

RECOGNIZING & AMPLIFYING  
**FAMILY POWER**  
in Minneapolis-St. Paul

**Community Convening Summary**

November 14, 2017



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### Recognizing & Amplifying Family Power

We wish to acknowledge and express our deep thanks to the community partners, presenters and facilitators who contributed their time, expertise, experience and wisdom as we embark on a journey of discovery and learning about the power and potential of family engagement.

#### ORGANIZING FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE PRESENTERS

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#### PARTICIPATING COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Children's Defense Fund – MN

Coalition of Asian American Leaders (CAAL)

EdAllies

Friendship Academy of the Arts

Harvest Initiative MN

Hennepin County

Hiawatha Academies

Minneapolis Urban League

Minnesota Education Equity Partnership (MnEEP)

Navigate MN

Network for the Development of Children of  
African Descent (NdCAD)

New Publica

Northside Achievement Zone

Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood

Students for Education Reform

Voices for Racial Justice

Youthprise

YWCA Minneapolis

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## BACKGROUND

# Moving education advocacy forward by focusing on parent engagement and systems change.



Minnesota Comeback, the J.D. Graves Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, and the Minneapolis Foundation share a commitment to advancing family and community voice in education systems change. We share an understanding that many of the complex and persistent challenges in Minnesota’s public schools are rooted in the education system itself. And we share a belief that families are the most credible stakeholders in education systems change. Our organizations approach this work in different ways and

are at different points along a trajectory of supporting parent engagement. Nevertheless, we recognized enough alignment in our respective work to embark on a shared learning journey, hoping to better understand how community members define successful family engagement for systems change.

### Convening Goals:

- Learn from each other
- Generate insights into family engagement in education
- Create a shared vision for a family-led systems change effort
- Identify potential actions that could advance family engagement at the systems level.

To that end, we sponsored a community convening on November 14, 2017. With nearly 30 partners reflecting the diversity of our community and bringing perspectives and insights rooted in community experience, we explored the topic of family engagement, public education and systems change. The participatory format was comprised of small group dialogue, collective visioning and presentations by three community organizers who shared their experiences leading successful systems change efforts in the Twin Cities. The presentations ignited discussions and ideas for deeper inquiry and application as we work to *recognize and amplify family engagement* in education.

This document presents a summary and synthesis of our conversations in November. The convening supported our own learning about family engagement for systems change, and we hope that it ignites similar reflection for readers. We remain deeply grateful to the community partners who shared their wisdom and insights with us, and who represent the true “authors” of the ideas presented here.

# KEY THEMES

*“We need to think outside the box in improving education systems. We are otherwise limiting ourselves to repeat the same problems and mistakes.”*

*“I believe in the power of people to change systems, not the other way around.”*

During the convening, community members shared many insights regarding successes, promising practices, and challenges around family engagement at individual, school, and systems levels. Community members also identified potential actions that could advance family engagement at the systems level.

From the conversation, several key themes emerged:

## **Families First**

For the outcomes of education systems change to be family-centric, families must be at the heart of the work. “Families First” emerged as a leading idea that played out in several ways, including:

### **Recognize Families as Experts**

Recognize that families are the experts on themselves, and explicitly value their lived experiences and wisdom. Parents should be seen and supported as leaders, and as full partners in the schools.

### **Support Parent-Informed, Parent-Led Systems Change**

One message heard multiple times and in many ways is that organizing at the grassroots level can effectively cultivate systems change. This grassroots organizing work should support active parents to lead the way to culturally informed systems change. Parents will be motivated to get involved if there are clearly demonstrated benefits.

## Shift Power

Putting families first means that **power must shift** to the families themselves. Work must happen at every level, from removing barriers to full engagement, to developing individual parents as leaders, to creating structure for parent participation on boards and councils. Systems structured to support collective decision-making are essential. There is also a need to support parents in decision-making that accounts for the entire student population as well as their own children.

## Context Matters

Community members envisioned schools as a hub and resource for the local community. Schools locally need to be responsive and engage with parents and students in ways that matter.

## Ground Change in Culture and Equity

Community members emphasized the critical **importance of language, history and culture** as part of curricula, but also as broader context for education systems change that focuses on the whole of the family. Many noted the urgent need to create a talent pipeline for hiring teachers and staff of color and those with a social justice perspective. How the issue of culture and equity is framed, and how the need is defined, matters. This work must be grounded in larger issues of power, privilege and equity.

## Change is Multilayered

### Vamos lentos por que vamos lejos (Go slow to go far)

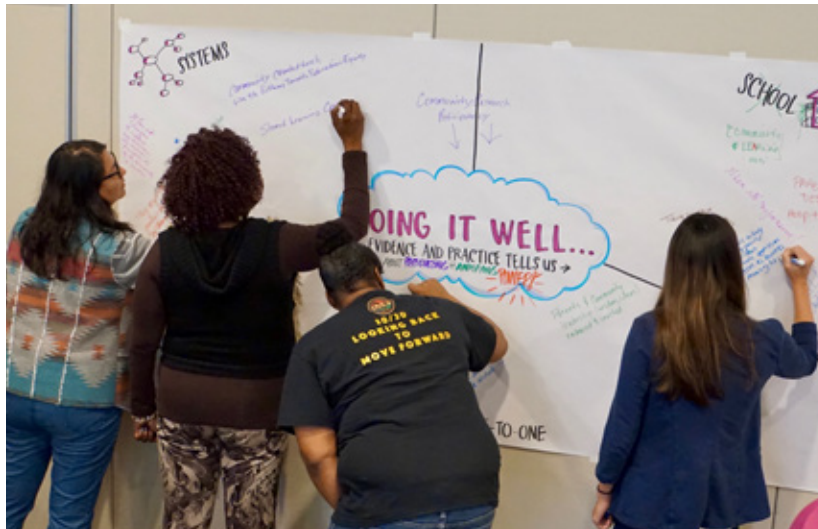
Discussions pointed to the need to go into this work with a long-term approach. The urgent need to act must be balanced with the exercise of strategic patience – making time to build relationships and for results to evolve.

## Attend to the Human Aspect of Systems Change

Human emotion and its influence on behavior were woven throughout the discussion. While doing this work, keep in mind the powerful influence of emotion on the potential for change. **“Being treated with inhospitality”** and **“teachers being afraid to engage with parents”** were noted as barriers to full engagement. Visions for change included **“kids and families feel safe”** and **“helping parent leaders develop confidence to go before a council/board.”** Community members also highlighted the underlying fear of change that exists in many entrenched systems. They reflected on the fact that today’s education systems are designed to protect themselves and to mitigate risk.

## INTRODUCTION

# Framing the Inquiry



The November 2017 Convening: **Recognizing & Amplifying Family Power** was an essential starting point to gain perspective and new insights about the power and possibilities of family engagement. We invited community partners to join in a conversation based on the following central questions:

- How do community members define family engagement in education?
- What do we know about what works, and how to do this work well?
- What are the most important values/core beliefs and principles for effective family engagement?
- How does the community define “success” in family engagement?

The convening was framed around three core actions:

**Listen. Learn. Imagine.**

Following are key insights, themes and directions for future dialogue and action.

# LISTEN

## Insights from the Field

To bring the family perspective to the convening, community members shared their insights around the following four questions:

- How do community members define family engagement in education?
- What works?
- What are the most important values/core beliefs and principles for effective family engagement?
- How does the community define “success” in family engagement?

# 1

## How do community members define family engagement in education?

At the individual level, community members focused on parents being able to effectively support and advocate for their children, and for that, they must be seen and respected as experts on their children. At the same time, it would be ideal for parents to engage with each other through systems or structures that invite a perspective of the student population as a whole.

### **Create space for elevating power.**

There was discussion about the word “empowerment” and consensus was built around “power elevation” as an alternative. Families already have power, and family engagement work should lift, elevate, and amplify that by making sure families and groups recognize their power, have the tools to use it both personally and at a systems level, and have access to decision-makers.

### **Recognize and see parents as experts on their children.**

School choice is important, but it should be accompanied by reliable, understandable data parents can use to make informed choices as they make choices for their children. Community members prioritized schools and parents working together to help students recognize their natural abilities.

### **Allow active parents, families, and community members to lead the way.**

Parent-informed and parent/family-led systems were the key theme when community members described family engagement at the systems level. Several community members suggested systems would ideally require that decision-making involve parents, students and teachers collectively.

### **Make schools and curricula more student- and community-centered, and more inclusive.**

Community members talked about making schools and curricula more student- and community-centered, and more inclusive. Schools could accomplish this by seeking a truly collaborative partnership between parents and schools that promotes deeper listening, and more parent-initiated strategies.

Several community members agreed that hiring more teachers of color who can relate to both students and parents is critical, while another suggested staffing schools from within the school community. Another emphasized the need for multicultural and multilingual communications on how the system works now, and how it could be shaped differently.

Several community members agreed on “centering ‘the other’ in culturally relevant and sensitive approaches” as important. This input emphasizes the need to prioritize diverse student identities across school functions. Another noted the need for solidarity across ethnic and racial groups. Discussion about the school level centered on schools as a hub and resource for the entire family and community.



## 2

### What works?

Community members commented that the keys to successful parent involvement at all levels are two-fold: Parents and families must themselves see and understand the benefits to their participation, and they must be seen as leaders within the system. To support their leadership, schools should invite and embrace ideas and wisdom from families and the community.

#### Participatory processes and tools work well.

Participatory processes and tools were noted as working well, especially those that offer shared learning opportunities. Community members also prioritized communication, specifically active listening and feedback loops. As one community member commented, these feedback loops are important to ensure schools and staff are responsive to families and students.

Practices that are grounded in the core concepts of culture and equity are essential. One community member commented that schools should ensure that curricula include the history, language and culture of students and families; another noted that schools should be actively evaluating practices and processes that perpetrate oppression or are barriers to meaningful engagement.

Community members agreed on the value of whole systems and whole family approaches for change work.

## 3

### What are the most important values/core beliefs and principles for effective family engagement?

“Families First” was a unifying theme in community members’ responses to this question. Experience counts, meaning families are a unique source of knowledge and expertise about themselves, and that should be recognized. Any solutions in this field need to work for families as whole, and families themselves can provide insight about what does or does not work.

Community members placed high value on meaningful relationships and active, open listening when developing solutions. They also value the principles of transparency, consistency, accessibility, and purposeful engagement.

Community members also noted:

- “Culture, language and history are crucial components in any family engagement solution.”
- “Courage, humility and honesty are essential.”

# 4

## How does the community define “success” in family engagement?

Community members said a key to success in family engagement at all levels is valuing and maintaining a focus on the role of parents and families as leaders, experts and full partners in the education system. Ideally, parents’ expertise and knowledge are sought and valued, and teachers are not afraid or anxious about engaging with parents and families.

One community member expressed this theme as, “Leaders ceding control to families that have been traditionally underserved.” Another said, “Parents are known when they enter the building.” Community members would like to see parents have elevated participation and roles in governing groups such as boards and councils.

### **Responsiveness is a component of success.**

At the school level, community members envision schools as welcoming and engaged in ways that matter to families. Schools would respond to the needs of students and families in a culturally-informed way. Parents and students would be asked about their assets and their needs. Data would be reported back to families in ways they would like to see and use it. At the systems level, responsiveness is tied to the capacity to strategically adapt in light of issues, needs, and concerns raised by family and community members.

### **Emphasize authentic investment in removing barriers rather than accepting “band-aid solutions” to enduring issues.**

Success requires that barriers to full engagement be removed. As community members thought about specific families they know, they identified specific, real-world barriers to engagement as language, politics, not being seen as the experts, and being treated with inhospitality.

Ideas for removal of barriers include simplifying systems to make them more navigable and creating a talent pipeline for hiring more teachers and staff of color. One community member said, “There’s a disconnect between family involvement and how we can help parents work with teachers to make sure student needs are met.”

# LEARN

## **Success Factors: Organizing for Systems Change**

Partners from outside the field of education shared their stories about successful community organizing around workers' rights, tenants' rights, and access to transit in the Twin Cities.

## **Workers' Rights: Organizing to shift the balance of power between low-wage workers of color and large corporations.**

**V**eronica Mendez Moore is a Co-Director at Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en la Lucha (Center of Workers United in Struggle). CTUL plays a crucial role in the labor movement, creating innovative, new models of organizing that re-organize the economy to build more power with and for workers. Recently, CTUL organized with retail janitors across the metro area, resulting in a Responsible Contractor Policy at Target with its cleaning contractors as well as industry-wide wage increases. This policy is the first of its kind in this industry nationwide and ensures organizing rights for janitors who clean Target stores.

*“Change doesn’t  
happen overnight. You  
have to stay with it.”*

VERONICA MENDEZ MOORE

Mendez Moore identified critical elements of success as:

- **Be persistent.**
- **Create a crisis to get a dialogue started when actions through traditional channels are ignored. Use small wins to create big wins.**
- **Welcome allies, yet preserve your own leadership role.**
- **Define the issue as broadly connected to needs in the community. Suggestion: We are fighting white supremacy in U.S. schools.**

## **Tenants' Rights: Organizing renters to fight against systemic issues that unite Minneapolis renters.**

**R**oberto de la Riva is an Organizer for Inquilinxs Unidxs Por Justicia (United Renters for Justice). Inquilinxs brings groups of tenants in Minneapolis' worst housing together in order to analyze problems occurring in their living situations, and then strategize and organize around those problems to create affordable, dignified living spaces in Minneapolis. It opened a class-action lawsuit against one of Minneapolis' largest landlords, and organized people of color to bring them into the conversation. As they push for rent control, they continue to move forward with policy building.

***“You can’t change these communities without building resistance and build those muscles – three years [later] we see those muscles are flexing, teaching and showing us the way. When we fight we win!”***

ROBERTO DE LA RIVA

De la Riva noted critical elements for success as:

- Define and clarify the issue.
- Involve those most affected, then let them show you the way.
- Create long-term structures and strategies for fighting back – changing policy takes time.
- Change the rules of the game.

## **Access to Transit: Organizing low-wealth community members of color to participate in the decision-making process in transit planning.**

**N**elima Sitati Munene is Executive Director at the African Career and Education Resource, Inc. (ACER). ACER engaged low-wealth community members of color to influence the narrative on community transportation and priority issues related to the Blue Line Light Rail extension. Its community-centered plan was recommended for adoption into the city of Minneapolis’ Comprehensive Plan.

Sitati Munene identified critical elements of success as:

- Involve those most impacted as they are best placed to come up with the right solutions.
- Build the knowledge and skills of community members to create agendas.
- Avoid stereotyping people, since you never know who might help your cause.
- Bring issue organizing into the community, using community spaces as the forum to share the conversation.

***“People are born leaders... [but] they needed skills and suggestions... [on how to] engage with elected officials. When we gave them the skills they were more confident to go in front of city council.”***

NELIMA SITATI MUNENE

# IMAGINE

## Imagining What's Possible

*“We want a system that is creative, created to address problems and dedicated to finding solutions. There’s no more ‘we can’t do that’.”*

*“We need a system that is flexible, that meets parents where they are, and is responsive to families in crisis modes.”*

Community members imagined what family-led education systems change could look like. Vital elements of their vision include:

- Elevated voices of community members.
- Collective vision and collective well-being, with parents creating change for all kids, not just their kids.
- Elevated language, culture and history — everyone’s story is included in the curriculum.
- Value placed on partnership and teamwork, with parents and teachers on the same team.

## What would need to happen to realize this vision?

### Put pressure on the system

One discussion group reflected that the system is set up to protect itself and deflect change and the system won’t change itself. They focused on the idea of a critical mass within the community pushing on the system, putting pressure on the system in order to change it. They suggested that strong leadership within the community is needed to build that critical mass.

***“We need to go from saying to doing.”***

***“Power is not given or ceded. It is taken.”***

***“We want accountability/auditing of schools to ensure dollars are allocated where necessary. Put integration funding under scrutiny.”***

***“Establish a decision-making structure to give real power to families in school communities.”***

**“Ask this:  
Who defines the rules?  
Who is supporting the current  
system or rule-makers?  
Who benefits?”**

**“Families values  
[are] not just heard,  
they are understood  
and valued.”**

**“Allow grantees  
and community to  
define objectives and  
outcomes.”**

## **Break the rules and flip the script!**

Several discussion groups focused on changing the rules and reframing the narrative. One community member commented, “I’m struck by the question about who makes and supports the rules, and how do we change that.” They considered assumptions that everything has to be framed through power, privilege and equity. They also suggested looking for places of leverage that are often missed, such as teacher licensure programs.

On this topic specifically, one group noted the need to “Lead with an equity lens and stop being racist.”

## **Develop parent leaders**

Community members recognized the need to cultivate a core of parent leaders. Initial actions suggested included raising awareness of both the need for leaders and the benefit of parent involvement.

- One discussion group suggested, “You send people to different places around the country that are doing this ‘right.’ We take advocacy groups and foundation and district leaders, but we don’t take families themselves. We need to take them to see what change looks like.”
- Other groups talked about the need for community partners to form relationships and trust with parents.
- One suggested investing in leadership cohorts as an effective technique for training and for building long-term, supportive relationships between parent leaders.

**“Families first means  
education is about families,  
not just children.  
Family first in policy.”**

**“Parents have  
direct and final say in  
accountability.”**



## Recognize dual imperatives: urgency and long-term commitment

Several discussion groups noted that real change doesn't happen quickly, that time and willingness are needed to work through complexity and foster relationships. However, there is also urgency to this work.

Community members commented:

- “We need short-term goals and long-term commitment.”
- “I was reminded of what it was like to plan a wedding. You can have things quick or cheap or right, but you can't always have the three at the same time. If you want the right kind of change...you have to take your time.”
- “I'm interested in the long haul. How do we create sustainability of funding and energy to keep it moving forward?”
- “We need longer-term funding strategies with a longer runway.”

**“Our parents and children have been speaking truth, and they're waiting for us to do something.”**

**“Effective organizations celebrate small wins and use momentum to organize people for big wins.”**

## What else would it take?

- “Acknowledgement that families and kids feeling safe is a priority.”
- “Consider historical trauma and offer trauma-informed learning.”
- “Hire more teachers of color, but also social justice-minded teachers.”
- “Networking with other people of color to create programs for us/by us.”
- “Use the word SEE. Some parents feel invisible. Make sure we are using it in this work as we talk about children's education.”

**“It takes thousands of times to make change and to embody the fundamental shift we are craving. Struggle more together to get to that place.”**

# SUMMARY

We are committed to supporting parent-led systems change, propelling smart work and strong leaders in the space. We see this work as a journey — one of learning and discovery. In the process of listening, learning and imagining with community members, we learned what family engagement in education could look like:

- Families are recognized as assets.
- Families' power is a key driver for systems change. They are already making decisions; therefore, they should have access to high quality, culturally relevant information to support those decisions.
- Families have local and system agenda-setting power and shared decision-making roles.

As a community, we identified what it will take to drive systems change and amplify family power in education:

- Put pressure on the system
- Break the rules and flip the script!
- Develop parent leaders
- Recognize dual imperatives: act with urgency, while still playing the long game

Our journey to date has provided clarity. It illuminated a set of community voices around family engagement in education. It represents a step toward changing the way the grassroots leaders think about family and community engagement.

# NEXT STEPS

We plan to **continue the conversation** across Minneapolis-St. Paul as we forge a more effective path to ensuring all students have an opportunity for a quality and culturally relevant education. Together, we will **pursue our journey of shared learning, building momentum for systems change** and **seeking ongoing opportunities for community engagement**. We will also pursue our organizations' goals and funding strategies in this area.

We encourage all involved in the education ecosystem – parents, teachers, schools, students, funders and more, to take up these questions:

- *How do community members define family engagement in education?*
- *What do we know about what works, and how to do this work well?*
- *What are the most important values/core beliefs and principles for effective family engagement?*
- *How does the community define “success” in family engagement?*
- *What could family-led education systems change look like?*
- *What would it take to get there?*
- *How might organizations work together, differently than today, for this common purpose?*
- *In what ways do you value family engagement? How are you recognizing, amplifying and supporting family engagement?*



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