RENNIE CENTER
EDUCATION RESEARCH & POLICY

Condition **O**f Education
IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Community-School Connections:
Shaping the Future of Learning through Collaboration

Overview

A year unlike any other, 2020 brought with it a global pandemic, rising political tensions, new movements for racial justice, and opportunities to reflect critically on the function and dysfunction of our societal systems. Among other consequences, the year's events have exposed how the education system has become responsible for addressing a large and increasing number of issues beyond academic learning: food security, mental health counseling, technology access, wraparound services for students and families, and more. Additionally, as school closures last spring turned students' homes into classrooms, and family members into classroom aides, it magnified the need for collaboration among the diverse stakeholders who play a part in student learning and the education ecosystem. In a year when our way of life and learning has been turned upside down and we have been reminded of the deep inequities that plague our education system, it is more important than ever to consider the essential role that community plays in our current education system—and in the future of learning.

Responding to the Current Moment

The Rennie Center has long focused on addressing gaps in opportunities and outcomes between White students and their Black and Latinx peers. We have highlighted many reform strategies aimed at addressing racial inequities, from changing student discipline policies to building inclusive school communities to creating career pathways for disconnected and marginalized youth. However, we cannot "improve" public education without addressing the underlying issues of racial inequity built into the system. How do we identify and share reform strategies designed to ensure the success of all students without fully confronting the deep and systemic racism that led to inequitable results in the first place? Too often, rather than offering a pathway to opportunity, our education system reveals a history of discrimination that continues to oppress our most marginalized citizens. As we reflect on this moment in time, we need to shift our mindset from promoting strategies for navigating an inherently inequitable system to dismantling and transforming that system itself.

The tragedy of the pandemic has exacerbated inequities across our communities, particularly among low-income families and communities of color. Sudden school closures have also brought an urgency to address these deep disparities, which manifest in stark realities such as:

- Too many low-income households and non-English speaking households do not have computers or internet access and lack digital fluency to support students.

- Students of color may be more likely to live in crowded conditions with family members who face a higher risk of exposure through their essential jobs.[1]

- Teachers' digital fluency and experience with remote learning vary widely.

- Remote learning makes it more difficult to maintain relationships and meet the social and emotional needs that schools typically address.[2]

Yet even amid these challenges, school closures have brought to the forefront several positive trends that can be integrated into schooling moving forward. In particular, teachers feel more connected to families, and young people are acquiring digital skills needed for the 21st century.[3] More broadly, the COVID-19 pandemic has refocused attention on family and community members as essential parts of the learning process and forced our system to identify and remove the barriers between school and community. We know community-wide opportunities and challenges require community-wide solutions and that schools cannot and should not do this work alone. We also recognize that our goal post-pandemic must not be returning to a "normal" grounded in deep and persistent racial inequity. Instead, as we look to the future, how do we learn from the experiences of the past year to foster sustainable community-led practices that transform how we approach teaching and learning?

In reporting on the Condition of Education in the Commonwealth (COE), the Rennie Center seeks to highlight innovative local solutions to local challenges and elevate best practice and lessons learned. Year after year we have profiled schools, districts, programs, and state initiatives that strive to increase access to opportunity for students and families across Massachusetts (and beyond). We hope to continue honoring that localized lens this year, noting that the practices featured in this year's report are not meant to be replicated, but rather adapted and modified to the context of each community. In addition, while COE 2021 has been informed by the realities of school and life amid the COVID-19 pandemic, we aim to elevate programs and practices that transcend this moment in time and support the long-term transformation of the education system.

The subject of this year's COE report also builds on those that have come before. Our research on social-emotional learning is more relevant than ever, as educators work to support students who are isolated from the school community and, in many cases, living through traumatic experiences amid the pandemic. And our recommendations for putting students at the center of their learning, elevating their voices, and finding authentic ways to assess learning can help our state build a more equitable education system. These past reports provided an important foundation for our research team as we explored this year's topic.

PROJECT COMPONENTS

Data Dashboard: This tool provides an in-depth look at school performance indicators. Users can delve deeper by looking at different student groups and monitor progress over time.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection and reporting on student achievement, attendance, and engagement has been substantially limited. This year, the Rennie team has created a data supplement that curates key indicators featured in our Data Dashboard. It focuses on what these indicators are measuring, why they matter, and what they can tell us about the education system. We are also taking this opportunity to think critically about our Data Dashboard in general: which indicators are included, how we categorize and present data, and the overall user experience of the website. We look forward to launching a refreshed Data Dashboard in the coming year.

Action Guide: This guide builds on the Data Dashboard by examining evidence-based practices, identifying local exemplars, and offering research-informed recommendations for statewide actions that have the potential to address performance gaps and contribute to broad improvement in student outcomes. The report looks at the progress made and the challenges that remain, focusing on areas where new approaches could help foster the success of all the Commonwealth's learners. By highlighting how communities are currently taking action, it offers strategies that can be applied within other schools and districts across Massachusetts, thereby grounding the research in real-world examples of success.

Federal and State Policy Snapshot

Developments in policy and practice over the past decade have led to a strong and growing focus on students' holistic development. Some of the highest-profile pieces of state and federal legislation over the past few years have recognized the need to focus on non-academic factors alongside other initiatives that address student achievement.

- In 2014, Massachusetts' Safe & Supportive Schools Act offered a comprehensive definition of a "safe and supportive school" as a "positive, healthy, and inclusive whole-school learning environment" that fosters positive relationships and provides integrated services for students' physical and psychological wellbeing.[4] It directed the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to develop a framework for schools on creating welcoming learning environments, encouraged schools to enact this framework, and offered resources (e.g., grants and technical assistance) to support this work.

- In 2015, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offered increased flexibility to states to define their accountability systems, while maintaining guardrails to ensure high academic standards (such as annual testing in grades 3-8). Recognizing the need for measures beyond test scores, the law also requires states to incorporate at least one non-academic measure of "school quality and student success" within their accountability systems.

- In 2019, the state's Student Opportunity Act promised to infuse $1.5 billion into school districts over seven years, with a particular focus on districts serving large numbers of historically marginalized students. The primary impact of the law was to change the state's funding formula by offering higher incremental spending for students with disabilities, English Learners, and low-income students—though it also made other modifications to the formula, such as raising per-pupil funding for guidance and psychological services by 60% in the elementary grades. Districts were required to develop a three-year plan detailing how they would use new funds to address "disparities in achievement among student subgroups" through specific, evidence-based interventions (e.g., wraparound services, expanded learning time, early education).

Each of these pieces of legislation incorporates a focus on non-academic data and/or services. They also demonstrate another recent trend in policymaking: creating space for educators and community members to inform how change occurs within their schools and districts. The two state laws listed above rely on districts to plan and implement interventions that work in their context, while the federal law allows states to define their own non-academic indicator of student success. In a climate of localized decision-making, there are many opportunities for the state, districts, and schools to address the holistic needs of students by elevating community-level expertise and resources.

The Influence and Impact of Social Capital

The concept of social capital lies at the heart of understanding how schools and communities can work together more effectively to support young people's long-term success. Social capital refers to the networks of people and community resources available to an individual. It includes the information, opportunities, and social support embedded in one's network of associations through formal and informal ties.[5] In other words, "social capital consists of the available networks and pathways a person or group of people has for support and/or opportunity: what are the networks that help you get by and networks that help you get ahead?"[6]

A community naturally features a complex web of relationships. Outside of the school day, students and families may interact with countless other individuals, from the local barber, to the pastor, to the grocery store clerk and the soccer coach. Cultivating these relationships through activities designed to build social cohesion can lead to better economic outcomes, such as lower unemployment during times of economic upheaval.[7] On the other hand, disregarding these relationships, and their power to support and sustain, means disregarding proactive ways of building students, families, and communities up for success.[8]

Community groups can play a powerful role in building social capital among residents—for example, Union Capital Boston invites local residents to connect at regular Network Nights as part of its mission "to transform social capital into opportunity by rewarding community engagement."[9] Schools can contribute to this work by collaborating with local organizations, celebrating students' community connections, and seeking ways to build on these valuable assets.

The Intersection of School and Community

This year's action guide aims to uplift key practices at the intersection of school and community. It is important to note that any efforts to integrate a community-based approach into teaching and learning must be combined with a strong academic foundation in order to improve student outcomes. The strategies outlined below must not be seen as alternatives to skilled teachers, quality instructional materials, effective school leadership, clear and high standards, and all the other components that come together to lay the groundwork for long-term success in college and careers. Instead, community-based supports should complement existing academic initiatives and reinforce the work that schools are already doing to help students build essential skills and competencies.

The report focuses on three priority areas for intertwining academics and community:

- **Holistic Learning:** The education system serves students with a wide range of abilities, interests, and lived experiences. A holistic approach to learning aims to understand and address the unique strengths and needs of each student, in order to help them achieve their full potential. Recognizing a community's cultural wealth and the learning that takes place outside school is essential to gaining a complete picture of each student as an individual. In addition, community can play a key role in building on students' strengths and addressing their needs through connections with relevant services.

- **Shared Leadership:** Serving all students equitably requires a commitment to incorporating diverse voices in educational decision-making. As a starting point, this means listening to and valuing a range of perspectives; at a deeper level, it means sharing power and expanding leadership opportunities to a broad array of stakeholders (particularly those most impacted by a decision). Consistently seeking input and feedback from students, parents, educators, and community members can lead to more inclusive and accessible processes, while resulting in higher-quality and better-aligned learning experiences for students.

- **Multiple Pathways to Careers:** Helping students develop the skills and competencies they need to enter the workforce is one of the core functions of the education system. Because every student has different talents, interests, and aspirations, the process of preparing students for a career should be equally individualized. Community members, community-based organizations, local businesses, and schools can all play critical roles in helping young people define and attain a career pathway, including by serving as a network of support as they navigate new experiences.

For each of these priorities, the report examines why integrating school and community is so critical and describes what community collaboration can look like in practice. It then shares several examples of current programs in order to demonstrate one or more key practices in action. Each section also includes a high-level overview of a measurement tool or approach for collecting community-level data. Finally, the report highlights opportunities for districts and the state to consider new ways of incorporating community engagement, data collection, and partnership to support a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences—as well as a more successful and equitable education system overall.

Holistic Learning

Holistic learning—which focuses on a broad set of factors that impact student wellbeing—is a powerful approach to teaching and learning because it acknowledges that academics must be paired with non-academic support to help students thrive in and out of school. A holistic approach involves two main components: understanding and building on student strengths, and assessing and addressing student needs. Carrying out this work effectively requires collaboration between schools and community providers as educators strive to learn more about each student as an individual—and to support their development through relevant instruction and connections to in-school and out-of-school resources.

Acknowledging that students have interests and needs that go beyond the classroom positions families and community providers as key partners in identifying and coordinating essential services to bolster student learning. Through this integrated approach, schools and community partners can work together to address the social, emotional, and academic needs of students, and to build an asset-focused system that supports students' identities while uplifting their experiences.

Why does it matter?

Seeking to understand and respond to students holistically reflects the reality that each learner comes into the classroom with a unique set of strengths, challenges, aspirations, and life experiences. Overlooking these distinctions means that too many students—particularly students of color—do not receive the support they need to thrive in school or beyond. In contrast, a holistic approach to learning seeks to break down the barriers that keep educators from recognizing and acknowledging the assets that students bring with them, while addressing pressing needs that could otherwise interfere with their learning. It provides an opportunity to engage all aspects of a learner's background and experience to instill curiosity, develop effective communication skills, and foster motivation to learn.[10]

Holistic learning leverages the incredible assets present in community expertise and cultural wealth. By uplifting cultural references in all aspects of learning, holistic learning can foster a dynamic learning environment informed by students'

experiences outside of school.[11] Research suggests that drawing from students' cultural knowledge and norms makes learning easier and contributes favorably to reading comprehension and mathematical thinking.[12] Students engaged in culturally affirming content also see improved attendance rates.[13] Leveraging the cultural wealth and experience of each student makes learning more interesting and meaningful, engages students beyond a Euro-centric curriculum, creates connections across differences by shedding light on diverse identities and home practices, and celebrates a sense of belonging by infusing supports from outside of the school walls into a child's experience.[14]

Additionally, a holistic approach can spark a mindset shift that leads learning to be valued wherever it takes place, whether in school or within the broader community. Students gain new knowledge and skills every day at home, with their neighbors, as they participate in sports or youth groups, and in other community gathering places. These experiences also offer opportunities for students to collaborate and problem-solve with their peers. However, such learning is often overlooked and undervalued in traditional school assessments and evaluation systems. School-community partnership can play an important role in highlighting the full range of students' abilities, helping educators recognize student strengths and offer targeted guidance and support.

Finally, when educators are attuned to the holistic needs of students, they can help identify and address non-academic barriers that would otherwise get in the way of learning. A student experiencing hunger, coping with anxiety, or suffering from a toothache will likely struggle to focus on building academic skills and knowledge. Schools can provide critical assistance to students (and their families) by building systems that allow classroom teachers and support staff to surface these types of challenges, take action to address them, and monitor their success in doing so. Enhancing learning through whole child supports can lead to improved academic achievement, reduced absenteeism, reduced risky behavior, and the development of a positive school culture that promotes student growth.[15] In order to achieve these benefits, though, schools cannot work alone—partnerships with community-based services such as food banks, housing offices, and health care providers are key.

What can it look like?

Facilitating holistic learning is not a "one size fits all" solution but rather an opportunity for schools and community providers to identify, scaffold, and individualize academic and non-academic supports for students. A holistic approach encompasses an array of practices designed to see students as individuals—recognizing them not just as future citizens or employees-in-training, but as the embodiment of a rich cultural background and environmental influences.[16] The following practices outline some starting points for communities, schools, and districts seeking to integrate a holistic approach to learning.

Uplift community cultural wealth

Cultural wealth refers to the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and relationships possessed by marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged in predominately White-dominated institutions like traditional education settings.[17] Community cultural wealth focuses on the cultural resources that students develop in their families and communities and how those experiences inform their learning journeys.[18] Facilitating a holistic approach to learning requires acknowledging the local context in which students live and learn, including by recognizing community cultural wealth as an asset and embracing diversity in all its forms.[19]

To put these principles into practice, schools can engage students, families, and community members in collective explorations of social justice and cultural identity. More specifically, school-community partnerships can work together to incorporate community cultural wealth in daily learning experiences by: diversifying teaching materials, content, and teaching/support staff; involving students in local social justice efforts; designing learning opportunities that allow students to leverage their cultural wealth to demonstrate mastery in diverse ways; embracing diverse language usage in interactions, writing, and tests; and involving students in the creation of knowledge, content, and curriculum across subjects.[20] By engaging in these inclusive practices, school-community partnerships will deepen relationships between home and school, thereby helping students make connections between where/how they live and what they are learning.[21]

Connect learning experiences inside and outside of the school

Learning can happen anytime and anywhere, whether in school, community, or family settings. Out-of-school learning can help students link core academics to real-world experiences, supporting the application of skills in authentic settings and environments. Connecting learning experiences inside and outside of the school also offers students access to academic enrichment, a broad array of services, and opportunities to build relationships with their peers.[22]

Many of the learning experiences students participate in outside of school come from informal settings, such as family or community gatherings. This speaks to the need for schools to prioritize two-way communication with family members, who are best positioned to perceive how students navigate these informal community spaces and share it with school staff. Two-way communication means that schools should not only be reaching out to families to share how students are progressing in their in-school learning; they should also be seeking to hear from parents and caregivers how students are building skills and interacting with others outside of school. Speaking with families can help school staff paint a fuller picture of what students know, can do, and aspire to, allowing them to better target student services and supports.

Since out-of-school learning can also take place in more formal settings, schools should also seek to connect with a range of community providers. Schools can help young people access opportunities for academic enrichment, community service, part-time jobs, and youth development programs.[23] These sorts of activities offer a range of benefits, such as enabling social connections with networks of peers, fostering near-peer connections and mentorship opportunities with role models from similar backgrounds, and nurturing students' interests in particular focus areas. By offering "informational support, counseling, emotional support, and validation built on a relationship of mutual knowledge and trust," they allow students to formulate their own definition of success—which may be difficult to construct from in-school interactions alone.[24] As with families, schools and community providers also benefit from two-way communication that enables information-sharing on general approaches to learning as well as individual student success (to the extent allowed by student privacy protections).

Focus on whole child supports

An important part of understanding students holistically is recognizing any barriers that could keep them from achieving their potential. If students are facing challenges to their emotional, mental, or physical wellbeing, they will struggle to engage in classes and develop new skills. If they have limited access to opportunities for cultivating their interests and talents, they won't be able to use those abilities to further their academic and career success. It requires an integrated effort across family, school, and community to identify these latent strengths and needs, and to inform a tailored set of services that supports the whole child.

In order to maximize the benefits of this approach, schools should start with a thoughtful method of reviewing and recording student information. Using this method, staff should be able to track student strengths and needs across various domains (academics, health, social-emotional development, family resources such as housing and nutrition, etc.). To collect these insights, it is critical to engage in ongoing conversations with educators, family members, and other community members who can share relevant information. Schools should synthesize their input and populate the data system through regular student review meetings; during these meetings, staff can also prepare a plan for accessing and coordinating resources to support individual students. Finally, staff should follow up on this plan regularly to monitor whether it is being implemented and to engage with students and families about its success.[25]

Along with an in-school system for identifying student needs and interests, supporting the whole child also requires links with community partners who can offer services that address student needs (such as mental health providers) and build on their interests (such as math enrichment programs). This is a dynamic, iterative process that benefits from schools' ability to build and maintain reciprocal relationships with community providers. Enabling more streamlined access to out-of-school services is a powerful way to bolster student success in school, and an integral part of a holistic approach to learning.

Implementing the practices described above requires effective school-community partnerships drawing on interagency support, family involvement, and adequate resources.[26] The following examples demonstrate how school partners can leverage community providers to facilitate a holistic approach to learning.

SPOTLIGHT ON
Framingham Public Schools: Fostering connections & relationships through a pandemic

Framingham Public Schools serves a diverse community of families and students with wide-ranging cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. The district's Office of Community Resource Development (CRD) plays a critical role to facilitate multifaceted, comprehensive, and holistic learning opportunities for each and every student. The CRD's mission is to expand access to high-quality out-of-school programming through effective community partnerships that enhance student development and achievement. It offers connections to a range of programs serving all ages, from infants to high school students to adult learners, with a particular focus on supporting a culture of collaboration across partners and ensuring equitable access to programming.[27]

The CRD strives to recognize and value the work of community partners in serving Framingham students and families and to connect, not displace, their efforts. To support collaboration and elevate the expertise of community partners, the CRD hosts monthly cohort meetings that bring together partners with school personnel to discuss how they can best serve the community. During these meetings, participants review district- and student-level data, collectively problem-solve how to approach various scenarios, and determine who should implement the proposed solution. This intra-district collaboration is vital for the CRD to develop and sustain dynamic and responsive programming for the Framingham community.

In reviewing available out-of-school options, the team at the Office of Community Resource Department also noticed that contracting with outside vendors to provide school-specific, out-of-school-time programs did not ensure equitable access for Framingham students. Therefore, they moved toward developing a homegrown, in-house model. The district currently oversees an infant-toddler program and all out-of-school-time programming for grades PreK–12, offering intentional pathways for students across grade levels. This includes the Explorers Program (a before- and after-school care program for students in grades PreK–5), Flyers After School (a STEM-focused program for grades 6–8), Resiliency for Life (providing SEL and academic support for high school students), a Summer Institute for high school recovery credit, and adult community education.

Leveraging strong community partnerships to adapt to COVID-19

Like many districts, Framingham Public Schools had to pivot quickly to provide families and students with resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortunately, the CRD was able to rely on its strong, pre-existing community partnerships to help connect students and families with the support they needed.

When school closures limited family and student access to key services, Framingham Public Schools acted quickly to put a plan in place with community partners. According to Tiffany Lillie, director of the CRD, despite the upheaval, educators in the public schools and service providers in the community kept talking in "calm, clear voices, in multiple languages—because while the

world had changed, the work remained the same: educate children; engage families; provide community resources." The CRD and community partners conducted weekly phone calls, offered feedback surveys to support access to services, and knocked on doors to deliver food, Chromebooks, or simply a safe and welcoming greeting. Through conversations with partners, Tiffany and her team discovered that a challenge among staff during remote learning was coordinating lunch and recess. With different virtual schedules, staff were feeling stretched thin to support students' learning throughout the day. By meeting with district leadership and sharing these concerns, the CRD was able to facilitate the district's launch of universal lunch and recess times in order to accommodate staff schedules and ensure consistent services for students.

Even though the CRD could not provide in-person programming or childcare, they continuously worked to meet students' social, emotional, and mental health needs. Throughout it all, they strove to maintain engagement and communication that was "truly relational" rather than "transactional," as Lillie puts it: "That's how we're going to get to a place of being able to have ongoing critical feedback."[28] Framingham was able to adapt to the ever-evolving teaching and learning conditions during the pandemic because they know their community. Community partnerships are essential to the work and collaboration of Framingham Public Schools. The Office of Community Resource Development strives to help students learn firsthand that the Framingham community is rich with many resources they can use now and in the future. Through community partnerships, Framingham is aims to expand students' horizons so that they see themselves as members of a vibrant community intent on nurturing their education and enriching their lives.

Cultural affirmation at the Benjamin Banneker Charter Public School

The Benjamin Banneker is a PreK–6 STEM school in Cambridge founded on the commitment to excellence in education. Benjamin Banneker Charter Public School students are taught to understand the value of education, while learning within an inclusive and dedicated community of educators. Students are respected as young learners with rich cultural ancestry and varied interests, abilities, and circumstances. In its 25th year, the Banneker is recognized for student outcomes that are well above the state averages in ELA, Math, and Science.

Beyond academics, the Banneker uplifts community cultural wealth as a main tenet of a holistic learning approach:

- **Celebrating culture:** Across subjects and grade levels, the Banneker School celebrates its community's cultural richness. Students see those who look like them in the content they learn and the teachers they learn from. The Executive Director and over 60% of the staff are educators of color, so students are exposed to a thriving and inclusive community working in harmony on their behalf. Authentic conversations occur daily among staff on issues of the day and with students on issues of concern. There is a palpable passion among school staff to provide Banneker children with a school experience that creates an achievement culture without sacrificing self-esteem, self-awareness, or respect for the role of a student's culture.

- **Learning culture:** Teachers are intentional about creating opportunities for students to develop a healthy identity and sense of self-worth. These opportunities are visible in the books students read, the history that teachers prioritize, and the art displayed in school corridors. A focus on student identity and ancestry is also evident in classroom assignments. For example, in a 2nd grade heritage unit, students interview their parents to learn and write about their family's heritage. Teachers also share their stories of growing up. The unit concludes with a well-attended family celebration where teachers, parents, and students prepare food representing their culture and heritage.

With these efforts, school staff aim to do more than support student learning. As a Banneker school administrator noted, "Without a school like the Banneker, how do we train Black children to survive and thrive in a racialized society? Banneker is showing many of its students that excellence is not just a faraway goal but a readily attainable reality."

For more on the Banneker, see the Rennie Center's forthcoming report, "A Culture of Excellence: A Case Study of the Benjamin Banneker Charter Public School."

Coordinating student support services

- **What is it:** The City Connects approach to integrated student support features a comprehensive, data-driven model for addressing common barriers to student learning. Student support staff meet with every teacher every year to review the strengths and needs of every student across all domains of development, group students into four tiers of escalating risk, and identify appropriate supports in the school and surrounding community. Another core component of City Connects is MyConnects, a secure database that helps staff track referrals, service delivery, and student outcomes.

- **How it works:** MyConnects allows users to gather disparate data, helping school-based staff keep track of updated information on many students at once. Using this system, a single City Connects Coordinator (a school staff member who serves as a single point of contact for implementing the City Connects approach) can work with up to 400 students. Data in MyConnects can be used for multiple purposes: documenting conversations, tracking the progress of ongoing interventions, and understanding the impact of those interventions over time.

- **Who can use it:** MyConnects is currently a proprietary web-based database developed by City Connects, a program of the Center for Optimized Student Support (COSS) at Boston College's Lynch School of Education and Human Development. The system is available to schools implementing City Connects, which currently includes more than 90 public, charter, and private schools across six states.[29]

- **Why it matters:** MyConnects provides an example of how a school can bring together data for a holistic view of each student and coordinate services with partners within and beyond the school building. Housing data on interventions in a single web-based platform allows for greater efficiency and effectiveness when connecting with a wide range of community agencies.

City Connects is a national leader in its field, helping to demonstrate best practices in student support. Practitioners looking to take the first steps toward a comprehensive model of addressing student strengths and needs may access resources and guidance by participating in the Systemic Student Support Academy, co-led by the Rennie Center and COSS on behalf of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Participants have used a variety of approaches for coordinating student support services, such as by modifying pre-existing district databases to allow for individual review and monitoring.

Shared Leadership

Communities, as well as schools, are made up of many diverse stakeholders with unique perspectives that can inform the interaction of education and community. The key to fruitful collaboration and decision-making processes that reflect the educational needs of all members of a community is finding ways for these different stakeholders to collaborate with one another through meaningful engagement opportunities.

This collaboration may be described as shared leadership, or interactions among family members, students, school- and district-based staff, and community members that strengthen relationships, inform school and community services, and build social capital among all members. More specifically, shared leadership represents one point along a continuum of school-community collaboration. On one end of the continuum, schools may be inviting family and community participation in school events and just starting to think about feedback mechanisms. On the other end, they may already have functioning, equitable structures in place to bring community members and perspectives into the education system. As this section will detail, there are many organizations, schools, and communities that are pushing towards a model of true shared leadership through family engagement and collaboration, yet there is still an opportunity to move further along the continuum and fully embrace this approach.

Why does it matter?

A successful shared leadership model benefits both the process and the outcomes of decision making. A wide array of voices making decisions, particularly those that have been marginalized by the education system and community services, can challenge and dismantle the White-dominant norms and biases ingrained in our systems. These voices provide input based on lived

CONTINUUM OF FAMILY-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

No Structure	Family & Community Involvement	Family & Community Engagement	Shared Leadership
A structure does not exist to involve, engage, or collaborate with families & community members on educational decision-making.	Families and community members are invited to participate in one-off educational experiences, like social events or conferences.	Families and community members are offered opportunities for feedback and space for their voices to be heard around educational decision-making. School staff build trust and relationships with these stakeholders.	Families and community members are consistently at the table, actively bringing new ideas about education initiatives. All structures incorporate and are run by multiple stakeholders. There is consistent two-way communication between school and community stakeholders, as well as beyond the education sector, with local businesses, places of worship, and other family-serving organizations.
	■ Parent-Teacher conferences ■ Sports leagues ■ School fundraiser	■ Feedback opportunities ■ Parent Cafés ■ School-based committees ■ Welcome meetings	■ Children's Cabinets ■ Codified decision-making structures requiring parent/community participation

experiences, not on assumptions, and bring forward expertise that stretches far beyond that of traditional education leaders. A parent can provide insight into what social-emotional supports their child needs, a soccer coach can share whether their players are coming to practice hungry, a YMCA program manager can share their successful outreach techniques for disengaged students—and that is just the tip of the iceberg. In a holistic learning approach, these types of reflections are used to support individual students; through shared leadership models, they can help reshape the education system as a whole. With a broader set of voices at the table, communities and schools can paint a clearer picture of existing opportunity and resource gaps and tap into networks of social capital to address those gaps.

Setting a shared vision is a key part of effective leadership in general, and it is no different when thinking about community-school collaboration. A shared vision can build participants' commitment to the process and hold stakeholders accountable to addressing inequities within the community and school. Additionally, school staff must avoid falling into the trap of thinking that shared leadership is just about getting input and feedback on decisions already made by those in positions of power. It requires a commitment to equitable distribution of opportunities for participation in decision-making (i.e., who has always had a seat at the table and can step back to allow others to step up?). It also requires accessible forums where a multitude of voices can be heard. Schools and communities must think through the barriers to entry—are important meetings held during work hours? are there interpreters available? what about transportation and childcare?—and offer a variety of forms of participation, both formal and informal, to accommodate various needs and interests.

Another major barrier that shared leadership can mitigate is deficit-based thinking that leads to a lack of self-efficacy. A mindset shift must occur that allows families and communities to see themselves as capable, invaluable members of schools and communities, with a wealth of knowledge to share. Schools and community organizations can help all families and community members cultivate these positive, affirmational roles and build their understanding of what effective, deliberate engagement and leadership looks like by engaging them in consistent, two-way, trust-building dialogue and affirming their roles as leaders.

What can it look like?

Many opportunities for families and community members to participate in their schools come through meetings or activities held just a couple of times per year. Others, like School Committee meetings or local cabinet meetings, can feel inaccessible or daunting to students, parents, and other community members hoping to actively participate. Though not all-encompassing, schools and communities can consider the following methods of engagement, which range on the continuum from emerging to full-blown shared leadership, when approaching questions about how to effectively establish formal and informal structures that support collaboration among multiple stakeholders.

Engaging student voice

Although they are the primary users of the education and community-based systems, students are often left out of decisions that impact their lived experiences. However, with the proper relationships and methods of communication in place, students of all ages can share their perspectives, communicate their needs, and recommend changes to school culture and climate, academic offerings, school operations, and community supports—and, in doing so, advance educational equity.[30] The whole education system benefits from student participation in decision-making, as researchers have found that these opportunities can lead to education policies and practices that better serve student needs.[31] Especially in the present moment, listening to student voice is imperative, as they are the only ones who have experience with attending school during a pandemic of this magnitude.

Schools and communities should be continuously evolving their methods for facilitating student voice. At a preliminary level, educators, school leaders, community providers, and other community members who often interact with students should be collecting feedback to inform their teaching or program offerings. This can be through the form of student focus groups, surveys, or informal conversations. Student-led conferences, where students share their portfolio of work and discuss their progress with family members and teachers, offer a more formal structure to building leadership and communication skills, as well as accountability for students' own learning.[32] In addition, students can partner with educators, school leaders, and community providers to identify opportunities for improvement and share accountability for helping implement those changes. Reserving spots with full voting privileges for student representatives on school boards and committees is another way to engage student voice and share leadership opportunities. By purposely engaging diverse student voices and, ultimately, allowing them to take on leadership roles, schools and programs can leverage students' expertise to design supports that positively impact the entire learning community.

PARENT LEADERSHIP TRAINING INSTITUTE

Parent, caregiver, and family representation on school councils, community boards, and other governing bodies is an essential component of shared leadership. However, barriers to accessing these bodies can present equity issues, leaving positions to be filled by higher-income, White, English-speaking family members. Initiatives like the National Parent Leadership Institute address these barriers by helping parents build their social capital and access the civic knowledge and skills necessary to make their voices heard. The Institute itself is also intentionally designed to allow equitable access for all interested participants, offering a model for engaging family members.

- The National Parent Leadership Institute's Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) is a 21-week curriculum that emerged as a result of disenfranchisement felt by parents in the education system. There are 69 PLTI communities across the United States, including Chelsea and Revere, MA, with an actively engaged alumni network. By working with parents through two phases—the first focused on understanding your own strengths, your community, and the meaning of leadership and the second on the nuts and bolts of civics, government, policy, and changemaking—PLTI enables parent leaders to make changes they'd like to see, through a Community Project that each participant undertakes. Oftentimes, the issues parents choose to focus on are related to education.

- Parent participants are provided with meals, transportation, high-quality childcare (including a children's leadership curriculum), interpretation services, social-emotional and team-building mechanisms, and more, in order to maintain equitable access to the initiative.

- Outcomes of the program have included increased civics skills and knowledge, parents running for elected office (10% of parent leaders have done so), unanticipated personal growth outcomes like employment or education, and branching off to create personalized support groups (for instance, one parent started an IEP support group).

Engaging parent, caregiver, and family leadership

Attempting to connect schools and communities without the engagement of families as co-designers of initiatives, programming, and supports will not lead to positive or equitable outcomes. Parents are students' first teachers, and they carry a wealth of knowledge about their children. Yet, they are often excluded or marginalized in key learning decisions. Too often, policies and practices within the education system minimize the cultural wealth, social capital, and immense value that students' home environments hold. As educators seek to rectify this situation, it is important to keep in mind that family participation may look different for individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Schools and community staff should work to understand the traditions and interests of families in their community as they identify opportunities for leadership.

Therefore, to promote effective parent leadership, schools and community-based organizations should work together to create an equitable environment that empowers parents/caregivers to contribute, collaborate, and create supportive learning environments for their students. Schools and community partners must simultaneously build the capacity of both parents and educators to allow a reciprocal dialogue regarding students' progress and areas for continued growth. These activities may include feedback opportunities through parent surveys and focus groups, welcome meetings each semester that build relationships between families and educators, and parent peer networks/coalitions, where parents meet to connect and share knowledge about community resources. Community providers can facilitate these relationships in a variety of ways, such as by offering space for parent meetings, conducting their own feedback surveys, or offering family-focused training sessions.

Beyond the preliminary level, schools and community-based organizations can invite parents into a reciprocal feedback process to generate ideas and offer solutions for the implementation of those ideas. Welcome meetings can expand beyond a twice-a-year event, to encompass regular touchpoints with families that bring unmet needs to light (and allow community and school representatives to divide responsibilities for addressing those needs). Parent and family leadership can also be demonstrated through full voting representation on school and community governing bodies, like Parent Teacher Associations, Special Education Parent Advisory Councils, or other school councils, where they can advocate for themselves and their families. Many schools do have functioning parent councils that accomplish many of these purposes, yet a MassINC paper on local accountability in Gateway Cities found that school site councils frequently struggle to identify parents who are willing and able to serve on these bodies.[33] Schools should build on these existing structures with an eye towards who is participating and what opportunities members have to be involved with decision-making.

Engaging community voice

Rooted in the heart of communities and serving a wide array of children and families, community-based organizations (e.g., YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, local neighborhood associations), community establishments (churches, barber shops, unions, civic associations), and community activities (Little League, music groups) offer unique perspectives and expertise outside of a child's life in school. These organizations step in to address challenges, particularly in areas where schools may have limited capacity, by providing tutoring, mental health support, health care, nutritional food options, civic engagement, and more. They also support strong social networks within communities and enable young people to connect with role models and mentors. Bringing local stakeholders into school decision-making processes can spark collaborative action to meet the needs of children and the broader community.

Harvard's Education Redesign Lab (which was started by the Rennie Center's founder and current board member, former Massachusetts Secretary of Education Paul Reville) has been leading this charge in almost 50 cities across the country by establishing Children's Cabinets. Locally, this has included work with Chelsea, Haverhill, Cambridge, Somerville, Salem, and Worcester. An example of a formal collaborative model, Children's Cabinets bring together local stakeholders to develop a shared and collective vision for learning experiences in schools and communities that address the holistic needs of children.[34] The Ed Redesign Lab ensures that these cabinets are made up of municipal departments and agencies; groups focused on children, youth, and families; public stakeholder representatives from health, early childhood, business, and higher education; and community members like business leaders, union members, civic leaders, parents, and youth. With all of these voices at the

table, the Cabinets can define what an effective educational pipeline should look like, compare that vision to the reality within their community, identify assets to fill any gaps, and choose high-priority entry points for collective efforts toward a stronger system.[35]

While Cabinets are one way to tap into a wide range of voices, some communities may get at this structure in more of an informal way, with school leaders and community leaders building strong relationships or staying in contact through standing meetings.

SPOTLIGHT ON
The Learning Community Charter School: Responsive partnerships with families

The Learning Community Charter School is a K–8 charter school located in Central Falls, Rhode Island, that has built systems for authentic family engagement and excellent instruction. By establishing trust and a culture of robust family-school relationships, The Learning Community supports its teachers and the families of its 600 students by placing family engagement, expertise, and leadership at the center of its work; according to the head of school, "Our families are instrumental to the work we do at The Learning Community."

The success of The Learning Community's family engagement starts with one thing: mindset. A common component across interactions between families and school staff is active listening. Rather than approaching interactions with families with predetermined decisions or agendas, the staff at The Learning Community take a step back and, through active listening, engage in a two-way discourse. By honoring families' questions and feedback first, the staff can better understand what is going on in students' and families' lives and respond in a more informed way to issues both big and small. With this approach, educators and school staff truly value the experiences and perspectives that students and families bring from their unique cultures and homes.

The following practices highlight the myriad of ways The Learning Community engages families across the continuum of family-community collaboration:

- **Welcome meetings:** The Learning Community teachers and staff host a welcome meeting with every new family and, in response to COVID-19, they have started doing this with every single family. (They plan on continuing this practice indefinitely.) During the meetings, teachers, parents, and students have the opportunity to connect, build a relationship, and discuss expectations of teaching and learning. The school staff is purposeful in asking families what their experience has been with education to understand how The Learning Community can better support their needs. This meeting is the catalyst for future leadership opportunities: as school staff model to families that they are receptive to feedback and input, this can lead families to seek additional leadership roles. Families leave this meeting knowing that they will always be listened to and welcomed at school—in fact, 98% of families report that the school is welcoming to them.

- **Parent Cafés:** The Learning Community hosts Parent Cafés that run twice a month in the morning and evening to accommodate working parents. During Parent Cafés, Learning Community staff ask families what is and isn't working with
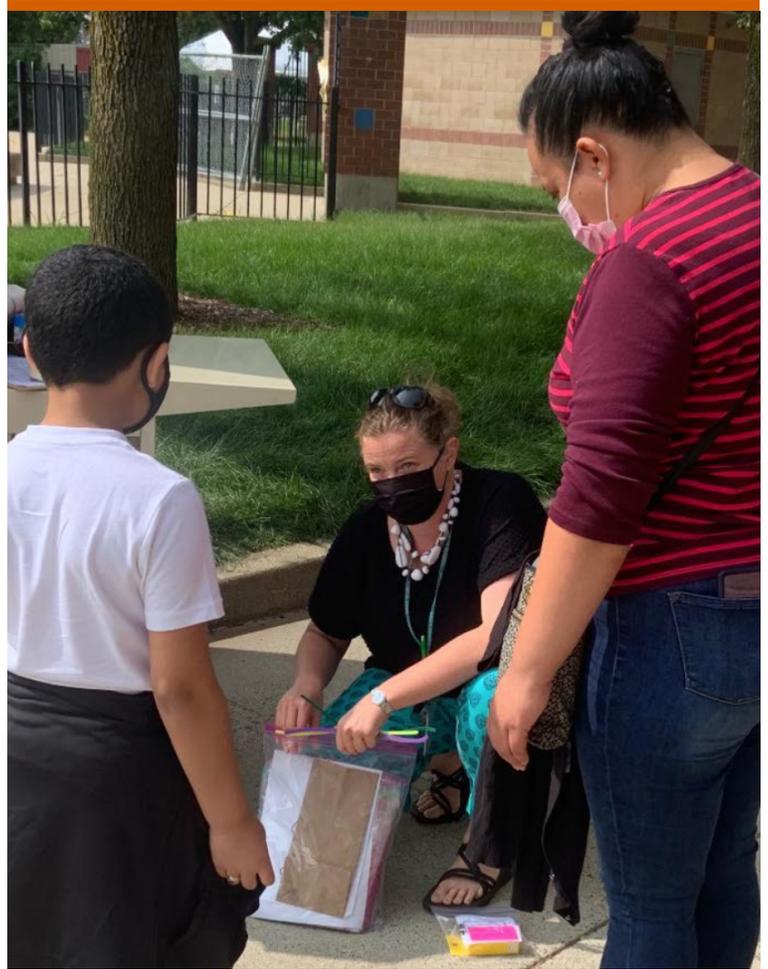
the school. These Cafés do more than provide a space for parent feedback—they also acknowledge the value of families' experiences as the school works to continuously improve its initiatives and actions.

- **Family conferences:** One hundred percent of families at The Learning Community attend parent conferences, and nearly all (96%) attend open houses. School staff use these opportunities to engage in two-way dialogue, facilitating leadership by families and allowing them to direct the conversation about their child. By flipping the script on a traditional parent conference—and asking about out-of-school supports that students and families might need—educators are able to surface key concerns and ideas for improving the school community as a whole, then work in tandem with families to address community needs. According to the head of school, "If you need health insurance, we connect you to the school nurse. If you don't have heat or need transportation, we act as a conduit to community resources. We may not have all the resources in house, but we can find someone who can help."

- **Response to COVID-19:** The Learning Community's response to COVID-19 was informed by deliberate engagement with families. The staff collected feedback from families and students about what was and wasn't working during their spring remote learning, then used this information to start multiple initiatives, such as 1:1 Chromebooks; a drive-up breakfast, lunch, and dinner program; and tele-mental health and telehealth. They also assembled robust outreach teams, reserving time every Wednesday to make calls to families. Based on input from welcome meetings with every family as they returned to school in the fall, these teams were updated to include interpreters, special educators, and social-emotional experts on top of school leaders and general educators. Interpreters were given additional training on how to support families, as they often serve as quasi-social workers in homes where families do not speak English.

Chelsea Co-Design Pilot: Shifting mindsets & rethinking hierarchical structures

In Chelsea Public Schools, which has recently taken multiple steps to establish racial equity as a driving force in the district, family and community engagement is viewed as a crucial lever for advancing equity. The district is committed to giving families and schools the chance to build relationships with one another. This commitment shines through in the district's Co-Design Pilot, led by the district's superintendent, Dr. Almudena Abeyta, and Eyal Bergman, a Harvard Doctoral Resident at Chelsea. With a predominantly Latino immigrant community and a majority White teaching staff, the district sought to remove barriers to effective communication and collaboration through a process of school improvement designed *with* families rather than *for* them.

Families have been involved at every step of the improvement process. This starts by soliciting stories and building authentic relationships with families. The goal is to shift the racialized power dynamics so that families are doing most of the sharing and educators are doing most of the listening. From there, teams of educators and families synthesize what they heard and propose small changes that can be observed and iterated.

Through these conversations, the co-design pilot brought together families and school staff to determine collective priorities, which are being addressed by nine co-design teams across the district. For example, the high school is focused on improving restorative justice and discipline practices; the English Language Learners Department is focused on improving the remote learning experience for its families and students; a cohort of elementary schools is seeking to improve their School Site Councils. The final and crucial step is to ask all stakeholders to reflect on the process, helping them consider what they have learned (and unlearned) about family engagement through this process in order to catalyze continued capacity building and systems change. The district is also preparing a series of videos of staff reflections so that they can be shared with colleagues across the district.

Overall, the pilot focused on rethinking family engagement not as a program to implement but as a practice to uphold: as Bergman notes, "If we listen deeply to what people have to say, we can elevate their voices and drive effective community-based solutions." By honoring family voice as a means for identifying and co-designing solutions, Chelsea Public Schools is aiming to deconstruct hierarchical power dynamics and build more equitable and authentic collaboration.

MEASUREMENT SPOTLIGHT
Family-School Relationships Survey

- **What is it:** Panorama Education, in partnership with family engagement experts Dr. Karen Mapp and Dr. Hunter Gehlbach, has developed the Family-School Relationships Survey. According to Dr. Mapp's research, schools that effectively engage families find that their students earn better grades, score higher on tests, develop stronger social skills, and are more likely to graduate. To build effective partnerships with families and community members, schools and districts must measure families' attitudes and perceptions about their ties to their children's schools.

- **How it works:** The survey exists as a series of scales, or groups of survey questions, that work together to measure a single topic (e.g., family engagement or school safety). Schools and districts can customize the survey by selecting the topics they value most. Panorama recommends choosing between four and seven topics so families can complete a short, focused survey that delivers valuable information on their attitudes and perceptions toward school.

- **Who can use it:** The Family-School Relationships Survey is a resource for principals, district staff, school boards, state departments of education, and/or parent-teacher organizations. The questions are applicable to all types of K–12 school settings—including public, independent, and charter schools—and to communities serving students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. It is available in 11 languages and is free to download on Panorama's website.

- **Why it matters:** Parent voice and feedback is often missing from education decision-making processes. The Family–School Relationships Survey can initiate a feedback loop between schools and parents/caregivers that recognizes their role as students' first teachers.

Multiple Pathways to Careers

Intertwining schooling and community offers an opportunity for not only students, but also families, to expand their social capital and explore pathways toward affirming and uplifting careers. Communities and schools can both play a major role in helping lay the foundation for a viable career pathway, including by (1) cultivating a sense of individual strengths and interests, (2) facilitating the exploration of career options, (3) building networks and social capital, and (4) supporting academic preparedness. Schools themselves may have the resources to take on only parts of these four areas—generally, those related to interest cultivation and academic preparation—while community organizations have a greater ability to provide diverse experiential learning and network-building opportunities. Young people (and their families) also benefit when staff from both sectors collaborate to build on these foundational elements by linking students and adults with education opportunities, training, career and academic advising, and support services.[36] Leveraged properly, school-community partnerships can provide many of the connections and supports needed to enable students and families to access pathways to careers.

Why does it matter?

For low-income families, job security and postsecondary credentials are crucial to obtaining stable, family-sustaining employment, entering the middle class, and ending the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Supporting access to stable, well-paying careers is particularly necessary given the huge income and wealth disparities seen in Massachusetts: not only is the gap in median income between Latinx and White households with children the largest of any state in the country, but the percentage of Black and Latinx children living in poverty statewide is also more than triple that of White children.[37] In the Greater Boston area, the median net worth of White families in recent years was upwards of $247,500, compared to just $8 for non-immigrant Black households.[38]

Wealthy, White communities often have structures in place to provide young people with pathways to a successful career. Within these communities, success tends to be defined in relation to White, middle-class values (e.g., attending college, attaining a "prestige" career path), and social capital comes from longstanding professional networks that help individuals attain successful outcomes. This traditional view of social capital frequently excludes marginalized students and families and undervalues the resources available to them. By engaging and leveraging the assets of marginalized communities, students and families have

the opportunity to dismantle this societal norm—and to better understand the cultural wealth (within themselves and their communities) that can support them in the journey towards a viable career.

Community cultural wealth (also described above as an element of holistic learning) is a necessary asset-based lens for building pathways to success for BIPOC and other marginalized communities. It has been defined as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression."[39] Applying this lens, rather than faulting marginalized populations for the inequitable systems in which they exist, community organizations, educational institutions, and local employers should seek to build upon the wealth that each individual possesses to provide opportunities for cultivating interests, exploring careers, building networks, and developing academic skills. This may be accomplished by providing a wide variety of opportunities to students and families alike, such as job training, apprenticeships, internships, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, financial and digital literacy courses, and project-based learning experiences.

Additionally, one of the highest-leverage resources for historically marginalized communities to build multiple pathways to careers are the people within the community. Before developing new academic, social-emotional, and experiential learning opportunities, it is important to take into account who students and families already know. By taking an asset-based approach and recognizing the established networks of caring adults, role models, peers, coaches, mentors, and others who already play a role (whether direct or indirect) in career development, schools and communities can paint a better picture of where gaps might exist in individuals' experiences. Facilitating this recognition is crucial to building students' and families' social networks. As noted by Julia Freeland Fisher, "[W]e know that students inherit very different networks. In addition to understanding whom students already know, we also need to invest in students' ability to build relationships and open doors to accessing different networks as well."

Student support staff and community-based organizations can then work together to fill the gaps in students' existing networks by connecting them with new networks, allowing young people to gain new acquaintances who can serve as resources and connectors. These new connections may not be as strong as close mentors, but they can still lend value. Among various types of interpersonal relationships, these "weak ties" with acquaintances are frequently the conduit for accessing new career opportunities.[40] Indeed, research has shown that "[y]oung people are more empowered to learn and advance toward their goals when the environment is populated by 'more connected others' who can help bridge to resources that would otherwise be unavailable."[41] In other words, as one young person put it (during a conversation to inform a Rennie Center report on career pathways), "It's hard to get something unless you know someone."[42] Acknowledging and supplementing students' networks can serve as an important component an effective, inclusive career pathway.

What can it look like?

Two-generation approaches

Two-generation approaches to child and family development are a noteworthy way in which communities and schools have partnered to support the whole family. Defined as "approaches that build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives together," two-generation approaches exist on a continuum of whole-family supports ranging from child-focused to parent-focused.[43] Organizations and initiatives that incorporate a two-generation approach typically support children and parents by focusing on social capital, early childhood education, K–12 education, postsecondary and/or employment pathways, economic assets, and health and wellbeing.

Two-generation approaches create a caring and supportive environment for young people, while providing resources that help adults gain parenting skills and train for a career. For example, early childhood programs can also offer services for parents, as with Head Start programs, which are directed to help parents with self-sufficiency goals like education and workforce pathways.[44] In K–12 education, partnerships between community programs and schools can promote active family engagement in children's activities by providing alternative, non-school-based entry points for supporting learning. For example, parents who feel intimidated by school meetings or official events may be more open to attending their child's community theatre performance or

speaking to the YMCA program director about their child's needs. This is a win-win, as children benefit from the programming and parents grow social capital that can help them participate in future educational experiences.

Meanwhile, in higher education, colleges and universities can provide two-generation support through childcare, family-based housing, and paid internship opportunities that benefit both families and children and lead to future socioeconomic stability. Nearly 1 in 5 undergraduate students is a parent, with the largest share of student parents (42% of the total) enrolled in community colleges.[45] Facilitating the success of student parents can lead to higher earnings: research has shown that among single mothers, who make up over half of all student mothers, those with associate degrees who work full-time, year-round, earn $330,000 more in their lifetimes than they would have with only a high school diploma.[46] Finally, at the workforce level, career training and advancement programs can offer on-site childcare or even youth ESOL classes, allowing both children and parents to participate in high-quality programming that can lead to future opportunities.

Experiential learning

As a starting point for effective career exploration, classrooms and community-based service providers should guide students to gain both career knowledge (learning about different types of jobs and the prerequisites for accessing them) and self-understanding (recognizing their own strengths and interests). Once students have developed a baseline understanding of careers they might seek, they will be well-positioned to engage fully in high-quality career experiences.

Experiential learning—which includes internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, and career pathways programs like those designated as Innovation Pathways in 36 Massachusetts schools—provides hands-on, real-world learning opportunities that help build skills and networks for participants. Community members, as well as community-based businesses and organizations, can bolster career readiness by supporting students and families with jobs, training, internships, workshops, and more, all while introducing them to new contacts and networks.

In practice, career exploration can come in multiple forms:

IN THE SCHOOL

- *Project-based learning:* Across all grade levels, giving students the opportunity to investigate and respond to a compelling question or problem can provide authentic experiences for students to learn about themselves, discover new strengths, and develop key skills for the workplace.

- *Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs):* Both a tool and a process, ILPs are typically used at the middle and high school level to capture how students' academic plans align with their unique identities and interests. ILPs can guide youth to pursue academic courses (and postsecondary training/degree programs) needed to enter their desired careers, and encourage youth to pursue out-of-school and work-based learning opportunities aligned with these careers.[47]

THE METROPOLITAN REGIONAL CAREER & TECHNICAL CENTER: Real-world learning driven by student interests

The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (commonly known as "The Met") is a network of six high schools located in Providence and Newport, Rhode Island. The Met was established in 1995, the first in the "Big Picture Learning" network that now includes nearly 200 schools worldwide. All BPL schools take an individualized/personalized approach to supporting student learning. One of the key components of the Met is that students learn in the real world beyond the walls of the school and classroom. The school's success comes from helping students find their passions—including by working with community partners to create learning opportunities where students can gain hands-on experience.

To build social capital, students engage in a structured outreach process that begins with sending a cover letter to employers they'd like to learn more about. They then seek to spend a day shadowing on-site and interviewing potential mentors before inquiring about longer-term internships. They match with a mentor from their internship site who coordinates with the student's "Advisor" (teacher) to provide constant feedback. The Met also offers approximately 15 options for certification through technical and vocational pathways, and every year the school graduates students who have earned enough credits for an associate degree.

Rather than primarily evaluating students' progress through conventional standardized achievement tests, the school uses assessment criteria that are individualized to each student and the contextualized real-world standards of their projects. This co-created system, paired with learning that allows students to move at their own pace as they demonstrate progress, allows students' development to correspond with their interests and potential career paths.

IN THE COMMUNITY

- *Job shadowing:* Job shadowing can serve two functions: first, to introduce students to a variety of career options and help them think about the ones that they'd be best suited for, and second, to allow students and community members to gain a few hours of exposure to a professional working in a career they know they'd like to pursue.

- *Work-based learning:* Establishing connections with local employers to offer project-based learning in authentic environments can help students build content skills along with knowledge of how to navigate a workplace. These opportunities often come as part of high school courses that involve sustained partnerships with local institutions (such as HMS MEDscience, available through Harvard Medical School).

- *Internships or apprenticeships:* These longer-term experiences allow students and community members to experience the reality of the work day in a low-stakes environment—and earn money while doing so.

Generating a strong relationship between schools and the community to support experiential learning requires proactive and creative thinking from both sectors. Communities can be forward-thinking by examining gaps in their current workforce and developing initiatives with schools to train students towards these future careers. School and community leaders should establish open lines of communication to make each other aware of any challenges they face in supporting career experiences and how they can help one another to fill those; this process should be informed by parents and families, through two-way communication with schools and participation in community groups. Organizing bodies, like a Children's Cabinet or a district's community engagement office, can also connect students and families to experiential opportunities beyond the school.

SPOTLIGHT ON

Springfield WORKS: A two-generation approach to building networks and career pathways

Springfield WORKS is a community-wide initiative of the Economic Development Council of Western Mass, created to improve the quality of life in the region through economic opportunity, growth, and resilience. Springfield WORKS serves as the connective tissue across the community to support parents/caregivers in accessing employment while working to ensure children are in a safe and healthy environment. This two-generation approach to education and careers emerged as a result of silos and disconnects in the community: employers faced large gaps in their skilled labor forces and economic mobility among residents was stagnant, yet many of the region's career development programs were under-enrolled. While the initiative is just two years old, and the number of participants is still small (the initial cohort from 2019 included nine participants), partners have learned a lot over the past two years on how to engage families to integrate a two-generation approach.

Through their efforts, over 30 partners including employers, educators, and community leaders are collaborating to align their programs and services. Agency partners identify, recruit, and support jobseekers, who can access adult education, training, credentials, and employment as part of a cohort of participants. For example, jobseekers are recruited based on their child's enrollment in Head Start, which serves as the jumping-off point for identifying families that are ready for education and work training. By turning to Head Start as a source of cohort recruitment, Springfield WORKS can ensure that their efforts are impacting

low-income families. Children benefit from receiving early childhood education through Head Start, and adults from attending parenting classes and building positive relationships with other parents. By intentionally connecting Head Start parents with one another as part of a cohort, parents can expand their networks and facilitate knowledge-sharing on community resources, programming, and parenting support.

In order to facilitate future employment opportunities and prepare residents for their visions of success, Springfield WORKS' cross-sector partners share job and career opportunities; train cohort members in industry-specific skills; provide mock interviews; encourage experiential apprenticeships, internships, or job shadowing; and ultimately, lead members to employment opportunities. Coaching and mentoring on job retention and career advancement are available for cohort graduates.

Although the program is still fairly new, the results to date are promising. In 2019, parents whose children attended Head Start received comprehensive workforce development, financial wellness, and healthy relationships/parenting training. Fourteen months since graduation, 88% of the parents are on career pathways of their choosing. In the midst of COVID-19, all families are still demonstrating strong economic resilience with solid financial stability; even those furloughed earlier in the year continued to be coached and were guided through the application process for unemployment and stimulus relief. In 2020, 10 of the 11 participants completed a remote version of the program—despite the demands of supporting their own children's remote learning—and all earned multiple certificates, including a National Career Readiness Certificate (a credential focused on essential workplace skills). They continue to receive coaching as they seek employment or post-secondary education.

Bunker Hill Community College: Uplifting cultural wealth and student experience

Through community partnerships and school-based initiatives, Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) has created a space for students to reflect on every experience as a foundational piece of their career journey.

Ethnography of Work: Based on a course offered at Guttman Community College in New York City, the Ethnography of Work at BHCC is a sociology course that aims for students to think deeply about their future in relation to the job experiences they've already had. Students are encouraged to think about the networks they've created with peers and supervisors, the possibilities of growth in their work, and how their experience working can contribute to their future career. Faculty have been trained to capitalize on the asset-based lens that the course can provide and are able to integrate principles of ethnography, or the study and systematic recording of human cultures, within their students' work.

Expansion of Learn and Earn Internship: The internship program at BHCC has taken strides to break down barriers of access to multiple career sectors, allowing students to explore their unique interests. The College has acquired funds to cost-share with community nonprofits, so student interns are paid (at least $15/hour) and receive a transportation stipend. Last year, for instance, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston was able to take on 10 BHCC interns. This turned out to be a productive reciprocal relationship—interns gained key on-the-job experience, and museum staff was able to form a better understanding of the cultural wealth and motivation of BHCC's students.

Two-Generation Approach to Student Parents: At BHCC, three-fifths of the students are also parents. Although in its initial stages, the College is focused on building out two-generation structures and data gathering systems that can collect important information about student parents during registration. Because many BHCC students are also parents of Boston Public Schools students, developing further opportunities to build both two-generation supports and pathways between BHCC and BPS can better prepare both parents and children for future success.

MEASUREMENT SPOTLIGHT
Measuring students' networks

- **What it is:** Understanding a student's social capital can help schools and communities provide support, relationships, and other resources that drive students toward their full potential. *The Missing Metrics* report from the Clayton Christensen Institute offers a framework for measuring students' social capital along four dimensions: 1) quantity of relationships (the number of people in a student's network), 2) quality of relationships (how the student experiences those connections), 3) structure of networks (the different people the student knows and the ways in which they're connected), and 4) ability to mobilize relationships (the mindsets and skills a student needs to activate relationships).

- **How it works:** The framework offers key questions to guide measurement in each of these dimensions and sample indicators that can be tracked (e.g., the amount of time both mentors and students invest in relationship-building). It also describes innovative tools to help gather this information, such as relationship/network mapping strategies, checklists, and student surveys.

- **Who can use it:** Any entity that seeks to know more about the web of relationships in students' lives can gather information on the indicators listed in the chart, including schools, institutions of higher education, out-of-school-time programs, and other community-based service providers. The sample tools referenced in the report come from a range of partners, some of which (such as the Making Caring Common Project at Harvard Graduate School of Education) make their tools available online to any interested users.

- **Why it matters:** Networks are powerful sources of support and opportunities for advancement, but evaluating intangible connections can be difficult. Gaining a better understanding of who is in a student's personal network and how these ties can be leveraged is critical to providing thoughtful career resources that plug into any gaps that may exist.

Along with these metrics on student network development, two-generation programs can examine a rich set of data sources as they integrate supports for children and families. As the Annie E. Casey Foundation outlined in their report *Advancing Two-Generation Approaches: Integrating Data to Support Families*, child data (e.g., attendance, grades, health and nutrition), parent data (e.g., educational attainment, financial literacy), family data (e.g., income, housing arrangements), and program data (e.g., class attendance, participants' goals) can all be analyzed to lead to program improvements and better outcomes for the whole family.

District Profile

Somerville Public Schools

Somerville Public Schools—which serves a diverse population of nearly 5,000 students—has demonstrated a commitment to connecting schools and community by working with parents, caregivers, and community partners to provide holistic student and family supports. As such, it serves as a worthwhile model of how a district can link multiple strands of the work described above into a coherent set of policies and practices. The following profile highlights various initiatives that the district has implemented to embed collaborative structures and build social capital for students and families, while centering equity at the heart of all its work.

Helping families thrive

The Somerville Family Learning Collaborative (SFLC) is the department of Somerville Public Schools responsible for coordinating family and community engagement. SFLC partners with numerous other state and local agencies to provide a variety of support services to help meet the needs of Somerville children and families. Programming starts at birth with SomerBaby (through which new parents receive a "Welcome Baby Bag" of resources and supplies as well as a home visit and referrals to other providers). Families also receive support with student enrollment and registration as students prepare to transition into schools, and school-based family and community liaisons offer a consistent connection with the education system. SFLC helps parents and caregivers develop their networks by offering parent/guardian English classes, playgroups, and parent support groups, and its multilingual staff can refer parents to other community services (food, housing, etc.) as needed.

SFLC's deep connections within the community quickly became a critical source of family support after COVID-19 hit. SFLC communicated with families through multiple channels—phone calls, text messages, emails, and connections through WhatsApp and FaceTime—helping them address basic needs related to health insurance, unemployment assistance, internet connectivity, COVID-19 testing, temporary housing, and more. Among the hundreds of families served over the past year, a subgroup of 631 families (most of them immigrant families with elevated needs) received up to five phone calls per week from SFLC staff; school-based liaisons, meanwhile, connected with an average of 375 families per week, indicating a broad-ranging effort to address holistic student and community needs.[48]

Building a structure for collaboration

The Somerville Children's Cabinet first convened in 2017 with support from the By All Means initiative at the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Education Redesign Lab. The Cabinet aims to enhance child wellbeing and educational achievement through intentional collaboration among community, city, and school agencies. Utilizing data from the public schools and the city's SomerStat department, the Children's Cabinet has focused on opportunities to share common sets of measurements to monitor and track progress. Placing a priority on consistent cross-sector communication, the Cabinet convenes monthly and is informed by other ongoing councils and taskforces, such as the Out-of-School Time Taskforce, Early Childhood Advisory Council, and School Committee.[49] This network has provided a valuable infrastructure for the city during these unprecedented times: when COVID-19 hit, the Cabinet offered a level of existing collaboration and adaptability that allowed school, city, and community partners to pivot to the urgent needs of their students and families.

Connecting students with experiential learning

As part of a high school redesign process, Somerville High School (SHS) is eager to provide "beyond-the-classroom" learning experiences to every student, allowing them to build their skills in real-world settings. In order to help manage the logistics of coordinating in- and out-of-school experiences, SHS (with support from the Barr Foundation) hired a Beyond the Classroom Coordinator. This individual helps to coordinate and develop learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate and linked to students' interests, potentially including field-based career experiences, internships, and dual enrollment or early college programming through Bunker Hill Community College and Cambridge College. The plan is to make experiential learning a core part of every student's education at SHS through scaffolded experiences at every grade level. The hope is that before they graduate, all students will have participated in at least one significant, authentic beyond-the-classroom experience.

Meanwhile, for students in grades 6-12 who have struggled in more traditional academic settings and would benefit from personalized support, Somerville's Next Wave/Full Circle Schools offer an alternative school community that emphasizes authentic learning experiences. Students engage in project-based learning in small class settings that foster close relationships with educators and peers. Next Wave/Full Circle has also been engaged in educational redesign work with the support of the Barr Foundation. And, just like students at SHS, students at Next Wave/Full Circle have opportunities to participate in out-of-school experiences linked to topics of interest, and to gain college credit before high school graduation through a dual enrollment partnership with Bunker Hill Community College (and, starting this year, through the Cambridge College Early College Program).

Along with community-based support and engagement, a consistent theme across all these programs is the central focus on equity. In 2019, the Somerville School Committee passed an Equity Policy that continues to guide work within the district. SPS leaders have explored new ways of partnering with educators, school leaders, and school communities to develop improvement strategies grounded in equity. For example, starting this year, each school has an equity specialist who works with a wide range of stakeholders to advance equity and anti-racist practices. In addition, in 2020, the district established the Advancing Equity Task Force, a group of 21 staff members in various roles across all schools and departments. The Task Force centers the voice and perspectives of students to identify and remove barriers and to advance equitable practices at the district level. The district also offers professional development sessions on topics including implicit bias training, deficit-based thinking, culturally responsive practices, and restorative justice. Through these and similar initiatives, and through its consistent engagement with the community, SPS aims to place the needs of students and families front and center in all that it does.

Recommendations

This year's Action Guide examines the value of bringing together schools and communities to leverage all the assets that students and their families possess. This work must be grounded in a specific local context. However, districts and states can support local efforts by helping to create the conditions in which collaborative community efforts can thrive and grow. The following recommendations outline a few specific areas where districts and the state can focus their attention in order to enhance the interconnection of schools and the community.

District-Level Recommendations

Offer forums and pathways for community voice and decision-making

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, parents and caregivers have gained new insights into students' day-to-day learning. This has provided an opportunity for educators and school personnel to deepen relationships with both students and the adults in their lives. Moving forward, districts should consider ways to maintain these connections by creating (or ideally, co-creating with community representatives) opportunities for students and families to participate in educational decision-making. Examples like Chelsea's Co-Design Pilot offer a model of empowering family and community engagement that is designed to elevate the perspectives of those who are most affected by changes, but traditionally least likely to participate in the change process. Working with community organizations and existing networks can help schools connect with a broader set of stakeholders than might otherwise participate in formal district forums like School Committee meetings. And while schools benefit from opportunities to gather input on new programming and feedback on current offerings, these can also serve as powerful methods of enhancing social capital by helping community members connect, collaborate, and build individual and collective self-efficacy.

Create a central hub within the district to link community and school efforts

Community providers are essential to offering holistic support for all students and families. However, coordinating and aligning efforts across school and community providers can be difficult without a shared understanding of available resources, expertise, and existing on-the-ground efforts. School districts should consider designating a central point of contact (whether an individual or department) to develop a common understanding of current community needs and the supports and services that can address them. Among other services, this central point of contact can facilitate regular meetings among partners to share data, discuss potential interventions, and ultimately co-design a coordinated, aligned delivery system to support families and students. The Office of Community Resource Development in Framingham Public Schools provides a model of how school and community partners can work together to facilitate this type of holistic approach to teaching and learning.

### Leverage technology to foster interpersonal connections

With the forced transition to remote learning, many schools, service providers, and community organizations had to pivot quickly to an all-virtual delivery system. In the past, these institutions may have relied on technology for some aspects of teaching and learning (e.g., to supplement content delivery or provide instructional tools); during the pandemic, however, technology has also become an important conduit to foster relationships and maintain connections with students and families. Districts should seize this opportunity by leveraging technology to increase social capital for students and families, for example through the use of virtual mentors and connections with new networks of peers.

As an example, they can look to the work of Union Capital Boston (UCB), whose mission is to "combine technology with relationship-building to strengthen community networks, build social capital, and create new pathways of opportunity for individuals and communities."[50] UCB usually hosts 75 Network Nights a year, providing space for community members to cultivate new relationships. Because of COVID-19, these have shifted to weekly *virtual* Network Nights, which offer critical information (and affirmation) to individuals dealing with the challenges of the pandemic.

State-Level Recommendations

Share data on student progress in clear, family-friendly language

There is a significant mismatch between how parents perceive their children's progress and how well their children perform on statewide or national assessments. According to a 2019 survey, 90% of parents believe that their child is performing at or above grade level in math and English; however, in the same year, results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (known as the "Nation's Report Card") found that just 34% of eighth grade students were proficient in both subjects.[51] When young people and their families lack a clear sense of how their performance compares to their peers, or to widely accepted benchmarks of college and career preparedness, it is difficult for them to identify—much less seek to address—shortcomings in their learning experiences.
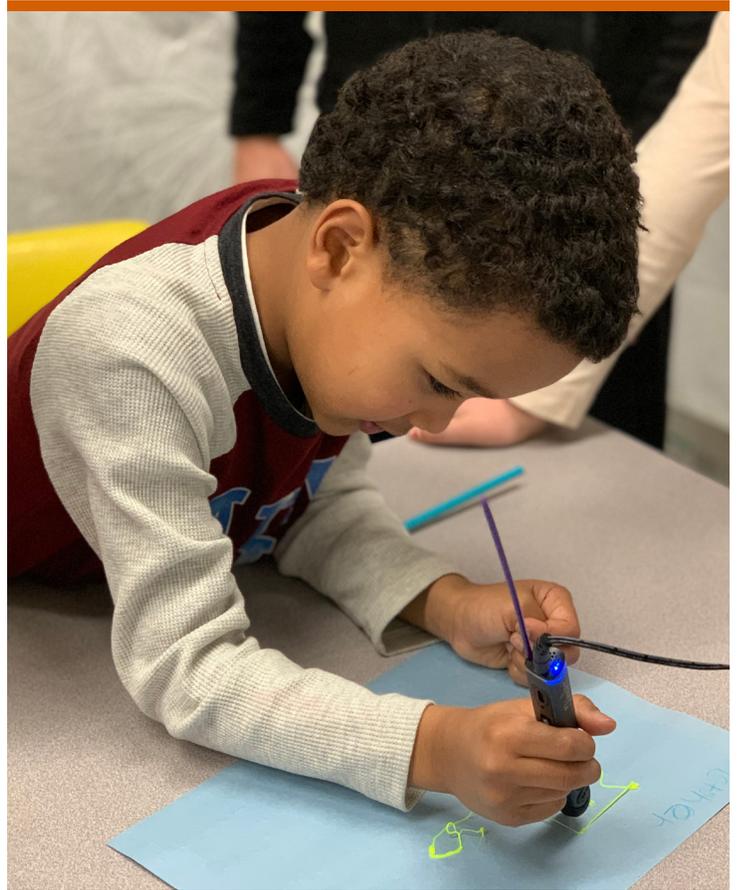
Therefore, the state should place a priority on enabling easier access to clear, family-friendly data. This data must not focus exclusively on assessment results; offering additional data points on access to opportunities will help highlight critical areas in need of attention and provide a more well-rounded picture of school and student success. At the same time, since assessment data (particularly from the MCAS) continues to be a key focal point in school reform efforts, the state should consider ways to make information on student performance more readily accessible to families and community members. In particular, as the state approaches the end of a five-year contract with the current MCAS vendor, they should prioritize data clarity and ease of reporting within the next contract cycle. Improved access to data can equip communities with important baseline information as they seek to exercise greater voice in decision-making processes.

Invest in local communities—and elevate examples of success

After it became law in November 2019, the Student Opportunity Act led many districts (particularly those with large concentrations of low-income students) to plan for a future that included substantial new state funding. Unfortunately, just a few months later, the economic turmoil that followed in the pandemic's wake upended those plans, at least temporarily. Moving forward, it will be critical for the state to invest new resources in districts serving high numbers of historically marginalized students—particularly given that both the need for a high-quality education and the cost of providing it have increased due to the pandemic.

Most of these resources will be directed through an adjusted Chapter 70 funding formula. However, the Student Opportunity Act also included a relatively small pool of funding ($10 million per year) for grants to support innovative approaches to learning. State leaders should consider how this flexible funding can be leveraged to invest in community-school collaboration. For instance, districts applying for funding could be required to demonstrate widespread community support for a proposed reform, or the application could ask how new projects will recognize and build on existing community assets. Once the grants have been made, leaders can use their bully pulpit to highlight exemplary programs and spark new thinking on how to integrate community members as full partners in the school improvement process.

Conclusion

The past year has brought a newfound urgency to adapt the way we approach education. Sudden school closures demonstrated the paramount importance of engaging families in learning, while a global pandemic and powerful movement for racial justice have highlighted deep disparities in access to opportunity across Massachusetts communities. Responding to the need for change, this year's Condition of Education report focuses on the intersection of school and community and examines how the Massachusetts education system can build a broader, more inclusive approach to teaching and learning that leverages all the assets in students' lives.

Rather than adding one more item to schools' to-do lists, we hope this guide helps schools and districts reframe (and refine) work that has already been taking place amid the pandemic. Schools have already been tasked with coordinating the distribution of critical resources (e.g., school meals, devices, tech support) to families—how can they think about systematizing the process of connecting families to community resources? Educators have already been prioritizing closer contact with families and rethinking how they give and receive feedback on student progress—how can staff work with the school community to offer new opportunities for engaging student and family voice in the education process? School closures have already shifted learning out of the classroom and into the community—how can educators continue to expose young people to real-world content and authentic learning experiences that build on their existing skills and networks? And institutions across the education system are responding to the need to center equity in all aspects of teaching and learning—how can this include deliberate efforts to acknowledge and value community cultural wealth?

We hope the programs spotlighted above can shed some light on these questions by showing how schools and districts across the Commonwealth (and beyond) are connecting with their communities in new and exciting ways. At the same time, while the examples from Framingham, Chelsea, Springfield, Somerville, and other sites provide useful reference points, the process of intertwining school and community will look different in each locality. Ultimately, we must seek to understand—and respond to—the unique context in which students live in order to craft an education system that will help each and every student thrive.

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