



TOGETHER FOR STUDENTS

Learning Project: Round One Findings

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TOGETHER FOR STUDENTS

For the first time in decades, more than fifty percent of our nation’s public school students live in poverty. The challenges children face are too broad for public schools and other agencies and organizations to manage alone. In 2016, three national organizations, The Coalition for Community Schools, Communities In Schools, and StriveTogether, came together to leverage the networks they represent – in some 250 communities – and the wealth of knowledge that has been generated by their innovative work to expedite the progress of communities to develop a more intentional system focused on meeting the unique needs of every child. These three Aligned National Partners (ANPs) launched the Together for Students initiative, a multi-year grant to support four communities, called local implementation sites (LISs), in transforming how they work together to meet the needs of every student. The four Together for Students implementation sites are Thrive Chicago in Chicago, Ill., Learn to Earn Dayton in Dayton, Ohio, United Way of Greater Lehigh Valley in Lehigh Valley, Pa., and Communities In Schools of Memphis in Memphis, Tenn.

This report describes critical learnings from the first two years of the Together for Students initiative.

TOGETHER FOR STUDENTS LEARNING PROJECT

Purpose

The purpose of the Together for Students Learning Project is to develop an understanding of the emerging lessons from the TFS initiative in service to the ultimate goal of improving population outcomes for students from cradle to career. The Learning Consultant was tasked with capturing critical insights, challenges, and potential opportunities to accelerate progress and improve practice in the four local implementation sites (LISs) and the broader field.

One important note about the Learning Project: it was not intended to be a program evaluation nor to measure site-specific impacts. It is too early in the grant to expect widespread system-level or population-level changes. Rather, the intent of the project was to gather and examine evidence of early successes, challenges, and alignment to the five core principles of TFS – Trusting Relationships, Cross-Sector Partnerships, Purposeful Engagement, Actionable Data, and Shared Accountability.

Project Plan

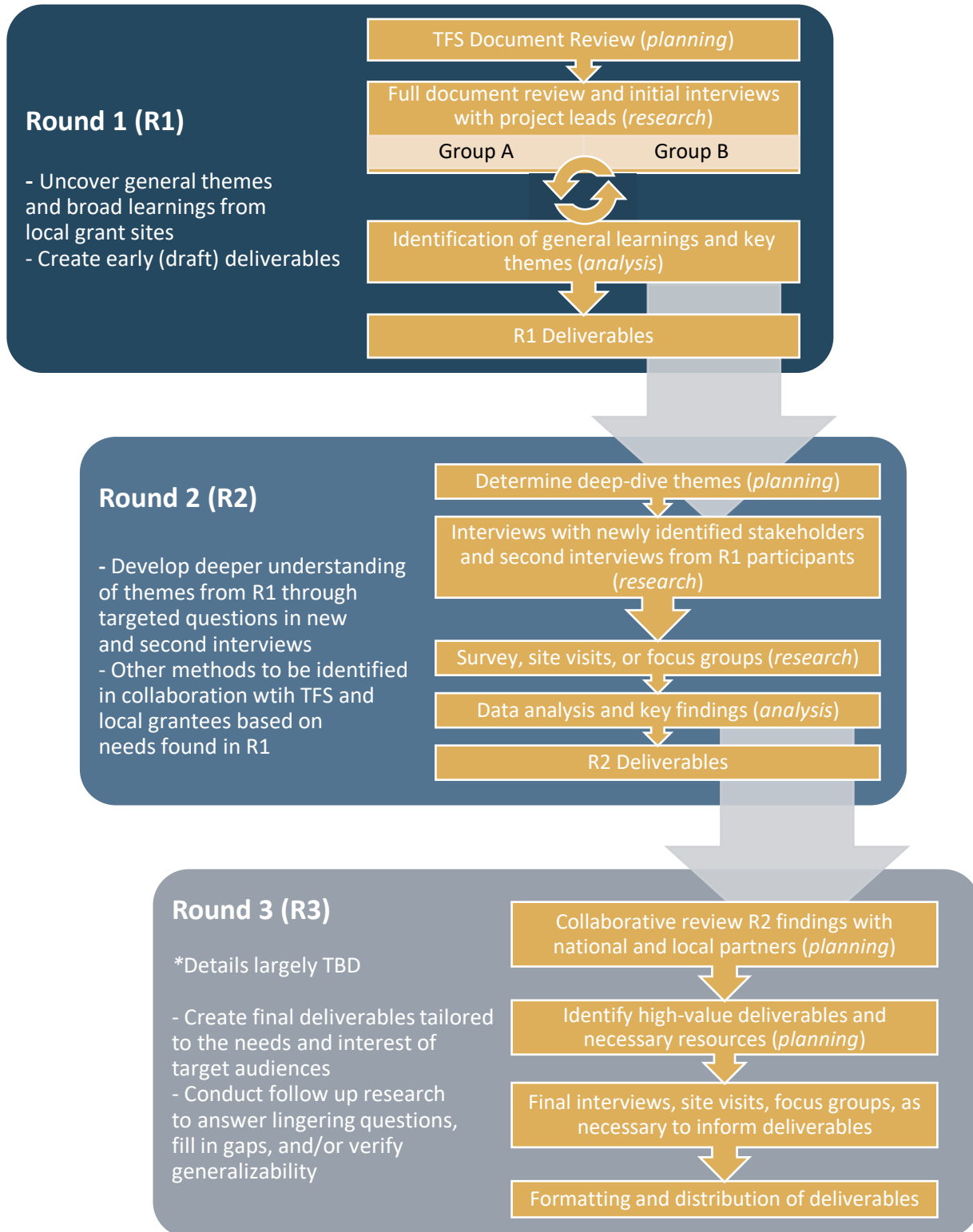
In consultation with the TFS project leaders at the three Aligned National Partners (ANPs), the Learning Consultant developed a project plan which was divided into four phases: three rounds of research and an additional phase of presentations. The research plan progresses from examining high-level, general findings to more targeted topics (for more information see Research Framework, p. 4).

In the first round of research (R1), the Learning Consultant focused on uncovering high-level learnings from both the ANPs and LISs. R1 was completed without significant delays despite the COVID-19 outbreak, early changes to the research proposal, and a couple of scheduling difficulties.

Round One examined two key sets of artifacts: 1) the work-to-date documents submitted as part of TFS grant reporting and 2) interviews of leaders at the ANPs and the LISs. The artifacts covered the work of the ANPs starting with the *Aligning Networks* report from 2016 and the work of the LISs beginning with the TFS planning event in Houston, TX.

Broader stakeholder groups will be involved through interviews, focus groups, and/or surveys in subsequent research rounds (see Rounds and Research Phases diagram, p. 3).

Rounds and Research Phases



METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Research Framework

The Together for Students (TFS) Learning Project utilizes an exploratory sequential mixed-methods research design. This research approach uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather information. As the name suggests, the process in exploratory sequential mixed-methods research is conducted in sequential phases of qualitative and quantitative exploration. The TFS Learning Project began in round one (R1) with qualitative survey research conducted through interviews and document analysis and will progress in subsequent rounds with additional interviews and then quantitative survey research completed with formal, online surveys.

Document and Interview Coding Process

The qualitative research process is essentially a way to answer questions through a series of systematic reviews of artifacts. Artifacts are anything that the researcher examines and can include documents, photos, interviews, focus groups, observations, surveys, etc. Rather than relying on anecdotal information, which can only describe one incident, the goal of the qualitative research process is to minimize bias and identify consistent trends. This gives a much more reliable set of information and answers to research questions.

A critical tool in identifying general findings is a research codebook. A codebook identifies and describes the themes of the research – all the things that are present across multiple artifacts. The codebook guides how a researcher examines and makes sense of the documents, interviews, and other artifacts in the research process. In the TFS work, the Learning Consultant developed a codebook based on themes that emerged from the initial reading of the work-to-date documents and used the codebook to review each artifact.

Interview Process and Protocol

As anticipated, the interviews provided a richer picture of the TFS initiative than the work-to-date documents could provide alone. The documents captured completed work and planned work. The interviews capture *how* the work is done and what factors make the work particularly challenging or successful.

Interviews with the national stakeholders were conducted first and had a loosely structured interview protocol. The Learning Consultant had a list of general questions, informed by the review of the documents to date, but allowed the participants to guide the conversation in toward topics they indicated to be important.

Interviews with the local leads were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. The Learning Consultant utilized several set questions (see R1 Interview Questions by Research Area, p. 5) and ensured there was also time for probing questions and additional input from the participants.

R1 Interview Questions by Research Area

Research Area	Interview Question
TFS Core Principles	How has it been to work in partnership with the different organizations contributing to the TFS work at your ANP/LIS?
	How have you divided the work and determined roles among your partners?
	How do you stay in communication with the different partners?
	How do you and the other partners balance the shared work with each organization's unique identity, cause, methods, etc.?
Successes	Have there been any factors in your work to date that you feel have really contributed to the early success of the initiative?
	What have been the biggest successes of working in partnership?
Challenges	Have there been challenges in the work to date?
	How have you and the other partners managed challenges?
	Has staff turnover been an issue for you? Your partner organizations? At the national level in the partners leading the TFS grant?
Participant-Identified Theme	Are there any other major areas, positive or negative, the Learning Project should examine?

Sample Size and Representativeness

The Learning Consultant worked to ensure that each of the Aligned National Partners (ANPs) and the Local Implementation Sites (LISs) were represented consistently across the documents and interviews.

There were some limitations in the information available from the LISs, specifically in the work to date documents. The Learning Consultant intentionally selected similar documents for coding from each LIS. This minimized discrepancies and ensured that any difference between the available artifacts would not skew the findings or create disproportional representation of individual LISs. The Learning Consultant systematically coded 18 documents totaling 224 pages.

Participants from each of the ANPs and the LISs were included in R1. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes depending on the participants level of involvement with the TFS initiative. The Learning Consultant completed a total of 15 interviews with 15 participants (see chart below), producing 13.5 hours of interview data.

Stakeholder Group	Interviews	Participants
ANP Participant	10	9
LIS Leader	5	6
TOTAL	15	15

NOTE: The number of interviews may not be the same as the number of people interviewed. Some interviews had more than one participant, and some participants participated in multiple interviews.

FINDINGS

In collaboration with the Aligned National Partners (ANPs), the Learning Consultant identified areas of focus for the first round of research (R1). They were:

- The TFS five core principles,
- The greatest successes and challenges of the TFS work to date, and
- Other important learnings identified by the TFS participants.

The Learning Consultant developed specific research questions to explore each theme. The key findings and related recommendations are listed below. Detailed analyses for each key finding are in subsequent sections of the report.

Note

Throughout this report, direct quotes from interview participants are included to more fully describe a particular finding. These direct quotes have been slightly edited to remove filler words, improve clarity, and ensure participant anonymity. When absolutely necessary, clarifying words have been added to a quote and are noted by brackets.

The Learning Consultant worked deliberately to ensure that every participant is represented through a quote and that the LISs and ANPs are represented proportionally to their participation.

Summary of Key Findings

Research Question 1: To what extent and in what ways have the Aligned National Partners (ANPs) and the Local Implementation Sites (LISs) adopted the TFS core principles?

The five core principles are an integral part of the TFS work at every level. However, there is variation in the frequency of each principle across different groups.

All partners see **trusting relationships** as the key to success in collective impact work. Trusting relationships are built through time, shared purpose, and consistent contact. Difficult organizational histories and competition for resources were the most frequent causes of reluctance to participate in the TFS work. TFS leaders have adopted various strategies to manage and improve difficult relationships.

Building **cross-sector partnerships** across broad stakeholder groups was a central component of TFS planning and year one implementation for the LIS. LIS leaders are now addressing the challenge of how to continue to meaningfully engage their cross-sector partners in year two of implementation.

LIS leaders see **purposeful engagement** as a critical component to the success of any effort to put students at the center. TFS created new opportunities for LIS to engage with students and families during the planning phase.

LIS leaders are fully embracing **actionable data** in a variety of detailed and creative practices. The ANPs value the principle of actionable data but have not fully explored or agreed on how to incorporate it in their TFS work.

Shared accountability is seen by TFS participants as either a compliance-focused effort or as a responsibility to serving students and families.

Research Question 2: What have been the biggest successes of the TFS initiative to date?

TFS has been especially effective at accelerating the progress of local partnerships and initiatives that were underway before the start of the grant. The grant has incentivized broad participation in the work and given LIS leaders leverage to bring other stakeholders to the table. LIS leaders have started to identify gaps and overlaps in services for students and families and are working to minimize duplicative efforts and ensure all students receive the supports they need.

Belief in the value of collective impact helps lay the foundation for successful shared efforts. The collective impact mindset is fostered by shared goals, perception of genuine motivations, and win-win undertakings. Viewing challenges as opportunities rather than roadblocks supports a positive outlook for long-term success. Explicit recognition and respect for partners' unique strengths supports collective impact work. Flexibility and willingness to compromise while not sacrificing one's core mission is necessary in collective impact work.

Research Question 3: What have been the greatest challenges of the TFS initiative to date?

As a rule, collective impact work is difficult and complicated. Managing a large group of diverse stakeholders takes a significant amount of time in addition to doing the work of changing systems and supporting students and families.

Changes in staff are an inevitable part of any project, and they present both challenges and opportunities for moving the work forward. TFS participants have developed ways to minimize the negative consequences of staff turnover.

Leaders are supportive of TFS and want it to be successful, but there is lack of clarity about the full purpose of the initiative. The longevity and sustainability of TFS is a concern shared by ANP leaders. The TFS project is only a small portion of the work of each national organization.

In several LISs, the COVID crisis has deepened stakeholder commitment to the TFS work. Despite the pandemic, LIS leaders are developing unique and creative ways to continue supporting students now and into the future. Going forward, LISs will have to determine ways to build and sustain trusting relationships, likely without in-person contact.

Research Question 4: What other learnings have emerged from the planning year and first year of implementation?

The planning year prior to the first year of TFS implementation was extremely valuable not only to the LISs but also for the sites that were not awarded the full three-year grant.

Positive relationships support collective impact efforts.

LIS leaders have identified a need for 'best practices' on a variety of issues, but they don't currently have the time or capacity to seek out these practices.

Together for Students Core Principles

The five core principles are an integral part of the Together for Students (TFS) work at every level.

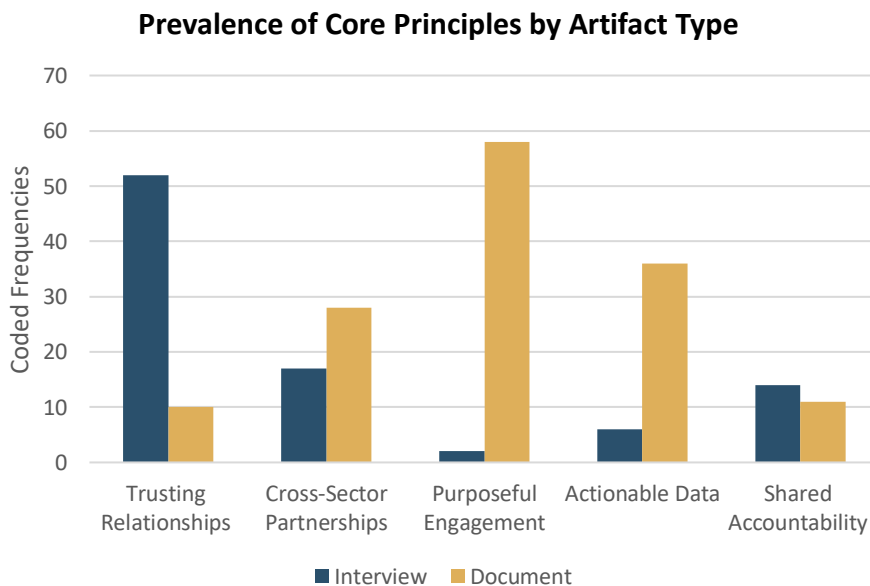
The five TFS core principles were presented and defined in the *Aligning Networks to Enable Every Student to Thrive* report, which serves as the foundational document of the TFS initiative. The core principles are the “shared priorities that will drive our joint efforts to put students at the center of education” (*Aligning Networks*, 2016, p. 4). The principles are trusting relationships, cross-sector partnerships, purposeful engagement, actionable data, and shared accountability.

It is clear through the artifacts that the five core principles are central tenants of the TFS initiative at every level. In aggregate, trusting relationships was the most frequently coded principle (59 instances), followed in order by purposeful engagement (42), cross-sector partnerships (40), actionable data (34), and shared accountability (21). Each of the core principles were mentioned:

- At the national and local levels,
- In both the documents and the interviews, and
- Across organizations and sites.

However, there is variation in the prominence of each principle across different groups.

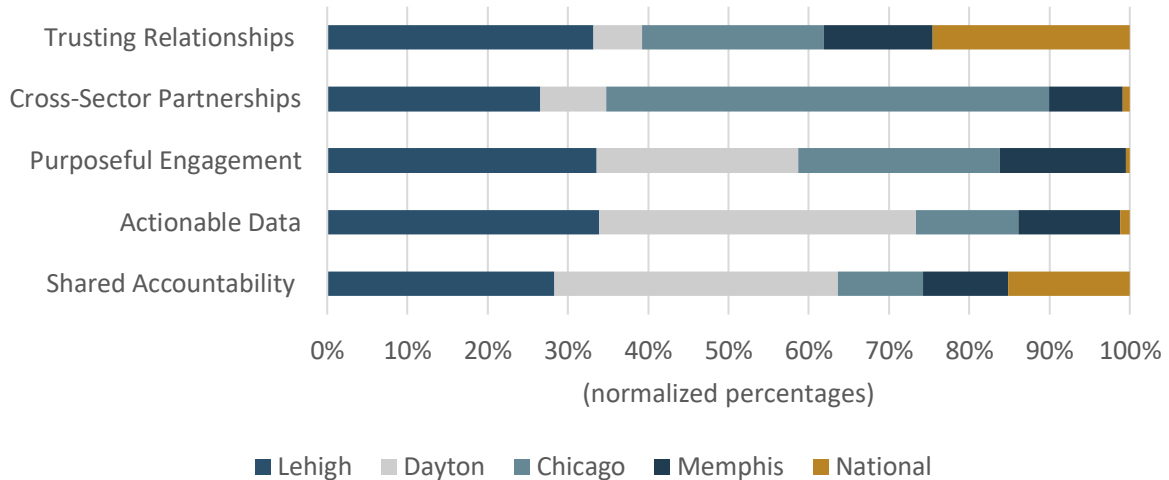
Each of the five core principles were referenced at different frequencies in the artifacts, both between the documents and interviews and across the different local and national partners. Disaggregated by artifact-type, the most referenced principles in the work-to-date documents were purposeful engagement and actionable data. While, trusting relationships, cross-sector partnerships, and shared accountability were the most frequently referenced principles in the participant interviews.



There were also differences in the prevalence of each core principle among the national and local stakeholders. All the partners placed similar importance on the principles of trusting relationships and shared accountability. The national partners, however, indicated significantly fewer instances of cross-sector partnerships, purposeful engagement, and actionable data than the local partners. In most

instances, the national partners identified the importance of the principle for adoption by the LISs, but they did not identify their own methods of practicing the principle.

Prevalence of Core Principles in National and Local Artifacts



Trusting Relationships

All partners see trusting relationships as the key to success in collective impact work.

The principle of trusting relationships was the most frequently coded of the five TFS core principles. It was found in similar frequencies across the national and local stakeholders as well as across grant sites. Trusting relationships were explicitly mentioned by nearly every interview participant.

Some participants noted the importance of trusting relationships to ensuring success. Others described the challenges they have experienced in building trusting relationships among diverse stakeholder groups and when forming new partnerships.

Many participants expressed a belief that trusting relationships are the most important component in laying a strong foundation for collective impact work. The following quotes from interview participants demonstrate the importance of trusting relationships in the TFS initiative.

"I think it's really critical to start with those trusting relationships."

"It is cliché, but progress only moves at the speed of trust."

"At the end of the day, it's all about relationships. It's all about negotiating all of the time. And it's about finding the people that have 'yes' on their heart for the work. That's how you're going to make traction and make things move. It is all about how we're building relationships, authentic, true, honest relationships."

"I guess a big key word is relationships and trust."

Trusting relationships are built through time, shared purpose, and consistent, intentional contact.

When asked how to create trusting relationships, participants identified several approaches including: deep commitment to a shared goal or value, making time for consistent communication and meetings (preferably in-person), and understanding that building trusting relationships takes time and effort.

Several participants noted the importance of prioritizing consistent check-ins with their partners. Consistent communication through formal meetings or informal conversations reassures partners that the work is moving forward, creates space for building rapport, and demonstrates that the collective work is a priority for each group. Even when meetings did not address critical TFS-related issues, they were seen as valuable by the majority of interview participants.

However, consistent communication did not mean ‘meeting for the sake of meeting’ or sharing superficial emails. Rather, it required TFS leaders to keep their internal and external partners informed about the status of the collective impact work, which occasionally meant less frequent communications but of higher quality.

Interview participants cited time spent in-person as another helpful practice to promote trusting relationships. For nascent relationships, face-to-face introductions helped set a positive tone for the future of the work. For existing relationships, time spent together improved trust between individuals.

Difficult organizational histories and competition for resources were the most frequent causes of reluctance to participate in the TFS work.

Several artifacts from the ANPs identified tension between the national organizations and between local affiliates as a key impetus for undertaking the TFS project in 2016. LIS participants identified tension between local organizations, although not necessarily organizations affiliated with any of the ANPs, as an ongoing challenge in the TFS work.

Reasons that potential partners were reluctant to join the TFS work included:

- The perception that the organizations were in competition for funding opportunities or clients
- A sense of defensiveness about their “sandbox” and methodologies

TFS leaders have adopted various strategies to manage and improve difficult relationships.

Acknowledging the importance of strong, trusting relationships, TFS participants at both the national and local levels have adopted strategies to address and overcome the concerns of reluctant partners.

Several participants described “meeting them where they’re at” and not trying to force a partnership with a group or individual who is not ready. The TFS leaders acknowledged that trust is not built overnight and that some partners will need extra time and effort to feel comfortable participating in collective impact work. In this approach, TFS leaders did not simply ignore reluctant partners, rather they continued to share information and offer support for any initiative working toward the best outcomes for all students. One participant shared their response to a reluctant partner as:

“There was one entity that came to a couple of the meetings, and I think they just felt like they didn't want to play in the sandbox. It was like ‘We got our own thing. We've been doing her own thing and we're going to keep doing her own thing. And we don't need to be a part of this’. What we did was, I basically said, ‘That's fine. We're not trying to control your world. You don't need to come to our things. But what we'll do is we'll continue to inform you as to what we're doing. And if there are ways that you want to join with us, you're welcome.’ Well, the interesting thing is they're showing up more and more frequently! If we had tried to force that, it would never work. But we kind of said, ‘That's fine. You, you have a great program. You've done great work. We're going to wish you the best. We'll help you any way we can. Cause you're working with kids. If you're working with kids and families, you may not be a part of our [effort], but you're doing important work and we're gonna support you. And that's kind of the approach we took.”

Another approach taken by TFS leaders was to encourage participation and accommodate reluctant partners. This took the form of changing meeting times, increasing outreach, and explicitly describing how their work is seen as an integral part in serving students and families. This approach is best summarized by one participant who said, “We intentionally invite them – intentionally and relentlessly invite them to the table. I say, ‘You gotta be there. We can't do this without you.’ We'll postpone meetings until we had assurance that they will be part of it.”

A final factor in managing difficult partnerships is recognizing which approach is right for which partners. Interview participants deliberately adapted their efforts to bring partners into the work depending on the partner's size, perceived importance in the community, intensity of their reluctance, and other nuanced factors.

“It helps that we're stubborn and persistent, and I'm able to nuance some things. So there are examples where somebody has been hesitant and we've been like, ‘Okay when you're ready or if you ever are ready and want to engage, like we're happy to sit back down and talk it through again.’ And there have been others who have maybe been hesitant. And we've been like, ‘Actually, it's not okay you're hesitant. What do we need to do to help you really understand what the win-win could be?’ And then, there are folks that have maybe been even blocking progress. We've spent some serious time strategizing around a couple of people in particular that are key to driving the work forward and are completely roadblocking the ability to drive the work forward.”

Trusting relationships require the ability to have ‘difficult conversations’, work through solutions, and willingness to forgive mistakes.

Several participants described moments in their TFS partnerships where they had to recognize, apologize, and ask forgiveness for a mistake. When handled directly, the participants were able to find a joint solution and move forward in the work.

“So to me, even when things don't go as planned or perfectly like being willing to be honest and open and thoughtful about how we manage through all of that. And that's where the collective impact work, I think is most important, is just making sure that we support each other and efforts no matter what the situation is.”

Another participant described how apologizing for a mistake, while difficult, might have ultimately strengthened their partnerships.

“I had to get on the line and apologize to our partners to say, ‘Look, I totally screwed that up.’ I would much rather ignore it and sweep it under the rug and say, ‘Well, we're just going to do it our way.’ But that's not good for the partnership and that's not good for kids. And I also was really touched by the grace of the partners to say, ‘We get it. And we'll just figure out the better way to move forward.’ Those kinds of things fuel relationships, and restore relationships, and make partnerships – I think and I hope – stronger.”

Cross-Sector Partnerships

Building cross-sector partnerships across broad stakeholder groups was a central component of TFS planning and year one implementation for the LISs.

The TFS core principle of cross-sector partnerships was mentioned almost exclusively at the LIS level; artifacts from the national level accounted for only 2% of the codes for cross-sector partnership.

The LISs have worked to create broad, diverse partnerships in support of their unique TFS goals. The partners represent such varied stakeholders as school districts, elected officials, businesses, philanthropies, healthcare organizations, social services, faith-based organizations, higher education, and public media. During the first implementation year of the TFS initiative, LISs brought together hundreds of organizations to help shape the direction and goals of the work.

LIS leaders are now addressing the challenge of how to continue to meaningfully engage their cross-sector partners in year two of implementation.

Now that the planning phase is complete, the site leaders are determining the best ways to continue effectively engaging all the stakeholders who have been involved in the TFS work to date. One interview participant explicitly mentioned the challenge:

“I would highlight the ability to actively engage all of our partners at the right levels consistently. That has been a challenge that we're working now to solve from the collective impact pieces. You know, once you get everyone here how do you engage everyone but meaningfully and communicate to everyone but meaningfully for the things they want while continuing to move the work forward?”

The LISs have continued to foster cross-sector partnerships in the second year of implementation in different ways. Some local leaders created working groups and allowed their partners to choose which group they would like to join. Others have developed a system for sharing information with all stakeholders about the TFS progress while involving key partners as needed. Another participant described their realization that their partnerships would be best served by waiting to engage the full stakeholder group in the next phase of implementation:

“External engagement, or lack of engagement, has also been purposeful. We have spent considerable time thinking about how to engage with our partners from the initial planning phase through a community of practice. The questions we have been asking is how we can re-engage them meaningfully, not just for the sake of engaging with them. As a result, we have not called a meeting with our partners yet [this year], operating under the assumption that it will be better for our long-term relationships.”

Purposeful Engagement

Like cross-sector partnerships, the TFS core principle of purposeful engagement was mentioned almost entirely by the LIS leaders. The ANPs have clearly elevated purposeful engagement as a central component of TFS, but the LISs have been primarily responsible for enacting the principle on the ground. This finding is consistent with what would be expected in implementation and the different roles of the national and local TFS leaders.

LIS leaders see purposeful engagement as a critical component to the success of any effort to put students at the center.

Across the LISs, purposeful engagement of students, families, and communities was a central focus of the TFS planning year. One artifact highlighted the need for authentic student and family involvement in changing systems to be more equitable. “Students and families have played a critical role in our planning phase. Engaging students and their families was not only a requirement of this project, but one that is necessary to have an authentic conversation about equity and ensuring that all students have access to opportunities.”

Purposeful engagement was primarily achieved through listening sessions, community meetings, and deliberately creating opportunities for students and families to give their perspectives to school and community leaders. One LIS leader felt that the TFS grant created unique opportunities to engage families in ways that would not have been available without the grant.

“Much of the other work that we have occurring in the community that is around equity and around trying to find ways to better engage students and families that this grant has just represented a significant a way for us to leverage opportunities that would not have otherwise been possible. So very appreciative of the chance to do it.”

TFS created new opportunities for LIS to engage with students and families during the planning phase.

The prioritization of purposeful engagement provided unique opportunities for LISs and their partners to learn how to improve their student and family engagement practices. For example, one participant said, “The planning process helped us to realize that we are doing a fairly good but scattered job of connecting directly with students and families.”

While youth and family involvement had been present in some of the LISs prior to the start of TFS, one site specifically noted the importance of the TFS initiative in promoting the involvement of students and families in new ways. “A real important part of this process that had not occurred before the Together for Students grant was the involvement of the parents and youth as stakeholders.”

Most of the TFS artifacts described LIS efforts to engage students and families in the project planning. However, only some of the sites mentioned how they were working to continue engaging these stakeholders during the implementation phases of the work.

Actionable Data

LIS leaders are fully embracing actionable data through a variety of detailed and creative practices.

Actionable data was coded in the artifacts in similar frequencies to the principles of cross-sector partnerships and purposeful engagement. However, the LIS artifacts were responsible for nearly all the instances of actionable data.

Of all the TFS core principles, actionable data has the greatest variation across the TFS leaders at the local levels. The LIS leaders and their partners are developing creative ways to implement actionable data and measure aspects of student growth in novel ways. LIS leaders are incorporating actionable data practices to examine not only the TFS impacts on student outcomes but also to measure their own effectiveness and progress. Some examples of actionable data being used by TFS leaders include:

- Measuring population-level student outcomes
- Creating tools to track individualized student outcomes
- Developing data-sharing agreements
- Collecting feedback from teachers about the benefits of professional development
- Gathering and analyzing feedback from educators at the school and district levels

Also, the LIS leaders and their partners are developing creative ways to implement actionable data and measure various aspects of student growth. Chicago, for example, is working closely with experts on social-emotional learning to create self-assessments for students and educators rather than rely on more conventional student evaluations. This effort is seen as both a challenge and a strength of the project.

The ANPs value the principle of actionable data but have not fully explored or agreed on how to incorporate it in their TFS work.

The ANPs explicitly value the principle of actionable data as seen in the foundational documents and participant interviews. But there were very few clear examples of actionable data in the TFS initiative at the national level. The research artifacts from the national level had only 2 examples of actionable data. Further identifying this limitation, national stakeholders expressed the belief that the ANPs could do more to increase their use of data by improving their alignment about which data that they would like to collect and examine and how they would like to utilize it. One participant described, “I think [the data piece] that’s an area that we could probably strengthen from a systemic point of view. I know we've asked the communities themselves for what change they want to make, but also probably from a leadership level.”

Shared Accountability

Shared accountability was mentioned the least of the five core principles, with 21 coded instance accounting for 10.7% of the total core principles codes. Artifacts from the national level referenced shared accountability with greater frequency than the LISs.

Accountability is seen by TFS participants as either a compliance-focused effort or as a responsibility to serving students and families.

The principle of shared accountability was expressed as accountability to two different stakeholder groups: each other in the partnerships and students and families. The former was seen as more of a compliance measure, often explained as how to track which partners are responsible for which tasks. For example, an interview participant shared, “When you put it in writing and then start to put something definitively on an action plan with deliverables and checkpoints, it gets done. The accountability piece gets done when it's on paper.”

Shared accountability to students and families was described not as a compliance exercise, but rather as a sense of responsibility for the greater good. As one participant described, “I truly believe that people around the table are about kids and families and community, and that to me matters. So it's less about what kind of an accountability of each other, but more us feeling accountable to those communities.”

Moreover, when shared accountability was viewed as a way of ensuring that partners were serving students, it transcended specific issues and created a willingness to share all successes and struggles among partners. In talking about budgets, a national participant expressed a deep commitment to shared accountability in service to students and families:

“Okay, we have our individual budgets, but how about we talk collectively around what this looks like as an initiative. To me, it doesn't matter who's underspent or overspent. What I look at it as a collective whole that we have to make sure we deliver seamless product to the communities and make sure that we're supporting each other as partners to be able to think through some of those logistics.”

Successes

The ultimate goal of the TFS initiative is to improve population-level outcomes for underserved students from cradle to career. All stakeholders recognize that this important objective will not be achieved quickly, but rather, it will take long-term dedication and collective effort. Given that the LISs are in the first year of implementation, it would not be reasonable to expect changes in population-level outcomes at this point. Instead of looking for systemic changes or improvements in student achievement, the learning project investigated early TFS wins and uncovered the conditions for long-term success as identified by the LIS leaders.

Early Wins

TFS has been especially effective at accelerating the progress of local partnerships and initiatives that were underway before the start of the grant.

None of the LISs started from zero in undertaking the TFS work. They had the benefit of a full planning year as well as other initiatives underway before the TFS grant period began. One of the major benefits of TFS has been to accelerate this work. As one interview participant noted, “For some parts of the work that were [already] going, this has been a real catalyst to drive it forward much faster. And I can say hands down that goes for all of our branding community mobilization efforts for sure. As well as some of the other pieces.”

In some cases, TFS was not the only factor contributing to the success of the work. Nevertheless, it was identified as an integral piece. “I think we're beginning to make real inroads into addressing [that problem]. And it would be unfair to say it was just because of the TFS grant; that's not true. But the TFS grant helped. It helped us.”

The grant has incentivized broad participation in the work and given LIS leaders leverage to bring other stakeholders to the table.

One interview participant described how the TFS grant allowed them to approach partners in a new way and with more options to incentivize participation:

“The Together for Students grant helped us leverage in a way that we wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. In other words, it's one thing to get everybody together, but when we got that Together for Students grant, we're able to say, ‘Look folks, because we've got this grant, we really need this.’ So, we used the grant to kind of a strong-arm everybody in a way that would not have been otherwise possible.”

LIS leaders have started to identify gaps and overlaps in services for students and families and are working to minimize duplicative efforts and ensure all students receive the supports they need.

Several artifacts demonstrated that because of TFS, the LIS partners have identified areas where there are gaps in services or where stakeholders are duplicating efforts. LISs leaders are starting to use this information to improve efficiencies and think about better methods of distributing services so that all students and families benefit.

Conditions for Success

Trusting relationships were identified by nearly all interview participants as the most critical piece for successful collective impact efforts. However, the research artifacts identified additional factors that both the ANP and LIS leaders believed would help create the conditions for long-term success.

Belief in the value of collective impact helps lay the foundation for successful shared efforts.

A collective impact mindset is essentially having a favorable predisposition toward collective impact as a means of accomplishing large, long-term goals. Interview participants identified the importance of having a collective impact mindset in the TFS work. For many participants, a collective impact mindset was expressed in the belief that more could be done by working together with partners than working alone. “I do think there's something kind of baked into the organization's DNA that was important. I think there was also like none of [our organizations] were exactly getting the results that we wanted. And none of us were getting to scale to what we needed to get to.”

The collective impact mindset is fostered by shared goals, perception of genuine motivations, and win-win undertakings.

Interview participants highlighted shared goals as a central piece of their work. LIS leaders deliberately worked with a variety of stakeholders in the planning phase of TFS to develop shared goals. This helped create authentic buy-in across participants and fostered the belief that doing the work together was more likely to be successful than attempting to do the work separately. This often included a belief that the work-as-usual will not improve population-level outcomes. As one person described, “It was like the old expression of Chinese fire drill with everybody doing different things. And it wasn't that people weren't busy. It was that it wasn't aligned and they weren't [aligned]. So, there was a lack of alignment, a lack of leveraging. And everybody would go home tired every day but weren't really moving the metrics.”

The research artifacts also highlighted the importance of trust in partners' motivations. When participants expressed their belief that their partners were undertaking shared work with the ‘right’ motivations, they were more likely to express positive opinions about the TFS collective work broadly. As one participant said,

“The reason why we're doing this work is to impact students and especially those most marginalized by the system: students of color and students living in poverty. And I feel like [our partners] actually have that equity at the heart of it. I feel like, if I was working with people who I felt were just checking a box or not like looking at who are we actually trying to make life better, then I feel like this work would be much more difficult to do. I think that would not be worthwhile to even engage in if that was the case.”

While a belief that partners have the best interest of students and families at heart is a significant factor in building trust across organizations, lack of confidence in others' intentions was noted as a factor that limited trust between partners. For example, one participant expressed concern that political pressure could undermine TFS collective efforts to truly put students at the center.

“We need additional capacity building. People have to admit that that's what they want. And I can't speak to everybody wanting that. And I don't know if this is what they would choose to say, “I'm going to bet all things on this.” And then that their political capital will allow them to make that statement and then the follow suit with their actions... It's a leadership, philosophical, political conundrum. When you get to a certain threshold in leadership, it becomes political.... Kids are no longer at the forefront; people say they are, but they're not. This is hard to like say, but it's just real.... People fold when it comes down to it.”

A third component in the collective impact mindset was the ability to create win-win opportunities in which all partners felt that they were not only contributing to improving student outcomes but were

also benefiting in some way through their participation in the shared work. One interview participant directly expressed the need for win-win initiatives, saying, “It has to be as much a win for another organization. And they have to be able to see that by them providing support in a certain way they're eventually going to gain something at some point in time. We can't just keep asking and asking.”

Another participant described how their partners began to see the shared data project as a benefit to their individual programs as well as to the service of students and families.

“I think all the providers began to say, ‘Hey, you know, this, this could help me too. Cause with my funders I can begin to show them the impact I'm having as opposed to just telling them I serve 2,700 meals. That was sort of the old model. All of a sudden they're going, ‘Wow, I can show my kids are attending school 96% of the time. My funders are going to like that, and I can prove it.’ So for us this is a huge step forward.”

Viewing challenges as opportunities rather than roadblocks supports a positive outlook for long-term success.

The majority of interview participants noted the difficulties associated with collective impact work. But they simultaneously expressed belief that each challenge created an opportunity for a new or different positive outcome.

“I think that honestly the [challenge] was a blessing in disguise. It allowed for relationship development. The team has done a lot to develop individual relationships with teachers and principals, recognizing that the key relationship for a school is the principal. So, developing strong relationships with principles related to buy-in and helping them see how deeper understanding and implementation of SEL will overall improve the function of the school and the outcomes for young people.”

Explicit recognition and respect for partners’ unique strengths supports collective impact work.

Another condition for success mentioned by participants was recognizing and respecting the strengths of their partners in the work. Under this finding, participants expressed a sincere acknowledgement of the abilities of other stakeholders. As two different interviewees described:

“There's just some of these bright spots that are just really important to show what the partnership between the organizations can really look like when you leverage the best of what each brand is able to do.”

“I think the idea of using this project so that each organization can leverage the strengths and the power of the others is brilliant, and I'm excited to see where it goes from here.”

Flexibility and willingness to compromise while not sacrificing one’s core mission is necessary in collective impact work.

A final condition for success highlighted by the artifacts was a willingness to be flexible. This meant that TFS participants were willing to change their way of approaching or accomplishing a task in order to accommodate and support the collective efforts of the broader group. This happened in small ways, such as willingness to meet at intervals decided on by partners, and it was also expressed in larger ways. For example, one organization leader described the importance of holding true to their core tenants while allowing flexibility for their local affiliates when it would better facilitate collaboration among local organization. They shared a belief that compromise and flexibility are necessary in collective impact efforts:

“I have a hypothesis that for this to work well in practice on the ground, everyone does have to give a little.... I don't know if there is a way in which we can fully create collective goals and a collaborative strategy and approach to it if we don't give a little. Because otherwise, we are still doing our own thing in service of that collective goal. So it's almost like you still have silos doing the work.... It's not the same as sort of braiding and integrating the work that you each bring to the table, to almost create something new.”

Challenges and Solutions

Challenges were identified in both the work-to-date documents and the participant interviews. However, for the most part, participants described challenges of the work and also illustrated the ways in which they were managing or mitigating each one.

This section summarizes unique challenges that did not clearly fall under another research theme. The topic-specific challenges, for example difficulties with trusting relationships, are listed under their respective themes.

The Nature of Collective Impact

As a rule, collective impact work is difficult and complicated.

Collective impact is clearly valued as an effective method to generate systemic, population-level changes. But it is also seen as being very complex and hard to accomplish. As one participant said, “We’re starting to get somewhere. I wish it weren’t so damn hard. It shouldn’t be this hard, but it has been.” Another participant felt matter-of-fact about the complexity and viewed it as simply a part of the work itself.

“In the collective impact work, you’re never going to have all of the pieces. It’s never going to feel totally comfortable. It’s not going to be neatly wrapped with a bow. And I tell people if that’s the kind of personality that you have, this might be tough work for you because it’s not *if* it will go wrong, something will be challenging. Something will be different, and you just have to be okay with being uncomfortable.”

Managing a large group of diverse stakeholders takes a significant amount of time in addition to doing the work of changing systems and supporting students and families.

In addition to doing the work agreed upon within the partnership, LIS leaders noted the additional effort required to manage their broad stakeholder groups. One participant described how the effort required to lead the partnership had grown significantly over time:

“I think it could be somebody’s full time job at this point because we’re just talking about one aspect of relationships. We’re developing relationships with school districts, but we’re also developing them with community organizations and potential funders. So I feel like a lot of my time is spent even out of the office visiting folks, sitting down, and explaining to them what we’re doing, why it’s important, why they should either join us or fund us or at least push our message out. So, as time has gone on more of my time has been devoted to that.”

Staff Turnover

Changes in staff are an inevitable part of any project, and they present both challenges and opportunities for moving the work forward.

Every TFS participant has experienced staffing changes during the initiative, whether within their own organization or through a partner organization. Interview participants accept and acknowledge turnover is an inherent part of the work. One interview participant shared, “We know that transitions will happen. People will get another job. They’ll get repositioned in their organizations. Things happen. You know, we say in our office, ‘What happens if I get hit by a bus? What is the plan for that?’ When there are transitions, what are your micro and macro succession planning strategies?”

Staff changes present both challenges and opportunities within the work. Interview participants described the most significant challenges from turnover in staff:

- Finding and hiring a new person for the role,
- Creating new, trusting relationships,
- Building the knowledge base of and familiarity about the TFS initiative, and
- Generating buy-in for the work (when the new staff is in a partner organization).

Participants explained that each of these challenges can be addressed but that each one takes a significant amount of time. As one LIS leader described,

“So my verbal agreements with the old superintendent and the old chief, these are not mine. Those verbal agreements went out the table when new leadership assumed control of the system. So those relationships are gone. Now you have a new opportunity, but that comes with delayed trust because you have to build a relationship with the new leadership.”

The same participant went on, “With a new administration and new staff at key organizations involved with the creation of this strategy, time had to be adjusted to allow for consensus building, buy in, and alignment to district priorities.”

TFS participants have developed ways to minimize the negative consequences of staff turnover.

Acknowledging that turnover is inevitable and can create challenges and delays in the project, TFS leaders have developed methods to smooth staff transitions and minimize the negative effects of turnover, including:

- Embracing the opportunity to start fresh and create a new relationship,
- Developing manuals of standard operating procedure,
- Overlapping time between the individuals leaving and starting the role, and
- Creating thoughtful transition plans to hand-off relationships.

One participant, in particular, described several ways to minimize the impacts of staff turnover and the importance of thinking about turnover proactively:

“I think those things are key. Standard operating procedures, operations manuals can help with transitions and succession planning so that people don't come in without any idea of where to start.”

“Overlapping is definitely good. And then, another thing is cross training, making sure that there's redundancy in expertise. That's another thing that's important as a strategy to keep the system from breaking down during transition.”

“How do you do succession planning in a way that makes it seamless for and helpful to the end user, which is the student, the young person, the community? How do you make those transition seamless so that the end user doesn't feel it, they don't feel an interruption? The system shouldn't be shocked with transition.”

Unique National Challenges

Some of the challenges with TFS are different at the national and local levels. Participants from the ANPs described several unique issues for the national work.

Leaders are supportive of TFS and want it to be successful, but there is lack of clarity about the full purpose of the initiative.

All interview participants from the ANPs described positive sentiments regarding TFS. They believe it is a tremendous opportunity to show a new way of making systemic, population-level changes for students and families. They also see the potential benefits from minimizing friction between partners and undertaking combined efforts. At the same time, however, several ANP interview participants described confusion or lack of clarity around the shared vision for the TFS initiative. A national leader posed, "Then, just clarity of vision. What are we trying to accomplish as a team? What marks our success? I think we need to have really good clarity around that."

The longevity and sustainability of TFS is a concern shared by ANP leaders.

Several ANP leaders expressed concerns about the sustainability of TFS. Specifically, they do not have an adequate, shared plan to sustain the TFS work beyond the current grant period. Some noted that this could be simply because the project is still in the early phases. But they wondered whether there should, nevertheless, be a long-term plan in place. "Cause at the end of the day, if they can't sustain it, then this was a nice experiment and we may learn some things. But if sustainability isn't part of this in terms of how you sustain this work, then there's nothing really to replicate."

The TFS project is only a small portion of the work of each national organization.

As with most collective impact work, the TFS initiative is a relatively small piece of the overall work of each individual organization. Some stakeholders expressed concern that because the work is not always prominent, it could be overlooked within and across organizations. "I think that is one of the potential threats of initiatives like this that they can get sort of swallowed up and kind of pushed aside, you know, just with everything else going on at a national level."

COVID-19 Pandemic

In theory, Together for Students and other collective impact initiatives are uniquely poised to support students and families through times of crisis, both individual crises as well as community-wide crises. Unfortunately, the theoretical benefits have been put to the test during several community emergencies and the national COVID-19 pandemic. We cannot yet measure the impact Together for Students will have for students and families in enduring these disasters. However, several participants described potential opportunities from COVID-19 and expressed their hope for the benefits that collective impact and community schools could offer in this difficult moment.

The pandemic, while devastatingly tragic, presents a unique opportunity to make the case for collective impact. As one stakeholder shared, "If partnerships can't work together now to help triage supports for kids, when we know the equity issues that exist in our communities are only going to be exacerbated by this current environment, and if you can't come together to collaborate in this moment, when can you?"

In several LISs, the COVID crisis has deepened stakeholder commitment to the TFS work.

Two interview participants described new or deepened buy-in for their TFS efforts and the benefits of the community schools model.

"COVID shifted the moment from compliance to an understanding and acknowledgement of the need for SEL health for adults as well as students. There have been active requests from

principles to get support for SEL for both staff in schools and students – more than 20 in one group and 50 in another.”

“This COVID crisis has really kind of put a spotlight on the amount of buy-in that district leadership has towards the role of community school coordinator. In the district where the leaders have been in place for 10 years, they're like, ‘We need coordinators to be in our buildings fully operational during this crisis’.”

Despite the pandemic, LIS leaders are developing unique and creative ways to continue supporting students now and into the future.

LIS leaders are deeply committed to serving students and families. Although the COVID pandemic has created new challenges and fundamentally changed the ways they anticipated doing their work, LISs are persisting in their efforts and are re-thinking how the TFS work can serve communities.

“Now we're stuck at home, but still we're trying to figure out ways to continue building. So that work is still happening. And I think it makes the resources we have from this grant even more important. As we navigate all of this, how could we leverage that even more to help us during this difficult time?”

“I think that this moment is going to be key for us because we're positioned to really support a key need post-pandemic in terms of reentry into the school. So we really try and talk through how does our project remain the same, but how is it different as a result of this? And potentially is there a scale difference as well? So we'll see what that looks like, still to come for that.”

Going forward, LISs will have to determine ways to build and sustain trusting relationships, likely without in-person contact.

Interview participants frequently described the importance of spending time in-person and even traveling with their partners for fostering trusting relationships.

“There's something about taking a journey together often that I think is really important for relationship building. Just the fact that maybe two people who hadn't worked together that closely, you know, hopped on a plane – at a time when you could still fly – and made a journey together to think about what could be different in their community if the two of them work together.”

It is currently unclear whether video conferencing or other technologies provide the same opportunities for relationship building.

Other Learnings

This section lists miscellaneous learnings that appeared with relative frequency across the artifacts but were not adequately captured under a specific research theme.

The planning year prior to the first year of TFS implementation was extremely valuable not only to the LISs but also for the sites that were not awarded the full three-year grant.

The artifacts described the importance of thoughtful planning among the LISs. The time was critical for gathering cross-sector stakeholder groups, generating widespread buy-in, and incorporating the perspectives of students and families, among other things. Outside the four LISs, several interview participants also shared examples of TFS groups from the planning year that did not receive full implementation funding, and yet, continued to pursue their TFS plans. One interview participant speculated that perhaps funding was not the only driver of local collective impact efforts and perhaps the opportunity and space to create shared plans could be sufficient to initiate change.

“Funding as an incentive gets people to get together and build plans. And sometimes whether you get the funding or not, you have a plan. Folks who perhaps may have never been at the table together or don't often come at the table, come to the table with some intentional result in mind, have now been connected. So, we do have communities that didn't get funded in the planning grant round, but they were able to build some momentum to move something forward in their communities. Again, planning grant communities that did not get implementation funds have continued with some of their relationships. I think that's a powerful thing.”

Positive relationships support collective impact efforts.

Although it is not required for successful partnerships, most participants described how their work is easier and more productive when they have positive relationships with their counterparts at partner organizations. This sentiment was expressed by two interview participants:

“I think it actually does help that we do have a rapport with each other. I don't mind going to these meetings each week. I wouldn't probably have them each week, but if I didn't like the people, that would be actually would make the work way more difficult.”

“It certainly does require a connection of people and people enjoying working with each other. And certainly, that's true here.”

LIS leaders have identified a need for ‘best practices’ on a variety of issues, but they don't currently have the time or capacity to seek out these practices.

Artifacts from the LISs noted that the sites would value national assistance to uncover best-practices in the following areas:

- “Attendance issues, reducing discipline incidents, closing achievement gaps, and building trauma-sensitive schools”
- Handling COVID closures and the new needs of students and families
- “Information and research about SEL best practices across the country”