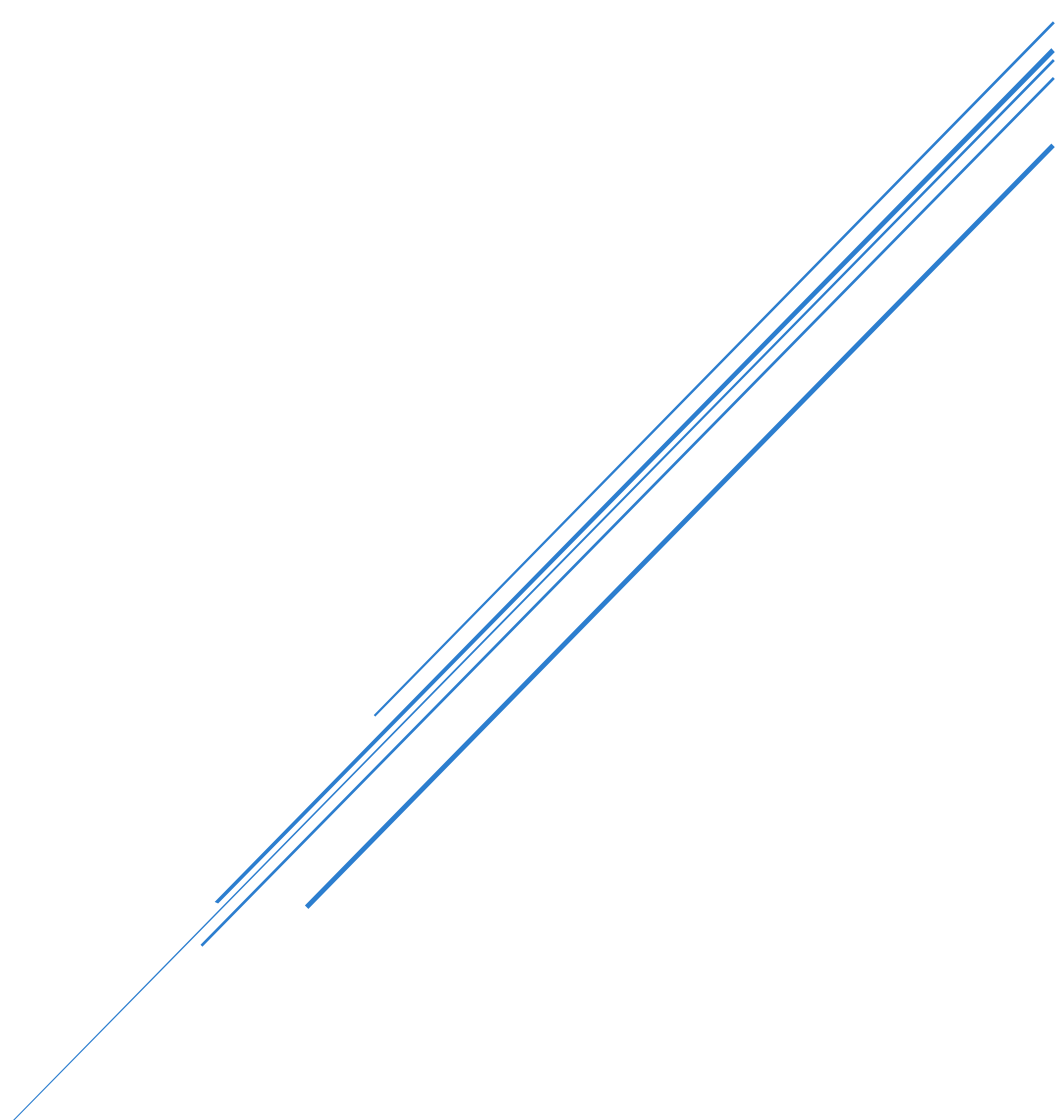


# SCHOOL/COMMUNITY TOOL BOX

Leveraging the power of family and school partnerships to transform the value of family and school partnerships.



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“Leveraging the power of family and school partnerships to transform the value of family and school partnerships.”

## Overview of the Project

This project supported five selected communities to pilot the use of the School/Community Tool Box that was jointly developed by the National Association for Community Mediation and Living Room Conversations. The toolbox includes step by step guides for a partnership of community mediation centers and school systems to use to both build community as well as address crisis in the relationship between the school and the community.

The pilot provided an opportunity for the local project teams to engage in a modified version of NAFCM's Learning to Action™ process focused on forming a supportive learning cohort,[1] supporting constructive dialogue[2] and fostering and sharing learning[3]. Funded by AAA-ICDR Foundation the project included initial training in using the toolbox, monthly learning cohort meetings including all local project teams and monthly individual meetings with the Project Lead, Dr. Mindy Burrell. The evaluation of project was an integral set of steps to allow NAFCM and living room conversations to evaluate the effectiveness of the tools in the toolbox both in their use by the local project teams and in creating the opportunities for policy change within the school systems

In each of the five communities, local project teams consisted of either a community mediation center, a school board or school district representative, and an education advocacy group (Scottsbluff, Nebraska; Mt Vernon, Washington; and, Savannah, Georgia) or a community mediation center and an education advocacy group who are building relations with their school board (Cincinnati, Ohio and Prince William County, Virginia).

Over the course of 18 months while the local project teams implemented the project activities in their local area, the evaluation team was working alongside to document the impact of the activities through a series of surveys, interviews, and review of artifacts created by the local project teams and project leadership. Overall, the evaluation found that the tools that were piloted were effective at their purpose of creating constructive conversation between school systems and community members. The addressing crisis tools were not used by any of the pilot teams. We found that there was limited public knowledge of the policy changes that came out of those community sessions even amongst those who had attended them.

Key learnings are that the tools were often used as a jumping off point and then were modified for the local context further development of the toolbox might include some direction on effective ways to provide that contextualization. The more successful project teams had an ongoing relationship with the school board and were not trying to develop that relationship during the project. A longer-term relationship built upon trust was a strong predictor of the success of the local project teams in achieving their policy change goals.

## Section 1: Methodology

The five project teams represented by the Community Mediation Center involved, were asked to fill out a baseline survey asking them to reflect on the relationships at the starting point between the team members and between the schools and the community. They were also asked to identify challenges and opportunities they envisioned at the outset of the project. These surveys were filled out following the initial orientation meetings and before they began planning listening sessions with their communities.

Following this baseline survey administered in late July/early August 2023, the teams were asked to submit additional data monthly as well as at the conclusion of each event they host. These brief surveys are an opportunity to track both tangible progress and the team members' subjective evaluation of community sentiments. This, combined with the monthly check in call notes gathered by project staff and observation of learning community calls supported the development of the case-by-case evaluation.

The evaluation includes a set of key leader interviews to gather insights from community members (defined broadly) who are impacted by the project but not a direct part of it. The expanded evaluation plan included interviews with 5 members in each of the five communities to trace their understanding of the evolution of the project in the community from roughly the mid-point (following initial listening sessions) in January 2024 through an interim interview in April/May 2024 to final interviews in September 2024. This methodology was intended to provide a 360-degree view on the impact of the use of the toolbox. This combines insider perspectives (the implementers: the Community Mediation Center, School District/ School Board and the Advocacy Group liaisons) and the outside participants, connected as either a school or community stakeholders participating in the process to address the potential and current tensions centered around the school and community relations. Chronicling the outsiders' experience, attitude and behavioral change supports a complete assessment of the impact of the toolbox and particular tool implementation toward dynamics of polarization, listening, intergroup empathy and pluralistic norms.

Project implementation teams were asked to nominate 5-8 individuals for selection for key leader interviews in each community. The interviews are semi-structured and last 1 to 1.5 hours each. Through January and February, we worked with project teams to collect a list of names and to schedule interviews. It was more difficult than we expected for the project teams to provide names and contacts, particularly for the Georgia and Virginia team. It was also more difficult than anticipated to get commitments and interviews scheduled with the individuals identified by the project teams. Significant follow-up was needed between the project manager and project teams to get their support in encouraging community members to respond. We substantially completed all 14 first round interviews by the end of April. The elongated period required to get interviews scheduled necessitated compression to 2 rounds of interviews. The second round of 7 interviews were conducted in July and August 2024 between school years.

The following interviews were conducted:

- Washington team: 3 first round and 2 second round interviews
- Nebraska team: 5 first round and 2 second round interviews
- Ohio team: 4 first round and 3 second round interviews
- Georgia: 1 first round and no second-round interviews
- Virginia: 1 first round and no second-round interviews

The difficulty in securing interviews and the variation in the amount of connection of the interviewees and the project means that comparison between cases is difficult so the interview data is primarily used to build out the case studies.

## Section 2: Case Studies

### Savannah, Georgia

#### Team Relationship

A pre-existing relationship exists between the school system, the CMC, and the Advocacy Group Deep Center. The team was challenged to get started and wanted to build on their pre-existing relationships with a vast network of stakeholders.

During the project a new superintendent was hired which tested the relationships between the CMC and the school system.

#### School-Community Relationship

Primary issues in the school-community relationship were identified as a lack of transparency and insufficient communication. This was reported both by the project team members and through the key leader interviews.

#### Results

The Savannah team has used the stakeholder mapping tool to help inform their development of two listening sessions, small stakeholder sessions and a living room conversation format with staff. They have reported an interest in continued conversation from the participants. They are learning how to use the tools more effectively and looking particularly at refinements to the questions they are asking. By the October listening session, the community members were expressing positive questions and the November group hoped to have listening sessions continue as a common practice. They continued listening sessions into the spring. The feedback they received was that meetings using the listening session questions would be a great way of creating a positive environment for parents and teachers to talk about successes and opportunities for students.

“We had one session where a parent said they belonged to Moms for Liberty...She had different views which she expressed, and afterwards she shared that she thought this was the first time anyone listened to her views. I used the listening session questions and in that conversation, there were expressed needs for transparency and communication, but it did not turn into a shouting match as seen on other school board meetings.” (Georgia Project Team)

The “Bringing People to the Table” tool was used for relationship building in meetings.

There have also been World Cafe meetings with educators in the fall. The team used information from the listening sessions to tailor World Café design. The team found this tool to be very generative and suggested it be highlighted not included as a part of the public participation guide.

This team also engaged in a Living Room Conversation in the spring which provided a different kind of feedback from parents than the proceeding listening sessions. They noted that the conversation elicited different kinds of feedback from the listening session and the questions that asked for memories got great conversation going.

The project coincided with the arrival of a new superintendent who embarked on a set of listening activities (“community conversations”) in parallel to the project team that were reaching a broader audience and focused on communication between the parents and schools. This is a strong show of support for increased communication but could have been coordinated better. The superintendent’s sessions led to a strategic document. Developing a policy about community engagement processes was the direction the group decided on. The district’s strategic plan now includes language about working with community partners to hold listening sessions, reflecting a shift in past practice. The team was asked to support connections between the Schools and Spanish speaking communities as part of a partnership in the policy change.

The toolbox has provided this team with entry points to begin the community processes they identified. They refined the tools and questions for their context over the life of the project. The team felt challenged to keep the momentum going through the series of meetings.

The Georgia team was working in a highly polarized context, and it shows in their notes. The team members also felt some personal challenges in listening to views very different from their own. One suggestion they had for working in a highly polarized environment is...

“It would help to be super specific about the container, about what we’re going to talk about, and keep it hyper local, hyper specific around something that we have the power to change and give the power in trauma-responsive way. For example, I could sit across from a Moms for Liberty person and talk about school communication protocols.... If we keep the conversation tight, it can work.”  
(Georgia Project Team)

This team felt very under pressure about the future of public education and worked in a complex environment.

## Interview Conclusions

Only one key leader was interviewed in Georgia. The overall impression from this key leader is that the school board does not interface well with the community with information sharing, communication, and school support. She reported strong community support from local partners, but not from elected school officials.

The school division has a new superintendent that is focused on increasing connections with the school community. A challenge that was identified was that communication from schools is decentralized with different schools taking different approaches.

Savannah has a strong network of social service organizations and community projects to build on. The community mediation center, however, is stretched.



## Hamilton County, Ohio

### Team Relationship

No pre-existing relationship exists between the school system, the CMC, and the Advocacy Group Deep Center. One of the major struggles for the team was trying to finalize a connection with a school system.

### School-Community Relationship

Trust between the community and school is fairly low, with some past joint efforts in different districts of the division. The most concerning issues are mental health and appropriate parental involvement. The team identified the challenges as Mental health issues, Parental and Family Involvement, Building, and Attendance, and Job Readiness as well as identifying the opportunity of involving parents and the community in finding solutions along with an opportunity to contribute to Ohio's larger Job-Readiness effort.

### Results

The Hamilton County team used the stakeholder analysis tool and reported that for it to be useful they needed to narrow the focus of the tool. They created a fact sheet for the team to use to ensure consistent communication across the team. One learning they found was they focused on, "making sure that our message is a positive one -----being sure not to convey a message that we are coming in to fix things for them or tell them what to do." (Ohio Project Team) They struggled to develop relationships with a school system to participate in the project.

They did intentional relationship building by participating in education expos and world cafes run by other organizations on education topics.

The team held listening sessions and used the Living Room Conversation model to prepare. They reported that narrowing the focus of the conversations has been a challenge, pointing to a need to subdivide topics. They intended to use the series of conversations with "what are issues" from the first sessions and then "how should we address them" from subsequent sessions.

In late fall they used a Living Room Conversation format with NGO leadership and framed it as modeling the type of conversation that can happen so the NGO's gained an idea of what such conversations would be like. This was strategic on the part of the team – since the participants were all leaders of nonprofits, they could see how good this conversation model is for building trust, social cohesion, sharing information and perspectives.

While the sessions they have held have been productive, they haven't been able to gather the community interest to determine a single direction. They received competing input from community leaders. The toolbox tools have worked as intended where they have been used- the group has not been able to deploy as many as they had hoped. They did find that once they were able to establish trust and that the team would be involved long term in the community, they found the community more engaged.

They initially focused on working with local PTA's to conduct needs assessment for the areas of concern for a community that was preparing for a merger of schools until the PTA's of those school indicated they were working together smoothly.

They continue to work with a School Board on policy issues around bullying. The concern is that the school has not moved forward with policy change because they are careful about public awareness of the bullying issues. Bullying was identified in interviews as a needed area of focus for school system efforts.

As the project progressed the focus changed toward, ““Collaborative things in our community may be a better result for us than changing a policy. That has more promise for us for continuing to expand than changing one policy would have.” (Ohio Project Team)

One complicating factor was the school board elections that happened in November 2023 so created a possibility of shifts in relationships. The team sent invitation letters to everyone that had been elected to invite them to a Living Room Conversation. Throughout the project this team struggled to build a working relationship with a specific school system leadership.

They have had some successes in expanding out trainings in conflict resolution to additional organizations including the Musketeer Association

## Interview Conclusions

The key leaders from Ohio shared frustration with the schools' lack of communication and coordination with the community. The emphasis fairly consistently pointed to communication issues starting at the top and impeding its flow down to local schools and communities. Overall, the lack of communication coupled with recent challenges in the community at large has stressed relations. Each school does have a coordinator whose job is to connect with the community so there is potentially a resource to build upon. Changes in how school choice is handled have diminished the connection of particular communities to a public specific school, since students are more widely distributed. Private schools seem to have higher trust levels.

Understanding the impact of the project on the perceptions of the key leaders was very difficult since it wasn't clear how to align the project team effort and community experiences since there was never a specific school system identified.

There were mixed opinions about the connections between schools and families. One interviewee pointed to the school specific coordinators that connect with the community. One talked about a disconnect between the schools and families, with parents not taking advantage of opportunities for connections with the schools. Social media activity was identified as an area that is creating stress and hostility with negative online conversations exacerbating tensions and polarization. Interviewees have seen input contribute to changes and that parent activity can matter.

Changing demographics of the surrounding community, including influx of refugee students and students with challenges at home, stressing the resilience of teachers and school staff to deal with it. One interviewee focused on the need for teachers to have

preparation to deal with kids with struggles and bullying. Gaps in funding post pandemic were identified by several as an ongoing concern.

During the follow up interviews the relationships between school and community was described as tumultuous with the ousting of the outsider superintendent, the interim insider superintendent, and the new insider superintendent. The new relationships are still shaking out with the community, school staff, and board leaders. It was too early to tell about trust levels with the new leadership and there is some confusion about who is making decisions.

Two interviewees had knowledge of proposed changes from the project. One mentioned the listening sessions but did not think there was follow-up and would like to see more from the project. One saw some improvement in how the school system values partnerships. The change of the superintendent was identified as a response to parent feedback.

## Gearing, Nebraska

### Team Relationship

This team has worked together successfully before on past programming and has built professional relationships among the key members. Trust within the team is strong. The team sees a challenge as getting parents who have not been engaged recently off the side lines to participate and identifying strategies to balance voices of parents. They see a recent state law requiring parental involvement as a great entry point for the project and has received positive reactions from school board members.

### School-Community Relationship

Mask mandates led to an increase of private parent social media groups and have activated against the schools. There have been threats toward school leadership and personnel. There is regular contact by a small group of vocal parents with school administration. The team is concerned about intervention by groups from outside the school district.

### Results

The Scottsbluff team has used the stakeholder mapping tool, living room conversations and listening sessions tools. In October they managed 9 listening sessions incorporating almost 150 participants (excluding school staff). They report the mapping tool as particularly effective. They suggested that further interactions of stakeholder mapping might be helped by a more international dive into the politics of the issues.

They combined the living room conversation tool with the listening session tool to help develop the listening session agenda. They reported different levels of effectiveness of the tools depending on the focus/narrowness of the questions presented and the different audiences.

This team attempted to leverage a policy change from outside the process that requires parental input to build momentum for their project. They noted differences across student level (elementary, middle, high) in parent's experience of connection to the schools which can generate additional detail for listening opportunities.

This team synthesized the tools in interesting ways and working toward larger goals. The team gathered substantial community feedback, building toward clarity on the policy changes they are pursuing. They have an interesting comparison with a nearby school district that is seeing increasing hostility between the school board and community, with contrast with what is happening in Geary where the project worked to help the schools engage openly.

They point out that they want to "Continue listening sessions with students so small things that come to the top, like more supervision on playgrounds, are dealt with and therefore ARE helpful with building trust." This focus on the voices of children was important.

The team's work supported the school board's adoption of a five-part strategy that focused on community engagement and incorporated information from the listening sessions.

## Interview Conclusions

Two main themes surfaced from the Nebraska key leaders' interviews. The first is frustration that social media is being used as a platform for galvanizing the community. Secondly, several of the key leaders expressed that the school district has different priorities than what many in the community would like to see. However, one key leader, who is involved at the district level, described aligned priorities and a high level of trust between the school system and the community. Transition in leadership at the board level was mentioned by several interviewees.

The school superintendent and school board members are reported to have strong alignment and a clearly strong working relationship. The addition of a new communication director was mentioned by almost all interviewees as a strong positive development. The strategic planning processes every 3-5 years is seen as an opportunity for meaningful community engagement. There were parent meetings at the beginning of the 2023-2024 year which included listening sessions. There were concerns about communication at the administrative level about the use of school space. Two interviewees associated with the schools talked about the demands from the community for information that cannot be shared because of HR regulations.

This case is interesting in that there are two entwined systems, Scottsbluff and Gering that have an ongoing rivalry between the two school systems. Respondents indicate that this is a result of the disfunction of local political leaders. There is also tension around property taxes levels which directly impacts school funding, making school issues a hot button topic particularly for community members without children in school. Needs beyond education were identified as a challenge at the district level.

Both follow-up interviewees was not aware of the change in policy but did see an increase in messaging and communication and saw value in the use of the Connect Portal to push out information.

## Mount Vernon, Washington

### Team Relationship

There is not a recent pre-existing relationship exists between the school system, the CMC, and the Advocacy Group.

### School-Community Relationship

Primary issues between the community and parents have revolved around budget cuts and layoffs. Trust has been impacted by a perception that the school board gave themselves raises and then laid off teachers and para educators but not admin positions. The team identified as a challenge getting necessary groups to the table and removing barriers to participation. They identified as an opportunity that they had made connections with trusted representatives in under heard groups and have a strategy to get them to the table.

### Results

The Mt Vernon team has worked with the stakeholder mapping tool and held 3 listening sessions. They emphasized their use of the Inquisitive Curiosity tool to build trust as well as the Stakeholder Mapping tool, Listening Session frameworks, and Unpacking the Conversation Agreements. Feedback was a desire to have some more easily printable facilitator tools to provide the prompts necessary to lead a listening session. They have identified both logistic and content area learning they want to engage with for the following sessions. The listening session learnings were “twofold: we don’t know what we don’t know, but listening sessions helped us to gather information and then utilize what we learned to find the necessary lynchpin of change.” (Washington Team)

The team did discover that publicity around the sessions created anxiety with some school system personnel when the framing was of capturing critique versus all opinions.

In implementing the sessions with interpreters, they discovered a need to have clear communication with the interpreters about their role (interpreting versus commenting) and the potential for the interpreters to have facilitation skills.

The area of policy change the group worked toward involved school-parent/home communication and ensuring that those communications are accessible to families. This has resulted in several initiatives to record and make available recordings of key meetings in both English and Spanish to endure that non-literate family members have access to education.

This team was unique because they had an active school board member on the team who found it to be a good opportunity to engage.

“This has helped me understand my role on the school board better. I’ve only been doing these 13 months and the first year you’re along for the ride but this helped give me a very specific thing that was my task – being a conduit. I focused on this as there was no one else from the board who could do it/ provide context for the center etc. In the team dynamic theory,

it helped me get into the storming and norming phases of the board. It gave me confidence that I'm one-fifth of the board even though others have been around longer. I need to start using the voice I have to shape directions and not be passive in things." (Washington Team)

The feedback from the process gave this school board member an opportunity to socialize change opportunities with colleagues on the school board and in administration. The team noted that a vote of no-confidence in a school board member created challenges for the Board's work but did not upset this process. "It helped (us) to see the WA team had a stronger relationship with their school district than they initially realized." (Washington Team)

## Interview Conclusions

The key leaders interviewed so far in Washington have all described a severe disconnect between the school system, particularly at the district level, and the community. Each participant gave personal and community examples of lack of information sharing and community engagement. This was described as "detached", "fractured", or "impersonal". This lack of information led to misinformation. One reported hearing about a vote of "no confidence" in one of the school leaders. One leader talked about last minute decisions that take the community by surprise.

All the respondents talked about the diversity of the community and the challenges in helping the diverse community to work together. "Tribal" was a word used by one to describe the divisions but then pointed out that the community works together despite differences.

Respondents reported concerns about private schools pulling both staff and students away from public schools, contributing to funding issues. There is also unevenness in how the schools are working with other community partners (YMCA, etc.) with a decentralized model leading each individual school to build its own relationship with the partners.

The listening sessions were reported to have created anxiety among school board members who reacted negatively to some community members sharing information about the sessions. Because the listening sessions were invitation only and there was no follow-up they didn't help build trust.

One interviewee indicated they were not aware of the policy shift but did see differences in how the school was operating in other areas. Another received an email about the change, but it was dated 6 months earlier, so it felt inauthentic. Communication remains an issue with outdated web content although minutes are posted more promptly. The new superintendent was identified as showing up more in the community although the chaos of the resignation of the previous superintendent has overshadowed change.

## Prince William County, VA

### Team Relationship

The CMC tried to work to build upon previous work in restorative processes with the schools to have engagement with the specific school systems. The team's primary challenge is getting high level support from the school system. The Board is focused primarily on upcoming election campaigns, and it is hard to focus efforts. They see it as an opportunity to pivot to a grassroots approach of working with individual schools instead of the larger system.

### School-Community Relationship

Prince William is next door to Loudoun County which is experiencing high-profile political conflict between schools and the community and similar issues showing up in another neighboring county, Fairfax. The overlapping issues include: trans bathrooms, use of pronouns and chosen names without direct parental input, quality of teachers during a nationwide teacher shortage, classroom sizes, technology, student social disconnection, etc. Prince William Board meetings got very disruptive due to the pandemic and afterward, but things have quieted down recently but little has been done to build/repair school-community connections.

### Results

This team had more active engagement with the schools through Restorative Practices training than other teams so their entry points could have been but it is harder to disentangle the new work from the results of previous work. The team struggled to build a relationship with a school system. Even with the restorative practice work they had issues accessing school leadership.

The team leveraged a relationship with school staff to send out surveys to gather feedback.

They used the listening session tools although the turnout of the event wasn't good enough to really evaluate usefulness of the tools. They partnered with Parent Liaison's to build turnout. One learning was combining listening sessions with other events already happening to build turnout. They provided an example of building a listening session on an English as a second language class. One Middle Eastern gentleman was excited by this opportunity and determined to participate. He wrote out his answers to the questions, took a photo of his answers which he sent to his brother, who immediately translated them and sent them back so the gentleman's answers could be shared. The gentleman was thrilled to have the opportunity and could not stop thanking you all for going out of your way to create this opportunity for people to contribute. This is "making magical things happen" as he and his classmates are people whose voices likely would not otherwise have been heard.

They focused, appropriately, on building buy in with the school system leadership for engagement with the process further and demonstrating/evaluating impact. They provide some important lessons learned about understanding the landscape of the politics of a community to understand the entry points for connection.



During the period of the grant there was major political disruption in the community focused on land use decisions for data centers which created additional polarization in an already polarized community. In addition, both districts close to the CMC had elections for school board members in November 2023 that changed the makeup with the school boards and made it difficult to get commitments to change. In addition, the Governor of Virginia is making parent involvement part of the campaign and has held several town halls for parents, although inviting only certain types of parents. This polarization of education made it difficult for the school systems to partner to make change.

## Interview Conclusions

Only one key leader has been interviewed in Virginia. This community was a significant challenge to find potential interviewees. Efforts to connect to the Spanish language community were not successful. The key leader's perspective is from a school administrative position. This individual relayed that serious effort was being made to connect with the community to overcome an us vs them attitude (school vs parents/community) in order to enhance collaboration.

This community has a large English as a second language population so the role of school liaisons who provide connection in multiple languages is key. There has been new software put in place to translate messages into additional home languages. Although challenges remain in ensuring parents have received and read messages.

## Section 3: Summary

### Toolbox Tools Used

The toolbox version 1.0 tested through this process was divided into two sections of tools. The first section was intended to provide an opportunity to Develop Trust and Build Relationships. The specific tools included were:

- Community Living Room Conversation
- First Meetings to Bring People to the Table
- Introspection Tool
- Inquisitive Curiosity Tool
- Keeping Your School Community's Momentum Going
- Listening Session Tool
- Stakeholder Mapping Tool
- Unpacking the Conversation Agreements

The two primary tools used by the communities were the Listening Session tool and the Stakeholder mapping tool. There was lighter use of the Inquisitive Curiosity Tool and the Bringing People to the Table Tool.

Both the project manager and team leaders reported that they used the tools as presenting as a jumping off point and were used then with relatively heavy revision and modification based on the context. This kind of modification was facilitated and made possible by the structure of the process as a learning community as well as significant support and guidance from the project management team to help them work through the revision.

One team suggested that more guidance on how to tailor the toolbox to the complexities and context of particular districts would be useful. It was also suggested that Title I requirements for family engagement might be a point of alignment.

This points to a need in the next version of the tools to have opportunities to support and training to help teams who want to implement tools.

The second section was structured as Addressing Moments of Crisis. The specific tools included:

- Stakeholder Mapping Tool
- Listening Session Tool
- Inquisitive Curiosity Tool
- Conversation Pathway: Getting Started
- Tips for Difficult Conversations
- Situation Response Tool
- De-escalation Tool

None of the teams in the project used tools intended for Moments of Crisis.

## Toolbox Lessons Learned

Across the five teams a take-away in working with the toolbox is that it takes time to socialize change and that the period of the project wasn't long enough in several cases to achieve substantial change. Comments from multiple teams were a need to modify the tools to make them context specific.

The teams across the board felt like the tools "let people hear other people in a safe environment which feels like we're all together instead of them against us. They let us seek change in a non-threatening way."

There was a sense that in following the tools as written, the moderator's opening statement needs to be less sanitized, more about acknowledging that, while you're neutral to content, you're part of the community yourselves and do wish to help build connection and trust and better communication

## Learning Cohort Support

The learning cohort support, outline in other elements of the project reporting was identified by every team as being crucial to their success. The sense of shared challenges and shared learning enhanced the outcomes.

In further rollout, the establishment of a cohort structure seems essential.

## Future Development

The teams were asked to reflect on how the toolbox could be improved for future opportunities. There were several specific suggestions.

- Some of the pages in the toolbox just have too much text.
- More templates like workshop templates or scripts would help. There are lots of good ideas but need more help on "how do I actually do this?"
- Perhaps include a table aligning this initiative with districts' existing priorities and how to measure what they need to measure.
- Prepping cards with questions on them for listening sessions. These can be used as talking pieces, but also, if time runs short, as an easy way for people to choose one or two of many questions to choose to respond to during their time in the circle.

## Policy Outcomes

The policy changes attempted included:

- Washington: greater clarity and accessibility of information for parents on school district website

- Nebraska: school board commitment to have regular conversations with communities outside of school board meetings and greater clarity and accessibility of info generally
- Georgia: school district's Department of Public Affairs will implement practices to broaden the reach and impact of communication with stakeholders, including through listening sessions/ community conversations
- Ohio: not policy change, but rather introducing the concept to the Ohio NGO community that facilitated conversations are powerful
- Virginia: making listening sessions or other community outreach tool a “go-to” tool for schools to use

Across the teams there was initial confusion about what constitute policy change. As one said ““Before DG explained that policy change could be small, we couldn’t see the potential change”. The understanding that the policy change can be small is also good for school boards, which (in their case) initially felt the project was too big and moving too fast.

Across the board, the key leaders were unaware of the policy/practice/procedure changes that the school systems had selected. A couple of interviewees recalled listening sessions with positivity but expressed disappointment at not seeing concrete measures/changes come from those sessions. However, there was a general sense that the school systems had made efforts at better communication with the community and school partners since the initial interviews last fall. Key leaders in each state expressed hope for further collaboration with school systems, but many related financial, staffing, and community issues (attitudes toward education, violence, mental health, etc.) as perceived barriers to the school system’s capacity to increase engagement with the community. Overall, there were no major shifts in perception between the two interview periods.

## Supporting & Limiting Conditions for Success

### Political Conditions

Gatekeepers were an important element in developing relationships among the teams. One team pointed out we should “not to forget administrators and secretaries as they are gatekeepers”. All of the teams discussed pressures on the schools. One noted that “Schools are guarded and are hit about everything. Key is to find someone who can connect a CMC with the school/ trusted link. Without (a team members) relationship with the district, this project would not have happened.

Teams lack formal positional power felt like a limitation in pushing change. There was a need for more confidence in asks to school leadership.

Several teams echoed this sentiment from the Georgia team, “existential threat to public education and a lot of that is playing out in GA in politics, intending to defund public school by using public funds to let parents “choose”. “In peoples’ anxiety about threat

we fail to see that it's not parents v teachers, (we have parents who are teachers, and v versa – it's not either /or)." (Georgia) This was expressed as a concern as the toolbox not being perceived as "Neutral."

For two of the teams (the two who found least success) the project encompassed an election for School Board that changed leadership structures. This upheaval in political structure made it difficult to get School Board commitments.

## Communication Conditions

Communication cultures across all of the teams varied widely. Based on different contextual situations the teams struggled with division about the goal of public education. "The narrative that public education is a public good is NOT working. It's being called indoctrination in the name of freedom, and state control." (Georgia)

All of the teams ended up focusing on improving communication challenges between school boards and communities which highlights the importance of this element. "The policy context is so complex and having someone really familiar with that piece of it would be helpful for the project. The fever pitch of anxiety is so high, and people are so wound up, that we can't get them to sit down together for listening sessions on crucial issues" (Georgia). The primary benefit identified by the project teams is tools that can be used to work with polarized communities to rebuild opportunities for communication.

## Conclusion

Following the evaluation methodology outlined in the first section, this report looks at both the individual artifacts of the project for each project team, reflections of project leadership, and interview data with community member to come to several conclusions.

1. The Toolbox tools that were used by teams worked as intended, providing step by step instructions for implementing collaborative conversations.
2. There is no data on the tools for the moment of crisis tools- these should be evaluated after future piloting.
3. The learning cohort was an important element to build the confidence of the project teams.
4. Pre-existing relationship of trust between CMC's and School Leadership was a primary pre-condition for success. Just work with the system wasn't enough, established multi-topic relationships were required.
5. Most community members were not aware of the larger policy changes even if they were aware of the meetings and public sessions, indicating a limitation in communication by the school's about outcomes.
6. There are suggestions for future build out the tools prior to implementation of the next steps.