

HUNDRED REPORT #036

# Journeys in Family School Engagement

Parents as Allies

DECEMBER 2023

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**HUNDRED TAILOR-MADE REPORT**

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HundrED Tailor-Made Report.  
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Conclusions and recommendations from HundrED reports represent the author’s own views. Innovators featured in this report have granted HundrED consent for the use of images and written works.

**This is an interactive document.**

## Foreword from HundrED

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When we create mutual respect between parents and teachers, it helps us in building a thriving learning community.

HundrED is a global, mission-driven organisation that identifies, showcases, and spreads innovative educational practices to inspire and improve education worldwide. We are pleased to introduce this report, in which we document a journey to deepen relationships between families and schools through the implementation and trialling of creative strategies we called “hacks.”

Our aim is that this report will serve as informative and functional guides to school leaders, district and municipality changemakers, and their communities, on the journey towards fostering parental engagement at scale within their schools and school systems.

When enhancing educational practices, there is a significant untapped potential in bringing together collaborative networks of multiple stakeholders, leading to more innovative and adaptable models to support the system as a whole. However, this presents the demanding challenge of coordinating efforts to create operating models that are

both adaptable and efficient in fostering connections and impact. We are thrilled to start our Tailor-Made initiatives in cooperation with Kidsburgh and the Parents as Allies partnership, with funding from The Grable Foundation. The Grable Foundation is a trailblazing organisation known for their groundbreaking efforts in supporting parents and caregivers in the greater Pittsburgh region of Pennsylvania, USA, for more than four decades.

We invite you along our journey, believing it is essential to share it to ensure that the experiences, learnings, and changes we are making are not hidden away. The journey guides us through various stages, relying on the contributions of a diverse group of organisations, schools and individuals who took part in the journey of co-designing and implementing Family School Engagement strategies together. Everyone involved has played an important role in this work. This story acts as the bridge that links those experiences and concrete outcomes with our Theory of Change, establishing a shared foundation for more meaningful pedagogical discussions, reflections, innovation trials and experiments in the future.

HundrED Tailor-Made initiatives are an essential part of our work in implementing K12 education innovations at scale. The complex and highly contextual nature of our global education systems presents many barriers for education leaders when it comes to successfully implementing

new solutions sustainably. To provide a global platform, we are currently instituting the HundrED Implementation Centre, part of HundrED Foundation, in Geneva, Switzerland. The Centre will provide research, practitioner support, practical methodologies and systems leadership, extending the work and reach of our implementation work.

We express our appreciation to everyone who we have had the pleasure of working with during this project.

With gratitude,



**Lasse Leponiemi**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & CO-FOUNDER  
HUNDRED



## About the Parents as Allies Report

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In early 2021, Parents as Allies (PAA) began a journey of collaborating with school teams in a design sprint process to develop creative and innovative solutions, or “hacks” that would address the specific needs of their communities. Their initial, two-month design sprint in 2021 centred around the question: “How might we build stronger engagement between families and schools for the benefit of all students?” Parents as Allies 1.0, a first iteration, leveraged the expertise of The Teachers Guild x School Retool Team at IDEO. An international group of 16 teams hailing from four countries– the UK, USA, Canada, and India– took part in this experimental project.

Almost one year later, in April 2022, PAA, supported once again by The Grable Foundation, began a second iteration. Parents as Allies 2.0 narrowed its focus to 22 Western Pennsylvania school districts. Joined by design sprint guides, the participating school districts’ Design Teams started with empathy interviews as the main source of inspiration to co-develop the hacks aimed at increasing and strengthening family-school engagement. Following human-centered design structure, the 22 districts participating in the initiative documented their learning journeys, from their practice mini-hacks, to fall and spring hacks and on to the new future of Family School Engagement (FSE) outlined in their sustainability plans.

### ACRONYMS

**CUE** - Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution

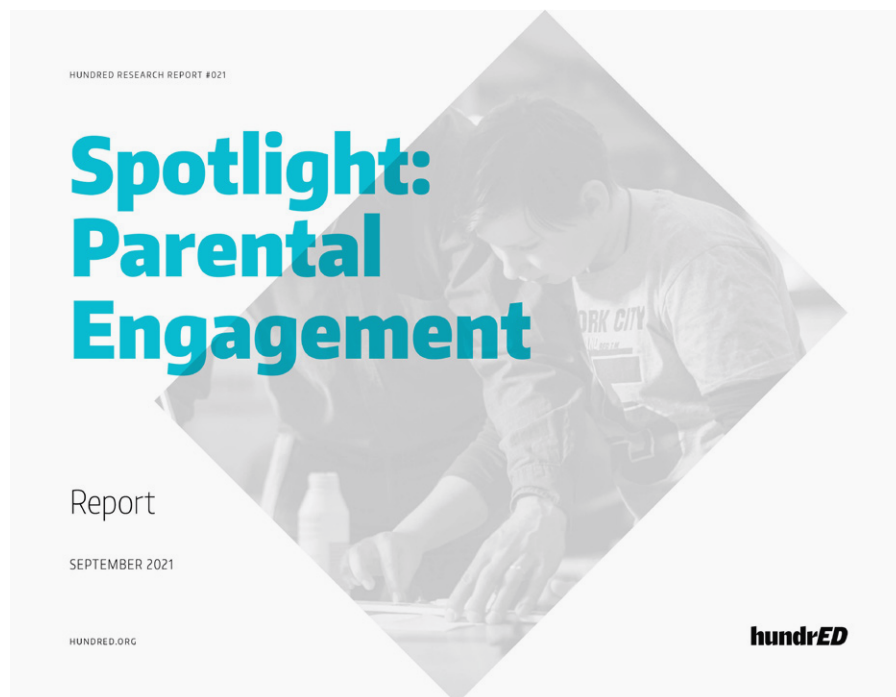
**ESL** - English as a Second Language

**FSE** - Family School Engagement

**PA** - Pennsylvania

**PAA** - Parents as Allies

**PDE** - Pennsylvania Department of Education



### HUNDRED SPOTLIGHT ON PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

Our work on Family School Engagement (FSE) with the Parents as Allies consortium had a fitting prequel, HundrED's 2021 Spotlight: Parental Engagement. During Parents as Allies 1.0 in 2021, HundrED focused on identifying impactful and scalable family engagement innovations from around the world. The Spotlight call received 187 innovation submissions from 49 different countries and selected 12 innovations from 12 different countries, spanning five continents. Given HundrED's role as a key agent of educational innovation amplification and involvement with the work being done in Western Pennsylvania, moving from identification to implementation as part of our Tailor-Made work was a natural extension.



## Human Centred Design

Parents as Allies 2.0 engaged fully with the process of human-centered design by supporting the 22 school districts as they developed their own strategies. School districts were introduced to the design sprint process, facilitated by Kidsburgh and supported and amplified by Learning Heroes, The Brookings Institution, and HundrED.

Human-centered design is based on the fundamental concept that we must understand human needs and behaviours in order to develop effective and useful products or solutions. Schools2030, a ten-year project soliciting educational innovations based on human-centered Design, holds that:

*“Using the stakeholder-focused, iterative process of human-centered design can provide helpful structures for creating more equitable solutions for all people, even those who are traditionally underrepresented. By creating a community-driven collaborative process that engages stakeholders in the work of co-creation and iterative feedback, human-centered design can help to identify solutions that will solve real problems and meet important (but sometimes misunderstood) needs.”*<sup>1</sup>

While HundrED is an expert in the identification of education innovations from around the world, working with Kidsburgh and the PAA partners

on this project gave us further insight into the on-the-ground processes that take place during design sprints conducted by teachers, parents, and school leaders.

“It is unreasonable to ask someone to change much more than 10% a year, but it is unreasonable to change by much less than 10% a year.”

– Steve Leinwand



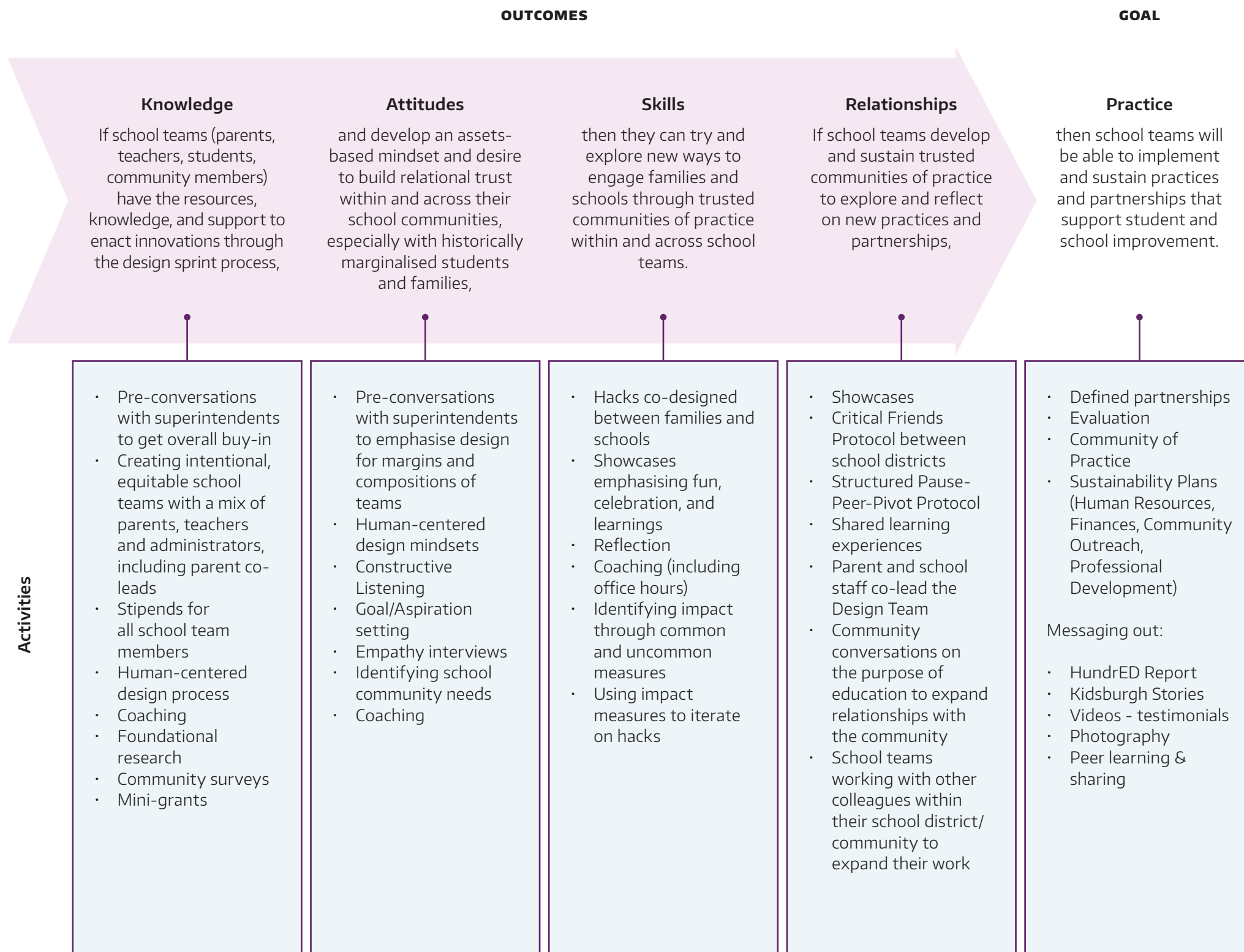


## Theory of Change

The Parents as Allies theory of change is based on two essential ingredients: trust and partnership. They believe that building a strong support system for students in Western Pennsylvania requires that parents, teachers, and school leaders cooperate and communicate in order to implement co-designed strategies for family, school, and community engagement.

“The ultimate goal is to gain the positive outcomes for learners that result from trust and teamwork between schools and parents.”

– Kidsburgh



### PARENTS AS ALLIES PARTNER COMMITMENTS

We, as Parents as Allies partner organisations, commit to:

- Centering the perspectives and needs of school communities (i.e., the parents, teachers, school leaders, and community members participating in and impacted by the work of the Parents as Allies project) by:
  - Recognizing that each school community represents diverse and complex perspectives.
  - Meeting school communities where they are ready to be met.
  - Deferring to school communities as experts on their contexts while supporting them to understand their contexts' nuances.
- Using tools and resources of human-centered design, research, and expertise to guide school communities toward more sustainable, impactful solutions.
- Respecting different ways of thinking and working among school communities and partner organisations to help drive mutual learning in pursuit of responsive collective action.
- Embracing an exploratory research mindset in which we as partners are learning and documenting what works and doesn't work.



### LEARNINGS FROM PARENTS AS ALLIES 1.0

Parents as Allies 1.0 provided the partners and schools involved in PAA 2.0 with valuable lessons. Rather than starting on the ground level, Design Teams had guiding questions to start them on the right track. They reflected on the importance of putting energy into key pieces of the process, like building authentic relationships; honouring the realities of everyone's daily lives; inviting parents to take on new roles; and adapting co-design to fit the needs of the community. Design Teams were able to think carefully and critically about how to ease challenges to FSE while encouraging and supporting the participation of the families and school community, and, most of all, being adaptable and flexible in their approaches.



## Partner Organisations

### THE GRABLE FOUNDATION

Partnerships between like-minded organisations made Parents as Allies a synergistic project for The Grable Foundation. First of all, the foundation's openness and existing commitment to family engagement made them ideal partners and funders for the work of PAA. Their long-standing association with the Remake Learning Network was advantageous to the creation of the partnership with PAA; many of the PAA school districts also participate in Remake Learning. In this way, there was already a strong commitment to the importance of Family School Engagement as well as support for experimentation and trying new things. This alignment of values and ideas has been essential to the success of the project.

Additionally, Grable's membership in the Family Engagement in Education Network, run by the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution, provided another reason for collaboration. Recognising an opportunity to build on Western Pennsylvania schools' participation in the Brookings' research on FSE, the Grable Foundation provided one million dollars to fund the Parents as Allies project. Each participating school district received up to \$2,250 for the design sprint process, up to \$1,000 for hosting a community-oriented Great Learning Conversation and up to \$10,000 in mini-grant funding to test their FSE ideas or "hacks."

The Grable Foundation's willingness to accept the validity of common and uncommon measures (rather than the usual metrics) as benchmarks for the success of the project was key in fostering an enabling environment for trialling FSE hacks.

→ Visit <https://grable.org> for more information on the Grable Foundation

## KIDSBURGH

More than a decade ago, a group of community leaders, child advocates and educators in Pittsburgh had a big dream: If they collaborated and innovated together, the Pittsburgh region could become the best place on earth to raise a kid. We envision a world where every child grows up safe, cared for and surrounded by opportunities to learn and create.

Kidsburgh serves Western Pennsylvania families and caregivers with deliberate goals in mind: to help them discover the many resources for children in the region and to offer solid reporting and expert advice about the challenges of raising healthy, thriving children.

Each week, Kidsburgh publishes original stories and content designed to inform and inspire parents and caregivers as they navigate our city and their daily lives. We also collaborate with media partners to deliver a wide range of news about everything from learning and child development to arts, culture, health, wellness and much more. Kidsburgh also features a robust calendar of kid-friendly events happening throughout our region, as well as directories of child-serving organisations and school districts. As we do this work, Kidsburgh is deeply committed to and will continue to purposefully discuss and deepen our knowledge, understanding, and commitment to diversity, equity, accessibility, inclusion, and antiracism.

Kidsburgh strives every day to do better and to be better at fostering an authentic sense of belonging for all.

### Kidsburgh's Role in Parents as Allies

Growing and maintaining the partnership between schools and families, as well as giving a voice to marginalised individuals in that relationship, were two of the driving forces behind Kidsburgh's involvement in PAA. Kidsburgh's role in the Tailor-Made project was one of creating and maintaining the structure of the project. More significantly, we also trusted the organic nature of the process. Kidsburgh held space for and tied together these two opposing but essential ideas, and collected the stories that came out of the participants' experiences.

→ Visit <https://kidsburgh.org> for more information on Kidsburgh

## LEARNING HEROES

Learning Heroes partners with states, districts, schools and organisations that want to strengthen their family engagement practice. Learning Heroes has listened to thousands of parents, teachers, students, and educators in over 25 US states through more than 200 focus groups, more than 10 national quantitative surveys, as well as ethnography sessions and in-depth interviews. Learning Heroes provides research based support on effective, clear, and action-oriented communications with parents. The goal is to improve student learning and well-being, and to facilitate home-school connections as an engine for equity in schools.

According to Learning Heroes' national research in the United States, there is a big gap between what parents think about their child's grade level progress compared to how their child is actually doing. Learning Heroes' mission is to inform and equip parents to best support their children's educational and developmental success. They focus on helping parents get the accurate picture they need and deserve so as to best support learning at home. Learning Heroes envisions that with parents as their children's learning heroes, children excel in school, leading lives of opportunity.

## Learning Heroes' Role in Parents as Allies

Learning Heroes was one of the consultants to the Design Teams in the PAA project. They assisted the Design Teams when they were making their first applications for funding, helping them to think about what they wanted to propose for their hack(s). Learning Heroes also hosted office hours, an informative talk, and a presentation about building trust and sustaining the progress of the hacks.

→ Visit <https://bealearninghero.org> for more information on Learning Heroes

### **BROOKINGS CENTER FOR UNIVERSAL EDUCATION**

Founded in 2002, the Center for Universal Education (CUE) is a leading policy centre focused on universal quality education and skills development around the world. The Center plays a critical role in accelerating education change so that all learners can thrive in a rapidly changing world. CUE helps inform the development of policy related to global education and promotes actionable strategies for governments, civil society, and private enterprise.

CUE's work focuses on:

- Conducting innovative research and developing tools or frameworks to achieve quality learning for all;
- Strengthening global education systems' capacity through facilitating workshops, developing networks, and providing on the ground technical support and advice; and
- Shaping the policy debate by elevating global education priorities on the international agenda and hosting convenings to incubate ideas.

In 2021, Brookings worked with several school districts in Southwestern Pennsylvania to survey parents and teachers about their educational beliefs. They held follow-up trainings and dialogues to help districts

think about how to build alignment between families and schools. Out of this research, Brookings published their *Playbook for Family School Engagement*, which provides a conversation starter toolkit for families and schools to use to start important conversations about the purpose of education as a springboard for change.

The playbook was developed from the premise that “hard-to-reach families were not opposed to engaging with schools; it was just that the schools’ approaches to engagement were getting in the way.”<sup>2</sup> Brookings supports the schools in developing novel approaches to FSE.

### **Brookings’ Role in Parents as Allies**

Brookings provided learning sessions to dive into their research: nearly 25,000 parents were surveyed with the help of 49 organisations across 12 countries (approximately 1,600 parents and 330 teachers from Southwestern Pennsylvania participated). Many of their materials are also available for school districts to use.

→ Visit <https://www.brookings.edu/centers/center-for-universal-education/> for more information on Brookings Center for Universal Education

## HUNDRED

HundrED is a global mission-driven organisation transforming K12 education. Our mission is to give recognition and visibility to practitioners who are driving innovative, impactful, and scalable approaches in education all around the world. At HundrED we believe that through identifying, amplifying, and facilitating the implementation of education innovations we can transform education systems, equip students with the skills to thrive as global citizens, and ultimately help every child flourish.

HundrED's participation in the Parents as Allies work is part of our innovation implementation work, our Tailor-Mades, where we learn from practitioners how they are innovating and scaling innovations within their local education ecosystems. Working with PAA has given us a chance to iterate our Tailor-Mades, applying and incorporating human-centered design principles across HundrED Tailor-Mades internationally. A key goal of the HundrED Tailor-Made process is to co-develop and scale impactful innovations with educators and administrators, increase practitioners' skills, tools and know-how to manage implementation processes, and adapt innovations to the situation at hand, while also ensuring that the innovations remain desirable, sustainable, and effective.

## HundrED's Role in Parents as Allies

HundrED's role in PAA was in communicating the impact of the FSE work in each school district to the international education community. Learnings from this latest project in Western PA were shared at the HundrED Summit in Helsinki, Finland, in November 2023, with the goal of inspiring those in attendance to continue the work by designing and/or implementing strategies for FSE.

→ Visit <https://hundred.org> for more information on HundrED.



# Chapter 1: Context



# Partnering to Champion Family School Engagement in Western Pennsylvania

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## FAMILY SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

Pennsylvania's educational system, like those in the rest of the United States, is made of public and private schools.<sup>3</sup> Public education (which also includes charter schools) is under the jurisdiction of the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). The US Department of Education plays a limited role in educational policy by exchanging compliance with federal education statutes for funding; most policy-making happens at the state and local levels. PDE oversees its 500 school districts, which are governed by elected school boards. This hierarchical system of educational governance allows for and requires decisions to be made at each level, finally reaching the schools, classrooms, and students and their families.

Pittsburgh, the seat of Allegheny County, is the second largest city in the state. Historically known for its steel industry and trade in natural resources, Pittsburgh underwent a major transformation in the latter half of the twentieth century, and by the 1990s, had grown to become a leader in non-industrial areas, including education. It is home to The Grable Foundation, an organisation with a long history of funding educational initiatives in Southwestern Pennsylvania. As Linda Krynski, Director of Kidsburgh, notes,

*"Southwestern Pennsylvania is known for a very generous philanthropic community, so that school districts here have learned to apply for grants that allow them to do things or be part of opportunities that allow them to experiment: it does create a culture."*<sup>4</sup>

That culture of educational philanthropy continues through a commitment to supporting the work of Parents as Allies. The strength of the education innovation community demonstrated in the Spotlight on Pittsburgh and the Spotlight on Parental Engagement would be funnelled into improving Family School Engagement.

## IMPROVING FAMILY SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

*"In one longitudinal study across 200 public elementary schools in Chicago<sup>5</sup> researchers identified five key supports that together determined whether schools could substantially improve students' reading and math scores: school leadership, family and community engagement, education personnel capacity, school learning climate, and instructional guidance. Crucially, schools improved most when all five supports were present. A sustained weakness in even one of these elements led schools to stagnate, showing little improvement."<sup>6</sup>*

According to the research done by The Brookings Institution Center for Universal Education, three main barriers significantly hinder family-school engagement in education systems today. These barriers are interrelated and impact the effectiveness of collaboration between schools and families.

### Barrier 1: Lack of Competencies and Training

One critical challenge is that schools and education personnel often lack the necessary competencies and training in family engagement. Historically, family engagement hasn't been at the core of educational design, resulting in limited professional development and support for educators. For instance, in the United States, less than half of states require school leaders to learn effective family engagement strategies, and even fewer require it for teachers. This training gap can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding between educators and families, affecting collaboration efforts.

### Barrier 2: Uncertainty and Unwelcome Feelings

Families, particularly from marginalised communities, often feel uncertain about how to engage with schools or, worse, feel unwelcome. Various reasons contribute to this, such as limited communication, inflexible school structures, and historical discrimination experiences by parents during their own schooling. Many parents express a desire to engage but lack clarity on how to do so effectively, leading to missed opportunities for collaboration.

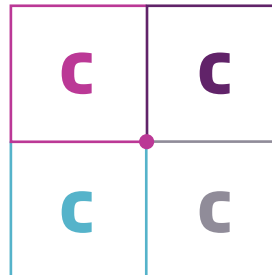
### Barrier 3: Limited Attention and Funding

Family School Engagement has received limited attention, research, and funding. Despite a dedicated community of researchers and practitioners, it remains a relatively small area of focus in education. Searches in educational databases show significantly more articles about teachers than parents, indicating a gap in research. Education philanthropy also tends to exclude parents from the conversation, with minimal funding directed toward addressing family needs and wants. These limitations hinder the growth and development of effective FSE strategies.

## THE DUAL CAPACITY FRAMEWORK FOR FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

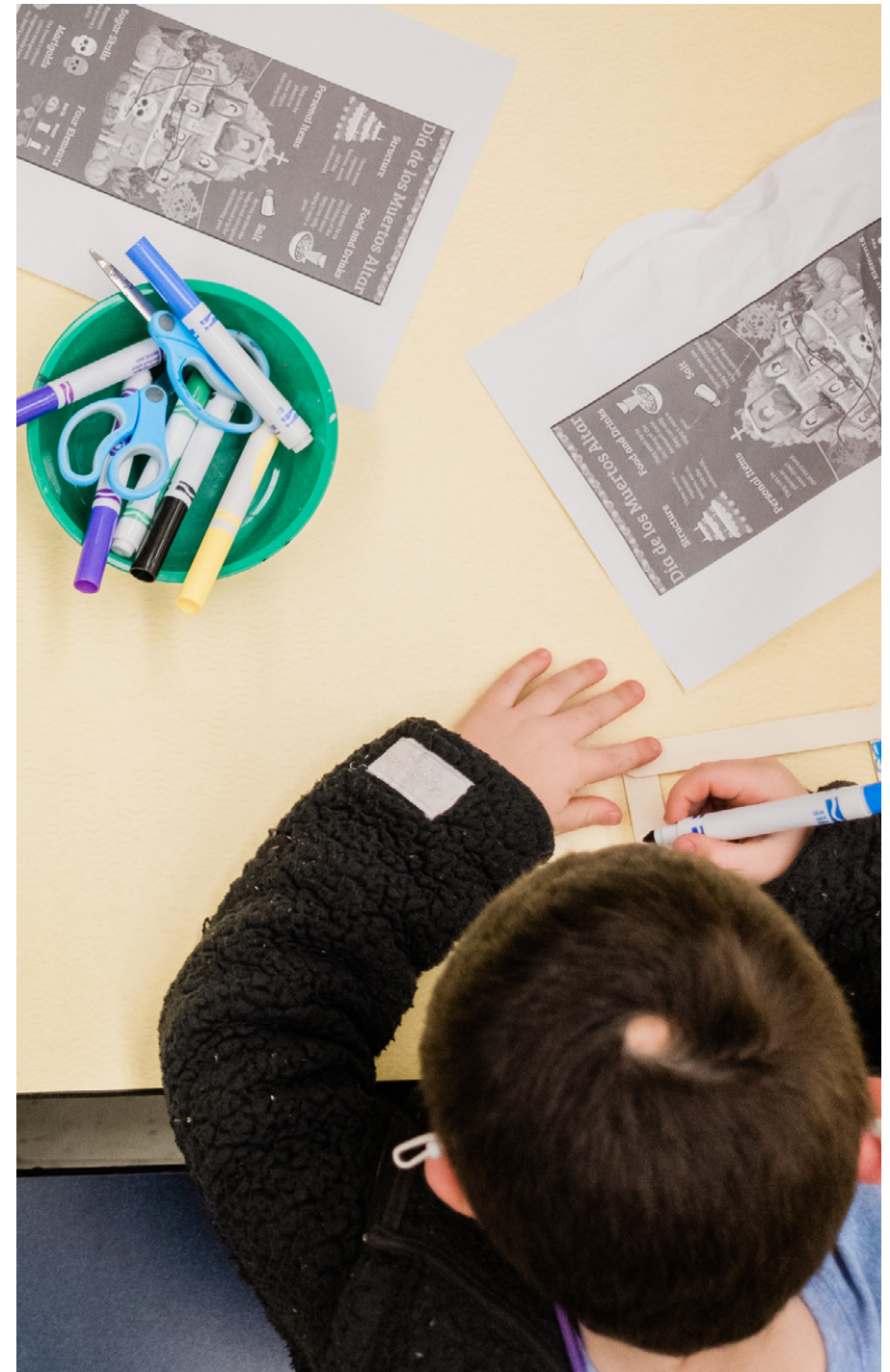
Developed by Karen Mapp and Eyal Bergman, the Dual Capacity Framework for Family-School Partnerships is a conceptual model designed to support student and school improvement by building capacity for effective engagement between families and educators.<sup>7</sup> This framework emphasises shared responsibility between families and schools, fosters collaborative relationships, promotes clear, two way communication. It ensures that families have the knowledge they need to support learning at home and facilitates family involvement in decision-making processes. It also underscores the importance of leadership within schools and districts, as well as continuous improvement efforts to refine family engagement practices systematically.

Achieving the goals of FSE, with a focus on developing the “4 Cs” (Capabilities, Connections, Cognition, and Confidence), necessitates the creation of essential process conditions:











- Fostering relational bonds built on mutual trust;
- Integrating family involvement into the learning and development process;
- Adopting an asset-based approach that recognizes the strengths and contributions of all stakeholders, ensuring cultural responsiveness and respect;
- Promoting collaboration; and
- Facilitating interactive communication.<sup>8</sup>

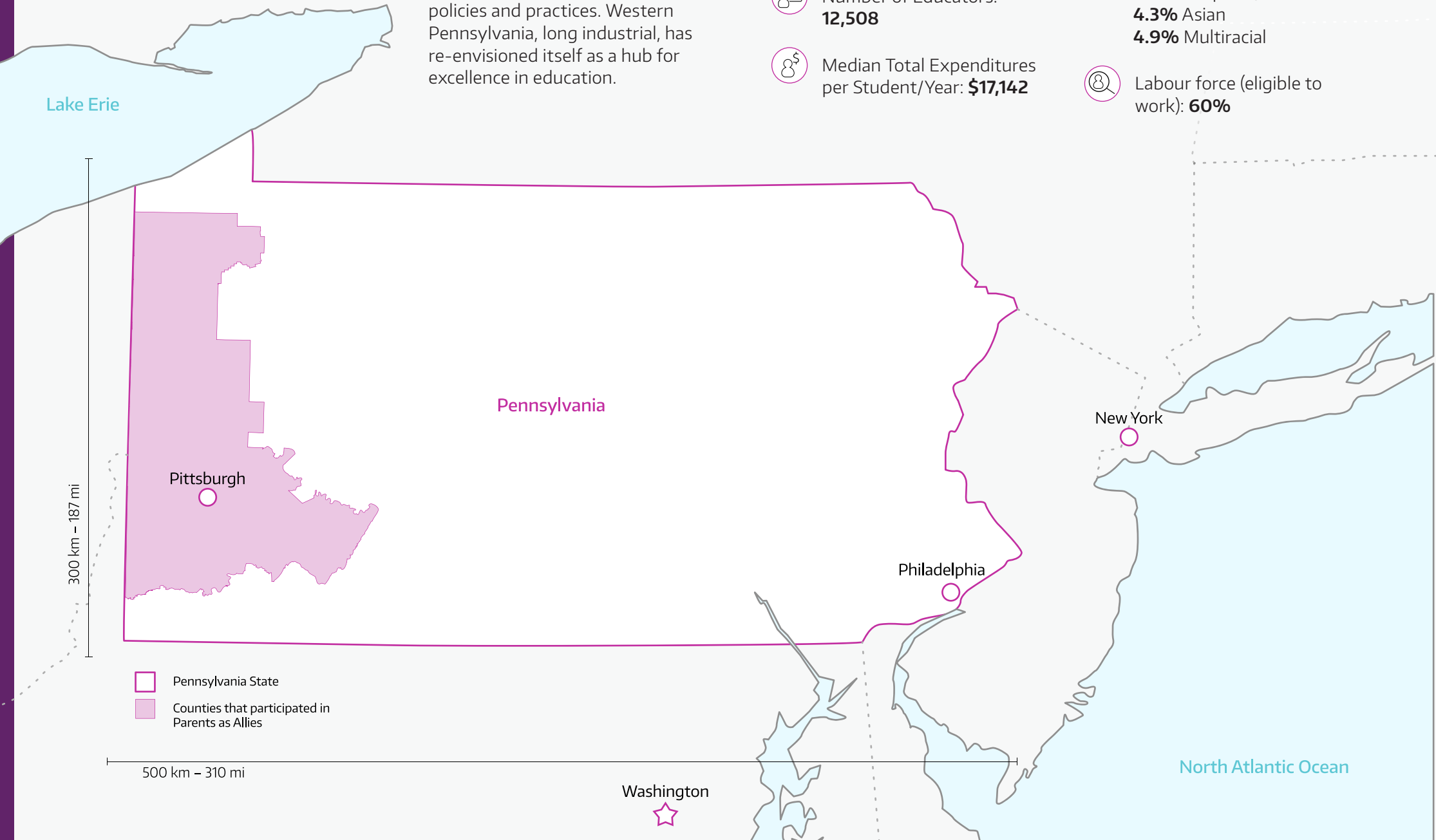
We know that organisational conditions are essential, requiring systemic support from leadership throughout the educational institution, integration of family engagement into all strategies, and the provision of sustained resources and infrastructure to enable a successful and lasting partnership between families and schools.

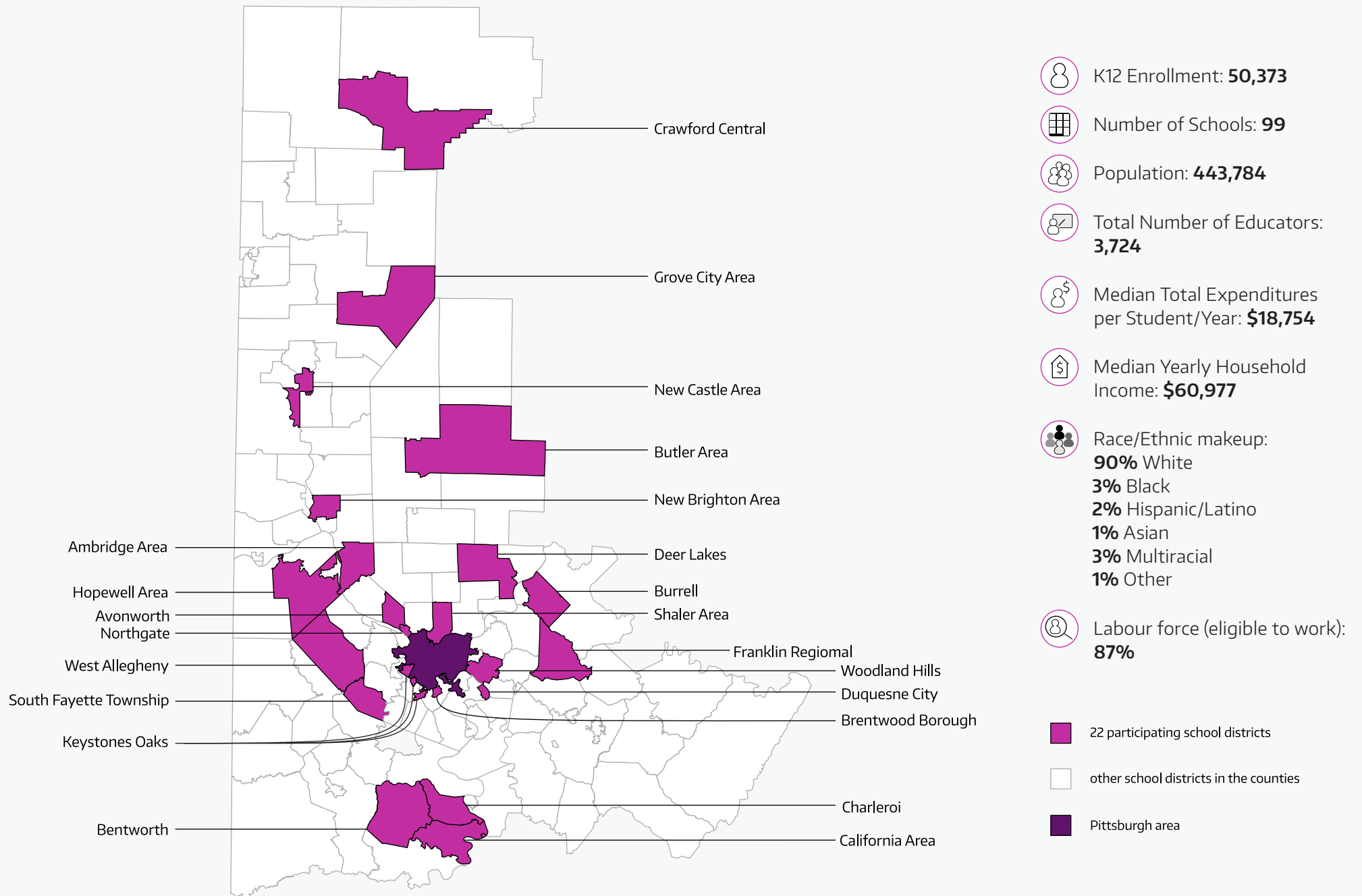


# K12 Education in Pennsylvania

Location plays a critical role in socio-economics and educational policies and practices. Western Pennsylvania, long industrial, has re-envisioned itself as a hub for excellence in education.

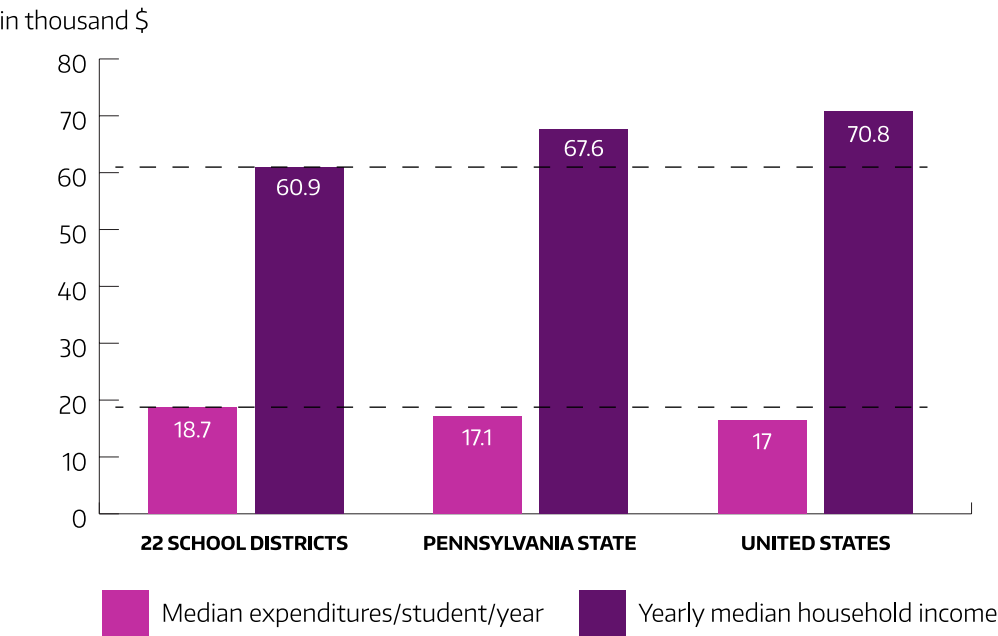
-  K-12 Enrollment: **1.7 M**
-  Number of Schools: **2,947**
-  Population: **13 M**
-  Number of Educators: **12,508**
-  Median Total Expenditures per Student/Year: **\$17,142**
-  Median Yearly Household Income: **\$67,587**
-  Race/Ethnic makeup:
  - 62.3%** White
  - 14.6%** Black
  - 13.7%** Hispanic/Latino
  - 4.3%** Asian
  - 4.9%** Multiracial
-  Labour force (eligible to work): **60%**



THE BIG PICTURE: 22 PARTICIPATING DISTRICTS IN NUMBERS<sup>9</sup>

COMPARING STATE AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Student Expenditures and Household Income<sup>10</sup>

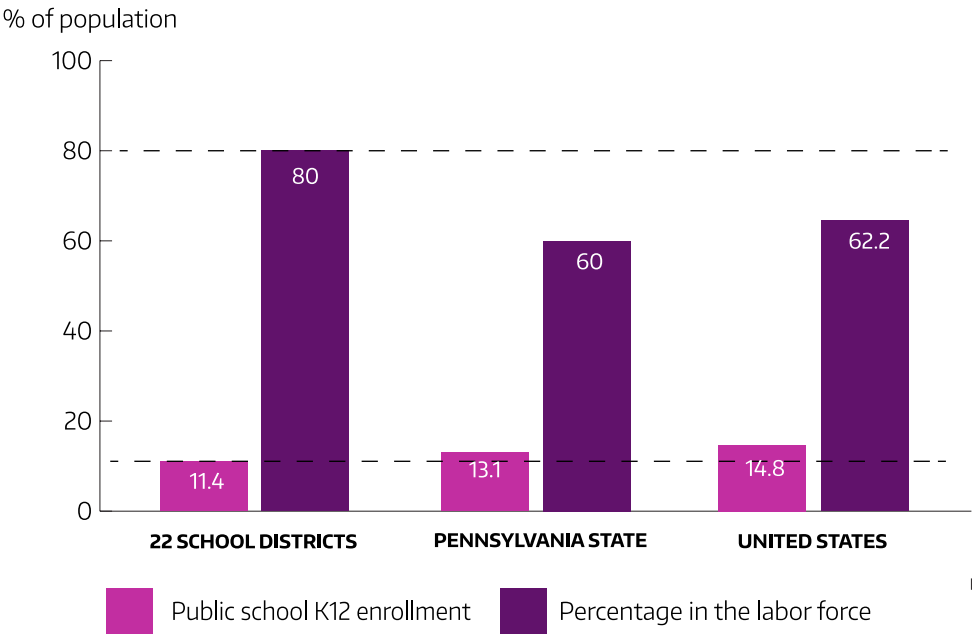


INCOME AND FUNDING

In the United States school funding generally comes from three main sources: the state government, the US Federal Government, and local property taxes. According to Duquesne University Law School's Juris Magazine, in Pennsylvania "...38% of school district revenues are funded by the state. After adding a sliver of federal funding, local property taxes are forced to make up the remaining 58%."<sup>11</sup> The overwhelming reliance on local property taxes to fund schools leads to inequalities in resources, and ultimately, the education that children receive.

The 22 districts that participated in PAA covered a range of socio-economic statuses from low- to middle-income, where, by US standards, the low-to-high income range is \$30,000-\$220,000 per year.<sup>12</sup> However, their yearly median household income was higher than the state's median. The median expenditures per student per year fell a bit under the rest of the state, but was higher than the US. Given schools' and families' financial situations, the mini-grants that the school districts received were a necessary part of facilitating the co-design and implementation processes.

K12 Enrollment and Labour Force<sup>13</sup>



LEARNING AND WORKING

The daily lives of children and their caregivers revolve around school and work. In the United States, compulsory education begins in most states at kindergarten (age 6) and ends upon completing grade 12 (age 18). According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the labour force includes anyone over the age of 16, employed or unemployed, who is actively looking for work or working.<sup>14</sup> In the state of Pennsylvania, K12 enrollment is at approximately 13% of the population, and 60% of residents are eligible to work. This is in line with the US as a whole, where K12 enrollment is 15%, and 62% of the residents are eligible to work. However, across the PAA participating school districts, K12 enrollment is almost 12% but well over 80% of the residents are eligible to work. From this data, we can picture the situation of the families and understand how socio-economics might play a role in how families prioritise engaging with the schools.

# Collection of Voices

Questions pulled from interviews with co-leads and partners.

## WHAT NEW MINDSETS AND PERSPECTIVES WILL YOUR CO-CREATION TEAM TAKE WITH THEM FROM THIS EXPERIENCE?



"We have done a good job of bringing in kindergarten families but we need to start to build trust with other elementary level grade levels and families. We are reminded that it's ok to start small and then grow."

– Danielle Zurisko, School co-lead, Woodland Hills School District



"If you reach one parent and build an authentic relationship, it can lead to bigger things. As a parent, it was huge to be invitees to a small intimate conversation to be heard."

– Twaina Williams, Parent co-lead, Burrell School District



"All parents want to be there for their kids, but they don't necessarily know how. Whether you're new to the community or you struggled academically yourself as a student, you can do these things for your kids."

– Mark Killinger, School co-lead, Charleroi School District

## WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS CAN YOU SHARE FOR THOSE LOOKING TO INCREASE FAMILY-SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?



"When parents are the leaders of the team it doesn't feel top down. The ideas go further when parents feel like they have a more expanded role. Parents feel like they are the success or failure; this idea runs with them. We've learned that you have to drive parents towards that with a little bit of structure."

– Adha Mendis, Kidsburgh's Human-centered design facilitator



"When school leaders let families into schools and let them assume roles beyond volunteering at events and raising funds, deep opportunities for family, school, and community engagement emerge."

– Emily Morris, CUE at The Brookings Institution

## WHAT STOOD OUT THE MOST TO YOU ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE?



"Hearing the Design Teams talk about it really makes you have this moment of an emotional response. Everyone really cares, but they've just never had the opportunity to come together and try something."

– Yu-Ling Cheng, Kidsburgh

# The implementation journey and innovations within the 22 districts

**AMBRIDGE AREA**

SCHOOLS: 3  
STUDENTS: 2300  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**BURRELL**

SCHOOLS: 4  
STUDENTS: 1738  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**CRAWFORD CENTRAL**

SCHOOLS: 8  
STUDENTS: 3100  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**AVONWORTH**

SCHOOLS: 4  
STUDENTS: 2100  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**BUTLER**

SCHOOLS: 2  
STUDENTS: 501  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**DEER LAKES**

SCHOOLS: 1  
STUDENTS: 430  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**BENTWORTH**

SCHOOLS: 3  
STUDENTS: 1150  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**CALIFORNIA**

SCHOOLS: 2  
STUDENTS: 979  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**DUQUESNE CITY**

SCHOOLS: 1  
STUDENTS: 357  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**BRENTWOOD BOROUGH**

SCHOOLS: 4  
STUDENTS: 1150  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**CHARLEROI**

SCHOOLS: 3  
STUDENTS: 1400  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

**FRANKLIN REGIONAL**

SCHOOLS: 4  
STUDENTS: 3300  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)



**GROVE CITY**

SCHOOLS: 3  
STUDENTS: 1800  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)



**NEW CASTLE**

SCHOOLS: 4  
STUDENTS: 3000  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)



**WEST ALLEGHENY**

SCHOOLS: 5  
STUDENTS: 3500  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)



**HOPEWELL AREA**

SCHOOLS: 5  
STUDENTS: 2107  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)



**NORTHGATE**

SCHOOLS: 3  
STUDENTS: 1000  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)



**WOODLAND HILLS**

SCHOOLS: 5  
STUDENTS: 3500  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)



**KEYSTONE OAKS**

SCHOOLS: 5  
STUDENTS: 1800  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)



**SHALER**

SCHOOLS: 7  
STUDENTS: 3900  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)



**NEW BRIGHTON**

SCHOOLS: 3  
STUDENTS: 1300  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)



**SOUTH FAYETTE**

SCHOOLS: 4  
STUDENTS: 3500  
TARGET GROUP: PARENTS

→ [Implementation](#)  
→ [Innovation](#)

# Chapter 2: Journey



## Small Wins, Big Stories

### ITERATING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

United in their common goal to increase Family School Engagement, the twenty-two school district Design Teams participating in the Parents as Allies initiative nevertheless had unique experiences. Through their shared exploration of human-centered design, they were able to develop hacks tailored specifically to their needs around FSE. This development process, as we have alluded to already, was not as simple as coming up with an idea and putting it into successful practice, like a straight line from point A to point B. The co-leads and their Design Teams had to experiment with the guidance of experts, trialling mini-hacks to test for efficacy, then evaluate, iterate, test, and evaluate again. What resulted from these focused and intentional efforts was a far richer understanding of FSE than we might have expected, because Design Teams reflected deeply on the process as well as common and uncommon measures of success.

In this section of the report, we give you a glimpse into the individual experiences of each school district: their aspirations, hacks, and learnings. These learning journeys are also shared on HundrED's Implementation and Innovation/hack pages, which we encourage you to browse for ideas you might be able to use in your own school or school district.

### PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

**Invest time and energy in building authentic relationships as a key starting point (and maybe end goal, too):** Across Design Teams, parents and leaders found the human connection essential to their school-based work, but also a powerful outcome of the work. How might we approach FSE from a place of true relationship building first?

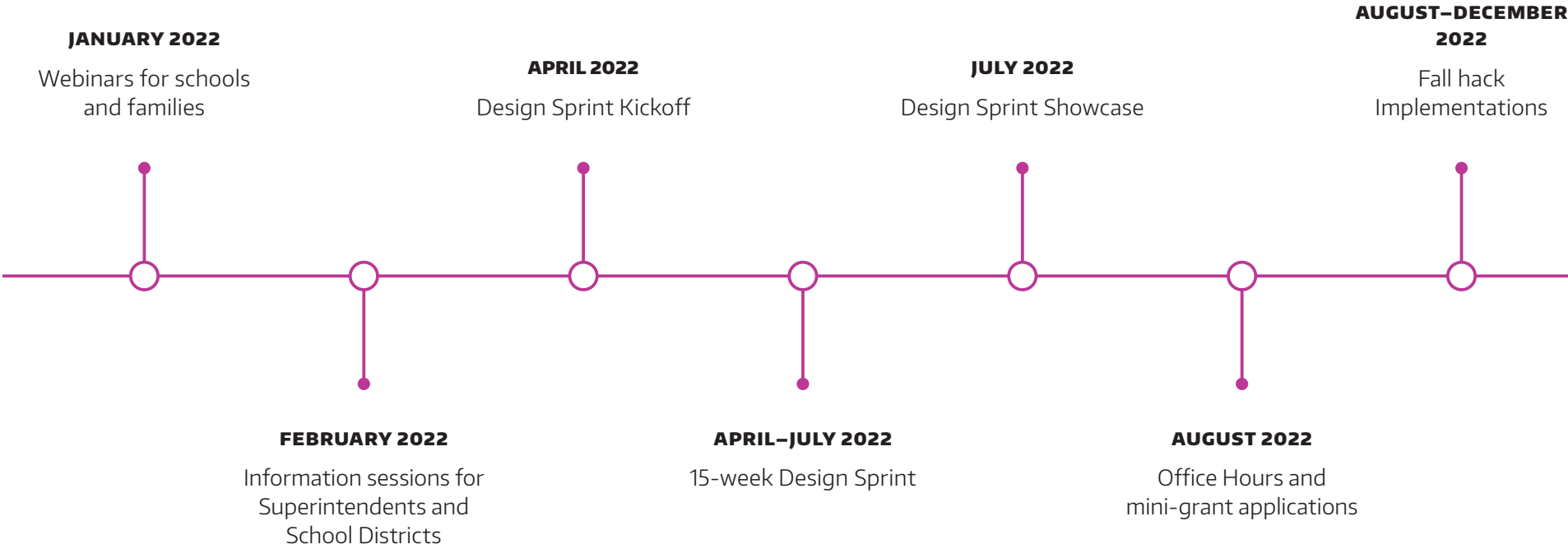
**Honour the realities and challenges of families' and educators' real lives:** It is an understatement to say that this is a challenging time for schools and families. How might we design family engagement that eases rather than exacerbates those challenges?

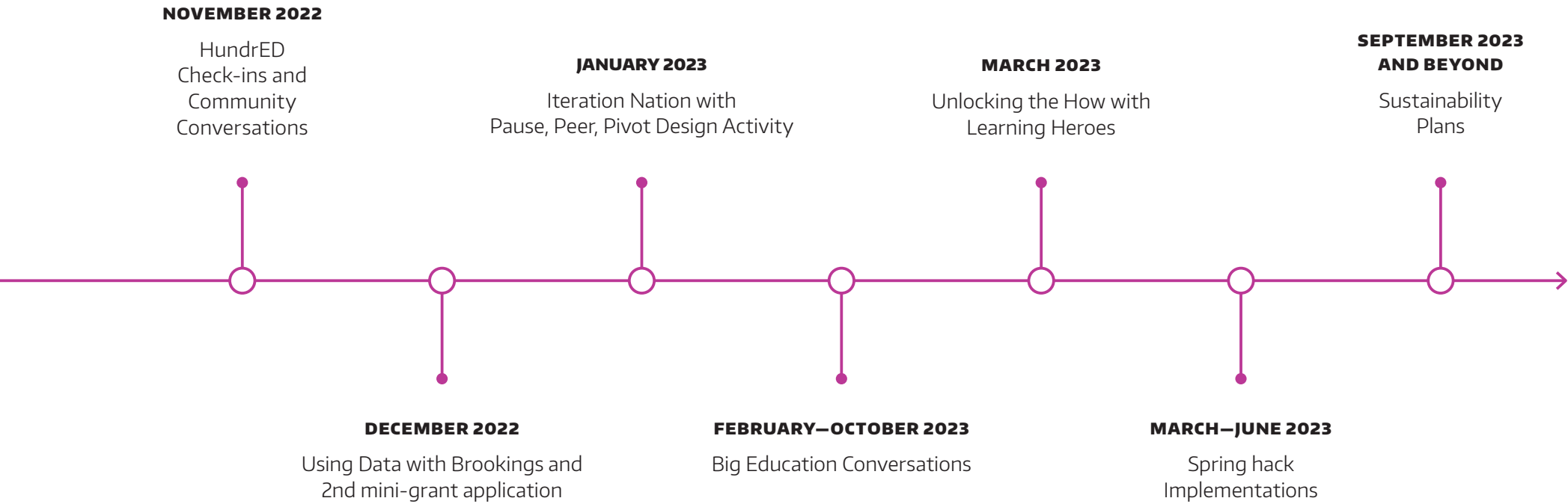
**Create the space to invite parents in, supporting them in taking on new roles:** The parents in this challenge were glad to be asked to join as leads and meaningful contributors. They also sometimes needed support or training to engage with the school in a new way. How might we encourage and support the full school community to participate?

**Adapt the tools and processes of co-design to your community's needs:** In this challenge, school teams used the Co-Designing Schools Toolkit. Once they had used the kit a first time with a facilitator and were familiar, they adapted the processes to suit their context and projects. How might we design for adaptability and remain flexible in our approach to family engagement?

# Families and Schools in Action

## PAA 2.0 TIMELINE





# 1.

## Alignment & Aspirations

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The Parents as Allies project built on the work of Center for Universal Education at Brookings and the diverse communities who collaborated on their [Playbook for Family-School Engagement](#). Through the use of human-centered design practices, trust and teamwork between schools and parents became more intentional. Empathy interviews were key during this phase; the information gleaned from the interviews gave the PAA Design Teams a sense of purpose and togetherness. This phase served as an opportunity for Design Teams to try out the process before taking the next steps.



*It all starts with a commitment to try!*

*Open hearts*

*Placing parents at the centre: co-designing solutions together with parents*



### ALIGNMENT VIA ASPIRATION

Teams took their ambition and boiled it down to one hopeful guiding statement. Although each School District had its own unique needs with respect to FSE, it was important to encourage them to find purpose and alignment with all of the other Design Teams through selecting one of the four PAA Aspiration Statements.

### ASPIRATION STATEMENTS

We will **understand family and educator beliefs** about the purpose of school.

We will **build trust** between families, educators, and administrators.

We will **create opportunities for engagement** in ways that are responsive to diverse language, cultural, socioeconomic and gender backgrounds.

We will **build opportunities for teamwork** between families, educators and administrators to support students' learning and wellbeing.

STEPS



IN ACTION

1

Kidsburgh leads information sessions for Superintendents and School Districts; School Districts and Superintendents commit to participation in the Parents as Allies initiative.

The initiative started with a meeting to create committed teams. The 22 school district teams consisted of 5-7 parents and school representatives.

In the first iteration of PAA, PAA 1.0, parents led the teams. In the 2.0 iteration, PAA coordinators realised that a collaborative partnership between families and schools is usually well facilitated by shared leadership between a parent and a teacher or school leader.

2

Kickoff of PAA 2.0: Introduction to Human Centred Design and Design Sprints

Kidsburgh's inspirational Human-centered Design facilitators joined the school district teams and introduced them to the design sprint process.

## 2. Selection

Design sprints were the first part of the human-centered design experience, and culminated in the Hero's Journey Showcase. The design sprint allowed the co-leads to test out the process by creating mini-hacks. The Hero's Journey Showcase was an opportunity for all 22 districts to come together and share their design processes.



## STEPS



## IN ACTION

1

Trial through mini-hacks. By ideating and testing with support from facilitators, the Design Teams could explore multiple ways to tackle their challenges.

At the Design Sprint Showcase after the 15-week design process and implementation of 22 Mini-hacks, the Design Teams met to build community, align their teams with an aspiration, conduct empathy interviews, ideate, gather feedback and showcase their work.

2

Receiving feedback is the key to meaningful growth. By asking families about their experience, Design Teams were able to iterate on their mini-hacks.

Office hours with Learning Heroes revealed key pieces of FSE: trust-building, relationships and teamwork between teachers and parents. Design Teams used these lessons to improve on their mini-hacks.

3

Share experiences with other Design Teams through the Hero's Journey Showcase. Teams could collaborate and learn through seeing beyond their own work, building excitement around FSE and cheering each other on.

Design Sprint Showcase: After 15 weeks and 22 small mini-hacks, the Design Teams came together to celebrate and reflect on their Hero's Journey. Teams created posters to commemorate the process and prepared themselves for the next step: developing the fall hacks.

### 3.

## Implementations of the Fall & Spring Hacks

---

The 22 school districts' journey, already well underway, entered the experimentation phase. The mini-hacks behind them, it was now time for trialling some newly brainstormed fall hacks, gathering feedback, iterating, and trialling hacks in the spring.



## STEPS



## IN ACTION

1

Fall hack trialling. Design Teams had four months to prepare for and experiment with the hacks they developed after the design sprint.

School districts apply for their first mini-grant of \$5000 to fund their fall hack. Interested districts meet with Learning Heroes to ideate.

Fall hacks showcase the power of events in developing FSE.

2

Reflection. Engagement with HundrED, Brookings, Learning Heroes, and Kidsburgh experts gave Design Teams an opportunity to continuously reflect on the process of trialling.

Co-lead check-ins with Kidsburgh and HundrED give the PAA initiative international visibility; key themes around successful FSE activities emerge.

District wide Community Conversations are conducted to drum up continued support for FSE.

PAA survey-inspired session with the Brookings Institution about how to use data in supporting FSE.

3

Iteration and preparation. Riding the wave of their fall hack, Design Teams could take some time to reflect on what their common and uncommon measures of success were, and in that way plan for the spring hack.

School districts are encouraged to apply for another mini-grant of \$5000 to fund their spring hack.

"Iteration Nation" event with Kidsburgh's human-centered design facilitators gives Design teams a chance to reflect on the fall hacks. Design teams use the Pause-Peer-Pivot Protocol to talk about their progress and be critical friends to push each other forward in developing their spring hacks.

4

Spring hack trialling. Design Teams had four months to prepare for and experiment with the hacks they developed after the fall hack.

Spring hack sees some schools taking new directions on their FSE strategies, while others stick to the tried and true activities.

Big Education Conversations are a part of some of the spring hacks. The conversations grow from simple prompts that encourage families to respond in a comfortable way.

## Summarising the Strategies and Hacks

With so many hacks and strategies at so many different schools, we found many ways to summarise the amazing work that went on during the Parents as Allies project. In this section we provide a few different ways to group the hacks, focusing on the types of events and their aims.

### FALL HACKS IN FOCUS

#### Community based FSE

School districts embraced creative approaches to connect with their communities right where they are, bringing about a wave of positivity and engagement. California Area planned to collaborate with a local community event before the winter holidays in 2022, setting up a booth where families could create sentimental keepsakes like photos or 3D prints. It was a unique opportunity for families to make lasting memories together. Similarly, Ambridge Area organised a tailgate party in a community with historically lower parental involvement. The outcome was positive – a record-breaking turnout filled with lively conversations, spontaneous dancing, and delicious food. A significant number of participants had not typically been active in school events, and even parents who were regular attendees joined in with great enthusiasm. Many families did not even stay for the game; they were just thrilled to have a school event right in

their neighbourhood. This triumph paved the way for a Halloween event at Ambridge Area Middle School, with parents eagerly volunteering to help with decorations. Parent co-lead Nate Harmon, an alumnus of the school, expressed his amazement, saying,

*"This is the first time I've ever seen Halloween decorations at the school. Witnessing parents stepping up like this is already yielding positive results."*

Duquesne City also made strides in community engagement by hosting a resource fair on the same day as parent-teacher conferences. The event featured over 20 local vendors and drew an enthusiastic crowd. Teachers were even able to provide immediate support to students, connecting them with valuable resources within the community. Meanwhile, New Brighton orchestrated a similar event focused on community groups, with 30 participants. Their dual objective was to establish the school as a trusted community hub while enhancing the flow of information to parents about available family activities.

In New Castle, the key to connecting with parents involved adapting their online strategy. A co-lead recognized that communication was faltering because parents weren't logging into the school portal where important information was shared. Upon gathering feedback from parents, they



identified Facebook as a more effective channel. Posting photos on the school's new Facebook page generated an outpouring of positivity, with parents sending shout-outs to the school.

### **Kids lead the way**

Shaler Area hosted "Sunday Funday" for their incoming 4th grade families to get to know each other and the teachers. During the event the kids started modelling for the parents how to interact with new people. Parents joined in when they saw their children safely hang out and play. Similarly, Brentwood Borough's focus on bringing in middle school families from international backgrounds started with the students; if the kids were excited, they would pull the parents in. Brentwood Borough's co-leads knew that at that age, the students would facilitate the parents coming together. Woodland Hills hosted their kindergarten welcome event at the local fire station in November, once the school year was well underway. Since the kids already knew each other and their teachers, the kids led with their enthusiasm, noticing their classmate's names on the roster and leading their parents to see the real celebrities, their kindergarten teachers.

### **Food brings people together**

West Allegheny's "Dinner and Dialogue" evening simultaneously celebrated culture and language diversity through a meal catered for their ELL families. They provided food and child-friendly activities that represented the families' heritages, and facilitated a dialogue that welcomed the parents to discuss FSE strategies with teachers and administrators. Avonworth organised a family ambassador evening and dinner, where families were paired to get to know each other better. After the meal, while the children had supervised play time, the parents had time to talk. Food also served as the starting point for Bentworth's casual kindergarten welcome event. "Hot Diggity Dog," a communal meal of hotdogs with all the fixings, was a departure from the usual formal information session. This event led to significantly less crying on the first day of school, for both kids and parents.

## Fun breaks down barriers and builds relationships

So many of the hacks were grounded in fun and resulted in parent-teacher relationship-building. Northgate organised parents to be facilitators of the maker space, designing the sessions in a way that the parents and the teachers together as equals. Learning through designing together created some memorable moments, which were even captured on Twitter. Keystone Oaks used their grant to provide teachers with a stipend and a budget for creating activities related to their department on the “Night to Unite.” Over 180 people came, showing the families’ commitment to come into the school and participate with their children.

Butler organised an evening called “STEAM & Play with a Twist,” where teachers and parents could casually mingle and chat in the hallways surrounded by the kids’ artwork, or go into the classrooms and look around. The kids loved going from station to station in a relaxed environment. Hopewell also hosted a family STEM/STEAM evening, with over 250 children in attendance. Parents and students were invested in the event, competing at the cup stacking table and pennies-in-a-tin foil boat challenge. After the event at Hopewell, participation in the afterschool science class went from approximately ten students to full capacity.

Burrell hosted “Fireside Chats” for a cosy evening around six bonfires. The firefighters who attended to monitor the event even joined in the chats. Groups were mixed with parents and teachers, and in this atmosphere some parents started opening up about their experiences and challenges at the school. For Deer Lakes, the informality made all the difference for their fall open house, allowing parents to walk freely in an open format, with the possibility to sign up for conferences if they wanted to talk to the teachers more privately. In a school where 75% of the educators are in the last third of their career, teachers later reflected that it was the best open house they’ve ever had.

## Leveraging Data in Decision-Making

The inspiration for Franklin Regional’s fall hack was drawn from an examination of parent surveys. To design the event, they collaborated with Mentoring Partnership of Southwestern Pennsylvania, an external community organisation, to guide open dialogues where parents had the freedom to express their insights openly. At the same time, Mentoring Partnership gathered anonymous data from the parents, providing the district with valuable information to inform their efforts.

## Welcome to our world

Grove City’s open house welcomed parents into the school, and for the parent co-lead, that was the first time she had been in the building. After the event, she noticed a change almost immediately - her daughter started sharing more about what was going on at school, “She wants to tell me more about her work because I’ve seen it.” The common experience of being in the school together has increased the availability for children to talk about their daily school life at home.

South Fayette led parents through an activity using psychologist John L. Holland’s RIASEC, a tool for gauging personality and vocational choices that the students were also using in their own classes. It was a beautiful way for the parents to also experience what their kids are doing at school by doing it themselves. Another school-based event, “Doughnuts for Grownups,” was also a success at Charleroi, where they held the event in the morning during the school day. Creating an opportunity for parents to be at school in the morning allowed them to see the positive atmosphere at the school, how the school works, and to be with their children in the school. Parents were also seen exchanging phone numbers, extending the relationships outside of school.

Crawford Central diligently addressed the matter of increasing the number of parents authorised to serve as volunteers, creating “Clearance Coaches” in their spring hack to help more parents navigate the process of becoming school volunteers. The schools’ commitment to working to remove the barriers to parent involvement built trust and made parents feel welcomed.



## STRATEGIES THAT FUELED FAMILY SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

### Feedback, Focus Groups and Information sessions

Going through the process of human-centered design taught the schools to prioritise listening to the communities that they served in a variety of different ways. For example, both Ambridge and Franklin Regional organised focus groups to hear about the needs and concerns of their community members. The focus groups helped the team at Ambridge to recognise the disconnect in the communication between parents and the school. Focus groups at Franklin Regional revealed that time was the main obstacle preventing parents from building relationships with the school. Crawford Central took a different approach, organising a tasty event, “Pastries With Our New Principal,” to help parents of incoming kindergarten children obtain clearances and meet the new principal in an informal setting. Feedback from families in Shaler Area revealed that Sundays would be a better day for events. This led to them staging a Sunday 4th grader “Welcome Event” where parents and teachers could connect, on a day when families have fewer commitments.

### Community Engagement Events

Another strategy that schools used was hosting specific Community Engagement Events. Based on family feedback that there should be more student run events, Avonworth organised “Hi Neighbor,” a cultural celebration that allowed families to learn from one another. South Fayette took their events off-campus, hosting social events to foster collaboration and cultural exchange. They even brought students, parents, faculty, and staff together to create communal art installations. Similarly, Woodland Hills took their Kindergarten families’ event to a local fire department, a unique setting where parents and kids alike felt comfortable to engage. New Brighton hosted a year-end Carnival to provide students with a fun summer sendoff and engage parents to volunteer for the event. California Area organised a community 5K race with information booths, local vendors, and wellness stations to reach families they do not engage with often because their children are not involved in after-school sports.

## STEAM and Educational Activities

STEAM and Educational Activities were also popular choices among various schools. Not only did the STEAM events generate fun, they also encouraged parents to learn alongside their children. Burrell introduced “wall activities” for parents to engage in conversations and STEAM stations for students. Butler’s STEAM event focused on career exploration and agriculture with the involvement of parents, scholars, and the community. Northgate had a lot of success developing a program to teach parents about maker principles, so they took it one step further, partnering with nonprofit organisations for K-6 programming, to expand the training.

### Arts and Creative Events

Arts and Creative Events were another way to bring students, parents, and teachers together. After a successful STEAM event, Hopewell organised a Spring Arts Event to attract families. Charleroi partnered with a local “paint and sip” business to organise “Canvases and Cookies,” where teachers and families worked together to create a painted canvas designed with a tree and all the family members’ names. Duquesne City held “The Dukes Showcase” while Deer Lakes organised “Unified Arts Day.” Both events gave students the chance to present what they had been learning to give parents a glimpse of what was happening at school.

### Supporting School Transitions and Orientation

While conducting empathy interviews, several schools came to realise that school transitions were a source of anxiety for students. In response, Bentworth welcomed incoming kindergarten students and allow their families to get to know the school and teachers. Since they were so successful with their fall event, they also hosted “Walkin’ Taco” to help ease the transition for grade 5 students to middle school. Similarly, Keystone Oaks hosted a variety of events targeted to graduating 5th-grade students and their families to help them adapt to middle school, including a movie night, open house, and activities fair.

## Language and Cultural Events

Some of the school districts have a more diverse, multicultural and multilingual school population, requiring a different approach to engage families. New Castle hosted an English Language Learner family movie night with movies in their original language and subtitles in Spanish, accompanied by books for different grade levels. Brentwood Borough added a multicultural day for students where students and teachers ran stations celebrating different cultures and traditions. West Allegheny introduced English as a Second Language classes for adult learners to improve communication with the school district and in the community.



# Chapter 3: Key Learnings



## Understanding Impact Through Common and Uncommon Measures

Parents as Allies' evaluation of the impact of the hacks' contribution to the implementation and sustainability of new FSE practices has drawn on IDEO's framing of measures indicating the potential for behaviour change. IDEO's pioneering work in human-centered design introduced a paradigm shift in the field of forecasting behaviours and designing interventions. Traditionally, behaviour change has been approached through quantitative metrics and conventional data analysis. However, IDEO recognised the limitations of this approach and has championed the use of what they call common and uncommon measures.<sup>15</sup>

Common measures often rely heavily on quantitative and statistical analyses to understand the outcomes of behaviour change. Uncommon measures, typically qualitative, explore the conditions that foster behaviour change, seeking unconventional indicators that may not be immediately apparent. IDEO's innovative perspective challenged the status quo and inspired a more holistic and empathetic approach to driving change, which fellow PAA partner The Brookings Institution also highlighted as an important quality of the human-centered design process. By embracing this way of thinking the PAA partners were able to facilitate a better understanding of the complex dynamics of behaviour change and help the co-leads to create conditions that facilitate meaningful transformations.

In education, common measures are often grades, standardised test scores, graduation rates, or attendance records. For Family School

Engagement, this may look like the number of families attending an open house, percentage of parents or caregivers involved in parent-teacher associations, amount of money raised by parents through fundraising, or the portion of students whose parents volunteer at the school.

Uncommon measures, on the other hand, involve forecasting changes in behaviours and designing interventions to facilitate these changes. This approach is akin to making creative leaps or hacking existing systems to achieve desired outcomes. For example, on a field trip to a museum, one uncommon measure could be observing that students who laugh during an exhibit are more likely to stay longer and engage in discussions about what they're learning. Uncommon measures delve into precursors of creativity and the conditions that foster behaviour change and encompass less conventional signs of success. Even seemingly minor details can serve as uncommon measures.

It's important to note that uncommon measures, while valuable, should not be seen in isolation. They complement common measures and form part of a broader suite of measurements, providing unique insights and clues that help create a more holistic understanding of the impact of a program. In essence, both common and uncommon measures contribute to a comprehensive evaluation of program effectiveness and offer a well-rounded perspective on the changes and innovations it has introduced.



### COMMON MEASURES: BY THE NUMBERS

#### Record Event Attendance

The results of the hacks reflected an impressive turnout at various school events, demonstrating the growing enthusiasm within the school community. For instance, at the tailgate event at Ambridge, 50 families joined in the festivities, with close to 200 people in total attendance. The school's commitment to hosting multiple events was met with a consistently strong response. At Bentworth, the revamped kindergarten orientation saw a significant increase in attendance, with 180 parents participating compared to just 70 the previous year. Similarly, the multi-cultural event at Brentwood Borough garnered immense support, with over 20 students and teachers actively running stations, and the entire high school joining the celebration. When Shaler Area held their 4th grade welcome event on a Sunday, they had over 50% participation, with 170 students out of 300 in attendance. These impressive numbers indicate that families are eager to engage with the school and take part in various events.

#### Increase in the Number of Volunteers

Another positive outcome is the increased willingness of parents to volunteer and actively participate in school activities. More parents stepped forward, raising their hands to volunteer their time and support the school community. This newfound enthusiasm, in turn, led to the emergence of new parent volunteers eager to contribute to events like New Brighton's Carnival. Additionally, teachers benefitted from this surge in volunteerism, gaining access to more chaperones for field trips and participants for school projects and various classroom activities. This collaborative spirit among parents and teachers enhanced the overall school experience and helped build a stronger sense of community.

#### New Certifications, Clearances and Course Participation

The Family School Engagement strategies also positively impacted course participation, certifications, and clearances. Notably, 30 Northgate parents successfully completed certification to become maker teachers, demonstrating their commitment to actively contribute to their children's education. Furthermore, 15 parents at West Allegheny committed to an ESL adult course offered at the school, showcasing a dedication to improving

their own skills and engagement with the school community. Moreover, there was a notable increase in the number of clearances completed at Crawford Central, indicating improved communication and collaboration between parents and the school. These results underscore the positive impact of family involvement on various aspects of the school environment, promoting a more inclusive and supportive educational experience for all.

#### **UNCOMMON MEASURES:**

#### **BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH TRUST, JOY, AND INCLUSIVITY**

##### **Meeting as People: Building Trust**

Informal conversations with teachers helped parents see that the school is approachable and cares. Parents started to realise they were welcome to reach out to the staff, and know the school and principal have high expectations for students. Teachers and parents felt they were building trust and had improved communication. For example, during Burrell Area's "Fireside Chats," themes taken from family feedback helped them to drive the improvement of future communication. California Area wanted to reach the families of students who don't participate in sports. Encouraging them to come out to a community 5K race/walk created an opportunity for trust-building. These efforts, the results of human-centred design, helped ease anxieties, increased parental involvement, and created a positive atmosphere. Continuous learning and improvement were evident as each strategy deepened relationships and revealed the importance of even the smallest efforts in building long-term trust.

##### **Cultural Appreciation and Engagement**

Families from various backgrounds found increased value, appreciation, and respect within their community. Cultural celebrations were embraced by both students and parents, fostering a sense of pride. Franklin Regional gave particular attention to their English Language Learning families by hosting a dinner; the positive results were reflected in the ideas generated during a discussion about the practical supports the schools can provide. Diverse families felt acknowledged and respected, contributing to a more inclusive atmosphere. The community learned and benefitted from many different cultural celebrations as families shared and celebrated their heritage.

##### **Community Building**

These types of engagement efforts had positive effects across the school district. Students asked each other to share more about their cultural celebrations, and parents started to connect with other parents. During the events, students saw their teachers outside of school, which fostered a deeper connection. Duquesne City involved the community in their resource fair, which included local businesses and organisations, showed support for the district and families, strengthening the partnership between school and community. New Castle Area realised that taking families out into the community during a movie night fostered trusting relationships between families as well as families and schools.

When asked about how they measured success for their fall hack, "Donuts with Grownups," Design Team members from Charleroi responded:

"Strong turnout: Out of 118 first graders, about 75 or 80 parents/adults attended. Only about 5 students per class didn't have someone there for them, and in those cases it was often because the adults had to work."

## A Sense of Joy

Fun events created positive interactions between parents, students, and teachers. The events helped open communication channels, and students eagerly showed off their school to parents. Deer Lakes reinvented their open house by inviting families to a street fair, a unique way to spark joy, where parents and teachers paired with teachers for team building activities. Hopewell saw positive engagement through excitement and competition at their STEAM event, where families had fun taking part in hands-on activities.

Positive feedback and word-of-mouth at parent and teacher conferences further reinforced the success of these engagement strategies. In Grove City, hearing from parents and caregivers about their positive experiences at their fall open house event encouraged the development of similar low-stress, fun family nights.

## Breaking Down Barriers and Developing Deeper Understanding

Many of the hacks had the goal to break down barriers created by poor past school experiences. They challenged apprehensions and helped create positive relationships between teachers and parents, building bridges to replace the roadblocks to family involvement. In Butler Area, inviting parents to learn more about performance data collection improved families' understanding and dispelled misconceptions they may have had. Keystone Oaks observed parents' anxiety around talking to teachers lowered when their 5th grade movie night created an informal atmosphere for communication. In Woodland Hills, parents reported feelings of pride and changes in their relationship with the schools. Charleroi wanted to break down barriers early with their "Donuts with Grownups" event. They saw how excited children and teachers were to see the grownups, and this translated to a positive experience for those who attended. Clearly, these barrier-breaking strategies led to a deeper understanding of the needs of families, increased parental comfort in talking to teachers, and exciting anticipation for school.

## Ripple Effects

South Fayette observed ripple effects happening school-wide: families that attended an event talked about it with other families, creating excitement about future activities organised by the school. Avonworth

noticed that these initiatives had a similar ripple effect on the school district, strengthening connections between parents, students, and teachers. These impacts keep widening, as other schools in the districts that did not participate in PAA also are planning to participate in developing new family school partnerships and strategies for engagement.

"Our family school engagement hacks went well. We learned from each hack and continued to improve our next strategy in engaging new students and families. Students were visibly excited when they received their welcome bags. And, we had an incredible turnout at our multi-cultural event. Through our signage project, we created a new display space for students to share about Ramadan."

— Brentwood Borough

**IMPACTS ON PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS**

- Engagement and Collaboration
- Feeling Valued
- Empowerment
- Overcoming Negative School Experiences
- Helping Parents Navigate the System

**IMPACTS ON STUDENTS**

- Excitement and Engagement
- Positive Identity and Pride
- Building Relationships

**IMPACTS ON TEACHERS**

- Building Relationships
- Increased Support
- Positive Collaboration



## ENTHUSIASM FOR PARENTS AS ALLIES

Perhaps the most remarkable impact of the districts' Family School Engagement strategies lies in the sheer excitement and enthusiasm kindled within the participating communities. All of the Parents as Allies partners were impressed by the appetite for inquiry, underpinned by a commitment to addressing deep seated questions and redefining established paradigms of FSE. The December 2022 meeting with The Brookings Institution and Kidsburgh, where schools and community groups convened to share diverse strategies, underscored the collective desire to explore innovative ways of reaching families through research. The excitement stemmed from a readiness to deviate from conventional approaches, both in the design process and in comprehending educators' beliefs and perspectives. The workshop was a time for facilitated connections and attentive listening, providing a platform for schools to express their commitment to change. The co-leads' dedication to supporting the often-overlooked 80% of families and students that do not feel seen or heard, was palpable. Schools demonstrated a shared aspiration to explore various methods of achieving this objective, underlining their unwavering commitment to this transformative work.

Participating in PAA not only whetted the participants' appetite for more but also solidified the districts' commitment to not only including, but centering parents in the co-design of FSE. Trust deepened, and partnerships flourished as a result of these collective efforts. In many districts, what PAA has fostered is nothing short of a culture of change for the participants, where design thinking, iteration, and collaboration have become the guiding principles. It is about building a community that shares a common aspiration for change and actively listens to and centres the needs of parents and students.

The beauty of the PAA initiative lies in its ability to enhance communication, introducing novel methods of dialogue and engagement. It has not only sparked curiosity but has also ignited the desire for positive transformation. The confidence and sense of efficacy that have emerged from this program are palpable. It has instilled a belief that collectively, when parents and teachers co-design, they can make a difference. This collective agency, born out of their shared experiences, is perhaps the most crucial impact of the program.

Moreover, the PAA project has successfully harnessed this curiosity and enthusiasm, paving the way for sustained effort. It has not only provided space to develop innovative solutions, but has also served as a breeding ground for sustainable change. While the program's hacks and solutions may not have been groundbreaking in themselves, and often trended toward traditional models of family engagement, such as events, the real magic lies in the ability to sustain the energy to drive continuous improvement. In essence, PAA has sparked a journey toward lasting change. It is about nurturing a culture of transformation, where every small step and incremental change matters. It has awakened a spirit of collective efficacy, a can-do attitude, and it is the people—passionate, committed, and enthusiastic—that will carry this momentum forward. While change may be gradual, the unwavering dedication and the belief in the power of collective community-based action is what will ultimately lead to enduring and innovative transformations in these communities.



## Key Learnings

### 1. Trust is the heart of family school engagement

Trust is central to effective Family School Engagement. Research from Karen Mapp and Eyal Bergman has shown that relational trust in school has four key elements: mutual respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity. Mutual respect lays the foundation for productive collaboration, competence inspires confidence, personal regard fosters holistic support, and integrity ensures honesty and transparency. These elements were visible in the aspirations and work of the PAA teams, where coming together and building relationships and a sense of belonging were at the centre of many of the hacks.



*"You first have to set up a trusting relationship. How do you establish trusting relationships? It has to come around social gatherings. Our schools are a fortress of safety. How do you let parents in? If you don't let them in, then you don't create those relationships. I am only inviting you in to talk when your kid is struggling? That already sets up a dynamic when we come to meet."*

**– Thomas Washington,  
Crawford Central**

*"To keep the sustainability, we need to keep the positivity."*

**– Ambridge Area**

“It was more about creating the correct conditions – a safe place for families and students to share.”

– Avonworth

## 2. Start Small

By starting with small changes, schools can approach FSE with intentionality and human-centeredness. This also allows for the creative and careful use of resources. Schools have re-evaluated how they allocate resources and have considered alternative ways of using resources to support family engagement initiatives.

### **Sustainability means planning**

Schools are actively considering how to maintain the momentum of the FSE hacks developed through PAA. Starting small facilitates building over time. This includes planning for the future, addressing turnover, and ensuring that the work remains sustainable.

## 3. Location Matters

Through their hacks, school districts have learned that the location of events has significant impacts on attendance, and hosting events at the school attended by the families can result in more participants from that school. At the same time, schools saw that meeting families where they are and can conveniently be, whether at school, in community spaces, or online, is important in fostering strong family-school partnerships. Recognizing that families have diverse needs, preferences, and constraints, this approach ensures inclusivity and accessibility. Attention to location includes the cultivation of safe spaces. The schools found that creating safe spaces for families and students to share and engage academically was crucial for successful FSE. Ultimately, meeting families where they are empowers parents to be active stakeholders in their child's educational journey, contributing to improved student outcomes and a more vibrant school community.

## 4. Reaching out with Intentionality Results in Increased Response

Many schools experienced an increase in reciprocal parent outreach and engagement. This has led to opportunities for more student participation and involvement. Once the districts started by centering the parents in designing their FSE strategies, more parents stepped up to participate and volunteer their time.

## 5. Food Brings People Together

Including food at events for FSE can help in creating a warm and inviting atmosphere. Sharing a meal or snack promotes conversations, both formal and casual, enabling parents, teachers, and students to connect on a personal level in a more relaxed and open manner. Offering food can also alleviate practical concerns for some families who may face food insecurity or logistical challenges in attending events. Food often transcends cultural and language barriers, providing a common ground for diverse families. By nourishing both body and mind, events where food is served become memorable and enjoyable experiences that foster positive relationships, enhance participation, and strengthen the school's sense of community.

## 6. Intentional Representation and Communication Lead to Inclusion

Schools are working to engage underrepresented populations within their districts and aim to be more representative of the entire community. Strategies to do so include exploring the efficacy of various tools and platforms to establish two-way communication between schools and families. They are actively seeking ways to enhance parent-teacher interactions.

## 7. Data and Information Gathering are Useful to Inform Strategy

Collecting data, conducting surveys, and engaging in open dialogues with parents are fundamental practices for enhancing FSE. Many of the districts used data-driven insights, which offered a more comprehensive understanding of parents' needs, preferences, and challenges. This allowed the design teams to co-design effective strategies that answered directly to the needs and desires of the parents in their community. By actively seeking and utilising various forms of data, schools can continuously refine their family engagement efforts, ensuring they remain relevant, inclusive, and impactful for all families involved.

## 8. A little whimsy goes a long way

Infusing fun, joy, and whimsy into FSE initiatives can create a positive and inclusive atmosphere. These elements make educational experiences memorable and enjoyable for parents, students, and teachers, breaking down barriers and encouraging active participation. When events and activities are fun, they can alleviate the stress and anxiety that some parents may feel when interacting with the school. Laughter and lighthearted moments also strengthen the emotional connections between families and educators, fostering trust, mutual respect and a sense of belonging. Moreover, a sense of whimsy can spark creativity and innovation, encouraging parents and teachers to think outside the box when it comes to supporting each child's education. Integrating fun and joy into FSE reinforces the idea that education can be a delightful journey for everyone involved, and that community is strengthened by sharing positive experiences together.



**CONSTRAINING FACTORS**

## 1. Challenges of Teacher Involvement

While schools aspire to involve teachers in FSE, they recognize that it can be challenging due to scheduling and other logistical factors. Planning and brainstorming are needed to make this happen effectively. In the future, more teachers should be involved from earlier phases of the project.

## 2. Power Dynamics

One of the observed challenges in the project centred around the power dynamics between parents and schools in FSE. When influential stakeholders, such as superintendents or administrators are involved, they can potentially silence other voices. While not the primary focus of the project, these dynamics sparked interest as an area for potential improvement. Some participants noted that there were conscious efforts made by school leaders to address these dynamics, encouraging others to speak and share their perspectives during meetings. Addressing these complex power dynamics comprehensively would require separate initiatives, extending beyond the PAA project's scope, but it served as a point of interest and learning throughout the project.

## 3. Three Main Barriers to Family School Engagement

Brookings' research identified three main barriers to Family School Engagement: lack of competencies and training among schools and educators; uncertainty and unwelcome feelings experienced by families; and that FSE receives relatively little attention and funding. All three of these factors manifested in various ways for the participating districts, and the PAA project served as a way for the schools to learn about and address these challenges.



## Moving Forward

Looking ahead, the co-leads who participated in PAA hold a collective vision of a brighter future for their districts. Sustainability stands as a central aspiration, with the recognition that preserving the positive momentum generated by these initiatives is vital. Districts are committed to nurturing the enthusiasm and engagement of parents and families, ensuring that the impact endures and flourishes in the years to come.

A commitment to fostering positivity in their interactions with the community is also at the forefront of schools' aspirations. Principals in the 22 districts are determined to shape a narrative of optimism, keeping school-related information positive on social media platforms. This commitment to positivity serves as a cornerstone of their engagement strategy and will continue to guide their actions.

Schools are also eager to strengthen ties with their communities, recognizing the invaluable resources and support the community can offer to their schools. The engagement of the community is perceived as indispensable for the sustained success of FSE efforts.

In addition schools aim to forge stronger connections with families from marginalised communities. They are dedicated to providing information in accessible ways and deepening the understanding of how to be a part of the school community and navigate the school system. This

commitment to improved communication and cultural sensitivity serves as a guiding light for their journey towards a more inclusive and engaged future.

Finally, schools intend to lead by example, showcasing the kind of engagement they hope to see from teachers and staff. They underscore the significance of active teacher participation in FSE and are actively exploring opportunities for professional development to enhance these skills. Collaboration remains a cornerstone of their vision.

To that end, PAA will continue to expand in cooperation with a community nonprofit, Pittsburgh Promise. Six school districts, Baldwin-Whitehall, Big Beaver Falls Area, Fox Chapel Area, Frazier, Freeport Area, and Pittsburgh Public Schools, have joined the cohort of schools actively working on FSE. These schools are keen to share innovative ideas, gain insights from peers, and collectively address the evolving challenges in FSE.

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