create and implement a shared vision and mission.
- ✓ Collaborates with all groups in strategic planning.
- ✓ Ensures all groups are represented on district committees.
- ✓ Integrates multiple voices in key decisions (e.g., hiring practices, safety and security, transportation).
- ✓ Co-analyzes student data with groups and brainstorm solutions.

“To elevate those marginalized voices – at times I don’t feel like school districts are doing a very good job of that and partially it’s because of a lack of trust from those marginalized voices. ... They need to see how much you care.”

— Practitioner

Districts often monopolize decision-making processes and fail to seek or value the perspectives, needs, or collaboration of families and communities. Strategic plans are often developed without incorporating the views of families and communities, creating obstacles for those who wish to participate in decision-making and advocate for new directions. Respondents also reported disagreements between districts, families, and community members regarding FCC goals, further hindering district decisions from respecting all community needs. Participants called for districts to foster ongoing communication between families and community groups to establish strategies and compromises that address family and community needs.

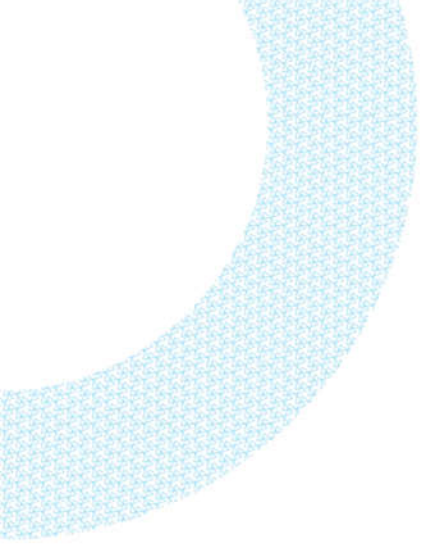
Here are some common barriers to collaborative decision-making:

- District leaders do not have experience or training in best practices for engaging with families and communities.
- Districts are unwilling or hesitant to share power.
- Families and communities do not believe that districts value their input and do not trust districts to include them in decisions.
- There are no accountability mechanisms in place to ensure that decisions reflect family and community needs and desires.

WHAT STRATEGIES CAN DISTRICTS USE TO FOSTER COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING?

Our research has found that there are key strategies districts can use to foster collaborative decision-making. Districts must commit the necessary time and resources to create opportunities for collaboration and honor the collective decisions made by coalitions of families, communities, and education leaders. Below we provide strategies with aligned resources to create the conditions necessary to support FCC and improve student outcomes.

- **Co-create goals:** When creating FCC goals, include multiple voices and perspectives to ensure all goals embrace the value that all people bring.
- **Require active family-community participation in all decision-making:** Districts must include families and communities in all processes, including writing district strategic plans, making policy choices (e.g., establishing youth advisory councils), planning events, and establishing funding priorities.
- **Appoint family-community representatives with voting power:** Include representatives from various groups (e.g., caregivers, community organizations) to serve on existing governing bodies and committees.
- **Communicate openly:** Use two-way, accessible, and ongoing communication with families to establish agreements and plans. Choose user-friendly communication methods and technology.
- **Collaboratively define and measure outcomes:** Work with families and communities to co-design the definitions of success and strategies for measuring progress along the way. Invite families and CBOs to not only interpret data but also design data collection instruments and plans.



FCC CHECKLIST

My district does the following to build trust:

- ✓ Cultivates and maintains strong relationships with families and community organizations.
- ✓ Creates a safe space for all voices to be heard on critical issues (e.g., discrimination, implicit bias, and microaggressions).
- ✓ Co-hosts community events (e.g., forums, multidirectional communication opportunities) with all groups.
- ✓ Intentionally seeks feedback from marginalized groups within the community (e.g., families who do not speak English or have low incomes).
- ✓ Learns the cultural nuances that foster healthy and respectful relationships (e.g., communication style or student-caregiver dynamics).

Building Trust

To support authentic FCC, districts must proactively build trust with families, students, and community groups. Specifically, families and communities must trust that their feedback and perspectives will be heard and used to inform decisions. Research has consistently shown that mutual trust and respect is a bedrock of FCC. Strong relationships are required for families and schools to collaborate openly and comfortably, implement strategies together, and sustain long-lasting initiatives. Moreover, given many underserved communities' hesitation or negative history with educational systems, districts must work to understand and address these reservations and experiences to rebuild trust.

BARRIERS TO BUILDING TRUST

One consistent barrier we encountered across research channels — from the literature to interviews with caregivers and district staff — was a lack of trust. There is an absence of trust on both sides: Families often do not trust school districts, and district staff do not trust families. This lack of trust prevents the development of strong relationships between caregivers and educators, which can impair student outcomes.

Families and district staff confront a range of obstacles to building trust. For example, school districts may not be familiar with the cultural identities and norms of their families, which could lead to misinterpreting interactions and behaviors. When missteps happen, districts and families must work toward a mutual understanding of what is best for the students.

When districts do not create a sense of inclusion and belonging, families have a hard time trusting the district. In practice, these barriers include:

- Families do not feel welcome at schools.
- Families do not believe their opinions are valued.
- Districts use engagement strategies that work for some families but exclude marginalized groups (such as those who do not speak English, have low incomes, and have residential instability), which convey a message that they are not important.

Logistical obstacles can also get in the way of building trust. These barriers include:

- Districts struggle to accommodate families' schedules, making it difficult for some families to participate in FCC activities.
- Districts use communication strategies that are not preferred by many families, making it difficult for families to learn about opportunities for collaboration.
- Districts only offer one-way communication channels that prevent families from co-planning and offering meaningful input. This may leave them informed but not engaged or not seen as meaningful partners.

WHAT STRATEGIES CAN DISTRICTS USE TO BUILD TRUST?

Building trust and relationships with families and communities takes time, consistency, and dedication. District staff at all levels must commit to the long-term goal of building and maintaining strong relationships with all families, especially those who face the greatest barriers to participating in school activities.

- **Create open communication channels:** Make all communication multidirectional, ongoing, and responsive to families' preferred languages and methods. Be sure to follow up with families when they provide input or are awaiting an update or response.
- **Hire and retain representative staff:** Recruit and support leaders and educators from the community who share the identities and lived experiences of students and families served by the district. These hiring practices can help create a learning environment in which staff share similar perspectives and values as the families and students being served.
- **Prioritize marginalized groups:** Design specific FCC initiatives (e.g., communication channels, events, workgroups) that focus solely on marginalized families and students whose voices and perspectives are most often excluded (e.g., multilingual families). Co-design these initiatives with representatives from these groups and train all district staff on best practices.
- **Empower liaisons:** Collaborate with family advocates and leaders, as well as CBOs, who can build bridges and trust.
- **Allocate necessary time and resources:** Incorporate dedicated time in the contractual work week to allow teachers to build relationships with families rather than treating FCC as a supplemental activity. Compensate families who engage in collaborative work with stipends, food, or other incentives to show that their time and contributions are valued.

“Thinking about how to engage families in two-way communication in a partnership, where there's equal footing and you're coming in with the mindset that everyone is there to learn from one another, is instrumental.”

— Practitioner

- **Co-create activities:** Co-lead events with parent associations and CBOs and create ongoing opportunities for families and communities to interact with district staff.
- **Address mindsets:** Insist on strengths-based approaches to working with families. Facilitate trainings on self-awareness, implicit bias, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

FCC CHECKLIST

My district does the following to strengthen commitment and values:

- ✓ Celebrate diverse identities and ensure these backgrounds are reflected in the district staff.
- ✓ Reflect the multiple cultures and values of historically marginalized families and communities in the district's practices.
- ✓ Co-design district policies with all groups.
- ✓ Regularly meet with all groups to evaluate the progress and success of their collaborative efforts.
- ✓ Leverages strengths/assets of families and communities to support students' academic and social-emotional development.
- ✓ Leverages the assets of CBOs (e.g., expertise, existing relationships with families, event spaces) to support FCC.



Strengthening Commitment and Values

School district staff who demonstrate a meaningful commitment to authentic FCC are more likely to achieve meaningful family partnerships. Despite its importance, study participants noted that district leaders rarely champion or prioritize FCC and that it is not consistently integrated into district policies and practices. Leadership should make building relationships with families and community organizations — especially with districts' most marginalized groups — an ongoing priority.

All district staff must value FCC as a critical component of their mission as educators and buy in to district-wide goals to sustain FCC over time. According to the literature and our own research, families and districts can effectively work together to advance student outcomes only when this commitment is in place.

BARRIERS TO STRENGTHENING COMMITMENT AND VALUING COLLABORATION

Throughout our interviews, community stakeholders shared that district leaders rarely championed FCC or integrated FCC throughout district policies and practice. Districts often lack consistent and committed leadership and thus struggle to create long-lasting, sustainable FCC efforts. Barriers to committing to and valuing FCC include:

- District staff do not value family and community input because they do not believe families and communities have expertise to support student outcomes.
- District staff do not understand the importance of culturally responsive practices or know how to integrate these practices throughout the district.
- Engagement efforts are sporadic or short-term due to competing priorities or other constraints.

WHAT STRATEGIES CAN DISTRICTS USE TO DEMONSTRATE THEIR COMMITMENT TO AND VALUE OF FCC?

Through our work, we found evidence-based strategies that help district leadership send a message to families, community members, and external organizations that they care about and are willing to sustain this work long term. When the leadership focuses on establishing relationships and collaborative partnerships, the whole community can more effectively support district initiatives for student success.

“If they’re going to be intentional about it, it has to be from the top down, and when I say top down, you have to have leadership that talks the talk, walks the walk.”

— Practitioner

- **Address mindsets:** Insist that all district staff value families and community groups as experts and contributors to children’s learning.
- **Make FCC a high priority:** Integrate FCC as an essential and ongoing component of district actions, rather than treating it as an “add-on” or “extra.” Allocate the necessary leadership roles, time, and financial resources to manage and enact FCC initiatives.
- **Establish FCC standards:** Create district-wide FCC standards that reflect the district context and priorities. Train staff on these standards and hold everyone accountable for upholding them.
- **Make FCC “business as usual”:** Create a district-wide culture that emphasizes FCC as a part of everyone’s job and regular practice. This means district staff and educators should have FCC in their job descriptions and annual goals.
- **Demonstrate commitment in all actions:** Highlight the importance of multiple perspectives in all district-supported activities, including communication with community members, data collection, and hiring processes.

FCC CHECKLIST

My district does the following to develop capacity and infrastructure:

- ✓ Creates staff positions dedicated to lead FCC efforts in collaboration with families and community members.
- ✓ Facilitates training on school-family-community collaboration for staff at all levels.
- ✓ Facilitates training for families on how to understand their child's academic data and make informed decisions.
- ✓ Connects marginalized families and communities to resources they need.
- ✓ Allocates necessary funding to support collaborative initiatives with families and communities.
- ✓ Advocates for state or federal funding to sustain its family and community engagement efforts with all groups.



Developing Capacity and Infrastructure

Nurturing and sustaining FCC is possible only if a school district has both the capacity and the infrastructure to do so.

Capacity for FCC includes ensuring staff are given dedicated time; receive appropriate training; and have access to appropriate tools, resources, and guidelines. Building and sustaining this type of capacity require adequate funding and management.

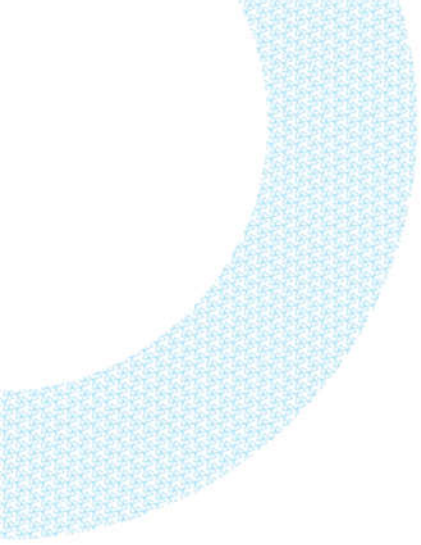
For family and community partnerships to outlast individual leaders and initiatives, a district also requires a well-developed infrastructure. This means that a district has the systems and policies in place to not only develop the capacity to achieve FCC but also sustain FCC efforts over time.

BARRIERS TO DEVELOPING CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Even when districts successfully launch a new FCC initiative, they often struggle to build the capacity, implement the structures, and secure the sustainable funding needed to support high-quality, long-term partnerships that lead to improved student outcomes.

Barriers to developing capacity and infrastructure include:

- Education leaders often lack a clear vision of what district infrastructure and staff capacity look like as they relate to partnering with families, especially those with higher needs (e.g., multilingual) and fewer resources (e.g., low incomes).
- District staff may not receive training and support in building family partnerships; thus, they lack the knowledge and skills to effectively plan and implement FCC. Professional development must be regular and ongoing, and champions and mentors are needed to support new staff in developing essential knowledge and skills.



- High staff turnover makes it difficult to ensure that all personnel are trained in FCC best practices.
- Families are not offered information or training to understand the role they can play in their child’s education. And when trainings are offered, they are provided only in English or at times and locations that are inconvenient for families with low incomes.
- Structural barriers such as funding shortages and competing priorities may get in the way of success, even when district leaders and educators are knowledgeable, motivated, and passionate about FCC.

WHAT STRATEGIES CAN DISTRICTS USE TO DEVELOP CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE?

Knowing authentic FCC requires investing funding and staff time, districts should leverage existing resources and strengthen partnerships to fill in gaps. To increase capacity, district administrators can coordinate with school board members, PTAs, and community groups to share resources, learn from one another, and collectively advocate for state and federal funding.

- **Invest in resources:** Include designated funding for staff training for FCC and ensure funding is sustainable year after year. Integrating FCC into strategic planning goals can help ensure investments are ongoing and tied to long-term goals.
- **Establish leadership:** Appoint district staff to lead family collaboration efforts. Embedding FCC tasks into funded, district-level positions can elevate FCC as a priority and increase district capacity to strengthen partnerships, offer more services, and collaborate with families.
- **Build partnerships:** Create relationships with CBOs to increase the district’s capacity to support families. For example, if districts lack resources to offer the services families need, district staff can coordinate with CBOs to provide necessary wraparound services (e.g., transportation, health, nutrition).
- **Plan professional development:** Reserve time and resources for professional development focused on FCC to ensure staff at all levels know how to integrate best practices into their work.
- **Nurture family leadership development:** Create leadership opportunities for families and support their development to ensure engagement is long-lasting.
- **Take a holistic and integrated approach to FCC:** Take advantage of existing district infrastructure to expand FCC capacity. For example, embed FCC in existing governing bodies (e.g., task forces) and events (sports games, theater productions, grade-level transition meetings/programs).

“I think for professional development for teachers or even administrators, one of the main things would be time – time to train, time to have that professional development so that we are better at creating those relationships. ... I believe that professional development sometimes is not really as thought out as it could be.”

— Teacher



MOVING FORWARD

Decades of research demonstrate the importance of FCC and strategies to achieve it, yet districts still need more support and resources to implement best practices. The following three recommendations encompass our findings from across our four study phases.

FCC research must engage diverse perspectives

We interviewed researchers and subject matter experts; held focus groups with caregivers, teachers, and principals; and conducted site visits in three school districts to gather a wide range of perspectives on FCC. These multiple perspectives were necessary to ensure our findings featured as many voices — audiences as possible. Future research should use participatory research methods, mixed-methods research approaches, and diverse dissemination strategies that reach practitioners' current challenges and needs.

Research must inform practitioner-friendly tools and resources

To bridge the gap between FCC research and practice, researchers must collaborate with practitioners to design materials that meet their needs. We aimed to contribute to this effort through creating a set of briefs, profiles, videos, and a library of essential resources on the Connected & Engaged website. Future FCC research should continue to frame findings and recommendations in ways that support educators and caregivers.

District leaders must advocate for education policies that support FCC

Structural issues related to education funding, teacher shortages, research, and governance make it more challenging — sometimes impossible — for districts to achieve FCC. To push for solutions to these challenges, districts must collaborate with state and local policymakers to design new policies that address the systemic barriers that prevent authentic FCC.

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APPENDIX: DISTRICT PROFILES

- **CLEVELAND HEIGHTS-UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT**
- **MORENO VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**
- **TUSCALOOSA CITY SCHOOLS**

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.





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.”

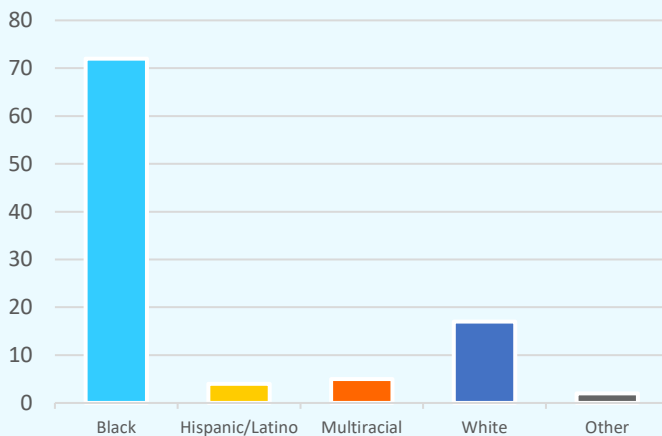
– Heights superintendent

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.

Suggested citation:

Renbarger, R. & Rodler, L. (2023). *Cleveland Heights—University Heights City School District*. FHI 360.
<https://connectedandengaged.fhi360.org/collaboration-in-action/cleveland-heights-university-heights-district-profile/>



Family and Community Collaboration in Practice: **Moreno Valley Unified School District**

Research demonstrates the importance of family and community collaboration (FCC), yet for many school districts, things can get in the way of realizing it. This profile describes Moreno Valley Unified School District's (MVUSD) innovative and successful approaches to overcoming challenges to FCC, specifically as it relates to building trust with families and creating staff capacity to maintain strong relationships. To achieve FCC, MVUSD used a few key strategies:

Sustaining ongoing, two-way communication opportunities

Communication is critical to building trust, fostering engagement, and facilitating collaborative decision-making. MVUSD staff consistently message the district-wide vision and goals for FCC in a way that is inclusive and fosters buy-in. To build trust, staff form relationships with families and learn about their perspectives through recurring meetings, emails, and community events. Communication is ongoing, multi-directional, and accessible to all families.

Providing services directly and through sustained partnerships

When serving families who need basic services such as food, housing, and health care, it can be challenging to find the resources to meet all needs. As part of their approach, MVUSD operates a Community Wellness Center, a one-stop shop for food, clothing, housing, mental health resources, and more. MVUSD also hosts events with community partners and service providers to meet urgent health and material needs.

Building capacity of parents, students, and district staff

Families and staff need support and training to fully collaborate in district decision-making. MVUSD facilitates multiple task forces and committees to ensure they are engaging specific communities, including African Americans, English Learners (Emergent Bilinguals), and students. These structures develop participants' knowledge and skills related to district processes and give them opportunities to collaborate with the district. MVUSD also employs a part-time grant writer to find additional resources to support innovation and FCC services.

Demonstrating care through building relationships and recognition

District leaders show they value students, families, and partners by attending community and school events, responding promptly to concerns, and regularly celebrating all groups' achievements and progress through awards and verbal recognition. Staff know their families personally, and families feel deeply connected to staff.





Photo courtesy of Moreno Valley Unified School District

INTRODUCTION

Moreno Valley Unified School District (MVUSD) sits within the “Inland Empire” of Southern California — about 60 miles east of Los Angeles in a predominantly Hispanic community. MVUSD has committed to build staff capacity to strengthen relationships with families. Their efforts support district-wide family and community collaboration (FCC). As a result of staff engaging in strategic two-way communication, meeting families’ basic needs, and strengthening partnerships with community groups, more families and students now feel valued and supported.

As a California school district, MVUSD is required to create a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). The LCAP details every district’s goals for student achievement, funding, and family engagement initiatives. The LCAP is an important component of MVUSD’s largest funding source, the Local Control Funding Formula (about \$104 million in 2023). Among other things, this money is used to support family engagement by financing staff, professional development, and events.

District details

Moreno Valley Unified School District (MVUSD) is a large school district serving the predominantly Hispanic suburban community near Riverside, CA. As of 2021, there were more than 190,000 residents in Moreno Valley. Approximately 14 percent of residents live below the poverty level and 78 percent of students enrolled in MVUSD qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch. MVUSD is supported by nearly 4,000 permanent employees, 1,000 substitutes, and dozens of community partners in California’s “Inland Empire,” a region of expansive cities and towns east of Los Angeles. Large local industries include agriculture, distribution centers, and manufacturing. The community also has a sizable military population due to the March Air Reserve Base.

MVUSD ramped up its collaborative decision-making process in 2019 in creating their most recent strategic plan. Highlights of the 2021-2016 strategic plan include:

- **Vision:** To empower students to become future-ready and positively impact the world.
- **Mission:** We will provide an equitable education for all students to be prepared for college and/or a viable career path.
- **Portrait of a Graduate:** MVUSD’s vision for the 21st century skills, character traits, and/or social-emotional competencies that students need to succeed in college, career, and live. The six competencies include: adaptability, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and perseverance.

The district goals to ensure the vision and mission are met include:

- Promote academic growth for every student.
- Establish college and career readiness for every student.
- Ensure equitable opportunities for every student.
- Provide a safe, welcoming, respectful, and rigorous learning environment for every member of the school community.
- Support effective communication throughout the district.

Districts are required to ask for family and student feedback as part of the LCAP development process, but MVUSD goes beyond most districts' interpretation of this requirement. MVUSD holds ongoing student and parent advisory committees in which students and caregivers are trained on the process and offered meaningful, repeated opportunities to provide feedback directly to the Superintendent.

With the investment from the federal and state funding streams, FCC duties are led and guided by the superintendent. Many additional district leaders also have FCC responsibilities, including the chief academic officer and directors of communications; wellness, mental health, and community outreach; student services; equity and access; and English Learners. As an extension of the superintendent's office, the district hires parent volunteers to serve as parent ambassadors at each school site to connect with families. The district also has two social workers at each school, 25 mental health therapists, and two parent engagement specialists. These staff members, along with all participants of student and family committees, receive professional development at the district and state level that is encouraged and funded by the district.

“We’re going to invest as much time and resources as we can because, in the end, it’s for our students. We care about our students, and we want to make sure that they have resources and tools available to them.”

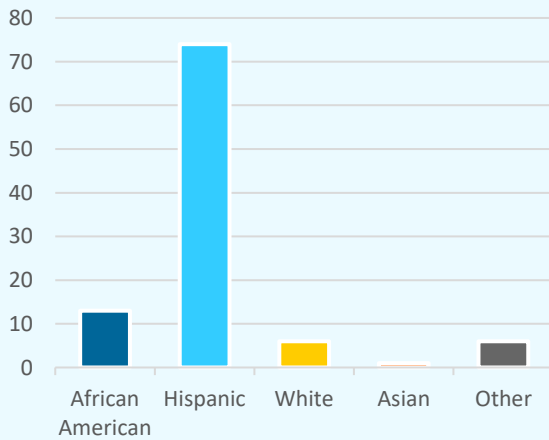
– MVUSD Community Wellness Center staff

District characteristics (2021-2022)

31,600
Students

40
Schools

Percentage of students by race/ethnicity



20%

English Learners



78%

Free and Reduced Lunch



14%

Students with a disability



100%

Title I eligibility



91%

Graduation rate

Sustaining ongoing, two-way communication opportunities

Like many districts, MVUSD has experienced challenges in its community. In ways that can inspire other districts, MVUSD has turned these challenges into opportunities to innovate, reform, and improve FCC practices.

For example, amid concerns in the community about bullying and anti-bullying efforts during the 2019-2020 school year, MVUSD created a kindness campaign called HeartsYOUUnited. The campaign’s goals included inspiring youth to stand up and speak out against bullying and violence, increasing awareness of available support programs and services, and fostering a safe learning environment in collaboration with staff and caregivers. MVUSD **clearly communicated these goals** to students and the community through district-wide emails, phone calls, and announcements, while also opening communication channels on the district website to hear directly from students and families. MVUSD also created a group of clergy members and other community leaders to support the initiative and provide supportive services.

As part of the HeartsYOUUnited campaign, MVUSD created special business cards for every student, teacher, administrator, and district staff member. The cards included a QR code that anyone could scan to access an online form to report instances of bullying. The form was made available on all school and district websites, as well as added as a shortcut on students’ laptops. Staff were asked to keep the link and card readily available to support students who want to report a bullying incident; this served as a way to immediately create a record and take necessary action.

These multi-directional and district-wide communication practices became permanent in MVUSD and provided a helpful communication infrastructure when the COVID-19 pandemic started. MVUSD was affected by COVID-19 earlier than other districts because the first group of travelers who were possibly affected were transported to the local military base. MVUSD worked with other districts and the local health department to share daily updates with the community. The superintendent sent **voicemails** to every student, staff, and family member along with **email updates** containing more information for their specific situation. District staff also coordinated consistent messaging by sending principals previews of the information families would receive, along with a list of resources to help principals answer questions that families might have.



TO REPORT **BULLYING** YOU CAN:

- Call 951-571-7630
- Visit bit.ly/mvusdbullying
- Scan the QR code below

STAND UP AGAINST BULLYING

IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING.

Be an **UPSTANDER**, not a bystander!




SCAN ME

MORENO VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
EXCELLENCE ON PURPOSE
WARRIOR DESIGNER



HOW TO BE AN UPSTANDER



- *If I see something, I will say something.*
- *I will be kind to others.*
- *I will be an **UPSTANDER**, not a bystander.*
- *I will stand up for what is right.*
- *I will respect my classmates, teachers, school community, and myself.*

MVUSD provided business cards to all students and staff to support the HeartsYOUUnited initiative and provide a QR code for reporting instances of bullying.

Even when regular COVID updates were no longer needed, the district continued **weekly calls and newsletters from the superintendent**. The district office formally and informally obtained feedback on the weekly calls, newsletters, and texts, and learned that respondents appreciated being informed. Calls from the superintendent were a particular favorite. Multiple community members and staff said the calls, which included anecdotes and details about the superintendent's family and life, made community members feel as if they know him and can approach him.

All forms of communication incorporate aspects of the strategic plan in what the superintendent calls "**agenda linking**." For example, when a student voiced concerns about the quality of the cafeteria food during a board meeting, the superintendent encouraged the student to work with the food services director because the issue related to the district goal of supporting a safe and respectful learning environment.

Each meeting on existing and potentially new initiatives starts with a reminder of district goals and commitments. These reminders ensure that all aspects of the district work together to improve on their established path.

"Text doesn't convey tone or your feelings ... so even when people are mad at me, they're not as mad at me because they know I care about them, they care about me, and we care about the school district."

- MVUSD Superintendent

PROMISING PRACTICES: Communication

How other districts can *coordinate communication* in their own communities

- + Create a district-wide **communication calendar** and schedule so families know what messaging to expect, from whom, and when. For example: Principals email school communities on Mondays and the superintendent sends a community-wide voicemail and electronic newsletter on Fridays.
- + Appoint district-level staff to **promptly respond** to student and caregiver feedback. Whether via email, in-person meeting, school visit, or other means, district staff must demonstrate to all groups that feedback is heard and valued. Provide clear information about expected response times in handbooks and on communication platforms (e.g., automatic email replies, survey headers).
- + Use "**agenda linking**" and tie messaging to strategic goals in meetings and everyday communication. Reminding students, families, and staff about goals and progress can support a district-wide shared vision of success.

Providing services directly and through sustained partnerships

MVUSD has long recognized that for students to be successful in school, the district must address students' social, emotional, and physical well-being as much as their academic well-being. Before designing specific programs to support families, MVUSD began by working to understand families' needs. The district turned to one of its 11 commitments: *listen to understand*. This commitment asks MVUSD staff, students, and families to listen openly and practice empathy before trying to come up with a response. One initiative exemplifying this commitment is the Community Wellness Center, a one-stop shop for a range of supports. The Community Wellness Center staff act on the district-wide commitment to **identify students and family needs first** and provide supportive services in response.

To illustrate, MVUSD learned that many students frequently miss school because they lack basic necessities, including transportation, housing, clothes, and basic health care. The Community Wellness Center starts by creating a welcoming environment for students and families. All center staff emphasize to families that there is no shame in coming for resources. One wellness liaison said, "I can totally relate to what they're going through, and I share my story with them. I share that we are all in this together." **Using empathy** to understand the families' situations helps staff meet their specific needs.

The center also collects data and examines trends, particularly regarding students who are chronically absent. After identifying needs, the Center then creates the infrastructure needed to meet them. In many cases, MVUSD or its community partners already have the resources that families need the most, but families may not know about them or have easy access. To make sure everyone could get what they need, MVUSD **mapped the assets that existed in the community** and then created the relationships to bring vital services to MVUSD students and families.

As part of this work, MVUSD hosts an annual **Health and Resource Fair** to meet all back-to-school needs. Each year more than 2,000 families come to receive free immunizations, dental and physical checkups, backpacks, clothes, haircuts, and food to ensure all students are ready for their first day of school. The center works with its community partners to meet these immediate needs and share information with families about services they can turn to throughout the year.

"It really starts with having a relationship with your families, because they don't just come out and tell you [what they need]. Once you have that relationship and build that trust, you determine what's needed and then I channel my focus on getting those resources."

– MVUSD Community Wellness Center staff

Building capacity of parents, students, and district staff

All districts need resources to meet the needs of their students and families, including money, time, supplies, and people. MVUSD works to incorporate FCC through multiple positions at the district level, and they use innovative strategies to find more resources when needed. Using these resources, MVUSD builds staff knowledge and skills through creating family and student coalitions.

Grant-writing to fund innovation

MVUSD hired a part-time **grant-writing consultant** as a strategy to obtain more funding to meet district priorities. Specifically, the Superintendent uses the grant-writer to identify and secure funding that can spur innovation and creativity among staff, rather than only filling in gaps in existing services. In collaboration with the Superintendent's office and other interested district personnel, the grant writer finds federal, state, and local grant opportunities and leads the writing of each proposal. This grant writer, who primarily works remotely in another state, has won multiple million-dollar grants to support identified needs.

Students and caregivers as district leaders

As part of the LCAP process, all California school districts are required to listen to and incorporate student and caregiver voices into their planning process. To accomplish this task, MVUSD created **LCAP committees** that meet monthly, online and in person. These committees are facilitated by the superintendent, chief academic officer, and the director of equity and access.

In each LCAP meeting, district staff create a classroom-like environment to break down complex funding and legal requirements for caregiver and student audiences. For example, in the first student LCAP meeting

“If we look at just outcomes, we miss the heart of what we're doing here, and that is providing care for our families, human to human. Our district really looks beyond the numbers. We look at the stories.”

– MVUSD Community Wellness Center staff

PROMISING PRACTICES: Task forces and committees

How other districts can *build the capacity* of students, families, and teachers

- + Train **parent ambassadors** in district policies and collaborate with them to share messaging with other families. Example: Provide training to ambassadors about completing the FAFSA to answer questions and encourage completion in the spring.
- + Facilitate ongoing **committee meetings** to provide recurring opportunities for students, families, and teachers to share ideas and concerns. Monthly (virtual) meetings can include a reminder about district goals and regular feedback about those goals.

of 2023, district staff created a scavenger hunt to teach students about district goals. At each meeting, district staff review the goals and reinforce the point of the LCAP feedback process. These goals are put into student- and caregiver-friendly language, and staff provide analogies for these goals that relate to their lives (e.g., their goals for their tennis serve). Staff also update students and families on what MVUSD already provides regarding that goal. As one staff said during a meeting, “You can’t give us feedback on something that you don’t know anything about.” Students and families are asked for their thoughts about how well the district is meeting its goals and what suggestions they have for improvement. Meeting attendance and feedback are recorded and those who stay until the end get a chance to win a gift card for their time and contributions.

MVUSD also facilitates **leadership councils** for communities that experience barriers to participation. For example, when data confirmed that African American students had lower graduation rates than their peers, the district began **African American Parent Advisory Councils (AAPACs)**. AAPACs operated similarly to the **District English Learner Advisory Committees (DELACs)**, which are federally mandated and designed for multilingual families (primarily Spanish speakers). The AAPACs serve as a forum for caregivers, students, teachers, and administrators to share concerns and resources. As one parent described their AAPAC, “it’s like a collaborative platform for parents to be heard, for students to be heard, for teachers to share concerns.” Now, after 11 years of facilitating district- and school-level AAPACs, MVUSD has African American graduation rates higher than the state and national average.

Another capacity-building strategy that MVUSD uses to collaborate with families is its **Parent Ambassador Program**. Parent ambassadors are parents from each school site who act as “an extension of the Superintendent’s office.” Parent ambassadors dedicate 20 hours each month to serve as a bridge between staff and families through communicating district messages and resources to the families at their school. Parent ambassadors also support other caregivers in navigating the educational system, such as understanding the IEP process, finding tutoring for students, bringing families to district events, and connecting families facing housing insecurity to the Community Wellness Center. Parent ambassadors have monthly trainings to learn from district departments and local partners and then share that information with other families. At these meetings, ambassadors also provide feedback to the district about the needs that the community still has. Ambassadors receive a monthly stipend of \$500.

“It's really a two-way street. It is very inclusive and collaborative. It's not just an open-door policy, but we want to also enter their door and go into their realm so we can learn more about what they can offer to our community.”

– Moreno caregiver

Demonstrating care through building relationships and recognition

District staff make a concerted effort to show they care about each student and family. To demonstrate this care, district leaders frequent school hallways and classrooms, sporting events, and local activities. As a result, families and students described MVUSD staff as approachable and open to hearing all concerns. District staff also promise to **respond quickly** to feedback. For example, after a student shared concerns about a school’s lunch offerings at a 2023 board meeting, the Superintendent visited that school the next morning to learn more about that student’s concerns and promptly connected them with other district staff to discuss possible solutions.

Celebrations and personal recognition are other effective strategies that MVUSD uses to show they care about their students, families, and partners. These celebrations occur frequently and in multiple ways. For example, the superintendent’s office honors achievements through district-wide weekly voicemails and newsletters, during in-person ceremonial events, at school board meetings, and through a “Year in Review” book that highlights successes at every school. These achievements are often not “typical” achievements — rather, they are everyday examples of how students exemplify any of the six core competencies of the district’s Portrait of a Graduate (see page 2).

“We all matter. No matter your culture, no matter your race, there is a little bit of something for everyone. It's noticed and it's not watered down.”

– MVUSD caregiver

Showing care and consideration is also important for maintaining MVUSD’s **reciprocal relationships with community partners**. Leaders from local businesses, organizations, and faith groups mentioned how they appreciate that MVUSD returns the favor by attending their events, providing event space when possible, participating on leadership committees or event panels, recruiting students to engage in local youth initiatives, and recognizing partners through award ceremonies.

PROMISING PRACTICES: Recognition and reciprocity

How other districts can *nurture relationships among* students, families, and partners

- + Identify district-wide core values and design **frequent opportunities** to recognize students, families, and partners who illustrate these qualities. Examples include award ceremonies, community banquets, social media, and newsletters.
- + Offer **continued support** to community partners to express gratitude and show a commitment to reciprocity. Attend their events, share their flyers, and provide space, if necessary, to strengthen the partnership. It is important to be visible and valuable to partners.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

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

- **Sustaining ongoing, two-way communication opportunities**
Districts should build relationships to learn about students' and families' stories, create a response based on heard needs, and consistently reiterate the district's goals and mission through coordinated district- and school-level messaging platforms.
- **Providing services directly and through sustained partnerships**
Strategies for finding resources should begin with mapping community assets and building partnerships for funding, time, volunteers, and other support. Create physical places that welcome families, along with regular, robust ways for families to conveniently access those resources.
- **Building capacity of parents, students, and district staff**
Districts can build the capacity of students and families by including them in leadership and feedback committees. Ensure they receive acknowledgment and support, such as through stipends or professional development opportunities. Districts can also hire experts, such as grant writers, to help fund councils' ideas and fill funding and resource gaps.
- **Demonstrating care through building relationships and recognition**
District leaders can demonstrate authenticity by spending time in the community and on school campuses, talking with students and families, and building relationships beyond formal communication channels. Districts and schools should frequently honor the strengths that students, families, and community organizations add to the district through awards and other expressions of gratitude.

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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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.

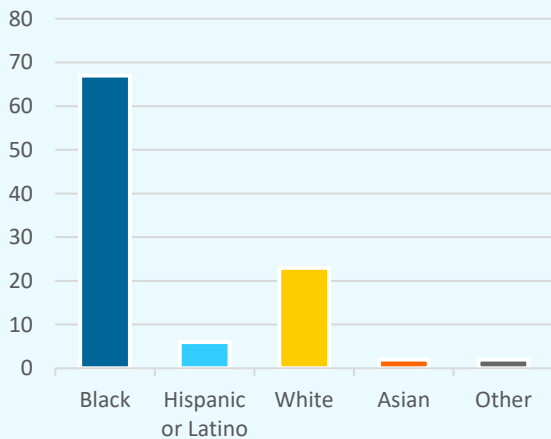
– Tuscaloosa superintendent

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.”

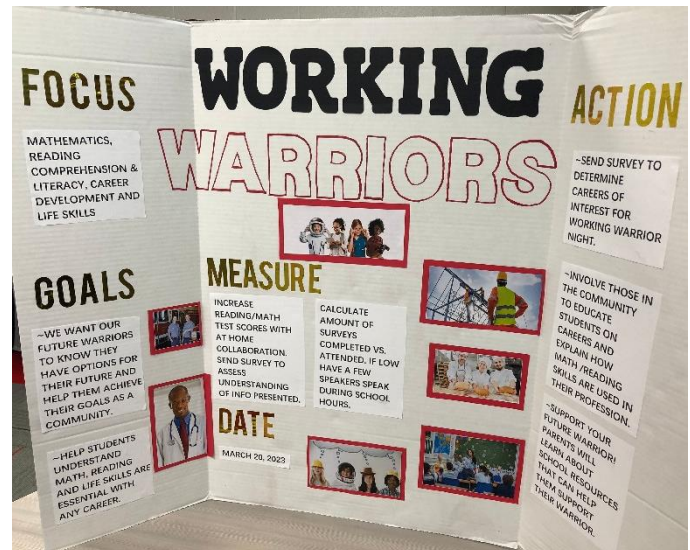
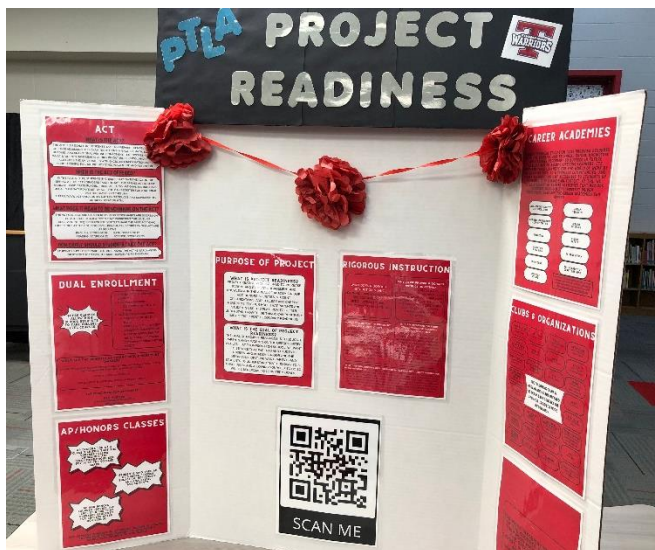
How PTLA is structured to support collaboration and learning

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

STAY CONNECTED

WE OFFER

- Reading ALLIES
- Parent Teacher Association
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters
- Boys II Men/L.A.D.I.E.S
- SOAR Reads
- 21st CCLC Afterschool and more...

VOLUNTEER NOW!

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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.

About FHI 360

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APPENDIX: STRATEGY SPOTLIGHTS

- **BUILD CONNECTION AND TRUST WITH LISTENING TOURS**
- **MEETING FAMILIES WHERE THEY ARE**
- **STRENGTHENING THE FEEDBACK LOOP**
- **INCLUDING STUDENT VOICE IN DISTRICT DECISION-MAKING**
- **WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE STUDENT ATTENDANCE**

Family and Community Collaboration Spotlight: Build Connection and Trust with Listening Tours

Key Strategies

Districts can build connection and trust with families and communities to support student outcomes by:

- **Conducting listening tours** to better understand the needs of families
- **Ensuring two-way communication** where caregivers can both speak and be heard
- **Valuing caregivers' time** by responding to feedback in a timely manner

To foster strong relationships and trust with families and communities, it is vital for school districts to create spaces for ongoing conversations and collaboration. One way to do this across the district is by implementing listening tours as part of a larger family and community collaboration strategy. A listening tour is a systemic planned approach to engaging families and community members in collaborative discussions that encourage them to share their needs, their viewpoints, their hopes, and their fears. When done authentically, multiple voices and lived experiences are valued.

Effective listening tours encourage ongoing two-way conversations and offer a space for raising concerns. They require districts to follow up with listening tour participants and make changes based on the information gathered. It's also essential that they include the voices of historically marginalized groups within the district's community.

»» Strategies in Action

Listening Tours in Action: Bronx Community School District

The Bronx Community School District 10, a district within the New York City Department of Education with around 50,000 students, has been effectively implementing listening tours for years. Conducted by District 10 staff, these listening tours are ongoing conversations with families that occur multiple times per month. For the tours to happen, the district explained that it is important to cultivate and sustain relationships with families, especially those from historically marginalized groups. The district also noted the importance of creating a space where caregivers always feel welcome, and their voice can be heard.



Ongoing conversations and a welcoming environment are not the only reasons District 10's listening tours are effective. Another essential ingredient is authentic collaboration with families. The district sees caregivers as the experts on their own children and values the insights they provide. The district ensures that families play a meaningful role in decision making so their insights and perspectives are used to address critical issues.

District 10 has made significant strides in its efforts to build trust and connect with families through listening tours and is a great example of how districts can authentically collaborate with families. By creating spaces for ongoing conversations, working with families and communities as partners, and fostering an environment of trust and collaboration, schools can better address the needs of their students and, ultimately, improve student outcomes.



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Family and Community Collaboration Spotlight: Meeting Families Where They Are

Key Strategies

Districts can meet families where they are and support student outcomes by:

- **Visiting families** in person or virtually
- **Proactively working with caregivers** to identify their student's needs and goals
- **Providing sufficient supports for teachers** by offering professional development, time, and resources for home visits

An essential element of authentic family and community collaboration is including all families in decision making and ensuring all voices are heard. This requires strategies for collaborating with families who have been historically excluded. One strategy is home visits. Visiting a family's home gives educators a unique opportunity to learn about the student's needs and goals and discuss the family's expectations. For home visits to take place and be effective, districts must provide educators with sufficient support, professional development, and time to conduct them. Many districts are finding that home visits are worth the planning and resources they require. By demonstrating how much educators respect and value family perspectives, home visits provide families an opportunity to take an active role in their children's education, leading to improved student outcomes.

Strategies in Action

District of Columbia Public Schools

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) uses this strategy, developed by the Flamboyant Foundation, across their diverse school district of about 50,000 students in the nation's capital. DCPS home visits take place both during the summer and during the school year. The district sends teams of two teachers to every student's home to get to know the family and child. The visits, which usually last around 30 minutes, encourage teachers and families to share information and provide them both with the opportunity to learn more about the student. Educators learn such things as the language families speak at home, family stories, and the student's access to books and other resources, while families learn about the school year's focus, key learning objectives, and ways they can help their child thrive.

"Teachers and families both share their hopes, dreams, and expectations for the student."

- DCPS.DC.gov

While emphasizing the importance of ongoing communication with families throughout the year (via phone calls, emails, and in-person conversations), DCPS has seen some successes using home visits. The district reported that home visits have increased trust between their schools and families, created enduring relationships between teachers and families, and reduced truancy rates. Research showed that the DCPS home visits also reduced the likelihood of a student having a disciplinary incident later in that school year (McKie et al. 2021). It is important to note that DCPS prioritized professional development and training on home visits for teachers and staff and provided sufficient time for teachers to conduct the visits.

COVID-19 forced DCPS to suspend in-person home visits and conduct them virtually instead. While adapting to the virtual format posed challenges, the district remained committed to maintaining strong connections with families. Teachers and staff continue to engage with families through video conferences and phone calls, offering support, resources, and updates on their students' progress. A virtual format like the one used by DCPS is a great alternative for districts that cover large areas or have limited budgets. By meeting families where they are — in person or virtually — districts can build stronger relationships and better understand the unique needs of their students.



Photo courtesy of [Upsplash](#)

About the Connected & Engaged Initiative

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.

Suggested citation:

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Family and Community Collaboration Spotlight: Strengthening the Feedback Loop

Key Strategies

Districts can strengthen the feedback loop with families and communities to support student outcomes by:

- **Valuing collaborative two-way communication**, where both the district staff and the family share the roles of speaker and listener
- **Obtaining ongoing feedback from families**, especially those from marginalized groups
- **Responding to feedback in a timely manner**, while the information is still relevant and actionable

Authentic family and community collaboration requires communication to be a two-way street. This means districts should work hard to reach all caregivers — especially those from marginalized backgrounds and those with different language needs — to ensure that decisions are centered on the voices, perspectives, and needs of all families. To do this successfully, school districts need systems for engaging and responding to families. One system is feedback loops. In a feedback loop, families provide regular feedback to districts, which then process the feedback and respond to the families.

For feedback loops to be effective, school districts should provide multiple, ongoing opportunities for caregivers to provide meaningful feedback throughout the year and for districts to respond in a timely manner. Having ongoing feedback loops that help caregivers feel heard fosters trust between families and districts and provides opportunities for authentic collaboration.



Strategies in Action

Feedback Loops in Action: Houston Independent School District

Houston Independent School District (ISD) is a large district in Houston, TX, with nearly 200,000 students. In 2023, Houston ISD began rolling out a strategic feedback loop using Possip, a tool that sends families multilingual surveys. Houston ISD then uses these surveys, which it calls “pulse checks,” to elicit feedback from their students’ families biweekly. Houston ISD also hired additional family and community engagement staff so their families could receive individual follow-up.

By implementing pulse checks, Houston ISD is working to ensure that family voices are heard and incorporated into the district’s decision-making. Houston ISD serves as an excellent example of how districts can elevate their feedback loops between districts and families. Implementing authentic improvements to feedback loops not only fosters trust and collaboration between families and the district but also leads to more targeted and responsive support for students. In turn, families feel empowered knowing that their feedback is valued and acted upon.



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Family and Community Collaboration Spotlight: Including Student Voice in District Decision-making

Key Strategies

Districts can engage students in decision-making by:

- **Involving students in strategic planning** to ensure their needs are reflected in district priorities and funding.
- **Forming student advisory committees** that provide ongoing opportunities for collaboration with district leaders.
- **Valuing student perspectives** alongside those of families, community members, and educators.

Student perspectives offer vital information school districts can use when designing strategic plans and strategies for engaging families and communities. Yet, incorporating student voice at the district level is not a common practice. Creating ongoing opportunities for students to partner with district leaders in important planning and strategy decisions is a key element of family and community collaboration (FCC). Students are members of every school community. If a district commits to including all voices in their community, youth voice can't be ignored. To ensure district decisions represent all community needs, district and school staff must be accountable to students.

While there are many ways to integrate youth voice and student perspectives, this strategy spotlight highlights two examples.

»» Strategies in Action

Involving students in strategic planning: Moreno Valley Unified School District in southern California hosts a virtual meeting each month to *train students on the annual strategic planning process*. Though all districts in the state are required to create Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and collect family feedback, Moreno Valley goes the extra mile to teach students how the process works, ask for their ideas, and ensure their perspectives are represented. Moreno Valley also offers *paid internships* for students so they can learn about the district's inner workings, like nutritional services or the superintendent's office. These work-based learning experiences help youth build meaningful connections to the educational system and the people in it while at the same time helping them develop college and career skills that support future success.

"I wasn't used to interacting with like higher ups like that, but I've enjoyed it. It's taught me I have to make communications with other people. I have to establish connections."

- Student

Forming student advisory councils: Cleveland Heights-University Heights School District, located just outside Cleveland, OH, uses student advisory councils with the superintendent to *review specific policy issues*. The superintendent brings policy questions to a high school group that meets monthly and a middle school group that meets quarterly. Topics have included the dress code, cell phone policies, and school climate. According to the superintendent, student voice was critical to making sure the district's decisions reflected all groups' needs, saying, "I truly believe that students that are thoughtful and empowered within their school spaces make the spaces better, but also hold all the adults accountable."

Tuscaloosa City Schools in Alabama also instituted student advisory councils to ensure that students can inform and advise the district's top decision makers. Principals and teachers at each high school nominate about 15 students to serve on the council, which meets in person with the superintendent every quarter. Each meeting centers on a topic suggested by the superintendent and students in the council. Students also help administer *school-wide surveys* to gather ideas from the broader school community and discuss them with the superintendent. In 2022-23, topics included school safety, the dress code, and unity among the multiple high schools in the district. Student suggestions informed revisions to the dress code, as students shared that the previous dress code disproportionately targeted female students.

Elevating student voice strengthens planning and decision-making and is an important step for any district's journey in creating productive and welcoming learning environments. District and school staff can borrow and adapt these strategies to ensure student voice informs policy and planning decisions, and to promote collaboration and trust between all members of school communities.



"[School staff] could be just walking around with the students, but if you're not actually listening to what they have to say, I feel that level of trust sort of deteriorates."

- Student

About the Connected & Engaged Initiative

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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Family and Community Collaboration Spotlight: Working Together to Improve Student Attendance

Key Strategies

Districts can collaborate with families and communities to support student attendance by:

- **Collaborating with families** to identify barriers to attendance.
- **Building partnerships with community groups** to address barriers to school attendance, like students' transportation and housing.
- Using student attendance interventions as opportunities for **wholistic assessments and service referrals**.

Being present most days that school is in session is critical to positive student outcomes and academic success, yet chronic absenteeism is a challenge in many schools. Districts across the country have attendance intervention processes in place to address this challenge. Districts can use these interventions as opportunities for increased family and community collaboration (FCC) and address the root causes of absenteeism. Asking families what they need, incorporating their perspectives, and providing additional resources allows for schools, districts, families, and communities to work together to create and support an attendance plan for each student.



Strategies in Action

East Side Union High School District's Student Attendance Review Board

An example of a supportive attendance process can be seen in East Side Union High School District (East Side), a district in San Jose, CA, with a population of over 20,000 students. This district has a holistic, family-focused Student Attendance Review Board made up of faculty, caregivers, and community partners. The goal of East Side's Student Attendance Review Board is to support students and families struggling with chronic absenteeism and truancy.

One strategy the SARB uses is to host a ***district-wide, all-day partner fair***, where students who are chronically absent, truant or at risk for truancy, their caregivers, and district staff have the chance to connect with community-based partners that can directly meet their needs. For example, community partners may help families find appropriate ***after-school programs, housing, or transportation*** to support their student’s attendance and academic success.

East Side’s intervention serves as a fantastic model for other districts to replicate and expound on. By recognizing that there are many root causes behind poor attendance, and by striving to implement a proactive, assets-based collaborative strategy, districts can effectively remove barriers to attending school and help ensure that every student can reach their full potential.



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APPENDIX: POLICY BRIEFS

- **STRENGTHENING THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE**
- **EQUITABLY FUNDING EDUCATION**
- **IMPROVING EDUCATION GOVERNANCE**
- **PUTTING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE**

Systemic Supports for Family and Community Collaboration: Strengthening the Educator Workforce

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For family and community collaboration (FCC) to be successful, teachers must be trained and supported to develop strong relationships with families. However, school districts have faced major challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff for years — especially since the COVID-19 pandemic began.¹ Low wages, poor working conditions, challenging school climates, and a lack of advancement opportunities discourage people from entering the teaching profession.^{2, 3, 4} These same factors are also causing current teachers to leave the field, perpetuating and worsening the teacher shortage.^{5, 6, 7}

Creating an educational workforce prepared to engage in authentic FCC requires investing in future and current teachers' physical, mental, and financial well-being. When properly supported, these professionals can fully collaborate with families and community organizations to meet the needs of all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these teacher recruitment and retention challenges, we recommend that state and local education agencies embrace reforms including:

- **Support early-career teachers through pre-service compensation.** Just as in other professions, teachers should be paid throughout the final phases of higher education and certification, as they gain foundational knowledge in FCC. Pre-service compensation could have the dual effect of making the field more attractive to new teachers and reflecting respect for all educators.
- **Strengthen loan forgiveness programs to expand and diversify the pool of incoming teachers.** Offsetting the high costs of entering the teaching field can incentivize more college students to consider the profession, expanding the pool of teachers to engage with families.
- **Align federal and state policies to improve teacher salaries and benefits.** Fair wages and benefits provide economic incentives for educators to join and remain in the field to build long-term relationships with families.
- **Improve working conditions and protect teachers' time for FCC.** Creating a healthy work environment can make schools more attractive to new teachers, support experienced teachers' mental health, and foster supportive conditions for FCC.

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

Teachers are vital to family and community collaboration (FCC) since they have the most frequent contact with families, are responsible for building trust, and co-plan with families about student learning and goals.⁸ Though school districts rely on them to conduct FCC activities, there are not enough teachers. The United States is facing a teacher shortage crisis.

Schools are also experiencing high turnover rates, which have reduced the number of experienced educators in classrooms who understand and use FCC best practices. High turnover prevents long-term, ongoing relationships from forming among school staff, families, and communities. With fewer staff in schools, the teachers and principals who remain are stretched thin across administrative and managerial tasks, leaving little to no time for family outreach and participation in collaborative decision-making.

Given the magnitude and pervasiveness of these challenges, major policy changes are needed to strengthen the educator workforce and create a landscape that supports FCC.

Current Challenges to a Strong Teacher Workforce

Understanding the challenges that K-12 education systems face in supporting a strong teacher workforce is critical to designing strategies to overcome them. Due to a variety of market conditions and state policies, school districts face major challenges to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and other critical staff. The resulting shortages and high turnover make it even more challenging for districts to build and maintain strong partnerships with families.

Negative perceptions and shortages discourage potential educators from entering the field

Without teachers in all classrooms to support student learning, communicate about students' growth, and work with caregivers to improve student outcomes, districts cannot effectively engage in FCC. However, recruiting qualified teachers and district staff was a challenge before the pandemic and remains a growing issue in providing students with a quality learning environment.^{9, 10}

As of late 2022, there were at least 36,000 open teaching positions across the United States, with over 163,000 more positions being filled by substitute teachers or by people who are not certified to teach.¹¹ Without qualified educators in classrooms, students do not receive adequate instruction and families lose a necessary partner in supporting student learning.

“I have never seen [teacher turnover] this bad. Right now, it’s number one on the list of issues that are concerning school districts.”⁷⁵

— Dan Domenech,
executive director of
the School
Superintendents
Association

This educator shortage is even worse when considering teachers of color (TOCs) [see Boxes: Barriers to recruiting (p. 3) and retaining (p. 4) teachers of color]. Even though students of color make up approximately half of the students in public schools, TOCs make up less than 20 percent of the educator workforce.¹² Recruiting educators who share the same experiences and identities as the communities they serve is important to nurturing FCC.¹³ Shortages of teachers from specific identity groups puts students and families from marginalized populations at a further disadvantage by having fewer liaisons who understand their background and experience.

The negative perception of the teaching profession is partly to blame for the educator shortage. Many people do not consider becoming a teacher because they recognize that teachers are not appreciated by the public or well compensated; sometimes family and friends actively dissuade them from becoming a teacher. Through reviewing research on the educator shortage, examining national data on the prevalence of the shortage, and conducting focus groups, the Government Accountability Office found that people often do not want to become teachers due to the high cost of becoming an educator.¹⁴ Not only do those interested in teaching need to obtain a bachelor's degree, but they must also take multiple certification exams, pay licensing fees, and complete an unpaid internship.¹⁵ States also differ on what exams and licenses are required for becoming a teacher, making it difficult to navigate the national teaching market. These barriers to teaching keep from the profession interested people who could support students' growth in partnership with families.

A shortage of qualified educators also perpetuates negative perceptions about teaching, thereby making the shortage even worse. As long as the educator shortage remains, districts experience conditions in which teachers are over-stretched with limited ability to engage with families.¹⁶ Without reliable coverage, in which all classrooms are consistently staffed with teachers, districts do not have the capacity to communicate or collaborate with students and families.

Education systems fail to offer fair compensation and benefits.

Compensation has been a longstanding issue for recruiting and retaining teachers, as teachers have lower wages and total compensation than most of their college-educated peers.¹⁷ Nationally, teacher compensation has remained relatively flat since 1996, increasing what experts call the “teacher pay penalty” — the financial hit that teachers take for being in the profession.¹⁸ On average, teachers are paid less now than they were a decade ago, after adjusting for inflation.¹⁹ States and districts vary in their ability

Barriers to recruiting teachers of color

Legacies of racist policies have pushed teachers of color (TOCs) out of the educator workforce and continue to impact the recruitment and retention of TOCs.

Challenges for recruitment include:

- Requiring high-stakes professional exams that regularly change requirements, have high fees, and do not align with TOCs' culturally relevant and social justice pedagogies acts as a major gatekeeper to TOCs.⁷⁶
- The faculty of colleges of education remain predominantly white and female, supporting limited ideas about who can be an educator, perpetuating racist practices, and discouraging TOCs from seeing education as a field for them.
- TOCs are more likely to face racial discrimination and bias in the hiring processes even when they have similar or more advanced qualifications than their white counterparts.⁷⁷

See page 4 for retention challenges.

to compensate teachers, with districts that pay lower teacher salaries facing increased difficulty keeping teachers or enticing former teachers to return to the classroom.^{20, 21}

This low level of compensation means that a mid-career teacher in a family of four would qualify for at least two forms of government benefits in over half the states.²² To make up for the low pay, almost 60 percent of teachers take on additional paid work.²³ This additional work can prevent teachers from recovering from the stress of their normal positions, particularly as most of this work is outside of the school system and not related to their extracurricular or professional development activities.²⁴ Because so much of communicating and engaging with families happens outside of normal class hours, additional jobs reduce the capacity and energy that teachers have to dedicate to FCC.

Financial concerns may be especially pressing for TOCs and teachers in schools that predominantly serve students of color, who also report the highest turnover rates.²⁵ Financial considerations including potential debt burdens are known to influence college students' decisions about which careers to pursue — and are even more influential for college students of color.²⁶

Few school districts support teachers who become caregivers themselves, making it more likely that teachers leave the profession to care for their own families. High numbers of educators leave their position due to child-rearing.²⁷ These teachers often leave because most districts only allow teachers to use accrued annual and sick leave to receive pay after a child is born or adopted.^{28, 29} These trends are detrimental to FCC, as teachers who are also caregivers themselves lose the opportunity to build relationships with their students' families.

Traditional education pathways rarely offer teachers growth and career advancement opportunities

Teachers have few opportunities for career advancement, which would help keep them in the profession over time.³⁰ Without these ongoing supports, few teachers can receive higher level trainings in FCC or share their own expertise with their peers. For example, only half of teachers are given the time to participate in professional development and fewer than 30 percent are reimbursed for participating in workshops or working outside of their contracted work hours.³¹ Without the opportunity for training — including training in best FCC practices — teachers' professional growth is limited.

Limited career advancement opportunities also could discourage teachers from building expertise in FCC. Advancing in an education career most often involves taking on more administrative tasks, such as becoming a principal or district staff member, and spending

Barriers to retaining teachers of color

Challenges for retention include:

- School climates are hostile to TOCs, demonstrating this by not valuing their contributions, pushing them into unwanted roles (e.g., disciplinarian), requiring them to take on additional duties that are uncompensated, and being evaluated more negatively than other teachers.⁷⁸
- Higher education faculty do not warn their pre-service teachers about the hostile racial climate they will face, making them unprepared for combating racism as an educator.⁷⁹
- TOCs are more likely to teach in districts that do not have the proper organization or resources to support teachers and students.⁸⁰

less time in the classroom. Having minimal opportunities for career advancement contributes to teachers feeling unappreciated.³² When there are no paths for teachers to advance in their careers and remain partially or fully in the classroom, educators might find advancement opportunities outside of education that acknowledge their expertise. Schools and districts that do not provide advancement opportunities lose expertise and educators' connections with families and community organizations.

Working conditions cause burnout and create negative school climates

Challenging working conditions create a cycle with negative implications for FCC. Teachers who remain in the profession lack the support and capacity they need to build strong partnerships with families. As a result, teachers leave the field in high numbers, perpetuating a shortage of educators with the expertise and experience needed to collaborate with families.

Basic employment and instructional conditions demonstrate a lack of concern for educators. In the United States, only about 60 percent of teachers have a permanent contract.³³ This lack of job security compromises teachers' mental health.³⁴ The physical spaces where teachers work also reflect a disregard for educators' wellness. According to the latest data on the quality of public school facilities, there are major problems with many aspects of physical school infrastructure, including floors and foundations (41 percent of schools), roofs (39 percent), ventilation systems (31 percent), air conditioning systems (28 percent), and heating systems (26 percent).³⁵ When over a quarter of the public educator workforce works in buildings with unsafe conditions, states and districts signal to teachers that their needs as humans and professionals are dismissed and ensure they are not able to even teach, much less fully engage in their FCC duties.

School climates also reflect and reinforce negative conditions. Teachers increasingly face violence at school, polarization around what they can and cannot say or teach, and increased harassment from community members around school policies without administrative support to address the challenges they are facing.³⁶ ³⁷ Limited by state policy and fearful of political backlash, district leaders often do not take action to support teachers, increase community support, or alleviate the discrimination and harassment teachers face.³⁸ Lack of administrative support has been identified as the working condition most predictive of teacher turnover.³⁹ School and district administrators should work to understand what support educators need and implement that support for teachers to stay in the profession and continue to build FCC.

Policies governing teachers' day-to-day experiences similarly cause stress and discourage FCC. Districts require teachers to do many

tasks that go beyond what one person can accomplish in a given school day, and teachers lack support to do this work.⁴⁰ Teachers are stressed with too many tasks, ranging from administrative duties, grading, lesson preparation, and picking up the duties of absent teachers — all tasks that do not involve direct instruction of students.⁴¹ On top of this workload, state agencies, districts, and families hold educators responsible for students' achievement scores, which also increases teacher stress.⁴² Finally, frequent policy changes at the local, regional, state, and federal levels add more stress to educators.⁴³

Amid these challenges, teachers report more mental health and anxiety issues than any other profession, including health care workers.⁴⁴ As of 2022, teacher job satisfaction levels were at an all-time low⁴⁵ [see Box: How COVID-19 affected school climate and teacher retention]. Teachers' likelihood of leaving their schools and the profession increases when districts lack support from the community and state.⁴⁶ Building community and district support is crucial to ensuring that engagement and collaboration go both ways — from educators and with educators. Educators must also work in buildings where they feel physically and emotionally safe so they are more likely to stay and be available to work with students and families.

How COVID-19 affected school climate and teacher retention

Virtual learning fundamentally changed the dynamics of family-school connection throughout the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. While educators, families, and communities navigated economic, emotional, health, and social stresses caused by pandemic lockdowns, schools attempted to continue educational instruction in virtual and hybrid settings. Changes included:

- More frequent communication between teachers and caregivers, as both groups needed to work together to make sure children had what they needed to learn⁸¹
- Revealed and sometimes exacerbated gaps between teachers and caregivers when technology barriers, disability concerns, and other challenges made virtual engagement impossible⁸²
- Heightened tension between the desire to return to in-person instruction and health concerns amid politically charged debates about vaccines and mask mandates⁸³

Policy and Program Solutions to Strengthen the Teacher Workforce

Mutual respect and professionalism are necessary for families and educators to collaborate. Building this respect requires a concerted effort from the public and federal, state, and local levels of government. Federal and state departments of education can support FCC throughout all districts by correcting the negative narrative around teaching and affirming the value of teachers and public education.⁴⁷ District leaders can implement policies that support educators' financial, physical, and emotional wellness. The following policy suggestions for supporting the educator workforce can help districts recruit future educators, retain current educators, and ensure all educators have capacity for FCC.

Support early-career teachers through pre-service compensation

Education systems must take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate respect for teachers early in their careers. Paying pre-service teachers during required student teaching years would be one strategy to acknowledge their worth and support well-being. Similar to medical residents who have completed their degree and act as a physician under the supervision of an attending doctor, student teachers have completed the majority of their degree and create lesson plans, teach students, work with families, and perform all of the tasks as a teacher. However, unlike medical residents — who have an average salary of \$60,000 — student teachers are generally not paid at all.⁴⁸ In fact, student teachers often pay to student teach as this is typically required as part of their university coursework. Some districts are working to pay their student teachers (“intern teachers”),⁴⁹ while some states have used a teacher apprenticeship model^{50, 51} [see Box: Promising examples of pre-service teacher supports]. However, models like these must be tailored for their particular populations, as evidence suggests “Grow Your Own” programs can be detrimental for TOCs unless created thoughtfully and with a strengths-based lens.⁵² Programs must create opportunities for potential educators to build relationships with university and district partners, tailor curriculum to the student body's needs, connect potential educators to TOC educator associations, and celebrate TOCs' successes.⁵³

Pre-service compensation would help acknowledge the work that early career teachers do, including engaging with families about student progress and participating in caregiver/teacher conferences. Compensating early career teachers helps increase equity in education by reducing the barriers to teaching, particularly for those from lower-income communities. This strategy can also support existing teachers; having another professional in the room to assist

Promising examples of pre-service teacher supports:

Tennessee

Tennessee created a “Grow Your Own” apprenticeship model to “provide innovative, no-cost pathways to the teaching profession” through partnerships between preparation programs and local education agencies.⁸⁴ As the country's first federally registered teaching apprenticeship program, the program is funded through a mix of federal and state workforce dollars.

Mississippi

Mississippi piloted a multi-pronged approach to strengthening recruitment of teachers (especially TOCs). The approach includes locally led “Grow Your Own” programs that aim to develop educators from local communities, as well as a state-led teacher residency program that uses philanthropic dollars to recruit and support TOCs on the pathway to certification.⁸⁵

Tuscaloosa, AL

Tuscaloosa City Schools piloted an internship program in 2022, awarding stipends to student teachers. The program had two goals: attract people into the teaching workforce and address immediate staff shortages across the district.⁸⁶

with FCC tasks makes it more possible for veteran teachers to engage with families.

Strengthen loan forgiveness programs to expand and diversify the pool of incoming teachers

Clarifying and expanding loan forgiveness programs would give potential educators more confidence to enter the profession, especially those from low-income backgrounds. Improving loan forgiveness programs could support FCC goals through increasing the size and diversity of the educator workforce.

The main federal loan forgiveness programs that teachers can use are complex and inadequate, such that people may be discouraged from entering the profession. These programs vary in terms of the source of loans and the type of schools eligible for loan forgiveness [see Box: Federal student loan forgiveness programs for teachers]. The timeline for loan forgiveness is long (10 years), and many eligible applicants in the past decade have been denied due to administrative errors and loan holders' confusion about forgiveness requirements.⁵⁴

Federal agencies should provide a simple and accessible guide for high school students considering teaching as well as for current teachers who may qualify for loan forgiveness. The guide could include questions to help students decide which loan forgiveness option works best for their situation and understand which teaching positions are eligible. While some progress has been made to shorten the timeline for forgiveness, increase support for loan holders in the forgiveness application process, and clarify the difference between the programs, much reform is still needed.⁵⁵ Federal agencies should shorten loan forgiveness timelines to two or three years and count student teaching years toward these timelines, as is done for medical residents in short-staffed areas.⁵⁶

To make loan forgiveness simpler for teachers and increase the number of teachers, federal and state agencies should support loan forgiveness for teachers in all public schools and all subjects. Evidence suggests that borrowers with four to five years remaining on their loan payments face psychological distress and engage in riskier behaviors than their peers in the last year of repayment or who have full forgiveness.⁵⁷ Decreasing the timeline on forgiveness for teachers who are already distressed could help retain them, thereby supporting FCC in the future.

Align federal and state policies to improve teacher salaries and benefits

Improving teacher pay and benefits would incentivize people to both enter and stay in the teaching profession. Paying teachers professional salaries can help recruit and retain teachers, reducing

Federal student loan forgiveness programs for teachers

Public Student Loan Forgiveness: Forgives the remaining balance of the borrower's Federal Direct Loans after 120 qualifying payments (estimated over 10 years).

Teacher Loan Forgiveness: Forgives up to \$17,500 of the borrower's Direct or FFEL Subsidized or Unsubsidized Loans after five complete and consecutive years of teaching at a qualifying school.

Perkins Loan Cancellation for Teachers: Forgives up to 100 percent of the borrower's Federal Perkins Loan if they teach full-time at a low-income school or teach certain subjects.⁸⁷

the teacher shortage. This would provide districts with more people who not only can teach their students, but also can work with families and community members to improve student outcomes.

At the federal level, reform could include changing regulations in the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to ensure teachers are compensated for all hours worked.⁵⁸ As of 2023, most teachers are not eligible to receive overtime pay if they work more than 40 hours in one week and earn less than the FLSA salary threshold. On average, teachers in the United States work about 47 hours per week, with many working as much as 60 hours per week during the school year and at least half-time during summer and winter “breaks.”^{59, 60} Teacher workload in the United States is more than most teachers in 49 countries surveyed.⁶¹ By properly compensating teachers fairly for all hours worked, education agencies can support teachers from groups that are in highest demand, such as young teachers and TOCs.⁶²

At the state level, multiple policies could be implemented to align teacher salaries with those of other professions. Most states deny stipends or salary adjustments for teachers who have additional credentials, National Board Certification, or advanced degrees; some other states defer to the district or local governing bodies to make that decision.⁶³ Creating statewide minimum salaries for master's degrees, doctoral degrees, and National Board Certification can support the recruitment of people with those qualifications and the retention of teachers who have gone above the necessary qualifications to improve their teaching.

Additionally, the lack of statewide teacher salary schedules and policies results in considerable variation in teacher pay among states and school districts [see Box: State variation in teacher compensation].⁶⁴ To illustrate, Montana pays the lowest starting teacher salary (\$32,495 in 2022) while New Jersey has the highest average starting salary (\$54,053 in 2022). State policy can and should support state minimum salaries that reflect the local cost of living, acknowledge teachers' expertise, and bridge the disparities in pay between teachers and other professionals. Proper compensation incentivizes teachers who may work overtime to engage in FCC activities (e.g., attend evening events) and reduces the need for educators to take second jobs, which takes away from their FCC work and rest time.

Many districts have experimented with “pay for performance” programs, in which districts offer financial incentives for specific teacher or student outcomes. While decades of research on this concept show mixed results, some versions of pay for performance programs have been found to increase student performance, such as those that change teachers' base salary, incorporate coaching and multiple career paths, or remove bonuses at the end of the year if targets are not met (through what is known as a “loss aversion”

State variation in teacher compensation

States differ in paying teachers more for National Board Certification. Some states pay an annual sum, such as Alabama and Arkansas, which provide certified teachers an extra \$5,000 a year.⁸⁸ Other states provide additional pay based on the teacher's base salary. For example, Delaware raises base pay 12 percent each year for teachers with valid certificates.⁸⁹

Ohio has a minimum salary schedule for teachers based on years of service and education level (less than a bachelor's degree, a bachelor's degree, five years of training but no master's degree, and a master's degree or higher) (Ohio Revised Code, Title 33, Section 3317.13).

strategy).^{65,66} Given the teacher shortage and need for districts to reach staffing levels that allow teachers sufficient time to engage with families, district and state policymakers should focus on simply raising base compensation for all educators rather than attempting complex incentive structures.

Another promising practice is providing educators with fully paid parental leave. To support educators in engaging with families and communities, districts and states must make sure all educators have the physical and mental well-being to do their jobs. By one estimate, fewer than 20 percent of school districts provide any paid parental leave.⁶⁷ El Paso Independent School District in El Paso, TX, is an outlier, with 10 days of paid parental leave for both birthing and non-birthing parents (e.g., fathers, adoptive parents).⁶⁸

State governments have the power to make this change. For example, Delaware now requires 12 weeks of paid leave for all state employees, including educators.⁶⁹ As paid parental leave policies impact infant mortality and child health, providing educators with this benefit can support their retention in the district and likelihood of returning by supporting their mental health and need for income.⁷⁰ States should adopt or expand this benefit to recruit more teachers who are both caregivers and educators.

Improve working conditions and protect teachers' time for FCC

To retain teachers, district leaders must ensure that their district has a school climate improvement plan in which families, staff, and students create a shared vision of what a safe and inclusive school environment looks like.⁷¹ These improvement plans should reflect a holistic understanding of working and learning environments that improve physical safety, address discipline, and support the mental and emotional health of all people in the school building — students, teachers, administrators, and families. To improve conditions for all teachers, especially TOCs, districts must make sure that curricula and learning environments reflect and respect a diversity of perspectives from all racial and ethnic groups.⁷² Improving day-to-day working conditions is critical to retaining the essential players in FCC.

Teachers' daily schedules should include dedicated time for FCC, as well as time for taking care of their own needs and well-being. States can create laws that require duty-free breaks for educators so they have time to eat lunch, go to the bathroom, and plan. While breaks may be technically included in educators' schedules, states must ensure schools and districts follow through in protecting this time for their teachers. For example, in 2022 South Carolina passed a law to give certain teachers (only elementary and special education teachers) a 30-minute break in their day.⁷³ This is a small step forward for creating conditions where teachers not only can

have time for engaging in FCC but can also be mentally and physically ready their work.

States must also encourage districts to help teachers advance their careers over time, without leaving the field and taking their FCC expertise with them. Some districts find success with teacher leader positions, in which effective teachers mentor and support other teachers and are compensated with stipends or higher salaries in return.⁷⁴ Creating new career advancement structures or learning from existing ones in other states and countries can encourage educators to stay by providing them a clear path for growth.

Conclusion

Teachers are an essential component of FCC, serving as a first point of contact for most families. Current challenges in the field of education, including negative perceptions of the teaching field, low compensation, poor benefits, and bad working conditions, perpetuate teacher shortages and high turnover rates. Without enough teachers in classrooms and working conditions that support teachers' well-being, districts cannot use FCC best practices to improve student outcomes. Federal policymakers can support recruitment and retention efforts by improving loan forgiveness programs, making it more financially feasible for potential teachers to enter the field. State policymakers and district administrators can support recruiting and retaining teachers by improving salaries, benefits, and overtime rules. To make FCC possible in every school district, policies at every level must recognize and respect the value of teachers in collaborating with families and supporting student learning.

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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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Systemic Supports for Family and Community Collaboration: Improving Education Governance

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A balance of power between educators, families, community members, and education policymakers is critical for respectful, authentic partnerships between school districts and families — partnerships that advance student outcomes. However, state legislatures and district administrators rarely provide families and communities opportunities to collaborate on important decisions that affect their children's learning.

Districts can use family and community collaboration (FCC) to balance the voices and perspectives of all groups. For FCC to be a universal priority in every school district, state and local education agencies must reform governance structures to share power and influence among the people who support student learning more directly: educators, families, and community groups.

Just as district administrators and educators must intentionally build partnerships and relationships with families, so too should all governing bodies. Through increasing representation and decision-making opportunities for all families, everyone at all levels can work together to improve student and societal outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Specifically, we recommend that state legislators, local governing bodies, and school districts:

- **Provide open access and accommodations for all families to participate in policymaking.** Collaborative decision-making is critical to FCC. Creating transparent governing bodies that are centered on diverse perspectives and reflect the identities and experiences of the people they represent supports FCC for the most marginalized families and communities.
- **Integrate FCC throughout state and local education policies.** This work includes embedding FCC in school district strategic goals and increasing transparency in legislative processes so families can participate more fully.
- **Increase voter participation in state and local governing systems.** Policymakers, district leaders, parent organizations, and community groups must work together to remove barriers to voting and better inform families about education issues. Increased participation in governing systems can elevate their perspectives and needs.
- **Conduct research to understand nuanced community opinions and avoid politicized jargon.** In an era of politicization in education, districts and policymakers can overcome political debates by working to understand families' actual experiences and needs. Goals for student outcomes do not fall along political party lines, and embracing the nuance is critical to overcoming political conflict.

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

State policymakers and local school board members shape the landscape for family and community collaboration (FCC) through determining school district budgets, staffing capacity, and operation policies. Too often, these governance structures exclude families and teachers and leave minimal opportunities for them to advocate for their needs. As a result, state legislatures and local school boards create education budgets and policy priorities that do not reflect the needs of these crucial community groups.

When families have a real seat at the table alongside school district administrators, lawmakers, school board members, and educators, districts' partnerships, strategies, and solutions are more likely to support student outcomes. To achieve this, governing bodies need to be more representative of the communities they serve and must work with those community members to create policies that prioritize supporting students with the greatest needs.

How Current Challenges in School Governance Discourage Family and Community Collaboration

The governing bodies that oversee education systems, including state agencies, local agencies, and district school boards, do not typically include families and teachers in decision-making. As a result, few families or teachers have the means to advocate for what they think is most important for better outcomes.

The exclusion of family and teacher participation in legislative and policy decision-making stems from a combination of systemic barriers to voting participation, structural racism, and more recent political trends. Reforming education governance systems to better represent and engage families and communities requires understanding and addressing each of these areas.

State legislatures do not represent family and community identities

The state legislatures that make critical decisions impacting student learning rarely represent the constituencies they serve, particularly more racially diverse or low-income communities. Aside from electing state representatives, families and communities are often kept out of crucial decisions that lead to education budget appropriations and legislation that impacts teaching and learning. This trend limits the possibility of authentic FCC in every school district, as family needs are less likely to be understood or represented in the state agencies that make important decisions about school operations, programming, and budget allocations.

A note on language:

In this series of policy briefs — as we do in our work — we use the term *“caregiver”* rather than *“parent”* to accommodate a wider variety of family situations.

However, in this brief, we use *“parent-teacher organizations” (PTOs)* as the umbrella term for caregiver organizations. This is the term recommended by the National Parent Teacher Association. The term *“parent teacher association” (PTA)* refers to specific school-based organizations.

There is not a single state in the country in which state legislatures reflect the racial and economic identities of all of their constituents¹ [see box: How gerrymandering prevents legislatures from being representative]. As a result, the people tasked with making critical education funding and policy decisions do not share the same experiences, perspectives, and expertise as the educators and families in their states. State legislatures have been growing more diverse in recent decades but remain predominantly white, affluent, and male.² While more progress has been made on a national level, particularly in the U.S. House of Representatives, most national and state governing bodies are still not reflective of their constituents.³ Without a fully representative state legislature, state and school district education policy is unlikely to reflect the perspectives of students and their families, thereby limiting authentic FCC at the local level.

State control of school districts creates barriers for communities of color

State education agencies (SEAs) determine many aspects of education systems, including funding for infrastructure and teacher compensation. Though state and local agencies both hold power over educational systems, SEAs often play a greater role in determining funding allocations and policies related to staffing, programming, and teaching and learning. Through these decisions, SEAs influence districts' capacity for FCC and students' experiences in classrooms.

Each state takes a different approach to delegating power between SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs), but most states retain the option to intervene in the funding and management of school districts. Some SEAs exert greater control over local school districts, making it more challenging for families and communities to be included in decision-making. In extreme cases of low school district performance, states can take over entirely. In a state takeover, states often appoint a new superintendent and may replace some or all of a school board. Research is mixed on the effectiveness of state takeovers, with some studies suggesting benefits and others suggesting negative impacts on student learning. Altogether, research generally suggests that takeovers have small or negligible impacts on student academic performance.⁴ Further, state takeovers delegate power to third-party organizations or administrators, taking from local communities and families what little power they have.⁵ State-appointed administrators are unlikely to have the time, incentives, or capacity to engage families or community members in their decision-making.

States are disproportionately likely to take over districts that serve low-income communities and more Black students.⁶ In fact, the share of Black students in a school district is a stronger predictor of

How gerrymandering prevents legislatures from being representative

The demographics of state legislatures rarely match those of the communities they represent. Some of this mismatch can be attributed to political gerrymandering, or the purposeful outlining of political districts to benefit specific groups. While both Republicans and Democrats have made attempts at gerrymandering in recent years, most redrawn district maps favor Republican-dominated legislatures beyond what would be predicted by a popular vote. At the same time, gerrymandering has harmed communities of color the most — dividing communities between districts and continuing the trend of underrepresented racial minorities in state legislatures.⁴⁰

What that means for FCC

As long as districts remained gerrymandered, more diverse candidates have little hope of gaining the political support they need to overcome legacies of marginalization and racism. Authentic FCC relies on all groups — especially those from marginalized communities — to hold positions of power and directly participate in policymaking at the highest levels.

state takeover than students' academic performance.⁷ Together, these findings suggest that state governments disproportionately disempower school districts serving more students of color and further impede FCC with marginalized families.

Local school boards fall short of fair representation

School boards, or boards of education, also make decisions that impact student learning and are unlikely to reflect the identities of people in their communities. School boards are important components of education governance. Though they operate within the policy landscape established at the state level, school boards still make many critical decisions that impact student learning, including decisions about how funding is allocated, strategic goals, and hiring decisions. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, this power has become even more noticeable as districts received infusions of federal funding that fell under the discretion of school boards.⁸ When school boards are accessible to all members of the community, they can provide meaningful opportunities for collaboration and partnership with families, educators, district administrators, and students. However, they fall short of true FCC when board membership does not represent the identities or needs of families and communities.

About 90 percent of school districts across the country are governed by locally elected school boards.⁹ School boards, like state legislatures, are rarely representative of their local communities. White and affluent individuals are overrepresented, while people of color and multilingual families are underrepresented.¹⁰ School board members typically receive little to no financial compensation for their work, which limits participation by community members with low incomes. People who work long hours or multiple jobs have less time and ability to take on unpaid school board work, making it more likely that people with higher incomes run for school board positions. When school boards do not hold the same perspectives and identities as the communities they serve, they are less likely to understand the needs and perspectives of marginalized families.

Not only do school boards not represent their communities, but neither do the citizens who vote them into office. In 2020, participation in school board elections averaged around 5-10 percent of eligible voters,¹¹ compared to 15 percent in municipal elections and 67 percent in the presidential election.¹² Those who do show up to vote tend to be older and whiter than their communities and typically do not have children of their own, especially in elections when school board members are elected in cycles out of sync with major elections.¹³ It is less likely that board members will share the same beliefs and priorities as the entire community when the people who vote are not representative. This

National School Boards Association 2018 Survey

Only 17% of
school board members
are people of color⁴¹

Only 32% of
school board members
have children in school⁴²

is a problem, as elected officials (including board members) are incentivized to prioritize funding and attention for schools in communities with the highest voter participation.¹⁴

These representation gaps are largest in school districts where students of color are the majority and in districts with the largest achievement gaps between students of different racial groups.¹⁵ School employees and educators constitute a small share of voters, even though school board elections impact their jobs and well-being more than most community members.¹⁶

Together, these factors indicate that school board elections do not encourage widespread participation, especially for marginalized populations. This lack of involvement in the election processes can have downstream effects for FCC at district and school levels, as it becomes more possible for elected school board members to hold priorities and views that are not in line with their communities.

Parent organizations are common but rarely used to their full potential

Parent engagement takes many forms, from supporting students with learning at home, to attending school events, to engaging in advocacy for the school. Parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) are one common organized mechanism for families to voice their perspectives and participate in school district decision-making. Participation in PTOs and other parent organizations often requires time, flexibility of scheduling, and other resources (e.g., an Internet connection, transportation), creating barriers for parents working one or more jobs.

While PTOs provide critical avenues for FCC in schools, they can play unintended roles related to school funding. For example, schools with limited funding might rely on PTOs to raise money for basic needs, like school supplies and events, rather than support PTOs to invest in training, organizing, and communication. PTOs can fundraise to support their own projects and operations, but this effectively benefits school districts in more affluent communities. These PTOs are often more able to raise more supplemental funding for schools than PTOs in lower-resourced communities, which exacerbates the resource gap between high- and low-income school communities.¹⁷

Nationally, participation in PTOs has declined in recent years, indicating that fewer parents are taking advantage of this clear-cut path for engagement. Though more than 3 million parents participate in local PTOs, this participation is down roughly 75 percent since the 1970s.¹⁸ However, the quality of engagement (more than the quantity of parents participating) can have more outsized impacts on student outcomes.¹⁹

“Whether students have laptops, functional classroom furniture, access to high-speed internet, and attend a safe and secure school — resources that facilitate high-quality schools and academic achievement — is conditional on whether they live in an electorally pivotal neighborhood.”⁴³

— Brian T. Hamel,
political scientist

As the demographics of school districts evolve, so too must PTOs. In 2022, the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) reported that 57 percent of students served by local PTA affiliates were students of color and 46 percent qualified for free and reduced lunch (a proxy for low-income status).²⁰ It is critical for parent organizations to be representative of the school communities they serve and maintain strong relationships with community groups.

“Parent rights” have become politicized, making it hard for districts to make policy that reflects parents’ true perspectives

With the recent political turmoil in the U.S. and contentious discussions that have polarized the country, many organizations and districts have lost sight of the definition and goals of FCC. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many PTOs and other parent groups have adopted more political stances on topics such as curricula, gun safety, school choice, instruction on race, sexuality, and gender identity.²¹ This politicization has taken a toll on school administrators and strained families’ relationships with school districts, thereby threatening the level of trust and transparency needed for FCC.

The intersection of parent organizations, education, and politics is not inherently problematic. For example, when parent organizations and advocates intervene because school systems are not providing legally required services, there can be great benefits to student learning. Parents also advocate for safety in schools, teacher pay, and equitable disciplinary practices. Conflict between different groups is necessary for education systems change; however, some recent political trends have created non-productive political conflicts and pulled parents to extreme sides of issues, rather than help them embrace nuanced and diverse perspectives.

In response, national organizations, federal agencies, and membership groups are attempting to empower parents in different ways. The National PTA has adopted progressive platforms that focus on addressing topics that have become highly politicized such as understanding and eradicating institutional racism, supporting students’ expressions of their gender identity, and condemning censorship and limited book selection.²² On the other end of the political spectrum, parent groups such as Parents Defending Education and Moms for Liberty advocate for parents to gain greater control over curricular decisions, discourage discussions of race and gender identity in classrooms, and encourage the removal of certain texts from libraries.²³ These political debates risk discouraging districts from collaborating with families for fear of stoking political controversy, even when the decisions have significant impact on student learning and well-being.

Surveys find that these debates have made teachers’ and school leaders’ jobs more challenging, which also reduces educators’

capacity for FCC. One 2022 survey found that 48 percent of principals and 40 percent of teachers reported political issues relating to their professions as job-related stressors.²⁴ Another 2022 survey of principals found that 69 percent reported experiencing “substantial political conflict” regarding topics including instruction about racism and race, book selection, social-emotional learning (SEL), and policies about LGBTQIA+ student rights.²⁵ Parents also share these concerns. A 2021 survey found that the top concern among parents surveyed was “having politicians who are not educators making decisions about what students learn in the classroom,” with 40 percent of parents indicating that they worry a lot about this issue and an additional 28 percent worrying some.²⁶ Together, these trends discourage true collaboration between families and schools, as both parties are pulled to extremes or fear having these important discussions at all.

Policy and Program Solutions to Improve School Governance

Strong FCC with school leaders and administrators can help maintain balance in decision-making and ensure school governance remains focused on student outcomes. State and local education agencies and policymakers can help create conditions conducive for these strong partnerships.

Provide open access and accommodations for all families to participate in policymaking

Families and community groups from all backgrounds, languages, abilities, and socioeconomic standings need to be heard in education governance for authentic collaboration to be possible. To achieve this goal, states and school districts must actively welcome and recruit participants from all identity groups and backgrounds. It is critical all perspectives of educators and families are heard and valued — not just the loudest or those with more time and resources.

Beginning at the state level, a more diverse legislature can support advocacy for the priorities held by communities of color, including FCC in schools. Research in this area is nuanced, given the many factors that contribute to the racial and economic characteristics of elected representatives and leaders, but in general representatives of color are more likely to advocate for priorities held by constituents of color, leading to increased adoption of related policies.²⁷ Voters of color also tend to become more mobilized to participate in politics when candidates of color are running and elected.²⁸ All jurisdictions should strive to create governing bodies that reflect constituents’ identities and experiences.

Increasing equity in PTO funding through district-wide collaboration

PTA Equity Project (PEP) is an organization created in 2016 to address disparities in PTA fundraising in Illinois District 65 (Evanston and Skokie).⁴⁴ PEP does this by pooling PTA fundraising dollars and equitably distributing them to all schools in the district based on a formula that considers school need and size. PEP meetings are open to the entire community and recordings are posted online, granting access to families who cannot attend.

This collaborative approach to fundraising ensures that all PTAs in the community have the resources they need to achieve their goals.

PTOs offer another entry point for families, and thus require transparency, resources, and accommodations for many types of participants. Knowing that some families face barriers to attending PTO meetings and events, PTOs should strive to welcome and support all types of engagement. PTOs can also address funding inequities in their communities through collaborating and sharing resources [see box: Increasing equity in PTO funding through district-wide collaboration (see page 7)].

Similar ideas apply to school board governance. For school boards to make decisions that meet the needs of families and communities — especially marginalized groups — they need to reflect and welcome local communities and maintain strong relationships with local participants. For families and community members who want to play a larger role in their local education system, school board meetings often serve as one of the easiest first points of access.

Districts electing school board members who better reflect the diversity of their districts see improvements in student achievement.²⁹ One study documented improvements in student academic outcomes because of increased minority representation on school boards, attributing the improvements to hiring more principals of color and increasing expenditures on school facilities.³⁰ Another study found that school districts with more racially and ethnically diverse school boards reduced the likelihood of disciplinary action (e.g., suspensions) for all students and reduced the disparity in disciplinary action between white students and students of color.³¹

Policymakers and school districts can work toward creating school boards that reflect the diversity of school communities they serve by increasing voter turnout and funding trainings for parents to gain the skills they need to run for the school board [see boxes on effective school board characteristics and capacity building on pages 9 and 10, respectively]. The U.S. Department of Education’s Statewide Engagement Centers Program awards funding to states to provide technical assistance to SEAs and LEAs, which can support these goals.³²

Integrate FCC throughout state and local education policies

School boards have significant governing power but often do not support or facilitate FCC as much as they could. State-level policy can be a strong mechanism to address district-level practices, so long as states provide the necessary resources and guidance to support districts. For example, California created the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) process in 2014 to require and support districts to create strategic plans that include family and community engagement [see box: How California’s LCAP process supports FCC at the highest level].

How California’s LCAP process supports FCC at the highest level

California’s Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) offer multiple lessons for how states, districts, and caregivers can collaborate to embed FCC in district planning and budgets.

Every district in California is required to develop and annually update an LCAP to outline a plan for district priorities, goals for student learning, and parent engagement. California’s Board of Education supports this mandate by providing specific requirements for LCAP planning, such as parental involvement, measuring school climate, and developing specific plans for marginalized students (e.g., youth in foster care, multilingual students).⁴⁵

As part of LCAP, districts are required to consult with families and students and hold at least one public hearing to solicit comments. The process is not perfect, as the dense district planning and budgeting jargon can be hard for families to understand.⁴⁶

Other states could advance FCC in their own states by adopting mandates similar to LCAP. By giving all school districts guidance (e.g., templates, instructions) and transparency requirements, SEAs can support school districts in building FCC into strategic plans and decision-making. PTAs also have opportunities to build families’ capacity to engage with these planning processes, and both state and local boards of education have a role to play, as well.

District-level policies also present opportunities for enshrining FCC initiatives into practice. State and local policymakers should review and revise the language of district bylaws and other governing documents to define equity goals, promote diverse school boards, and ensure families have opportunities to participate in policymaking. Similarly, local governing bodies can support FCC by requiring transparency in school board meetings and processes.

FCC can also be integrated throughout policies in parent organizations. For example, local PTAs can adopt the National PTA's National Standards for Family-School Partnerships and use existing resources that support participation from all key groups.³³ The standards offer guidance for collaborative decision-making and participation in school governance but allow the necessary flexibility for PTOs to reflect the needs and perspectives of their communities.

Increase voter participation in state and local governing systems

For state legislatures and school governing bodies to create education systems that nurture FCC with school districts, all community members need the capacity, time, and information they need to vote in elections. Voting is a critical tool that families and community members have to advocate for students, even if it feels disconnected from school districts' day-to-day operations.

People with higher incomes vote at higher rates than people with low incomes, and people who favor conservative, non-distributive economic policies are overrepresented among people who do vote.³⁴ Increasing voter turnout — especially among low-income and marginalized communities — be a major step toward enacting education policies that better reflect all students' needs.

Increasing voter turnout requires mobilization by community-based organizations (CBOs) as well as political campaigns. CBOs and governing bodies can implement proven strategies to increase turnout, including Election Day registration, personalized written materials, and personal interactions (e.g., canvassing, phone calls).³⁵ More broadly, research has found that policies that facilitate voter registration (e.g., automatic voter registration) and offer more options to vote (e.g., early voting, mail-in ballots) are effective in increasing turnout.³⁶

In local elections, which have even lower turnout rates than state elections and fewer voters who reflect local communities, equitably increasing turnout is critical. While no single strategy can drastically improve turnout alone, a mix of strategies can have important effects. For example, aligning local election days with major election cycles has been shown to increase voting.³⁷ Other effective strategies include reducing barriers to voting (e.g., identification requirements) and increasing convenience (e.g., more polling locations, extended hours).

Characteristics of effective school boards

The Center for Public Education's "Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards" draws on a meta-analysis and case studies to identify practices that have positive impacts on student outcomes. Best practices include:⁴⁷

- **High expectations and clear vision:** School boards establish well-defined goals for student achievement.
- **Shared values:** Members share beliefs about the potential of school systems to support all students in reaching their goals.
- **Accountability:** Boards focus more on student-centered policies than operational issues.
- **Collaboration with families and teachers:** Boards foster collaborative relationships that inform goal-setting and decision-making.
- **Data-driven continuous improvement:** Boards use data to measure progress and identify challenges.
- **Supporting professional development:** Members allocate necessary funding for training and other activities that align with district goals.
- **Strong relationships with superintendent:** Boards maintain mutual trust with superintendent and collaborate.
- **Internal trainings:** Members use professional development to build their knowledge, shared values, and commitment.

Together, these changes can reduce the costs associated with voting that disproportionately discourage parents with low incomes from participating in elections that impact local schools.

Effective FCC with districts also requires informing community members about the impact of the elections. School districts, school boards, and CBOs can play a critical role in informing local voters about ballot measures and budget decisions that impact students. Mobilizing CBOs and local meeting places, such as faith organizations and libraries, can offer meaningful opportunities to prioritize outreach to the families who are least represented among typical voters, including families with low incomes, families of color, and families who do not speak English at home.³⁸

Conduct research to understand nuanced community opinions and avoid politicized jargon

Focusing on key concepts and avoiding political hot topics can help districts and states stay focused on student learning, regardless of political climate. Rather than feel the need to weigh in on politicized topics, school districts and parent organizations should collaborate to research and understand the perspectives of their communities. By digging into the nuance of families' opinions, beyond the confines of political affiliation, districts can better design policies that meet students' needs.

For example, multiple states have addressed concerns around SEL by surveying families on the goals they have for students in school — free of the jargon. One 2021 survey revealed parents across political parties mostly supported students learning the core competencies of SEL (e.g., relationship skills, self-management) but had strong reactions to the term itself (some positive, some negative).³⁹ Primarily conservative states such as Indiana and Alabama have shifted how they describe SEL and increased focus on describing the important skills that educators know matter for student outcomes.

Conclusion

Reforming education governance systems to support FCC in all school districts will require a coordinated effort at state, local, and district levels. Lawmakers and school board members must embrace the need for family and community expertise and engagement in making decisions that affect student learning. To create meaningful and equitable opportunities for all families to participate, governing bodies must accurately reflect the identities and experiences of each district community. Community members not only need access to information about how to vote but also opportunities and support to directly participate in governing. Together, these policy and legislative reforms can support authentic partnerships between families and school districts that advance student outcomes.

How can school boards build the capacity of their own members?

Research suggests that training for school board members improves the performance of those boards, with the benefits in performance outweighing the costs in travel, time, and attendance. Capacity-building activities can include annual trainings for all members and mentorship programs for new board members.⁴⁸

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Systemic Supports for Family and Community Collaboration: Putting Research into Practice

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Supporting family and community collaboration (FCC) requires effectively bridging research and practice, yet a range of challenges can get in the way of success. The sheer volume of available research may prove overwhelming, the research may not seem clearly actionable, or educators may not receive training in how to translate research into practice. Even when school districts obtain evidence-based tools, educators rarely have the time, training, or support to use those resources effectively. Improving the connection between FCC research and practice is critical to ensuring sustainable approaches to building partnerships between districts and families and to supporting student growth.

Improving the implementation of FCC practices requires all groups — families, teachers, district administrators — to build their capacity for authentic FCC. This includes access to evidence-based training and district-wide commitments to allocating resources required to complete trainings. By working together, all key constituents can help reduce the disconnect between research and practice and make the field more effective in supporting family and district partnerships and student outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To make FCC research more actionable, we recommend educational leaders, pre-service education programs, and district staff:

- **Teach evidence-based FCC practices during pre-service teacher training.** Ensure all teachers enter the field with critical skills, including best practices in communicating and building trust with families.
- **Provide in-service professional development for teachers and district staff that focuses specifically on FCC.** Districts should financially support teacher participation in conferences and other development activities as well as support leaders' development in FCC.
- **Ensure educators have time to implement FCC activities in their daily practice.** Districts must provide teachers with necessary coverage and time to integrate FCC into their work.
- **Build caregivers' capacity to step into leadership roles and co-design evidence-based FCC initiatives.** In line with the spirit of FCC, districts should work directly with communities and caregivers to learn and decide how best to integrate research into district practices.

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

Existing research offers frameworks, strategies, and tools to guide districts' implementation of FCC. However, more coordination between researchers and school districts is needed to ensure these resources are circulated in ways that best meet the needs of educators.

The gap between research and practice is widened by shortages in funding, educator staff, and effective school governance — all topics explored in other research briefs developed through the [Connected & Engaged](#) initiative. School districts need training and resources to build their capacity to implement best practices in FCC. Without access to evidence-based strategies, districts often default to one-sided communication strategies and district-dominated decision-making. To break down these limitations in FCC infrastructure and implementation, policymakers and researchers must collaborate with districts to design and provide tools that match the needs of educators.

Current State of Research-Based Practice

The *Connected & Engaged* initiative identified more than 140 websites, publications, and other outlets that provide evidence-based resources to support FCC. Much of the available research describes core components of FCC, such as the need for shared decision-making and strong relationships.¹ However, providing the information alone has not been enough to integrate these findings into district practice and strengthen staff and families' ability to conduct FCC.

District staff and families need information and time for relationship building

Family surveys and student outcome data indicate that the implementation of best practices in FCC is poor throughout many school districts, with many caregivers and educators holding misconceptions about the importance of FCC and inaccurate understandings of students' needs. A 2020 survey by the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) found that only 16 percent of parents indicated they "strongly agreed" that their local school leaders valued the role that families play in students' success.² Across multiple years of surveys, Learning Heroes has found that more than 90 percent of parents across all racial and income groups believe their children are at or above grade level in math and reading, when really only approximately 40 percent of students are at or above grade level.³ These disconnects demonstrate the need for better collaboration so everyone is properly informed about students' needs and goals for meeting those needs.

“Despite decades of research supporting family engagement’s benefits on children’s social, emotional, behavioral, and academic development, teachers are not always adequately prepared to consult and work with families.”²⁵

— Smith & Sheridan

Educators are also pressed for time to meaningfully engage with families. Learning Heroes found that less than two thirds of teachers reported having time during the workday to connect with families and only 60 percent of principals reported having a central office leader in charge of engagement.⁴ Without the time and support to fully collaborate with families and community organizations, educators will not be able to work with crucial parties to collectively improve students' outcomes.

Together, these results indicate that there are outstanding gaps between research and practice that have not yet been solved by the proliferation of written resources, toolkits, and research reports.

Districts struggle to connect educators with training and best practices

Professional development opportunities, including in-service trainings, summer workshops, and conferences, are one major venue for educators to access research on best practices in FCC. Educators can also find resources online, as researchers disseminate recommendations and case studies in newsletters, magazines, and other education venues. However, many teachers cannot access resources online or at conferences for financial and logistical reasons.

When FCC is not a top priority for school districts, professional development funds are allocated toward other topics, leaving educators who seek training on FCC without financial support to pursue it. Financial cost is a major barrier for both teachers and principals who seek professional development outside of their districts' scheduled options.^{5, 6} Summer professional development opportunities are often state-wide, or national in scope, which requires educators to travel. It is not common practice for districts to provide each educator a yearly professional development budget to pay for conference registration fees and travel expenses. Given these resource constraints and teachers' typically low salaries, participation becomes unfeasible for many educators.⁷

Finding free resources also poses a barrier for many educators. Some resources live behind paywalls, making them challenging for educators to access — particularly staff at under-resourced schools who do not have funds for membership fees or article charges. Yet even resources that are freely accessible require time and capacity to vet, adapt, and implement in a district setting. While some districts provide in-service training that incorporates resources without a cost to educators, educators still desire better and more training to improve their practice.⁸ Districts who do not provide teachers with access to vetted information — or the capacity to use that information — contribute to the gap between research and practice.

“When it comes to family and community engagement, attention by policymakers — and the federal, state, and local funding that goes along with such attention — has been scarce for many years. The U.S. Department of Education, for example, has few staff members dedicated to the issue. Attention to policy is essential for building sustainable family and community engagement initiatives.”²⁶

– Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe

Policy and Program Solutions to Put Research into Practice

If research is clear about what districts should do to support FCC, how can policymakers support the implementation of these best practices? Professional development opportunities offer the most direct path for educators to engage with research, making professional development a critical point of collaboration between educators, researchers, and facilitators. Busy teachers and school administrators may not have time to sort through the latest research, but pre-service educators and professional development facilitators have opportunities to infuse research into the curriculum and instruction used in trainings and courses. Policymakers should enact legislation and dedicate funding to support context-specific professional development for both educators and families.

Teach evidence-based FCC practices during pre-service teacher training

Pre-service trainers can support districts in reaching their engagement goals by preparing the future workforce with the knowledge and skills they need to achieve systemic FCC. Current pre-service training is heavy on theory and predominantly tailored to white educators, with less of a focus on serving teachers of color and applying theory to practice.⁹ Courses may discuss the importance of working with families to improve student achievement but not provide culturally responsive strategies for collecting appropriate data, communicating with families, or planning for specific outreach. To improve pre-service training so that it better prepares all educators to engage with families, teacher education programs must provide a foundation of culturally responsive FCC strategies and instructional practices.

By integrating elements of FCC into all subjects, from pedagogy to subject matter instruction, pre-service instructors can help ensure all teachers begin their first year in the classroom with a solid foundation of FCC best practices. Strengthening pre-service training would provide student teachers with the ability to co-create with families and communities and enforce the mindset that working with families is an essential and energizing part of their regular duties.¹⁰

Provide in-service professional development for teachers and district staff that focuses specifically on FCC

Teachers and district staff who are at the front lines also need ongoing training on how to build and sustain relationships with caregivers and families. Teachers need professional development on best practices in FCC, particularly those that are asset-based,

Federal funding for FCC technical assistance

The U.S. Department of Education supports the research-to-practice pipeline through funding the Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFEC) program. Grants are awarded to technical assistance organizations that help state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) implement evidence-based FCC practices.²⁷ Grantees vary in focus, but common goals include training families and educators in best practices, hosting conferences for teachers and administrators, and building capacity of SEAs to continue training.

culturally responsive, and interactive.^{11, 12} Part of this training in FCC practices should address how teachers and principals can manage relationships when the overall political climate is turbulent or when schools are grappling with contentious.¹³ Integrating specific FCC topics within district-wide professional development can also support the use of best practices from the vast body of literature.

Teachers can also access FCC training at the multitude of educational conferences held each year. Research shows that attending conferences supports teachers' sense of professionalism and community, as well their identity as teachers.¹⁴ To make it possible for teachers to access these development opportunities, districts must redirect existing funding or identify new funding opportunities to cover teachers' expenses and time.

Ensure educators have time to implement FCC activities in their daily practice

Surveys indicate that teachers want more opportunities to co-create standards with researchers and opportunities for training in implementing standards, which require time and district support.¹⁵ The pervasive lack of substitute teachers and administrative support creates barriers for teachers — both to access professional development on FCC practices and to implement those practices in their daily work. Teacher and substitute shortages are most prevalent in low-income communities, meaning this challenge is more pressing for districts serving students with higher needs.¹⁶ Substitute shortages also mean full-time teachers must fill in for one another, leaving little time to implement or improve their FCC practices.

To ensure teachers engage in FCC, research points to the importance of administrative supports, such as being given time to devote to professional development or incentives from school and district leadership, as major factors in teachers' pursuit of professional development.¹⁷ Without time and support, teachers cannot access information on best practices, let alone have the capacity to integrate the professional development research into their classrooms. Teachers need time to implement the strategies as well as educator-focused FCC resources suitable for teachers' specific contexts, so teachers do not have to spend time searching for the right resources.

Build caregivers' capacity to step into leadership roles and co-design evidence-based FCC initiatives

Just as FCC research calls for families and communities to participate in decision-making to support student learning, districts should call for these same groups to participate in putting FCC research into practice. Districts have evidence-based options for

Professional associations offer support for systemic FCC

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) collaborated to create the State Consortium on Family Engagement. NAFSCE has provided technical assistance and evidence-based training to 18 SEAs.²⁸ Through this collaboration, a Family Engagement Opportunity Canvas was designed to help SEAs and their partners build their own state-level family engagement activities, policies, and programs.

Networks like these can step in to connect educators and policymakers with research to support best practices at the state and policy levels, as well as on the ground with educators and administrators.

bringing families into decision-making processes, including hiring family liaisons, carving out roles on task forces and leadership committees, and offering trainings and workshops.^{18, 19, 20}

Training families to understand and implement best practices can be a great starting point. For example, Tuscaloosa City Schools in Alabama uses a Parent Teacher Leadership Academy to build the capacity of families and staff and create ongoing opportunities for collaboration [see Box: Promising practice: Tuscaloosa City Schools' Parent Teacher Leadership Academy].²¹ Throughout these trainings, it is critical for trainers and district staff to embrace the expertise families bring to the table, in addition to offering information that is new for families.²² To achieve this, the Family Leadership Design Collaborative, a network focused on centering racial equity within FCC, recommends that districts prioritize the needs and perspectives of non-dominant families (e.g., people of color, multilingual families, low-income families) to create a strong foundation for collaboration and designing solutions.²³

The research process itself also offers opportunities to empower families to actively guide research priorities and questions, rather than only participate as subjects. Community organizations across the country already use a variety of creative and effective strategies to build the capacity of families to participate in education research. For example, Village of Wisdom, a community-based organization in Durham, NC, facilitates fellowships for Black parents to learn about and conduct participatory action research and work toward more culturally affirming learning environments in schools.²⁴ To be responsive to community needs, different localities will require different approaches to engage and elevate all voices. Expanding the variety of existing grass-roots efforts and embarking on new collaborations can help to build families' knowledge and capacity in FCC.

Conclusion

Families, teachers, and district administrators all need access to evidence-based professional development and sufficient resources to make FCC possible in every school. Many tools are available, but the challenge remains in ensuring educators have systems, supports, and financial resources to put them into practice. Families also need support from districts to learn about best practices and co-create district strategies for implementing them in every local context. Together, these efforts can support partnerships between districts and families to advance student outcomes.

Promising practice: *Tuscaloosa City Schools' Parent Teacher Leadership Academy*

Tuscaloosa City Schools' method for infusing research into FCC initiatives is through the Parent Teacher Leadership Academy (PTLA). Run by a local university partner (University of Alabama), the program is grounded in Dr. Karen Mapp's Dual Capacity-Building Framework and brings best practices to school-based teams of caregivers and teachers. Over one school year, each school team designs a project to support an academic goal at their school. Monthly meetings introduce teachers and parents to best practices, as well as strategies for grant writing, measuring outcomes, and collaborating with community organizations.²⁹

The school district uses funding from the professional development budget to support teachers' and parents' participation in PTLA. Each cohort receives training and support to implement research into practice.

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