

Together for Students: OVERALL LESSONS LEARNED AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

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, we created the Together for Students initiative (TFS), a multiyear grant to create incentives and opportunities for collaboration. We have worked to lead by example and to support four local affiliates 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 was March 2021-May 2022.

Now, after our third year of implementation and the initiative comes to a close, we've been reflecting on what we've learned. In this brief, we capture key successes and moments of failing forward — and how our overall learnings can help other communities pursuing integrated community schools and collective impact work.



METHODS

In this final learning project, focus groups were conducted with implementation site partners at each of the four sites. The goals were to understand efforts related to the youth engagement initiative over the past year as well as get reflections on the overall work of the last three years. We also conducted youth-only focus groups and heard directly from youth through video interviews. Finally, we interviewed teams at each of the three national partners to understand the overall goals and expectations they had for the TFS initiative, as well as perceived successes and challenges along the way. Learnings from all three projects are captured in the reports and briefs available [here](#).

five principles

When we began the Together for Students initiative in 2016, we knew that it would be hard to align three distinct organizations and all of our local network members. In some communities, our network members were already working closely together, but in many others, a sense of competition, limited resources and misunderstandings had created tension and misalignment. To encourage collaboration and highlight our shared values, our leaders agreed on five principles at the heart of our work: **cross-sector partnerships, purposeful engagement, trusting relationships, actionable data** and **shared accountability**.

As we highlight the overall lessons learned — including the key successes, challenges and future possibilities — they are all grounded in these five principles. We hope these lessons can help other communities pursuing integrated community schools and collective impact work moving forward

Cross-sector partnerships

Cross-sector partnerships strengthen collective impact

All of the partners in this work believe in the power of collective impact. Every partner believes organizations can have a bigger impact working together than they can alone, and we believe that everyone involved in TFS work has the best interest of students at heart. When the project was frustrating or challenging, partners' dedication to collective impact and our belief in the other TFS partners helped us stay committed to the TFS initiative.

The ability for partners to find common ground and collaborate in ways that we hadn't before is a big success from

this initiative. These collaborations are successful because we all share purposeful engagement to keep students at the center of the work.

Purposeful engagement

Students' needs are the center of our partnerships

TFS partners share an unwavering belief that students' needs should always be our focus, but we know that high-level goals can get lost in day-to-day work. This work is successful when 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.

Throughout the initiative, TFS created new opportunities for implementation sites to engage with students and families. Every site found ways to empower and uplift youth voice to make a change or advocate for their community.

Trusting relationships

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

TFS partners also understand the importance of open and honest communication for building trust. For most partners, this included knowing that we could have difficult or uncomfortable conversations with other partners in the work. Because collective impact work is challenging, partners need to be able to address their differences and concerns directly with one another. Most local site partners agree that they can have these difficult conversations with other TFS partners.

Actionable data

Access to actionable data facilitates continuous improvement and accountability to results

We can be sure that partners' efforts are leading to results for students when data is used on a regular basis to align actions to results. Organizations have supported one another through the collection and analysis of data to help illustrate successes, areas of improvement and trend analysis. Sharing specific and meaningful student data has been a major success in the past three years.

Shared accountability

Shared accountability helps ensure students are at the center

TFS partners have shared communication and engagement efforts to tell our story and build awareness. TFS has also helped to create stronger branding and messaging to make the work something that the community recognizes. When challenges are encountered or successes are realized, the narrative is one around shared accountability.

looking forward: opportunities to build on Together for Students

We have many ideas about the future — what communities doing this work should focus on and what the priorities for the field should be. Here are some key insights that came from these conversations:

- There is an opportunity for **youth and families to be more involved** in the work. The youth engagement project helped communities uplift youth voice in various ways, and all spoke to the desire to engage youth and families more deeply to engage in planning and decision making, as well as helping identify barriers to success.
- COVID-19 encouraged more **creativity in engaging families**, which is something that sites want to carry forward as part of this work. It also shined a light on the need for greater social-emotional learning supports — for youth and for adults.
- The introduction of increased **virtual learning platforms** over the last couple of years has also illuminated new possibilities in engaging students in a variety of ways. Technology has played a critical role in this, and there is an opportunity to take a more blended approach to learning moving forward.
- The **alignment of national and local community partners** has been a big success of the TFS initiative. There are opportunities to continue this momentum — for the national partners to develop and communicate a set of core messages; align more concretely around policy and advocacy efforts; help ensure resources flow to partnerships that are getting results and offer training, coaching and peer learning opportunities for the field.