



REIMAGINE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Community tables are more than a way for systems to check a box. They are purposefully built and governed to shift decision-making power and maintain it in the hands of the community.

Prioritize Community Relationships and Trust

Engage community early on and plan sufficient time to build a shared vision

When efforts we reviewed across the literature and in dialogues with our Subject Matter Experts engaged community members and community organizations early on, they were better able to put community perspectives at the center of project framing, goal setting, and planning.

Purnell et al. (2018) observed that although the idea behind the For the Sake of All initiative in St. Louis came from academic partners, they intentionally had a broad focus and brought in community partners to guide the work from the beginning. Kreger et al. (2011) similarly noted that in the Community Action to Fight Asthma initiative, “By allowing the community to prioritize the direction of advocacy efforts, the coalitions achieved policy change through increased community involvement and support” (Kreger et al., 2011, p. s212).

In contrast, The California Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities initiative initially asked communities to work on ten previously identified

Reimagine Community

Engagement highlights findings and strategies culled from an integrative synthesis of research papers, case studies, and experts from across the field.

The strategies are meant for public systems as they seek to collaboratively develop solutions, break down racist and stigmatizing narratives about Black and Brown communities, refocus on relationships and trust, and overcome the gaps between what individuals and families say they need and what systems deliver.

outcome areas. However, this was recognized as a misstep: “The smarter move would have been to engage community leaders with the clarity of a shared vision and operating principles and allow community leaders and residents to spend more time incubating goals results and strategy” (The California Endowment, 2016, p. 6). Eventually, individual sites were given space to develop their own agenda.

Local priority setting feeds effectively into the engagement process, but ultimately takes substantial time and resource investment. In the Food & Fitness partnership, the sponsoring foundation recognized the groundwork necessary for building this shared vision and funded “a 2-year planning stage at the beginning of the initiative, which allowed partnerships to bring key stakeholder and community residents together, conduct community assessments and policy scans, and develop comprehensive community action plans to bring about long-term change” (Quinn et al., 2018, p. 79s).

Participants said that once a shared vision was in place, they used this vision to help unite people in their community that were not currently involved in the partnership and engage them in the work.

(Quinn et al., 2018, p. 89)

Map and track power dynamics, seeking out leadership from grassroots organizations close to community

Issues of trust, funding imbalances, representation, and relationships all impacted who stepped up and who stepped back from community partnership processes. Grassroots community organizations often had strong community ties, but limited resources and connections to large systems. As a result, these groups required special consideration and outreach. For example, The Los Angeles Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project began with a request for proposals process that targeted long-established community-based organizations with the hope that these groups would be in the best position to accelerate change processes (McCroskey et al., 2010).

Addressing power dynamics among stakeholders and seeking out leadership from organizations with close ties to community were central to the sustainability of the New York Food & Fitness Partnership. Capers (2018) reported that at an early stage, there was “wariness among members around whose voices would be heard and what would be accomplished” (Capers, 2018, p. 58s). These concerns were compounded by issues of race and representation; the effort was initially spearheaded by a large city-wide organization that was widely regarded as being white-led. These issues ultimately came to a head: “it became clear that the Partnership would either have to disband and return funding to the [Kellogg Foundation], or it would need to revamp its leadership structure” (Capers, 2018, p. 59s). The original convener stepped down, transitioning leadership to a grassroots Brooklyn-based and minority-led development organization with strong connections to the neighborhood. This transition made a powerful difference for the cohesion and efficacy of the Food & Fitness Partnership.

Attention to power dynamics when planning community involvement was necessary across the board, beyond partner recruitment. In the Los Angeles Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project, organizers found that face-to-face planning meetings helped community members trust that their perspectives will be heard:



As a result of these [planning] meetings. . . [the] community has also established a leadership role and willingly engages in dialogs with DCFS, participates in crafting solutions, and holds DCFS accountable for reducing racial disproportionality (Lorthridge et al., 2012, p. 283).

Parent leaders in Community Organizing for Family Issues (COFI) initiatives found it useful to convene separately before engaging with partnership stakeholders because of the power imbalance and pushback they anticipated. This preparation helped parents demonstrate the value they brought to the collaboration as a coordinated group, which in turn led institutional partners to engage with them on more equal footing (COFI, 2017).

Broaden the Decision-Making Table

Meet community members where they are, building the table around their needs and priorities

As the For the Sake of All initiative found, effective community outreach means “[meeting] residents where they are” (Purnell et al., 2018, p. 739). COFI emphasizes the importance of parent-centered engagement (COFI, 2012). To get parents involved, COFI recruits at schools, childcare centers, and other places where parents feel at home. Similarly, during the initial phase of The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections initiative, bringing community to the table meant knocking on doors, finding family-friendly venues to meet, and creating family and neighborhood circles; this progressed to more formal opportunities like community mapping, local learning partnerships, and community summits (Hebert & Gallion, 2016).

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Although broad community participation was a common priority, outreach efforts led or initiated by institutions often hit roadblocks. Reid et al. (2019) report that one community coalition in the Spreading Community Accelerators Through Learning and Evaluation (SCALE) initiative was “founded and built by government institutions and predominantly white individuals from institutions,” and that only later on were they able to “[make] steps forward in inviting people from underrepresented groups into the coalition” (Reid et al., 2019, p. 104s). This represents progress, but it also reflects the difficulty of shifting the institutional status quo.

Initiatives often relied on community to bring in community. Some efforts relied on churches and faith-based organizations, given their history of leadership and organizing in many Black and Brown communities (Devia et al., 2017; Eng & Parker, 1994; Purnell et al., 2018). The Bronx Health REACH Coalition was the most notable example, with churches forming the foundation of recruitment and community power building: “The churches were critical for two reasons: they maintained networks of trust, and they had an infrastructure that supported the group efforts. They were described as the nucleus for the early growth of the project, and the glue that helped mobilize residents” (Devia et al., 2017). The For the Sake of All initiative struggled to reach on-the-ground community members and eventually turned to church leaders for help (Purnell et al., 2018).



Some did direct outreach and later asked participants to refer others who might be interested in getting involved. In the Alabama Breast and Cervical Cancer Coalition, Wynn et al. (2011) write: “[Volunteers] who were held in high regard in their communities as natural helpers were singled out and recommended by community key leaders to serve as [community health advisors]” (Wynn et al., 2011, p. s105).

Seek broad participation

Many efforts emphasized the critical importance of getting the right people at the table. Often, partnerships prioritized diversity of perspective, sector, and scale (Purnell et al., 2018). LaChance et al. (2018) summarized what they learned from the Food & Fitness Partnerships: “The core partners must be an authentic part of the community, and a diverse set of stakeholders. This means that core partners include stakeholders that come from all segments of the community. . .” (Lachance et al., 2018, p. 109s).

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Subject Matter Experts we spoke with argued for avoiding “rounding up the usual suspects” and counseled prioritizing engagement with Black- and people of color-led grassroots organizations. One person noted that because smaller groups are less well-connected, they may not get involved unless they’re intentionally sought out. Community advisors for the Communities of Opportunity project warned, “They had seen too many grants in the past go to larger organizations able to hire talented grant writers but unable to secure real commitments from community members.” To counteract this tendency, the effort planned for a longer application process, involving site visits to “ensure that an authentic local partnership was in place” (Wysen, 2021, p. e52).

Moving beyond the “usual suspects” also means seeking out particularly marginalized community members, and those outside the service population. One Building Healthy Communities report describes bringing individuals into the policymaking process who have historically been excluded, like those who are low-income, undocumented, LGBTQ, or formerly incarcerated (Ito et al., 2018). Lachance et al. (2018b) called attention to including young people: “[Partnerships] learned that youth are a critical component of our future, and it is important to connect youth to the community change work. . .” (p. 121s). The Building Healthy Communities initiative sought out youth involvement by purposefully choosing sites where the average age was younger than the general population of the state (Pastor et al., 2014).

Importantly, community members were often given authority over whether and how other stakeholders should be given a seat at the table. For example, the Hope Zone project in Baton Rouge brought together a range of stakeholders to shape project activities. However, “resident leaders retained the priority voting power to determine which community partners should be invited to participate in the [Community Research Team]” (Brown & Stalker, 2020, p. 215; Israel et al., 2005). Reflecting on a partnership with migrant farmworkers, one of member of the research team suggested: “One possible strategy is to start with the most immediate community of identity. . . and after trust is established, and with their concurrence, bring additional parties into the process” (Israel et al., 2005, p. 1467).



Create Varied, Accessible, and Substantial Engagement Opportunities

Create multiple points of entry, ongoing opportunities for connection, and on-ramps to all levels of engagement

The partnerships we reviewed generally approached community engagement as more than a one-time commitment. Effective partnerships required having an open door and creating many opportunities for community engagement, at many levels.

In the Healthy African American Families effort, “the level of activity from other community or academic partners ranges from self-selected minimal to substantial input. Partners may also ‘get on and off the bus,’ meaning they may choose to initially participate, then reduce participation, and then resume participation later” (Ferre et al., 2010, p. 7). Evaluators similarly reflected that in the Making Connections initiative, having many ongoing opportunities to get involved was key: “The most successful local efforts came when there was a sustained value accorded to resident role and voice, and the many different activities—from community meetings to network organizing to participatory research to community organizing—were a continuous and evolving expression of the importance of that value” (Hebert & Gallion, 2016, p. 6).

Many efforts ended up relying on a small, more deeply engaged group of community participants—who often served as a bridge into and from community—alongside ongoing broader outreach. In the Hope Zone effort in Baton Rouge, a community research team collected community perspectives on strengths and needs. These ideas were then turned into partnership proposals, which were reviewed in a series of large community convenings (Brown & Stalker, 2020).

Structure involvement with participant autonomy in mind, creating a welcoming environment

It is also crucial for funders, services providers and civic institutions to act in a transparent, non-defensive manner and to seek and welcome ‘pushback’ from residents. Ultimately, what is sought by prioritizing resident leadership is a shift in influence and power, and unless that is recognized and honored, the encouragement of resident voice may be superficial and result in resident frustration when nothing really changes. (Hebert & Gallion, 2016)

Some Subject Matter Experts suggested that engagement should start from and rely on natural social networks within communities. Network approaches to community engagement mean having few or no barriers to participation; one Subject Matter Expert recommended this kind of “open architecture” rather than a membership approach. This leaves the door open for people to contribute when they have time, perspective, or resources to share. Experts also emphasized that participation opportunities need to welcome residents and community stakeholders into an environment where they feel safe and supported.

Some experts pointed out the tendency for systems to seek community input for purposes of rubber stamping or checking a box. They suggested a need to develop partnership infrastructure that allows participant autonomy, giving them room to act outside of and resist institutional norms or expectations.

Some of the research team pointed to the success of Moms Rising, Think of Us, and similar efforts that expand the concept of engagement, bring more voices to the table, and offer a variety of options for when



and how to engage. Systems can look to these practices when thinking about how to broaden and structure community involvement.

Remove barriers to community involvement and provide concrete support for strong, sustained community leadership

In many of the efforts we reviewed, resourcing grassroots organizations and community members for their contributions was key to sustainable community leadership. Reflecting on the Making Connections initiative, one evaluation report suggests:

If funders, service providers, and other community institutions are serious about resident leadership, those entities also need to learn how to operate in a different manner by committing to supporting resident leadership for the long haul. . . by compensating residents for their time commitment and by developing a coherent and unified co-investment strategy among funders for supporting those activities. (Hebert & Gallion, 2016, p. 7).

Other efforts and publications echo this sentiment. In the Community Action to Fight Asthma initiative, Kreger et al. (2011) observed: “Organizations with salaried staff members from the community made more progress in expanding relationships and establishing policies than organizations with volunteer staff” (Kreger et al., 2011, p. s212).

Unfortunately, compensation for community contributors is not the norm in many system settings. COFI observed that at many decision-making tables, every person in the room except the parent leader is compensated (COFI, 2017). Israel et al. (2005) argue that even if efforts can only provide partial or in-kind recognition, it is still warranted: “Although it may not be possible to fully compensate community partners monetarily for the time they contribute to the partnership, adequate recognition of and compensation for their contributions should be provided” (Israel et al., 2005, p. 1469).

Removing barriers for community engagement also means planning participation opportunities with the needs of community members and organizations in mind.

Removing barriers for community engagement also means planning participation opportunities with the needs of community members and organizations in mind. COFI’s parent advocates hit roadblocks trying to join existing decision-making tables, because system actors scheduled meetings without considering parent needs; this sent the message that “we do not need you” (COFI, 2018). In contrast, another effort planned convenings with community partners in mind:

[We] provided dinner for our coalition members at all meetings as a gift of appreciation for their time. . . . Moreover, we held all meetings in the community so as not to create a travel burden for residents who lacked transportation and so that residents would be able to stay in their own environment (Bateman et al., 2017, p. 331).

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OTHER RESOURCES



Disrupt system mindsets and habits: Reflect on the impact of racism, reinforce strength-based narratives, take the long-view when setting milestones.

Invest in communities: Position communities to take the lead and cultivate community strengths and skills.

Reimagine community engagement: Prioritize community relationships and trust, broaden the decision-making table, and create substantial engagement opportunities.

Transform systems with community in the lead: establish community ownership over system responses and resources and then scale up.

Embed community leadership and adapt over time: Build collaborative infrastructure and commit to continuous evaluation.

For methods, limitations, and acknowledgements:

System transformation through community leadership:
Strategies for building effective partnerships with Black and Brown communities:
Methods report.



Toolkit:

An array of highly actionable resources culled from the field to activate leadership in system change.



Contact Us:

For more information or to engage in this dialogue about system transformation, email us at: **CommunityLeadership@ChapinHall.org**



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