



Transforming Systems from the Bottom Up – Co-Creating Change in Aurora, CO

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The COVID-19 pandemic has shined a spotlight on the vital role that school systems play in supporting children, families, and communities and on the capacity of those systems to respond effectively and equitably to the needs of students. Modern school districts were built to meet the demands of exponential population growth, urbanization, diversification, and industrialization. Yet, as collections of individual schools, districts have since their inception struggled to balance the complexities of governing and operating multiple schools across multiple communities of multiple means and multiple demands. Even as they strive to meet our individual and collective aspirations, they also reflect our local and national failures.

School districts tend to reflect our failures to create a more equitable society and even operate in ways that perpetuate and exacerbate them, often by serving the interests of privileged parents, communities, or interests, at the expense of the poor and marginalized.

Policy efforts in American education have traditionally focused on ways to improve achievement and equity in schools and school districts through carrots and sticks in the form of state and federal monitoring and support. Yet decades of top-down reforms have failed to significantly shift the lines of opportunity, especially for low-income, black and brown students, the same students whom school systems have failed for generations to serve.

In the face of persistent gaps by race and income, both in opportunity and in outcomes, there is renewed interest in the possibility of a flipped paradigm for education reform, one that puts the experiences and voices of students and parents, especially those most marginalized in existing schools and systems, front and center. The idea of these efforts is to shift the focus of systemic and school level reform from the top down to the bottom up by empowering the people closest to schools to demand improvement for their children and their communities. This kind of “community organizing for school reform” according to its proponents “offers an urgently needed alternative to traditional school reform, one that situates schooling issues within larger economic and social systems, directly attends to issues of power, and builds democratic capacity to sustain meaningful reform over the long term.”

Community engagement has long been recognized as a core part of system change, but in execution, models for engagement have often fallen short or appeared as an afterthought. And the mechanisms for how the concerns of the most marginalized members of the community can influence change at the district level in a systematic way is often unclear.

Over the last two years, the Center for Education Policy Analysis (CEPA) at CU Denver’s School of Public Affairs has partnered with the Center on Reinventing Public Education on a project with the Wend Collective to study this question.

Through its Education and Community Systems work across the country, Wend is committed to making space for parent, student, and community voices to shape public education systems for the future. From 2016 - 2018, Wend commissioned national and regional research into what parents' dreams and hopes are for their children and how education systems might best partner with them to reach those goals. Seeking to put that learning into action, beginning in January 2019, Wend began building partnerships in Aurora, Colorado to support existing community engagement efforts, led by Aurora Public Schools in the first stages of Blueprint APS, their active district redesign process, and through a partnership between the APS Innovation Zone and Children's Hospital Colorado. In summer 2019, Wend partnered with an Aurora community nonprofit focused on family engagement and educational equity to engage parents directly in helping the district plan for future programming and facility needs. Since then, Wend has supported the development of a network of multiple partners to use a community-up strategy to reshape Aurora Public Schools and build a community-based system for strategic decision-making across Aurora's education system.

At the heart of Wend's investments in Aurora is a theory of change (Figure 1) purposefully designed as an alternative to external and top-down efforts to drive improvement and equity. The idea is that systems can only be responsive to their constituents when they operate through deep engagement and partnership with the communities they serve in all their diversity and complexity. Rather than imposing changes to the system and its schools from above, the goal is to encourage the district to co-create itself and its schools from the community-up, making it more responsive to the people most impacted by it, and especially those most underserved by it today.

A Vision for Collective Decision Making, Community Continuous Improvement, and Social Change

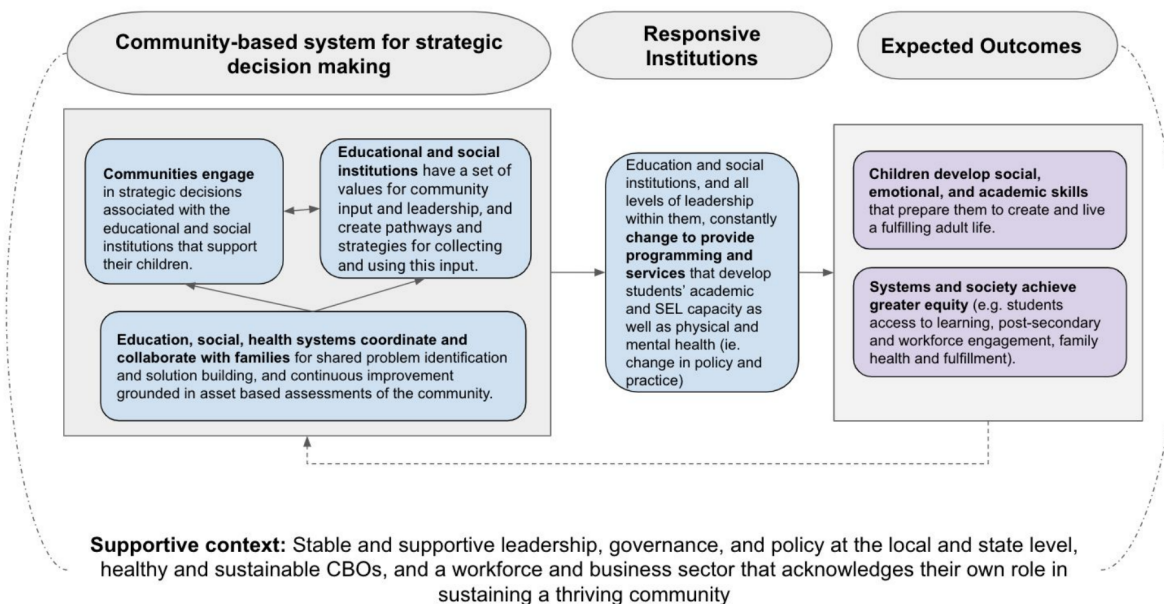


Figure 1. Wend theory of change for community-district change

As it explores the challenges and opportunities of encouraging change from the bottom up, Wend has engaged our team at CEPA and CRPE to study the efforts of their partners inside and outside the school system. We are studying how this theory of change lines up to reality, examining the linkages in the theory, and exploring the contextual and political factors that support and hinder a community-up model, all with an eye towards the sticky questions:

- How do the diverse perspectives of families and community members resolve into a path forward?
- Do the institutions have the trust, capacity, and leadership needed to implement community-raised solutions?
- How do institutions navigate the different zones of parent, community, and district expertise?

There is a wide body of literature, research, and thinking on engagement and organizing in school systems. In this project we hope to build on this literature by examining both district-led and externally led engagement initiatives from the lens of influencing system-level change. We will report out what we learn as the projects continue.

The complexities and challenges of providing public education in a pandemic make deeper engagement among schools, families, and communities more difficult and yet more necessary. As we discussed with Superintendent Rico Munn [last year](#), Aurora Public Schools' response to the pandemic emphasizes the vital role that schools play in supporting families, especially the most vulnerable, but also the real obstacles that large school systems face in communicating and listening to families and in responding to their needs. In future briefs, we will explore how the district is navigating through the pandemic as it continues to implement Blueprint APS.

School systems in the United States, once built for stability and predictability, are increasingly facing pressures from their constituents to adapt to a rapidly changing world. The pandemic has shined a spotlight on how essential a public service public education in America remains, and at the same time the rigidity and fragility of our existing systems for delivering it. It has highlighted the challenges school systems face in adapting and diversifying their services, especially in a way that responds to the distinct realities of families and engages the assets that exist outside of schools. Millions of families and their communities have found new agency as they have been forced to adapt to systems that too often do not adapt to them. The question remains, whether schools and school systems are willing to hear and let families and communities influence the way forward.