

EARLY LEARNING SUCCESS THROUGH COLLABORATION

# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

STRATEGIES TO PREPARE ALL CHILDREN TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN SCHOOL



Connecticut  
Early Childhood  
Alliance



# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

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Donald E. Williams, Jr., CEA Director of Policy, Research, and Reform



Mayor Toni Harp, New Haven



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report represents the perspectives of nearly 200 parents, educators, local leaders, and service providers who live and work in Connecticut's neediest communities. Participants shared their perspectives in the recent Community Conversations symposium. The proceedings of this symposium are summarized in this report.

Participants at the Community Conversations symposium discussed the many challenges facing early childhood development and learned about success stories that exemplify how community engagement, collaboration, and innovation have been harnessed to develop young children into strong students. They discussed key factors influencing early learning, child development, and literacy. They learned strategies for building collaborative, inclusive, and engaging school and community partnerships. And they addressed persistent challenges caused by structural racism, inequity, and bias—implicit and otherwise—that continue to impact child development in communities of color.

Key takeaways from the symposium can inform state and local decisions:

**1. Commitment:** A

community's system of child development, like a garden, is most productive when it is tended. Decisions to reduce resources and make collaboration inefficient will cause long-term harm to children and the communities in which they live.



Robert Cotto

**2. Partnerships:** There are

various public and private services targeting child development. Policies and practices that foster collaboration can be the most successful and cost-effective. The work of Family Resource Centers, Community Schools, and Yale's 21st Century Schools model developed by Ed Zigler are models for implementation.

**3. Community Schools:** Proven strategies like comprehensive community schools can cost-effectively connect services to the needs of students and their families, and maximize student learning opportunities. Collaborations between schools, Family Resource Centers, and local partners have shown great success and should be enhanced.

**4. Racial Equity:** Challenges facing children and families impacted by poverty must be met head-on and cannot be fully addressed without addressing structural barriers like racism and bias that constrain opportunities for advancement.

**5. Restorative**

**Practices:** Early learning environments can and should address the social and emotional needs of students as a preventative step to assist students in their development and reduce incidents of disruptive behavior.



Dr. Julian Vasquez Heilig

**6. Collaboration:** True collaboration creates ownership of decisions and engagement

that can be greater than the sum of their parts. Bottom-up engagement that promotes and voices of parents, educators, and other local stakeholders results in the most effectively implemented solutions to locally identified challenges.

**7. Individualized Attention:** One size does not fit all. Policies and practices should enable educators of all children to recognize each child's unique gifts and individualized needs. Trends in education policy affecting young learners have relied heavily on standardization and "objective" measures that ignore research, invite bias, and ultimately exacerbate achievement gaps. They have diminished play and social-emotional learning. They should be reversed.

For additional information on presentations at the symposium and videos of the keynote and breakout sessions, visit [www.teachers-policy-institute.org/events.html](http://www.teachers-policy-institute.org/events.html).



Ellen Shemitz, Executive Director, Connecticut Voices for Children

## PLENARY: ED TALK ON COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

**Dr. Julian Vasquez Heilig** Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, California State University and California NAACP Education Chair

Dr. Julian Vasquez Heilig shared his perspectives on events in urban communities that have undermined democracy and invited privatization at the expense of racial and economic equity. He underscored the importance of community-based improvement and collaboration over the imposition of top-down corporate-inspired reforms.

Quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s observation that "this country has socialism for the rich, rugged individualism for the poor," Dr. Heilig drew attention to the school closures that negatively affect neighborhoods with a false promise of "choice." As an example, he noted that closing a school and replacing it with a charter school run by some outside company is not providing choice—it is taking control out of communities and abolishing democratic control of schools. Education reform has meant taking away democracy and local control. It has been taking away individual attention to each child and replacing it with cookie-cutter curriculums and zero-tolerance punishment policies. He noted that it is time to take back control of children's most formative years.

Dr. Heilig praised the work of the parents, educators, and service providers in the room for coming together to address the many needs of children in more collaborative ways. One strategy promoted by Dr. Heilig, called "Promise Neighborhoods," embodies community based approaches to child development. According to the Promise Neighborhoods Institute, Promise Neighborhoods assist "neighborhoods in building a seamlessly linked cradle-to-career pipeline of education, health, and social supports to create communities of opportunity for children and their families; providing technical assistance; facilitating peer to peer learning; advancing and supporting equitable policy strategies...."

Promise neighborhoods are federally-supported and have been developed in cities across the country. While federal grant funding may be an option for cities to consider, even in its



Dr. Julian Vasquez Heilig

absence, the promise neighborhood strategy is one that can be emulated in communities cost-effectively. The cradle-to-college approach of Promise Neighborhoods ensures continuity of services and attention through early care, preschool, literacy, and adolescent phases of a child's life.

Dr. Heilig also drew attention to comprehensive community school models that embrace the involvement of parents, local leaders, educators, and service providers around identified needs and resources for children. Citing examples from Austin Texas, New York City, and elsewhere, he noted the importance of community members collaborating to improve opportunities for children.

In Community Schools and Promise Neighborhoods are the seeds of community engagement done right. Because such approaches enable communities to determine their unique challenges and identify specific resources in their community to address them, the continuity of services becomes more targeted, cost-effective, and meaningful. Dr. Heilig noted that building community solutions is not easy work; it takes time, commitment, and organizing. He shared tips for creating more empowering communities through the use of social media and networking that can bring neighbors together toward a shared vision and goals.

**Takeaway:** Community members can define the destiny of their communities when they work together to achieve common goals for their children. This represents democracy at its best. In the absence of collaboration, communities lose control to outside interests and the imposition of misguided top-down reforms.

For more on Dr. Heilig's work and comments see:

[www.cloakinginequity.com](http://www.cloakinginequity.com)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=14iH0-rrRxc&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14iH0-rrRxc&feature=youtu.be)



## THE STATE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

**Daniel Long**, Research Director and **Nicole Updegrove**, Associate Policy Fellow, Connecticut Voices for Children

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**Description:** Experts share the latest information on the status of childcare access and affordability, child poverty, unmet needs, and the challenges Connecticut faces in ensuring equitable opportunities for all of its children

This presentation looked at available data on early childhood trends from 2002 to 2015 in the areas of early childhood program funding, slots, types of child care, the early childhood workforce, and access to programs. Notable trends were the increased investment in early childhood, the rise in child poverty, a decline in licensed family child care, and inequity in preschool access.

Participants discussed perspectives on multiple issues affecting child development. The recent funding crisis in Connecticut's Care4Kids child care subsidy program was prominent. In addition to the primary impact on parents and service providers triggered by underfunding, the ancillary impact on employers, the income security of families, and the stability for children underscored the damage that can be done to the fabric of communities.

Participants also discussed the struggles of the early childhood workforce. Persistent underfunding has been reinforcing uncompetitive wages that ultimately limit the supply of more highly qualified early childcare workers. This cycle of disinvestment reinforces the cycle of poverty that leaves disproportionately more children of need underprepared for kindergarten.

Participants also raised concerns regarding the limits and failures of assessing children's school readiness in ways that are age-appropriate and pedagogically consistent with positive child development. Ill-conceived trends that narrow the early childhood curriculum have deemphasized the value of social and emotional learning, and the development of other critical competencies. Participants also discussed the weaving of this troubling trend into the K-12 system with the overemphasis placed on statewide mastery exams, like the state's use of the SBAC tests. This overreliance on narrow outcomes has invited cultural and racial bias, reliance on negative reinforcement and harsh discipline, and standardization insensitive to learners. In communities where learning environments can do the most to close the achievement gap, a narrowed focus on limited outcomes is doing a disservice to Connecticut's neediest children.

The presenters and participants discussed recommendations to address these issues:

1. Continue to invest in child care and preschool.
2. Increase support for home-based child care.
3. Improve the links between early childhood programs.
4. Implement educational change collaboratively, particularly with respect to the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act.
5. Support higher education and fair compensation for child care workers.

**Takeaway:** There are various services targeting child development. We must look at how they are interrelated and how collaboration can best ensure that all of the needs of children are addressed equitably and appropriately.



Ellen Shemitz, Executive Director, Connecticut Voices for Children



Dr. Daniel Long

## OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS: COORDINATING TWO GENERATION TRAINING PILOTS

**Amy Waterman** President, Connecticut Family Resource Center Alliance and Middletown FRC Director  
**Cathy Battista** Meriden FRC Director and Past President, Connecticut FRC Alliance

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**Description:** In 2015, Connecticut became the first state in the nation to establish a two-generational school readiness and workforce development pilot program to deliver academic and job readiness support services across generations, (parent and child or caregiver), concurrently. The program assesses the needs of the whole family, creates portals for learning, and coordinates early learning, adult education, housing, public health, job training, transportation, and other related support services to bolster school and workforce success for both parent and child. Attendees will learn about the successful strategies and challenges ahead for more comprehensively and efficiently marshaling community resources to meet the needs of parents.

Overcoming cyclical poverty takes a multi-faceted approach that addresses multiple points of influence. A successful approach called Two-Generational Programs or “Two-Gen,” coordinates early childhood services, parenting skill training, and job training to promote economic self-sufficiency.

Two-generation program approaches have been used for over 20 years. They have been implemented through Head Start (Head Start Family Service Centers), Even Start (US DOE), the Comprehensive Child Development Program (US Department of Health and Human Services), and through other public and private partnerships. They have shown tremendous success in their 20-year history.

According to the presenters, there are five key components of the Two-Gen approach—programs, policies, systems, and research:

**Programs:** Two-generation programs provide opportunities for and meet the needs of parents and their children together. Spanning the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, two-generation programs exist along the continuum and range from established to emerging organizations.

**Policies:** Federal and state policymakers can pursue new or revised policies to help parents and children break out of the cycle of poverty. These policy recommendations that support two-generations together span early education, post-secondary education, economic assets and health and well-being. They are informed by a growing field of innovative practitioners and policymakers. The policies work within the existing legislative and funding landscape rather than seeking new funding or legislation.

**Systems:** Two-generation approaches can be applied to systems—formal (e.g., a municipal public housing authority, a statewide community college system) or informal (e.g., the patchwork of early childhood education funding streams that exists in many states). These systems may be loosely configured or more integrated depending upon the state or community.

**Research:** A strong body of academic research is needed to build an evidence base that shows what works best for whom and to undergird effective policies, programs, and system change. To learn more about the established and emerging two-generation research, go to [www.ascend.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.ascend.aspeninstitute.org).

Connecticut is one of only two states to implement a statewide

Two-Gen strategy through a pilot program enacted in 2015. Family resource centers have become central to administering local programs by adding a workforce development component to their service profile. This broadening of mission, while challenging, is consistent with the proven strategies of the 21st Century Schools model developed by researchers with the Zigler Center for Child Development and Social Policy at Yale (see breakout discussion in this report).

A Two-Gen program operated by a family resource center in Meriden, Connecticut recently took on this challenge. In addition to its long-standing commitment to core services, the Meriden Two-Gen initiative helps parents address obstacles to job opportunities. It connects parents to job training resources and program alumni who serve as “navigators” who help



Kyle Pilon, Two-Gen Coordinator, and Cathy Battista, Meriden FRC Director

parents find and access needed services. The program also addresses gateway barriers, like child care and transportation services, that prevent access to training and job opportunities.

The program is open to underemployed and unemployed low-income parents who have children under age eight. Most in Meriden had been referred from adult education programs. Interested families who meet the eligibility criteria are referred to an intake process that is rooted in building a mutual partnership and understanding the long-term goals of applicants’ families. A standard question during the process is “What are your goals, hopes, and dreams?” Not every family is

selected. The program is not just about getting a job; it's about finding a rewarding career.

Those who are selected into the program are then asked to develop a Family Goals Plan, which they plan with their navigator. Goals focus on early childhood education, secondary and postsecondary attainment, occupational goals, building social capital, and health and well-being. The program helps many parents enroll in community college and workshops on financial literacy, parent empowerment, and other life skills.

Collaboration and engagement reinforce the mission, sustenance, and success of the program. The program is guided by a steering committee that includes parents. Participating families become “ambassadors” for future participants and the Family Navigators are drawn from program alumni. By engaging parents and participants in this way, Two-Gen provides an inclusive and supportive environment; it also builds a cadre of trained volunteers and staff for more efficient delivery of services.

Partnerships are also key to efficiently and effectively delivering results. The program operators in Meriden strive to build more partnerships with community providers and agencies. Currently, they partner with about twenty public and non-profit agencies including:

- ACES Early Childhood Services
- American Job Center
- Boys and Girls Club
- Catholic Charities
- Child Guidance Clinic
- Community Health Center
- FAVOR
- Girls INC
- ION Bank
- Literacy Volunteers
- Meriden Adult Education
- Meriden Children First
- Meriden Health and Human Services
- Meriden Housing Authority
- Middlesex Community College
- MidState Medical Center
- Rushford Healthcare
- South Central Connecticut Substance Abuse
- Women and Families Center
- YMCA

Outcomes of Two-Gen programs have been favorable to date. The new Connecticut pilot programs await their evaluation by independent evaluators who will be reviewing the pilot programs. While it has been established that the Meriden Two-Gen is already making positive changes in people's lives, challenges to more successful implementation are being identified. The program can become more efficient and expand its reach.

The primary concern is funding. The pilot program is funded by state pilot grant that enables the center to implement the

program cost-effectively. Improving efficiency and expanding the program's reach rely on the dependability of this funding. The state's continual revenue shortfalls are unsettling and threaten the sustainability of the program.

Program sustenance is a precursor to addressing other challenges to enhancing the program and making it more efficient. Securing greater commitments from partners who can provide gateway services of child care and transportation could free up ongoing staff time and resources for other purposes. There are overlaps in the provision of other services that could be refined to more cost-effectively address participant needs. Also, intake of participants has relied on interviews and recruiting the strongest candidates. To expand the reach and

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***“The Meriden Two-Gen program exemplifies how a small state investment can leverage more comprehensive services through collaboration, engagement of communities, and innovation.”***

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effect of the Meriden Two-Gen program, intake will shift to a recruitment model that places less emphasis on strength and more on need—a shift made more possible through the greater capacity a growing cadre of staff and volunteers brings.

In summary, the Meriden Two-Gen program exemplifies how a small state investment can leverage more comprehensive services through collaboration, engagement of communities, and innovation.

**Takeaway:** Focusing on the specific needs of people in their local communities can better address opportunity. Building partnerships makes it easier to connect and coordinate services effectively and efficiently.

## ALTERNATIVE TO SUSPENSIONS: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

**Steven Hernandez** Executive Director, Connecticut Commission on Women, Children, and Seniors

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**Description:** Some educational settings practice harsh, zero-tolerance authoritarian discipline policies that can be counter-productive to child development and learning. They can also be fraught with racial bias and inequitable treatment. But some programs and schools are beginning to implement positive school climate and “restorative practice” strategies that address root causes of poor behavior, enable children to be part of problem solving, foster mutual respect, and proactively build more positive school communities. The Commission is on the forefront of implementation and has recently been awarded a national philanthropic grant to expand its work. Attendees will learn about the social and emotional skills building and restorative practice model being promoted by the Commission, including implementation experiences in Connecticut schools. Discover whether this is a practice that could be adopted in your local school or program.

Connecticut has strong anti-bullying legislation—but to create positive school climates that enable all children to learn we need to increase our focus on preventative strategies that address the causes of poor behavior.

Teaching social and emotional skills is one way to prevent behavior problems before they start and remedy existing behavior problems.

Social and emotional skills may sometimes seem like abilities that students either possess or lack, but they really can be taught. Students do not gain these skills organically but instead learn them by the way the adults in their lives model behaviors. These skills can be taught intentionally in schools.

Important social and emotional learning skills include self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These are skills that are



Steven Hernandez

vital in the classroom and can transform a student from tuned out and bored to engaged and curious.

Social and emotional skills are best taught not by adopting an entirely new curriculum, but by integrating the skills into everyday learning and having them permeate the whole school day.

Schools that are looking to implement a social and emotional learning approach can look to model practices that have already been developed in Connecticut. These model practices rely on best practices already in place in some Connecticut schools and demonstrate how to successfully weave the practices into the school day.

Community support is necessary to sustain this work. Teachers and administrators need to communicate with parents and community members about the importance of these skills and get the whole community on board with this work. By focusing on the goals educators, parents, and community members share for students, all stakeholders can come to see how social and emotional skills are vital to reaching those goals. At the high school level in particular, youth leadership and advocacy can also be instrumental to implementing a social and emotional learning framework.

Schools that have successfully implemented approaches to teaching social and emotional skills see improved attendance rates, reduced rates of suspensions and expulsions, improved literacy rates, and improved graduation rates.

**Takeaway:** Social and emotional skills are vital to students’ success in school. These are skills that can be taught, and schools and communities need to join together to take on the important work of teaching these skills.

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: SUCCESS AND LESSONS LEARNED

**Marilyn Calderón** Executive Director of Connecticut Parent Power

**Adela Jorge-Nelson** Waterbury Education Supervisor of Bilingual/ESOL Department

**Description:** This session will focus on the importance of investing sufficient time and dedication to co-creating linguistically rich environments that can foster expanded learning opportunities for all students. Attendees will learn about best practices that have been implemented to achieve this goal. They will also examine successes and lessons learned from implementation of dual language learning experiences in Connecticut school districts. "How do we build on students' strengths while building environments that are culturally sensitive, responsive, and relevant to expanded learning opportunities?" Attendees will explore such questions and more.



Marilyn Calderón and Adela Jorge-Nelson

The presenters shared their own uplifting stories of entering the public schools as Spanish speakers and learning to speak and read English. They discussed how their experiences prepared them to pursue degrees and career goals.

In celebration of the new school year, the presenters shared a short video about the civil rights movement and English language learners (ELLs). Freedom to Talk is a historical narrative by Kenji Hakuta about how the principles of civil rights are extended to today's new state academic content and English language proficiency standards (see video here: [vimeo.com/133969433](https://vimeo.com/133969433)). The presentation underscored the importance of building relationships with families, making them welcome, inviting them back again and again, and building trust. A summary of the strategies follows:

### Strategy 1 – Home Visits

(All strategies must be culturally sensitive/responsive, trustworthy, respectful, and embrace all students, parents, families where they are.)

Presenters advised: You may not be sure about how to plan a home visit to an ELL family, but going into the home and just introducing yourself as his/her teacher is a start with a genuine interest in understanding as much as you can about your student and their family.

### Strategy 2 – Parent Letters

Presenters advised: Another effective strategy in gathering

information is to ask parents to write letters about their children (which don't have to be in English if you have interpreters who can help you read them). Ask about their child's strengths and their areas of growth.

### Strategy 3 – Student Feedback

Key question for all your ELL students: Where are you from?

Presenters noted: This question may be easy to answer, but you may also find that it isn't as easy as it first seemed! Your students may have:

- Recently immigrated from their country of origin
- Recently arrived from a different country than their country of origin (as in the case of a refugee camp)
- Been born in the U.S.
- Moved frequently between multiple countries, such as the U.S. and Mexico
- Moved around the U.S., as in the case of migrant farmworkers

Finding out this single detail will also provide your first clues regarding a student's prior experiences with schooling, the family's socio-economic situation, and any previous traumas.

You may be able to learn about students' backgrounds from students themselves, parents, siblings, a home language survey, or student records.

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***"One of the proven strategies that has worked with the majority of ELL students, parents, and their families is consistently asking how the teacher, school or community is doing in providing the supports and updates necessary for social, emotional, physical and academic success."***

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Once you know more, it may be helpful to learn more about a student's country of origin, cultural and religious traditions, and the political or historical situations that may be affecting patterns of immigration.

### Strategy 4 – Observe, Ask, and Follow Up

Fruitful relationships with ELL students, parents, and families

are more likely when you get to know them as individuals and can lift up their gifts organically through real relationship building. ELL families need to feel safe, connected, and embraced without worrying about immigration status causing harm to a child or family. One of the proven strategies that has worked with the majority of ELL students, parents, and their families is consistently asking how the teacher, school or community is doing in providing the supports and updates necessary for social, emotional, physical and academic success.

Follow up phone calls with a translator or personal home visits will continue to show the parents that you value their input into their child's education. Calls and visits also promote relationships that go beyond the classroom to a more empathetic family-driven approach where everyone wins.

#### **Strategy 5 – Keep Transparent Updates with Solution Based Team Action Steps**

As you follow up with ELL students, parents, and families you should be transparent and honest on where the successes and challenges may be. Parents, students, and teachers need to feel that they each play a role in fostering the best end result for the student with action steps that all can respectfully agree on. Building bridges is essential for attaining optimal student success.

**Takeaway:** Family engagement is critical to program success and necessary for true collaboration with the “collective we” mindset. Transparent collaboration can only occur if everyone has the ability to share their voice in the process while having genuine input into decisions that affect services for their children. Language barriers should be replaced with “building bridges to communication for all.”

# COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY SCHOOL PRACTICES

**Kyle Serrette** Director of Education, Center for Popular Democracy

**Description:** Community Schools means different things to different people. Some Connecticut schools incorporate aspects of community schooling models, but none match the power of comprehensive community school models that have developed across the country. Comprehensive community schools can be beacons of support to students and parents, and serve as anchors of revival in urban communities. Attendees will learn about the unique features of comprehensive community schools and the key steps to take for bringing the power of the model to neighborhoods and their schools in Connecticut.

What are community schools and why do some flourish while others struggle? The Center for Popular Democracy defines community schools as follows. “Community Schools leverage public school facilities to become hubs of educational, recreational, cultural, health and civic partnerships, which optimize the conditions for learning and catalyze the revitalization of the community.”



Renae Reese, Kyle Serrette, Jocelyn Ault, and Allison Logan

The Center has investigated what enables some Community Schools to substantially improve outcomes for students and shared those findings with participants.

Most of the 5,000 community schools the Center surveyed nationwide weren't able to establish the visions they'd first set forth when they became community schools, but a minority had achieved their visions. Schools that successfully transformed themselves were able to dramatically reduce the achievement gap, chronic absenteeism, dropout rates, and student mobility while increasing after school participation rates, graduation rates, and academic rankings.

Community schools that thrived and sustained transformation went about developing and implementing their school plans through certain key mechanisms.

### 1. Needs/asset assessment

All of the successful schools spent at least six months doing a needs/asset assessment and visioning work and engaged 75 to 100 percent of key stakeholder groups in that work. While it may be hard to engage such a high percentage of parents and community members, the schools that were able to do so found the results were transformative.

### 2. Strategic plan

The successful schools created very thorough, comprehensive strategic plans that relied on extensive feedback from stakeholder groups.

### 3. Community school coordinator

Having a designated staff position dedicated to the work of conducting a needs assessment, developing a strategic plan, and then implementing that plan is essential. Principals and other school staff already have their plates full with other responsibilities.

### 4. Stakeholder community school board

When partners that are engaged in filling the needs identified by the assessment, including local business owners and social service providers, come together on a school board they can more nimbly respond to new needs as they arise.

### Funding

For many of the thriving community schools, the only regular expense is for one staff position—the community school coordinator position. The best community schools pay for very few of the services they provide to students. They instead rely on their community school coordinator and community school board to leverage existing resources within the community and develop partnerships with businesses and local organizations.

For more information, read the report from the Center for Popular Democracy, *Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools*.

<http://bit.ly/1LjfNj>

**Takeaway:** Community schools bring together diverse services and resources to strengthen schools and improve outcomes for students. When community schools implement a plan that is truly responsive to community needs and relies on developing partnerships and making use of existing assets already present in the community, schools can sustain their transformation efforts for the long term.



Kyle Serrette

## UNLEASHING THE POWER OF RACIAL EQUITY

**Renae Reese** Executive Director, Connecticut Center for New Economy

**Daniel Durant** Organizer, AFT Connecticut

**Description:** Based on their experiences working to promote jobs and opportunities in Connecticut cities, the presenters will guide attendees through a discussion of challenges and strategies for enhancing racial equity. Workshop participants will explore the roots of the student/teacher diversity gap and ways to close it. Participants will also understand crucial ways communities and educators can come together to achieve a more diverse educator workforce and promote local opportunities.

In Connecticut, the unemployment rate for black people is 16 percent versus 7 percent for whites. Graduation rates for students of color (78 percent for blacks, 74 percent for Hispanics) are lower than rates for whites (93 percent). And roughly 46 percent of Connecticut students are non-white, while just 8 percent of teachers identify as a racial minority. These statistics are just limited examples of data underscoring the persistence of institutional inequity. Equality of opportunity remains as challenging in Connecticut as anywhere in the United States.

In this session, participants were asked: “What does equity in education look like? How will we know that we have achieved it? The answers were illuminating and exhibited a wide array of responses. But they shared a similar theme: Equity is achieved when all children—regardless of race, gender, income or other circumstances—participate in high-quality educational experiences that prepare them to reach their full potential.

Although predictions varied about when equity would be achieved, consensus emerged that progress can be made right now in local communities. Working together, participants identified numerous strategies for effecting change:

- Promote engagement. Communities can be vibrant places to live and work; People who are invested in the community, live in the community. People who work in the city should live in the city.
- Collaboration around community economic empowerment is needed and achievable. We can and should come together as a collective: teachers, administrators, parents,



Dan Durant and Renae Reese

children, community members, businesses, local leaders, clergy, etc. Community organizing is key, and parents must be involved.

- Forge authentic partnerships where groups and individuals “leave their brand at the door.” They work for the greater good and defined common goals with no hidden agendas.
- Regional solutions can work to overcome parochial interests and territoriality.
- Get involved in local organizations, systems, and decision-making to help foster change.
- Foster empowering opportunities for teachers, parents, and community members to collaborate.
- Be intentional, goal-oriented, and organized toward outcomes.
- Implement the “Sesame Street” approach—where teachers visit students’ homes to meet parents and caregivers, and to see how students live and better understand the challenges children face.
- Mastering and influencing political decision-making is key.

Participants noted the importance of promoting job opportunities, empowerment, and income equality in historically disadvantaged communities. Presenters noted that bringing back union jobs accomplishes these goals and helps to reverse cyclical poverty. Promoting jobs in teaching, manufacturing, nursing, and other union fields can also enhance community empowerment.

Noting innovative trends in “Bargaining for the Common Good,” participants discussed the potential role of collective bargaining as a mechanism for collaborating with local workers to reduce inequality and strengthen democracy. Some very real recent examples help show the path.

In Seattle, unionized teachers worked with community partners to determine key issues. As a result, the Seattle Education Association demanded daily recess for elementary students, a one-year ban on elementary suspension and a process to create alternative socially just discipline policy. The effort resulted in a 5 day strike—teachers walked out—and community allies helped teachers achieve success.

More locally, a group called New Haven Rising is working to promote jobs for Black and Latino people and greater access to economic opportunity. It collaborates with community members, workers, and employers to promote local employment and home-grown job opportunities.

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***“Participants noted the importance of promoting job opportunities, empowerment, and income equality in historically disadvantaged communities. Presenters noted that bringing back union jobs accomplishes these goals and helps to reverse cyclical poverty. Promoting jobs in teaching, manufacturing, nursing, and other union fields can also enhance community empowerment.”***

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In Hartford, the Connecticut Center for a New Economy, along with the local teachers union (AFT Hartford), seeks to raise awareness about racial inequity. Together they recognized that at a time when schools are seeking more teachers of color, unions, employers, and parents can collaborate to promote careers in education within local communities. The effort—“My Classroom, My Colleague”—seeks to encourage local teachers to collectively bargain for the hiring of minority teachers from the local community. This is potentially a win-win approach that illustrates how collaboration can address multiple challenges in innovative and empowering ways.

Takeaway: By establishing racial equity as an achievable goal, and implementing practical strategies to achieve it, parents, educators, leaders, and others can come together to foster empowering changes. Unleashing the power of racial equity is a proactive option.

## A CHILD'S BRAIN: DEVELOPMENT FROM BIRTH TO AGE 8

**Allison Logan** Early Childhood Project Manager, United Way of Coastal Fairfield County

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**Description:** Research has shown the critical link between early brain development and cognitive and social/emotional skills in later years. A child whose brain has been undermined through poverty and toxic stress can suffer long-term behavioral and cognitive difficulties. The session will look at the roots of toxic stress and include discussion of available and needed resources to address this adversity systemically, through the Collective Impact work of The United Way of Coastal Fairfield County. Attendees will come away with new ideas, potential strategies, and a new appreciation for the multiple opportunities to positively affect a child's development.

The science of child development shows that children's experiences through relationships with parents, caregivers, relatives, teachers, and peers significantly impact their lifelong capacities for learning and relating to others. Increasing high school completion rates and reducing incarceration and homelessness can be achieved if attention is paid to improving children's environments of relationships and experiences early in life.

Referencing Dr. Janice Gruendel's work, participants learned how life circumstances associated with family stress, such as persistent poverty, threatening neighborhoods, homelessness, and very poor child care conditions can elevate the risk of serious mental health problems. They can also become generational and cyclical. Such stressors in early childhood impact young children's brains and body systems, exacerbating the cycle as children grow to become adults and parents.

The presenter reinforced the need for a shift in the way we approach these inter-related issues. For decades communities have worked to improve student achievement through a piecemeal set of reforms, each in its own "silo." These efforts have not led to the desired improvements in student achievement, calling for a dramatically different means of supporting student success. This new vision takes into consideration:

- A Shared Community Vision where all participants have a shared vision for change, as well as a common understanding of the problem and how they will work collectively to solve it.
- Use of Evidence Based Decision Making where collaborators make decisions based on local data that shows areas of need, available resources, and promising practices that are already working for kids.

- A Commitment to Collaborative Action among community members to use data and make progress toward outcomes collectively.
- A Commitment to Investment and Sustainability among partners to initiate and/or redirect resources (time, talent, and treasure) toward data-based practices on an ongoing basis, and engage the community to ensure long-term sustainability.

Participants then learned about a collective impact model being used in Bridgeport through Bridgeport Prospers. This program works to improve outcomes by focusing on the earliest years, when the brain is at a critical time of child development. Bridgeport Prospers focuses on home visitations and resources for parents, such as their access to information and non-licensed early care providers, and improving parents' abilities to track outcomes over time.

**Takeaway:** Community collaboration and real engagement among parents and service providers can align best practices, brain and child development science, and the unique needs of individual students facing the greatest challenges. Programs like Bridgeport Prospers provide real-life blueprints for others to emulate.



Allison Logan

## FAMILY RESOURCE CENTERS AND THE 21ST CENTURY SCHOOLS MODEL

**Amy Waterman** President, Connecticut Family Resource Center Alliance and Middletown FRC Director

**Cathy Battista** Meriden FRC Director and Past President, Connecticut FRC Alliance

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**Description:** Providing child care and family support services is critically important to overcoming long-standing obstacles to educational opportunity in Connecticut's cities. Schools of the 21st Century are examples of how child care, outreach services, home visitations, and health and nutrition services—in addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic—can be integral parts of the neighborhood schooling mission. Attendees will learn about new roles schools are taking on and real-life lessons for expanding the traditional mission of local schools to better serve the needs of neighborhoods and communities.

Born from the innovation of Ed Zigler thirty years ago, and carried on through the work at Yale's Center for Schools of the 21st Century, Family Resource Centers (FRCs) connect key services to children in need. There is much that they do, yet much more needs to be done. Family Resource Centers are poised to be key drivers of community-based solutions that meet each student's developmental and learning needs.

In Connecticut, what started as four pilot programs has grown to 74 sites in 47 school districts. While FRCs are not all the same, they are all based on the principle of early preventive care and offer a continuum of support to children from birth through their early development into students, healthy and ready to learn.

There are seven key components of all Family Resource Centers:

- Providing early care, education, and support.
- Providing before and after school care.
- Providing needed services such as: the Families in Training program to help prepare parents as children's first teachers, financial literacy workshops, screening for stages of child development and social and emotional wellbeing (Ages and Stages), and Learn Together Groups.
- Increasing access to adult education opportunities such as those related to continuing and career education, GED, ESL, citizenship, job training, and others.
- Supporting positive youth development through Boys and Girls Club, curricula promoting social-emotional learning, Computer Club, Book Club, as well as health and nutrition guidance.

- Enhancing family day care by promoting Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers, workshops and professional development training, and collaboration with Pre-K programs.
- Providing resource and referral services to support family wellbeing, housing, job searches, health supports, and other key services provided in the community and through charities like the United Way.

The presenters noted that the highly successful Family Resource Model in Connecticut does a tremendous amount of good through collaborations and partnering with many organizations. They are efficient and avoid duplication of services by effectively coordinating existing services.

Yet, the group also discussed that the promise of Family Resource Centers has yet to be fully realized. Family Resource Centers operate in local schools, but their level of shared decision making with school leaders could be stronger—which would ultimately benefit children and their parents.

As has been exemplified in other states, Family Resource Centers have also been effectively collaborating to implement comprehensive community school models that integrate community service providers, parents, charitable organizations, educators, social workers, and school principals into synergistic partners addressing the complete needs of students.

**Takeaway:** Family Resource Centers collaborate with a variety of other organizations and are an efficient way to provide services that help overcome obstacles to educational opportunities. In an effort to ensure that all students can meet their potential and pursue the greatest scope of opportunities, Family Resource Centers are a critical ingredient.

## ADDRESSING RACIAL BIAS IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

**Walter Gilliam** Director, Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy, Yale

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**Description:** Rates of preschool suspensions and expulsions are alarming. They indicate shortcomings in policies meant to prevent and respond to incidents of poor behavior, and evidence indicates that racial bias plays a significant role. This pattern also underscores the need for enhanced student engagement and new strategies for developing expectations among children in educational and childcare settings. Attendees will learn about the work of Dr. Gilliam and the Zigler Center in developing the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership model and its innovative behavior management strategies that serve as an alternative to suspension and expulsion.

Dr. Walter Gilliam, director of the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University, told participants that we all harbor implicit biases. Gilliam is a lead researcher in studies that examine the ways that subtle stereotypes influence our expectations and interactions with others.

One of Gilliam's recent studies demonstrated exactly how implicit bias can reveal itself in the preschool classroom. At a major annual conference for preschool teachers, 135 educators were asked to help researchers learn how they spot difficult behaviors. (They did not know they were part of a study examining implicit bias.) The teachers, who were shown short videos of four children in a preschool classroom, were instructed to press a key if and when they detected behaviors that could become a potential challenge.

What Gilliam's team found was that, regardless of their own race, teachers focused most of their attention on the African American boy, followed by the African American girl. Although none of the four children exhibited signs of disruptive behaviors, this is where educators tended to look—and keep looking.

African American children, who account for fewer than one in every five preschoolers (18 percent), represent almost half (48 percent) of the preschoolers who are suspended more than once—a pattern that Gilliam attributes to our tendency to watch for negative behaviors among certain demographics.

In fact, African American children are 3.6 times more likely to be expelled from preschool than white children—a trend that affects their school readiness by disproportionately denying access to early learning. Part of the problem can be traced to zero-tolerance policies and attitudes, which Gilliam equates to “zero thinking” and “zero decision-making.”



Walter Gilliam

Gilliam adds that most of what we know about implicit bias is relatively new, with a majority of the research coming out in the last five years. Much of the emerging research, he observes, is directed at understanding how subtle bias impacts the behaviors of professionals who provide care (police, teachers, physicians) and developing better interventions.

Gilliam's team has been focusing on those areas and working toward the development of smarter professional development

for early educators, based on how biases are formed and how they impact teacher decision-making. Teacher supports, such as mental health consultants who can provide a fresh, objective set of eyes and a supporting relationship with the teacher, can prove useful. Gilliam said that what we really need is far smarter and far more effective professional development regarding teacher biases, which is where his team has been turning their attention.

**Takeaway:** Racial and cultural biases—implicit, unconscious, or otherwise—impact children's experiences and trajectories of opportunity at an early age. The impact of bias plays out in responses to behaviors, zero-tolerance policies, and in lowered behavioral expectations reinforced by strict disciplinary codes and inappropriate punitive actions. Counteracting bias requires disavowing such harsh policies and providing training in cultural awareness and support to counteract the legacy of structural racism and bias.

# PLENARY ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR CHILDREN TO START EVERY DAY READY TO LEARN

**Moderator: Mayor Toni Harp, New Haven**

**Description:** Mayor Harp will explore the perspectives of various people in a community who share in the task of developing our youngest children to be successful in school. The session is designed to bring together the perspectives of professionals who provide services to children with the voices of and perspectives of parents who access services on behalf of their children.

In the first half of the session, Mayor Harp will lead a roundtable discussion with childcare providers, educators, and other service providers that will discuss successes, challenges, and potential for meeting the many developmental needs of all children.

Parents and other community members will join the discussion in the second half to share their perspectives and further identify potential strategies for more effectively meeting the comprehensive needs of children.

Roundtable participants shared that early education policy lags far behind what we know today about the human brain and how it develops. Emerging findings in brain science make it all too clear how great the need is for all children to have high-quality early learning opportunities.

Participants shared a wide variety of additional obstacles that can prevent children from succeeding in the classroom. Teachers shared that large class sizes can prevent them from connecting with students and hinder their efforts to tailor instruction to meet each student's needs. Educators also said that teacher prep programs often don't adequately build teachers' cultural competency skills so that they are not as prepared to teach a diverse group of students as they could be.

Parents and educators did identify much that schools are already getting right about how to effectively educate all children.

A teacher said that progress monitoring systems now in place allow him to effectively identify a student's level so that he can implement appropriate interventions. An advocate identified the importance of culturally relevant resources in making students feel that they are valued, welcome, and part of the learning community.

Ultimately, all participants agreed that successful educational opportunities come down to relationships.

Strong, trusting relationships between parents and teachers improve students' relationships with their school community



Marilyn Calderón, Connecticut Parent Power, and Stephen Higgins, East Hartford teacher



Mayor Toni Harp, New Haven

and strengthen their motivation to do well in school. Those trusting relationships come out of parents being empowered to have a true voice as part of the school community and having teachers and administrators respectfully listen to their concerns.

Heartfelt relationships between students and teachers are key to keeping students engaged at school. Strong relationships allow teachers to be attuned to what students want to learn and to areas where they may be struggling so that teachers can act to remedy factors that might prevent students from learning.

**Takeaway:** Policymakers, community members, parents, teachers, and advocates must be aware of obstacles that prevent children from succeeding in the classroom and take action to remove or surmount those obstacles. While many challenges exist, schools do already have many strategies for effectively supporting children to do their best. More of these best practices should be shared among schools and districts to benefit more children and communities.



Samantha Dynowski, Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, and Vernon Thompson Bridgeport teacher