StriveTogether®   **IEL** Institute for Educational Leadership. Innovation. Equity. Leadership.   Communities In Schools®   Together for Students

Together for Students:
YEAR THREE LEARNING PROJECT

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Since 2016, the Institute for Educational Leadership's (IEL) Coalition for Community Schools, Communities In Schools (CIS) and StriveTogether have been working together as national partners to support efforts fostering collaborative organizational approaches to serving students in local communities.

Through the support of the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI), these three aligned national partners launched the Together for Students (TFS) initiative, a multiyear grant to support four communities in transforming how they work together to meet the needs of every student. The four TFS implementation sites are Thrive Chicago in Chicago, Ill.; Learn to Earn Dayton in Dayton, Ohio; Lehigh Valley Reads in Lehigh Valley, Pa.; and Communities In Schools of Memphis in Memphis, Tenn.

National and local partners center the five Together for Students principles (trusting relationships, cross-sector partnerships, purposeful engagement, actionable data,and shared accountability) in the implementation of the Together for Students (TFS) initiative.

In June 2021, the national partners created an opportunity for the four local communities to use funds toward supporting sites in implementing and learning from youth engagement. This initiative was intended to empower and uplift youth voice to make a change or advocate for their community. All four communities received funding from the learning grant to support this initiative.

the learning project

Project goals and process

The purpose of this learning project is to capture lessons from the youth engagement initiative as well as overall lessons learned from the TFS national partners and implementation sites to improve outcomes for students. It builds on previous learning projects in **2020** and **2021** that sought to develop an understanding of the emerging lessons by capturing critical insights, challenges and potential opportunities to accelerate progress and improve practice in the four local implementation sites and the broader field.

Research questions

Research questions were developed and refined in partnership with the national and site partners in the beginning of the project. The first set of research questions are geared toward the local site implementation teams

to understand their perspectives on the youth engagement initiative and on the overall three-year initiative. These questions included:

▎OVERALL LESSONS LEARNED

• What have been the core elements of your overall TFS implementation over the last three years? What has been your theory of change?

• What are the biggest challenges you have faced in TFS implementation over the last three years?

• What changes have been made to the original design as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

• How have the five guiding TFS principles (trusting relationships, cross-sector partnerships, purposeful engagement, actionable data and shared accountability) been incorporated into the work? Which have been most critical to successes?

- What have been your biggest wins and successes over the last three years?

- What surprises emerged as part of this work?

- What do you see as opportunities for growth based on the lessons learned in your implementation?

- What opportunities exist now that might not have been present when you began this work?

Youth engagement initiative

- What have been the key elements of the TFS youth engagement initiative implementation?

- To what extent have youth been engaged in design and implementation of solutions as part of this work?

- What have been the core challenges and opportunities of the youth engagement initiative?

- How might youth and families continue to be engaged in the work?

The second set of research questions were geared toward the national partners to gain their reflections on the TFS initiative since its inception. These questions included:

- What were you most excited about when the Together for Students initiative launched?

- How have you seen your relationships as national partners change over the course of this initiative?

- What do you view as the biggest successes of the initiative now that it is almost complete?

- What are the biggest challenges you have faced in implementation over the last three years?

- Is there anything that you may have done differently with this initiative given the benefit of hindsight?

- What do you see as opportunities for growth or for future exploration — both at the local and national levels?

Methods and analysis

Focus groups were conducted with implementation 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 gather reflections on the overall work of the last three years.

We conducted two youth-only focus groups — one for Dayton and one for Lehigh Valley. Because of stricter privacy constraints in Chicago and Memphis, we did not conduct focus groups with youth in those sites. However, we were still able to gain youth voice by working with the core site teams. In Chicago, students recorded themselves answering the same questions that were asked in Dayton and Lehigh Valley focus groups. In Memphis, three elementary youth were filmed and interviewed by Memphis Film Works (a partner of CIS in Memphis), who shared the recording with us.

We also 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.

All interviews and focus groups during both rounds were facilitated by learning consultants using a semi-structured interview protocol. One facilitator served as the primary facilitator and the other as the notetaker. A Padlet was also used in the focus groups to better capture all of the voices that were part of the focus group. The Padlet results were analyzed using inductive and deductive design methods as well as formal qualitative coding processes. Interview notes were analyzed for themes, and the results of the focus groups and interviews are codified in this report.

In total, 48 people participated in the learning project. We engaged 9 national partner representatives, 21 core site team members and 18 youth across the four sites.

summary of round one and two findings

Two previous phases of learning were conducted related to the Together for Students initiative. A learning consultant was tasked with capturing critical insights, challenges and opportunities to accelerate progress and improve practice in the four local implementation sites and the broader field. The learning consultant gathered and examined evidence of early successes, challenges and alignment to the five core principles of TFS — trusting relationships, purposeful engagement, cross-sector partnerships, actionable data and shared accountability.

The learning project was conducted in iterative phases. In the first phase, the learning consultant examined the perspectives of TFS leadership through document analysis and interviews with leaders at the three aligned national partner organizations and the four local implementation sites.

The second phase of the learning project expanded the scope of investigation by integrating the perspectives of TFS partners and participants at each of the sites. This report builds on learnings from the first phase and describes learnings gleaned from TFS by a broad group of community partners.

Learnings from rounds one and two have been captured in a set of technical reports and shorter briefs. Here are links to past work: Round two briefs on **Trusting Relationships** and **Students at the Center** as well as the technical **report** and the **StoryCorps** project. Also available are the round one **brief** and **report**.

Overview of round one and two findings

Here are a few of the key findings that emerged in rounds one and two:

KEY FINDING: *The five core principles are an integral part of TFS among the national partners and the site leaders.*

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.

TFS site leaders see purposeful engagement as a critical component to the success of any effort to put students at the center. During the planning phase, TFS created new opportunities for implementation sites to engage with students and families.

Building cross-sector partnerships across broad stakeholder groups was a central component of TFS planning and year one implementation at the local implementation sites. At the time of the report, TFS site leaders were addressing the challenge of how to continue to meaningfully engage their cross-sector partners in year two of implementation.

Local TFS sites are fully embracing actionable data in a variety of detailed and creative practices. The national partners 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 a responsibility of serving students and families.

KEY FINDING: *TFS has helped improve relationships among local site partners.*

TFS has been especially effective at accelerating the progress that was underway in local partnerships and initiatives before the start of the grant. The grant has incentivized broad participation in the work and given local TFS leaders leverage to bring other stakeholders to the table. Implementation site leaders have started to identify gaps and overlaps in services for students and families. They are working to

minimize duplicative efforts and ensure that all students receive the supports they need.

> **KEY FINDING:** *Collective impact efforts are difficult and have been slowed by staff turnover and the COVID-19 crisis.*

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 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 some ways to minimize the negative consequences of staff turnover, but turnover remains a challenge for the project.

In some TFS sites, the COVID-19 crisis has deepened stakeholder commitment to collective work. Despite the pandemic, site leaders are developing unique and creative ways to continue supporting students now and into the future. TFS site leaders will have to determine ways to build and sustain trusting relationships, likely without in-person contact

round three findings

Findings from rounds one and two were reinforced and built upon in the round three interviews and focus groups. It remains clear that there are close links between local site leaders and partners and national partners. In round three, we explored partner perceptions of the youth engagement project that took place over this past school year as well as reflections on the overall three-year initiative.

Youth engagement project:
Insights from site teams

In June 2021, the national partners created an opportunity for the four local communities to use funds toward supporting sites in implementing and learning from youth engagement. This initiative set out to empower and uplift youth voice to make a change or advocate for their community. All four communities received funding from the learning grant to support this initiative, ranging from $25,000 -$34,000 determined by their submitted budgets.

We asked each site team for their reflections on the successes, challenges and overall insights on this project as they neared its completion.

> **SUCCESSES**

We first asked what the biggest successes of the youth engagement project were, and a few common themes emerged across the sites. They are identified in the table below.

theme	# of times mentioned
Opportunity to gain youth voice	8
Fostering youth connection and belonging	6
Partner collaboration	5
Opportunity for innovative programming	2

The **opportunity to gain youth voice** came up most often. Participants cited that simply creating an intentional opportunity to engage youth was a success in and of itself. Here are few examples of how gaining youth voices was described:

- "We heard some really important and powerful feedback from youth's own experiences about equity within the education system."

- "The greatest success is giving students a meaningful platform that recognizes and honors their input."

- "Daily circles open avenues for student voice and advocacy through discussion and increase understanding of their wants and needs."

- "Being able to elevate students' voices through art and poetry has brought awareness to students' creativity. They have ideas that are really good and worth exploring more deeply."

Fostering youth connection and belonging was another theme that came up often. Respondents also noted this as an effective means to engage students more intentionally. Some of the highlights include:

- "Students enjoy the after school program and want to attend every day. It is a place they feel comfortable and safe."

- "Access to a quality creative space, technology and food — Students are stimulated and motivated to engage when these needs are met."

- "After-school programming continued through the shutdown caused by the pandemic; remote connections made a huge difference in keeping our students engaged."

Partner collaboration was another success that came up more than a few times. The youth engagement initiative engaged additional partners in the work and helped forge stronger relationships between partners that were working on it. Some examples include:

- "The collective impact of this initiative has been amazing. Spanning three counties, it's been great to see so many districts focused now on literacy thanks in large part to the group's efforts under the leadership of our site team and partners."

- "Diverse partners — including the school districts, children's hospital, YMCA and community and faith-based organizations — did so much work to meet the needs of families and students during the pandemic.

They stepped up and delivered food and instruction kits, held Zoom calls and in-person services at other sites, and much, much more."

A few other notable successes were highlighted around bringing about opportunities **for innovative programming.**

- "Being able to elevate students' voices through art and poetry has brought awareness to students' creativity. They have ideas that are really good and worth exploring more deeply. In many schools, there is no opportunity for art and poetry as an extracurricular activity, so providing this outlet has been pretty exciting."

- "Thinking outside of the box to align with current events, needs and discussion going on in community. Making a relevant video that both offers a platform for students and engages other students, too."

CHALLENGES

We also asked what the biggest challenges have been with the youth engagement project. The most common themes are identified in the table below.

theme	# of times mentioned
COVID-19 pandemic	7
Time/scheduling	6
Authentic engagement	3
Transportation	3

Not surprisingly, effects from **the COVID-19 pandemic** were cited as a challenge the greatest number of times. Examples include:

- "The energy for new initiatives and continued progress has been impacted by the toll of the pandemic and high level of social-emotional learning needs from staff and students."

- "The pandemic has been a challenge for everything. It is an ongoing challenge to engage students and families."

- "The largest challenge was the lock-down and pivot to remote learning that really disconnected some of the face-to-face work. Just trying to re-envision how to deliver services online was so time consuming... it took away from youth and family engagement."

- "Community Schools could have been the center point of our project; however, CSCs were focused on meeting critical needs of students/families during pandemic that little time was available for the engagement project, which was also running on a tight timeline."

A different pandemic-related challenge was not having enough **time** to run the project and/or **coordinate schedules**. Some examples of this include:

- "Coordinating time for all stakeholders to gather."

- "COVID-19 has obviously had an impact on everything. It's been difficult to have the face-to-face time as schedules have been scrambled."

- "Recruiting participants: Not having enough time to build the trust and relationships needed to quickly recruit students."

- "Time. Buy-in to the project came later, which created an interesting dynamic to meeting the deadline."

Creating **authentic engagement** and being limited by the number of youth who are able to engage was also cited as a challenge. Some examples include:

- "Always challenging to have a small group (12 kids) represent the full youth perspective on an issue."

- "Trying to show equal love to all 23 school districts in our footprint has sometimes been a challenge when narrowing a project down to a dozen participants."

- "Making sure that students were telling authentic stories without adult manipulation."

Finally, **transportation**, **staff changes** and **mental models** for compensating youth, came up as challenges in various focus groups:

- "Transportation: getting kids to school when there is no gas money for transportation."

- "There has been a lot of role movement within this core group. There is opportunity for realignment and deeper collaboration."

- "There was some pushback from school districts re: compensating students for their time."

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

We also asked participants how they might continue or better engage youth and families in the work. A few themes emerged here around better engaging youth through co-design of the work, more intentional engagement and a two-generation approach.

theme	# of times mentioned
Co-design of strategies and programs	4
More intentional engagement	3
Two-generation approach	3

Comments that spoke to gaining more significant engagement of youth through **greater collaboration and co-design** were most prevalent. Examples include:

- "Would have loved to get more input upfront from students about the topic/s they wanted to focus on outside of COVID-19."

- "More open conversations and invites for families to directly engage in the planning and decision making. We need to continue to explore strategies to increase participation since it can be difficult to reach families and encourage them to share their voices."

- "I think we need to engage students and families much more in problem-solving

about data and brainstorming ideas."

• "Continuously build relationships and our brand to increase trust. It's not enough to just ask for feedback — there needs to be two-way engagement."

Having more **intentional engagement** with youth is also important as sites look to the future:

• "We must continue to build strong trusting relationships with our families. Everything is possible if there is trust."

• "Better marketing to make our presence known to youth and families would prove powerful. In addition to this engagement initiative, we also have lots of resources to share that can impact lives in a short period of time through other opportunities for engagement."

Finally, taking a **two-generation approach** to engage both youth and their families is necessary to authentically engage and address barriers for students:

• "We need a two-gen approach — to help families stabilize enough to have reduced stress and build back the bandwidth to interact with their kids at all age groups."

• "Share positive affirmations to the parents about their child while the child is present... This is a holistic way of motivating both child and parent about their investment in the programs."

Additionally, a few other notable ideas surfaced in conversations that include **ways to engage**, **stipends for youth** and **building capabilities** of leaders to engage. Examples include:

• "Engagement: It seems that a blend of modalities (online, in-person, hybrid) can continue to be used to widen the reach of this initiative. Upscaling accessibility will continue to grow the impact on LV students."

• "Tie participation with stipends and introductions to career paths that interest the students and their parents."

• "We could be doing more pulse surveys with youth and families across our coalitions that ask similar questions to gauge engagement desires. We can be doing more to build capacity of leaders with decision-making power leaning into trusting the feedback offered by youth as valuable."

Youth engagement project:
Insights from youth

We conducted focus groups with youth in Lehigh Valley and Dayton to gain their insights on the project, and accessed pre-recorded videos of youth in the Chicago and Memphis sites. They provided a number of insights into their engagement with the initiative.

theme	# of times mentioned
The importance of their voice	8
The impact of storytelling	4
Team work and collaboration	6
Safe and peaceful communities (school and neighborhood)	5

Each youth project varied but all included storytelling. Some youth were able to select their topics while others were pre-selected. One theme that was clearly communicated in three of the four youth focus groups is that their voice matters — they have a lot to say and want to share.

THE PROJECT

• "The project allowed teens to tell stories about a concern they have."

• "Each of us has a story to tell."

• "This gives teens a voice."

• "Shines a light on how we think about our community."

• "Kids do not get to make choices nowadays." (Dayton)

• "Exposure and working with partners like Apple — which provided the tech tools for us to capture our interviews — was a good

experience."

- "I brushed up on my leadership skills."

- "I must learn how to motivate people. If people are not motivated, then you will not accomplish anything." (Chicago)

- "The project gave us the opportunity to meet new people and speak out."

- "You could express what you thought about school." (Lehigh Valley)

THE OVERALL IMPACT

- "This project has made me walk in my purpose."

- "I've broadened my knowledge and become more outgoing."

- "There are more teen resources available than I thought based on my research." (Dayton)

- "This project changed my perspective on Black and brown unity."

- "I heard different perspectives of what people went through during COVID-19; I wasn't expecting to hear some of the things they shared."

- "I learned that I am a great communicator." (Chicago)

- "Anyone can be a leader."

- "The world is not always fair — It can be good and bad, but you can always find the best in anything if you look for it." (Lehigh Valley)

- "I learned I can talk to my teachers about what is going on."

- "Some challenges are staying positive and meeting expectations." (Memphis)

MOVING FORWARD

- "City leaders need to acknowledge Black and brown voices like they do with white voices."

- "We need more programs like this."

- "We use to have a school newspaper, but we don't anymore."

- "Increase the number of narratives by including more schools."

- "Invest in more trauma groups for students to meet weekly." (Chicago)

- "This can help create a calmer school environment."

- "This project created positivity and love and helped us be able to do classwork." (Memphis)

- "I want to see them do something with what we are saying, not just listen."

- "We need more adults bridging the gaps." (Dayton)

- "We need more security in schools."

- "School districts need to do more." (Lehigh Valley)

OTHER INSIGHTS

- Chicago students mentioned several times that they discovered that they were leaders and loved working with their teams.

- Dayton students were able to create a safe space because they all shared a common goal —to create change. Their project was a collaborative effort which required them to work together to get the end product they all wanted.

- Memphis and Lehigh Valley students emphasized the importance of reducing violence and "drama" in schools. They want a secure learning environment.

- The students want to continue these projects.

Students do not just want to be heard — they want their ideas put into action. For systems to change, young people need to know how

to advocate for themselves. There's a huge opportunity for StriveTogether, Coalition for Community Schools and Communities In School to invest in on-the-ground youth advocacy training. The school systems don't have all of the capacity and capabilities needed, but with the right partners, students can enact real change. They are collaborative, creative and caring leaders and members of their community.

Overall reflections on Together for Students: Insights from site teams

We asked site teams for their reflections on building trusting relationships, overall successes, challenges, surprises and possibilities for the future. We share insights from each of these in this section.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

In rounds one and two, building trusting relationships emerged as an important theme across the board. We asked sites to expand on this and to offer what concrete changes that they might have seen as a result of building relationships over the last three years. A few common themes emerged and are identified in the table below.

theme	# of times mentioned
Greater involvement and connection across partners	5
Relationships with additional schools	3
New funding and resource opportunities	3

First and foremost, the ability to build better and more trusting relationships led to **greater involvement and connection across partners**. This presented itself in a few different ways:

- "I have new trusted colleagues in the pre-K through grade 12, higher education, health care, non-profit and faith-based spaces that are able and willing to come together and

address literacy."

- "We are now meeting to look at wraparound services in the school district and I think there is a higher involvement and connection between the schools and agencies."

- "Schools have built a stronger community in relation to social-emotional learning integration. They are learning from each other and sharing practices internally and across schools."

Similarly, respondents also reported that as a result of building trusting relationships, the work has been able to **expand to more schools**. A few examples include:

- "We have relationships with at least half of the districts in our scope, when prior to TFS we were connected with just four."

- "We have been able to build relationships with new districts and partners who we did not engage with in the past."

Building trusting relationships has also led to new **funding and resource opportunities**. These include:

- "Collaboration amongst partners on programming; more collaborative grants amongst partners; more information sharing and best practice sharing between partners."

- "Our school district is really working on restorative justice and they also bring a lot of resources to families through the district's work with food pantries and many other agencies."

In addition to these themes, participants also lifted up some additional important insights around relationships helping to **break down silos**, create **greater awareness and support** for the work and **expand to additional communities.**

- "Relationships have developed that were not happening before the programming for students became more integrated. Silos were broken down."

- "Raising awareness: There has been a definite shift in the educational community over the last three years with regards to the impact of literacy, use of structured literacy as a best practice, and the need to promote student voice and choice as part of local educational programs."

- "From a community perspective, alumni, retired teachers, business and civic leaders are willing to provide external support that includes encouraging students to excel. These community members are interested in providing input into the in-school experience once a clear path is evident by school leadership. They also understand the dynamics of many of the parents who send their children to school. Many of these parents fall within an economic bracket that does not permit as much involvement as they would like. There are economic, social and emotional constraints that must be understood. There are community members willing to help."

- "We have a network across the state of other communities that are working towards our initiative's goals in their own community with a focus on students at the center. This wouldn't have happened without the existence of the partnership. We also have some momentum to be working towards a state level campaign for grade level reading that the partnership is out in front promoting."

SUCCESSES

We also asked what the biggest wins and successes of the initiative have been over the last three years. The themes that emerged are identified in the table below.

theme	# of times mentioned
Carrying the work forward	4
Creating demand	4
Stronger branding and messaging	3
Actionable data	3

One of the biggest successes cited was simply the willingness and ability to persist **and carry the work forward** given that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted much of work starting in March 2020. The successes identified were:

- "Building relationships is what allowed us to have the trust needed during the most uncertain times. While COVID-19 was a barrier, we were able to connect with students and families in innovative ways. There was a lot of expression of care. The relationships opened the doors for us when others had to continue knocking — very sacred connections."

- "Keeping the work going through the shifts in staff and COVID-19."

- "Partnership of the school district sharing tech resources so the neighborhood school centers could run after-school programming in a pandemic."

- "The United Way staying the course with the partnership and grade-level reading with community schools as the center point."

Another success cited often was the ability of the Together for Students work to **create demand** for the results of the work in various ways. This was seen in Lehigh Valley in particular. A few examples of what this looks like include:

- "School districts and community partners asking for us to host community conversations to address particular challenges/bright spots."

- "Students and families are more passionate about literacy."

- "Parent engagement: There have been many programs added to help support school districts in promoting literacy and engaging parents as partners with this effort. Waterford Learning, Talk Read Sing, and the Ready4K texting program are just a few that come to mind."

Together for Students also helped to create **stronger branding and messaging** for the

work. Some of these also connect to themes highlighted in the previous question around creating awareness:

- "Building a stronger brand and messaging. Becoming something that community recognizes."

- "Greater awareness in community on importance of 3rd grade reading, positive attendance, summer learning, etc."

- "More conversations around the science of reading have been happening between parents! Also, there is more awareness around the importance of early, non-school-based literacy activities to support students' reading growth."

The ability to generate and share more **actionable data** was also cited in a few different ways. Examples include:

- "Grant reporting and measurement support. 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."

- "There have been new conversations about data sharing with school districts."

- "Data Sharing System: The Learning Circle portal has been a tool that has improved access to student records — Tracking student progress and performance in/out of school."

Other noteworthy successes that were identified here related to **shared goals, equity, new funding, parent engagement, the youth voice project and policy advocacy**. They include:

- "Organizations have developed shared 'common' language/goals that benefit children."

- "Finding the way to embed equity into our literacy efforts has allowed us to be advocates for transforming the system

while working within it."

- "I think that the ability to use this grant to leverage funds has been a big win."

- "Parent engagement: There have been many programs added to help support school districts in promoting literacy and engaging parents as partners with this effort."

- "The Youth Voice project! The film screening is going to be an amazing event for our students to see their films on the big screen."

- "Generating interest across the state for the promotion of some legislation that will address teacher prep programming and require the science of reading practices in our classroom."

CHALLENGES

We asked about what have been the biggest challenges over the course of the Together for Students initiative. The themes are identified in the table below.

theme	# of times mentioned
COVID-19 pandemic	11
Staffing/turnover	8
Mental health and wellness	3
Actionable data	3
Communication across partners	2

The biggest challenges have clearly been the **COVID-19 pandemic** and managing through the enormous disruptions that it has brought on. A few of the examples cited include:

- "I think that the COVID-19 pandemic was a huge barrier both in terms of increasing engagement of families and youth and the fact that it created such learning challenges."

- "Getting people to reengage in life after this pandemic has been very challenging."

- "Schools prioritizing focus on other more short-term issues with their students in response to COVID-19."

- "Making actionable changes feel achievable and meaningful to educators during pandemic learning instead of an additional task to complete."

Perhaps related to the COVID-19 pandemic challenges are more specific challenges around **staffing the work**. This showed up in a few different ways:

- "The cohesive nature of our team was interrupted by a change in staff at one of our partners. That said, we vested in relationship building upon meeting our new partner."

- "Staff turnover. This has been a significant challenge for developing capacity and continuity. However, it does feel as though this retention issue is becoming less and less prevalent as we end 2021. Fingers crossed."

- "Not having enough staff capacity to interlock all of the pieces/bodies of work most effectively to drive the bus forward as efficiently and successfully as we had been hoping."

- "Leadership transitions in some of our key partner organizations."

There were additional themes that showed up a few times that are worth calling out. **Mental health and wellness**, accessing **actionable data** and **communication across partners** all came up as challenges. Some examples include:

- "Poverty and inability for families to meet the needs of their kids, bus driver shortage, teacher shortage, high gas prices, mental health crisis in our community, housing shortage (more families living in cars)."

- "Getting people to reengage in life after this pandemic has been very challenging."

- "Figuring out creative ways to measure and show impact and success."

- "In the beginning, we had cross-district discussions about this grant... but this did not continue during the pandemic. I think this was a lost opportunity and one we can work to address moving forward."

- "Clear, consistent, effective communication across a web of coalitions and the backbone — lots of projects, lots of diverse community partners engaged."

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS THAT EMERGED

We asked whether there were any surprises that emerged as part of the work together. Two themes and a number of additional ideas were highlighted for this question. The themes are identified in the table below.

theme	# of times mentioned
Commitment of partners	3
Mental health and wellness	3

We heard some great insights around themes of **commitment to the work**. A few include:

- "I have been surprised by the commitment of the after-school programs in working together. Agency program managers have actually gone to other organizations to fill in or help with after-school teacher absences to continue programming."

- "Individuals are so committed to this work. People really go above and beyond to respond and be creative — even when exhausted."

- "I'm surprised that the libraries have stepped up as brilliantly as they have."

In addition to **mental health and wellness** showing up as a challenge, it also emerged as a surprise for some, perhaps elevated by the impacts of the pandemic. A couple of examples cited were:

- "Behavioral changes in students returning to in-person schooling and events."

• "Pre-pandemic the emphasis in so much of our work was around academic issues.... post-pandemic and during the life of this grant, there has been more emphasis on non-academic issues... the social-emotional dynamics confronting students."

A few additional insights that emerged as surprises for participants include themes around **funding, student engagement, peer connections, staffing** and **policy**:

• "Funding became a way for us to have 'skin in the game'. We were able to make progress in some areas where it may not have been possible if we weren't able to bring money to the table."

• "Many have been surprised by the interest and engagement of students with deeper learning elements; I believe this is a better approach since it is based in engagement and student voice rather than rote learning."

• "I was impressed at the beginning how we connected with other organizations that were attempting to address similar challenges. The work of the Campaign for Grade Level Reading and the Charlotte-Mecklenberg early childhood literacy initiatives has been very valuable."

• "I never expected the teacher shortage and workforce shortage in general to be as overwhelming. Agencies struggle to fill basic positions."

• "We have so many great pieces of work in place and need a larger focus on policy to drive real change. We need some inroads in our state department of education if we are going to see the strides we want to see in literacy and youth-centered co-creation of community... that takes timing and relationships."

▌FUTURE PRACTICES

Finally, we asked participants about the future: what new practices might have emerged for them and what they want to carry forward.

A few themes we saw included the use of technology, youth and adult social-emotional learning (SEL) supports and creativity in engaging families.

theme	# of times mentioned
Social-emotional learning supports	6
Use of technology	5
Creativity in engaging families	4

COVID-19 shined a light on the need for more **social-emotional learning supports for both youth and for adults**. This theme emerged more than any others.

• "SEL — Trauma-informed care, staff mindfulness practices, etc. It's been a tough year. The support from fellow providers has helped us all stay motivated, valued and feeling as though we are making a difference in our work/service."

• "Enhancing the ability to support social and emotional competencies: Adding mental health supports and strengthening our social work engagement is a practice we will definitely continue to carry."

• "More emphasis on SEL dynamics and addressing the mental health needs of students and teachers."

• "The pandemic highlighted the mental health needs of our students. I hope we can continue to include mental health in the conversation moving forward."

The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to shut down and introduced virtual learning options. **Technology** has played a critical role in this, and there is a desire to keep some of this in place to take a more blended approach to learning.

• "Strategic use of virtual platforms will serve us well in the future."

• "The districts, the backbone, agencies, foundations — everyone really went to bat to get devices and wi-Fi to children. It was amazing!"

- "Ability to flip between in-person and virtual support; use of tech to support students at non-traditional times."

Creativity in engaging families is also something that sites want to carry forward as part of this work. Some ideas the came forth were:

- "Online engagement can in many ways level the playing field and give families an easier way to weigh in. Staff still need to build trust and climate/culture in a way that families and students want to show up to."

- "The importance and flexibility of online/virtual options for meetings, classes, etc."

- "Importance of social media platforms as a real-time and effective way to communicate with youth, parents and providers."

Overall reflections on Together for Students: Insights from national partners

We asked the national partners — StriveTogether, Communities In Schools and Coalition for Community Schools — about their reflections on the overall successes, challenges, surprises and possibilities for the future related to the Together for Success initiative. Some common themes and important insights came out of these conversations as well.

SUCCESSES

We first reflected on the opportunities and successes of the initiative. We asked what they were most excited about when the Together for Students initiative launched and what the biggest successes of the initiative have been.

- "One of the biggest successes with Together for Students has been **alignment**. It's a win to have real conversations about national partner alignment in an effort to create strategies to work together to ensure we keep the focus on students."

- "The creation of the **five principles** across all three national organizations was an important success. It allowed

us to all be quick and responsive in policy conversations and informed the development of policy. The five principles allowed us to jointly present and help shape legislation that is now in place."

- "Having national partner alignment also helped **enable local conversations to take place** that helped navigate through some of the on-the-ground challenges at sites. When local sites are aware of the alignment at the national level, it provides an easier runway to create alignment at the local level."

- "The level of **deep partnerships** at the community level has been very uplifting. Sustainability came up as a topic for the communities at the start of year three, and there was no hesitation from any of the communities about their commitment to sustaining the work."

- "There has been a big **increase in federal funding** for community schools, and that's a big deal — it's taken a long time to get here."

CHALLENGES

We then asked what the biggest challenges were in implementation over the last three years, and if there is anything that they may have done differently with this initiative given the benefit of hindsight.

- "**Alignment of national partners** is a critical success of the initiative, but it was also one of the key challenges that we worked through to get to where we are. Each organization operates a little bit differently, and it has been a challenge to create alignment on how each organization works and to craft more of a shared vision for the work."

- "This alignment is also related to challenges experienced around **staff transition at multiple levels** — all three organizations experienced leadership transitions and many of the program staff also changed over the course of the initiative. In hindsight, having the new leaders come together to align with

more intention might have been helpful to more quickly get on the same page and develop more of a shared vision for the work. Similarly, the development of a **more concrete learning agenda across the national partners** could have helped to outline what we hoped to learn."

- "The **COVID-19 pandemic** certainly presented a critical challenge. All the plans fell apart for the local partners, and we had to rethink how they were going to utilize the funding. As a result, we made slower progress than we originally had intended. Chan Zuckerberg Initiative was very nimble during this time which was incredibly important. They should get credit for their investment in this work."

- "In hindsight, the **structure of how the grant was run** may have been a missed opportunity. We invited a hundred or so communities to participate, which would lead to four of them getting implementation grants. Clearly a lot of good work was happening across the hundred sites, and we might have rethought how the grants were given and how we might have kept this larger group more engaged in the work. How might we have run a more equitable and intentional process to support the broader work most effectively? There was also a missed opportunity to create a learning cohort."

LOOKING FORWARD

Finally, we asked some questions about the future — what are opportunities for growth or for future exploration, both at the local and national levels? There were a number of insights that emerged:

- "Think about what the future of the integration of community schools' work with regional partnership work. **What are the shared competencies?** What knowledge, skills and attitudes are important for the work? Perhaps we create aligned professional competencies for resource coordinators to help with transitions across the networks."

- "We need to **change the way local communities currently have to compete for resources**. It prevents our ability to keep students at the center. There is an abundance of resources, not a scarcity. The philanthropic sector needs to have resources positioned so that they are holding students at the center, and they're not preferencing or prioritizing specific models. How do we allow for innovation so that resources are flowing to what gets results for students? How do we incentivize collaboration rather than competition when it comes to the distribution of resources?"

- "When we were initially working together, we were in a time of scarcity. There was more of a collective mindset to put up four walls and plant a flag. We're not in that time and space anymore though, and the pandemic has helped open up resources for education. It's **no longer a zero-sum game.** We can all work together and be successful and sustainable. It continues to be proven locally. Being vulnerable in the partnership will lead to better outcomes for all. There is space and need for all of us to step in and work together."

- "How do we continue to **foster alignment** — to make sure we are on the same page and be thoughtful about national mapping of the work? We might consider creating an overlayed map of StriveTogether, Communities In Schools, and Institute for Educational Leadership network partners. This will help us maximize our impact on communities doing this work."

- "It will be important how we **codify and communicate** this work moving forward. We have a model and examples that we can spread to the field as place-based partnerships are gaining momentum. We also have practical examples and learnings about how to do this work that we can disseminate across the field. It will be important to do this together, not as separate organizations. Our learnings will hold more weight coming from all three national organizations."

conclusion and recommendations

We found evidence throughout our conversations of the five core principles of TFS — trusting relationships, purposeful engagement, cross-sector partnerships, actionable data and shared accountability.

Cross-sector partnerships

All of the partners in this work believe in the power of collective impact. Every partner said they believe organizations can have a bigger impact working together than they could alone, and partners believe that everyone involved in TFS work has the best interest of students at heart. Several partners shared that when the project was frustrating or challenging, their dedication to collective impact and their belief in the other TFS partners helped them stay committed to the TFS initiative.

The ability for partners to find common ground and collaborate in ways that they hadn't before is a big success from this initiative. These collaborations are successful because they all share purposeful engagement to keep students at the center of the work.

Purposeful engagement

TFS partners share an unwavering belief that students' needs should always be their focus, but they 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

TFS partners also shared the importance of open and honest communication for building trust. For most partners, this included knowing that they 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

Partners can be sure that the efforts of partners are leading to results for students when data is used on a regular basis to ensure actions are aligned 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

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

Recommendations

Based on our conversations and review of previous learning project findings, here are a few **recommendations** to consider for next steps:

- 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 for 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.

- There is an increasing number of resources for the work across federal and state levels, including the American Rescue Plan which sets aside $122 billion for K-12 education through September 30, 2023. There is an opportunity for the national partners to come together to **elevate the stories of this work and align on a core set of messages** that can make it easier for communities to leverage these resources.

- The national partners have come together to help shape legislation that is currently in place, but there is an opportunity to do more — to **further shape policy** development, advocacy and implementation at the national level.

- There's a huge opportunity for the national partners to invest in on-the-ground **youth advocacy training**. The school systems don't have all of the capacity and capabilities needed, but with the right partners, students can make real changes.

- The national partners should consider partnering on the development of **shared competencies** for school resource coordinators and best practices in developing community schools programming. Consider the creation of **courses, coaching** and **facilitated peer learning** to build the capabilities of communities doing the work.

about

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 grasstops 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.

Working directly in 2,300 schools in 25 states and the District of Columbia, Communities In Schools builds relationships that empower students to stay in school and succeed in life.

Our school-based staff partner with teachers to identify challenges students face in class or at home and coordinate with community partners to bring outside resources inside schools. From immediate needs like food or clothing to more complex ones like counseling or emotional support, we do whatever it takes to help students succeed.

StriveTogether is a national movement with a clear purpose: help every child succeed in school and in life from cradle to career, regardless of race, ethnicity, zip code or circumstance. In partnership with nearly 70 communities across the country, StriveTogether provides resources, best practices and processes to give every child every chance for success. The StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network reaches more than 14 million students, including more than 8 million children of color and over 6 million children experiencing poverty. The network spans 29 states and Washington, D.C.

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