



# Together for Students: **LESSONS FROM OUR EFFORTS TO CREATE BROAD PARTNERSHIPS WITH STUDENTS AT THE CENTER**

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Students today face tremendous challenges that no single school, organization or agency can solve alone. Our three national organizations — the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership, Communities In Schools, and StriveTogether — believe that communities must come together if we want to create a student-centered education system where all students have the resources they need to be successful.

With support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the Together for Students initiative (TFS), a multiyear grant to create incentives and opportunities for collaboration was created. We have worked to lead by example and to support four local partners in Chicago, Ill., Dayton, Ohio, Lehigh Valley, Pa., and Memphis, Tenn., in transforming how organizations work together to meet the needs of every student. The first year of implementation was March 2019 – February

2020, the second year of implementation was March 2020 – February 2021, and the third year of implementation will be March 2021 – January 2022.

Now, after our second year of implementation, we've learned a lot. We've had early successes and moments of failing forward. To understand and improve our work, we engaged in a two-phase learning project. Through interviews, focus groups, document reviews, meetings and online surveys, we heard important lessons from TFS partners and community stakeholders. [You can find all the takeaways in the reports available here.](#) In this brief, we explore the progress we've made in a central goal of our effort: Building broad, thoughtful partnerships with the needs of students and families always at the center of our work. We hope our learnings and these materials help other communities interested in collective impact work.

## who are the TFS partners?

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### **NATIONAL PARTNERS**

The national partners are the three national organizations — the Coalition for Community Schools, Communities In Schools and StriveTogether — who started the Together for Students initiative.

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### **LOCAL SITE PARTNERS**

Local site partners are people and organizations involved with TFS at one of the implementation sites as site leaders, core site partners or community partners.

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### **TFS SITE PARTNERS**

TFS site leaders are the individuals and organizations responsible for grant deliverables. They are the partners most closely involved with the TFS project at one of the four implementation sites.

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### **TFS CORE SITE PARTNERS**

TFS core site partners are individuals and organizations who support the TFS initiative at one of the four implementation sites but are not the primary conveners of the work. Stakeholders in this group indicated that they were not site leaders but were involved with TFS as part of their job.

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### **TFS COMMUNITY PARTNERS**

TFS community partners are individuals who have more limited involvement with TFS but are nevertheless key stakeholders in aligning and streamlining supports for students. These partners, including educators, volunteers, parents and students, indicated that their involvement with TFS was not part of their regular job.

## our theory of change: we can do more for students together

At the heart of our work is the goal of building broad coalitions that can meet the comprehensive needs of all students, what we call putting students at the center. We believe that if every organization in the education and youth service space would unite to put students at the center, perhaps we can close both the achievement gap and the opportunity gap within a generation. Through the TFS initiative, we hope to support our local network partners with resources and incentives to create effective collaborations with families, communities and a variety of cross-sector organizations. Now, one year into implementation, we have seen early indications that these intentional efforts have supported broad cross-sector partnerships and that the needs of students are central to the work at every TFS site.

“We’ve all waded in the same waters, but we have never worked directly together on an education initiative like this before. So it’s been a really fulfilling way to look at pooling resources that can move the needle in our area. It seems like a lot of small efforts are finally being pulled together into this very focused, large effort that can actually make a big impact.”

ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNER,  
TFS LEHIGH VALLEY

### this project is working to create a system where every student and family will have what they need to thrive

*% of TFS organizations partners agree or strongly agree TFS is a part of their job:*

94% 

*% of TFS organizations partners agree or strongly agree TFS is not a part of their job:*

82% 

### Students’ Needs Are the Center of Our Partnerships

We believe that students’ needs should always be our focus. But we know that high-level goals can get lost in day-to-day work. So we wanted to learn whether student-centered systems are truly the focus of efforts at TFS local sites. We found that students’ needs are the driving motivation of partners at every site. For local partners, putting students at the center has meant coming

together with a dedication to students and a desire to meet all of their complex needs, not only their academic needs.

In the first full year of TFS implementation, we learned that dedication to shared beliefs is extremely important within our partnerships<sup>1</sup> and that nearly all TFS partners are dedicated to creating strong, student-centered systems. When we asked TFS organizational and community stakeholders about how they worked to put

<sup>1</sup>You can read more about the importance of shared beliefs in our learning brief [(Trusting relationships title)/HYPERLINK].

**“The district, in addition to community partners, business and nonprofits, sees the need for a more holistic approach to education. This is what education can look like when we have everyone invested in supporting kids and families and neighborhoods to make sure that needs are met so that there aren’t barriers to academics. So the beauty of it is that the shift has definitely happened within the district as a whole.”**

■ ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNER, TFS MEMPHIS

students at the center of TFS efforts, we heard many descriptions of the ways in which students’ needs are the driving force behind their involvement. Partners have been willing to compromise and even put aside individual priorities because of a deep commitment to supporting and serving students. This shared dedication to students has helped keep TFS partnerships together even when there were disagreements.

TFS sites aren’t just committed to building student-centered systems, they’re also committed to addressing all the complex needs of students and families — academic and nonacademic. When asked if they agreed that TFS is working to create a system where every student and family has what they need to thrive, the overwhelming majority of both organizational partners (93.9%) and community partners (81.5%) agreed.

## expanding TFS partnerships

As we work to build student-centered systems dedicated to meeting the needs of all students, we know that we need to break down silos of services and create broad coalitions of families, communities and cross-sector partners. Since TFS local site partners have completed only one full year of implementation, we wouldn’t expect to see long-term changes for students yet. But there are early indicators that TFS sites are bringing together organizations and stakeholders from a variety of fields and with wide-ranging expertise and experiences.

The local sites have all worked to grow their partnerships with organizations familiar with education as well as organizations outside of the education sector. Through our survey of TFS organizational and community partners,<sup>2</sup> we found that all TFS sites have increased the number of groups joining together to support students. But the increases aren’t consistent across all sites, as

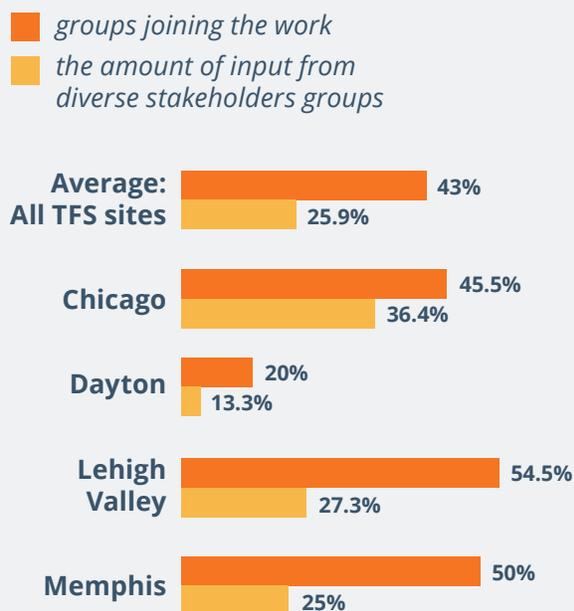
**“The student is who we serve, not our program, not our organization, but the student. We serve the student first.”**

■ ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNER, TFS DAYTON

shown on the next page. We also learned that while most sites are increasing the number of groups joining the work, they do not feel that the amount of input from diverse stakeholders is increasing to the same extent. Overall, 43.0% of TFS partners feel that the number of groups joining the work has increased, but only 25.9% see an improvement in the amount of input from diverse stakeholders. One limitation of this data is that

<sup>2</sup>“Organizational partners” are groups or individual stakeholders who are involved with TFS as part of their job. “Community partners” are groups or individual stakeholders whose involvement with TFS is not part of their job.

## improvements in groups joining the work and diversity of perspectives at each site



some sites had strong existing partnerships and infrastructure before the TFS initiative, and the resources provided by TFS could have supported further enhancement of existing partnerships.

### TFS Sites Are Creating Unexpected Partnerships to Support Students

Thinking beyond the typical education partners, TFS local sites are bringing in partners who can address the variety of challenges that many students face. For example, the TFS partnership in Lehigh Valley, Pa., is focused on supporting students' early literacy achievement. However, partners recognized that many children in the community have unmet medical needs and significant adverse childhood experiences. Creating a student-centered system means finding ways to address these needs in addition to students' academic needs. Therefore, TFS partners in Lehigh Valley include medical organizations and experts in addressing childhood trauma as part of their student-centered partnership.

"I think one group that we needed to bring in more was parents. And I think we have plans to make a parent advisory group, but it was difficult to get those groups engaged. We need to go to them versus having them come to us. We got the student voice piece included. So there was a bit of a student voice, but I think the parent piece was the one that we probably did not get engaged as much as we could have or should have."

ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNER, TFS CHICAGO

### Sites Feel They Need To Do More To Involve Parents

During year one of implementation, TFS partnerships with many key stakeholders have grown across local sites. Unfortunately, parents have not been as successfully included. TFS sites recognize the importance of hearing from parents, but every site expressed challenges with meaningful parent engagement.

One of the biggest difficulties for local partners was knowing the best ways to connect with parents. Every TFS site had concerns that the barriers many parents faced in engaging with a new project weren't being addressed. Some examples were communication difficulties, asking parents to "come to us" instead of "going to them," and not being available during the times that worked best for parents. No site's participants felt that they had engaged parents well, and many acknowledged that this could be an area of growth for them in the coming years of the TFS initiative.

### Most Parents Feel Included

Interestingly, TFS organizational partners and community partners have different views of parent involvement. When asked what things have improved due to the TFS collaborative in their communities, organizational partners and community partners had similar responses except about the amount of parental involvement. Less than half (45.5%) of organizational partners agreed that parents are involved, but nearly two-thirds (71.1%) of community partners agreed that parents are involved. It's not clear why the

“With collaboration, you’re able to get all these different people at the table. And while there might be inherent challenges to that, I see it as a plus. If I don’t have expertise in this area, most likely there’s someone else in the collaboration who does. There’s only a certain amount that we could accomplish as individual schools. Being able to collaborate with diverse partners allows you to branch out and perhaps answer questions or meet needs that you wouldn’t otherwise be able to do. So that’s one of the real strengths that I see through my lens.”

■ ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNER, TFS LEHIGH VALLEY

two groups felt so differently about this specific issue, but learning about this difference may be valuable over the next year of implementation.

Because we realize the complex challenges students face today, our national partnership is working to support our affiliates in four communities to create student-centered systems that meet all the needs of students and families. In alignment with our theory of change, the broad and complex needs of students and families are the focus of our work. Our core partners and community partners at every site are dedicated to working together to address these needs.

In our TFS sites, we’ve increased the number and types of partners working together to support students — including health professionals,

trauma specialists and experts in social-emotional well-being. But we need to do more to facilitate parent involvement in our work.

In the first full year of implementation, we have expanded our partnerships and kept students at the center of our work. With time, we hope these coalitions will create lasting improvements in the ways communities meet the broad needs of all students. Given the challenges that arose during this year of implementation, from the COVID-19 pandemic to social and racial injustice, the work of local affiliates is more important than ever. We know that we can improve students’ well-being and support their academic success if we come together in a streamlined way to address all the different challenges students are facing.



**stakeholder involvement: students, parents and community members**



*percent of respondents who agree or strongly agree:*

statement	organizational partners (TFS is a part of their job)	community partners (TFS is not a part of their job)	difference
<b>Students are involved.</b>	65.2%	73.7%	8.5%
<b>Parents are involved.</b>	45.2%	71.1%	25.6%
<b>Community members are involved.</b>	75.8%	78.9%	3.1%

## data tables

### number of interview and focus group participants in each round by TFS partnership level

stakeholder group	R1 participants	R2 participants	total participants
national TFS leaders	9	0	9
local site leaders	6	1	7
core site partners	0	21	21
<b>TOTAL PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>37</b>

### number of participants in each round

local TFS site	R1 participants	R2 participants	survey participants	total participants
Chicago	1	6	7	34
Dayton	2	5	26	33
Lehigh Valley	2	6	40	48
Memphis	1	5	11	17
<b>TOTAL PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>132</b>

### improvements from the first year of TFS implementation

area	Chicago	Dayton	Lehigh Valley	Memphis	average: all TFS sites
focus on meeting all needs of students (academic and nonacademic)	54.5%	46.7%	63.6%	75%	58.3%
groups joining the work	45.5%	20%	54.5%	50%	43%
the amount of input from diverse stakeholder groups	36.4%	13.3%	27.3%	25%	25.9%
the amount of input from parents	18.2%	33.3%	4.5%	50%	20.3%
the amount of input from students	36.4%	20%	13.6%	50%	25.1%

## data tables

### purposeful engagement and cross-sector partnerships: organizational partners (TFS is part of their job)

total responses	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	n/a or not sure
Community members are involved.	0%	4.5%	15.2%	53%	22.7%	4.5%
Our communities diversity is represented.	0%	4.5%	18.2%	42.4%	28.8%	6.1%
Parents are involved.	0%	10.6%	25.8%	36.4%	9.1%	18.2%
Students are involved.	1.5%	6.1%	12.1%	43.9%	21.2%	15.2%
A variety of sectors are represented in the project, for example: health, housing, education, wellness or employment.	0%	6.1%	15.2%	39.4%	18.2%	21.2%

### purposeful engagement and cross-sector partnerships: community partners (TFS is *not* part of their job)

total responses	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	n/a or not sure
Community members are included.	2.6%	5.3%	0%	39.5%	39.5%	13.2%
Our communities diversity is represented.	0%	5.3%	2.6%	31.6%	47.4%	13.2%
Parents are included.	0%	2.6%	13.2%	36.8%	34.2%	13.2%
Students are included.	2.6%	5.3%	2.6%	21.1%	52.6%	15.8%
Different groups are represented included, for example: health, housing, education, wellness or employment.	0%	10.5%	10.5%	23.7%	41.1%	13.2%

# data tables

## students at the center: organizational partners (TFS is part of their job)

total responses	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	n/a or not sure
This project is working to create a system where every student and family will have what they need to thrive.	0%	0%	4.5%	50%	43.9%	1.5%
This project supports the needs of the whole student: health, well-being, housing, safety and academic.	0%	0%	9.1%	47%	39.4%	4.5%

## students at the center: community partners (TFS is *not* part of their job)

total responses	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	n/a or not sure
This project is working to create an education system where every student and family will have what they need to thrive.	0%	0%	10.5%	36.8%	44.7%	7.9%
This project supports the needs of the whole student: health, well-being, housing, safety and academic.	0%	2.6%	13.2%	28.9%	44.7%	10.5%

## about us

### Coalition for Community Schools



Supported by the Institute for Educational Leadership, the Coalition for Community Schools evolved since 1998 as an ecosystem of national, state, and local cross-sector leaders that promote community schools as an equity-driven, researched based strategy, and fights for justice and investments for young people's access to resources, supports, and opportunities they deserve to advance their hopes and

fulfill their social responsibility.

The strengths of the Coalition are the close relationships we have with thousands of grassroots to grassroots leaders, organized in networks to expand their knowledge, skills, beliefs, and practices; and our ability to prepare, support, and mobilize leaders, to create transformative and innovative solutions to disrupt the status quo, and eliminate systemic and structural barriers to equitable outcomes in education.

### Communities In Schools



Communities In Schools® (CIS™) is a national organization that ensures every student, regardless of race, zip code, or socioeconomic background has what they need to realize their potential in school and beyond. Working directly inside more than 2,900 schools across the coun-

try, we connect students to caring adults and community resources that help them see, confront, and overcome the barriers that stand between them and a brighter future. Together, we build a powerful change movement made up of peers, students, and alumni committed to building an equitable path to education for future generations.

### StriveTogether



StriveTogether is a national movement with a clear purpose: helping every child succeed in school and in life from cradle to career, regardless of race, ethnicity, zip code or circumstance. In partnership with 70 communities across the country, we provide coaching, resources and

rigorous approaches to create opportunities and close gaps in education, housing and so much more. We use data to illuminate problems and solutions, tackle tough conversations and deliver impactful results for more than 12 million children and counting.

## ABOUT STRIVETOGETHER

StriveTogether is a national movement that helps over 11 million students succeed, cradle to career, for a more prosperous future. In partnership with nearly 70 communities, we amplify local actions into national impact by identifying best practices, measuring what matters and spreading what works.

**StriveTogether**<sup>®</sup>

Every child. Cradle to career.

125 East Ninth Street  
Second Floor  
Cincinnati, OH 45202  
513.929.1150

332 South Michigan Avenue  
Ninth Floor  
Chicago, IL 60604

[StriveTogether.org](https://StriveTogether.org)

