

PARENTS AS ALLIES

A GUIDEBOOK FOR BRIDGING THE OCEAN
BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL THROUGH
INNOVATIVE FAMILY-SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT





HI THERE, WE'RE KIDSBURGH!

We're a group of community leaders, child advocates, parents, and educators with a big dream for the Pittsburgh region: we want Pittsburgh to be the best place on Earth to raise a kid. In the past few years, we've taken particular interest in the joyful, stressful, profound, remarkable topic of....

FAMILY-SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

It sounds so simple. Of course families and schools should work together. It takes a village, right? Who cares more about kids than their parents and teachers? They usually live in the same communities, shop at the same stores, and cheer for the same teams. It should be easy to stay on the same page! They have so much in common, and there's so much at stake.

It sounds simple. It's not.

It's not simple because in many communities, home and school are two islands separated by an ocean of challenging communication, busy schedules, and inflexible systems.

The ocean between parents and teachers means they can't chart a course together. As a result, schools are disconnected from the rich lives that families lead and families aren't comfortable participating in their children's education. Everyone wants to connect, but it's hard to traverse an ocean on your own.

A few years ago, we decided that it's time to stop expecting parents and teachers in western Pennsylvania to cross an ocean to connect with each other. It's time to connect the islands of school and home. It's time to build bridges, sail boats, charter flights, and push these islands so close together that nothing divides children's education from their upbringing.

In the following pages, you'll find the story of our journey so far.

THIS IS OUR GUIDEBOOK FOR CONNECTING THE ISLANDS

It shares how 31 teams of families and educators across western Pennsylvania are designing, testing, and spreading innovative approaches to family and school engagement. **If you're a school community looking to build or rebuild trust and unlock the powerful alliance of parents and teachers, this is for you.**



WHY FAMILY AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT?



PARENTS



BARRIERS

- ▷ SCHOOLS ARE NOT HISTORICALLY DESIGNED TO ENGAGE PARENTS
- ▷ NOT MUCH TRAINING FOR SCHOOLS & TEACHERS
- ▷ PARENTS DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE REACHING OUT TO TEACHERS & SCHOOLS

SCHOOLS



KEEP READING TO FIND:

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BEFORE WE GET STARTED, LET'S TALK TERMS AND COVER A COUPLE OF BASICS.

Parent: We use this term as shorthand for any family member, caregiver, or guardian caring for the health and well-being of children and youth.

Family: This term is sometimes perceived as more inclusive than "parent." We use the two interchangeably.

Allies: We use this to refer to those who unite to form a supportive connection for a common purpose.

ABOUT PARENTS AS ALLIES

Kidsburgh started the Parents as Allies program in 2021 after finding inspiration in a report from the Center for Universal Education at Brookings Institution titled *Collaborating to Transform And Improve Education Systems: A Playbook for Family-School Engagement*. The report identified powerful effects that were stemming from small changes: simple things like teachers texting with families or schools offering parents a tech-support hotline, were resulting in better attendance and more learning for students.



Adha and Rachel, our human-centered design facilitators:

Adha Mengis and Rachel Siegel facilitated our design-sprint process, taking each of our teams from fuzzy idea to concrete action. They gave us the gift of human-centered design, ensuring that teams never lost sight of the joy, humanity, and personal relationships in this work.



The Brookings Institution:

Think tank and research powerhouse Brookings provided the underpinnings for both the program's inspiration and its design. Their research informed every team's efforts, and they conducted surveys in southwestern Pennsylvania and around the world that captured belief and perception gaps between teachers and parents.

We wanted to see if educators and parents in the greater Pittsburgh region could get similar results by testing out similar small "hacks" to improve connections between families and schools. With the support of The Grable Foundation, we started bringing together school districts from across western Pennsylvania that were interested in trying it out with us.

Three years of research and experimentation later, we've now worked with 31 amazing teams in western Pennsylvania, each made up of both parents and educators, to try out dozens of different family-school engagement strategies that have reached thousands of students and their families. Small grants of up to \$5,000 per hack funded the teams' experiments.

A powerful group of external partners provided expertise and advice along the way. Each partner committed to centering the perspectives and needs of our school communities, respecting different ways of thinking and working, and embracing an exploratory research mindset.



HundrED:

International education-innovation nonprofit HundrED connected our local efforts with the international parental-engagement movement. HundrED helped ground our efforts in other innovations globally, and shared our learnings with others around the world through their own playbook and online profiles of each team's efforts.



Learning Heroes:

The advocates at Learning Heroes shared their first-hand experience doing family engagement in schools. They provided coaching and advice to teams throughout their journeys, giving realistic and constructive feedback on how to do this work and how to make it sustainable.



WHAT'S WITH ALL THIS "HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN"?

We're going to level with you: not everyone who was involved in this project was on board with the human-centered design focus from the beginning. Some folks, both teachers and parents, were downright skeptical. So if you're not so sure what human-centered design is, or whether it's worth all the hoopla, you're not alone.

But we feel the need to tell you that those skeptics all came back to us over the course of their journeys and told us that **human-centered design was an essential ingredient in doing this work.**

Connecting families and schools requires getting personal, there's no way around it. The word that kept coming up, over and over, was empathy—the ability to identify with another person's emotions, thoughts, and attitudes. Bridging these gaps in perceptions

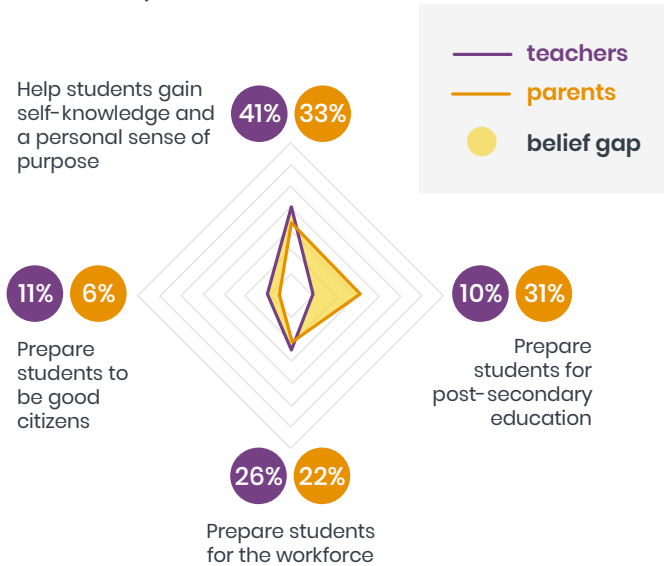
and beliefs, and finding ways to connect across the oceans that divide us? It requires empathy. Human-centered design provides a framework for developing empathy, even for people who aren't comfortable doing so.

Human-centered design is an approach to problem-solving that starts and ends with the people you're designing for and with. The goal is to involve your "users" and immerse yourself in their experience so that you can design solutions that meet their actual needs, not the needs you perceive they have. This approach helps human-centered designers keep an open mind, especially when families' needs change over time, because change is what people do (especially growing kids!).

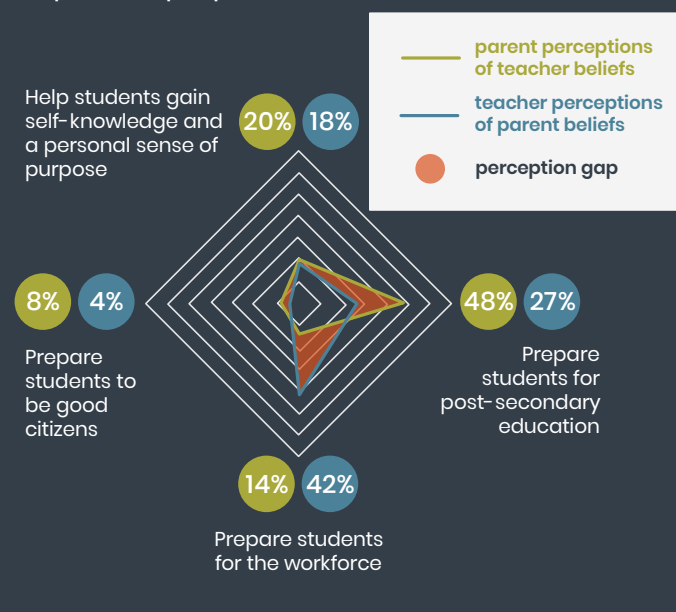
GAPS IN BELIEFS AND PERCEPTIONS

Brookings surveyed over 1,500 parents and 300 teachers in western Pennsylvania about their beliefs and experiences. Those surveys uncovered distinct belief and perception gaps between the two groups.

The survey asked what they believe is the **most important purpose of school**. Here's what they said:



The survey also asked **what they think the other group believes** is the most important purpose of school:



FROM INVOLVEMENT TO ENGAGEMENT

One of the foundational things that Brookings helped us see was the distinction between involvement and engagement (as popularized by English and social studies teacher Larry Ferlazzo):

comparing approaches

Family Involvement

A school striving for family involvement leads with its mouth

Identifies projects, needs, and goals, then tells parents how they can contribute

Goal is to serve clients

Family Engagement

A school striving for family engagement leads with its ears

Listens to parents and what they think, dream, and worry about

Goal is to gain partners

source: Ferlazzo, L., & Hammond, L.A. (2009). Building parent engagement in schools. ABC-CLO.

CHARTING A COURSE

Parents as Allies is guided by the theory that in order to build a strong support system for students and schools, parents and school faculty must have both the space and resources to build relational trust and to collaborate on (re)imagining family, school, and community partnerships.

At the core of the Parents as Allies process to connect a community's islands is a **design sprint** composed of five steps:

A design sprint is a collaborative approach to problem solving that combines reflection and action in a fluid and iterative process.

1. LANDSCAPE SCAN

Prior to the start of the design process, school leaders survey parents and educators to collect their beliefs on family-school engagement and to better understand current levels of trust. Understanding how beliefs and trust vary by demographics, levels of education, and age of children reveals the diverse range of beliefs and sentiments within school communities. This information forms the basis for the critical discussions that school teams will hold throughout the process.

Parents as Allies used the Conversation Starter Tools developed by The Center for Universal Education at Brookings.

2. BUILDING A TEAM

Teams of five to seven members are formed to reflect the diverse identities and strengths of the school community. Each team consists of:

- **At least three parents/guardians**
- **One school administrator**
- **One classroom teacher**

Each school needs to pay special attention to inviting parents who represent communities previously left out and marginalized.

Once assembled, teams select one parent and one school representative to be the team's co-leads (sharing leadership responsibilities helps to equalize the power imbalance between schools and families that is often present in efforts like this).

Kickoff Workshop

All the teams come together as a cohort to participate in a day-long workshop where facilitators guide them through human-centered design exercises to reflect on their own school experiences. Parents are able to express frustrations dealing with schools and educators are able to share the difficulties of engaging with parents. By making intentional space and time, these candid conversations set the pillars necessary for building bridges of trust.

Now ready to work together, teams are led through human-centered design activities to discover their superpowers—the assets and resources they bring to the process—and develop a collective vision and shared aspiration for their school community.

Empathy Interviews

After returning to their school community, teams conduct empathy interviews to uncover barriers, needs, and opportunities for building stronger family-school engagement. Teachers from the team interview parents from the school community, and parents from the team interview teachers at the school, to better understand the different perspectives of these groups and their experiences with the school—positive, negative, and neutral.

3. TESTING OUT A MINI-HACK

Equipped with a better understanding of their school community's challenges and opportunities, teams are ready to develop creative solutions. Through a series of facilitated workshops, teams develop **design hacks**: activities or practices to address their school community's needs, barriers, assets, and aspiration statements.

To put their creativity into practice, teams first develop a low-stakes "mini-hack" that requires minimal time and resources to implement. These mini-hacks, which range from coffee conversations to parent surveys to translating school signage into multiple languages, give teams the chance to gather practical experience leading interventions in their community and to develop the skills, confidence, and momentum for the larger design hacks that come next.

INTENTIONALLY CREATE SPACE & TIME



BUILD TRUST AND ALIGNMENT BETWEEN TEACHERS + PARENTS THROUGH LISTENING AND DIALOGUE

4. DEVELOPING DESIGN HACKS

After completing their mini-hack, teams reconvene as a cohort to share what they learned and to discuss their ideas for more substantial design hacks. Facilitators assist the teams in developing those ideas into plans that could dismantle barriers to family-school engagement.

Each team's design hack represents a unique response to their school community's specific needs and aspirations. Teams choose from among nine possible "levers" to implement their hacks:

- **Schedule:** Changes in the uses and management of time
- **Event:** Gatherings that bring people together
- **Space:** Changes in the uses and management of physical spaces
- **Finance:** Changes in the uses and management of funds
- **Process:** Ways of working together through problems
- **Role:** Changing or creating new duties and responsibilities
- **Ritual:** Routines that mark time, set the stage, guide transitions, or recognize achievement
- **Incentive:** Offerings that motivate preferred actions and behaviors
- **Communication:** Methods of sharing information

5. REFLECTION & REFINEMENT

Teams gather throughout the process to reflect on and refine their work. Alongside this self-reflection, teams attend regular "office hours" with mentors and advisers that teams can call on for guidance.

Design Sprint Showcase

Teams come back together as a cohort to present their design portfolio of hacks and to share what they learned from the experience. In structured feedback sessions, teams reflect deeply on the process to help inform future plans.

100 WAYS TO CROSS AN OCEAN

In 2022 and 2023, 31 teams of educators and families from 28 school districts across western Pennsylvania charted their own courses, following the steps of the Parents as Allies design sprint. They built the bridges, sailed the boats, chartered the flights, and pushed the islands in their communities together.

In the following pages, you'll meet these teams and read about the design hacks they've tried so far. Some of the hacks succeeded wildly, others fizzled out, and some evolved. Every single one informed the teams' efforts and we've gathered them here so that you can crib from them as you go on your own journey to connect your community's islands.

To help you find the guidance that is most relevant to you, we've collected the case studies into eight common themes:

If you want to reach the people you seldom see: meet families out in the community.
PAGES 14-21

Looking to meet the parents who rarely come out, these teams took the school out of the building, hosting events in settings that were more accessible and appealing to families.

If you want to make families feel comfortable: trade formality for fun.
PAGES 22-35

These teams found that parents had negative associations with school. In response, they switched the focus from academics, attendance, and discipline to fun, food, and festivities.

If you want to smooth the transitions: rethink the orientation.
PAGES 36-45

To address the drop-off in engagement that's common as students move up from one school to the next, these teams found new ways to welcome new families each year.

If you want to embrace changing demographics: celebrate your diversity.
PAGES 46-53

Several teams tried hacks to make school more accessible and welcoming to minority families in both practical and festive ways, from translated signage to cultural celebrations.

If you want to forge interpersonal connections: generate tiny particles of positivity.
PAGES 54-59

Giving educators and families easy ways to share small messages helped these teams unlock joy and positivity in a big way.

If you want to get parents invested in learning: show them what modern learning looks like.
PAGES 60-63

These teams found that parents were eager to get involved in their children's learning, they just needed a better window into the process.

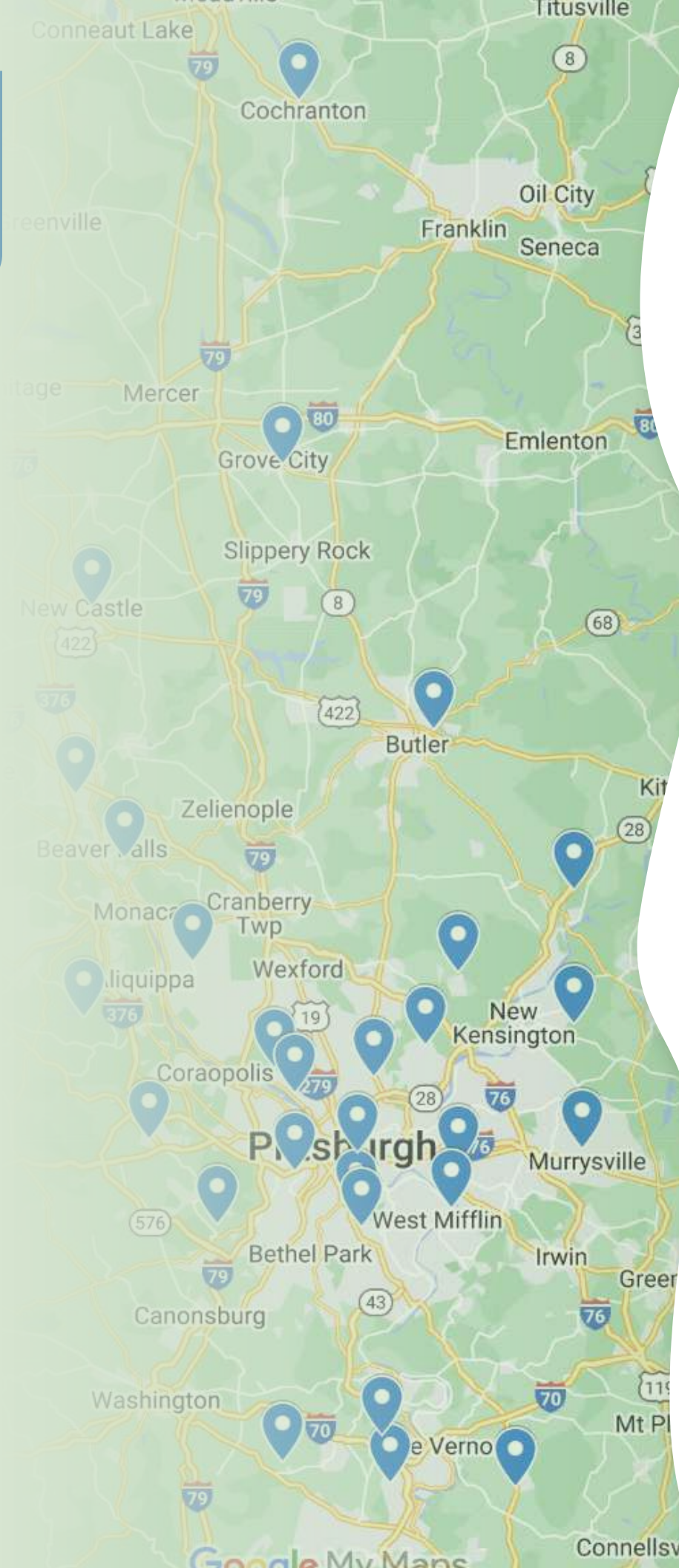
If you want to move from involvement to engagement: empower parents and students.
PAGES 64-75

By putting parents in charge instead of asking them to show up or help out, these teams found out just how powerful parent allies can be.

If you want to do any or all of this and more: bring food.
ALL OF THE PAGES

One thing you'll notice in just about every single one of these stories: food is a human connector. Offering food gets people in the door. Breaking bread makes it easy to talk and to listen.

As you read these pages, remember: thanks to the Parents as Allies cohort model, these teams were connected to each other from the start. These are not 31 separate stories, but rather a series of interconnected journeys led by teams that inspired, supported, and learned from each other. And many teams explored several of these themes at once!



THE SCHOOL DISTRICTS ON THIS MAP AND FEATURED IN THESE CASE STUDIES ARE:

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If you finish these case studies and want to read even more, you can get all the details at HundrED's Parents as Allies collection: hundred.org/en/collections/parents-as-allies.
Scan this QR code to go right there!





COMMUNITY DAYS

CALIFORNIA AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Lesley Daniels, Parent Co-Lead

Rachel Nagy, Elementary School Principal and School Co-Lead

Keren Galis, Parent

Regina Juarez, Teacher

Tessa Rechichar, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 10,705

Student body: 979 students

Participating grades: K-6

INTRO

The California Area Elementary School team wanted to reach beyond the well-connected parents who were already involved and include parents they seldom saw at school events. Empathy interviews helped them understand that not every parent has positive experiences with and expectations for school.

In response, the team had to leave their comfort zones and rethink their assumptions to find unexpected ways to make the school more accessible.



MINI-HACK: SUNDAY INFO ALERTS

The team started with an effort to address gaps in communication: automated texts to parents each Sunday evening with the week's upcoming events, alerts, and activities. They also posted news and opportunities to social media in a regular cadence. These small things were such a big deal to parents that they're now part of the normal routine.



DESIGN HACK: HOLLY DAYS

The next step was to leave the comfort of the school building to seek out the community. The school joined in the local Holly Days community event, which is held every December at a central location that's more easily walkable for families than the school.

Holly Days was the perfect opportunity to connect with parents in a fun, convenient, non-academic format. The school hosted a table with festive activities. With both parents and teachers in jeans and holiday sweaters, drinking hot cocoa and engaging in informal conversation, a deeper trust and connection began to emerge.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: COMMUNITY 5K WALK & RUN

Success at Holly Days inspired another event the following spring, a 5K "fun run" race designed to build connections with families whose children weren't involved in spring sports. This relaxed after-school event was held in a park a short walk from the school, making it a convenient stop-in for students and parents.

AHA MOMENT

“ It was the empathy interviews that educated us about miscommunication or missed layers of communication. We needed to take an honest look internally at this because we understood parents are really, really busy and they are trying their best. ”

FUTURE PLANS

Informal community events in the fall and spring are now a part of the school's regular plans. The team is also taking the engagement frameworks they've used to the school's parent organization as a resource for taking this work further.

OUTCOMES

- People let their guards down and were relaxed with each other.
- More students attended after-school clubs as a result of increased communication.
- People involved reported an overwhelming sense of community pride.



MEETING FAMILIES WHERE THEY ARE

AMBRIDGE SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Nate Harmon, Parent Co-Lead
Ronnell Heard, Middle School Principal and School Co-Lead
Adrianna Cephas, Parent
Jen Buchanan, School Staff
Katie Morgan, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 23,033
Student body: 2,308 students
Participating grades: 6-8

INTRO

In a district whose families have a wide range of incomes, engaging parents with less means was a particular focus. The Ambridge Area Middle School team knew that lower-income families wanted to be more involved in school, but the team didn't know how to help them.

The team knew they had to listen carefully and find ways to help school staff and families connect in ways that were both convenient and personable.



MINI-HACK: ZOOM MEETING

The team started small: a virtual meeting with a group of new sixth-grade parents. They listened to parents' concerns and desires, helping parents feel heard, and creating a sense of mutual collaboration.

Parents were clear: they were concerned about communication, and they weren't sure if the school was rooting for the community. They wanted to be involved in the school, but didn't know how, when, or where to do so.



DESIGN HACK: HIGH SCHOOL TAILGATE

For their first big hack, the team held an event for middle school families at the local high school, seven miles from where students go every day. The reason: accessibility. The middle school is a 20-minute drive for most families, and there's no public transportation to get them there. Meanwhile, the high school is located downtown, walking distance for many. Families without a car could make it to the high school with significantly less effort.

This bold choice paid off, with almost 200 people from the middle school community coming to tailgate the big rivalry football game. Food trucks, line dancing, yard games, and friendly conversation helped school staff and families connect on a personal level. Parents and teachers relished the opportunity to talk to each other about shared interests and excitements instead of discipline and grades.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: MIDDLE SCHOOL TAILGATE

The following spring, a second tailgate event, this time at the middle school, proved how important it is to meet parents where they are. Despite even more activities and food, attendance was significantly lower. The families that did attend were those with cars. The team made note that future family events at the middle school would need shuttle bus service from the high school.

AHA MOMENT

“ A lot of schools assume they know what families want, but they're not necessarily hearing from the voices of people who need help. Meet with the people. Hold events where people can just be people.”

When conversations went beyond discipline and grades, parents and teachers saw each other as regular people who care about the community.

OUTCOMES

- Parents immediately became more involved, donating decorations for Halloween.
- Increased attendance attributed to stronger community connections.
- Authentic connections helped dispel rumors and tension.

FUTURE PLANS

These initial hacks have met with such success that parents and school staff at Ambridge decided to participate in a second design sprint focused on the elementary school.



LISTENING TO OUR MOST VULNERABLE FAMILIES

WOODLAND HILLS SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

- Gretchen Ciocco**, Parent Co-Lead
- Danielle Zurisko**, School Social Worker and School Co-Lead
- Brittany Daye**, Parent and School staff
- Cara Leas**, Teacher
- Meg Madle**, Parent
- Emily Stayshich**, Parent
- Michelle Parker**, Parent
- Carlissa Turner**, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

- District population:** 52,876
- Student body:** 3,500 students
- Participating grades:** Kindergarten

INTRO

Like many school districts, Woodland Hills has seen its share of resident families leave the district or opt to enroll their children in charter schools. As a result, enrollment has declined and, along with it, family and community engagement with the school.

To reverse this trend, the Woodland Hills team wanted to engage families early in their children's school experience so that they would be more likely to continue their K-12 journey in the district.



MINI-HACK: TRANSFER FAMILIES SURVEY

First, the team recognized that they had to listen to and learn from the families they hoped to engage. Rather than try to reach the whole district all at once, the team focused on families transferring into the district, especially those making the transition into kindergarten, because they would offer the best insights into families' first impressions of the district.

The survey was intentionally short and simple. Questions assessed families' access to information and their sense of feeling welcomed, and solicited their suggestions for how the district could improve.



DESIGN HACK: KINDERGARTEN FALL FESTIVAL

To gather more input from parents and families, as well as create opportunities to build relationships, the team decided to organize a fun and social community event on neutral ground at a local fire station.

To build a festive atmosphere, the Saturday afternoon event featured face painting, carnival games, family-friendly food, and, of course, tours of fire trucks. While these activities kept the children engaged, families were able to socialize with educators and build rapport in a relaxed atmosphere.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: STORY WALK

Building on the successful model of the fall festival, the team organized a Story Walk event in the spring. Families of kindergarten and first-grade students were invited to visit story stations where parents, teachers, and local "celebrities" read stories and played fun games with the students and their families.

OUTCOMES

- Started to cultivate a sense of "oneness" among families of the class of 2035.
- Positive word-of-mouth feedback gathered at follow-up parent-teacher conferences.
- Increased demand for more community engagement events.

AHA MOMENT

“ You want your child to have friends, a connection with the teacher and even a connection with the principal. I learned that the teachers and the administrators also wanted to know that everyone is functioning as a community, making friends. When I realized that this is a two-way conversation, it completely changed for me.”

FUTURE PLANS

In addition to honing their approach to engaging elementary school families, the team is considering how to expand into the higher grades. They're partnering with a local university to devise family-engagement plans focused on the needs and aspirations of parents of older students.



CELEBRATING STUDENTS

PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

TEAM

- Tia Herring**, Parent Co-Lead
- Shandia Booker**, Middle School Counselor and School Co-Lead
- Amy Yearwood**, Community Partner at The Pittsburgh Promise and Co-Lead
- Jayla Manison**, Parent
- William (Bill) Gilliam**, Parent
- Jordan Morris**, Community Schools Site Director
- Billy Rutherford**, Community Partner at The Pittsburgh Promise

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

- District population:** 300,431
- Student body:** 20,080 students
- Participating grades:** 6–12 at Milliones University Preparatory School

INTRO

From the start, the team knew they wanted to smooth out uneven terrain: some UPrep teachers found it comfortable and easy to engage with parents, while others did not. The school had seen an increase in parental attendance at school events in recent years, but getting parents to come in for one-on-one discussions was a persistent challenge. The team decided to lean into what was working—parents’ enthusiasm to celebrate their students—to try to build stronger relationships that could lead to deeper engagement.



MINI-HACK: SMALL GROUP CONVERSATION

The team wanted to gather a handful of parents for a small group conversation that included food, icebreakers, and questions about parents’ experiences with the school. The event didn’t go as planned—only one parent attended. But a small group of students stopped in, and the team pivoted to find out what they wanted from their UPrep experience.



DESIGN HACK: BACK-TO-SCHOOL BLOCK PARTY

To celebrate the start of a new year as a school community, the team came up with a novel idea that hadn’t been seen before: a back-to-school block party. By hosting the block party in the community rather than on school grounds, the team met families and students where they already felt comfortable and familiar.

School administrators, teachers, and community partners showed up to celebrate, volunteering at the event and mingling with families. Parent and family attendance wasn’t as high as the team had hoped, but the families that did attend enjoyed the festivities, which included freshly grilled hot dogs, bingo with prizes, and plenty of space to toss a football around. Spirits were high and the event started the new school year with positivity and excitement.



This team was a special collaboration between parents and school staff at Milliones University Preparatory High School (UPrep) and staff at The Pittsburgh Promise, a community nonprofit organization committed to supporting the city’s children and public schools.

AHA MOMENT

“ We want parents to make greater connections with one another, because if they can function as a community, parents’ expectations can be known and realized.”

FUTURE PLANS

School staff are interested in making the back-to-school block party an annual tradition that brings the community together to celebrate the start of the year.

OUTCOMES

- Parents, students, and school staff line-danced joyfully in the street together.
- Families connected with community resources.
- Families with younger children attended the event, which helped them consider sending their kids to UPrep.



FIRESIDE CHATS

BURRELL SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Autumn Turk, Ed.D., School Co-Lead
Twaina Williams, Parent Co-Lead
Jennifer Baxter-Blubaugh, Parent
Tameka Buchak, Parent
Vicky Quinn, Parent
Adam Rossi, High School Teacher

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 13,767
Student body: 1,800 students
Participating grades: K-12

INTRO

Like many school districts in small, close-knit communities, Burrell School District can count on a good turnout at sporting events, where parents and families fill the stands to cheer on their hometown heroes. But that enthusiasm doesn't often translate into community engagement in other school activities and events.

Reflecting on the barriers to engagement, the Burrell team recognized they needed to build trust and reciprocity. They wanted to build stronger relationships based on two-way communication between parents and educators.



MINI-HACK: COFFEE TALKS

To start building relationships, Autumn, the school co-lead, and Twaina, the parent co-lead, organized a series of 10 informal coffee talks at different locations in the community. They met in parks, fire halls, community centers, churches, and, of course, the schools.

The team used conversation starter techniques to talk with community members about their own K-12 experience, their thoughts on the purpose of school, and how they felt about family-school engagement.



DESIGN HACK: FIRESIDE CHATS

After considering many options, the team settled on hosting "fireside chats" at the high school.

They partnered with the local fire department to set up 6 fire pits on school grounds where parents could join small group conversations with teachers and administrators. Enticed with seasonal food and warm drinks, about 130 people attended the first Fireside Chat event on a crisp fall evening.

The team recruited school board members, parents, teachers, and students to help organize and host the event. Each fire pit had a dedicated facilitator to guide the conversation and notetaker to capture what was shared.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: BURRELL COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Based on feedback gathered at the Fireside Chats, Burrell organized Burrell Community Connections, a large-scale event where students, families, educators, and community partners could get to know each other, share ideas, and learn about resources.

AHA MOMENT

“As a parent, it was huge to be invited to a small intimate conversation to be heard.”

Parents are more comfortable sharing their thoughts about the school with another parent. The parent co-lead and other parent allies were essential participants in both the Coffee Talks and Fireside Chats.

OUTCOMES

- Started to build trusting relationships—participants keep coming back!
- Established a strong partnership with the fire department.
- Consolidated community feedback to inform school faculty and staff.

FUTURE PLANS

The team plans to make Fireside Chats an annual event. The educators on the team are working to incorporate family-school engagement into the schoolwide curriculum.



FOOD MAKES IT FUN

BENTWORTH AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Lauren Kasula, Parent Co-Lead
Scott Martin, Superintendent and School Co-Lead
Sarah Dykes, Parent
Alicia Young, Teacher
Jill Brunner, Parent
Jamie Lukich, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 8,203
Student body: 1,150 students
Participating grades: K-8

INTRO

The Bentworth School District team wanted to engage parents who aren't easily reachable: those who are uncomfortable speaking out, who might have bad memories of their own school experience, or who face barriers to engagement like transportation and work schedules.

The team faced their challenge head-on, meeting kindergarten parents where they are and using food as a community-building incentive. When they saw the effects, their efforts quickly spread.



MINI-HACK: COFFEE & DONUTS

Instead of expecting parents to come to them, the team set out to find parents where they are. Targeting a high-population area, the principal went door-to-door offering coffee and donuts and chatting with parents.



DESIGN HACK: HOT DIGGITY DOG

Next, the team remixed the school's kindergarten orientation to make the event more fun, friendly, and informal. The superintendent grilled hot dogs. A parent from the team created a flier collecting all the information about extracurriculars in one place. A bus driver talked parents through the expectations for their child's first bus ride. Administrators provided information about the school's safety procedures.

Over 70 people attended, and both parents and teachers gave enthusiastic feedback. Everyone had more opportunities to connect and talk, parents were excited to send their kids to school, and importantly, teachers reported that they preferred this approach to the standard orientation.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: WALKING TACO

Success with kindergarten families inspired the team to do the same thing for students entering middle school. Incoming fifth-grade families were invited for an orientation where they shared tacos in the cafeteria, won free raffle prizes, got to know their teachers and classrooms, and heard about what to expect.

Once again the event was met with praise from all, with fifth-grade teachers voicing a preference for this orientation event over the regular fall open house format.

LESSON LEARNED

“ We got to know the administrators, teachers and parents better. And, we were able to reach out to new parents. Bentworth is a small community and you hear things through the grapevine. It's something to build on.”

OUTCOMES

- Parents and school staff are learning from each other to the benefit of the students.
- At least three students have returned to the district because of outreach efforts.
- Participation in kindergarten orientation more than doubled from one year to the next.

FUTURE PLANS

These events are the new normal for kindergarten and fifth-grade orientation, and the team has their sights set on the high school next. They're also hosting more events in the gym instead of classrooms, so that complex and expensive state-required clearances don't prevent parents from joining in.



STEAM FAMILY GATHERINGS

HOPEWELL AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

June Wulff, Parent Co-Lead
Korri Kane, Elementary Principal and School Co-Lead
Nicole Ozimok, Teacher
Amy Kelly, Parent
Jeanette Miller, Parent
Nicole Ormsby, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 17,857
Student body: 2,107 students
Participating grades: K-4

INTRO

With changing demographics in the district, the Hopewell team wanted to find ways to make new families feel welcome. Empathy interviews revealed that both parents and teachers wanted to feel more connected.

The goal was clear: bring the community back into the school, and not just for sports games. They set out to make this happen across the district's three elementary schools.



MINI-HACK: SMALL EVENTS

To begin, the team knew they wanted to create safe, welcoming spaces for parents and families outside of school hours. They hosted simple, small events at all three elementary schools at little or no cost—the kind of events that they could make happen with existing materials or donations.

STEAM activities at these events had a powerful two-fold effect: enticing students with something fun, while giving parents a taste of what and how their child is learning at school.



DESIGN HACK: FAMILY STEAM NIGHT

To take their efforts further, the team built on what worked and planned a big Family STEAM Night that brought together all the families across the three elementary schools.

This jam-packed, hands-on, tech-free night was a hit. Community partners, including museums, the local library, and community colleges hosted activity stations. Former students came back to share STEAM activities. Families connected with each other and with school staff, and everyone reported a great community vibe.



FOLLOW-UP TO THE HACK: ATTENDEE SURVEY

Following the big event, the team sent an online survey to parents in attendance to find out what worked and what could be improved. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with families clamoring for more opportunities to engage in their children's educational journey.

LESSON LEARNED

“ We cannot stress enough how important it is to have families involved in the school. Coming out of the pandemic, kids felt disjointed. We can't let the barriers prohibit us from doing something that brings families into the school.”

OUTCOMES

- Students are excited for the next STEAM night.
- Overwhelmingly positive feedback reported in the post-survey.
- Several teachers volunteered their time and brought their families.



RAISING SPIRITS

FRAZIER SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Amanda Law, Principal and School Co-Lead
Nina Steiner, Parent Co-Lead
Anne Stillwagon, Teacher
Allison Testa, Parent
Lori Kirchner, Parent
Christine Lombard, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 7,593
Student body: 1,054 students
Participating grades: K-5

INTRO

The team at Frazier School District knew that teachers and parents shared an unwavering commitment to their children’s learning and wellbeing, but they also understood that sometimes this shared commitment wasn’t enough—especially when miscommunication and misunderstanding led to mistrust.

The team set out to create opportunities for parents and teachers to better understand one another—their perspectives, expectations, and needs.



MINI-HACK: FRAZIER FAMILY FEEDBACK

The team issued a survey to gather feedback from families. What changes could the school implement to improve communication, family involvement, and educational experience? Across the 82 responses, the team gathered data to inform their design hacks.

The survey also provided the team with bright new ideas for improving parent engagement in the school. Chief among them: bring the school and community together to raise spirits.



DESIGN HACK: SPIRIT TAILGATE

The team organized the first ever “Spirit Tailgate” event to bring together parents and teachers. The event combined opportunities for families to gather information with opportunities to have fun together as a community. Held on the same night as the school’s Youth Football & Cheer Night, the event drew more than 200 attendees.

In addition to tailgate favorites like burgers, hot dogs, and cornhole, the event also included booths where families could have their questions answered, get help with their child’s online account, obtain volunteer clearances, learn more about federal programs, and join the PTO.

OUTCOMES

- More than 200 people attended the inaugural Spirit Tailgate.
- More than 80 people responded to the family feedback survey.

LESSON LEARNED

Learn by doing. Even with the information gathered through empathy interviews and surveys, it was only after implementing their tailgate event hack that the team understood what parents were looking for from their engagement with the school. The live dialogue created at the event was both the means and the ends of stronger family-school engagement.



TURNING ATTENDANCE INTO ENGAGEMENT

BALDWIN-WHITEHALL SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

- Dr. Kara Eckert**, Director of Instruction and Learning (1-5)/Office of Community Partnerships and School Co-Lead
- Jennifer Lydon**, Parent and Parent Co-Lead
- Dr. Randal A. Lutz**, Superintendent
- Alicia Johnson**, Assistant Principal
- Asha McMillan**, Elementary Teacher
- Mary Pannier**, Youth Advisor at SHIM Cares
- Krishna Kafle**, Parent
- Rob Achtzehn**, Parent and School-Board Member

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

- District population:** 35,956
- Student body:** 4,467 students
- Participating grades:** K-12

INTRO

In the Baldwin-Whitehall School District, educators and parents were both observing a similar phenomenon: increasing parental attendance, but decreasing parental engagement. More parents than ever were attending events like open houses and sports games, but fewer parents than ever were participating in the traditional means of engagement like school-board meetings and volunteer opportunities.

Through a series of empathy interviews, the team learned that parents were eager to engage, but were dissatisfied with the available options. These insights spurred the team on to develop new ways to close that gap.



MINI-HACK: WE ARE NEIGHBORS

At We Are Neighbors, a district-wide community event held annually in May, the team hosted an information booth and collaborative art project to engage parents and families. People were invited to respond to the prompt “What is the purpose of school?”

In addition to the art installation, parents completed a survey to suggest engagement ideas. While the team was able to connect with many parents at the event, the art activities interested students much more than adults. The team realized they needed to organize an event specifically for parents.



DESIGN HACK: UNITE AND IGNITE

Based on the survey responses collected at We Are Neighbors, the team organized Unite and Ignite, an engagement event designed just for parents, but with childcare provided to lower barriers to participation.

Held on a warm evening in October, the event was set up around five cozy fire pits where parents and educators could exchange ideas and get to know each other. While the turnout was lower than the team hoped, those who did attend were a diverse and enthusiastic group.

Guests at the event were treated to a variety of attractions, including live music, a delicious taco bar, childcare services, s’mores by multiple fire pits, and the chance to win prizes.

OUTCOMES

- Attendees provided positive reviews of the event.
- Nine parents signed up to get more involved in parent-engagement work.
- Discovered cultural differences in expectations for parental involvement.

FUTURE PLANS

The team has launched Engage Members, Bridge Relationships, and Create Enriching Experiences (EMBRACE), an effort to sustain momentum and bring together several parent-engagement activities. The group’s first work together will be the creation of the Journey of a Highlander, a depiction of the competencies students will develop over the course of their education in the district.

AHA MOMENT

Even when they show up, parents might need extra help engaging. When parents accompany their students to events and activities, they may not expect to engage deeply in activities and discussions designed for adults. This observation led the team to design parent-only events to really focus on their targeted audience.



RESETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND PARENTS

BIG BEAVER FALLS AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

- Jackie Sabol**, Parent Co-Lead
- Jenn Ceriani**, Title I Lead and School Co-Lead
- Tom House**, Middle School Principal, Community Outreach and School Co-Lead
- Stef Pyle**, Teacher
- Maria Stevenson**, Parent
- Mike Dawkins**, Parent
- Joyce Depenhart**, Director of Student Services

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

- District population:** 13,403
- Student body:** 1,666 students
- Participating grades:** PreK-12

INTRO

Despite well established parent-engagement habits in elementary and high school, Beaver Falls Middle School lacked a tradition of engagement. The team wanted to create new opportunities to spark engagement among middle school parents and staff.

Based on insights gathered through empathy interviews with parents, the team knew that the interest was there among parents, it was just looking for its counterpart within the school.



MINI-HACK: SIXTH GRADE SNACK AND CHAT

The team saw a natural opportunity to start building positive parent engagement in the middle school by inviting the families of incoming sixth graders to attend a fun and informal get-together at the middle school. Since the students and families would be coming from two separate elementary schools, the event would also give them a chance to start to build connections.

The event emphasized fun with food, music, and featured “getting to know you” posters about the middle school staff. While the middle school staff were at first hesitant to engage, they opened up over the course of the event. Now, they want to do it every year instead of formal matriculation events.



DESIGN HACK: BFMS MEET THE TEACHER

The team built on the positive experience of the Snack and Chat event to plan something bigger for the whole middle school. First, they identified a pre existing event they could build on: Meet the Teacher Night.

To make it more fun and informal for everyone, the team took the event outside, where the entire staff, including support staff, were stationed at tables in front of the middle school. The street was closed to traffic so parents and families could walk among the stations, meet their child’s new teachers, and gather information packets for each grade level. Music, food, and popsicles helped build a fun and spirited atmosphere.

OUTCOMES

- Staff provided positive feedback on both hack experiences.
- Recorded largest ever turnout for Middle School Meet the Teacher.

FUTURE PLANS

After seeing the appetite for engagement among teachers and parents in the middle school, the team plans to survey middle school teachers and start to build a team of dedicated staff and parents in the middle school to keep the momentum going.

LESSON LEARNED

Schools are a place of habit. People park in the same parking space, eat the same lunch, clock in and clock out at the same time. Teachers, staff, students, and families are used to the routine. By injecting a bit of fun and stimulation into the mix, you can reset expectations for what’s possible.



MAKING SCHOOL A PLACE FOR FAMILIES

FOX CHAPEL AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

- Susan Kreit**, Principal and School Co-Lead
- Lisa Soose**, Parent Co-Lead
- Gabby Bonelli**, Teacher
- Sarah Jones**, Teacher
- Matt Murray**, Parent
- Josh Scott**, Parent
- Felix Matathias**, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

- District population:** 30,000
- Student body:** 4,163 students
- Participating grades:** K-5

INTRO

Like many schools, Fairview Elementary in the Fox Chapel Area School District benefited from a small but committed set of parents who engaged through PTO and volunteer events. However, these parents represented only a fraction of the school community.

Through a series of empathy interviews with parents and educators, the team discovered obstacles to engagement and communications challenges, but they knew they needed more information from more parents before they started making changes.



MINI-HACK: PARENT-ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

The team sent a needs-assessment survey to all third grade families. The questions were simple: What should the school start doing to improve engagement? What should the school stop doing to improve engagement? What should the school continue doing to improve engagement?

The survey also gauged parents' priorities. To the team's surprise, survey responses revealed that parents prioritized social, emotional, and mental health.



DESIGN HACK: FAIRVIEW FAMILY NIGHT

In the spirit of building community, the team decided to host a new back-to-school event called Fairview Family Night. To distinguish the event from the existing annual Curriculum Night, promotion of the Family Night emphasized the fun, informal, and social nature of the event.

Families were invited to mingle with school staff, visit informational booths, and enjoy food and activities. Childcare was provided (movie night!), freeing up parents to visit with teachers, support staff, special area teachers, and PTO representatives. A resource table staffed by community members provided parents with information on sports, clubs, and family resources. The team also hosted a booth by Identogo where parents could complete the process to obtain volunteer clearances.

While the team focused on building relationships between school staff and families, many parents noted the relationships they built with their peers as well.

LESSON LEARNED

Check your assumptions. Discovering that parents prioritized social, emotional, and mental health so highly was a big surprise to the team, especially the educators. Given the pressure for ever greater academic achievement—pressures felt by both students and teachers—learning that parents shared educators' concern for students' well-being gave the team permission to focus on building relationships.

OUTCOMES

- 100% of the parents that were surveyed want Fairview Family Night to be an annual event.
- On a scale of 1-5, 80% of teachers rated Fairview Family Night 4 or 5 for building relationships.

FUTURE PLANS

Fairview Family Night is now an annual event. The team plans to make improvements to the event design and raise funding to sustain this event over the long term.

The team also plans to bring Identogo back to the school as a stand-alone event to help more parents obtain volunteer clearances.



MAKING MIDDLE MEAN MORE

GROVE CITY AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Marisa Jackson, Parent Co-Lead
Larry Connelly, Middle School Principal and School Co-Lead
Susan Myers, Parent
Jessica Plummer, Parent
Alisha Johnson, Teacher
Erin Persch, Teacher

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 16,835
Student body: 1,800 students
Participating grades: 6–12

INTRO

Grove City's superintendent and a school-board member had a proposition: could a dedicated effort by a team of middle school staff and parents stem the typical drop-off in family engagement that happens when students enter middle school?

Principal Larry Connelly assembled a team of parents and teachers to give it a try. They needed to think differently, putting less emphasis on academics and instead focusing on the bigger picture for new middle schoolers and their families.



MINI-HACK: A FUN TRANSITION

The Grove City team started by changing the way they planned their fifth and sixth grade Fun Night, an annual transition event for incoming middle schoolers. Instead of relying solely on teachers to plan and execute, they invited parents into the planning process.

Parents were eager to join, and had many ideas: a tour of the middle school, meet-and-greets with staff and principals, and a Q&A session for parents. These small changes created a more welcoming atmosphere and set the foundation for strong family-school bonds from the start.



DESIGN HACK: FROM ORIENTATION TO OPEN HOUSE

Small changes to the Fun Night led to big changes to the school's parent orientation. The team decided to leave behind the typical night of formal presentations about academic expectations and instead focus on fun and excitement for the school year to come.

A taco truck, shaved ice, and free movie-theater popcorn greeted families at the door. Families and school staff participated in a scavenger hunt and art activities while taking in a showcase of student work. Instead of giving presentations, teachers opted for informal conversations with parents. The result was a vibrant, relaxed gathering that nurtured the growing connections between families and the school.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: MORE EVENTS, BETTER CONNECTIONS

The mindset for event planning had shifted, and this inspired more and better events throughout the school year. Enthusiasm for this different way of planning events even spread to the high school. By seeing each event as an experiment, the team had flexibility to find out what worked, leave behind what didn't, and continue to improve.

AHA MOMENT

“ Parent engagement can't be understated. If teachers and parents can be partners, it improves everything—for the teacher, the parents and most importantly, the students. Our big takeaway is to be very intentional in the planning and to devote time to family engagement.”

OUTCOMES

- Teachers' initial unease transformed into excitement for connection.
- Parents felt more comfortable talking to teachers and reaching out to the school.
- Teachers felt more comfortable reaching out directly to parents.



MEETING IN THE MIDDLE

DEER LAKES SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Christine Ashi, Parent Co-Lead
Samantha Abate, Middle School
 Principal and School Co-Lead
Bobbi Ann Barnes,
 Assistant Superintendent
Katie Mangieri, Teacher and Parent
Sara Shea, Parent
Betsy Stein, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 14,541
Student body: 1,950 students
Participating grades: 6–8

INTRO

The Deer Lakes Middle School team wanted to tackle something big. Their goal was to prevent the seemingly inevitable decline in parental involvement that happens as students enter middle school. They cared deeply about understanding the goals and dreams of families for their students, and suspected that other parents and teachers felt the same way, but didn't know how to start.

Their journey took them out of the school building and into partnership with teachers, families, and students.



MINI-HACK: ASK-IT BASKET

Drawing inspiration from one of the Parents as Allies human-centered design activities, the team started with a virtual “ask-it basket,” an anonymous online form where parents of incoming middle schoolers could ask questions about their students’ pending transition. Answers to the questions were sent out to all parents before school began.



DESIGN HACK: REVAMPED OPEN HOUSE

Next, the team identified the school’s annual open house event as an opportunity to rethink how middle school families are welcomed at the beginning of each school year. They reimagined the event from top to bottom, involving students and teachers in the planning.

As families arrived at the open house, they were welcomed by a street-fair atmosphere: string lights, food from local restaurants, and sweet treats to eat. Instead of giving presentations, teachers traveled with families throughout the school and talked with the parents while everyone participated in team-building activities.

Parents and teachers walked away seeing each other in a different light. The resulting increase in positivity and trust was a tangible difference from past years.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: UNIFIED ARTS DAY

The team kept the momentum going later in the school year at a Unified Arts Day for students and families planned collaboratively by art, STEM, computer science, wellness, foreign language, and technology teachers. A showcase of student work gave parents a window into what was happening at school.

LESSON LEARNED

“ You need a good group of people to work together who will commit to removing all the barriers. Our team had a wide range of backgrounds which helped us better understand our families. And it’s critical to find different ways for teachers to be involved.”

OUTCOMES

- Parents and teachers saw each other in a different light.
- Significantly increased open house attendance.
- The school has committed to the new, non-traditional open house format.



NIGHT TO UNITE

KEYSTONE OAKS SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Tabitha Warman, Parent Co-Lead
Sarah Welch, Coordinator of Public Relations
 & Communications and School Co-Lead
Gina Huss, Teacher
Julie Balcerek, Parent
Rosa Ellenberger, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 20,980
Student body: 1,907 students
Participating grades: 6–8

INTRO

The Keystone Oaks Middle School team had a familiar problem: the transition to middle school saw a drop-off in parent engagement. The district has three elementary schools and only one middle school, which means the transition to sixth grade takes three sets of close-knit relationships and jumbles them all together.

When they listened to families, the team learned that this shift was disorienting, and even though parents wanted to be involved, they weren't sure how. In response, the team hosted a series of events, experimenting and iterating each time to create a more welcoming, collaborative atmosphere.



MINI-HACK: MOVIE NIGHT

The team's first experiment was a movie night that brought together all the soon-to-be sixth graders. Students from all three schools came together to watch a movie while parents and families explored the middle school building and got more comfortable with the space. This simple evening was a first step towards lessening anxiety through what can be an awkward transition.

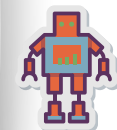


DESIGN HACK: NIGHT TO UNITE

Next, the team set their sights on reinventing the middle school open house. At this annual event, teachers typically gave formal presentations while parents sat in the classroom and listened. The team decided it was time to break from tradition and use that time to talk and have fun together.

At the new open house, students were the tour guides, showing the middle school to their parents. Teachers hosted hands-on events and activities, including mini-golf, ice-cream making, mummy games, and more.

The revamped open house was festive, active, and joyful. Parents got to hang out with their kids, and their kids' teachers, in a relaxed school atmosphere. Positive interactions began to build into positive relationships.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: ACTIVITY FAIR

Another opportunity the team identified was to showcase the after-school opportunities available to middle schoolers, helping parents to see the wide array of activities on offer. An activity fair event for families showed off the resources available to incoming sixth graders, from chess and robotics club to language resources, free and reduced lunch, and the school's music program.

AHA MOMENT

“ Sometimes it's just doing something simple. It doesn't have to be a big, complicated event. Sometimes you just need to open your doors literally and invite people in to sit down and ask their questions.”

OUTCOMES

- Parents felt more comfortable with the middle school transition.
- New partnerships formed with community organizations.
- Teacher engagement in the middle school transition event increased.



MOMENTS OF TRANSITION

SHALER AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Christine Ashi, Parent Co-Lead

Ian Miller, Elementary School
Principal and Team Lead

Sue Prodente, Teacher

Amy Glath, Teacher

Lindsay Cochran, Parent

Jennifer Rausch, Parent

Jamie Murphy, Parent

Tara Ronel, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 38,205

Student body: 3,928 students

Participating grade: 4

INTRO

Like many schools reorienting themselves in the post-COVID world, the team at Shaler noticed a disconnect between the school and the community. Educators felt it, families felt it.

To begin to reconnect the school and community, the school team developed ideas for gathering input and engaging families in activities that would rebuild those bonds of trust and communication. They focused on those families that have had multiple students go through the district and sought their honest feedback.



MINI-HACK: TRANSITIONING FAMILY SURVEY

To gather feedback, the school conducted a survey of fourth-grade students and their families. Fourth grade is a transitional year in the district, so the survey aimed at assessing how the students and families felt about their experience of that transition, what went well, and what could be better.

Both students and parents completed the same survey. The students answered their questions on devices in school and then took the devices home to have their parents complete the survey, an approach that worked even better than expected. The survey confirmed the disconnect with parents and identified issues for the school to address.



DESIGN HACK: FOURTH GRADE WELCOME

While the team was able to respond quickly by launching use of the REMIND app and re-establishing the school newsletter, they knew they wanted to create more impactful moments for engagement as well.

They decided to organize an event to welcome incoming fourth graders. Held on a Sunday at parents' suggestion, the event focused on reducing anxieties for students, families, and educators. The event was the first time that families were mixing together into one school.

Designed so that students could meet and "just be kids," the event invited students to play on the playground, enjoy Italian ice treats, and add their name to a banner that would be hung in the school. Meanwhile, parents participated in ice breakers to help them start talking to each other.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: SIXTH GRADE SENDOFF

The transition from sixth grade to seventh grade can be stressful also. Students are entering a new school building, following a new school schedule, and dealing with the onset of adolescence.

The team organized an event to help incoming seventh graders. Again held on a Sunday for family convenience, the carnival-style event featured cornhole, a dunk tank, popcorn, and pizza.

Parents were required to attend the whole event, which gave them plenty of time to connect with their children's new teachers and establish lines of communication for the upcoming school year.

LESSON LEARNED

“ Slow down and really partner and build trust. We wanted to have really honest and authentic conversations. There had to be some vulnerability on our part.”

The fourth-grade family survey was successful because it was narrow, intentional, and specific. The result was better and more actionable responses.

OUTCOMES

- Less anxiety among parents and fewer anxious students over the school year.
- Both events are now part of the annual school calendar.

FUTURE PLANS

With these two events now part of the plan, the school team is looking for smaller and more frequent ways of keeping up school-community engagement.



CALIFORNIA AREA
SCHOOL DISTRICT

MIXING IT UP IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

CALIFORNIA AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Joshua Pollock, Secondary Principal
& Co-Lead

Lesley Daniels, Parent Co-Lead

Jamey Wolfe, Teacher

Meghan Johnson, Parent

Keisha Russell, Parent

Lisa Luncinski, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 10,705

Student body: 979 students

Participating grades: 7-12

INTRO

After a successful effort at the elementary level (see pages 14-15), California Area School District decided to expand their family-school engagement efforts. And while parents of elementary students have the PTA, classroom volunteering, and holiday activities to keep them engaged, and parents of high school students participate in extracurricular and athletic booster, the team noticed that parents often feel “lost” when their child reaches middle school.

The team set out to bridge the gap of parent engagement that happens during the middle school years.



MINI-HACK: ICE CREAM SOCIAL

The team looked for opportunities to invite middle school families into the school that would not intrude on the school day. The result was a lunchtime Ice Cream Social. Families were invited into the cafeteria to share ice cream with their kids. Despite timing barriers related to parents’ work schedules, approximately 20 parents attended, representing about 12% of families.

This was new for the parents, who don’t usually get to visit during the lunch period. It gave them a chance to see how their children socialize—and they got to be a little silly together.



DESIGN HACK: TAILGATE PARTY

Given the popularity of football games in the community, they decided to host a tailgate party during the gap between the end of the school day and the beginning of that night’s game.

Students and families were invited to the Trojan Tailgate Party featuring a DJ, games, food, swag bags for all, and fun. Despite having to move indoors to avoid the rain, approximately 80% of middle school students attended the tailgate as did approximately 50% of middle school families.

During the event, students proudly showed their parents around the school and introduced them to teachers. In the weeks following the event, the middle school hallways were filled with kids wearing the backpacks they received at the tailgate.

LESSON LEARNED

Timing is everything. While the Ice Cream Social was a fun event that the team plans to repeat, its timing during the middle of the workday created an inherent barrier for working parents. Likewise, the tailgate party was mostly a student event until 5:00PM when parents started pouring in. This helped the team realize that parents want to be involved, but time stands in the way. It’s the team’s job to find ways to remove that barrier.

OUTCOMES

- Post-tailgate surveys indicated 100% of participants had fun.
- Fewer discipline referrals during the week following the tailgate.
- More than 30 inquiries about additional tailgate-style events.

FUTURE PLANS

The school plans to continue hosting tailgate parties and other after-school events to fill the gap between the end of the school day and the end of the workday. And the school principal will host evening advisory meetings where parents can share their ideas.



HI, NEIGHBOR

AVONWORTH SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Soha Hindawy, Parent Co-Lead
Scott Miller, Primary School Principal
 and School Co-Lead
Cristina Del Campo, Parent
Jennifer Gould, Teacher
Alicia Logue, Parent
Bitá Mascara, Parent
Emoniqua Dent, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 12,194
Student body: 1,853 students
Participating grades: K–2, 7–12

INTRO

Avonworth School District is becoming more diverse each year. This growing diversity often shows up first in the primary school. The team from Avonworth Primary Center knew that authentic family engagement would require that new families felt welcomed and respected. They wanted to help parents feel that they belonged, in both the school and the greater school community. To do this, they started slowly, assembled a powerful team of parents and school staff, and kept saying “yes.”



MINI-HACK: TRANSLATING THE MOTTO

The team began by making a simple change: translating the school's motto, #bethekindkid, into 10 different languages spoken by families, identified from the Kindergarten entrance survey and a local demographic study. They hung a poster with the motto in all 10 languages in the school's entrance lobby so that students and families would be welcomed in a familiar language each day.



DESIGN HACK: HI NEIGHBOR!

For their first full-scale hack, the team hosted an event they called “Hi Neighbor!” that brought together families to share three holidays they knew their community celebrated: Day of the Dead, the Lunar New Year, and Ramadan. Parents took the lead, decorating tables, preparing food, creating hands-on activities, and providing information so that families and teachers could learn.

The event was a hit. Families and school staff connected as they shared food, traditions, and fun. Parents reported feeling valued, appreciated, and respected.

The district has since hosted several more Hi Neighbor! events, each with a unique focus. Christmas Around the World featured how the holiday is celebrated in six different countries. The team even took the event format to the secondary school, where 7th through 12th graders planned everything from which cultures were featured to the food on offer.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: FAMILY AMBASSADORS

To take their efforts further, the team has begun to connect families that are new to the district with current families, creating an ambassador system that helps new families feel that they are welcomed not just in school, but in the school community.

LESSON LEARNED

“ Leadership can play a big role in helping remove obstacles, challenges and barriers, and help provide the resources. Then, step aside to let the rest happen naturally.”

Throughout the process, don't be afraid to ask for feedback. Ask specific questions about what could be better, and give people safe and private opportunities to share their thoughts one-on-one.

OUTCOMES

- More parents volunteering, and wanting to actively engage at school.
- Teachers are incorporating different cultures and traditions in the classroom.
- Students asking other students to share about their cultural traditions.

FUTURE PLANS

Hi Neighbor! events continue to spread throughout the district, and “Coffee chats” give teachers, parents, and administrators intentional space and time to learn from each other.



WELCOMING AND BEYOND

BRENTWOOD BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Lori Bollinger, Parent Co-Lead
Stephanie DeLuca, Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development and School Co-Lead
David Radcliffe, Middle School Principal
Nick Caponi, Teacher
Julie Sommer, Parent
Surace MeBane, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 9,319
Student body: 1,124 students
Participating grade: K-12

INTRO

Brentwood Borough School District is experiencing dramatic demographic shifts with a growing English-language learner population. In the 2022-23 school year, 30% of the eighth-grade class had joined the district during middle school rather than coming from one of the district's elementary schools. A great many of these new students were English-language learners.

The Brentwood team's mission was clear: intentionally welcome immigrant and refugee students, and support them as valued members of the community.



MINI-HACK: MULTILINGUAL SIGNAGE

It started with signage at the middle school. New signs were added to the standard English signs throughout the building, translating them into the three most commonly spoken languages.

Multilingual signage served the practical purpose of helping more students and parents find what they were looking for. It also signaled to students and their families that they are seen and valued members of the community.



DESIGN HACK: WELCOME BAGS

When the team asked students how they could be of more help, students responded that they wanted to fit in. In response, the team gave each middle schooler a tote bag with a water bottle and T-shirt. All three items were printed with the school's name and mascot.

In middle school, when it feels so important to students that they be "part of the group," this simple giveaway helped ensure that each and every student had swag to wear on spirit day and any day they felt like showing their school pride.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: MULTICULTURAL CELEBRATION

Students and teachers from the high school's multicultural club hosted activities for the entire school during a special multicultural celebration on a school half-day. Students signed up for three rotations of various activities from guacamole making to cultural dance demonstrations to henna tattooing. The event created a tangible energy in the building as students celebrated different traditions, cultures, and places around the world.

LESSON LEARNED

“ What we think we need is not necessarily what members of the community would identify as what they need. So if you're making plans, you have to start with questions.”

Don't be scared to try! If your idea doesn't work, that's OK. Chalk it up to a learning experience and keep going.

OUTCOMES

- Teachers and school staff are more aware of students' cultures and their effects on learning.
- Students reported a positive experience in school.
- More students and families are helping identify their needs for school.

FUTURE PLANS

Based on feedback and learning, the district has many plans for continuing to improve experiences for ELL students, from teacher-trainings about family communication to adjusted plans for orientation events and more.



HERITAGE, THE PATH TO CONNECTION

NEW CASTLE AREA
SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Leah Shipman, Parent Co-Lead
Courtney Bauder, Teacher and School Co-Lead
Debbie Deblasio, Superintendent
Carol Morrell, Principal
Emily Sanders, Director of Academics
Tabitha Marino, Principal
Rich Litrenta, Principal

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 23,069
Student body: 3,010 students
Participating grades: K-2

INTRO

New Castle is a small town. Many families have deep roots in the area and take a lot of pride in its history. As the community changes with the arrival of new neighbors, the school recognized the need to build bridges between those who had called New Castle home for generations, and those who were just putting down new roots.

The school team created opportunities to celebrate the growing population of recent immigrants so that new families could feel more welcomed and comfortable and so that longtime residents could see that the community's small-town qualities were stronger than ever.



MINI-HACK: FLIP-BOOK SHOW & TELL

The school team knew they needed to gather information from families of English-language learners (ELL), but also wanted to begin building authentic, human relationships. Rather than send a survey home or try to conduct interviews, the team organized an event for parents to visit the school and see flip-book animations created by their children showing what they were learning in school. While the parents enjoyed the showcase, the school team could ask parents questions with the aid of translators.

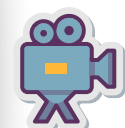


DESIGN HACK: CELEBRATING HISPANIC HERITAGE

To help families of ELL students feel fully engaged in their children's educational journeys, the school team organized a celebration during National Hispanic Heritage Month.

Teachers tasked their ELL students to create invitations for their families and for a non-immigrant student and their family.

The result was a fun night that felt like a family get-together. Over food and dancing, families from different backgrounds built relationships with one another, and with the school. Interpreters were on hand to support conversations.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: MOVIE NIGHT OUT

Branching out from the school, the team partnered with a local movie theater to organize a family movie night for ELL families. The goal was to create a fun and relaxed environment where families could feel comfortable and free to enjoy time together as a community.

The theater screened a version of the film with Spanish-language subtitles so that everyone could enjoy the movie. Each student also went home with a free dual-language book they could take home and read together with their family.

OUTCOMES

- Inspired additional celebrations during Black History Month.
- Nearby school districts are replicating the approach.
- Recognized as a model by Pennsylvania's Latino Affairs Commission.

FUTURE PLANS

Teachers are integrating the feedback and insights gathered through family-engagement events into their instructional approaches so that ELL students have more opportunities to connect with lessons and contribute to discussions. The school team is planning more opportunities to build connections with families.

LESSON LEARNED

Involve local businesses, especially those frequented by parents and families.

The New Castle team used all local businesses to provide different food for their events and specifically selected ones popular with the population of families they were hoping to reach. It was important for families to see how the school and their favorite local businesses were working together to support their students.



DINNER & DIALOGUE

WEST ALLEGHENY SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Hera Ahmad, Parent Co-Lead
Maria Hnarakis, Parent Co-Lead
Melissa Wagner, Elementary School Principal and School Co-Lead
Olivia Pasquino, Teacher
Clare Tunney, Teacher
Claire March, Teacher
Christiana Butler, Teacher

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 22,156
Student body: 3,500 students
Participating grade: K–5

INTRO

The student and community population served by West Allegheny School District, a suburban district serving communities just west of the city of Pittsburgh, has changed dramatically in recent years. New arrivals from around the world have brought more linguistic and cultural diversity to the district.

Sparked by the ideas and energy of one immigrant parent, the school team developed new ways of connecting and communicating with these families.



MINI-HACK: SCHOOL TOUR FOR ELL FAMILIES

To begin creating opportunities for communication, the school hosted tours specifically designed for families of English-language learners (ELL). Throughout the tour, parents stopped at stations where they were prompted to respond to questions in their own language:

- **What are your fears?**
- **What are your hopes?**
- **What are your needs?**
- **How are you coming to us?**

The responses to these questions helped the school team empathize with the families, provide more support to overcome language barriers, and develop more ways to engage them as part of the school community.



DESIGN HACK: DINNER & DIALOGUE

Building on the success of the tours, the school team organized a banquet meal. The goal was to create space and time to generate dialogue in a fun, safe, respectful environment. Featuring food from as many cultures as were represented at the school, the event saw a huge turnout and became a celebration.

After the meal and while the children played in the gym, parents and educators discussed recent changes at the school, including reassigning many ELL students to a school building located nearer to their neighborhoods.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: LOVE GROWS HERE

To recapture the spirit of that first fall dinner event, the school team organized a Valentine's Day event. This time, activities focused on helping parents learn about American customs, better understand the sports and activities their children could participate in, and gain comfort in attending community events.

AHA MOMENT

“ Greater comfort can lead to connections, to relationships, and to trust. Part of this is about keeping the group small enough to allow free exchange and conversation. In small, steady ways, this is how we’ve grown our impact.”

OUTCOMES

- Learned about the need for greater language-translation tools and resources.
- Began using Talking Points app and offering English-language classes for adults.
- Organized Equity Panel for native English speakers and ELL students to connect.
- Began issuing school newsletters in multiple languages.



EMBRACE THE HUB

NEW BRIGHTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Julie Smith, Parent Co-Lead

Jason Hall, Elementary School Principal
and School Co-Lead

Emily Carson, Parent and Teacher

Daren Duncan, Parent

Dana Kwidis, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 10,246

Student body: 1,333 students

Participating grades: K-5

INTRO

The New Brighton Area Elementary School team was committed to embracing the school's role as a hub of the community, a central resource for bettering the lives of families. Empathy interviews revealed to the team that parents were enthusiastic about helping their kids academically, but felt a communications disconnect with the school. Teachers were clamoring for better communication, too.

The team decided to do proactive outreach to families. Their engagement efforts resulted in a new targeted program, revamped community events, and postcard-sized pieces of joy.



EARLY HACK: FOCUS ON FATHERS

After observing a gender imbalance in parental engagement, the team spent time getting intentional about connecting with fathers. They started with a cornhole tournament, specifically inviting dads, and asking each dad to recruit another dad to come along.

The tournament led to an ongoing mentoring program that connects dads and other male mentors with their boys in the school, creating intentional time to play basketball together and talk. This simple format gives the men and boys a structure within which to bond. Fathers were grateful for the school's role in making this happen, and reported feeling more comfortable entering and engaging with the school.



DESIGN HACK: COMMUNITY EVENTS

The team set out to bookend the school year with community events that would change mindsets. Their Back-to-School Bash eased anxieties about the new school year while featuring 21 community organizations with resources for families. At the end of the year, the team engaged parents beyond the "regulars" who usually volunteer to organize a carnival-style celebration for students.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: TWO-WAY POSTCARDS

The team's next experiment was a simple idea to encourage positive interactions. They printed and distributed pre-addressed, stamped postcards to both teachers and parents. Teachers could use their postcards to send parents a quick positive note home when they noticed something about their student. And parents could send a postcard to their child's teacher about something they noticed at home related to school.

Teachers' skepticism about the idea melted away when they started receiving appreciative postcards from parents. They realized that the postcards made it easy to exchange positive, personal notes that broke through the humdrum routine.

LESSON LEARNED

“ You have to make family-school engagement a high priority. It takes planning and work. It takes discussion.”

OUTCOMES

- Each effort led to better communication and deeper trust.
- New parent volunteers have emerged to help with school events.
- Attendance has improved because of family-school engagement efforts.



DREAMS, DIALOGUE, AND DISCOVERY

DUQUESNE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

LaTresha Dean, Parent Co-Lead
George Little, K-8 Principal
 and School Co-Lead
Erica Slobodnik, Teacher

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 5,534
Student body: 357 students
Participating grade: K-8

INTRO

Duquesne City School District has done a lot of work in recent years rebuilding trust as they have welcomed back their seventh and eighth graders nearly 10 years after the state-mandated loss of those grades. The team knew that it takes a village, and that growing trust could lead to better outcomes for students.

The Duquesne City team wanted to build a foundation that would allow for deep connection between school and community, and a mutual understanding of the dreams and hope that parents and teachers have for kids.



MINI-HACK: SPREADING POSITIVE MESSAGES

To start, the team asked teachers to send home positive notes from school. These messages were different from the norm—they weren't about something the student was doing (right or wrong)—they were encouraging notes praising parents for the great job they were doing raising a young person.

Parents loved these simple notes, and immediately wanted to know the teachers better. A spark had been lit.



DESIGN HACK: RESOURCE-FULL FAIR

To build on the spark, the team hosted a resource fair to help connect families to the entire school community, and the many resources it had to offer. Held on the same day as parent-teacher conferences, this drop-in fair helped parents see that the school cared about more than academics, showcasing employment opportunities and community resources, such as mental health support and financial literacy training.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: DUKES SHOWCASE

The overwhelmingly positive response to the fall resource fair inspired the team to hold another event the following spring. At the Dukes Showcase, parents and families heard directly from students about their learning experiences, from esports to maker activities.

This outdoor, family-friendly event put students in charge while giving teachers and parents an opportunity to connect more deeply about the students' education.

AHA MOMENT

“The most rewarding thing for our team was that we understood the importance of what we were doing for the community.”

OUTCOMES

- A survey collected information about what resources parents were interested in.
- Parents and teachers actively shared positive feedback.
- Events helped feed the relationships between parents and teachers.



BRIDGING THE GAPS

AMBRIDGE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

- Adrianna Cephas**, Parent Co-Lead
- Ronnell Heard**, Middle School Principal and School Co-Lead
- Jasmine Ross**, Parent
- Amber Terrick**, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

- District population:** 23,033
- Student body:** 2,308 students
- Participating grades:** PreK-5

INTRO

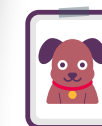
The team from Ambridge was met with such an enthusiastic response to their initial participation in Parents As Allies (see pages 16-17) that they were eager to participate in a second cohort, this time focusing on one of the district's three elementary schools, Highland Elementary.

The team knew that school staff, parents, and students didn't see eye-to-eye, and set out to bridge the gaps between all three groups, especially when it came to communication.



MINI-HACK: SURVEYING PERSPECTIVES

The team's mini-hack was a learning experience: they distributed a survey to teachers, parents, and students, asking them to answer questions about their own expectations, as well as how they perceived the expectations of the other two groups. When the surveys came back, the team realized that everyone filled in the sections about their own expectations, but skipped the others. The survey results were useful nonetheless. They revealed uneven expectations, and a need for more connection. (And next time, the team would write clearer survey instructions!)



DESIGN HACK: SCHOOL STAFF POSTERS

Ahead of the annual school open house, the team sent a "get to know you" survey to all Highland staff: teachers, staff, custodians, and cafeteria workers. On the night of the open house, they hung posters in the cafeteria featuring fun facts and details about each person: where they grew up, their pets' names, their interests, life experiences, and more.

Parents, teachers, staff, and students were all encouraged to read the posters to learn more about the people that work at Highland—not just their job titles and names, but the things that make them human. Attendees were quizzed on the poster information and offered gift cards as rewards to those who answered correctly.

When parents visited classrooms during this open house, they arrived knowing more about the teacher in that classroom, and in many cases, what they had in common. The relationship started with a simple, personal connection, rather than a complex, all-business mindset.

AHA MOMENT

“ Always say yes, never say no. If you say no the first time someone comes to you with an idea or suggestion, they'll probably never come back again.”

OUTCOMES

- Over 100 families engaged in activities, pizza, dessert, and games at the open house.
- The team received thank-you cards from both families and school staff, acknowledging that this open house was better than ever.
- After the open house built some warm connections, the school started welcoming parent volunteers for school events.

FUTURE PLANS

The district has many more ideas to keep bridging the gaps: connective calls and texts via the PTO, a requirement that teachers make at least three positive calls home per week, and opening up new volunteer opportunities. And the district is also interested in getting a third school, State Street Elementary, started on the family-school engagement journey.



BRINGING BUTLER BACK

BUTLER AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Nichole Morgan, Parent Co-Lead
Vanessa Boyd, Elementary School Principal and School Co-Lead
Meghan Lucas, Teacher
Josh Hundertmark, Principal
Chelsie Tonini, Teacher
Bobby Anderson, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 52,760
Student body: 6,086 students
Participating grades: K-5

INTRO

When Butler Area School District reopened Broad Street Elementary School, they faced unsettling memories, held by parents and teachers, of the school's closure seven years prior. The team wanted to change how people saw the school, and get everyone involved in the creation of a new Broad Street.

A bridge between school staff and families was the answer. At Broad Street, students are called scholars. Through intentional efforts to listen to parents and grandparents, the community came together as partners committed to scholars' success and wellbeing.



MINI-HACK: SPRING SHOWCASE

The team started by inviting parents in to see what their kids were doing at school. This spring showcase displayed students' artwork, classroom work, and STEAM activities. Families enjoyed shaved ice, and parents met one-on-one with teachers and administrators.



DESIGN HACK: DATA WITH A TWIST

Next, the school community gathered on the school's patio to share a meal and conversation, and then tackle one of the big challenges the families face. While students were engaged in STEAM activity stations, parents had an opportunity to hear directly from teachers about the educational data reports that had many parents and grandparents scratching their heads.

Parents heard about the school's system for reporting performance data from teachers and reading specialists, who explained how to interpret these reports, and how to use them to better understand what and how scholars are learning.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: MOVE UP DAYS

As the school year came to a close, classroom teachers, the art teacher, and parents at Broad Street collaborated to celebrate kindergarteners and fifth graders as they moved up to the next grade in their learning journey. Kindergarteners designed their own superhero capes, while fifth graders designed caps with words about their accomplishments and their futures. Each fifth grader also got a jar in the hallway that collected paper notes of congratulations and encouragement from school staff, family, and other community members.

LESSON LEARNED

“ It is definitely a process. You need to build and gain credibility with your parents and community, and keep building on that. It is about building relationships. Parents didn't want to step foot in the school. We had closed the door to them. Now we've seen that this can change. Parents feel welcome, they feel empowered, they want to plan things and participate in things. They're asking questions now. We are working side-by-side and arm-in-arm.”

OUTCOMES

- Parents better understand student data, which means scholars and teachers can communicate with them about it.
- Broad Street is becoming the school where teachers want to work—not flee.
- Teachers have seen an improvement in attendance and in academic curiosity.



RIASEC-ING WITH PARENTS

SOUTH FAYETTE TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Dominique Robinson, Parent Co-Lead
Chuck Herring, Director of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion and School Co-Lead
Erin Barth, Parent
Kevin Maurer, Middle School Associate Principal
Mary Geib, Parent
Becky McClintock, Paraeducator, Parent
Preeti Ptodar, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 17,913
Student body: 3,443 students
Participating grades: 5

INTRO

Coming out of challenging times and facing a district divided by geography and culture, the team at South Fayette was frustrated by the disconnect between families and schools. If only parents and families could meet the people who are teaching their children every day and engage with them as peers, families might be open to learning how their children learn better, so they can work in tandem with educators as a team.

So the school team set out to discover what could unlock a communal commitment among parents to support all children.



MINI-HACK: VOLUNTEER CLEARANCE FEST

Sports and extracurricular events are a big part of the school and community culture in South Fayette. And parent volunteers are integral to those events. However, even as the district is growing, the volunteer pool has been dwindling. In response, the school team organized an event where parents could get help completing the necessary paperwork to gain their volunteer clearances.



DESIGN HACK: RIASEC NIGHT

The school team heard from parents that they wanted to understand what their children are learning, especially as the school embraced new and innovative approaches like the RIASEC model of career exploration.

The school team organized “a sneak peek” for parents of fifth-grade students who would be starting the program. The experience mirrored that which the students would go through: parents completed a survey to identify their vocational traits, were matched with parents who had similar traits, and then were tasked with completing a collaborative challenge.

The result was a three-fold win: parents felt informed about and influential in their children’s learning, families connected with one another in new ways, and lines of communication between parents and educators were strengthened.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: PAINTING UNLOCKED

Given the academic focus of their first hack, the school team wanted to create an opportunity for parents and educators to connect as equals. They decided to host an event at a community center where parents and educators were grouped into teams and provided with a “breakout box.” The teams had to solve clues in order to access the art supplies in the box. Once they’d cracked the code, they had to use the art supplies to create a small work of art that would become part of a larger community art installation located at the school.

LESSON LEARNED

“ This was the perfect project to find the common ground between families and schools. We were all experiencing the same thing in different ways— regardless of whether you were a new parent in the district, an educator, or a family who had been here for generations.”

OUTCOMES

- Recruited new parent volunteers for school events and activities.
- Gained parent and family affirmation for a major change to the district’s approach to career-exploration education.
- Generated greater interest among parents in participating in organized engagement activities like Parents as Allies.

FUTURE PLANS

Now that the ball is rolling, the school team has committed to creating new and more events for family-school engagement as a normal and expected part of every school year.



MAKER COACHES

NORTHGATE SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Christina Garczewski, Director of Special Services and School Co-Lead

Joe Peacock, Elementary School Principal and School Co-Lead

Olesia White, Parent Co-Lead

Tanja Syed, Parent

Christina Folino, Teacher

Molly Lipovsky, Teacher

Breann Rupik, Teacher

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 13,040

Student body: 1,053 students

Participating grades: K-6

INTRO

While most school teams in the Parents as Allies cohort faced stagnant or declining parent engagement, Northgate had more parents signing up to participate in school activities than ever before. This signaled growing interest among families to be more involved in the life of the school.

The team's challenge was to find ways to engage these eager parents and, importantly, build connections to those parents who were not already engaged.



MINI-HACK: GAMES IN THE PARK

Starting small and keeping things fun, the school team organized an event at a local park where parents could connect with each other and with educators while playing games. The highlight of the event was a water balloon battle that parents and kids talked about for weeks afterwards.

The event showed that parents were ready, willing, and able to show up for fun one-off events. Now the team needed to figure out how to replicate that experience with more purposeful and impactful forms of engagement.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: MAKER COACHES

Building on parents' interest in the school's maker-education programs, the school team invited parents to become trained makers who could then assist teachers in the classroom.

Over the course of three training sessions, teachers taught parents about the principles of making, the fundamentals of coaching creativity, and the operations of a makerspace. By the end of the training, the parents were ready to join teachers in the classroom.

LESSON LEARNED

Don't be satisfied until you reach beyond the "regular" attendees—those parents you can count on to always show up. The real goal is to engage the not-yet-engaged. Keep asking yourself: Who's missing? Who's next? Think of the dads, the grandparents, the community members who you know care about the students in the school, but haven't yet found a way to engage.

OUTCOMES

- 30 parents became certified maker coaches.
- Expanded the maker coaches model to other schools in the district.
- Parents are now helping to train other parents to become maker coaches.

FUTURE PLANS

Building on the maker coaches model, the Northgate team is starting up more teacher-parent collaboration programs at the intersection of art, science, and technology.



BUILDING CONNECTIONS

CRAWFORD CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Jill Hyatt, Parent Co-Lead and Teacher
Ann Noonan, Director of Ed Tech Integration, Grants, Federal Programs, Community Outreach and School Co-Lead
Thomas Washington, Superintendent
Tammi Costello, Teacher
Maria Rosado-Husband, Parent
Morgan Lindsey, Parent
Christin Smith, Parent
Andy Walker, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 29,185
Student body: 3,188 students
Participating grades: K-6

INTRO

The Crawford Central team wanted to help move parents from involvement (like attending a sports game) to engagement (like volunteering at school). Parents reported wanting to engage, but feeling that they couldn't.

Working towards this goal was a twofold effort: the team needed to change their mindset, and parents needed support getting clearances to be able to join students and teachers in classrooms.



MINI-HACK: SIXTH GRADE EXIT SURVEY

The team started with questions. They distributed an anonymous survey to the parents of graduating sixth graders asking about their level of connection, communications with staff members, and what could be improved.



DESIGN HACK: CLEARANCES EVENT

The complicated set of clearances and background checks that Pennsylvania parents need in order to volunteer in classrooms is challenging to navigate, and the cost and time involved is a barrier to engagement. The team's next hack tackled this head-on. The school held a fun, informal event where parents could follow all the steps they needed to get their clearances.

While their children engaged in STEM activities and watched a movie, parents were able to complete the forms and training on provided laptops. A teacher's spouse provided the required tuberculosis tests. A community partner provided the necessary fingerprinting. And the school covered all the associated costs.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: PARENTS, PASTRIES, AND THE NEW PRINCIPAL

The team's next hack was as simple as inviting parents into the school for a pastry. A school administrator stopped parents as they were dropping off students on a Monday morning and asked them to come into the building, grab a breakfast treat, and meet the school's new principal. This simple act helped the new principal build personal connections at the start of her leadership tenure.

AHA MOMENT

“ In school, we think we have to maintain all the control. Through this process we learned that if schools trust the families to be partners, then families will step up and become real partners.”

OUTCOMES

- The number of school volunteers jumped from 2 to 14.
- A teacher voluntarily helped even more parents to complete their clearances after the event.
- Teachers now have volunteers they didn't previously have for field trips, school projects, etc.

FUTURE PLANS

Parents are now volunteering to be "Clearance Coaches," helping other parents obtain their clearances. And district administrators are taking a grill they purchased for the project into local neighborhoods to serve hot dogs and answer questions in a friendly and informal setting.



DEEP LISTENING

FRANKLIN REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Jessica Wagner, Parent Co-Lead

Jennifer DiFulvio, Assistant Superintendent and School Co-Lead

Ted Dufresne, Parent

Tiffany Booker, Parent

Julie Fikejs, School Counselor

Treci Bonime, Parent

George App, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 22,408

Student body: 3,300 students

Participating grades: 3–5

INTRO

The Franklin Regional team wanted to really listen to their parents and families. They knew that school communication was too one-way, and they didn't know what parents actually wanted from engagement.

Instead of jumping into an event or program, the team stuck to their aspirations: each of their hacks was a different approach to listening carefully to parents. The resulting data is driving their engagement efforts.



MINI-HACK: PARENT SURVEY

Efforts began with a four-question online survey sent to parents of students in grades three through five. The survey asked parents to report how connected they felt, what would help them feel more connected, and what obstacles make it difficult to connect.

Many of the 110 survey responses named time as the biggest barrier to building relationships. There was significant positive feedback about teachers, but also a clear desire to feel more connection.



DESIGN HACK: DEEP LISTENING THROUGH FOCUS GROUPS

To dig in deeper, the team invited parents and teachers to participate in focus groups facilitated by The Mentoring Partnership, a local nonprofit with expertise in community engagement. Teacher and parent groups were separate, and food and childcare were provided to make the sessions as appealing as possible.

Having a third party conduct the sessions helped both parents and teachers be open and honest. Participants spoke freely, which is exactly what the team wanted—real concerns and ideas. Feedback included ideas for better communications, more opportunities for parents to engage, and a peer-parent mentoring group.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: FAMILY DINNER

After conducting the focus groups, the team noticed something missing: they were not hearing from families that were new to the district, especially English-language learner (ELL) families. To fill this gap, they brought several ELL families together for dinner at a local restaurant and simply listened to them.

As they broke bread in a relaxed atmosphere, ideas came out naturally, and engagement didn't feel forced. The team heard ideas that they had not previously considered, and walked away with a better understanding of the support that ELL families need most.

FUTURE PLANS

The team's listening has driven their empathy to a new level. From detailed focus group feedback to ideas emerging from the data collected during the process, future steps for deepening engagement are clear, including cultural celebrations and more intentional connections between parents and teachers.

OUTCOMES

- Parents grateful and appreciative for being asked to join in.
- Teachers interested in having parents in their classrooms and wanting parents involved.
- Focus group data is informing next steps.



FUN FOR GROWNUPS

CHARLEROI AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Mark Killinger, K-2 Principal and Team Lead
Whitney Baker, Parent
Kimberly Gilmore, Teacher
Elizabeth LaCarte, Teacher
Holly Chrobak, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 11,547
Student body: 1,413 students
Participating grades: K-5

INTRO

The Charleroi Elementary Center team knew that their students and families have struggles they were not aware of, and empathy interviews made it clear that school was not a comfortable place for every parent.

The team suspected that making parents more comfortable couldn't happen through a formal process. Instead, they wanted to try something different: a series of fun, informal experiences that would create positive interactions between parents and teachers.



MINI-HACK: LUAU SHIFT

To begin, the team wanted to bring a new mindset to the school's existing end-of-year luau. They purposely reached out to those parents who didn't typically engage, and asked how they wanted to be involved.

It turned out that many under-involved parents wanted to be part of the luau, but didn't know how. All they needed was a friendly, open, intentional invitation to get on board. This started to build trust.



DESIGN HACK: DONUTS WITH GROWNUPS

The next step was designing a new event for the beginning of the next school year. "Donuts with Grownups" invited caring adults of first-grade students to join teachers on a school-day morning for a casual breakfast.

Parents and guardians got to know teachers on a human level, not just as names and roles. Families met other families, building relationships within the school community. Everyone agreed this was a fun, personal way to start the school year.

The team was glad they chose the intentional phrase "Grownups" rather than "Parents"—some students brought an older sibling, a guardian, or someone else important in their life.



FOLLOW-UP HACK: A CADENCE OF EVENTS

As these small opportunities for fun and informal interactions between school staff and families began to make a difference, the team realized that they needed to keep it going. They hosted a "date night" for parents and children around Valentine's Day, bingo night events at school, and even a special family painting activity night.

Now, a regular cadence of fun and informal events is emerging at the school, creating a series of positive school memories for families fueled by friendly, personal interactions.

AHA MOMENT

“ Teachers and administrators may have chosen their careers because they had a relatively good school experience as children. But we must remember that not all parents had a good school experience and therefore might not immediately engage. We learned that parents have a desire to be there for their kids and we needed to create ways to engage them in a comfortable setting.”

OUTCOMES

- Teachers felt they were developing an authentic relationship with parents.
- Parents felt more comfortable interacting with the school and coming to the building.
- Events built teamwork and trust between school and home.



THE POWER OF INFORMATION

BUTLER AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEAM

Crystal Zier, Parent Co-Lead
Nicole Munko, Elementary Dean of Students and School Co-Lead
Katheryn Armor, Teacher
Lauren Kubiak, Teacher
Jennifer Tack-Henne, Teacher
Tia Gelles, Parent
Sara Joseph, Parent
Joe Floris, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 52,760
Student body: 6,035 students
Participating grades: K-5

INTRO

After a successful effort at Broad Street Elementary (see pages 60-61), Butler Area School District decided to activate another family-school engagement effort, this time at Center Township Elementary.

In empathy interviews, the Center Township team found that parents wanted to be more involved, but didn't know how. If the team could compile a list of parents' interests, availabilities, and skills, teachers and school staff would know whom to call when an opportunity to help arose. The team set out to discover the talents and interests of parents.



MINI-HACK: SURVEY AT THE SPRING SHOWCASE

To learn more about parents' interests and needs, the team shared a QR code linking to a simple survey at the school's Spring Showcase event. Though many families took the codes, only a handful actually completed the survey. The parents that did fill out the survey gave quality answers that the team used as they moved forward. But the team also learned a very valuable lesson: distributing a QR code is not enough. If you want a lot of people to take your survey, you need to do more.



DESIGN HACK: PARENT INVOLVEMENT DATABASE

When parents and families received invitations to a Fall Festival at Center Township, they thought it was just another fun school event. And it was a fun event, featuring food, games, crafts, entertainment, and prizes. But the event was also an opportunity for the Center Township team to build their list of parents who were interested in helping out at school, including their talents, interests, and availability.

The team again used a QR code that linked to a survey, but this time they offered a prize to each parent that completed the survey. They actively invited parents and families over to the prize table and explained the survey.

The team not only engaged families in a fun event, they also compiled a powerful database. Now, they can use the database to pull together a group of parents to plan an event, volunteer for a field trip, prepare a craft, and much more.

OUTCOMES

- Increasingly positive and successful interactions with parents.
- 90% of parents who completed the database survey expressed willingness to be more involved.
- Over 60 parents are now included in the database, along with their talents and offerings.

FUTURE PLANS

The parent involvement database is a living document that will continue to be updated. It will be shared between teachers, school staff, and the PTO for use when a classroom or activity needs support.

AHA MOMENT

“ You may not understand what you signed up for or how it is going to turn into anything of real value in the beginning. But if you hold on, you will be surprised and your school will benefit.”



WARMER WELCOMES FREEPORT AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

TEAM

Alison Dorogi, High School Counselor and School Co-Lead
Autumn Palmiter, Parent Co-Lead
Renee Bogan, Secondary Assistant Principal
Nick Smith, Teacher
January Furer, Parent
Bret Sather, Parent

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY

District population: 12,364
Student body: 2,035 students
Participating grades: K-12

INTRO

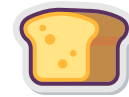
With a growing school district to engage, the Freeport team was on a mission of welcoming. Empathy interviews revealed that even well-established parents were craving more communication and connection. This got the team to thinking: if this is an issue for parents who are already familiar with the district, what's it like for parents that are new to the district, and what can we do to help them? They set out to establish new ways of welcoming, engaging with students, parents, and school staff every step of the way.



MINI-HACK: STUDENT AMBASSADOR PROGRAM INVENTORY

To start, the team decided to gauge interest in a new program that would give students an opportunity to make their school a place where everyone feels safe, welcomed, and connected. The response was clear: students were enthusiastic about the chance to serve in a leadership role and welcome their peers.

As a result, the Freeport Area School District Student Ambassador Program launched in the 2023–24 school year.



DESIGN HACK: TABLE TALK DINNER

For their big hack, the team wanted to activate the student ambassadors, building direct connections with new families. They hosted a welcoming dinner which brought together the ambassadors, new families, established parents, and school personnel to share a meal and conversation. The goal was to make new families feel welcome, to hear their stories, and to get their feedback. A light structure to the conversation helped put everyone on the same page, and encouraged intentional discussion.

The event was warm, cozy, and successful. Families, students, and school staff all reported enjoying themselves. The team gathered insights into what the district does well and what can be improved upon in the future. And importantly, new families felt welcomed and comfortable.

AHA MOMENT

“ People need to understand the length of the commitment, and the time and flexibility it requires. It has always felt good, but it always felt like there would be more and more, and quite involved. Some people could get frustrated that it’s still going, and that it takes time.”

FUTURE PLANS

The Student Ambassador Program will continue and evolve, and there are plans to extend it into the elementary schools, too. The district also hopes to transform the welcome dinner into an annual fall welcoming event. And the team is using the feedback they've gathered to create welcoming packets that ease the transition into the district for new families.

OUTCOMES

- Student Ambassador Program launched by the district as a result of exploratory survey and interviews.
- 30 new and established community members came together for the welcoming dinner.
- Connections and feedback are fueling improved efforts to welcome families.

TOOLS & TEMPLATES

Ready to start connecting the islands of home and school in your own community? We created a collection of Parents as Allies tools and templates to help!

Scan the QR code or go to kidsburgh.org to find PDF versions of these tools and templates to use in your community.



REFLECT: WHAT ARE YOUR ASPIRATIONS FOR YOUTH?

WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES AND DREAMS FOR YOUTH IN EDUCATION?

LEARN: BARRIERS

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS BLOCKING PARENTS AND TEACHERS FROM BUILDING TRUST AND ALIGNMENT

PARENTS | TEACHERS

LEARN: WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PURPOSE OF SCHOOL FOR YOU?

- TO BE ACTIVE CITIZENS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS
- TO UNDERSTAND ONESELF AND DEVELOP SOCIAL SKILLS AND VALUES
- TO DEVELOP SKILLS FOR WORK
- TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR FURTHER EDUCATION WHETHER IT BE UNIVERSITY, VOCATIONAL OR TECHNICAL SCHOOL

I BELIEVE THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT PURPOSE OF SCHOOL IS...

REFLECT: WHAT ARE YOUR ASPIRATIONS AND GOALS FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

Of the work you are doing with family, school, and community engagement...

WHAT IS ONE COMMON ASPIRATION?

-
-
-

LEARN: WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PURPOSE OF SCHOOL FOR OTHERS?

BUILDING TRUST AND ALIGNMENT THROUGH CONVERSATION

THE PURPOSE OF SCHOOL IS:

YOUTH | PARENTS | TEACHER | WIDER SCHOOL OR COMMUNITY

I THINK OTHERS BELIEVE...

GREAT LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

I WONDER WHAT THEY ARE CURIOUS ABOUT... MAYBE A SPECIAL PROJECT WOULD INTEREST THEM.

HERE IS HOW YOUR CHILD IS DOING ACADEMICALLY... EVERYTHING LOOKS GREAT.

THANK YOU FOR ALL THESE SCHOOL UPDATES.

I THINK MY CHILD WOULD LOVE A CHALLENGE... THEY'RE REALLY CURIOUS ABOUT ASTRONOMY.

TO MAKE LEARNING MORE RELEVANT, HERE IS WHAT I WOULD WANT SCHOOLS TO KNOW ABOUT MY CHILD...

EMBARKING ON YOUR JOURNEY

At its core, family-school engagement is about trust. The ocean that separates school and home is an ocean of mistrust. The goal of engagement is to get both groups to cross that ocean together. The school teams you've read about in this guidebook have embarked on heroic journeys to chart their own course across that ocean.

Along the way, they've learned what works and what doesn't when it comes to building connections and seeding collaboration between parents and educators. They've also discovered that, as challenging as it is, family-school engagement is just a means, not an end. The end, the destination we're all navigating towards, is successful, thriving children. What that looks like will vary with each school, each community, each family, and each child. Where we start and where we end may be different, but the journey will be so much better if we crew the ship together.

WAYFINDERS

To help you navigate your own parent-engagement journey, we'd like to offer 14 mindset shifts that the Parents as Allies teams discovered along the way.

WE USED TO THINK...	NOW WE THINK...
Family-school engagement is too hard, and we aren't in the right position to do it.	Opportunities for engagement are everywhere, and it's our responsibility to do this work.
Everything runs on the school schedule.	Weekends are where it's at. That's when parents have time to pause and participate.
Schools know what's best and can solve problems on their own.	Families have their own ideas, needs, and wants. Their participation is essential to finding and fixing barriers.
Excellent family engagement requires large-scale events and a big budget.	A small hack, purposeful call, or simple survey can be a form of excellent engagement.
Parents are comfortable coming into their children's school.	Past experiences can leave many parents feeling intimidated or unwelcome in school.
Parents and families aren't interested in deeper engagement.	Many parents do want to be more involved in school, but don't know how.
Successful family-school engagement means reaching 100% of families.	Individual connections go a long way.
Engagement is about structures and procedures.	It's all about relationships.
"Parents" is a single group with similar priorities and problems.	Parents' ideas, needs, wants, and concerns vary widely.
If parents aren't speaking up, it means they have nothing to say.	Parents want to give their feedback, but often lack opportunities to do so.
Everything needs to be planned out ahead of time.	Building relationships and trust comes before content and planning.
The relationships between our schools and our families are too broken to repair.	We have a lot in common, and shared goals have the power to bring us together.
The surest way to reach parents is to send a flier home with their students.	There are a lot more and a lot better ways to reach parents these days.
School is serious business.	Yes, but school should also be a place of joy and celebration.

Parents and educators are the two groups of people who care the most about children. You'd think they'd be natural allies. But that's not always the case. For families in many communities, home and school can feel like two separate islands separated by an ocean of communication challenges, schedule conflicts, and mismatched expectations.

Parents as Allies is a heroic effort undertaken by families and schools to build understanding, trust, and collaboration, for the sake of the children that both groups care so much for. This guidebook shares the insights of 31 teams of parents and educators from across western Pennsylvania who are working together to bridge the ocean between home

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Parents as Allies is led by Kidsburgh, a family-media project based in Pittsburgh, PA. Kidsburgh serves local families and caregivers by helping them discover the many resources for children in the region and offering solid reporting and expert advice about the challenges of raising healthy, thriving children. Learn more at kidsburgh.org.

A Root + All project.

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