



RECASTING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES AS CO-DESIGNERS OF EDUCATION IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES



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Executive Summary

In a national moment of political tumult and violence directed at immigrants, people of color, and other marginalized groups, our education systems need new strategies to meaningfully engage families and communities in ensuring equitable learning for our youth. Not only do families and communities bring historical and lived knowledge about how to persist through these challenges, they can also bring critical expertise in how to advance educational justice and community well-being.

In these difficult times, or perhaps because of them, we have found evidence of justice-based approaches to family engagement that position parents and families, particularly from communities of color, as fellow leaders in transforming schools and educational systems to better serve all children, families, and communities. Our project, the **Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC)**, is a national network of scholars, educators, and family and community leaders who work to center racial equity in family engagement. We do this by reimagining how families and communities can create more equitable schools and educational systems.

This memo is our effort to share what we have learned with public school leaders and others working to engage families and communities in education.² Based on the findings of our collaborative work, we conclude with policy recommendations. System, school, community and foundation leaders committed to racial equity and family co-design work should:

Build and Set the Co-Design Table

- Support initiatives that tap into and develop the collective leadership of families and communities of color in improving schools, communities, and broader systems, rather than programs that seek to change parent behaviors to better support schools' agendas. Design family engagement agendas and activities *with* family and community members, rather than approaching them as passive recipients.
- Prioritize school change efforts that engage families and communities with educators and seek to build solidarities across racial and professional divides *through* work to disrupt inequities.
- Provide funding and resources for sustained, reflective work to imagine and implement transformative change. Giving communities the time and space to design and implement the work ensures longer-term sustainability and ownership of change. This contrasts with existing programs that create “one-off” events focused on “listening” to families in order to “inform” predetermined goals and agendas.
- Partner with community-based organizations and public agencies to enact educational change. School systems alone cannot foster and sustain transformation, and many community organizations already provide learning opportunities beyond the traditional system.
- Invest in building and supporting the capacity of local leaders (not policy elites) to facilitate meetings and conversations across racial, cultural and other differences. Such facilitation should enable participants to bring their full selves and learn from inevitable tensions.

Engage in Co-Design

- Recognize that histories and systemic inequalities shape how families and communities experience and participate in formal spaces, and that patterns of inequity tend to re-assert themselves despite good intentions. Support strategies that intervene productively in the interactions that function to reinforce hierarchical power.
- Begin processes with the priorities, experiences, concerns, and issues that already exist in the communities that schools serve, rather than with the agendas of schools, funders or policymakers. Policies and funding should aim to strengthen work that is already happening in communities, rather than impose a new program.

Sustain Co-Design

- Redesign key educational decision-making processes (such as hiring, policy development, resource allocation, and school improvement) to ensure that those directly impacted by racial inequities have influence, not just token “input.”

- Ensure that programs have the capacity and flexibility to respond to the broader sociopolitical context and dynamics that shape daily realities for nondominant families and communities.
- Provide support for partnerships to reclaim data for reflection, improvement, and measuring progress towards educational justice and community well-being. Partner with researchers to identify or co-develop “metrics that matter” to local communities, reflecting community-determined accountabilities.



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The children attending our nation's schools are living in a tumultuous and alarming political climate. Children come to school worrying about their parents not being home when they get there, as deportation raids and family separation policies targeting Latinx and Asian communities are forefront in their minds. As police killings of young unarmed Black and other men of color continue, parents worry that their young boys will not make it safely home. Children arrive at school to find swastikas etched into their lockers - triggering memories of Jewish great-grandparents killed under these symbols. Mass shootings at schools and other public places are in the headlines almost weekly. Indigenous families find their sacred lands and homes yet again under threat of destruction. Our children are witnesses to the #MeToo movement and the growing public recognition of violence against women. Despite the increase of hate crimes and rising violence, the US Department of Education is rescinding civil rights protections for students with disabilities, LGBTQ students, and students of color at an alarming rate. But these policies and political climate did not arise anew with the current administration. They build on centuries-old narratives about parents, families and communities of color.

As Fryberg and Bang (2018)³ explain,

This country has a long history of both removing nonwhite children from their families and incarcerating families of color who are positioned as a threat to the United States. For hundreds of years in the United States, black children were

stripped from their parent's arms and auctioned off as slaves. The incarceration of Japanese-American families during the second world war in "internment" camps is another well-known and devastating example of such policies. And for generations, the United States government targeted Native American communities with child-separation policies to force compliance and assimilation.

Why do these kinds of policies and actions continue to arise in our country, and what sort of ideas enable them? While racist, white supremacist, anti-immigrant ideologies are certainly at play, one overarching concept is a pattern of blaming parents and caregivers to justify the systemic inequities and inhumane treatment of nonwhite and poor families. In the extreme cases, like those we have seen under the current administration, parent and caregiver blaming can be used to justify the removal of children. The Trump administration has criminalized parents and caregivers, removed their children, and allowed some Americans to profit from this profound injustice. In more subtle forms, parent-blaming narratives are used to prop up policies intended to compel nonwhite or poor families to adopt mainstream, white values and norms.

As the largest public institution in our nation, the education system is often the site where parent-blaming narratives are transformed into policies that further separate young people of color from their communities and their families. Narratives of social mobility and education are often premised on the idea that educational attainment for low-income children of color requires them to "escape" their communities for a better life somewhere else. In this way, many efforts to engage parents and communities in education systems actually further marginalize them.

In contrast, but within this same historical and current context, we have worked as a community of families, educators, researchers, and service providers to design a model of family and community leadership that aspires to liberation rather than further oppression. This NEPC policy memo is our effort to share what we have learned with public school leaders and others working to engage families and communities with education. In these difficult times or perhaps because of them, we have cultivated justice-based approaches to family engagement that position parents and families, particularly from nondominant communities, as fellow leaders in transforming schools and educational systems to better serve children, families and communities.

Our project, the [Family Leadership Design Collaborative \(FLDC\)](#), is a national network of scholars, educators, and family and community leaders who work to center racial equity in family engagement. We do this by reimagining how families and communities can create more equitable schools and educational systems. The Family Leadership Design Collaborative engages in research to develop "next" (beyond current "best") practices,⁴ measures and tools to foster equitable collaborations towards community well-being and educational justice. We define *family and community design collaboratives* as networks that work together to enact the following core principles:

Begin with Family and Community Ecologies to:

- center the knowledge, priorities, and agendas of families and communities of color as well as others marginalized by educational systems
- recognize histories of resistance and transformation
- approach communities as dynamic and multifaceted

Refuse and Disrupt Dominant Power Dynamics to:

- recognize inequities, as shaped by histories and power
- name colonization, racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity as intersecting forms of oppression
- challenge approaches and dynamics that seek to assimilate and erase our cultural ways of knowing and being

Enact Solidarities in Collective Change-Making to:

- develop “how can” questions to envision beyond our existing systems and structures
- sustain “here and now” relationships that embody the change we wish to see in the world
- build solidarities across and with difference to enact transformative and consequential forms of learning and activity

Cultivate Ongoing Transformative Possibilities to:

- envision intergenerational change-making
- transform power relations between communities and schools
- draw insights across disciplines and theories to evolve language towards educational justice

Critical to this work is an understanding that cultural knowledge and practices persist in every community despite centuries of colonization, structural racism, and oppression. To build on this knowledge and practice, we supported what we refer to as *family and community design collaboratives* in spaces that had unique contexts, leaders, experiences, and goals. The collaboratives brought together people who had not previously worked together and enabled communities to engage together in new ways. By creating new relationships across a geographic space, the groups were able to think beyond the constraints of their own disciplines and experiences to envision education justice and community wellness in their own communities. These leaders became designers of their own futures, creating space for

dreaming about new possibilities for improving their communities and schools. Historically, this kind of family engagement has not been fully supported or even welcomed by school and district staff and educators. By creating, supporting and implementing new strategies for collaborating across families, communities, and educational systems, FLDC is working as a network to shift that historical pattern. This policy memo shares emerging findings and policy recommendations from the first phases of our work.

Review of Literature: Parents, Families, Communities and Equity in Education

Decades of research suggest that family engagement and positive parent-teacher relationships are critical for student learning and academic success.⁵ A subset of the family engagement research that we call the “critical family engagement literature” examines how the experiences of families of color shape their engagement in U.S. schools and how they can create powerful changes to address racial inequities in education. Despite this research, many of the conventional approaches used in schools today relegate families of color to prescribed parental roles, such as volunteering, fundraising, chaperoning, or Parent Teacher Association (PTA) involvement. These activities primarily support the priorities of the school but tend to reinforce racial inequities in education.⁶

To guide our work, we grouped the critical family engagement literature into four primary theories of change, or logics, that shape how the field conceptualizes the problem and analyzes actions undertaken to address racial inequities in education. We examined these underlying theories of change to illuminate the field’s current conceptions and to suggest new directions in policy, practice and research towards educational justice and community well-being.

Theory of Change #1: Expand “what counts” as engagement from families/communities and their diverse educational practices.

The critical family engagement literature challenges racialized assumptions about the participation of families of color in their children’s education as uninterested and in need of “fixing.” By “nondominant families and communities,” the literature means those impacted by systemic oppression, such as marginalization based on race, class, language, or immigration status.⁷ Schools often pressure nondominant families to meet schools’ expectations and adhere to white, middle-class behaviors. When nondominant families do not participate in the ways that schools expect them to, educators often assume that they do not value education.⁸ Because of these assumptions, schools can perpetuate deficit-based practices and reinforce educational inequities for nondominant families.

In contrast, the critical family engagement scholarship illuminates the diverse, culturally based practices that families employ in the education of their children, much of which are not recognized by school personnel.⁹ For example, the practices of Latinx immigrant families – like the use of *consejos* (cultural narratives) – are active forms of involvement in

education. They instill cultural values, share knowledge and experiences, and teach children skills through observation rather than direct instruction.¹⁰ This theory of change highlights the deficit assumptions that often undergird educators' approach to nondominant families and seeks to document the actual engagement practices of families with the goal of changing policies and practices to become more inclusive.¹¹

Theory of Change #2: Highlight how schools and systems marginalize nondominant families in schools.

The critical engagement literature also recognizes how school systems reinforce the inequities that constrain the role of nondominant families in schools. This literature highlights how race and racism manifest in school systems in policies and practices, as well as the interactions between educators and families of color. For instance, nondominant families are constrained in their ability to participate in school-based engagement activities by structural barriers such as language (e.g., English-only communications with limited availability of interpreters), time and resource obstacles (midday meetings, lack of childcare, transportation, etc.), and the bureaucratic nature of schools (e.g., procedures for registration or requesting meetings, use of Robert's Rules of Order in activities). In addition to these structural barriers, families often perceive schools as unwelcoming environments providing minimal opportunities to influence decisions within schools.¹²

Even when nondominant families do participate within the constrained structures, educators' racialized and classed interpretations of their behaviors often implicitly blame and marginalize families. Lareau and Horvat¹³ showed how working-class African American parents who expressed concerns about their children at school were perceived as interfering or "problematic," in contrast to "good" parents who advocated for their children in ways that more closely resembled white, normative standards of interaction and behavior (i.e. being deferential to teachers and avoiding criticism). The racialized assumptions that undergird school interactions differ by racial groups, but parents of color are primarily associated with negative interpretations.¹⁴ Some families proactively resist engaging with schools as an act of self-determination;¹⁵ others reclaim space and agency through their presence in or out of schools; and yet others "disengage" with schools. This theory of change illuminates how school systems reinforce practices and policies that lead to the reproduction of white norms that preclude nondominant families from meaningful participation in schools.

Theory of Change #3: Formal education leaders should share decision-making and equalize power relations to foster responsive schools.

A subset of the literature contends that educators and school leaders must recognize how schools systematically marginalize families and need to disrupt those marginalizing processes by providing opportunities for families to build their leadership and influence within their schools.¹⁶ To this end, the literature suggests that principals and superintendents employ strategies such as conducting informal "house" meetings with families, home visits, or being present and engaging in community spaces.¹⁷ These community-focused leadership

practices serve as opportunities to develop deep relationships of trust and build mutual understanding between communities and schools across all levels of the education system - from early childhood through high school.¹⁸ By engaging with families, education leaders can better tailor programs and schools to meet the needs and priorities of families and communities.

Theory of Change #4: Organize families and communities to lead equitable school change.

Another strand of the literature recognizes nondominant families and communities as possessing considerable knowledge and expertise to impact and improve schools towards more equitable outcomes.¹⁹ The literature identifies pathways by which nondominant families shape the policies and practices that determine their educational opportunities within and beyond school spaces. For example, research from the community organizing literature highlights the power and agency of families and communities to improve schools in the pursuit of educational equity.²⁰ Organizing with these goals focuses on school reform and enables families and community members to exert influence from outside of schools by bringing together diverse individuals, organizations, and agencies.²¹ Compared to more traditional assumptions that families need to “get on board” with the school’s agenda, these studies consider families equal partners in school change efforts. This theory of change seeks to leverage the expertise of families to hold systems accountable to developing and implementing more equitable school policies and practices.

In summary, the field of school-based family engagement has built a robust body of critical scholarship and strategies that seek to advance racial equity in schools and communities. The theories of change from the critical engagement literature are not mutually exclusive in working towards educational justice; rather, the different theories of change may work in tandem at various levels. Other literatures – such as family and informal learning, culture, learning, development, and the anthropology of education – offer alternative ways to envision families and communities as central actors in equitable student learning and development. Thus, converging research points to centering nondominant voices and community priorities in order to disrupt inequitable systems, practices, and norms – and to imagine and enact new and different ways forward.

We build from this critical scholarship to position FLDC as part of a broader movement to counter parent-blaming narratives and contribute research and practices that partner *with* nondominant families and communities to cultivate justice-based educational systems and community well-being.

Evolving a Research-with-Practice Methodology: *Solidarity-Driven Co-Design*

The FLDC emerged amidst a groundswell of calls for changing the conventional relationship between communities, education research, and practice²². This effort joins others in the field

in working to create new relationships, resources, mechanisms, and inquiries in collaboration with families, communities, and educators.

Our research design pulls from several different methodologies—design-based research,²³ participatory design-based research,²⁴ decolonizing methodologies²⁵ and community-engaged scholarship²⁶—building on them to evolve our methodological approach into what we call *solidarity-driven co-design*. In *solidarity-driven co-design* we engage families and communities as experts and decision-makers in identifying problems and investigating and implementing solutions over time. The aim of this approach is to make policy decisions and design educational practices, tools and organizations in ways that build solidarities in the moment as well as over time.²⁷ We take the idea of “walking our talk” to heart as we work to enact the relational changes we wish to see in the world in the process itself.

As Maisie Chin, Executive Director of CADRE and an FLDC leader, explained, *solidarity-driven co-design* seeks to “create the future kinds of relationships we hope to build in the present.” To do this we begin with a series of practices and understandings. We intentionally shift away from conducting research and practice *on* families to researching and designing *with* families.²⁸ Throughout the co-design process, we sought to move beyond “how do” questions that describe the way things currently are toward “how can” questions that generate knowledge and solutions towards new possibilities.²⁹ We begin from the premise that families and communities possess vital knowledge and expertise, not only about their own individual children but also about their communities, their histories, and systemic educational inequities in and out of schools. Such knowledge and expertise are not simply “assets” to appreciate. They are vital building blocks for efforts to transform our schools and broader educational systems towards educational justice. We understand the aim of this process as building collective agency and social transformation.³⁰

We enacted these principles of *solidarity-driven co-design research* by creating and supporting family and community design collaboratives, that is, sustained partnerships between families, community leaders, researchers, and sometimes professional educators. We systematically gathered, analyzed and used data to guide the next steps in the research, build new knowledge, and improve both practice and theory.³¹ In the first phase of the FLDC, we engaged 10 family and community design collaboratives in a series of in-depth reciprocal work groups called design circles with 6-35 individuals. In this early phase of development, each collaborative worked to engage stories, experiences, and expertise within their communities in order to imagine beyond the current status quo and catalyze action. All groups started from the same two guiding questions:

- How can communities, families, and educational systems co-design new possibilities toward community-defined well-being and education justice?
- How can we build and enact solidarities within and across communities?

These 10 design circles met three to five times over a span of weeks or months to identify injustices and issues as well as to co-design potential solutions towards education justice and community well-being. Indigenous, Latinx, African American, Asian American, and other families and community members joined researchers and in some cases, professional edu-

cators and systems-based administrators, in social dreaming and collective change-making to explore what transformative change might look like and how it might be brought about in education. The design circle sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed to produce a total of 36 transcripts (each ranging from 1.5 to 4 hours).

Our university-based research team partnered with the local family and community design collaboratives to analyze the transcript data both within and across sessions to identify theories of change and key concepts that reflected the ideas and strategies that emerged from this co-design process. We iteratively analyzed our data in five phases: 1) discuss data with each set of site-based collaborative partners to inform the next steps in the co-design process itself; 2) analyze transcripts and write analytic memos to develop our criteria and initial coding schemes; (3) systematically code all session transcripts and partner analysis conversations; 4) analyze the coded data to develop initial findings with collaborative members; 5) re-code our full data set using refined codes to finalize themes and consolidate findings with collaborative members.

Each local community defined both what educational justice and well-being meant for them and how they worked toward it themselves. Thus, each collaborative designed different practices, programs, or tools to support their efforts, but they all worked with the goal of educational justice and community well-being. These initial design circles were intended to catalyze new ideas, different relationships, and next phases of work, not to transform systems or accomplish educational justice in and of themselves. They did, however, either put new efforts in motion or provide the space and time to take existing work to a new level. For instance, in Chicago, members of diverse urban Indigenous communities envisioned a series of community-based intergenerational cultural learning activities aimed at “raising good elders.” In Los Angeles, parent leaders and researchers designed in-the-moment interventions to humanize racialized parent-teacher interactions and build solidarity between Latinx and African American parents. In West Salt Lake City, Utah, the team developed parent and administrator materials for strengthening the role of families in school-based decision-making councils. Seattle community leaders designed facilitative practices for cross-racial coalition work. In Detroit, community organizers worked with researchers to develop an action research guide for youth and community organizers. Systems-based leaders also built collaboratives in their own contexts. In Southfield, Michigan, the interim superintendent partnered with parents and principals to redesign their engagement in schools, while systems-based leaders in western Washington districts partnered with families and communities to co-design a principal hiring process, a district family engagement policy, teacher professional development, and a district family decision-making council.

Lest co-design become the next “silver bullet” in education reform, we caution that the initial process in these communities constituted a modest – but we argue critical – step forward in enabling local family and community collaboratives to build their capacity to make change over the long term. Tracking and supporting co-design processes across far-flung urban, suburban and rural geographies with distinct racial, cultural and linguistic histories, and particular community contexts, entailed significant challenges, constant adaptation, and inevitable tensions. Despite the diversity of the collaboratives, though, the dominant structures of US schooling and deficit-based assumptions about nondominant families and

communities in education were surprisingly consistent and often reasserted themselves into efforts to imagine alternatives. Across these distinct projects, outcomes and contexts, then, we identified a set of common strategies that shaped *how* these collaboratives approached co-designing with families and communities.

Strategies for Building Family and Community Design Collaboratives

Across the FLDC project we identified five major strategies utilized in the different collaboratives. Given our goal of making this work unique for each context, we never created a single list of strategies to use. Rather, each collaborative built upon the FLDC principles to develop and use strategies that came out of their own knowledge. Following the idea of engaged research, when a successful strategy emerged during the course of the project, we shared it with the different collaboratives. Not every collaborative utilized every one of these strategies, but these were the five most common strategies.

1. Involve families and communities as co-designers of their own futures.
2. Engage multiple identities and perspectives in interactions and relationships.
3. Sustain reflexive and iterative learning processes over time.
4. Engage current and ongoing tension points.
5. Imagine and enact change.

Strategy 1: Family and community design collaboratives involve families and communities as co-designers of their own futures.

Families and communities need to be the architects of their own futures. In practical terms, this means starting with and privileging family and community stories, lived experiences, knowledges, and cultural practices. Districts and schools must ensure that families and communities are actively present and shaping decisions. Social dreaming³² - collectively imagining futures founded on educational justice, community wellness, and critical solidarities – is a strategy for helping to develop and advance solutions that aren't defined by our existing systems. In practice this means beginning the work by providing time and space for nondominant families and communities themselves – not their representatives – to explore their own experiences in educational systems and collectively discuss their dreams for their children's education. For example, one design circle hosted a series of conversations about how Indigenous families and community members have experienced education historically up to the present. Although collaborative members discussed how schools had been a source of colonization, erasure, and oppression, facilitators also prompted participants to share their ancestral knowledge and stories of education and childrearing outside of schools, both the strengths and the things they wanted to do better for the next generation. They began to envision what education would be required to raise "good elders." In this way, Indigenous

community members and parents recognized both historical injustice and practices as they worked together toward a self-determined future rather than one shaped only in response to inequity.

Strategy 2: Family and community design collaboratives engage multiple identities and perspectives in interactions and relationships.

Building authentic and just relationships requires that people bring their full selves, including their multiple identities (e.g. mother and researcher and community organizer) to the process. This enables people to listen critically and to learn from one another by hearing their own stories mirrored in the struggles and dreams of others. Conversely, when individuals bring singular identities to co-design conversations, existing hierarchies, power dynamics, and traditional notions of expertise seemed to limit understanding of the problem and possible solutions. We saw how moment-to-moment interactions inadvertently reinforced marginalizing and colonizing practices and expectations. For example, one deficit belief that arose in conversations was the idea that some families of color are so focused on meeting their immediate needs that their children's education is not a priority for them. But when researchers or educators shared their own struggles as parents who are often away from their children, that vulnerability challenged the discourses of blame and opened the conversation to strategies for supporting each other as families more collectively.

Another assumption was that working-class immigrants and people of color do not have the capacity to dream, theorize or contribute to transforming education and systems of oppression. However, when principals and district leaders in one design collaborative listened closely to the stories and insights of the African American parents in their schools, they recognized their "specific revealing wisdom"³³ about the system and began to see themselves as extended family members working in tandem with parents to raise "whole" children. These interactions enabled them to push past the typical principal-parent power dynamics, allowing a shift in how people understood their respective expertise, a shift that can change both the quality of relationships within the group and the power dynamics in the broader system. For example, one parent and a principal in that district subsequently worked together to entirely restructure PTA meetings to center parents' stories, deep listening, and relationship-building between parents and with educators.

Strategy 3: Family and community design collaboratives sustain reflexive and iterative learning over time.

In order to enact more just relationships and develop theories and practices for a broader audience, participants need to engage in iterative learning. This means that the collaborative members must individually and collectively reflect on and improve our practices, expectations, and positionalities throughout the work. When this happened, especially when it happened reflexively, we saw increased trust, which in turn led to greater collective learning and agency. For instance, groups identified and discussed moments where they slipped into dominant assumptions in interactions. In one instance, upon revisiting the transcript

of their previous conversation, the facilitators engaged participants in questioning the unspoken authority given to the white facilitator over the facilitator of color. As one facilitator noted, this was a reflexive process of reciprocal vulnerability. A willingness to be changed as well as to push others towards change may require “vulnerability” and “courage.” It is crucial to commit to repairing relationships and to taking up tools and processes to engage in this reflexive work. In contrast, in meetings where only participants or historically marginalized members were expected to be vulnerable and to learn, we saw historical positions of power reinforced and evidence of tension in relationships and in reaching conceptual agreement.

Strategy 4: Family and community design collaboratives engage current and ongoing tension points.

Advancing education justice and community well-being is not simple or neutral work – as a result of historically rooted systemic power, moving towards justice entails real tensions between people and between ideas. Despite a common aversion to tension, acknowledging the tensions that exist within our families, communities, and work allows for a new kind of critical community engagement. When people seek to heal from the symptoms of systemic violence, new possibilities emerge. Our collaboratives found that tensions – both within relationships and around understandings of problems and solutions – often reflect structural and systemic inequities across generations. A critical historical analysis can help collaboratives unpack and disrupt these dominant power dynamics and assumptions. For example, in one design circle, parents role-played typical parent-educator discussions of student behavior. This helped them recognize how racialized power dynamics that play out in confrontational meetings disempower parents and harm young people. By recognizing those interactions as rooted in underlying assumptions and patterns of behavior, parents began to move through the emotions of the moment and find ways to lead educators towards more humanizing interactions. In a different circle, challenges to academic progress and physical health were reframed from community deficits to opportunities for community members to consider new roles and responsibilities working to address these issues.

Strategy 5: Family and community design collaboratives imagine and enact change.

Throughout this project, collaboratives moved beyond “listening sessions” that asked people to share their traumas for other people’s use (e.g., researchers, policymakers) toward imagining new practices and systems that move towards education justice and community well-being. Collaboratives did this by focusing not only on what happened in the past but also considering what could change to disrupt inequities. This helped build participant agency and shift research and practice towards the broader aims of wellness and justice. Imagining and enacting change required making space for messiness. This means struggling with “both/ands,” an idea from Black feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw,³⁴ who argues that reducing identities or decisions to simplistic Black/white binaries, yes/no, either/or is too limiting. Instead it is important to realize that people’s intersectional identities (for instance around race and gender) can shape experiences and understandings simultaneous-

ly. Making space for messiness also means letting go of the expectation that there will be a single, perfect model, explanation, or solution.

This process was nonlinear and evolved out of diverse socio-historic contexts. For this reason, collaborative members described the co-design process as “alive,” “authentic,” and “aligned.” That is, facilitators and participants recognized that the process of designing change could be transformational in and of itself. For example, in one design circle, the School Community Council (a school decision-making body) was supposed to include parents’ voices, but instead enacted a rubber-stamp dynamic that families of color experienced as alienating and exclusionary. Rather than simply telling the researchers or policymakers about those experiences and expecting them to do something about it, parents, teachers, principals, researchers, and district folks put their heads together to imagine what a productive School Community Council would “look like, sound like, taste like.” They put their ideas together into a report they shared with policymakers – which resulted in the state legislature changing the rules so that Councils can now use funds to support families in engaging in schools and decision-making.

Reclaiming Data as a Tool to Support Family and Community Collaboration

Several conventional measures of family engagement exist—for example, tracking attendance at school events, or even trying to correlate a parent’s participation to a child’s performance on a standardized test. We found that such measures fall substantially short in assessing the quality and impact of family and community design collaboratives. They were also not useful for improving efforts to collaborate with families and communities.

Instead members of the FLDC sought out new, different approaches to generating, analyzing, reflecting on and sharing equity-focused data. Most of the collaboratives used transcripts of their own conversations as a form of qualitative data to deepen and guide their work in the co-design sessions. The collaboratives also explored their own ways of measuring success beyond traditional systems-based approaches. Across sites, the collaboratives initiated conversations about “metrics that matter” that would address the aims of educational justice and community well-being and be useful for improving and assessing their designs and activities. For instance, together, we developed a metric to measure the multiple dimensions of “solidarity.” The metric consists of overlapping circles that prompt participants to indicate whether and how an activity 1) made communities’ histories, struggles, and resiliencies present; 2) built trust and care within and across communities; 3) cultivated practices and spaces for thriving communities. We piloted this metric at our site visit with Indigenous families and communities in Chicago, and they shared that they felt this measure better captured the aims of the cultural learning experiences they were designing. The American Indian Center in Chicago has begun to use a version of the metric to improve their work across programs and report to funders in their evaluations.

We need to further develop and pilot other new measures of family and community leadership. We found that such measures might move beyond colonizing approaches dictated by

dominant accountability systems and towards reclaiming “metrics that matter” in cultivating community well-being and educational justice.

Policy Recommendations

This work leads to several recommendations for school, system, state and federal decision-makers. System, school, community and foundation leaders committed to racial equity and family co-design work should:

Build and Set the Co-Design Table

- Support initiatives that tap into and develop the collective leadership of families and communities of color in improving schools, communities, and broader systems, rather than programs that seek to change parent behaviors to better support schools’ agendas. Design family engagement agendas and activities *with* family and community members, rather than approaching them as passive recipients.
- Prioritize school change efforts that engage families and communities with educators and seek to build solidarities across racial and professional divides *through* work to disrupt inequities.
- Provide funding and resources for sustained, reflective work to imagine and implement transformative change. Giving communities the time and space to design and implement the work ensures longer-term sustainability and ownership of change. This contrasts with existing programs that create “one-off” events focused on “listening” to families in order to “inform” predetermined goals and agendas.
- Partner with community-based organizations and public agencies to enact educational change. School systems alone cannot foster and sustain transformation and many community organizations already provide learning opportunities beyond the traditional system.
- Invest in building and supporting the capacity of local leaders (not policy elites) to facilitate meetings and conversations across racial, cultural and other differences. Such facilitation should enable participants to bring their full selves and learn from inevitable tensions.

Engage in Co-Design

- Recognize that histories and systemic inequalities shape how families and communities experience and participate in formal spaces, and that patterns of inequity tend to reassert themselves despite good intentions. Support strategies that intervene productively in the interactions that function to reinforce hierarchical power.

- Begin processes with the priorities, experiences, concerns, and issues that already exist in the communities that schools serve, rather than with the agendas of schools, funders or policymakers. Policies and funding should aim to strengthen work that is already happening in communities, rather than impose a new program.

Sustain Co-Design

- Redesign key educational decision-making processes (such as hiring, policy development, resource allocation, and school improvement) to ensure that those directly impacted by racial inequities have influence, not just token “input.”
- Ensure that programs have the capacity and flexibility to respond to the broader sociopolitical context and dynamics that shape daily realities for nondominant families and communities.
- Provide support for partnerships to reclaim data for reflection, improvement, and measuring progress towards educational justice and community well-being. Partner with researchers to identify or co-develop “metrics that matter” to local communities, reflecting community-determined accountabilities.

Notes and References

- 1 This policy memo is about family and community leadership—at the center of our work is an understanding that though researchers have the privilege of time and funding to publish our findings, every member of the FLDC actually helped lead the actual project. To compromise across this tension, we have added the full list of co-authors in the acknowledgements.
- 2 We target this piece towards education leaders in school systems and philanthropy. We have several other publications that share this information for other publics. The broadest audience can find information on our website <http://familydesigncollab.org/>. Academic publications include:

Alcantara, V. & Geller, J.D. (2017, April). *Moving from “This is how it’s always been” to “This is how it must be”: Lessons from participatory design research*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), San Antonio, TX. Seattle, WA: Family Leadership Design Collaborative;

López, G.R., Yanagui, A., & Kuttner, P.J. (2017, April). *What does partnership taste like?: Reimagining family-school partnerships through participatory design research*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), San Antonio, TX. Seattle, WA: Family Leadership Design Collaborative;

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Publications for community organizers and educators include:

Khalifa, M. (2017). *Centering ancestral knowledges: Leadership in learning environments*. FLDC Research-Practice Brief. Seattle, WA: Family Leadership Design Collaborative;

López, G.R., Mayer-Glenn, J., Yanagui, A. & Kuttner, P.J. (2016). *Re-imagining school community councils*. Salt Lake City, UT: School-Community Partnership Design Circle with Seattle, WA: Family Leadership Design Collaborative;

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Authors' Acknowledgements

This memo is about family and community leadership—at the center of our work is an understanding that though researchers have the privilege of time and funding to publish our findings, every member of the FLDC actually helped lead the actual project. As such we are adding the full list of additional co-authors here. We use a “+” to indicate the people who were part of the initial leadership team.

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