

RISING TOGETHER

How Four Districts are Building Community During the COVID-19 Pandemic



INTRODUCTION

Family and community engagement is critical for lasting improvement in schools and districts. When families and community members form powerful partnerships with schools and districts, students benefit: Increased family engagement in education is linked to improved school readiness, higher grades, higher test scores, better attendance, fewer tardies, lower suspension and expulsion rates, and increased likelihood of high school graduation.¹

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, family and community engagement has never been more important—or more challenging. With school buildings closed and the academic rhythm disrupted, traditional barriers between families, community, and schools are being dismantled. Typical methods of communication are impossible. Yet at the same time, schools and districts are relying on families, caregivers, and a wide range of community organizations to be full partners in student learning. The stakes are

high, and the solutions are far from obvious. But if school and district leaders commit to both doing the work and sharing what they've learned, there is an opportunity to make progress that will last far beyond the pandemic.

Since this summer, we have had the privilege to partner with four diverse school districts—Richland Parish, Louisiana; Hamilton County, Tennessee; Hartford, Connecticut; and Collier County, Florida—as they prioritized community engagement as a core element of their COVID-19 response strategies. We started this work with a straightforward premise: that if school system leaders are provided with best practices for authentic community engagement and are equipped with the knowledge and tools to implement them well, they will emerge from this experience with a deeper commitment to working with families as partners in the education of their children.

The districts rested their work on TNTP's four pillars of community engagement:



SHARED VISION

Communities and school systems must first work closely together to shape a common vision for student success and make sure that everyone—from teachers to parents to community leaders—have a role to play in that vision.



INTENTIONAL CULTURE AND DIVERSITY

To build trust—especially in communities that have experienced divestment—schools must address implicit and explicit bias, understand the unique context and assets of specific communities, and encourage the sharing of diverse perspectives.



AUTHENTIC COLLABORATION

Families and community organizations are critical to student success. Schools need to share data and resources that can help families and community organizations better support student learning outside of school.



360-DEGREE COMMUNICATION

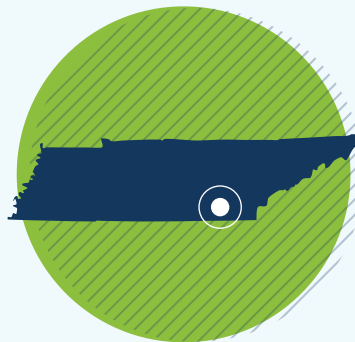
Sharing information regularly and transparently is critical, but it's not enough. Schools must create meaningful opportunities for all voices to be heard, and families and communities need to know the role their feedback played in decision-making.

1. Xitao, Fan & Michael Chen. "Parental Involvement and Students' Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analysis." *Educational Psychology Review* 13.1 (2001): 1–22. Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. Annual Synthesis. National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools. Sheldon, S. B., & Epstein, J.L. (2002). Improving student behavior and school discipline with family & community involvement. *Education & Urban society*, 35(1), 4–26.

Though the districts applied these ideas to their specific local contexts and needs, they all have made exciting progress and have gained valuable insights. And in this report, we share what they've learned. What follows are four detailed case studies about each district's family and community engagement initiative.



Richland Parish convened a new community taskforce to advise the district on the content and distribution of its reopening plan—and it was so successful that it will continue after the pandemic.



Hamilton County launched virtual learning centers across the county to bridge the digital divide, provide student services closer to where families live, and strengthen ties to community organizations.



Hartford marshaled all of its resources to find students who went “missing” during COVID-19—and managed to locate 90 percent of them.



Collier County executed a districtwide strategy for closing the digital divide, focusing on the unique needs of students identified as migrant.

We hope that these insights prove useful to districts across the country—that they both help make the case for why family and community engagement is important and provide ideas for where to start. As we describe, family and community engagement is about constant listening, learning, and feedback. So if you have any thoughts or suggestions for this work, please e-mail us at info@tnp.org

RICHLAND PARISH

Louisiana

Population
20,474
(ACS 2018)

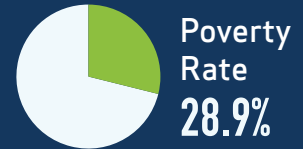
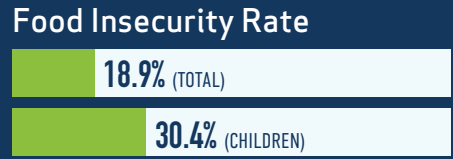
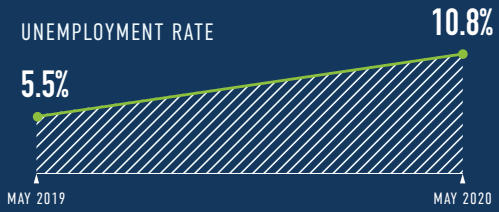
Median Household
Income
\$34,422



Citizenship Rate
99.9%



Internet
Connectivity Rate
31.3%



DISTRICT ENROLLMENT

2,760

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS

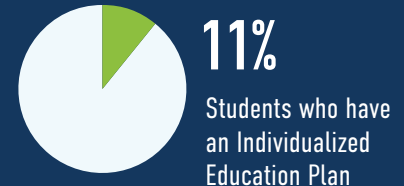
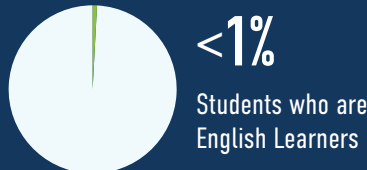
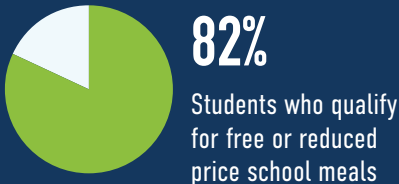
12

STUDENT POPULATION

White
42%

Black
55%

Other
3%





RICHLAND PARISH, LOUISIANA

If you search for images of Richland Parish, Louisiana, you'll quickly discover pictures of Alto Presbyterian Church, a 145-year-old, wood-framed building. It's impossible to look at images of this landmark without imagining the comfort and fellowship it has provided the community over the better part of one and a half centuries.

Community assets, such as places of worship, play vital roles in helping to meet the unprecedented needs of students and families amid the COVID-19 pandemic. From the outset of the pandemic, the Richland Parish School Board sought authentic partnership with the members of its community when, far too often, others in America sought division. They did so by closely examining their community's strengths and untapped

assets along with the district's own blind spots and growth opportunities. In the end, they discovered their community already has what it needs to help students and families through these challenging times and perhaps emerge better off because of it. They just had to ask for help.

It is June of 2020. A historically unparalleled school year is in the rearview mirror. The Richland Parish School Board is already grappling with the implications of their

lessons learned from the sudden shift to remote learning in the spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They recognize that teachers, families, students, and community members are apprehensive about what school will look like come the fall. Anchored in their lessons learned from the spring and the state's "Strong Start 2020 Reopening Plan" guidance, Richland Parish worked tirelessly to put its best thinking for the fall on paper. By early July, the district had written its reopening plan, but district leaders knew that this was only one small part of the work required to successfully reopen their schools.

Recognizing that the success of their reopening plan was inextricably linked to the support of family and community members, the district took a critical look at their detailed plan and asked themselves two questions: Have we written our reopening plan in an accessible manner for all of our key stakeholders? How can we find out if we did so? In response to their first question, district leaders quickly designed a two-page summary of the reopening plan, with the concerns and needs of family and community members top-of-mind. To faithfully answer the second question, however, the Richland Parish School Board knew it had to do more.

Perhaps by happenstance, in June, Richland Parish and TNTF conducted an asset mapping exercise for their community. Asset mapping can and does take on all shapes and sizes. A strong asset map is much more than a list of potential community partners—it places people

front and center, valuing a local hair salon owner, youth soccer coach, or pastor as highly as it does the senior leaders of community organizations. There is no place without assets; there is no place that doesn't have people and organizations with value.

Equipped with a detailed asset map of their community and urgently needing honest feedback from community members on their reopening plan, the Richland Parish School Board formed a Community Engagement Advisory Panel. To ensure the panel was an authentically district-wide initiative, the district made sure that each community within the parish was represented, including parents, mayors, law enforcement and public safety officials, and leaders from the faith-based community. Although the district had an immediate and specific ask for the members of this group, they committed to preserving it beyond the 2020-2021 school year.

Recognizing the importance of first impressions, the district took a different approach to inviting community members to serve on the Community Engagement Advisory Panel. Rather than relying on emails or text messages, district leaders picked up the phone. When speaking one-on-one with prospective panel members, district leaders not only described their vision for the Community Engagement Advisory Panel, but also asked community members to describe how they would like to see the group formed and used to best support Richland Parish.

This story is about a school district that sought partnership and discovered that in its community it already has what it needs to help students get through this difficult time.



VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

Laura Wood, a Richland Parish resident and business owner, serves on the Community Engagement Advisory Panel.

“The district invited me to serve on the Community Engagement Advisory Panel. We’ve met five or six times and I have been to every meeting. The biggest thing for me was getting the information out to the community. When the pandemic happened, I felt like no one knew what was going on. I got deemed as the notetaker in our meetings and so after taking notes in every meeting I knew that there was information in them that people needed to know. After each meeting, I’d take those meeting notes and post them on social media. From there, a lot of others began sharing my posts. Parents really appreciated it because it showed them what was going on. In my opinion this solidified for our community that our school board is there for us and that education is a priority.

I am proud to serve on the panel because I believe it keeps everyone on the same page and creates positive momentum. There are representatives from every community in the parish here. We are a small parish and news travels fast, sometimes bad news can travel faster. It is extremely beneficial to have the whole parish unified. The Community Engagement Advisory Panel gives us something positive to focus on instead of the pandemic by bringing each community together as a united front, having the school board’s back.”

The response from the Richland Parish community was swift and enthusiastic. By late July, the Community Engagement Advisory Panel was live. In part because of varied access to broadband Internet across the parish and in part because of the gravity of the moment, leaders from the faith-based community, parents, and local business representatives came together in person, with appropriate precautions, to launch the panel. By the end of their first meeting, the Richland Parish School Board had not only gathered invaluable feedback from the group on how to strengthen their reopening plan for family and community members, but they had also received generous commitments from panel members to discuss the plan with their constituents. In hopes of fostering 360-degree communication with their community, the district thanked panel members for offering to distribute the reopening plan and encouraged them to elevate any questions that emerged from the community.

Since their initial meeting in July, the group has continued to convene on nearly a monthly basis. While the topics of these meetings vary, the tone has been consistent. Seeking to understand and learn from the perspectives of community members, district leaders position themselves as listeners throughout the panel's meetings. When they do share out to the group, district leaders make a point to clearly and concretely illustrate how the panel's input has shaped their actions.

During each meeting, the district invites panel members to weigh in on emerging challenges, such as safety measures to combat COVID-19 and strategies for

effectively conducting virtual parent-teacher conferences. The district also sought the panel's input on key new initiatives, such as the launch of a parent center to serve the entire parish. Members were asked to elevate the specific needs that the parent center should be designed and equipped to address. Aleasha Waller, Family Engagement Coordinator for the Richland Parish School Board and Community Engagement Advisory Panel member, highlighted that the district is looking forward to leveraging the parent center to offer a variety of workshops designed to meet the specific needs of family and community members. Based on the panel's feedback, the district will also offer workshops in various community settings for those unable to travel to the central office.

The 2020-2021 school year is just the beginning for the Richland Parish School Board's Community Engagement Advisory Panel. The district has already committed to its members that they will be the ones who will determine how best to continue this critical work and identify additional voices from the community to join them. Looking ahead, Richland Parish Superintendent Sheldon Jones, Louisiana's 2021 Superintendent of the Year, envisions that the panel will continue to meet monthly "to discuss the successes and challenges of the Richland Parish School Board that most directly impact the greater school community." The ongoing work of the Community Engagement Advisory Panel, according to Superintendent Jones, will help the Richland Parish School Board fulfill its goal of ensuring families are equal partners in their students' education.



VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

Novelette Dorsey is a member of the Richland Parish community and the parent of two school-age children who attend Richland Parish public schools.

“My relationships with their teachers are great. At the beginning of the semester, I made myself known, attending each parent-teacher conference. During school days, we use an app called Class Dojo to communicate. I can check-in with their teachers throughout the day. I can see what my children are working on and how they are doing in class.

At the end of the day, parents want to keep their kids safe. That said, not every parent has reliable internet service to make at-home learning possible. And even when parents have to share their internet network, it’s difficult. A friend from church bought a building to create a virtual learning center. She has a long waiting list. They have a mentor who makes sure the students successfully complete each of the six courses and get a minimum of four hours of learning each day. Then, she cleans the building before a second group of students come for another four-hour period.”

HAMILTON COUNTY

Tennessee

Population
364,286

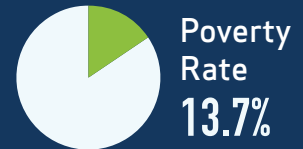
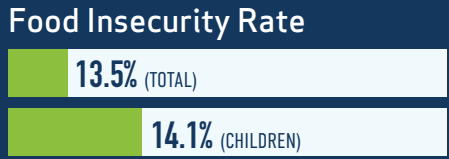
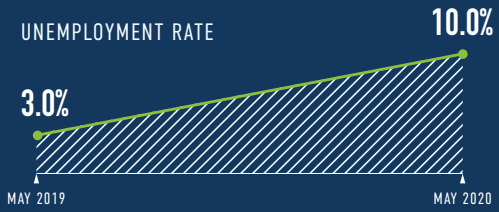
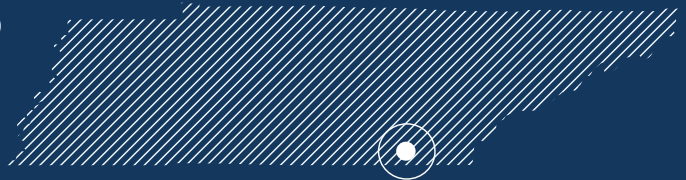
Median Household Income
\$57,280



Citizenship Rate
96.8%



Internet Connectivity Rate
87.5%



DISTRICT ENROLLMENT

45,342

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS

78

STUDENT POPULATION

White
49.3%

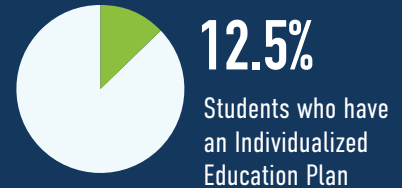
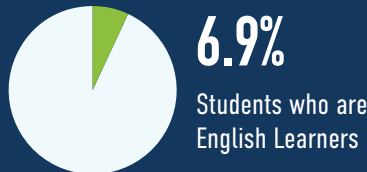
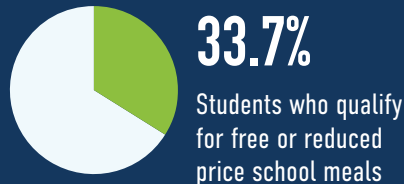
Black
30.8%

Hispanic/Latinx
16.1%

Asian
2.9%

American Indian/Alaska Native
0.8%

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
0.2%





HAMILTON COUNTY, TENNESSEE

Just before midnight on April 12, 2020—roughly one month after Hamilton County Schools (HCS) halted in-person instruction due to the spread of COVID-19—a tornado with winds up to 145 miles per hour touched down in Chattanooga, the county seat and fourth largest city in Tennessee.

From there, the tornado traveled a nine-mile, 1500-yard-wide path through the area, leaving thousands without electricity, hundreds of homes and buildings damaged or destroyed, dozens of people hospitalized, and at least 10 residents lost. HCS was a key player in the community's response to the tornado. "As far as this tragedy, we are thinking about our families and our students and employees and the community at large and are really trying to ensure that they are taken care of and their needs are met," the district's superintendent

Bryan Johnson said when asked about the efforts and impact of the area's schools during the crisis. Perhaps the best way to understand HCS's response is to examine the billboards they put up across the district. From the urban center of Chattanooga to the outer edges of Hamilton County, these billboards had a simple but critical message: the phone number to a regularly staffed resource hotline facilitated by the district, designed to ensure that every parent could readily access information and resources such as counseling, supplies, and academic support.

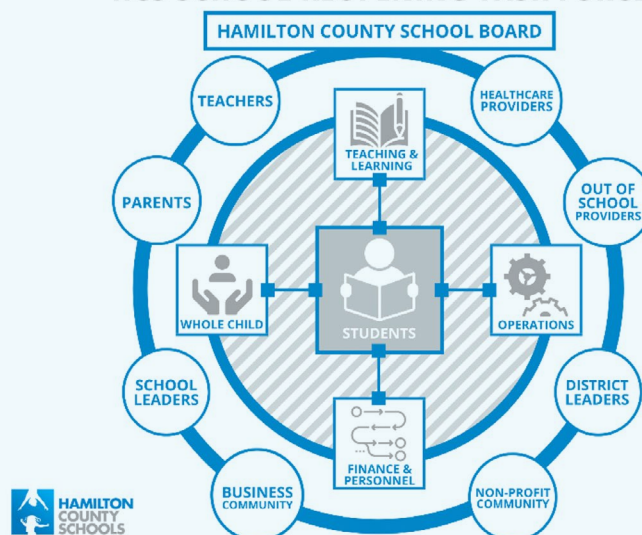
HCS' well-coordinated and community-centered response to the tornado did not happen by accident. Long before this tragedy took place, HCS was deeply invested in authentic community engagement. In April 2019, HCS formalized partnerships with local government agencies and community organizations to launch the first-ever Children's Cabinet. Designed to help ensure every student in Hamilton County has access to the resources they need to thrive, the Cabinet initially supported the district's pilot of Student Success Plans to meet the needs of the whole child—and it continues today. HCS made it a priority to establish initiatives such as the Children's Cabinet and partnerships with Chattanooga 2.0 and United Way because of its commitment to proactively forging collaborative relationships with community leaders and groups.

Proof of this can be found in the make-up of the district's School Reopening Task Force. By the end of the 2019-20 school year, the district brought together a multifaceted collection of non-profits, businesses, after-school centers, healthcare providers, school leaders, teachers, and parents. Their primary focus was to ensure that when schools reopened in the fall, there were not only clear guidelines in place to keep the district's students and staff as safe as possible, but also a plan to mitigate the impact of these new policies and procedures on student learning and the well-being of the HCS community. To summarize

the Task Force's purpose, Superintendent Johnson said in a release from the district's newsroom that "The Task Force will take what we have learned as our teachers and students have responded remarkably during this COVID-19 pandemic and reimagine every aspect of what we do to be an even better school district when we are able to provide a safe return to classrooms across Hamilton County."

Superintendent Johnson couldn't have been more right about what was to come. By the end of the summer, the district, alongside United Way and Chattanooga 2.0 (a coalition of roughly 100 groups committed to transforming education in Chattanooga-Hamilton County by focusing on equity and workforce development) established 21 full-time and 16 hybrid Virtual Learning Centers with a goal of providing a safe, supportive environment for students to gather in small groups, with the guidance of trained adults, to engage in the district's remote learning program. These centers, spread throughout Hamilton County and hosted by a variety of community partners, from YMCAs to churches to museums to even the Chattanooga Zoo, ensure that no student in the district has to be left alone because of a parent's work schedule, while also bridging gaps in internet connectivity, food access, and specialized academic supports that have widened due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the coinciding economic recession.

HCS SCHOOL REOPENING TASK FORCE



This illustration of HCS' School Reopening Taskforce highlights how key stakeholders—both inside and outside of the school system—are working together to ensure each student in the district has as successful school year.

VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

Rev. Dr. William “Terry” Ladd, III is the Pastor of the First Baptist Church East 8th Street, the oldest historically black church in Chattanooga, Tennessee.



“At the start of the pandemic there were reports of parents in affluent communities hiring teachers to come into their homes to supervise kids through Learning Pods. However, in our communities that are underserved and have specific challenges, that’s not an option. Our church has a 501(c)3 nonprofit, First Baptist Cares. We applied for grants from the state to fund five Virtual Learning Centers, but very limited funding was provided. We launched two Virtual Learning Centers and funded them ourselves, trusting God that we could do it. The Chattanooga Times Free Press wrote a long article about them and we’ve started getting small grants of five to fifteen thousand dollars to help fund the centers.

Our Virtual Learning Centers are full time: the children come in at 7:30am, receive breakfast, a full school schedule, and social-emotional supports. We wanted to make sure our kids were not just being babysat and that the assistance they received was top notch. We hired a yoga instructor to give our children some time away from the computer. We want to make sure we’re helping

the whole child. We also hired students enrolled in the college of education at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga. These students could not go to physical schools to fulfill their student teaching requirements, so they are being met through our Virtual Learning Centers. We’ve seen that with adequate funding and supervision, this model can work. We know it helps students who are underserved, and it allows parents to feel safe about them entering an environment with small classrooms. We are in the process of putting together a survey to get feedback from parents. Each of our families have already reenrolled for next semester. They feel comfortable with the safety of our centers.

A biblical narrative says, a young lad gave Jesus two fish and five loaves of bread; we gave our small gift to a greater good and God has multiplied it. If your buildings are not being utilized, please consider opening a center. Even though it’s dark and many are suffering we can bring light to those who are suffering through our ministry.”

Hoping to maximize opportunities for community partners to engage in this initiative and recognizing that the needs of students and families would evolve due to the pandemic, the Virtual Learning Centers were designed to be different. As the district's request for partners describes, "This is an opportunity for local organizations to fulfill a need in the community and to support the families they serve. There are multiple levels of engagement, everyone can participate in some way." In practice, this means that certain Virtual Learning Centers offer services five days a week to help students navigate the district's at-home learning curriculum. For those community partners who wanted to help but weren't equipped to provide this level of support, there were other meaningful opportunities. HCS, The United Way, and Chattanooga 2.0 had the foresight to recognize that additional capacity would be necessary if the district needed to shift to hybrid learning—a mixture of in-person and remote learning. As such, they invited community partners to provide "Phase II" support, helping to facilitate student learning two to three days a week if the district needed to pivot to hybrid learning. In early December, when HCS announced that it was temporarily making this shift due to rising COVID-19 cases, these community partners were quickly activated to bolster the county's resources for students and their families. The process of engaging "Phase II" partners to immediately begin providing services went smoothly because the groundwork and preparation began in early August.

Community partners were also invited to coordinate and facilitate education wellness checks across Hamilton County. The purpose of the education wellness checks is to connect a Community Success Coach with an HCS student to support their continued focus on academic growth amidst the pandemic. Families were invited to opt into this support service, recognizing that many parents are working and thus unable to regularly monitor their child's academic progress on the district's remote learning curriculum, "HCS at Home." Community Success Coaches from across the county were paired with students to help them identify and overcome learning barriers, particularly student attendance and submission of high-quality work.

And, finally, it should be noted that the Centers themselves were not all "ready-made" education assets. Instead, the district modeled inclusivity by giving faith-based partners with a desire to operate Virtual Learning Centers the opportunity to apply for microgrants from the Hamilton County Schools Foundation, made possible through a partnership with the Generosity Trust, to cover program costs such as transportation, utilities, technology, face masks, and staffing. This approach allowed for the Virtual Learning Centers to be far more diverse and geographically dispersed than they would have been otherwise, and also provided a way for the region's robust faith-based community to directly partner with HCS schools by adapting their physical spaces and purchasing essential supplies needed to fulfill student and staff needs.

What the pandemic has done is forced systems to think differently about how we deliver education. Candidly, I think many systems will be transformed forever, and we will be one of those.

Back in May 2020, Superintendent Johnson—who was later named Tennessee's 2021 Superintendent of the Year—told the Chattanooga Times Free Press that "What [the pandemic] has done is forced systems to think differently about how we deliver education. Candidly, I think many systems will be transformed forever, and we will be one of those." It's probably too soon to say exactly which of Hamilton County School's innovations will remain once the region regains its footing after the COVID-19 pandemic, but even at this point in time it feels fair to say that the district and its countless partners have not only surfaced a new proof point about what can happen when communities come together, but also reinvented and redefined the role and importance of Hamilton County Schools.



VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

Molly Blankenship is the Executive Director of Chattanooga 2.0, a cradle-to-career partnership founded in 2015 with a goal to transform education and workforce development outcomes. Forbes Magazine selected Molly for their 2021 “30 Under 30” award for education.

“Chattanooga 2.0 is our community’s collective impact effort. Our role is not to be a direct partner, but rather to bring partners together to identify strategies to close opportunity gaps from early learning through graduation. When COVID-19 hit, Chattanooga 2.0 played the role of convener, focused initially on addressing learning loss through summer programs. Led by the YMCA and Boys and Girls Club, a plan was developed to provide summer programming to five thousand students who had inconsistent access to remote learning in the spring. This served as a catalyst to wanting to make sure students had equitable access to remote learning in the 2020-2021 school year. As a result, the concept of virtual learning centers emerged. The school district, community groups, and churches have worked closely together to launch these centers across the county to provide students and families with academic and support services close to home.

The Chattanooga community has a long history of collaborative problem solving. We have come together as a community to move from a city on decline to one on the up and up. We recognized a serious challenge; because of the work that partners have done a muscle has been built. A collaborative infrastructure has been built.”

HARTFORD

Connecticut

Population
122,587
(2018)

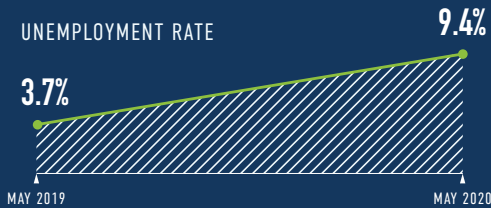
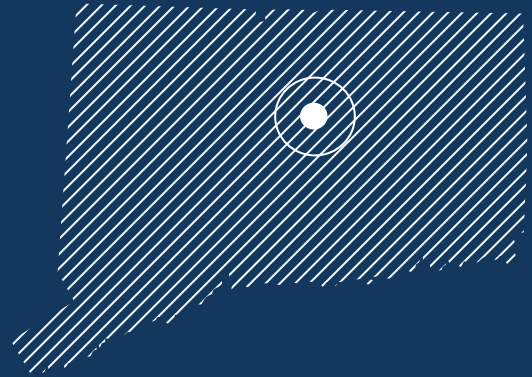
Median Household
Income
\$34,338



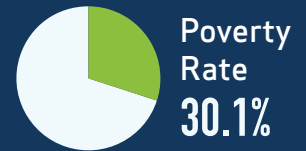
Citizenship Rate
87.3%



Internet
Connectivity Rate
84%



Food Insecurity Rate



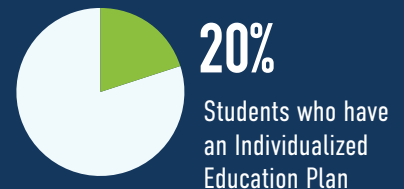
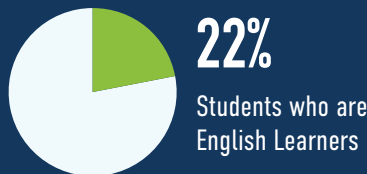
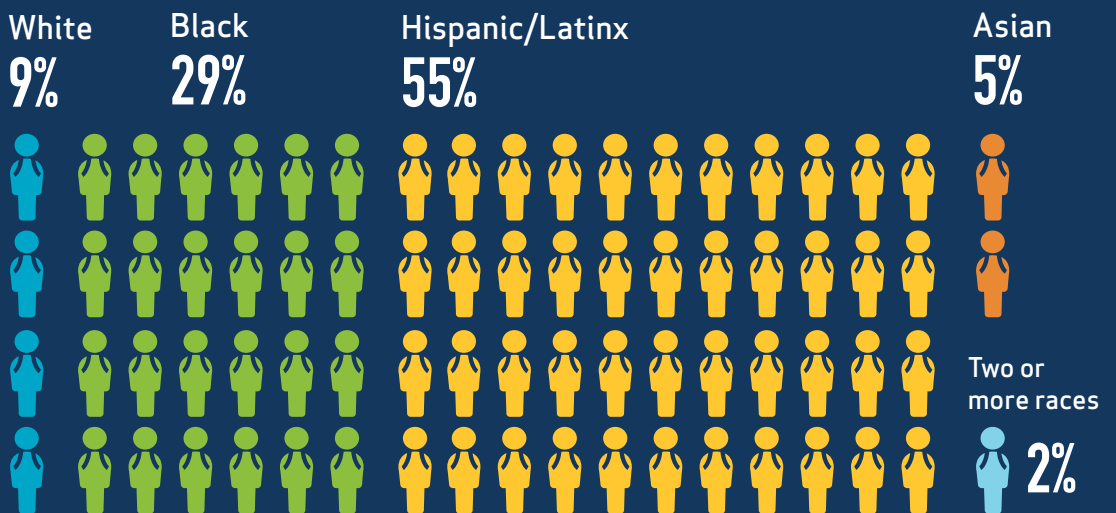
DISTRICT ENROLLMENT

17,773

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS
39 (18 MAGNET)

LANGUAGES SPOKEN
83

STUDENT POPULATION





HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

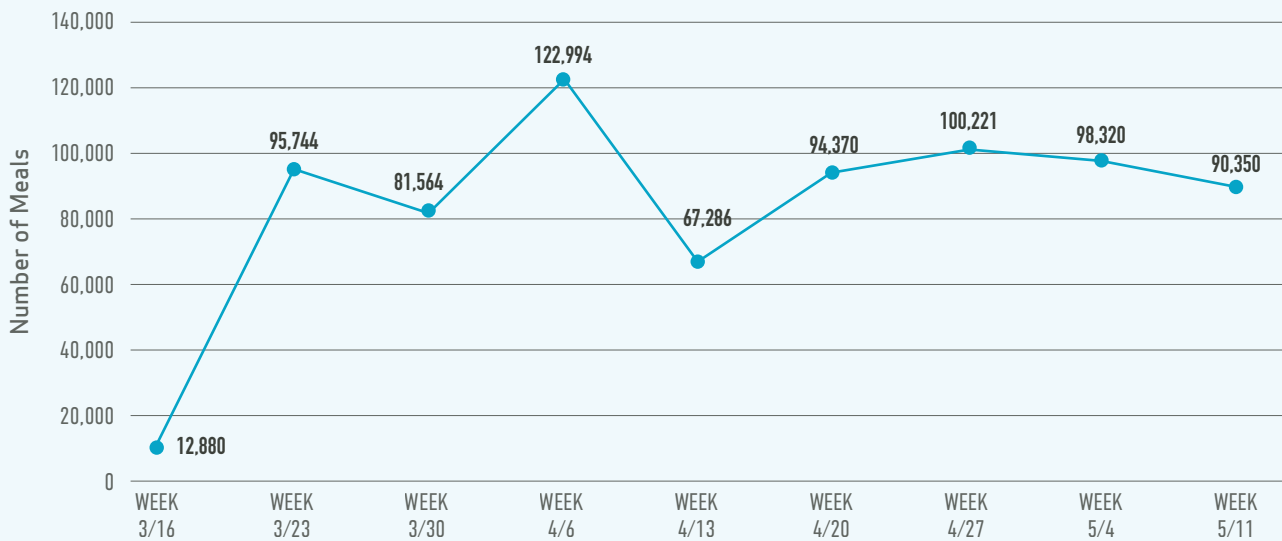
Like districts across the country, Hartford Public Schools (HPS) had never dealt with anything like the COVID-19 pandemic. While effectively serving HPS' nearly 20,000 students—80 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced price lunch—is a challenging task under any circumstances, the pandemic brought forth many additional complications and challenges, including food insecurity, the digital divide, and student attendance, that pushed the district to change its strategy and approach.

But by doubling down on its commitment to partnering with students, families, teachers, staff and community groups, HPS met those challenges—and fostered relationships that will help the district long after the pandemic.

When HPS shifted entirely to remote instruction in March 2020, the district's Department of Food and Nutrition Services, in coordination with other district departments,

16 school sites, and community partners, organized and distributed approximately 100,000 meals a week to students across the district. To do so, the district had to reinvent the way it delivered food to students. Amidst the pandemic, HPS developed more than a dozen outdoor meal distribution sites at schools. Meals were made available to any child 18 years and younger, and meal bags included several days' worth of meals to ensure children continued to receive the nutrition they needed.

NUMBER OF MEALS SERVED



In addition to focusing on meeting the needs of students and families for food, the district also worked to bridge the digital divide. After schools closed on March 16, the district launched an effort to distribute devices to students who needed them for remote learning. That required a massive effort on the part of staff to identify students lacking a device, refurbish existing devices, and invest in more. The district organized device distributions at school sites until it had delivered 11,000 devices by the end of the spring. The effort also involved the delivery of hundreds of WiFi hotspots to families that lacked reliable internet access—another barrier to learning. Going a step further, based on family feedback and need, over the summer, the district made the commitment to provide “one-to-one” device access to students so they would not have to share a device with a family member. To date, 95 percent of students have been issued a district device.

Beyond providing access to food and technology, HPS also prioritized 360-degree communication with its stakeholders. For instance, when TNTP supported HPS with administering a survey to the district’s teachers,

principals, support staff, students, and parents, the district made the bold decision to share not just headlines from the surveys, but the anonymized survey data itself via a public-facing dashboard. The data included both the positive feedback—responses from students mentioning how much they miss seeing their friends, their teachers, their coaches—but also data that indicated parents were frustrated with navigating the district’s website, with balancing work and their child’s learning, and with the district’s lack of mental health supports. And the district’s Superintendent, Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, consistently demonstrated authentic connection with families in a diverse community by hosting live virtual Town Halls in Spanish and English and taking questions about device distributions, Wi-Fi access, remote and hybrid learning models, and more. Between March and June, HPS shared on average 1.5 written messages per week to update families, in addition to the Superintendent’s video messages and media interviews, all of which are shared on the district website, in the weekly newsletter, and on the Superintendent’s and district’s social media feeds.

VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

Lonnie Burt is the Senior Director of Food & Child Nutrition Services in Hartford Public Schools.



“When the pandemic hit, we had to completely retool our food distribution strategy. Before, we were cooking food and serving it directly to students. Once the pandemic hit, we had to figure out how to prepare uncooked meals that students could pick up and transport home. This was a major shift, similar to how General Motors had to pivot from making cars to designing respirators. From there, we had to tackle safety concerns. Our staff were scared, but they stepped up in incredible ways and put their fears aside to make sure our students had food. We developed safety protocols that allowed them to distribute the food in a socially distanced manner with the proper personal protective equipment.

It was important to us that our students had access to local, healthy food. We partnered with the Knox Foundation and the Keney Park Sustainability Project to provide fresh produce in our meal bags. Towards the end of the summer, we were able to give out fresh produce boxes along with our meal bags at our seventeen

distribution sites. We flash froze local produce over the summer to be able to distribute it this fall and winter as the supply of fresh local produce diminished. We also partnered with local businesses, such as Scotts’ Jamaican Bakery, to include local food goods in our meal bags. This helped us support local businesses in our community. At the end of the day, ensuring our students have consistent access to healthy food is a critical part of fighting through this pandemic. We’re committed to ensuring all families have access to quality nutrition during these unprecedented times.”

Despite these and other authentic community engagement efforts, like many other districts Hartford Public Schools began the 2020-21 school year with approximately 1 out of every 10 of its students (around 2,000) “missing”—i.e., disengaged from school and the support services it provides. This is far from a Hartford-specific challenge. As Bellwether Education Partners illustrated in a recent report, approximately 3 million students are estimated to be missing from school.

To boldly address the number of missing students, HPS designed a districtwide strategy headed by its Family and Community Partnerships team, which was formed well before the pandemic. Led by the Chief Engagement & Partnerships Officer, Nuchette Black-Burke, the department was originally designed to coordinate the work of nearly 200 staff across the district, from school-level staff that work directly with families to district-level staff that form proactive and strategic partnerships with local non-profits in order to better serve the district’s students.

The Family and Community Partnerships Team partnered with the district’s communications and data teams as well so it could make progress more quickly. The district’s data experts quickly ran detailed reports to capture as much information as possible about the missing students, including active community groups in their neighborhood, past extracurricular involvement, and the language most often spoken at home. The communications team then created targeted messages based on the specific interests and needs of different student groups.

Armed with this information, school and district-based staff were better equipped to connect with missing students. Leveraging numerous outreach strategies, including social media and home visits, the district worked tirelessly to re-engage these students. For example, the Hartford Public School’s Welcome Center, a supportive hub for family and community members, focused on the needs of homeless students. The Welcome Center targeted their outreach around addressing key barriers for homeless students, including access to devices and the internet. However, they did much more than distribute devices and wi-fi hotspots. The Welcome Center’s team members knew that these resources, while practically

important for remote learning, were not enough to ensure that missing students would return to and stay in school. With the necessary public health safety measures in place, The Welcome Center opened its doors to offer tutoring and mentoring services for homeless students.

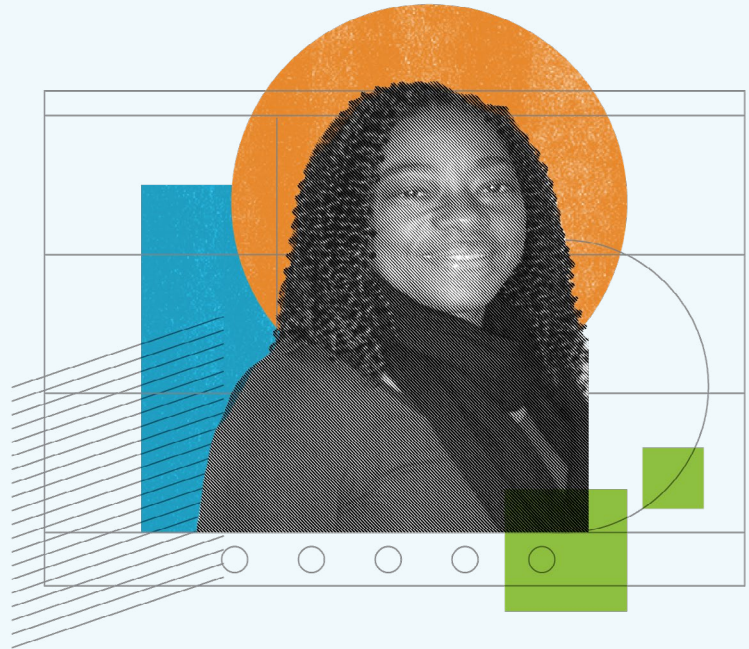
We want all our students and families to know that they are respected, connected, and valued.

The district also drew on the connections that community-based organizations across Hartford have with students and families to expand their reach. HPS shared with their community partners as much information as they could about their missing students, including the differentiated and targeted messages. Community partners were integral in reconnecting with students who were hard for the district to reach. “Hartford Public Schools is committed to supporting all our students and families, especially during these challenging times. Whether they were making meals, handing out devices, delivering online instruction, answering phones or knocking on doors the HPS team left no stone unturned in our outreach efforts to students and families during the pandemic. We want all our students and families to know that they are respected, connected, and valued,” said Ms. Black-Burke.

Today, there are roughly 200 students missing from their classrooms in Hartford Public Schools, a 90 percent decrease from the start of the 2020-2021 school year. As Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez, highlighted, “I am inspired by the heroic dedication of our teachers, staff, and community partners in support of ALL our students.” Yet despite their progress, HPS and their community partners aren’t resting; their work to re-engage each and every one of these students is ongoing.

VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

Judith Fagan is the Director of The Welcome Center in Hartford Public Schools. For 40 years, Judith has served in a variety of roles in Hartford Public Schools.



“The Welcome Center is designed to spring into action to engage and support the needs of families with respect and professionalism. We strive to elevate the voices of families who do not feel like they are being heard. If a parent calls us with a concern about something happening at school, we help facilitate the necessary conversation between the parent and teachers or school leaders. We are facilitators who help parents navigate challenges, access resources in the community, and overcome barriers.

Our district is very committed to improving student attendance, especially for students who have been chronically absent since the pandemic began. At The Welcome Center, we’re focusing on improving the attendance of homeless students. Through the McKinney-Vento Act funding, we were able to hire tutors to support our homeless

students. This fall, we looked at attendance data to identify the homeless students who had been chronically absent. We decided that these were the students we most wanted to get connected with a tutor. We used all of our points of contact to reach unaccompanied youth and parents. I am happy to share that almost half of our homeless students are linked up with a tutor. Tutoring is a critical point of contact and a stable activity for our homeless students that will help raise the level of academic success. It allows us to better understand the needs of the whole child and those of their family members. At the end of the day, we want to do everything we can to remove barriers to school attendance. That is why we do daily well-being calls to parents to check-in to determine if they have any unmet needs that we can help address.”

COLLIER COUNTY

Florida

Population
384,902

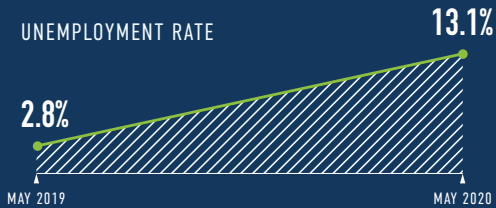
Median Household
Income
\$65,675



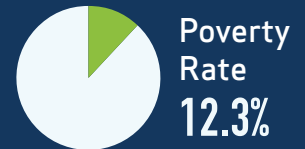
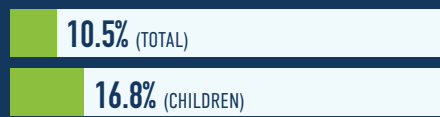
Citizenship Rate
86.5%



Internet
Connectivity Rate
97.3%



Food Insecurity Rate



DISTRICT ENROLLMENT

46,979

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS

59

LANGUAGES SPOKEN

106

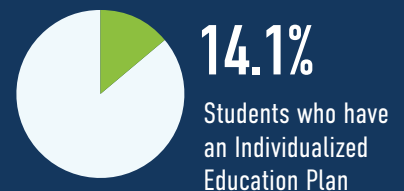
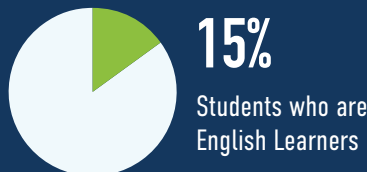
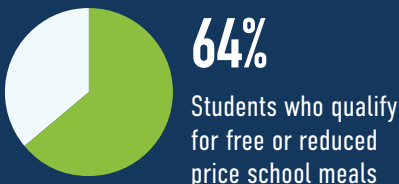
STUDENT POPULATION

White
32%

Black
11%

Hispanic/Latinx
53%

Migrant
6%





COLLIER COUNTY, FLORIDA

Collier County, Florida is perhaps most well-known for its natural beauty: beaches, everglades, and nature preserves. Yet to truly understand the richness of the communities in this southwestern region of Florida, you need to dig deeper. For instance, the children that make up this county are linguistically diverse. More than half of Collier County Public Schools' (CCPS) students live in homes where a language other than English is primarily spoken.

Collectively, students in the district speak over 100 different languages or dialects and hail from nearly 120 different countries. Collier is the county with the largest number of identified migrant children and youth in the state of Florida, with nearly 3,000 students receiving support from the district's award-winning Migrant Education Program. In 2020, CCPS received numerous accolades from Florida's Exemplary Migrant Education

Award program, including teacher of the year, staff development employee of the year, migrant graduate success story of the year, and community volunteer of the year. Additionally, a 2020 graduate from Immokalee High School was recognized as the National Migrant Education Student of the Year. Yet the pandemic presented unique challenges that required the district's migrant education program to develop new initiatives in partnership with

other district offices and community leaders to be able to continue to provide high-quality support to migrant students and their families.

When the pandemic forced CCPS to shift to remote learning, the district approached the task of distributing devices with a special emphasis on the specific needs of migrant students and their families. While Collier County has over a 90 percent internet connectivity rate, the district estimated that approximately 90 percent of migrant families did not have access to reliable internet. To ensure all migrant students had consistent access to the district's remote learning program, the district's Migrant Education Program, working in close partnership with the district's technology team, knew they needed to do much more than distribute laptops. They quickly developed a three-pronged strategy focused on device distribution, internet connectivity, and technical support. This strategy was resoundingly successful because of how the district approached its execution. In addition to allowing students and families to pick up devices at specific times and in specific locations, district and school staff, including home liaisons, worked closely with community partners such as the Guadalupe Center and Immokalee Foundation to deliver these resources directly. By going the extra mile, the district, school, and community representatives were able to answer questions from migrant students and families, not only about the technology necessary to engage in remote learning, but also about other challenges that the district and its community partners could help them solve.

CCPS' strategy for bridging the digital divide started, but did not end, in the spring of 2020. The strategy was refined in the summer and fall to support migrant students with summer school and the start of the 2020-2021 school year. Each time, the strategy evolved based on feedback from migrant students and families as well

as community partners. For example, with summer school on the horizon, the district recognized two key opportunities to enhance their door-to-door device distribution strategy. First, they included each of the necessary registration forms for the 2020-21 school year along with detailed guidance on how to complete them. While these forms are normally sent out closer to the start of the school year, the Migrant Education Program was cognizant of the pandemic's pronounced impact on the migrant community. This was about much more than paperwork; this was about ensuring migrant students were fully enrolled from the outset of the upcoming school year. Second, the Migrant Education Program saw their pre-summer school device distribution as an opportunity to provide personal protective equipment to students and families. At a time in which access to fairly-priced, high-quality personal protective equipment varied, the district saw a need and met it.

As the 2020-21 school year began, CCPS expanded its scope of support for migrant students to remote learning. For instance, the district's high schools traditionally meet with seniors during the first quarter to discuss graduation requirements and provide one-on-one counseling to students at risk of not graduating. With the pandemic shifting instruction to a virtual environment, Collier County Public Schools had to be creative. At Immokalee High School, where close to 40 percent of students identify as migrant, the team saw a need to develop a dedicated virtual space to help seniors track their progress toward graduation. As a result, they launched "Immokalee High School Road to Graduation," a virtual course and community for students to receive one-on-one support from their teachers and mentors. One hundred percent of seniors enrolled in the optional class, reinforcing the importance of counseling, even in a virtual environment.

By going the extra mile, the district, school, and community representatives were able to answer questions from migrant students and families.



VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

Clara Calderon is the
Principal of Immokalee
High School in Collier
County, Florida.

“At Immokalee High School, about 700 students identify as migrant. We offer a unique set of services for these students and their families. We have a dedicated center for migrant families on our campus that is focused exclusively on meeting their needs. We also provide space for our students to meet with their classroom teachers and migrant resource teachers for additional support and mentoring.

Particularly with the pandemic, it is important to have a physical place that students and families know they can come to with questions and to ask for support. We also know these are especially challenging times. To help improve attendance at meetings and other events, our school’s Migrant Resource Center team picks up parents and students who don’t have transportation. These interactions with our migrant students and families forge strong connections that are vital for the success of our students and community.”

Resources such as this were critical for sustaining student attendance and engagement, particularly in the migrant community, as the pandemic's impact on the economy resulted in soaring unemployment rates. As Marlene Dimas, a leader in the district's Migrant Education Program, highlighted, "When planning their student's education, migrant families often have to think about where their next job will be, or even the one after that. The pandemic made things even more difficult because of job uncertainty." Acknowledging these stressors, the Migrant Education Program knew it needed to engage directly with migrant families, rather than rely on calls or text messages. First, teachers identified which students were not logging in the district's remote learning program. Next, one of the district's home liaisons conducted a home visit to help students and families use their devices, access the district's remote learning platform, and identify if any other barriers to learning exist. As necessary, home liaisons did follow-up home visits to address any outstanding questions or provide additional resources. The Migrant Education Program also strived to meet the needs of future students by collaborating with family members who anticipated relocating to Collier County in the coming months due to shifting job opportunities. "When families know that their next stop in another month is us, we not only work with them to complete the registration process, but also to help them obtain reliable internet and devices so their child can be successful from day one," said Ms. Dimas. Through actions such as these, the district exemplifies its commitment to meeting the needs of current and potential migrant students and families in CCPS.

"A commitment to equity is part of our district's way of work," shared Dr. Courtney Zmach, the director of grant development, research, and evaluation for CCPS. "The entire district has worked together during the pandemic, seamlessly ensuring all students and teachers needs were at the forefront, including students and families who are migrant. It was a collective lift during unprecedented circumstances. Historically, the district's migrant program funds supplemental educational opportunities for students who are migrant—this summer was just a little different with some programs being hosted virtually and some in person. The migrant program served 746 children and youth age three through high school in summer 2020 compared to 708 in summer 2019. This highlights the dedication of our families to participate in our summer learning opportunities and commitment of teachers funded by the migrant program to help minimize learning loss for our students. We are proud of the continuous dedication of our Migrant Team who advocate for the entire migrant community in Immokalee and Naples."



VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

Bobby Gonzalez is a
Resource Teacher at the
Migrant Education Center
in Collier County, Florida.

“The Migrant Resource Center is where our students report feeling the most comfortable. Many of them lived in other southeastern states before coming to Florida. We often hear that this is the first school they’ve gone to that has a resource center just for them.

The pandemic has everyone at the district and school level working overtime to ensure students feel as well supported as possible. Our four migrant resource teachers have been thinking outside of the box since last spring about how best to offer academic and social-emotional programming virtually. We’ve also moved our college counseling program entirely online. Even our college visits have been virtual this school year. With the distractions caused by COVID-19, our charge for the seniors has been to get on track to graduate and stay on track. Our students are putting in the work to be successful after graduation.

I don’t know if it’s the families, the students, or the team, but it is so easy to do this work. This is such a hardworking community. Establishing strong relationships is the key. When students or families come to you, that’s the rewarding part. I’ve been here for 26 years, working on this team for three quarters of that; it’s a blessing for me to do the work that I do.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the case studies illustrate specific strategies and initiatives implemented by our four partner districts, we believe they collectively lift up a few key overarching recommendations for authentic family and community engagement.

1 The time is not *just* now.

In light of the challenges associated with the pandemic, many districts are prioritizing authentic community engagement. While this is certainly helpful at present, it is vital that enthusiasm for and investment in authentic community engagement extend well beyond the pandemic. If they have not already started to do so, districts should begin asking students, family members, teachers, and community members to identify the engagement strategies they want to see maintained and ingrained for years to come.

2 Leadership must champion the central role of authentic community engagement.

The initiatives described in the case studies would not have been possible without district leaders committing to authentic community engagement in both words and in actions. Through their strategic initiatives, district leaders have an important opportunity to demonstrate that authentic community engagement is not “nice to have,” but vital for the students’ academic, social, and emotional growth.

3 Use data to identify which voices are missing.

When we try to determine whose voices are missing or underrepresented, we too often rely on our own perspectives and opinions. Such an approach creates blind spots that can unintentionally hinder efforts to authentically engage community stakeholders. Closely and routinely reviewing data that illustrates the state of student, family, and community engagement can help check those blind spots and identify which voices are missing from the conversation. Equipped with this information, district leaders are better positioned to develop a tiered, systematic approach to bringing those voices to the table, as exemplified by the case studies.

A CALL TO ACTION

For many districts across the country, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for authentic community engagement. Districts could not overcome the barriers to teaching and learning brought on by the pandemic, such as rapidly shifting to remote learning and accessing the necessary technology, without the support of family and community members. The case studies are just four of many recent examples of how districts have worked with family and community members as authentic partners to address these historic challenges.

The districts highlighted in this report, like many others, engaged family and community members when designing their reopening plans for the 2020-2021 school year. What began as community conversations to help guide the reopening of schools has, in many districts, evolved into other examples of authentic community engagement to help address the challenges associated with rising unemployment rates, food scarcity, and the digital divide. As we turn the calendar to a new year and the growing possibility of a post-pandemic environment, we call on district leaders to commit to earnestly reengaging family and community members to help shape their priorities for the next major transition. We encourage district leaders to listen for what they should sustain beyond the pandemic based on feedback from community stakeholders. Rather than thinking about how we can return to normal, district leaders should seize this opportunity to talk with community members about how best to reimagine it.



RESOURCE LIBRARY

To learn more about TNTP's community engagement resources, please visit our [Engaging Families Toolkit](#). These free resources provide guidance on planning community conversations, engaging families virtually, and strengthening student attendance. For more information about TNTP, please visit our website at [TNTP.org](#).