empower**ED**
BIRMINGHAM

Community-Led Design
for Educational Change
BLUEPRINT

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empower**ED**
BIRMINGHAM

> " Every child should be equipped with resources that will create a lifetime of success."

WE ARE EMPOWERED BIRMINGHAM

People in the Greater Birmingham area are the heart of the city. From small daycare and barbershop owners to church members and Fortune 500 employees, the city thrives on relationships anchored in trust and respect. The collective desire to positively shape the lives of all children connects our corporate leaders and community leaders alike despite differences in education, race, socioeconomic class, and political affiliation.

The EmpowerED coalition is comprised of individuals, organizations, groups, and community advocates who share one common goal: better education for all children. EmpowerED recognizes the power of individuals, their lived experiences, and their stories to shape and influence education. From the daycare owner who works with children during their developmental years to the church pastor who is rooted in social justice advocacy—all these voices are critical. When the community leads, the entire community benefits.

EMPOWERED EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, EmpowerED Birmingham, a coalition of over 20 Birmingham-based organizations, called on students, parents, and the community at large to join a community-led design process in service of the children who call Birmingham home. Currently, Birmingham City Schools (BCS) serve almost 22,000 students, almost 90% of whom identify as African-American.[1] Further, 70% of BCS students also classify as economically disadvantaged.[2] In 2020-21, BCS students consistently lagged behind in ELA and Math proficiency as compared to the state of Alabama as well as surrounding counties.[3] Additionally, college and career readiness for BCS graduates hovers near 60% despite a graduation rate of 82%.[4] EmpowerED was founded on the belief that the children of Birmingham deserve access to high-quality education and pathways for college and career success. After learning from one another, exploring different educational approaches, and interviewing people in the community, EmpowerED identified three focus areas for educational change:

Access to Information

When information is not transparent or it is not presented in a user-friendly manner, the education process is obscured, which disempowers community members. EmpowerED will work towards making it easier for families to access the information that will help them make the best decisions for the whole well-being of their children.

[1] *Student data.* Alabama State Department of Education. (2022, March 24). Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://www.alabamaachieves.org/reports-data/student-data/
[2] *Student data.* Alabama State Department of Education. (2022, March 24)
[3] *School performance.* Alabama State Department of Education. (2022, July 11). Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://www.alabamaachieves.org/reports-data/school-performance/
[4] *School performance.* Alabama State Department of Education. (2022, July 11)

Stronger Community Partnerships

The Birmingham community is committed to serving others and is willing to help, but it is not always easy to connect these resources and organizations with the community members who could benefit from them the most. EmpowerED wants to see investment and exposure for the many people and organizations that are working towards ensuring that no children go through their education without receiving the support the community can provide.

Community Power

Even in the midst of a crisis, our community is better when it sticks together. EmpowerED will amplify the community's hopes and experiences to be a collective voice to speak about the barriers that stop our children from thriving at school. EmpowerED believes that with renewed commitment to work together, students and families can be influential decision-makers when it comes to their education needs.

DISCOVERING SOLUTIONS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Once the focus areas were identified, the coalition followed up with a multi-phase engagement process to better understand the educational landscape, needs, assets, and lived experiences of a wide range of stakeholders. This included reviewing school performance data and gathering stories, ideas, and concerns from parents, students, educators, and community members using surveys, house meetings, door-knocking, and retreats.

To support this process, the coalition identified 10 community facilitators from Birmingham who were trained to facilitate in teams of two in different parts of the city, including the downtown corridor, Arlington-West End, Ensley, and others. Facilitators hosted weekly research-action meetings with the community, went on block walks to speak with their neighbors, gain insight into the needs of the focus areas, and ask those communities to share their experiences.

Along the way, we heard from a senior in high school who shared that they don't have access to desperately needed emotional support and career counseling. When we spoke with a mother who felt confused and intimidated during a meeting in which she was trying to advocate for a child with learning challenges, several other mothers jumped in to share similar stories. During block-walking in Marks Village, we talked to a mother and father who worked tirelessly to support their two children academically, but too often ran up against challenges accessing resources and support that were not available in their immediate community.

In the end, the coalition polled 400 community members, engaged 122 local organizations, and gathered stories and feedback from 346 individuals, 50% of whom were either students or families of school-aged children. After gathering stories and data from surveys, the EmpowerED coalition worked together to draft a set of recommendations firmly anchored in the lived experience and perspectives of community members.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Build a pipeline of student career opportunities to improve economic mobility.

2. Reimagine students' educational experiences beyond school walls and partner with culturally affirming community-based organizations.

3. Increase language access for students and families.

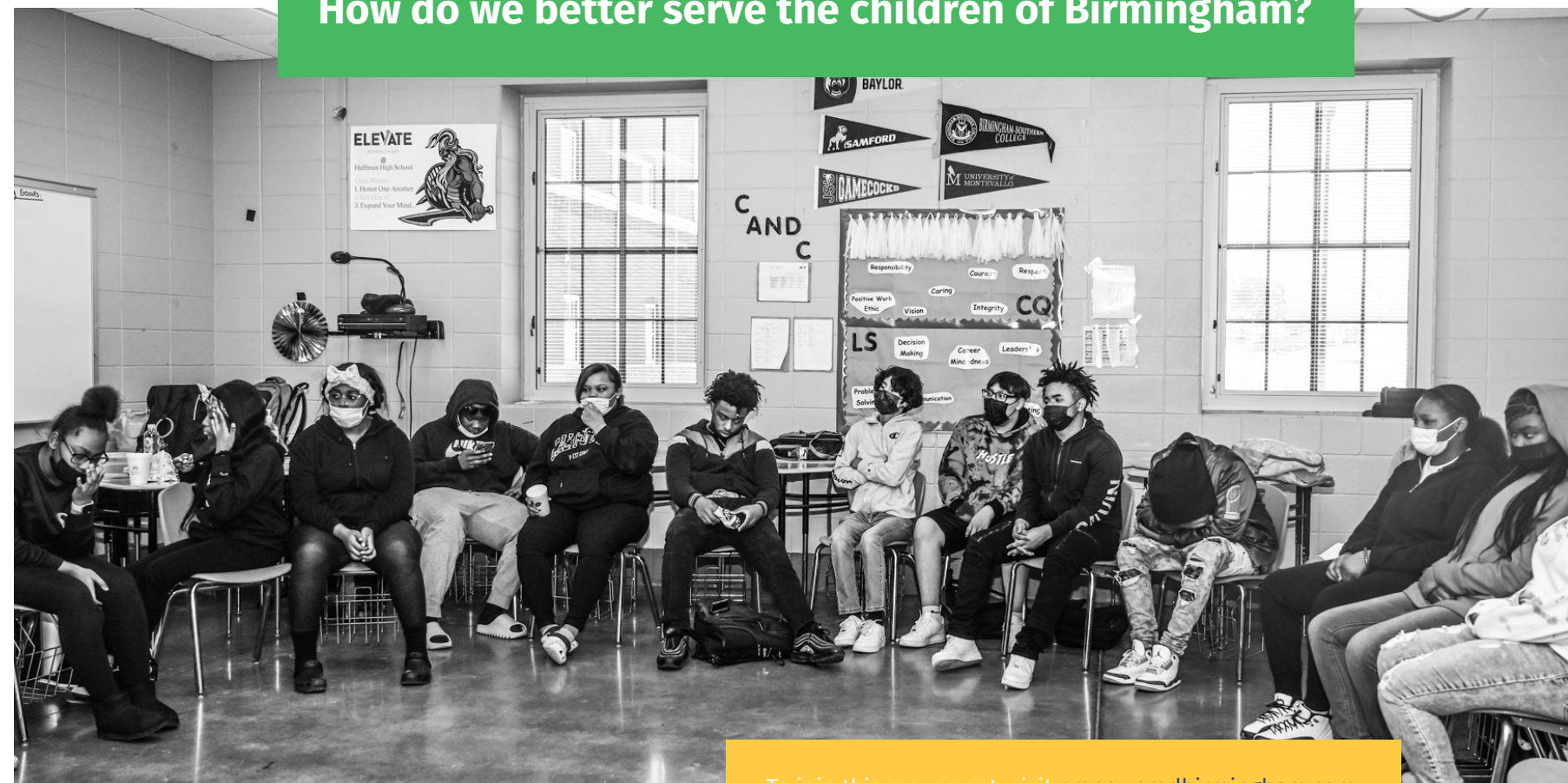4. Form a parent organization to advocate for family and school priorities.

Each of these recommendations serves as a call to action, and is directly connected to the three focus areas (Access to Information, Stronger Community Partnerships, Community Power). Each recommendation is also tied to specific requests of district leaders and city leaders, as well as commitments from the EmpowerED coalition.

What Now

Over the coming months, EmpowerED Birmingham will be working to take action toward this collective plan. We believe that only when we come together to rally around students–with access to timely and accurate information about student outcomes–can we succeed in reimagining educational policies and practices that will ultimately lead to better academic, economic, and life outcomes for the students of Birmingham.
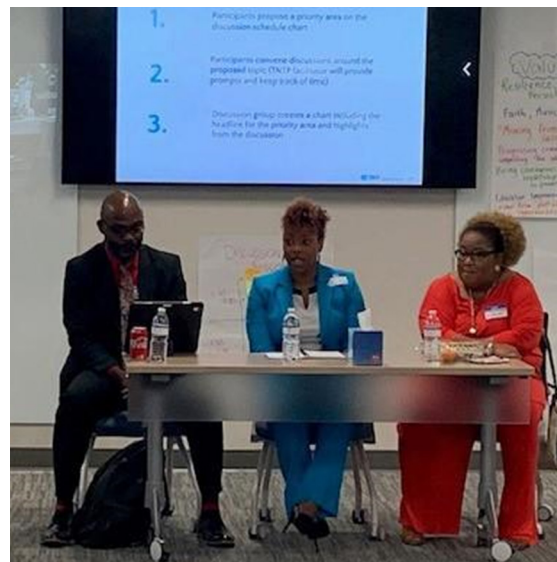
Real impact begins with recognizing the power that each of us has. It can start right now with you. From understanding where the greatest needs are, to articulating recommendations and strategies, the coalition work of EmpowerED asks all of us:

How do we better serve the children of Birmingham?

To join this movement, visit empoweredbirmingham.com

OUR STORY

Early on, the EmpowerED coalition made the strategic decision to adopt a model of community design and participatory research. We would not mimic traditional coalition structures that only organize the leadership of institutions to make the decisions for the vision and strategic direction of the work. Instead, we developed a process in which a set of local leaders would set a broad vision by consensus. We then handed over that vision to the community to build out the recommendations on how best to enact change in service of students and families.

We found it essential that the community saw their lived experiences and ideas at the heart of our collective vision for change-making. The coalition was intentional in welcoming community members, providing them with a variety of ways to honestly express their concerns; vision-casting around solutions to the problems lifted, and participating in the research and fact-finding related to their agreed-upon change levers. From the very first surveys to subsequent meetings, parents and students have had an active seat at the community table bringing with them power, brilliance, and resilience.

In 2020, organizational leaders from across Birmingham began having individual and small group conversations at the intersection of education and student well-being. As leaders on the front lines of the unfolding crisis in health, the economy and education, we feared for our most vulnerable students.

Anchored in the belief that it takes a village to support students, we began to engage community-based organizations and organizational leaders across the social determinants of health. We engaged faith leaders as well as leaders from higher education, food, healthcare, neighborhood associations, business, government and neighborhoods. The goal of these conversations was to connect the natural work of the leaders to the broader conversation about the educational and life outcomes of Birmingham youth.

The Process

Coalition Formation

We officially formed a loose coalition structure in the summer of 2021 as a commitment to each other and our community to envision new ways of seeing policies, systems and community structures that serve our students. We are not a 501c3, but rather a set of traditional and non-traditional organizations and groups that have pledged to work together for collective impact in education/for students. We committed to hold space to create a collective set of values, vision for education and collective decision-making. We have all dedicated sweat equity to the project through staff capacity, building use, thought-partnership, intentional relationship-building and active engagement with families, students, community members and decision-makers under the umbrella of EmpowerED Birmingham.

Visioning and Planning: Creating a Framework for our Collective Plan of Action

Many of us agreed that the current educational system does not work for Black, Brown, and low-income children. To that end, the planning and visioning team came together to unpack the reasons why it isn't working and what can be done to improve the education and life outcomes for Birmingham's youth. The planning team of 21 leaders spent the summer of 2021 working together to analyze the educational outcomes and how they impact social and economic mobility in Birmingham. Through consensus, EmpowerED Birmingham defined a framework that included the following

- What's at stake if we do not commit to collective action?
- What is the coalition's collective purpose and goals?
- What's the vision for students and schools and how might we act together?

In the end, we cast a vision of a future Birmingham that empowers students and families to strategically direct their power to drive systemic change that will create an exceptional educational experience. We believe the Birmingham community has the ability to chart their path towards a future where all students have access to excellent educational opportunities. Through that process, three focus areas emerged: 1) access to information, 2) stronger community partnerships, 3) community power.

House and Community Meetings

Once we named initial priorities, the coalition dedicated late fall 2021 and eOnce we named initial priorities, the coalition dedicated late fall 2021 and early spring 2022 to call together organizational leaders and community members across Birmingham to hear the vision and values and share their perspectives. We encouraged people to meet in their homes and/or community spaces like coffee shops, zoom rooms, and barbershops, to unpack the ideas and to give us insight on whether the proposition aligned with their lived experiences, values and/or encouraged them to act. We ended up holding eleven house meetings with over 135 participants.

House and community meetings helped us understand that community groups and individuals were already deeply engaged in this work and serving on the front lines. They also helped us to refine the vision of the coalition by providing insight on what communities were willing to organize around and felt were needed (or missing) from the conversation about how they collectively could reimagine education. We were then able to leverage what we have heard to invite the community into deeper exploration on what it would take to implement the strategies outlined in the framework document.

Preparation for Community Design Teams

As we began developing a strategy for change, we found it essential that local leaders and community members ran the design and implementation conversations. We set out to identify 10 community members (parents, teachers, community organizers) to lead Blueprint Design Teams for each focus area. These facilitators went through an application and interview process and then committed to be oriented to community facilitation principles and to conduct six to eight weekly meetings with community members as they worked on the plan. We supported the community facilitators with mentoring, session planning meetings, in-person and virtual support and meeting debriefs.

Community Research and Design Teams

We spent six weeks examining shared education experiences, researching innovative local and national education approaches, engaging in power mapping, analyzing outcomes from membership organizations, and interviewing people in our communities. This responsive research captured what parents and community members knew firsthand about the school and community experiences for students and families. The community facilitators then worked together to codify all that was heard; align the strategies and tactics and make a set of recommendations.

In order to support those left out of traditional education conversations, we decided to do intentional work with two groups: students and Latinx families. We worked alongside nine youth storytelling griots that facilitated a story banking process for six weeks to gather youth stories and voices. With their help, we gathered 114 stories as research for our blueprint recommendations.

Developing Recommendations and Strategies

The design teams and facilitators then crafted their vision and research into the recommendations. Those recommendations went back to the coalition for discussion and consensus-building. The process continues as the coalition finalizes the timeline for rolling out the internal and policy-change work.

A coalition member who is a **business owner and former educator** in the city of Birmingham explained,
"If the work is done with fidelity, the impact on education is just not empowering for parents, but it pushes parents to hold teachers and school leaders accountable."

This point was further illuminated by a coalition member who is a **pastor and a parent**. He noted that
"Parents have a good idea of what a school needs and how their children learn. As a pastor, I believe in movements that put power in the hands of the people."

Recommendation 1: Build a pipeline of student career opportunities to improve economic mobility.

What We Know

We understand that economic and social mobility is multidimentional and a nationwide issue that Birmingham is not facing alone. Economic and social mobility is the goal for the outcome of every student's education. Creating access to good jobs and providing support that open doors to students are consistently highlighted as the key components to improving economic mobility according to the programs across the country where these models are successful.[5] Evidence suggests that work based learning programs demonstrate notable benefits for students, specifically students of color.[6] Work based learning reinforces the relevancy and authenticity of the learning experiences for students, engaging learners who prefer applied learning environments Moreover, work based learning has been found to increase students' persistence, graduation, and employment rates, with notable gains for students from underserved racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. An example of this is The Collective Blueprint in Memphis, their mission is to increase socioeconomic mobility for Opportunity Youth by building pathways to thriving careers. In their pilot program, 81% of young adult participants completed their school programs (compared to a ~5% community college graduation rate locally) and 67% earned certifications.[7] Even in the midst of COVID, nearly 70% of this cohort completed their school programs and were on their way to full time employment.[8]

"Life sciences employers cite the need for bachelor's level graduates to do applied work, but find the BA-candidates do not have the applied skills needed due to a focus by academia on theory and preparing students for medical or graduate school." "Employers report that students often favor advanced degrees over the work experience that will help them succeed in entry level positions. In areas such as Health Care, employers are finding highly educated, well credentialed graduates who do not have the clinical experience necessary to fill roles and manage teams."

[5] Ross, M., Kazis, R., Bateman, N., & Stateler, L. (2020). Work-based learning can advance equity and opportunity for young people. Brookings. Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20201120_BrookingsMetro_Work-based-learning_Final_Report.pdf
[6] Rodriguez, J., Fox, H., & McCambly, H. (2016, September 30). Work-based learning as a pathway to postsecondary and career success. insights on equity and outcomes. issue 18. Office of Community College Research and Leadership. Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED574535
[7] The Collective Blueprint: Impact. The Collective Blueprint. (2019). Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://changeiscollective.org/impact
[8] The Collective Blueprint: Impact. The Collective Blueprint. (2019).

What We Heard

Our community design teams met weekly during a two-month span digging into the root causes of various areas of improvement in the local education system, which included listening to current K-12 students. While students expressed many joys of their current education experience, many responded with concern and a lack of clarity about how their education journey is intentionally preparing them for college or career. Without clear expectations about what was expected academically from students at each grade level, family members and community members were not able to fully support students in reaching their academic goals or career dreams.

As a result, half of surveyed students indicated a lack of clarity on their next step after high school. Many high school students we spoke with were also unaware of how to secure meaningful work experiences or how to pursue alternative education routes outside of four-year universities.

Many family members who participated in house meetings recognized that business growth is driving Birmingham's resurgence, and expressed fear that without more support, many Black and Brown students would be left out of the benefits of that growth.

TALENT & WORKFORCE

What does the Landscape of Talent and Workforce look like in Birmingham?

Supply-Demand Mismatch

Currently, in Birmingham, employers report a shortage of skilled workers in IT, Engineering, Skilled Production, and Management Talent

High Proportion of Low-Skilled Workforce

Between 2016-17, in Birmingham, only 21% of workforce demand fell into high-skilled labor and required bachelor's degrees or higher
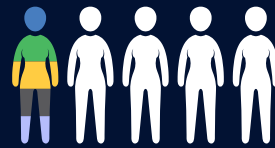
COMMUNITY SURVEY

Parents say…

That they recognize that business growth is driving Birmingham's resurgence but that without more support, many Black and Brown students would be left out of the benefits of that growth.

Students say…

That there is lack of clarity on the next steps after high-school and that they are unaware of how to secure meaningful work experiences or how to pursue alternative education routes outside of four-year universities.

REFERENCES
1. Build (it) Together Report
2. EmpowerEd Community and Student Survey

The lived reality of students–coupled with regional workforce data[9]–made it clear to design team members that a dedicated and well-resourced effort to support juniors and seniors in high school with exploring workforce opportunities could have a long-lasting impact. Instead of a school-to-prison pipeline, the Birmingham community deserves a pipeline to possibility.

How Do We Make Change?

For City Leaders:
• Embed a career pathway tracker on the City's website which identifies skill-building opportunities, jobs, and internships for young people ages 16-25 by 2024.
• Partner with education advocates and community-based organizations to create public-facing resources.
• Host a virtual dashboard that illustrates key academic and developmental cradle-to-career milestones to empower families to support learning at home by 2024.

For District Leaders:
• Adopt the career pathways tracker as a tool used to support school counselors, students, and families as they navigate the opportunities that exist, and are created, for Birmingham youth to prosper. This tool will also support skill-building, soft skills, and training opportunities for young people ages 16- 25 (that would make them viable candidates for career sparking opportunities) by 2024.
• Secure internships for at least 30% high school juniors or seniors by 2025.
Increase teachers' exposure to 21st-century work skills via professional development and summer externships with local businesses by 2024.
• Create opportunities to explore career pathways within the district such as internships, shadowing opportunities, and pathways into high-demand careers of the future including teaching, counseling, facilities management, finance, operations, information and technology, and various other paraprofessional roles within the district by 2024.
• Support students in preparing for various roles and opportunities by supporting resume writing, soft skill training, and emotional intelligence so that students can transfer those skills from an internship or temporary employment status into full-time roles throughout their lives and careers by 2025.

[9] Burning Glass Technologies, CAEL. (2018). Building (it) together: A Framework for Aligning Education and Jobs in Greater Birmingham. http://buildingittogether.com/. Retrieved August 5, 2022, from http://buildingittogether.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Building-it-Together-Report.pdf

EmpowerED Commitments:

• EmpowerED Birmingham will monitor and track the internship/career tracker, make an annual budget and economic mobility recommendations to the city and play a role in preparing students to be competitive for those opportunities.

• Co-create a tracker as a resource for economic mobility. The tracker should host and monitor internship and career opportunities throughout the Greater Birmingham area.

Partner with city officials to align the purpose and outcomes of student career opportunities to backward plan for student needs related to preparation, skill development, transportation, etc.

• Support and encourage school counselors and staff to use and make meaning of the tracker.

• Facilitate learning sessions for groups to use the public-facing dashboard that illustrates key academic and developmental cradle-to-career milestones.

> **Recommendation 2: Reimagine students' educational experiences beyond school walls and partner with culturally affirming community-based organizations.**

What We Know

Afterschool programs can support social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development, reduce risky behaviors, promote physical health, and provide a safe and supportive environment for children and youth[10]. For example, Horizons National, an intensive 6-week summer learning and enrichment program, runs small classes led by professional educators across 71 districts in 20 states. Horizons programs, locally owned and operated in all locations, include a rich culturally inclusive and responsive curriculum emphasizing literacy and STEM and incorporate social-emotional and whole-child teaching practices Further, they maintain connection with students and families throughout the year by offering Saturday programming, special events, and community reunions.[11] A study on their impact has shown that Horizons students show consistent gains of 6-12 weeks grade equivalence in reading and math over each 6-week summer session, have higher attendance rates, lower rates of chronic absenteeism, higher scores on standardized assessments of elementary math and science, and fewer disciplinary referrals as compared to their peers not in Horizons programs[12].

[10] Youth.gov. (n.d.). *Benefits for youth, families, and Communities*. Benefits for Youth, Families, and Communities. Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://youth.gov/youth-topics/afterschool-programs/benefits-youth-families-and-communities#:~:text=Afterschool%20programs%20can%20support%20social,environment%20for%20children%20and%20youth.

[11] *When learning is fun...students learn best!* Horizons National. (n.d.). Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://www.horizonsnational.org/program/

[12] *Research*. Horizons National. (n.d.). Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://www.horizonsnational.org/program/results/research/

> " *Schools tell us what to do. . . mentors show us **HOW** to do it."*

What We Heard

During multiple EmpowerED Birmingham retreats, community leaders credited small, minority-led service organizations as the cornerstone of academic support for many Birmingham families. Often overlooked and underfunded, coalition members indicated a sincere desire for minority-led community-based organizations to have stronger connections with school districts to align their efforts to serve students better. Conversations with community members gathered by design teams backed up their concerns. Minority-led nonprofit organizations secure nearly four times less funding of white-led organizations of similar sizes[13][14]. Data from student surveys showed the grave importance of these kinds of support. Fifty percent (50%) of students surveyed said they don't have an adult outside of their family who believes in them and their dreams.

Given the fact that roughly 70 million dollars of American Rescue Plan funds are currently available to support community-based organizations working in Birmingham, it's all the more critical that culturally-affirming community organizations are given a seat at the table and valued for their role in supporting and mentoring students.

BEYOND SCHOOL

Why Should We Reimagine Students' Educational Experiences Beyond School?

Social Emotional

Four in five teachers want more support to address students' social and emotional development.

Integrating social and emotional development improves students' attitudes and engagement in school
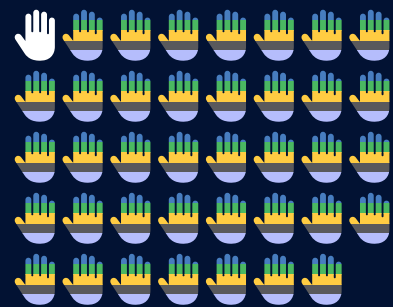
COMMUNITY SURVEY

What do Students in Birmingham think about Support Beyond Academics?

50% of students surveyed said they don't have and adult outside of their family that believes in them or their dreams

More that half of the students surveyed spent the most time worrying about their grades or their career/future

Only 1 of 39 students surveyed felt safe at their school

REFERENCES
1. Bridgeland, J. Bruce, M., & Hariharan, A. (2013). The missing piece: A national teacher survey on how social and emotional learning can empower children and transform schools. A report for CASEL. Washington, DC: Civil Enterprises.
2. Durlak, Weissberg, Dynmicky, Taylor & Schellinger. (2011). The Impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 82(1): 405-432.
3. EmpowerED Internal Student Survey

How Do We Make Change?

For City Leaders:
• Allocate 20% of the $70 million in ARP funding the city received in Spring 2022 to support at least 20 minority-led community-based organizations providing academic support during out-of-school time for PK-12 students by 2024.
• Allocate funding for a nonprofit incubator to support minority-led nonprofits with grant writing, developing program models, and measuring impact by 2025.
• Create a heat map of resources available to Birmingham residents to identify food deserts, unemployment, and out-of-school enrichment programs by 2024.

For District Leaders:
• Establish data sharing agreements with a selected network of community-based partners to strengthen the academic support offered to students by 2025.
• Create a full-time liaison position in every feeder pattern to support community-based organizations by aligning their academic support with district priorities by 2025.

EmpowerED Commitments:
• Establish and provide continued development to a network of community-based organizations that commit to an SEL-informed, culturally affirming approach to students who wish to integrate academic support into their programming.
• Support school districts with RFP development for community partnerships, evaluation, and reporting.
• Collaborate with district/school representatives on academic alignment and evaluation with partnerships.
• Utilize the Birmingham Board of Education Funding Cycle Timeline to determine advocacy strategy to obtain funding for community-based organizations.

[13] Savage, B., Dorsey, C., Kim, P., Daniels, C., & Sakaue, L. (2020). Overcoming the Racial Bias in Philanthropic Funding. Stanford Social Innovation Review. https://doi.org/10.48558/7WB9-K440
[14] *Funding the new majority: Philanthropic investment in minority-led nonprofits.* The Greenlining Institute. (2019, November 20). Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://greenlining.org/publications/2008/funding-the-new-majority/

What We Know

In the United States, where 1 in 5 individuals now speak a language other than English at home, schools encounter significant language barriers[15]. Unfortunately, most statistics don't account for limited English proficiency among parents and guardians. Communicating with parents in their preferred language is critical to their full understanding and participation in their children's education. This challenge is similar to what multilingual families face in healthcare and there is much to learn and replicate from successful bilingual navigator programs in healthcare systems. The Bilingual Patient Navigator Program at Seattle Children's Hospital, hired bilingual patient navigators who were part of the Spanish-speaking and Somali-speaking communities in the city, they shared the culture and language of the patients and the families they assisted. An evaluation study after 2 years of this program showed that there were significant improvements: a drop of no-show rates for navigated patients that resulted in savings of about US $35,000, and a decrease in the average length of stay from almost 15 days to 6.5 days. This shows that supporting bilingual families in navigating complex systems can help the patients better build trust with the medical staff, understand their options within the system, restate medical jargon into plain language, unravel mistaken inferences, and to point out barriers to their treatment plan[16].

What We Heard

From conversations with families, it's clear that parents are encountering major language barriers as they try to understand their child's educational experience. The Blueprint Design team that surfaced this issue was completely facilitated in Spanish with Latinx families, they raised numerous concerns about the significant language barriers currently in place at schools. Each participant shared experiences of not being able to contact a teacher, access academic reports, or adequately sign up for school events or support due to materials only being written in English. The group emphasized that school districts have a long way to go and need to commit a significant investment to ensure all
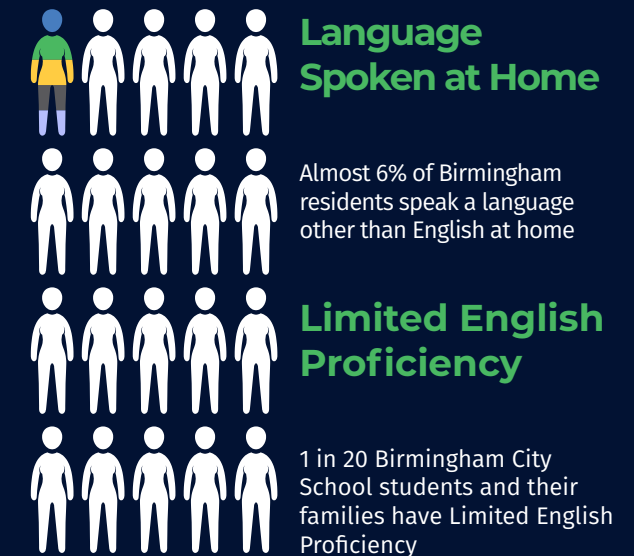
families in Birmingham, regardless of ethnicity or country of origin, receive timely and accurate information in their home language.
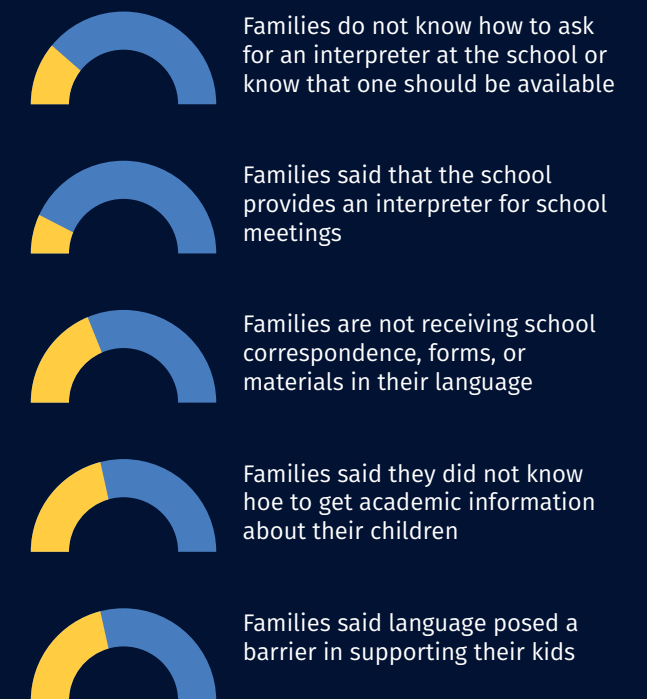
A digital survey administered by the Language Access team also collected 136 responses from families about language access, information sharing, and how the education system is currently supporting families. Findings from that survey show that:

[15] Bureau, U. S. C. (2022, March 8). Language spoken at home. Census.gov. Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://www.census.gov/acs/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/language/
[16] Crezee, I. H., & Roat, C. E. (2019). Bilingual patient navigator or healthcare interpreter: What's The difference and why does it matter? Cogent Medicine, 6(1), 181087776. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331205x.2019.1582576

> "Just having teachers and administrators that looked like me and sounded like me made the school possible for me. I knew they had my best interest at heart."
> (Birmingham Metro Area Student)

LANGUAGE ACCESS

Language Spoken at Home

Almost 6% of Birmingham residents speak a language other than English at home

Limited English Proficiency

1 in 20 Birmingham City School students and their families have Limited English Proficiency

COMMUNITY SURVEY

What do families in Birmingham think about language access and information sharing in the Birmingham School System?

Families do not know how to ask for an interpreter at the school or know that one should be available

Families said that the school provides an interpreter for school meetings

Families are not receiving school correspondence, forms, or materials in their language

Families said they did not know hoe to get academic information about their children

Families said language posed a barrier in supporting their kids

REFERENCES
1. 2016-2020 American Community Survey
2. 2019-20 Alabama Department of Education
3. EmpowerED Digital Community Survey

How Do We Make Change?

For City Leaders:
• Adopt a language access plan and language justice statement to publicly affirm the rights of multilingual citizens and commit resources to improve translation and interpretation support for city services by 2025.
• Create a multicultural liaison office that focuses on how the city is engaging with different cultures, ethnicities, and languages, through the mayor's office by 2023.

For District Leaders:
Adopt the following district goals:
• All external district communications will be translated into the top three languages present in the Birmingham district by 2025.
• Audit how many bilingual or multilingual staff are employed in school-based positions and increase the percentage of bilingual school support staff to match the multilingual population in each school or district-wide, whichever number is highest by 2030.
• Hire a "school ambassador" in each school who targets a specific population (e.g. Spanish speakers). Each school ambassador should have a shared language and cultural background with the target parent community and should ideally be a parent in that school. The person in this role would serve as a link between non-English speakers and schools to facilitate trust building with school staff, accurate information, and school system navigation. Districts can expect to budget between $31,600 to $62,000 for this position, depending upon the qualifications of the applicant.
• Improve ease and efficacy of district structures for requesting translation and interpretation by placing an accessible form on the district homepage, a translation or interpretation request hotline, and by assigning one staff member on each campus to be the point person for requests from their school.
• Adopt a school board statement on Language Justice or a Language Access Plan that is regularly updated according to changes in populations, languages present in the districts, and budget allocations.

EmpowerED Commitments:
• Commit to a Language Justice approach in all of EmpowerED's communications, meetings, and programs.
• Provide support to the multicultural liaison office for the Mayor's Office.
• Collaborate with school districts on planning and facilitating the onboarding and continued development of school ambassadors.

> **Recommendation 4: Form a parent organization to advocate for family and school priorities.**

What We Know

It is difficult for parents to navigate school systems in any given number of ways including but not limited to how to advocate for their students during behavior or academic meetings or even how to make a strong support plan during moments of low performance. A 3-year national study on the program Parent to Parent reported this can be mitigated when parents have access to networks of other parents who have similar experiences and who are equipped to troubleshoot solutions[17]. As a result, cities such as Memphis and Nashville have invested in parent outreach, parent counselors, and parent advocates to show up for parents who need additional support.

What We Heard

Across house meetings, door knocking, and community conversations, numerous families shared stories of feeling a lack of support, awareness, and consistent disappointment while trying to navigate various challenges on behalf of their students in their respective districts. The challenges persist across socio-economic statuses. One mother who was a former educator herself expressed frustration that even after studying the district's handbook, she was not able to figure out how to advocate for her child to keep him from being sent to an alternative school.

[17] S. SINGER, G. H., MARQUIS, J., POWERS, L. K., BLANCHARD, L., DIVENERE, N., SANTELLI, B., AINBINDER, J. G., & SHARP, M. (1999). A Multi-site Evaluation of Parent to Parent Programs for Parents of Children With Disabilities. Journal of Early Intervention, 22(3), 217–229. https://doi.org/10.1177/105381519902200305

These stories set the stage for a broader conversation about what parents need to be better supported, valued, and informed as they navigate the educational and school discipline issues that they face–and they were backed up by survey data. Forty percent (40%) of surveyed parents indicated that they do not know to whom to reach out when they need support navigating a challenge within their school system, while half of parents wanted greater access to critical information that would help enhance their understanding of how their child was doing in school and how they could support learning at home.

Collectively, the Community Power Design Team acknowledged that developing an organization to meet parents in their greatest time of need as they advocate and seek clarity for their students' rights is an important pathway to equity and justice.

How Do We Make Change?

For City Leaders:
   • Commit to working with parent organization to align shared visions for education with funding and budget priorities in the budget planning and approval process.
   • Participate in regular meetings with parents and parent advocacy leaders to support quality education in partnership.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT
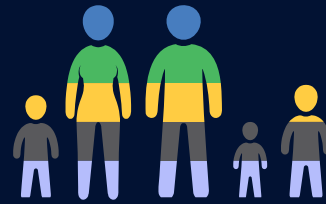
When parents are involved, students get better grades, score higher on stadardized tests, have better attendance records, drop out less often, have higher aspirations, and more positive attitudes toward school and homework

COMMUNITY SURVEY

What do families in Birmingham think about being able to advocate for ther child within the School System?

Of the surveyed parents indicated that they do not know whom to reach out to when they need support navigating a challenge with their school system

Of the surveyed parents want greater access ti critital information that would help enhance their understanding of how their child was doing in school and how they could support learning at home

REFERENCES
1. Bogenschneider, K., & Johnson, C. (2004, February). Family involvement in education: How important is it? What can legislator do? In K. Bogenschneider & E. Gross (Eds.), A policymaker's guide to school finance: Approaches to use and questions to ask (Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar Briefing Report No. 20, pp. 19-29). Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Excellence in Family Studies.
2. EmpowerED Community Survey

   • Commit funding and research to developing alternatives to traditional suspension and expulsion protocols.
   • Identify support systems for long-term academic growth for school-aged youth.

For District Leaders:
   • Host quarterly community town halls to share disaggregated discipline data with community-based organizations, parents, and education advocates beginning in Fall 2023.
   • Establish a policy banning suspension for PK-3rd-grade students and suspension for truancy and tardiness violations by 2025.
   • Measure and publish the outcomes of MTSS, RTI, and SEL interventions on student discipline by 2025.
   • Address truancy and suspensions with root cause analysis and use community-based organizations to solve behavioral and attendance issues by 2025.
   • Partner with parents and community-based organizations to ensure academic and discipline resources are accessible to families by 2024.

EmpowerED Commitments:
   • Seek funding to start a parent organization that can support families in any or all of the following ways:
      • Create training materials for parent advocates to support families with in-person support to navigate the school system, especially in high-stakes meetings with school or district staff.
      • Create a workshop series for families to share resources tied to cradle to career benchmarks, including a career prep tracker developed by the city of Birmingham.
      • Build advocacy power with families through a series of advocacy workshops that will prepare families to better support their peers, support the implementation of the Blueprint, and provide resources to better advocate for their children.
      • Build a robust training series that transforms parents into school finance advocates in their community.
      • Create a directory of organizations and programs that work toward the goal of supporting Birmingham's families with access to resources and opportunities that aid in advocating for their children's education, wellbeing, and economic mobility.

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