Addressing Educational
Inequities in the Wake
of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Supporting Families and Communities in Children's Academic Thriving and Well-Being in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Addressing Educational Inequities in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Supporting Families and Communities in Children's Academic Thriving
and Well-Being in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic[1]**

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Families and communities have long played pivotal roles in the educational ecologies of children, although their expertise often goes unrecognized in the public school system. However, the roles of families and communities shifted dramatically to the foreground in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, unveiling pre-existing and deepening socioeconomic disparities, racial injustices, global displacement, and climate injustices. When schools closed across the country and more than 50 million children were at home, policymakers and formal educators were reminded of the central role of families and communities in learning (Baker, 2022), driving efforts to support families and address the deep-seated racial and social inequities in educational systems.

We situate the impacts of the pandemic within a history of formal schooling in the United States that has stifled agentic learning or life opportunities for minoritized populations (Ladson-Billings, 2006). For example, for many Indigenous families, boarding schools functioned as a violent tool of settler colonialism that sought to strip children of their cultures, languages, identities, and communities (Garcia, 2019; Montaño Nolan et al., 2019). For other racially minoritized and migrant communities, schools have been a site of assimilation and discrimination. Anti-Blackness has solidified the nexus between school discipline and the juvenile and adult prison systems (Meiners, 2011; Warren, 2022). Despite existing efforts at "partnership," schools have largely "engaged" families from Indigenous and racially marginalized communities in constrained roles with highly normative expectations about what it means to be a good parent or to do well in school (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022).

In the wake of the pandemic, racialized backlash, and budget deficits, efforts to support children's academic success and well-being can default to a logic of individualistic interventions to address supposed "deficits" in children and youth of color. However, such discourses operate from an ahistorical set of assumptions that position families and communities of color and working-class families (generally) as problems to be "fixed." In this paper, we use the word "intervention" to indicate the systemic changes that school districts and systems might undertake to transform their approach to families and communities, but we acknowledge the problematic use of the term in some disciplines and research. Other common, deficit-based terms that scholars and practitioners use include "remediation" of individuals to adhere to dominant school cultures and norms. We move away from this deficit-based frame and humanize the experiences of minoritized families and communities by acknowledging the multiple conceptions of education and forms of capital that they maintain and bring to the educational experience.

In this paper, we draw on scholarly literature and our own empirical work to examine how marginalized communities have challenged and transformed school structures and processes to meet their children's needs since the COVID-19 pandemic. In the sections that follow, we first briefly define key terms and methods used in the essay, then draw from recent literature and inquiries to address three guiding questions:

1. How did the pandemic shape the educational experiences and priorities of youth, families, and communities, particularly those marginalized in educational systems?

2. Given the current experiences of minoritized youth, families, and communities:
   a. What **systems-led initiatives** support families and communities in pursuit of thriving and well-being for their children?
   b. What **family- and community-led initiatives** support families and communities in pursuit of thriving and well-being for their children?
3. What do family- and community-led models look like on the ground?

We conclude by identifying policy conditions, structures, and resources necessary for sustaining and scaling promising interventions to support minoritized youth, families, and communities in healing, learning, and well-being in the wake of the pandemic. While partnerships and collaborative work in educational systems offer promise for family and community voices to be incorporated into policy and practice, we interpret these findings with some caution. We note that community organizations and private philanthropic resources cannot fill the gap left by the withdrawal of state and federal funding, especially as districts across the country face budget deficits.

EQUITY DEFINITIONS AND METHODS

We are intentional about the terms we use in this essay. Below is a list of terms (see Table 1) we use throughout the essay and corresponding definitions based on critical, asset-based, family-centered approaches in research.

Modes of Inquiry and Methodological Notes

For this systematic review, we drew on past research, our expertise, and current empirical research. Given that much of the scholarship related to the effects of the pandemic is forthcoming, we created a systematic process to critically address the

TABLE 1 Key Terms

Term	Definitions
Asset-based approaches to families and communities	• Perspectives focused on valuing and recognizing the strengths of individuals and communities rather than emphasizing disadvantages (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ramos Montañez 2023). • Belief that students, families, and communities possess intellectual resources for achieving academic and cultural goals.
Families/caregivers	• Critical actors within the care system (recognizing that caregivers for children include parents as well as a broad range of adults and relationships). • Children and youth as *part* of families.
Low-income families	• Students whose family income qualifies them to receive free or reduced lunch (Dominique et al., 2022).
Intersectionalities of race, disability, gender, language, LGBTQ+, immigration status	• Intersectionality inquiry examines how the positioning of individuals and their embodied minority categories are tied up in policies, laws, and governing in ways that often constrict their opportunities (Cho et al., 2013). • Marginalization of intersectional individuals takes form through political avenues; even when policies aim to improve conditions for a particular minority group, intersectional individuals within that minority group often experience unintended consequences (Crenshaw, 1991).

topic. We used the search terms: ("covid" *or* "covid19" *or* "pandemic") *and* ("student*" *or* "adolescent" *or* "child") *and* ("ethnic" *or* "Hispanic" *or* "Latin" *or* "Black" *or* "African American" *or* "immigrant" *or* "minority" *or* "minoritized" *or* "nondominant") *and* ("family" *or* "community" *or* "nonprofit") *and* ("education" *or* "intervention" *or* "impact" *or* "learning" *or* "mental health"). The rationale for these terms relates to our above contextualization that the pandemic impacted minoritized communities disproportionately. The search engines used were Academic Search Ultimate and Google Scholar. The AERA Open Access Journal was also used extensively to find articles and refine search terms for the most up-to-date scholarship. Forty-two articles were read, annotated, and analyzed thematically by the team, and an additional 36 were read and integrated in subsequent revisions (for a total of 78 articles).

Sources of Evidence

To answer our guiding questions, we systematically reviewed new and existing literature and drew from our own scholarship to offer grounded examples. We organized our analysis around research that was conducted during and "after" the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2024). While we drew on most of the literature to answer research question one, we did a deep dive in some of the literature for question two, and for question three, we drew primarily on our current research. In other words, we utilized three sources of evidence: studies identified through systematic searches (Research Question [RQ]1 & 2), our own studies and knowledge of the field (RQ2 & 3), and relevant studies published in the early pandemic. However, many of the inequities that communities faced preceded the pandemic, so we note this where applicable throughout the essay. The selected studies were largely qualitative, which captured families' and communities' experiences of the pandemic's impact as well as their agency in pursuing solutions to address those impacts. We note this because our aim was not to catalog the full heterogeneity of pandemic impacts. We focus largely on the minoritized and marginalized groups, not with a comparative focus, but with acknowledgement that multiple forms of marginality persist across identity markers such as race, gender, class, disability, language, and immigration.

Analytic Process

Thematic analysis informed themes across each research question. For RQ1, the analysis identified key themes: the disproportionate negative impact on minoritized youth during the pandemic; diverse caregiver experiences of these impacts; the role of technology in facilitating social connections for school-age youth; and the insufficient school responses to mental health and other student needs. These themes provided evidence for RQ2, which examines interventions. The interventions were categorized into two types: Systems-led initiatives and family- and community-led initiatives. Given the scarcity of family- and community-led models in existing literature, RQ3 is explored through case studies from the authors' ongoing work.

Limitations of Analysis

Before we address our findings, however, we want to offer an important caveat about our methods. We reviewed literature at the outset of this essay in 2023 and continued to add to our analysis because research about the pandemic was coming out continually. Given the timing of the search and analyses for this manuscript, the research literature reflects initiatives and scholarship that had resources and privilege during a time of immense challenge to publish peer-reviewed academic work. That means the dearth of published research literature on approaches or initiatives should not be taken as a lack of effectiveness or significance. There are likely powerful initiatives that did not get significant funding to expand or be documented. We note a somewhat self-reinforcing dynamic in which primarily initiatives with prior research evidence on them received attention and support. The literature we identified also likely reflects scholars with greater resources (time, money, institutional, or familial supports) to publish; there are likely scholars (especially junior scholars, racially or multiply minoritized scholars, and scholars who are caregivers for children or elderly family members) who continue to do deeply collaborative and engaged work with families and communities, but whose research-related partnerships during the pandemic have either not yet been published or have been shared through forms of public scholarship that cannot be found through academic literature searches. We, thus, also complement the findings from the literature with research about initiatives studied prior to the pandemic, our own knowledge of the field, and our own respective research endeavors to provide a fuller picture than that afforded solely by a literature review.

FINDINGS

Pandemic Experiences of Racially Minoritized Youth, Families, and Communities

Disproportionate Impacts on Learning and Well-Being

As many scholars and policymakers have noted, the pandemic unveiled longstanding inequities and resulted in dramatically disparate impacts by race and class (among other dimensions). While some privileged families, especially from White middle- and upper-middle-class communities, organized private tutors and learning pods to maintain and advance their children's academic progress (Lee et al., 2023), other less advantaged families experienced harsher impacts on their physical and mental health, deeper disruptions to their children's education, and greater economic, food, and housing insecurity, all against a backdrop of racialized sociopolitical turmoil and precarity. These impacts were felt across various multiply marginalized students, including language learners, and those from mixed-immigration status backgrounds, and students with disabilities (Guller et al., 2021; Nicholas et al., 2022; Shifat, 2020). Equity issues are historical and endemic in educational systems, but the pandemic exacerbated equity concerns for minoritized students, especially those from low-income backgrounds and/or who experience multiple positions of marginalization (i.e., due to disability status, language learning status, or immigration status) (Artiles, 2019). We briefly share dimensions of those impacts while also attending to the resiliencies, learning, and

innovation that minoritized working-class families employed to sustain their children and communities during a time of unparalleled challenge. The literature reviewed for this section is largely from early research in 2021.

While we do not yet have a full accounting of pandemic impacts (which may continue for years to come), there is remarkable consistency across studies with regard to the disproportionate negative impacts on children and families of color in the United States. By May 2022, an estimated 216,617 children in the United States had lost a parent or other primary caregiver, with children of color twice as likely to experience such a loss compared to White children (Treglia et al., 2023). Youth and families, especially those who identified as Black, Indigenous, Latino, Pacific Islander and Asian American, were caring for extended family, grieving lost loved ones, and caring for the younger children of front-line workers. Many low-income workers lost jobs. Studies have documented high levels of stress, anxiety, suicidal ideation, loneliness, and depression among youth as well, which were often heightened for those from racially or sexually minoritized and/or undocumented communities (Alessi et al., 2023; Czeisler et al., 2020; Gazmararian et al., 2021; Naff et al., 2022; Parenteau et al., 2023; Park et al., 2023) and may have been amplified by broader sociopolitical dynamics like highly-publicized police killings of Black people as well as ongoing anti-Asian violence (Asbury et al., 2021; Bogan et al., 2022; Darling-Aduana et al., 2022).

Much recent education policy debate has focused on how to recover from "learning loss" (equated with lower test scores), but the "learning loss" narrative implies a return to the old "normal" of schooling as desirable, when in fact pre-pandemic schools did not foster agentic or robust learning for young people in many marginalized communities. At the same time, the "learning loss" narrative positions students being at home with families as uniformly detrimental (Ishimaru et al., 2020). Such narratives also narrowly focus on standardized assessment data and position formal academic content as the only form of learning, contrary to learning science research field consensus that schools and academic learning are one of multiple contexts in which learning occurs (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018, p. 22). Individualistic deficit-based narratives (absent structural examinations) have long been "disproportionately applied to individuals with historically marginalized identities" (Brinegar et al., 2021, p. 2), and discussions of "loss" and "recovery," positioned in larger accountability regimes, inevitably focus on what parents do not or cannot do within the White dominant cultural norms of schooling (e.g., Flores, 2022; Gonzalez & Artiles, 2020; Lopez et al., 2001). While "learning loss" narratives are not new, we argue that the inordinate focus on testing implicitly takes up a blame-the-victim stance with marginalized groups. Disrupting such deficit-based assumptions requires addressing not only impacts on families but also recognizing their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and ingenuity in leveraging their own ecologies to sustain and support the learning and development of their children and youth during a time of profound challenge and difficulty (Kufeld et al., 2022).

Variable Family Pandemic Experiences by Race and Class

The impacts on children were also accompanied by stark racial and class differences with regard to parental concerns, as well as decisions about when and how to

return to in-person schooling, with Black, Asian, and Latino/a families significantly less likely to prefer to return their children to schools by 2021 (Freidus & Turner, 2023; Haderlein et al., 2021). According to a Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health (2020), White and Hispanic parents' primary concerns were overuse of social media and bullying/cyberbullying, whereas Black parents' primary concerns for their children were racism and COVID. The current politicized anti-equity backlash in education—orchestrated by elite advocacy organizations but represented primarily by White parents—highlights continued racialized distinctions between many White and racially minoritized parents (Ferguson et al., 2022; LoBue & Douglass, 2023). In sum, the impacts, concerns and priorities of families and communities in the wake of the pandemic reflect marked differences—and sometimes politicized divides—by race, class, and other intersecting lines of oppression, such as documentation status, disability, gender, and sexual orientation.

At the same time as the many deleterious impacts described above, families from working-class communities of color persevered and continued teaching their children in remote and disrupted conditions (Martin et al., 2023; Robillard et al., 2024; Segel, 2023; Turner, 2020). Some Black families (Ishimaru et al., 2020) and parents of students with disabilities (Averett, 2021) described their children as happier and more relaxed at home, no longer subject to racialized surveillance or constrained behavioral expectations. Black families in one study described cooking and eating meals with their children, taking their children to work, speaking home languages, and marching in protests as forms of learning they engaged with their children (Ishimaru et al., 2020). Likewise, Cohen et al.'s (2022) daily diary study of elementary-school families during COVID-19 found that families adapted and fostered learning at home. Although families from different socioeconomic contexts valued different activities for their children, the study concluded that "families' cultural practices, and their socially meaningful interactions with others during their daily routines, are what motivate and guide families to be joyful, engaged learners" (p. 10). Youth and families also used technology to build community, support learning, and connect with others (see technology-based interventions below) (Literat, 2021; Michela et al., 2022). Finally, learning in community spaces persisted as well, often in ways that expanded beyond narrow forms of academics to more holistic learning that included culturally responsive and identity-affirming content and pedagogies (Harris et al., 2023).

In sum, the experiences and priorities of minoritized youth, families, and communities in the wake of the pandemic were varied and diverse, but they departed in substantive ways from those of many White, middle-class families and offer potential practices and cultural models of education that can serve as resources for transforming schooling in the wake of the pandemic. Despite the potential for learning from different cultural practices and strategies, we note that dominant policy approaches to academic recovery and equity in the wake of the pandemic often position minoritized families and communities as instrumental to the production of students' academic outcomes. This positioning is problematic for several reasons. It reinforces a colonizing dynamic in a simplistic model of change (e.g., policies often target families and communities to get them to enroll students in "interventions" or do activities at home to support the interventions at school). Approaching families as a means to the end of narrowly focused academic outcomes also reinforces epistemic injustice; in such a regime, only

knowledge related to White normative conceptions of academic learning matters. We, thus, focus the remainder of our manuscript on efforts that recognize and approach families not merely as necessary intermediaries for reaching children but as crucial to the well-being and learning of children and young people within the broader educational ecosystem that shapes their development.

Current Contexts

Moving into the current moment, three key dynamics seem to shape the experiences and priorities of racially and other minoritized families and communities in the post-pandemic era: a youth mental health crisis (which overlaps with everyday socioemotional challenges as well as issues of chronic absenteeism); an increasingly contentious and hostile sociopolitical and legislative context that constrains opportunities for students to learn about minoritized groups' histories, racial identity-affirming content, and systems of oppression; and dramatic budget challenges in school district finance that, given historical school closures and other patterns of disinvestment, are likely to disproportionately impact predominantly Black, Latino/a, Indigenous and other intersectionally minoritized communities.

For many racially minoritized families, these are structural issues that cannot be addressed through targeted interventions. For example, individual student-level efforts to increase attendance without examining underlying causes or attending to the multiple overlapping influences on school absences can inadvertently reinforce racialized institutional harm or exacerbate mental health and engagement issues (Childs & Lofton, 2021). Similarly, in practice, school-based interventions often focus on academic and mental well-being separately (and devoid of an analysis of structures of racism that we note above from families' perspectives). This focus assumes that if mental health or social-emotional health is measured and "fixed," then that will lead to academic recovery. But such siloed, linear constructions do not align with the field's current knowledge of learning as complex and multidimensional, and shaped by developmental, cognitive, physical, social, and cultural systems (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018).

Thus, the current priorities and experiences of youth, families, and communities in the wake of the pandemic suggest the need to address socioemotional well-being, cultural identity, history, economic stability, and academic success as integrated and connected parts of the broader, holistic development of children and young people.

Systems-Led Interventions to Support Learning and Well-Being in the Wake of the Pandemic

Given the experiences of minoritized youth and families in the wake of the pandemic, we turn now to interventions that seek to address the disproportionate impacts on learning, varied familial experiences, and mental health needs we identified in our literature review. We first note, however, the limitations of conventional intervention approaches and elaborate our rationale for focusing on approaches that seek to foster more equitable forms of collaboration between families (including youth), community-based organizations, educational systems, and other agencies in supporting the thriving and well-being of children and youth.

Although U.S. systems have implemented a plethora of interventions with families to support their children both prior to and after the pandemic, individual-level remediation regimes have largely fallen short of fostering students' well-being in integrated or holistic approaches (Bauer et al., 2021; Sanchez et al., 2011). Interventions for low-income students and students of color are often "solutions" built around a logic of deficiency based on assumptions that families lack capacity, understanding, and resources for supporting the academic success of their children (Ishimaru & Bang, 2019). Meanwhile, many scholars have noted the need for social relationships and support through peer-mentoring and affinity group relations (Sanchez et al., 2011; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Educators often fall back on default organizational scripts, codified in policy and practice, which rely on one-way communication and White, middle-class norms of parental involvement (Lopez, 2003). Missing from interventions that claim to be "equitable" are authentic opportunities for families to participate in schooling and influence important decisions, including partnership with schools that do not center on fault finding conversations (Ishimaru, 2020). Families and communities of color have long been excluded from educational policy making or programs in educational systems; even as much changed in the wake of COVID-19 (including the rise of the almost exclusively White, extremist "parent rights" or "freedom" groups [LoBue & Douglass, 2023]), the exclusion of racially and otherwise minoritized families and communities persists in current policy making and decision-making (Sampson & Bertrand, 2022).

Nonetheless, schools, communities, families, and youth must address the negative impacts of COVID-19 and leverage the innovative practices and learning that unfolded in spite of the many challenges. To ensure that interventions address the needs and priorities of specific populations, districts should approach families as fellow *leaders/ educational policy thinkers* (Fernandez & Scribner, 2020; Ishimaru, 2020; Olivos, 2006; Rodela, 2022; Rodriguez, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2020). Ishimaru (2020) calls for a new paradigm in which educators center the lived experiences of families and communities and collaborate with them to create more just schools. Within this paradigm, there exists four guiding principles: collaboration that begins with family and community priorities, interests, concerns, knowledge, and resources; transformation of power; construction of reciprocity and agency; and the pursuit of change through collective inquiry. By attending to these dynamics within overlapping individual, organizational, and systemic levels, minoritized families and communities can share their crucial expertise and leadership skills, which are necessary if schools are to meaningfully address injustices. While this raises critical questions about the extent to which American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)-funded pandemic-recovery efforts have reflected equitable collaborations, such an inquiry is beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on how initiatives might center the experiences of families and communities and acknowledge multiple cultural models of education (Valenzuela, 1999; Villenas, 2005).

Thus, we argue that efforts to support children's thriving must happen collaboratively and in partnership with families and communities (community-based organizations or other collectives). In this section, we discuss collaborative initiatives that are primarily led by professionals within formal educational or other governmental institutions, recognizing overlap between these and opportunities for more participatory or community-led approaches (which we address subsequently in the next section).

These systems-led interventions seek to address the disproportionate impact on the learning and well-being of minoritized youth and families. We start with pandemic-era initiatives and dynamics and then overview initiatives that preceded the pandemic but continued to be implemented during and after to address long-standing inequitable impacts. We group these into two types of efforts: (1) *school-based initiatives with families* (such as technology-based interventions; family–community–school partnerships for youth mental health; parent–teacher home visits; parent leadership training initiatives; and shared governance and decision-making with families); and (2) *community-focused initiatives* (community schools and cross-sector collaborations). For each of these systems-led reforms, we draw on research to illuminate both enabling and constraining conditions with regard to realizing more equitable collaborations in addressing the experiences and priorities of racially and otherwise minoritized youth, families, and communities in fostering academic thriving and the holistic well-being of children.

School-Based Initiatives with Families

When schools went remote during the COVID-19 pandemic, technology moved to the foreground as a central way to maintain schooling and social connection. Thus, we first review literature about the use of technology in pandemic-era interventions with minoritized youth and families. Related to the use of technology, the extended period of isolation, uncertainty, and loss led to a growing youth mental health crisis. We secondly review the body of pandemic-specific literature related to school partnerships to support youth mental health. Finally, as described earlier, the inequities that emerged from the pandemic were not new; they exacerbated long-standing, historically rooted inequities. Thus, several school-based initiatives with families and communities that existed *prior* to the pandemic continued to be important avenues for fostering positive parent-teacher relationships, reciprocal communication, and more holistic learning and supports *during* and *subsequent* to the pandemic. In this third group of initiatives, therefore, we review interventions that continue to offer potential for leveraging the expertise of youth and families to improve schooling and educational practice: parent–teacher home visits, parent leadership trainings, and shared governance models. These initiatives were during and coming out of the pandemic, but it is of note that many of these actions that families were taking existed prior to the pandemic but nevertheless were rarely acknowledged by schools or districts as valid actions. So, while we frame them as actions that families were engaging in, many families have been doing community level work prior to the pandemic without support from schools.

Technology-Based Interventions with Families. During the pandemic, research shows that families utilized technology and built subsequent communities through Twitter and other digital tools (Michela et al., 2022; Szabo, 2021). Youth also used online tools and platforms to connect and create space for play and relationships (Gavin, 2021), such as using TikTok to share challenges of online learning for immigrant/minoritized youth, or to support/tutor peers (Literat, 2021). Each of these studies commented on the importance of using technology and social media for community building and increasing youth and families' engagement with school (Michela et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Gazmararian et al. (2021), found that interventions are needed to

mitigate the effect of the pandemic on adolescent mental health. Digital tools have helped school counselors to meet with students and families simultaneously, increasing family engagement in learning and mental health, compared to solely working with students one to one (Sugrue et al., 2023). Strategies may include improving the resilience of teenagers, developing peer support networks, leveraging digital technology for mental health support, facilitating partnerships between families and mental health providers, and ongoing government support. Isolation and a lack of school and social belonging were ever-present, and youth often felt powerless (Rodriguez & Wy, 2024). Literat (2021) drew insights from youth's use of TikTok to recommend schools increase student agency (youth said they often felt powerless/decided for) and adopt a pedagogy of care in recognition of trauma, various lived experiences, and students' expressed need for authentic relationships.

In one example, Calabrese Barton et al. (2021) describe how youth used local COVID-19 dashboards for their schools and cities, visualizations of viral spread, and TikTok videos describing mental health strategies for coping with long-term isolation. Youth accessed data to learn about their world and to solve new problems. They also critically examined how data are used in power-mediated ways to construct knowledge about, organize activity, and surveil them and their worlds. Youth have sought to reform their engagement with data in ways that resist, protect, care, and transform their experiences with and in the pandemic.

Family–Community–School Partnerships to Support Youth Mental Health. The lived experiences of minoritized students and families during and after the pandemic can be both sources of resilience and support as well as traumatic and rife with uncertainty with corresponding impacts on the mental health of immigrant and other minoritized youth (Literat, 2021; Oliveira & Segel, 2022; Park et al., 2023; Yeh et al., 2022). These youth can benefit from pedagogical practices that support critical consciousness (Yeh et al., 2022), control over circumstances through problem-solving (Harris et al., 2023; Yeh et al., 2022), and agentic opportunities for self-improvement and social change (Harris et al., 2023; Literat, 2021). Research during the pandemic showed a number of key ways that schools attempted to partner with families to offset isolation and support mental health. Yeh et al. (2022) suggest that to support students' mental health in the face of a pandemic and growing social inequity, school personnel should be trained to inquire about the different challenges and barriers that students face. Several studies found that deep, collaborative relationships with families were essential for supporting academic and social-emotional outcomes and economic inequalities during the pandemic (Pavlakis et al., 2021). Additionally, research found that families needed integrated student supports, services, community-school partnerships, and updates to technology and communication outreach to families (Calabrese-Barton et al., 2021; Pollack et al., 2021). Partnerships with outside agencies in the provision of holistic services outside of supplemental instruction has also been effective in helping minoritized youth to thrive (Dorner et al., 2022; Pavlakis, 2021; Pollack, 20221; Schwartz, 2023). School–agency partnerships can foster deeper understanding of community needs and assets, increase a school's capacity for consistent communication and regular home visits (Dorner et al., 2022), drive innovation in family services (Pavlakis et al., 2021), and support the maintenance and leveraging of intervention-specific practices (Pollack et al., 2021).

Parent-Teacher Home Visits. Parent-teacher home visits have continued to be an important tool in a broader system of engagement for building relationships and communication between families and schools both during and subsequent to the pandemic. Referred to variously as "relational," "empowerment," "sociocultural," or "asset-framed," these home visits differ from more traditional (deficit-based) visits in which the focus is on remediating an individual student's attendance, behavior, or performance, or on evaluating the home life and parenting of a particular child (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). As developed by the Sacramento-based Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV), in particular, this family engagement practice grew out of a community organizing focus on developing relationships and fostering empowerment to improve educational experiences, particularly with racially or linguistically minoritized and immigrant families (Venkateswaran et al., 2018). The model adheres to five guidelines that evaluators determined to be essential to the development of more positive, trusting relationships and communication between educators and families:

1. Visits are always voluntary for educators and families and arranged in advance.
2. Teachers are trained and compensated for visits outside their school day.
3. The focus of the first visit is relationship-building; educators and families discuss hopes and dreams.
4. No targeting—visit all or a cross-section of students, so there is no stigma.
5. Educators conduct visits in pairs and, after the visit, reflect with their partners.

The majority of empirical studies about home visits precede the pandemic and focus on student outcomes. For instance, in a series of three studies to examine the impact of PTHV implementation on academic outcomes, Sheldon and Jung (2018) found positive academic outcomes for students and schools, including decreased chronic absence, improved ELA performance, and improved math performance. Qualitative studies of similar approaches have also highlighted positive impacts on educator mindsets, beliefs and learning, parent-teacher communications and relationships, and student academic support, particularly for students from im/migrant and bilingual/multilingual communities (Ginsberg, 2007; Johnson, 2014; Lin & Bates, 2010; Lopez et al., 2001; McNight et al., 2022). However, studies also highlight how even asset-focused relational home visits can reinforce normative power in which "teachers held the power, and they asserted and maintained it; marginalized families were positioned as the learners, even in their own homes" (Paulick et al., 2022, p. 70). These and other studies (Park & Paulick, 2024) warn that home visiting practices, when implemented in ways that do not challenge these normative arrangements, can also *harm* relationships with families and undermine efforts to support racially and linguistically minoritized students. Both researchers and practitioners emphasize the need for sustained training and support for teachers that embed home visiting into more comprehensive system-wide approaches to equitably engaging families (Harris, 2024).

Parent Leadership Training Initiatives. Many schools and systems across the United States partner with nonprofit organizations to offer parent and educator trainings that include both conventional parent involvement practices (such as supporting homework

at home and attending parent–teacher conferences) and more agentic parent leadership skills (such as advocating for student needs and participating in school-based decision-making and leadership). These initiatives largely pivoted to online trainings and engagements during the pandemic, but the content, aims, and approach have remained similar across delivery formats in the wake of the pandemic. Prominent examples of such trainings include programs offered by Abriendo Puertas (Opening Doors), Parent Involvement in Quality Education (PIQE), Parents for Public Schools, and a number of charter schools who provide families training in organizing and leadership, such as the Alliance Schools in Texas, Rocketship Charter Schools, Innovate Public Schools, and Green Dot (via United Parents and Students). Many programs are tied to particular schools, districts, or communities; for instance, the Flamboyan Foundation focuses primarily on family engagement with schools in Washington, DC, PIQE districts are all in California, and Abriendo Puertas particularly focuses on institutions that serve Spanish-speaking Latino communities. Although we have included parent leadership trainings in school-based initiatives, we note that there are also a significant number of such initiatives supported by independent non-profit organizations (e.g., Parent Leadership Training Institute, Teaching for Change, Parent Ambassadors, and others), and considerable overlap with parent and community organizing groups we discuss in the next section (i.e., United Parent Leaders Action Network [UPLAN] represents a national coalition of parent leadership organizations).

These training initiatives vary widely but program evaluations have associated trainings with improved parent knowledge and school preparation practices (Caal et al., 2019); more positive parent-teacher relationships (Sanzone et al., 2018), improved academic achievement, and other academic outcomes, such as attendance and graduation (Martin & Espinosa, 2008; Paredes, 2011). Geller et al. (2019) articulated a comprehensive theory of change and indicators to account for the impacts of parent leadership development on families and young people; an evaluation with seven parent leadership groups using these indicators found personal transformations among parents in their perceptions of themselves as leaders and changemakers as well as policy wins and sustained change via parental roles in implementation. Similar to home visiting practices, these trainings and interventions do not guarantee parent agency and leadership; without careful attention to power and changes in educator and school practices, such efforts may be implemented in ways that lack cultural responsiveness or that relegate parents to "limited voice, agency or decision-making power" (Sanzone et al., 2018, p. 5). Nonetheless, parent experiences and empirical impact studies suggest that such leadership development initiatives can also be an important aspect of systemic efforts to foster minoritized family agency and policy advocacy for programs, resources, and interventions to meet the needs and priorities of children and families in the wake of the pandemic.

Shared Governance and Decision-Making with Families. In theory, enlisting youth, families, and community members in educational decision-making enables local communities to shape priorities and resource allocation to address their specific needs, aims, and contexts, particularly given the disproportionate impacts on minoritized youth and the variability of familial experiences during the pandemic and its (ongoing) aftermath. Civic engagement and democratic participation in the governance and decision-making

in schools are part of the rhetorical fabric of the U.S. public education system, but this theory often contrasts with the complex realities of who can exercise influence and how participation is operationalized (Anderson, 1998). The typical mechanisms, such as voting for school board members and providing testimony at school board meetings, provide limited avenues for influence and tend to privilege dominant, mostly White, stakeholders and their priorities (Sampson & Bertrand, 2022).

However, a more recent wave of participatory reforms has opened the door to families and communities taking part in consequential budget, hiring, and resource decisions. For instance, first passed in 2013, California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) decentralizes budget decision-making to the local level and requires caregiver, student, and broader community involvement in developing plans to achieve district goals, particularly to improve academic achievement for multilingual learners, low-income and foster youth (Marsh & Hall, 2018). Youth in several schools and districts have been able to use this requirement to amplify student voice and advocate for changes to school culture, instruction, and graduation supports (Casar et al., 2022). However, research across the state suggests that these community engagements are also racialized, classed, and powered in ways that often center the agendas and priorities of institutional actors and reinforce the historical dynamics of disenfranchisement experienced by racially minoritized communities (Daramola et al., 2022). We thus turn to community-centered initiatives in which systems are partners but not solely shaping the conditions (such as structures, agenda, norms, and protocols) for supporting youth and families in pandemic recovery.

Community-Centered Initiatives

In addition to school-based interventions, we also note possible opportunities for systemic, collaborative approaches that seek to involve families and communities to address disproportionate impacts on youth learning and mental health in the wake of the pandemic. Like the inequities they seek to address, community partnerships preceded the pandemic, but in the wake of pandemic impacts on youth and families they offer more than "one size fits all" approaches because they prioritize community needs, values, and concerns rather than institutional agendas and policy outcomes. Community "partnerships" often entail school contracts with after-school providers and non-profit community-driven spaces and programs (Rodriguez, 2019, 2024; Rodriguez et al., 2020). These partnerships can take different forms and have different goals, such as service-oriented, developmental, or organizing around community-identified issues (see Figure 1, adapted from Rodriguez, 2020, and Warren, 2011). While these definitions vary across the scholarship, they guide our approaches in this essay. We address both systems-led initiatives and family- and community-led approaches (in the subsequent section).

Systems-Led Community-Focused Initiatives

Historically, the partnership concept was to center community needs so that schools were a central institution and one that could help to broker resources to families that might be in need; this "full-service" community-school model was indeed service-

Approaches to Community-Centered Initiatives

1 SERVICE	2 DEVELOPMENTAL	3 ORGANIZING
Serves a community need, which is identified by the community.	Develops: • Capacity in individual-collectives • Relationships and networks of supports • Broader community infrastructure • Policy	Organizes through: • Identifying school or community issues • Collecting and leveraging research • Developing advocacy plans or campaigns • Raising awareness • Changing systems/practices

FIGURE 1 Approaches to community-centered initiatives.

oriented, often approaching families as "in need" of a service, rather than as central actors in decision-making, or policy making (Smrekar & Mawhinney, 1999). Incentivizing some of these partnership or community-school models (e.g., Race to the Top, Community Schools, Harlem Children's Zone [HCZ], Children's Aid) has resulted in mixed approaches to seeing families as assets, possessing ideas to be incorporated while also providing critical resources and benefits for minoritized families. Further, holistic neighborhood approaches like HCZ have not led to combating educational inequities. Efforts to achieve this have been in the form of community schools, which we discuss first, and cross-sector collaborations (also sometimes referred to as collective impact initiatives).

Community Schools. Definitions of community schools can vary as they are a strategy of educational reform that is often intended to counteract neoliberal, privatization of public schools. Community schools generally augment connections between schools, families, and communities with the goal of improving students' educational outcomes and well-being (Bill et al., 2024). Although community schools most often reflect a service model, they can also take forms that build social capital and political power (Warren, 2011). However, like other interventions reviewed, they can also perpetuate deficit-based discourses through racial projects and particular ways of engaging that remain school-centric, White, middle-class, and normative (Rodriguez, 2020). Some of these models foster equitable collaborations with minoritized youth, families, and communities (Garcia, 2022) while others sustain racial stereotypes or perpetuate the mar-

ginalization of Black and other racially minoritized families (Baxley, 2022; Rodriguez, 2020). At the core of community schools is to create a sense of educational spaces where families can access "health, social welfare, juvenile justice, extended day educational opportunities, [and] community participation" (Stallings, 1995, p. 8) and more recently, neighborhood transformation (Bower & Rossi, 2019).

Murillo et al. (2023) describe one way that community schools can mitigate inequality, in a study about a school-based legal clinic partnership to support immigrant families through integrated supports (Oakes et al., 2017). Immigrant families are particularly vulnerable to threats from immigration enforcement outside of school and racialized discrimination and exclusion (Rodriguez, 2022). And often, schools are the only sites of sanctuary that they have (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018). Murillo et al. studied how a legal clinic for immigrants was developed, implemented, and integrated to operate within a K–12 community school in California. The authors found the range of services offered by the clinic, and such services were integrated into the life of the school.

A takeaway in this work was how Integrated Student Supports (ISS) impact disparities in educational outcomes that relate to multiple facets of students' and families' lives (e.g., health, immigration) (see Oakes et al., 2017). ISS are a component of community schools. ISS involves supporting the whole child through five tenets: (1) needs assessment, (2) coordination of supports for students, (3) integration of supports within schools, (4) community partnerships, and (5) data collection and tracking. These components guide the development of programs and practices that address students' non-academic needs (Murillo et al., 2023). Murillo et al. (2023) combines ISS and tenets of community schools to share how collaboration between schools and community organizations are critical to supporting students. The benefits of working across social and educational systems are evident through school partnerships with community organizations, medical and legal centers, and other direct social services (Roth et al., 2018).

Similar to other schools, community schools also struggled with remote learning during the pandemic, but the culture and leadership of some enabled more humanizing and emancipatory responses to the challenges. For instance, as the principal of a community school, Garcia (2022) partnered with researchers and youth in a participatory research project to share the experiences of students and teachers in ways that helped the community to understand the complexities of each other's struggles and identify strategies to improve learning experiences. Thus, community school reforms represent a promising intervention for supporting youth and families in post-pandemic times, but they require focused and intentional efforts to foster equitable collaborations to realize their potential.

Cross-Sector Collaborations. These collaborations are strategic partnerships between schools, community-based organizations (CBOs), advocates, businesses, governmental agencies, philanthropy, and the public-at-large around a shared vision and indicators of improved outcomes for students from "cradle-to-career," especially within a particular neighborhood, city, or region (Horsford & Heilig, 2014; Kania & Kramer, 2011). Particularly in the past decade, cross-sector collaborative efforts have spurred new funding and initiatives, including the federal Promise Neighborhood Initiative, HCZ, and the Strive Network. These efforts have ushered in a new policy context for work

to "engage" diverse caregivers and families in education and related supports, such as housing, workforce development, social services, food stability, and health care. Although families are often the central focus of the wraparound supports these multiorganizational collaborations enable, research suggests that efforts to bring families and communities into the conversation as equal stakeholders can often fall short of the rhetoric and aspirations (Kania et al., 2022).

Data continue to be a central focus in these initiatives, and the Strive Network, which includes 65 "cradle to career" initiatives, reported that the majority of network members who shared data in the prior year saw improvements in early reading and middle grade math as well as improvements for youth of color in several outcomes, from kindergarten readiness to graduation and post-secondary enrollment (StriveTogether, 2023). Similarly, a rigorous causal impact study of the HCZ found improved achievement scores for students selected by lottery into the HCZ charter schools. Thus, as a model, collective impact has been highly successful in winning resources, attention, and to some extent increasing student outcomes—but as the originators of the model, Kania et al. (2022) conceded after a decade of such investments, "the single greatest reason why collective impact efforts fall short is a failure to center equity" (p. 38). In particular, they highlight the limitations of driving change and solutions envisioned solely by power elites, who most often are White and male, without the insights or leadership of the communities marginalized in systems. Rather, the authors recognized, "As outsiders, we often don't know enough to be as helpful or effective as we should be, so we need first to talk, listen, and learn" (p. 40).

We turn next to initiatives led primarily by families and communities outside of formal educational institutions and other agencies. Although schools and civic organizations are often involved in these interventions, the primary leadership and decision-making for these efforts come from organizations and collectives of racially minoritized families and communities.

Family- and Community-Led Interventions to Support Learning and Well-Being in the Wake of the Pandemic

In this section, we turn from systems-led interventions to family- and community-led initiatives, which include a broad set of different collaborations. We distinguish them as being largely led by communities, or prioritizing community, in research partnerships rather than being led by professionals in educational or other formal systems. We discuss three broad categories of family- and community-led initiatives: (1) *youth and community organizing*, (2) *family- and community-based codesign*, and (3) *community research collaboratives* that involve programs, advocacy, and shared decision-making. Generally, we overview collaborations involving community-based spaces (after or out of school settings [e.g., community-based spaces in organizations or public libraries]) but still may involve schools either through a partnership in name or that community-based organizations are recruiting students and families from these schools. These collaborations are participatory, and center voices of those involved/impacted. In some cases, organizing and advocacy are prioritized, or attempted, while building social capital remains a major aim of many community-based participatory initiatives (Geller et al., 2023; Warren et al., 2021). Referring back to Figure 1, these collaborations can

also have different aims, but largely focus on building power and capital while moving away from solely service-based models.

Youth and Community Organizing

In the years prior to the pandemic, hundreds of grassroots community organizing groups were becoming a national educational justice movement focused on educational change with youth, families and community members (Warren et al., 2021). These groups focus on developing the relationships, leadership, and power of those directly impacted by racial and educational injustices to advocate and sometimes collaborate with schools and systems to address issues such as the racially disproportionate school-to-prison pipeline, the closure of schools serving predominantly students of color, community school reforms, and the adoption of culturally responsive curriculum, among other campaigns. As decision-making and control of education have moved father from the local level and with the rise of ultra-conservative White supremacist forces, many in the educational justice movement have argued for intersectional organizing that brings struggles for equitable education together with organizing for Black lives, affordable housing, immigration reform, reproductive rights, LGTBQ+ rights, and struggles against gentrification (Warren et al., 2021).

During the time of pandemic remote learning, some organizing groups, like Oakland REACH, created innovative learning communities for Black and other racially minoritized children. They enacted culturally relevant pedagogy, mindful discipline, racially and linguistically affirming approaches, and focused on family socioemotional health. While many of these efforts ended or shifted to enrichment activities with the return to in-person learning and lack of funding to sustain their capacity, parents and caregivers gleaned new insights about high quality education that shaped their subsequent advocacy (Daramola, 2022).

Amid the resurgence of the movement for Black Lives, youth organizing groups across the country from Oakland to Chicago to North Carolina realized decades of struggle to remove police and School Resource Officers (SROs) from schools (Gomez, 2021; Welton & Harris, 2022). Similarly, a wave of school renamings (to replace historical figures with racist or colonizing legacies) were often sparked by youth and community organizing groups. Such efforts grow out of a broader abolitionist movement, which seeks not only to disrupt carceral systems and logics but also replace them with resources and restorative practices of community care. While these youth and community-driven movements are not "interventions" in any conventional sense and cannot (and should not) be co-opted for systems aims, they do offer potent civic engagement and learning contexts for young people and communities toward liberatory, community-centered change agendas, and futures beyond the status quo of educational systems.

Family- and Community-Based Codesign

Codesign is an approach to participatory design research that brings together diverse stakeholders in order to collectively and iteratively identify issues, problems, or possibilities of practice and to design change (Ishimaru & Bang, 2023). Participatory design *with* (not for) youth, families, and communities has deep roots in Indigenous and

decolonizing methodologies, in non-dominant community practices and in community-based design research (Bang et al., 2016; Brayboy, 2006; Kovach, 2010; Patel, 2015; Smith, 2019), as well as community-engaged scholarship (Anyon, 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Warren et al., 2018). Solidarity-driven codesign emerged from the work of the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC), a national, transdisciplinary collaborative of family and community leaders, educators, and researchers who center racial equity in family engagement. Within broader aims of community-defined educational justice and collective well-being, solidarity-driven codesign seeks to:

- Begin with family and community ecologies.
- Refuse and disrupt dominant power dynamics.
- Enact solidarities in collective change-making.
- Cultivate ongoing transformative possibilities.

In a study of 10 codesigns across diverse geographical and racial/ethnic contexts, Ishimaru et al. (2023) examined sustained engagements to develop an empirical typology of collaboratives' theories of change, or the broader aims and the who, what, and how of their change-making conversations. They found that sustained engagements that build politicized trust (Vakil et al., 2016) and the ability to grapple with tensions over time deepened relational theorizing and enabled groups to envision family- and community-centered possibilities for change beyond systems as currently constructed (Ishimaru & Bang, 2022).

Solidarity-driven codesign processes have been used to design a broad range of policies, decisions and practices, including more equitable family engagement curricula for districts, redesigned principal hiring practices, district strategic plans, and budget decision-making councils (Ishimaru, 2020). During the pandemic, for example, Alvarez et al. (2022) drew on "co-designed video methodology" to create, share, and examine family and educational leader videos to share their lived experiences of COVID-19 and quarantine. This allowed school leaders to reimagine the role of schools and to shift to community-centered design over an academics-centered perspective in their leadership. In another example, through the Learning in Places project (Learning in Places Collaborative, 2021), Tzou, Bang, and colleagues have been codesigning with families and educators to develop field-based early elementary science learning and pedagogies for both classrooms and home/community contexts. The engagements and pedagogy center racial equity, ethical, evidence-based decision-making, and just relations with the natural world using school gardens and local neighborhoods. Finally, Nickson and her colleagues (under review) created the conditions in an urban district for codesigning early critical literacies and family-educator agency with Black boys, their families, educators and systems leaders.

Community Research Collaboratives

This third and final group of community-led initiatives represent a broad range of programs and partnerships that have in common a focus on prioritizing the perspectives, goals, and decision-making of youth, families, and communities who have been historically excluded or marginalized toward aims of advancing equity and justice

in education and communities. Because these differ from systems-based Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) and other forms of research, York et al. (2020, p. 7) define *community research collaboratives* as "*partnerships among community members, researchers, and/or educational institutions that aim to advance equity and justice by jointly creating new knowledge, policies, and/or practices that lead to systemic change in educational systems and society.*" Their inquiry emphasizes that a key distinction lies in the role of community stakeholders in driving priorities and decisions. We provide examples of three different community research collaboratives below, while noting that this is a burgeoning (yet underfunded) type of partnership that are but a subset of a larger set of participatory research collaborations (see also CREATE Center [Smith et al., 2023]; URBAN [Warren et al., 2018]; York et al., 2020).

First, Ghiso and colleagues (2022) long-term community-based research project in Philadelphia existed prior to the pandemic and has continued through and after it, seeking to "better understand the ways that immigrant youth and families advocate for themselves in the face of educational inequity" (2022, p. 495). Their multiracial, multilingual, and intergenerational project considers the community and families in it as sources of knowledge that members of the community have generated and shared with one another over time as they engage in study and inquiry, referring to this as "intellectual commons" (Campano et al., 2022). Building from the city's activist and grass-roots legacies, the Partnership includes university faculty, grad students, Philadelphia youth, and families in work to examine material conditions of schools, create alternative spaces for youth, to engage in culturally responsive and critical literacy inquiries, and to design professional development for educators based on lived experiences and perspectives of historically disenfranchised groups. During the pandemic, researchers found that immigrant families drew on individual and collective experiences to engage in research as an act of care, to address pragmatic and immediate needs in their schooling, and to contend with legacies of oppression. They sustained their collaboration despite the profound challenges presented by the pandemic through expanding networks of care.

Moving their informal spaces online, the collaborative used breakouts and short informal Zooms about cooking to continue their practices of hearing about the daily lives of members and supporting the intergenerational aspects of the collaborative, integrating care and intellectual inquiry together. The partnership also invited youth to analyze current topics and challenges in times of the pandemic crisis, making it relevant to their lives. In doing so, the partnership allowed for intergenerational ways of knowing and honored different types of knowledge (rather than assuming one dominant knowledge that comes from the school or school space). The authors argue that the intellectual commons enabled participants to draw inspiration and insight from different kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing, including storytelling and co-constructing knowledge with youth while also engaging in grassroots activism.

A second community research collaborative can be found in Rodriguez's (2019, 2020) and Rodriguez et al.'s (2021) work about a library-based program to support the social belonging of newcomer immigrant youth. The library was a central "hub" for building relationships between immigrant families and public institutions. The library partnered with a local school district in the Northeast, including district personnel with long experience working with language learners, and developed a civically engaged curriculum to promote social belonging for newcomer immigrant youth and

their families. The program was held at the library for youth. The library-based program, through a community–school partnership, sought integrated supports, expanded learning opportunities, and opportunities for newcomer youth to engage in community issues and develop as leaders. The aim was to take back information they learned through the curriculum that centered on youth migration experiences to their schools. The projects that youth engaged in included digital literacy projects, interviewing and researching local immigrant-serving organizations, and learning about civic and political institutions. Key to this partnership was the hiring of relevant personnel invested in immigrant issues at the school district and library level. While this partnership was multidimensional, the library was really the hub of communication and relationships that were central to the youth experience. These non-school-based staff and programs were central to building social capital and networks of support (Rodriguez, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

A final example of a community research collaborative can be found in Rodriguez's and colleagues study of a CBO in the Washington, DC, area. This organization, Voices United (pseudonym), is an immigrant empowerment organization. They recruit immigrant and refugee youth, most of whom are from Latino backgrounds, from area middle and high schools as well as run parent programs to equip them with knowledge for their own liberation. The programs build social and political capital beyond direct social services. The staff is multilingual and typically racially/ethnically diverse. The programs are also intergenerational, considering caregivers' advocacy and inclusion as a key component for recruiting youth as well. In other words, many youth in this study (Rodriguez et al., 2023; S. Rodriguez, personal communication, August 2021) learned about the program from their parents, mostly mothers and caregivers. Through a youth-centered and research-based curriculum, youth learn about civic issues and how to engage and become leaders in their communities. The program activities teach youth about racism, language barriers, and economic challenges they and their families often face. Participants in the Voices United youth program also gain the skills and resilience to identify and challenge the systemic inequities in their city and communities, and to shape a new vision for the future.

Youth build social relationships and capital through the organization. One Latino youth (S. Rodriguez, personal communication, September 2023) expressed that the CBO felt like a sanctuary compared to the school environment, noting that the energetic and approachable CBO staff made him feel welcomed and engaged. He described how the friendly atmosphere and peer interactions at the CBO led him to participate in activities, ultimately fostering lasting friendships and a sense of community. Similarly, another youth (S. Rodriguez, personal communication, February 2024) highlighted how shared identities and experiences, such as immigration status, play a crucial role in forming meaningful relationships. She noted that discussing her immigrant background with peers at the CBO, who also shared similar experiences, created a strong sense of camaraderie and mutual support. The CBO environment provided a safe space where these connections could thrive, fostering positive peer relationships that extend beyond the immediate setting.

One of the things another youth (Rodriguez, 2024; S. Rodriguez, personal communication, August 2023) learned at the community organization was how to be a leader, which meant she learned how to be confident, to give a voice to others, and stand up

for herself (Rodriguez, 2024). To her, a leader is responsible, is trustworthy, and listens to others, and is not embarrassed to speak when needed. This skill has been useful to her in school, during social times, and with her family. Because she was able to learn about others and hear other people's stories, she feels the CBO has prepared her for her future. The benefits of the CBO have also reached her family. Because of the organization, her parents have the opportunity to learn English.

For many youth, these relationships and resources through the organization are central to their sense of belonging and well-being (Rodriguez et al., 2024). A youth from El Salvador (S. Rodriguez, personal communication, September 2023) mentioned:

> My well-being mentally, it is draining. It's draining to think about because sometimes wanting to make things as normal as possible when they're not normal. Or when they're, uh, like, different from what's considered normal in a family. Like, usually, families sit together. We don't have that [due to family separation].

A takeaway from this study, like Ghiso et al.'s (2022) study, is that while the program focuses on empowerment, leadership, and building capital, youth learn and make meaningful connections and experiences in the community-space by forging connections with other youth due to shared identities, immigration, and familial histories / experiences; and finding "sanctuary" and belonging in the community-based space (Rodriguez, 2019). These spaces center youth voices and experiences and consider their whole person as relevant to and an asset in the space; they are asked to contribute and do more than learn English or improve academic outcomes.

Although community research collaborative models have affected crucial positive change in the learning, experiences, leadership, and educational systems as determined by minoritized youth, families, and communities, a central concern relates to the extent to which such initiatives can become systematically embedded at scale in publicly funded spaces in order to serve all who can benefit from them. Such efforts are largely supported by limited philanthropic resources and depend on a small number of mostly racially minoritized scholars who intentionally and creatively navigate the instrumental expectations of academic research production. The impacts and efficacy of these approaches in addressing community-defined needs, priorities, and solutions highlights the importance of sustained and dedicated resources, support, and understanding of these efforts. We also need a new generation of scholars who see this work as central to their own scholarship as well as academic incentive structures and supports that reward and support community-based research.

Community-Led Models from the Field: Cases of Grassroots-Level Approaches

While we have spent time in this essay synthesizing systems and school led initiatives, and highlighted community-level, collaborative models, our third guiding question invites us to consider some examples of community-led models from grassroots, real-time perspectives. As we noted, the research on community approaches has existed prior to the pandemic and was accelerated during the pandemic. In our own research,

we are in the field with such approaches and share two case examples of innovative approaches.

Case studies of family- and community-led models are less common due to multiple challenges of personnel and funding alongside the time and capacity to build authentic partnerships between researchers and practitioners. While studies like Ghiso and colleagues (2022) and Rodriguez (2019; Rodriguez et al., 2020) are centered on community needs, often the research or evaluation team offers supports through research-evidence that do or do not take shape depending on the capacity of many local community organizations or members. Because of the relative dearth of on-the-ground accounts of such models, we offer two cases from our own work to offer more grounded insights that cut across the bounded categories we created from the literature. We also draw across these to suggest policy conditions necessary to foster their success. We discuss one example from Rodriguez and colleagues where the "intervention" was community-driven and is largely executed by community members and community-based organizational staff in conjunction with the research team that Rodriguez was a part of (Identity Inc., 2024; S. Rodriguez, personal communication, November 2023). The second case from Ishimaru and Elmi's (2024) current study describes multiple community-driven "interventions" led by racially minoritized families and community-based organizations to support youth and implement systems change in and beyond local schools.

Case A: Community-Driven Programs and Research to Support
Health and Well-Being for Latino Families

For the last several decades a community-based organization and non-profit, Identity Inc., in Maryland, has served Latino (immigrant) families to increase access to resources, educational opportunities and programs, and social services. The organization has built strong partnerships with local families, policymakers, and personnel in multiple educational and social systems that serve underserved populations. In its multiple programs, Identity centers the lived experiences, humanity, and healing of the community as its priority through direct services, mental health services, integrated school-based supports, partnerships with schools and the district, and research-based advocacy campaigns.

In response to the Latino community's urgent need for emotional support, Identity Inc. developed a non-clinical Community Mental Health (CMH) program known as Encuentros to support youth and families. Encuentros was inspired by established Latino traditions of family and community as resources for emotional support and distress. The primary goal of the program is to help community members manage the mental health impacts of their own and their families' trauma and equip them with skills to be agents of change in their communities. Earlier iterations of the program, which began in the spring of 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, trained frontline staff and Community Mental Health Workers (CMHWs), also known as *promotores*, who were Latino community members identified by Identity as liaisons between the community and organizations or resources. CMHWs were trained in topics such as active listening; coping in a crisis; managing anxiety, grief, and loss; helping children cope during COVID-19; and trauma-informed self-care. Identity then piloted its first non-clinical CMH groups of four sessions, co-facilitated by CMHWs with parents, and

youth. CMHWs, or *promotores*, must participate in 24 hours of required training in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), confidentiality, sexual abuse awareness, and how to make referral to Identity's Case Management Program, among other things. This program was expanded in the spring and fall of the following year, adding more groups and sessions for adults and youth. Survey data showed participants managed stress and feelings of sadness, helped children manage difficult emotions, and their overall mental and emotional well-being improved. The research team utilized a community-based participatory approach and engaged in rapid cycle evaluation practice (Identity Inc., 2023; S. Rodriguez, personal communication, June 2022).

The key learnings from program staff and researchers are the essential communication and collaboration that links research and practice. Adults and youth comment on how critical the space through the Encuentros dialogue is for their well-being and social relationships that contribute to their belonging in the school and community. The program was built from the grassroots level and relies on external funding to build capacity, train case workers, and to facilitate the program. The community-based organization staff designs and implements the program with technical assistance from research partners.

Case B: Multiracial Community-Driven Programs, Advocacy, and
Research to Support Youth and Families in Schools and Beyond

Originally founded by a group of Somali mothers, Supporting Parents in Education and Beyond (SPEB) supports immigrant families and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities "to transform systemic inequities in education by engaging families, educators, and community partners in systems change work on a local, state, and national level" (Supporting Partnerships in Education and Beyond, 2024). SPEB offers a year-long Institute that brings families and educators together across different schools and districts, primarily in the broader region of South King County, Washington, a geography that contains both some of the most diverse zip codes in the country as well as vast inequities and resource challenges. As the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and influenced dramatic change in all aspects of life, SPEB (like so many other organizations) rapidly pivoted to provide direct supports to families. The group secured computers for children and families, coordinated with other community groups to offer food and resource fairs, signed families up for rent support, and directed them to social services. They also moved the Institute online. Undeterred by the technological challenges and the immense learning curve of online engagement, SPEB's monthly Institutes provided a lifeline of connection for nearly 70 parents, caregivers, educators and eventually also youth—struggling to make sense of their own experiences of fear and trauma, especially as Black, Indigenous, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Asian American communities who were disproportionately impacted. Similar to the Philadelphia partnership described above, the Institute convenings served as an "intervention" with minoritized, working-class youth and families that fostered networks of mutual aid and collective care to sustain a disproportionately impacted community in a time of immense precarity and challenge (Ishimaru & Elmi, 2024).

During this time, Somali mothers who were worried about their children's academic learning also came together and created a tutoring program for their children, which they dubbed *Guul*, which means "success" in Somali. Leveraging educators in Somalia, Uganda, and Kenya working in a different time zone, Somali parent leader Muna Hussein organized online tutoring for children after school in mathematics and Somali language. Muna enlisted teenagers from the community to lead small groups of children in English literacy tutoring. Families expressed great relief and gratitude to the program. Teachers at the children's U.S. schools expressed surprise at the transformation and growth they perceived among the children who were part of the program, particularly during a time when most children were falling significantly behind.

Meanwhile, in the SPEB Institute, families began to design solutions by reflecting on the supports that communities of color have relied on for raising children long before the pandemic. In particular, Samoan parent leader and community auntie Helen Tauanu'u championed the role of a "village" that has raised healthy, confident, and well children despite oppression, hardship, and colonialism across time. Many Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities in the United States continue to raise children collectively, drawing on both extended (blood) relatives *and* "fictive" kinship networks of older youth, adults, and elders who are "family of the heart": aunties and uncles. Latino/a, African, African American, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Asian American families in SPEB discussed how aunties and uncles buffer youth from the worst impacts of racism, exclusion, and marginalization in schools and society and help youth to sustain and affirm their cultural identities. With the support of Dare2Be, a Black-led sister organization, the initiative is being codesigned for each context to bring cohorts of trusted adults, elders, and communities into schools to support youth. In the wake of a pandemic that continues to disproportionately impact Black and other communities of color, the Aunties and Uncles in the Schools Initiative aims to provide students the culturally responsive role modeling, advocacy, socioemotional supports, cultural teachings, and healing that schools alone have not been able to provide.

POLICY CONDITIONS AND SUPPORTS

Drawing from our case studies of community-led approaches, we recognize that efforts to scale such work to all the families and communities who may benefit from them call for important policy conditions and support. Our review of family and community centered initiatives reveals an opportunity to outline effective policy conditions at local, school, and state levels. We identify three overarching recommendations for policymakers:

1. Support localized interventions and appropriate scaling with funding mechanisms for such approaches.
2. Attend to holistic experiences of youth, families and communities (i.e., learning and academic outcomes as well as well-being and mental health).
3. Enhance data-use capacities through funding mechanisms and/or research practice partnerships among K–12 school systems, higher education entities, community-based organizations and other relevant stakeholders or intermediaries.

Our analysis of community-led approaches to family engagement highlights several critical policy conditions and supports necessary for scaling these efforts effectively. To broaden the impact of these initiatives, it is essential to build and sustain long-standing relationships between schools and trusted community organizations. During crises like the pandemic, formal systems have often eroded trust, making it vital for schools to collaborate with organizations and leaders already embedded in the community. Policies should promote and fund locally developed programs that are tailored to the unique needs, values, priorities, culture, and histories of specific communities. Often policymakers want one-size-fits-all programs that purportedly reflect "what works" rather than approaches that are responsive to community needs. However, localized approaches that rely on the qualitative experiences of families and communities are not only relevant but also more likely to succeed. Furthermore, sufficient financial support is crucial for the development, refinement, and sustainability of these programs. In order to realize their crucial role, CBOs need funding to hire and retain staff, manage initiatives, and maintain their efforts over time.

Emphasizing the holistic learning and well-being of both youth and families is another key component of effective policy. Interventions should address academic, emotional, social, and psychological needs in an integrated manner, acknowledging that youth are inextricably linked to their families and communities. Therefore, policies must support comprehensive efforts that address these interconnected needs simultaneously. To maximize impact, it is important to encourage diverse and integrated interventions. This includes not only direct services but also mental, social, and emotional supports, as well as leadership development opportunities with emphasis on care and healing (Rodriguez et al., 2024). In community-based spaces, care and healing alongside trauma-informed practice and attention to mental health needs are being addressed. Policies, programs, and practices should facilitate ongoing professional learning and collaboration among educational practitioners, enabling them to share approaches and learn from each other. Special programs, conferences, and networks can provide valuable opportunities for such sustained learning and exchange.

Lastly, policymakers can enhance data capacities through research partnerships that support evidence-based practices. Access to both quantitative and qualitative data and the ability to conduct research enable practitioners to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and make informed decisions, thereby strengthening the overall impact of family or community engagement initiatives (Ishimaru & Elmi, 2024). By addressing these policy areas, we can create supportive systems that scale and sustain community-led family engagement initiatives, ultimately benefiting a broader range of families and communities.

A critical component of each of these recommendations involves funding. While the support and innovation of philanthropic organizations are essential and evident in educational circles, transforming structures will require stronger federal, state, city, and/or local funding to support data use, training, and human capacity to address equity and improve access to resources. In our cases, and the empirical research on community-led initiatives or partnerships, the funding has been secured often by university-based researchers from foundations more frequently than by state and local entities that educational systems reside in. States and local entities rely on partnerships in many forms and yet often fail to support their longevity. Based on our case research

and empirical research, we call for improved funding and infrastructure to support community-led initiatives.

CONCLUSION

As we return to the four key themes, we argue that multiple interventions will likely be necessary to fully address the disproportionate impacts on the learning of minoritized youth, the varied experiences of families, the potential uses of technology to foster connection, and the pressing need to address the mental health crisis among youth, particularly those minoritized by race and disability. In particular, we suggest that family- and community-led initiatives offer promising ways forward for addressing these challenges and possibilities within the context of their particular needs, priorities, and aims. To realize the potential of these interventions beyond the local cases we shared, we argue for the need to better understand the organizational structures, leadership and educator capacities, sustained resource supports, and relational conditions that enable minoritized youth, families, and communities to lead change *with* educators and systems actors to foster the dignity, well-being, and holistic learning and development of a generation of children impacted by the pandemic and tumultuous sociopolitical forces.

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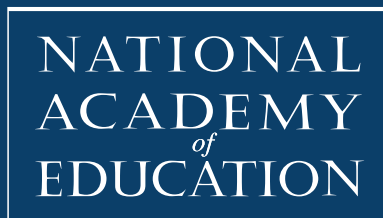
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