

# Together for Students: **LESSONS ABOUT BUILDING TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS FROM OUR COLLECTIVE IMPACT INITIATIVE**

---

Students today face tremendous challenges that no single school, organization or agency can solve alone. Our three national organizations — the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership, Communities In Schools, and StriveTogether — believe that communities must come together if we want to create a student-centered education system where all students have the resources they need to be successful.

With support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, we created the Together for Students initiative (TFS), a multiyear grant to create incentives and opportunities for collaboration. We have worked to lead by example and to support four local affiliates in Chicago, Ill., Dayton, Ohio, Lehigh Valley, Pa., and Memphis, Tenn., in transforming how organizations work together to meet the needs of every student. The first year of implementation

was March 2019 – February 2020, the second year of implementation was March 2020 – February 2021, and the third year of implementation will be March 2021 – January 2022.

Now, after our second year of implementation, we've learned a lot. We've had early successes and moments of failing forward. To understand and improve our work, we engaged in a two-phase learning project. Through interviews, focus groups, document reviews, meetings and online surveys, we heard important lessons from TFS partners and community stakeholders. [You can find all the takeaways in the reports available here.](#) In this brief, we want to explore one of the biggest lessons we learned in year one: Trusting relationships are the key to success, and there are many ways to build them. We hope our learnings and these materials help other communities interested in collective impact work.

## who are the TFS partners?

---



### **NATIONAL PARTNERS**

The national partners are the three national organizations — the Coalition for Community Schools, Communities In Schools and StriveTogether — who started the Together for Students initiative.

---



### **LOCAL SITE PARTNERS**

Local site partners are people and organizations involved with TFS at one of the implementation sites as site leaders, core site partners or community partners.

---



### **TFS SITE PARTNERS**

TFS site leaders are the individuals and organizations responsible for grant deliverables. They are the partners most closely involved with the TFS project at one of the four implementation sites.

---



### **TFS CORE SITE PARTNERS**

TFS core site partners are individuals and organizations who support the TFS initiative at one of the four implementation sites but are not the primary conveners of the work. Stakeholders in this group indicated that they were not site leaders but were involved with TFS as part of their job.

---



### **TFS COMMUNITY PARTNERS**

TFS community partners are individuals who have more limited involvement with TFS but are nevertheless key stakeholders in aligning and streamlining supports for students. These partners, including educators, volunteers, parents and students, indicated that their involvement with TFS was not part of their regular job.

## the importance of trusting relationships

At the outset of Together for Students (TFS) in 2016, national leaders from our organizations agreed on a set of five shared principles to guide our work: trusting relationships, purposeful engagement, cross-sector partnerships, actionable data and shared accountability. These core principles have shaped the TFS initiative at every level.

Though national and local partners have incorporated all five principles into the first year of implementation, the most important principle by far has been trusting relationships. TFS site leaders and core site partners have consistently identified strong, trusting relationships as the foundation for collective impact and the key to success.

One reason trusting relationships are crucial is that working together across programs and organizations is complex and difficult. It requires partners to share some of their internal thinking, be open to the influence of outside organizations and engage in shared decision-making processes. For this type of deep collaboration to take place, there must be trust among partners.

### Trusting Relationships in TFS Sites

Recognizing the importance of trusting relationships, local TFS leaders intentionally built partnerships and strengthened relationships during the first year of implementation. They reached out to hundreds of organizations in their communities. Some were new to education. Others had been working in schools for decades. They were all asked to join in partnership and contribute their time and resources to work collectively to better serve students.

“The relationships we started in the beginning of the year were key to getting us through this super challenging time.... The team that we built and the relationships that we built have been integral in moving the work forward.”

■ CORE SITE PARTNER, TFS CHICAGO

To learn whether these efforts had been successful, we surveyed site leaders, core site partners and community members to see whether they felt the organizations involved with TFS had trusting relationships. The survey found that 88.8% of participants who were part of TFS through their job felt they had trusting relationships with other partner organizations. Of the community partners, who are involved with TFS outside of their job, 85.0% said they trusted the organizations leading the TFS effort (see Table 1 in the Data Tables section at the end). Not only did local TFS partners feel that they had trusting relationships, but the majority at every site said relationships had improved among organizations because of the TFS initiative (Chicago - 63.6%, Dayton - 73.3%, Lehigh Valley - 59.1%, and Memphis - 75.0%).

The strong foundation of trusting relationships felt by so many TFS partners was especially important in 2020. As one partner from Chicago pointed out, strong relationships helped sustain the TFS work during a difficult year.



**89%** of TFS local partners have trusting relationships with other partner organizations

**85%** of community partners trust the organizations leading TFS

## challenges to building genuine trust

“Although we had enough trust built between the agencies to [have hard conversations], we still see turnover within some of the positions. So we’re a little bit course correcting, trying to get everything ready for the next stage. But for the most part, I think the foundation has been laid, and it’s a lot stronger than it ever has been.”

■ ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNER, TFS DAYTON

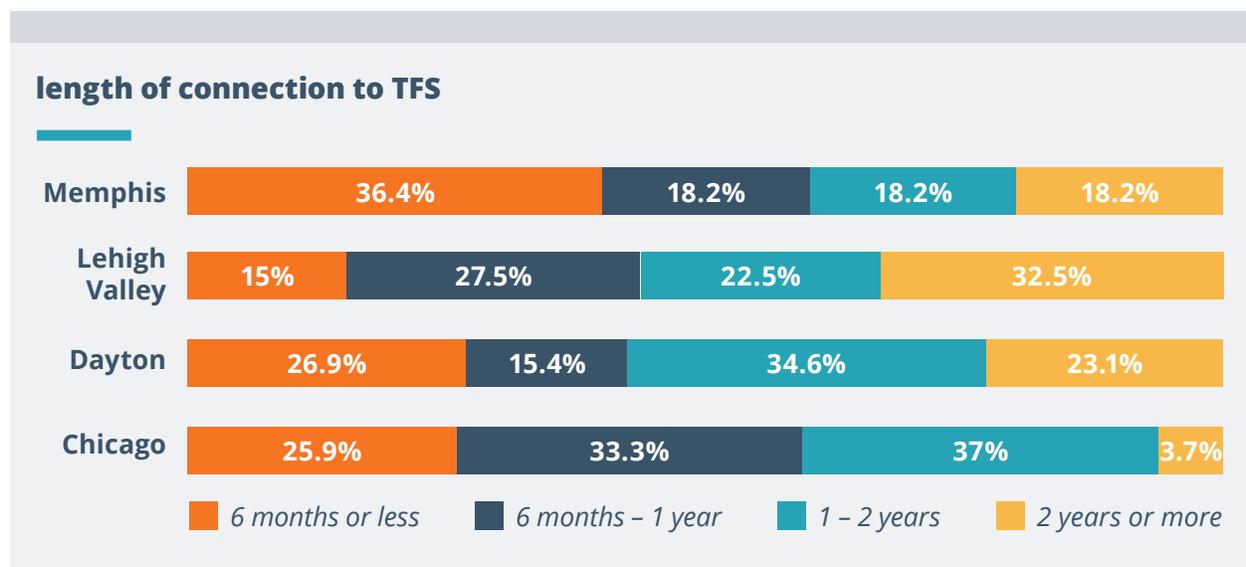
While trusting relationships are important in collective work, they are not a given. Many factors can reduce trust among partners. Local TFS leaders and partners encountered two major issues that made it difficult to build critical relationships: strained organizational histories and staff turnover. The partners also identified ways to confront these challenges.

### Improving Strained Relationships

At the national and local levels, TFS organizations have worked to serve students for decades, often crossing paths and sharing networks. Unfortunately, some of the relationships between these organizations have become damaged because the organizations have been in competi-

tion with one another for philanthropic support, turf or recognition. Occasionally, there are other disagreements between organizations about the best ways to serve their communities. In some cases, these strained histories have never been addressed and continue to negatively impact current efforts to collaborate.

Many TFS partners who experienced tense relationships decided to use the TFS initiative as an opportunity for repair. In several sites, the TFS grant funds helped incentivize collaboration. Once organizations were willing to engage, TFS leaders intentionally dedicated time and effort to working through the tension. A TFS partner in Memphis described the importance of learning to work through a difficult past to find new ways to collaborate as a central purpose of TFS.



## Handling Staff Turnover

Turnover in staff can have significant impact on a project. In collective impact work, staff turnover can also affect trust between partners. When there is a change in staff, the relationship typically leaves with the individual. Turnover is especially disruptive to collective impact work because not only do knowledge and skills need to be rebuilt with the new individual in the role, but a new relationship also needs to be built from scratch, which takes significant time and effort.

On average, 31.6% of TFS site partners listed staff turnover as a challenge in the project. Although every TFS site experienced staff changes during year one, turnover in Chicago and Memphis was more significant than in the other two sites. In both of those sites, more than half of participants have been engaged with TFS for less than a year (see Table 2 in the Data Tables section).

To minimize the negative impacts of staff turnover, one TFS site tried building relationships not

“There’s some history there, and I think it took somebody to help us really focus on the task at hand to work through that history. I actually see that as part of the TFS work. We’re not getting a lot done, but what we’re doing is moving through the tension of learning to collaborate with one another.”

■ CORE SITE PARTNER, TFS MEMPHIS

only among individuals but also across organizations. They created rapport and trust among their partner agencies. This approach didn’t eliminate the effects of staff turnover, but when it inevitably happened, there was a foundation of trust to continue the work.

## factors that promote trust

“Everybody at the table really is committed to the success and well-being of Memphis students; that’s really true. We all genuinely care.”

■ ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNER, TFS MEMPHIS

In year one of TFS, we learned a lot about the challenges of building trusting relationships. We also learned what things help support those relationships: the belief that all the partners are deeply committed to serving the best interest of students, the belief that organizations can have a bigger impact working together than they can alone, the ability for partners to have difficult conversations with one another, and regular

communication between partners. We used interviews and surveys in the second phase of our learning project to find out how much TFS partners were experiencing these trust-building factors.

### Commitment to Shared Beliefs

The most significant thing we found is that all TFS partners believe in the power of collective impact work. At every site, 100% of partners said they believe organizations can have a bigger impact working together than they could alone. Nearly the same proportion (96%) believe that everyone involved in the TFS work has the best interest of students at heart. Several partners shared that when the project was frustrating or challenging, their dedication to collective impact and their belief in the other TFS partners helped them stay committed to the TFS initiative.

**“I can honestly say that everybody’s there for the bigger picture. It just feels like everybody is in it for the right reasons. We see ourselves as part of a bigger initiative to really drive change.”**

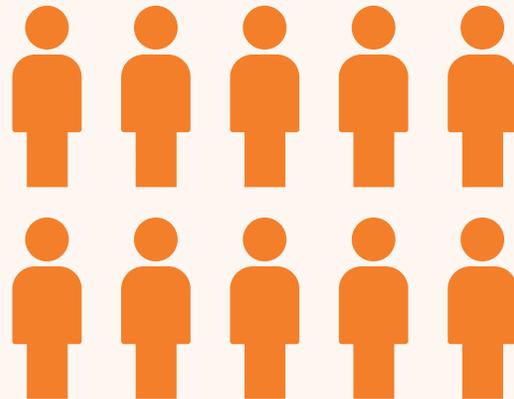
■ CORE SITE PARTNER, TFS LEHIGH VALLEY

### Honest and Consistent Communication

TFS partners also shared the importance of open and honest communication for building trust. For most partners, this included knowing that they could have difficult or uncomfortable conversations with other partners in the work. Because collective impact work is challenging, partners need to be able to address their differences and concerns directly with one another. Most local site partners (74% — see the figure below) agree that they can have these difficult conversations with other TFS partners.

Consistent communication also helps build trust in relationships. Formal and informal communication between partners reassures partners that the work is moving forward, creates space for building rapport and demonstrates that the collective work is a priority for each group. Among local TFS partners, 79% (see the figure below) feel that they have regular communication about the TFS work with their partners.

**100%** of participants believe organizations can have a bigger impact working together than they could alone



### partners who agree or strongly agree with each statement

*average of all TFS sites*



I have regular communication – emails, calls, meetings, etc. – with partners.



I can have difficult conversations with partners in the project.



Everyone in this project has the best interest of students at heart.

## trusting relationships

Since the beginning of TFS, trusting relationships have been an important principle of the work. In the first implementation year of the grant, trusting relationships have helped the national and local partners lay a foundation for strong collective impacts in the final two years of the initiative. Built intentionally and patiently, trusting relationships

are strengthened through shared beliefs and direct communication. They can be negatively impacted by strained organizational histories or high staff turnover. But they are the first step in building partnerships that can work together to meet the needs of all students in a community.

## data tables

### participants responding “agree” or “strongly agree” to each statement

area	Chicago	Dayton	Lehigh Valley	Memphis	average: all TFS sites
Organizations can have a bigger impact working together than they could alone.	100%	100%	100%	100%	<b>100%</b>
Everyone in this project has the best interest of students at heart.	94.8%	100%	100%	90.9%	<b>96.4%</b>
I can have difficult conversations with partners in the project.	79.0%	55%	62.6%	100%	<b>74.2%</b>
I have regular communication – emails, calls, meetings, etc. – with partners.	63.2%	60%	93.8%	100%	<b>79.3%</b>
I have trusting relationships with partner organizations.	84.2%	80%	100%	90.9%	<b>88.8%</b>

### length of involvement with TFS

Site	6 Months or Less	6 Months – 1 Year	1 Year or Less	1 – 2 Years	2 Years or More
Chicago	25.9%	33.3%	59.3%	37%	3.7%
Dayton	26.9%	15.4%	42.3%	34.6%	23.1%
Lehigh Valley	15%	27.5%	42.5%	22.5%	32.5%
Memphis	36.4%	18.2%	54.5%	18.2%	18.2%

## about us

### Coalition for Community Schools



Supported by the Institute for Educational Leadership, the Coalition for Community Schools evolved since 1998 as an ecosystem of national, state, and local cross-sector leaders that promote community schools as an equity-driven, researched based strategy, and fights for justice and investments for young people's access to resources, supports, and opportunities they deserve to advance their hopes and

fulfill their social responsibility.

The strengths of the Coalition are the close relationships we have with thousands of grassroots to grassroots leaders, organized in networks to expand their knowledge, skills, beliefs, and practices; and our ability to prepare, support, and mobilize leaders, to create transformative and innovative solutions to disrupt the status quo, and eliminate systemic and structural barriers to equitable outcomes in education.

### Communities In Schools



Communities In Schools® (CIS™) is a national organization that ensures every student, regardless of race, zip code, or socioeconomic background has what they need to realize their potential in school and beyond. Working directly inside more than 2,900 schools across the coun-

try, we connect students to caring adults and community resources that help them see, confront, and overcome the barriers that stand between them and a brighter future. Together, we build a powerful change movement made up of peers, students, and alumni committed to building an equitable path to education for future generations.

### StriveTogether



StriveTogether is a national movement with a clear purpose: helping every child succeed in school and in life from cradle to career, regardless of race, ethnicity, zip code or circumstance. In partnership with 70 communities across the country, we provide coaching, resources and

rigorous approaches to create opportunities and close gaps in education, housing and so much more. We use data to illuminate problems and solutions, tackle tough conversations and deliver impactful results for more than 12 million children and counting.

## ABOUT STRIVETOGETHER

StriveTogether is a national movement that helps over 11 million students succeed, cradle to career, for a more prosperous future. In partnership with nearly 70 communities, we amplify local actions into national impact by identifying best practices, measuring what matters and spreading what works.

**StriveTogether**<sup>®</sup>

Every child. Cradle to career.

125 East Ninth Street  
Second Floor  
Cincinnati, OH 45202  
513.929.1150

332 South Michigan Avenue  
Ninth Floor  
Chicago, IL 60604

[StriveTogether.org](https://StriveTogether.org)

