

Schools Drive Power Change Through Parent-Teacher Relationships

The design-thinking process can be a step toward learning more about the real barriers that keep families from engaging in their children's education.

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When parent leaders at P.S. 41 in the Bronx, New York, became part of [a design-thinking challenge](#) issued by the Teachers Guild—a project of worldwide design and consulting firm IDEO—they thought they were setting out to create a GED program for parents, who often complained that they felt unprepared to help their children with homework when they hadn't finished high school themselves.

But the more the leaders listened to what parents had to say, the more they learned that there were more pressing concerns, including homelessness and food insecurity.

"We started to do our homework," says Tom Sheppard, a parent leader at the school who also serves as an elected member of the District 11 Community Education Council. "We started to ask ourselves, 'Can parents really walk in and ask for a high school education when they are having real survival needs?'"

Ultimately, the request to the school for space shifted from having a room for adult education to having a room for families to find help with a range of needs. The result is the school's new Family Empowerment Zone, a place where parent leaders collaborate with school personnel, including the school social worker and the parent coordinator. Families now have access to a food pantry and a school-supply area, and teachers gave their time to help staff the center over the summer.

The Family Empowerment Zone at P.S. 41 is different from a typical school welcome center, says LaToya Reed, the school's Title I parent representative. While welcome centers are often still directed by school employees, Reed said it was important to have a parent-led space so "no one would feel ashamed."

Drivers of change

What has transpired at P.S. 41 is an example of how authentic communication with families can uncover the true barriers that prevent them from feeling comfortable in their children's school and from feeling that they are equal partners with educators.

"Relationships are what drive change—not new practices," says Molly McMahon, director of the Teachers Guild. "Design thinking can be seen as a one-off process for solving discrete problems, but it can foster real transformation when embraced as a mindset. What it requires is a community that believes in each other and trusts each other."

That's one of the lessons that the Teachers Guild has learned from its collaboration with P.S. 41, which—with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York—was meant to encourage educators and parents across the country to co-create programs that improve their schools and learning opportunities for students. Teams were asked to respond to the online challenge question: "How might we strengthen communication and trust between families to better support students' success?"

In another collaboration, the Teachers Guild supported an effort at Round Rock High School in Texas, where marketing teacher Tiffanie Harrison and the Round Rock Black Parents Association worked together to create restorative circles for parents, teachers, students, and community members.

Human-centered design is a problem-solving approach used to create new products and services based on knowing and empathizing with people. It is both a process and a mindset. In family engagement, families' voices, experiences, and needs become the center from which new ideas, processes, and services are developed.

"Relationships are what drive change—not new practices."

*— Molly McMahon,
The Teachers Guild*

Called Lift Every Voice, the project was inspired by the restorative practices that schools have increasingly adopted as a way to reduce racial disparities in school discipline and mend relationships between students and adults when trust has been broken.

Harrison and the parents felt that not only students but adults also need a safe place where they can discuss issues of race, equity, and creating schools where all families feel welcome. They held a community circle at a [September “unconference”](#) organized by Educators in Solidarity, an Austin-area coalition working to address issues of racism in schools and communities, to discuss ways to meet the needs of the larger community.

Meeting needs on “a deeper level”

But the team has since “pivoted,” Harrison says, to offer professional development for teachers and district personnel. They have also hosted Black Teachers Matter happy hours to give black educators a chance to connect and relax in a “safe and collaborative space,” she says.

“This is all to the benefit of our students,” Harrison says. “When parents and teachers work together, we can meet the needs of our students at such a deeper level.”

With [recent allegations](#) of discrimination against a local principal, Harrison says giving educators a forum in which to discuss these sensitive topics is even more pressing. Lift Every Voice would like to hold “racial healing circles” for those affected.

And the team now sees its work as a model for other communities and would like to see it spread. “Parents, particularly parents of black students,” Harrison says, “need support in advocacy all over the country.”

“When parents and teachers work together, we can meet the needs of our students at such a deeper level.”

*- Tiffanie Harrison
Round Rock Black Parents Association*



Parents at P.S. 41 in the Bronx, New York, celebrate the opening of the Family Empowerment Zone.

Lessons learned

With the official collaborations over, the Teachers Guild is considering ways for participants to continue sharing their experiences and lessons with each other, whether virtually or in person. McMahon and Lusmaia Diaz, the program manager for education, have also summarized what they've learned from teams of educators and parents across the country.

- **School represents inequity for marginalized communities.** That is where the distrust begins. Trust begins when educators, parents, and others in the school community understand their own assumptions before they listen to others, empathize, and make a commitment. Building trust also takes time, consistency, and vulnerability.
- **Accessibility matters.** It means designing for place, language, and culture and meeting people where they are. The core to designing for accessibility means attending to context and culture, language differences, and communication channels. Reflecting on the work in Round Rock, marketing teacher Tiffanie Harrison says, "We need to be in the community, instead of expecting the community to always come to us."
- **Recognition matters.** Family members' work to advocate for their children is often invisible. Recognition means having the opportunity to reflect on one's own experiences, to share it with others, and to have those contributions honored. Activities such as storytelling, gatherings, and opportunities to bring ideas to life are essential to recognizing families.
- Finally, **relationships matter.** Systems change through trust and belief. Relationships happen through having a shared vision, collaboration, distributive leadership, and feeling psychologically safe to challenge the status quo.

Another lesson learned from the collaborations is that just because the work of co-creation can take a different direction doesn't mean those involved in the process should abandon their original goals.

At P.S. 41, parent Tom Sheppard and parent representative LaToya Reed haven't given up on making sure the Family Empowerment Zone continues moving toward improving educational opportunities for parents so they can feel more confident to support their children's learning. They've held a family literacy event with books for families available in the school auditorium. And they plan to open GED classes to members of the community to make the program sustainable.

Sheppard says, "We don't have to sit around and wait." ↻



Another view of Family Empowerment Zone

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Suggested Citation:

Global Family Research Project, (2019). *Balance of power: As the racial makeup of D.C. schools change, Kindred works to give all parents a voice in improving their school*. Retrieved from bit.ly/GFRP_IDEO