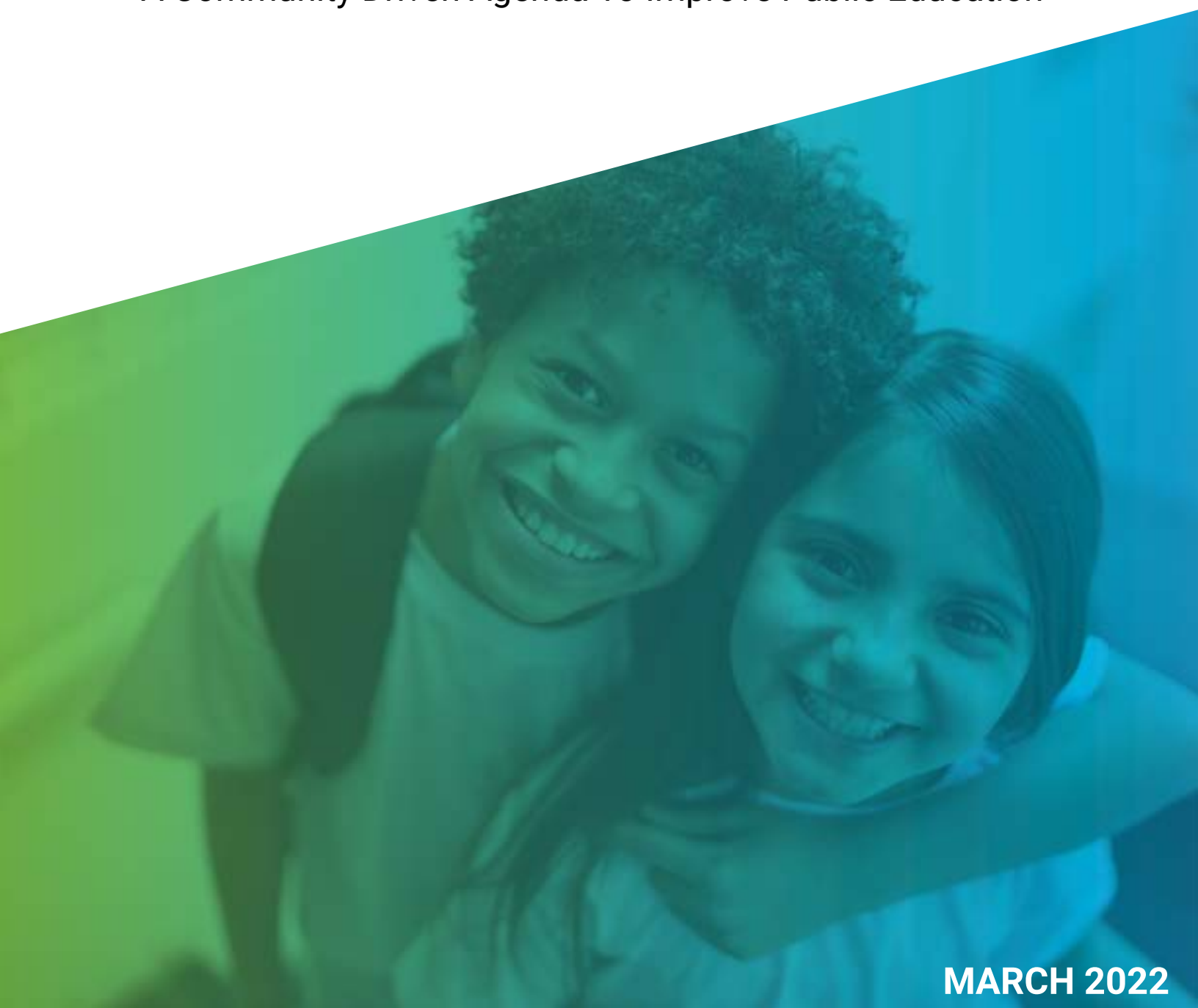




Demanding a brighter future for every child.

SEEKING COMMON GROUND:

A Community Driven Agenda To Improve Public Education



MARCH 2022

INTRODUCTION

Fewer high school graduates. Fewer on-track readers. Fewer kids in public school. These are just some of the devastating consequences families and schools face due to the pandemic.

And, it's not over yet. Whether a class goes into quarantine or public health officials change their safety guidance, the pandemic still disrupts children's learning. At the same time, educators, parents and politicians are at war over how to teach our children their nation's history. The conflict has sparked battles at school board meetings and in state legislatures from Arizona to Maine.

Many initially hoped these massive disruptions would unlock the door to innovation—that we would find new ways to meet the educational needs of every child, and intensified public interest would increase demand for better outcomes for our schools. But the current reality feels bleaker, as the country becomes increasingly polarized and districts flail in their efforts to recover.

This is not the first time a crisis has been declared in America's schools. Earlier efforts to make meaningful improvements to our schools came through what many call [standards-based reform](#), an approach that established a common set of expectations for all students, and then relied on measures of student achievement to hold schools accountable.

The most well-known attempt to hold schools accountable for their failures, [No Child Left Behind](#), produced [mixed results](#). This

reauthorization of the federal education law in 2001 forced districts to take a [hard look](#) at themselves, but it also had [unintended consequences](#) for the students and communities most in need of help. This, in part, has fueled a backlash to many of the core tenets of standards-based reform—including academic standards, standardized tests and school accountability—and led to an even murkier system of ensuring that schools are delivering on their mission to educate and graduate students.

Add to this the huge challenges the pandemic has thrust on schools and communities (and even a [national pause](#) on state tests in 2020), and we are faced with a difficult question.

WHAT CAN WE DO NOW TO PUSH FOR DRAMATIC SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT?

CONVENING A SERIES OF TOWN HALLS

To find a way forward, brightbeam convened the **Seeking Common Ground Town Halls**, a series of virtual panels in October 2021 that brought together key national and grassroots leaders to tackle the critical issues underlying this core question.

Our panelists hailed from a range of backgrounds—from parents, teachers and community activists to policy analysts and political insiders. Our goal was to sound out these leading voices on key topics:

- 1 What should students be learning?
- 2 How should we gather and use data for student learning and school improvement?
- 3 What could next-generation, mutual accountability look like?
- 4 How can we best support young people socially and emotionally in school after pandemic-imposed school disruptions and extended isolation?

MEET OUR PARTICIPANTS



Zakiya
Sankara-Jabar



Paige
Kowalski



Maurice
Cook



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Dan
Weisberg



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Hovanetz



Jason
Allen



Marika
Pfefferkorn



Chris
Stewart



Jovan
Manning

THE GOAL OF THIS REPORT

First, we will take you through each of the town halls, highlighting many of the key points and perspectives. We analyzed hours of conversation from our live town halls—along with accompanying interviews with panelists for additional context—to find where opinions converged and diverged. In a polarized education sector, these conversations shed light on the **common ground** held by diverse actors, and at the same time they called attention to “**growing edges**”—areas of diverging opinion that warrant further exploration.

Next, we take a deeper dive into promising practices for the future of school improvement, sourced from two of our panelists’ organizations. Building on the work of TNTP, we look at some new perspectives on assessment. And, using a case study from the work of the Marcus Foster Education Institute, we examine a recent example of mutual accountability in action.

Finally, we have distilled these many insights and viewpoints into an activist-informed **agenda for action**. These are recommendations leaders at the national, state and local levels can use in designing future accountability systems, and action steps they can start taking right away to collaborate with communities to improve the learning experiences and outcomes for every student.

As you read this report, keep in mind that our panelists want fresh thinking about accountability. They want states and districts to support internal school cultures where adults constantly strive to improve their performance. They want schools to partner with families and communities in more equitable and mutual ways. They want transparency in finances and windows into classroom practices so that parents can ask hard questions about what is taking place. Most of all, they want bottom-up accountability, where three things happen:

- 1 Students and parents clearly understand what they need to do to achieve their own ambitious education goals.**
- 2 Parents know whether school staff are providing the opportunities and supports students need to excel.**
- 3 Parents have the information and power they need to hold systems to account when they fail to deliver for their children.**



TOWN HALL 1:

What Should Our Children Be Learning?

Learning about your own culture and learning about the culture and experiences of others is what forms our humanity. It's a very fundamental aspect of a civil society. This stuff is as important as teaching kids to code. And so for it to get short shrift is very telling."

— Alicia Dixon
Marcus Foster Education Institute

Ethnic studies is not even a state standard in the state of Minnesota. Kudos to our chair of the (Minneapolis) school board, she did a lot of advocacy for that. It took her six years, because we don't have a state standard. We don't have the numbers in the state senate to pass any kind of comprehensive education reform."

— Adriana Cerrillo
brightbeam activist

We've got to have more visibility into what kids are actually being asked to do. Are they being engaged? Are they being given rigorous, relevant materials where they can see themselves, see the connection to their aspirations, or not? We don't know. If we had more visibility into what our kids are doing every day, then I think those choices end up being way more equitable."

— Dan Weisberg
TNTP

We are teaching to the tests. We got rid of No Child Left Behind, but we're still doing that."

— Christine Sampson-Clark
NEA Executive Committee member
and middle-school math teacher

TOWN HALL 1:

What Should Our Children Be Learning?

COMMON GROUND

Our Town Hall panel unanimously supported accurate teaching of U.S. history without whitewashing to avoid tough topics like [genocidal warfare](#) against Native Americans or the [legacy of enslavement](#) that lives on in the criminal justice system and its [mass incarceration](#) of [Black people](#). Our panelists wanted to go farther and end whitewashing in the sense of narrowly focusing on Europe in world history and European-Americans in U.S. history. “Content is about getting away from this Western mentality,” said brightbeam activist Adriana Cerrillo, to stop “making kids of color feel like if you’re not white, you don’t fit in.”

Panelists also agreed on the important role ethnic studies can play in student learning, both by affirming students’ own identities and by exposing them to wider perspectives. “If students had a greater voice, we would have more ethnic studies all around the country,” noted TNTP’s Dan Weisberg. (This point also resurfaces in Town Hall 4 on social-emotional learning and student well-being.)

Panelists shared a concern that, too often, the curriculum students are offered doesn’t challenge them enough. Cerrillo contrasted the trigonometry and advanced research she was doing as a 14-year-old in Mexico with the racist assumptions of high school teachers she later encountered in the U.S., who expected little of her and also refused to support her while she was learning English.

“How children learn matters just as much as what they learn,” said Marcus Foster Education Institute’s Alicia Dixon. “It’s not depending

on rote memorization, but teaching them to analyze.”

Weisberg referred to a new report released by TNTP and Zearn, [Accelerate, Don’t Remediate](#), which found that low-income students of color were more likely than their white, wealthier peers to be assigned remedial work even when they didn’t need it, leading to a downward spiral where they fell further and further behind. The report advocates that teachers expose students to grade-level content and assignments first, then remediate to fill gaps as needed.

GROWING EDGES

Has standards-based accountability pushed what we’re teaching into a better place, or do we need an entirely new set of standards and system of accountability to shift what we’re teaching our young people into a more rigorous, relevant and engaging place? This question revealed deep growing edges of divergent thinking among the panel.

TNTP’s Weisberg noted that Common Core standards have already pushed textbook publishers in a better direction. “There’s more rigorous and culturally relevant materials out there than ever before.” Though he wouldn’t want to scrap annual standardized tests, he also observed, “We need a much more systemic view of what our kids are getting.” From the point of view of students and families, grades and annual test scores—“which often don’t sync up”—don’t clearly show whether young people are on track to achieve their aspirations. “In the really negative space, it’s just out-and-out fraud. Kids are coming

home with A's and B's and walking across the stage with a high school diploma," but when they arrive at college they find out they have weak preparation and waste time and money on required remedial courses.

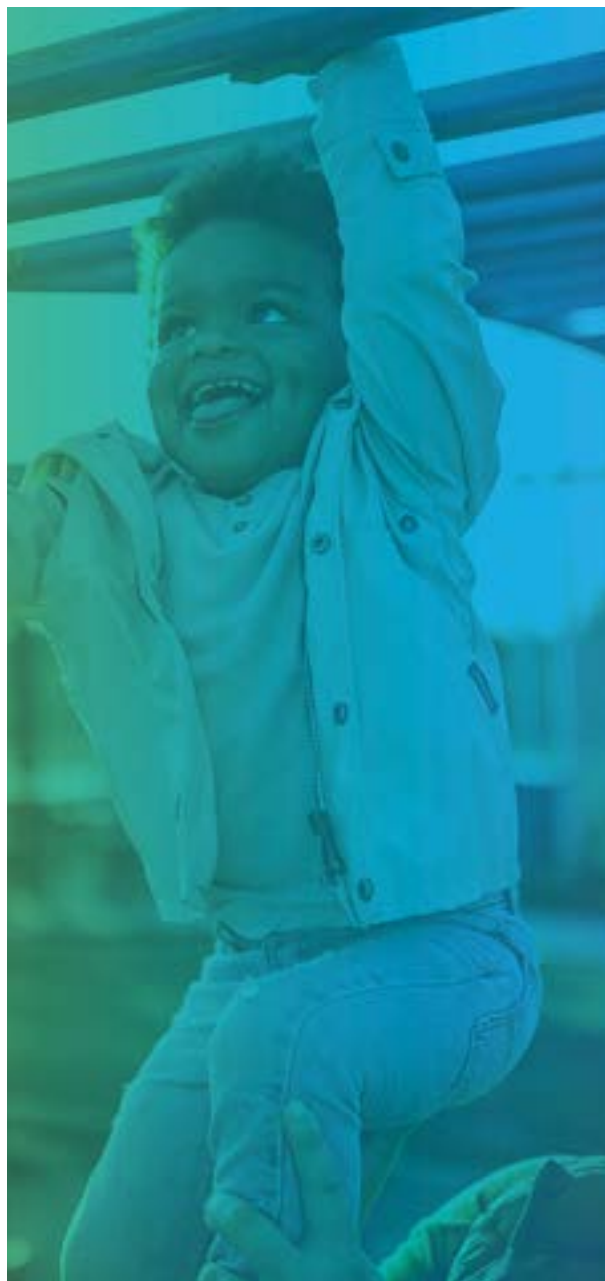
Without a clear sense of the amount of opportunity students have been given to learn, their performance lacks essential context. Teachers and principals need to be looking at the assignments students receive, along with samples of their work, to start conversations about what academically challenging work looks like. "We need to know who is teaching at an advanced level and who isn't," Weisberg said in a follow-up interview. He also recommended that schools survey students to find out whether they feel challenged and engaged, and whether they feel they belong at school. "They will tell you, 'I know I'm getting prepared for college in this class, but in this one I don't feel like I'm learning.'"

Teacher and NEA officer Christine Sampson-Clark acknowledged the need for some kind of accountability system, saying, "It's unfortunate that it feels like people won't do [anything] unless their feet are to the fire." But to her, current standards don't do enough to foster the collaborative skills and other soft skills students will need in the workplace. She continues to ask the question, "Are the standards really speaking to what our kids need to know?"

Cerillo, who also sits on the Minneapolis Public Schools' Board of Education, took an even more radical stance: "We need a different system. Burn it down, but we gotta build it up." Marcus Foster Education Institute's Dixon focused more on changing how we work within systems, whether existing or new. "I'm a little bit agnostic about new versus existing, because much of what we would build would have the same sort of remnants of what our major challenges are now. I would advocate

that we think more about how we work and how we educate our children."

Dixon noted that some schools are already creating cultures that welcome and encourage all students to excel while challenging adults to continually reflect on and refine their practices. "There are methods we could integrate into our current systems, or build them into a new system."





TOWN HALL 2:

Disarming the Doubled-Edged Sword of Data

What we really need to be thinking about, not just for our parents, but the staff and the people in the schools, is to have a foundational data literacy so that everyone can participate in the conversation.”

— Marika Pfefferkorn
Twin Cities Innovation Alliance

We actually have to trust our parents and be honest with them and give them information....I want my babies to be screened for reading risk. We should go hard to secure [data privacy] protections for our kids. And we should go hard to make sure our kids get what they need.”

— Kareem Weaver, NCTQ Fellow/
Oakland NAACP Education
Committee

Our technology and our data use and our ability to collect and share information have evolved so much faster than our policies and our laws like FERPA have been able to keep up with...and we’re putting that burden on our schools.”

— Paige Kowalski
Data Quality Campaign

We’ve seen data be used in a harmful way. We’ve seen schools be places where our children are prepared for prison, instead of prepared for college. School systems have to acknowledge the harms they’ve done in the past... so parents can trust them. In the Black community, there is huge mistrust with the system. Things have been used against our children’s best interest.”

— Natasha Dunn
Chicago parent leader

As a mother, and as a Black woman in America, I have a hard time seeing how predictive analytics are going to be good for my kid, especially if we haven’t accounted for racial bias and systemic racism in the formula.”

— Zakiya Sankara-Jabar
brightbeam director of activism

Why don’t we use predictive analytics to figure out which teachers are most likely to succeed at teaching Black children? Or all children?”

— Comment from a
Facebook Live participant

TOWN HALL 2:

Disarming the Doubled-Edged Sword of Data

COMMON GROUND

Our panelists shared an awareness of the deep distrust regarding school data collection and data use that prevails among communities of color. Without applying historical analysis and a racial equity lens, educational leaders have used data to make decisions that harmed communities of color—most notably in the case of [school closures](#).

While the protests of white, middle-class suburban parents led to their schools being reclassified to escape closure, protests by parents of color in poorer communities had [no such results](#). Repeated experiences like these leave many students and parents in communities of color deeply distrustful of “data-driven decision making.”

Our panel also recognized the importance of creating a level playing field for conversations about data collection and use in schools. Educators, parents and communities all need education in data literacy so that they can have informed conversations about the kinds of data that schools and ed-tech providers collect and how the data are used. Through its “No Data About Us Without Us” [fellowship](#), Pfefferkorn’s Twin Cities Innovation Alliance has taken into its own hands the task of educating parents and community members about how data is collected, shared and used—or misused—in schools. Their recent conference, [Data 4 Public Good](#), delved into the use of surveillance technology like [Gaggle](#) in schools, [algorithmic justice](#) and [ethical artificial intelligence](#).

There was wide agreement that districts and states should be taking more responsibility for providing easy-to-understand information about how student data is collected and used. Districts must make greater efforts to educate parents about data use and obtain their informed consent before collecting data and before allowing vendors to collect data.

The data most familiar to schools—standardized test scores and demographic information—encourage adults to view students through a deficit lens. Without high-quality training and support, adults are unlikely to use those kinds of data for self-reflection on their practices. Our panelists also saw a need for additional measures to help principals and teachers improve their practices, including ongoing coaching.

Parents and communities want data that can tell them whether the practices of school staff actually support students and give them resources and opportunities. Data use in schools requires greater attention to racial equity and more awareness of how systems have historically used data to harm people of color, including redlining, school closures, and gatekeeping that prevents children of color from accessing gifted programs and advanced coursework.

Our panelists also supported the idea of creating a more seamless set of privacy protections for students, rather than the hodgepodge of state laws that now govern student privacy and data use in schools and by third-party ed-tech companies.

GROWING EDGES

A big challenge—one that provoked a lot of differences among our panelists—was the question of whether it's even possible to responsibly use early warning signals to support children before they fail. Many panelists felt it was unlikely school systems could stop themselves from looking at leading indicators through the usual lens of a deficit in children.

Paige Kowalski presented an analogy to illustrate how early warning signs should be used. When doctors let patients know when their diet, exercise and other habits are likely to harm their health or even shorten their lifespan, they don't just give them the news and walk away. The doctor offers suggestions for ways to improve their health habits and checks back with them in a few months to see whether things are improving. "Those are the kinds of conversations we want to have in education," she said.

Unfortunately, reality doesn't often live up to Kowalski's vision. Pfefferkorn illustrated what too often actually happens when early warning signs are put to work in school and other youth-focused systems. St. Paul's school district sat down with city and county officials to share data across systems and develop a predictive model to find students who were more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system. Despite reviews by research teams and legal teams, the plan moved forward without acknowledging the obvious racial bias in suspensions data that informed the predictions. "So it was a totally flawed model," said Pfefferkorn. Twin

Cities Innovation Alliance campaigned hard and successfully to stop this use of early warning signs because it was based on biased data. (For more on the campaign and their universal, strengths-based, prevention-focused recommendations to replace the predictive model, see their [policy brief](#).)

Before moving forward with new assessments and accountability systems, policymakers must provide clear policies and plans to protect students' data privacy. Without strong privacy protections, we could see a resurgence of the [grassroots opt-out movement](#) that occurred during the Obama administration. Though concerns about overtesting, narrowed curriculum and student test anxiety have featured more prominently, concerns about [student privacy](#), especially when it conflicted with test security, have surfaced.

A more tactical difference also surfaced. When it comes to protecting student privacy, grassroots folks are still searching for their most effective targets for activism. Our panelists recognized problems with our current patchwork of privacy laws but differed in their approach to solutions. Some noted the absence of a true equivalent to HIPAA (the federal law that prevents sensitive health information from being disclosed without a patient's knowledge and consent) for educational data and thought the solution lies in new federal law. Others thought that grassroots activists might have more and faster success in protecting students by educating their state and local policymakers.



TOWN HALL 3:

Building Mutual Accountability Between School Systems and Families

Success stories won't happen if you just support those who already have [resources]. Districts should be held more accountable. Go into what they're doing with that money."

— Janet Gomez
Mikva Challenge student leader

If I'm thinking about justice for children, all the adults that are implicated in their healthy development would be on the hook in some formal, fair way, for the outcomes of those children."

— Chris Stewart
brightbeam

We should hold all kids to the same high standards, but we have to provide each child equitably with what they need to reach those standards. And they're going to do it on their own timeline, not the timeline educators set."

— Laura Jimenez
Center for American Progress

We need an understanding of the different roles that the federal government plays, states play, districts play and schools play in education. Not everything that happens in schools is within their control. An accountability system of the future needs to hold each level of the system accountable for the role they play, and get very honest about the role that each level plays."

— Christy Hovanetz
ExcelinEd

The schools that need the most resources are somehow neglected the most. I can't claim I have the answers, but I do know that a student that comes to school hungry, hasn't slept, cannot be measured with a student that doesn't face the same problems."

— Maurice Cook
Serve Your City

TOWN HALL 3:

Building Mutual Accountability Between School Systems and Families

COMMON GROUND

Our panelists reached emphatic consensus on two points: the unfair reality that current accountability systems and testing practices weigh heavier on students than they do on adults, and the need for change. If accountability systems really centered students and their learning, they would look far different from what we have now. Instead of asking how schools are held accountable to states or the federal government, we would be asking, as Laura Jimenez from the Center for American Progress phrased it: “How are schools accountable to their communities, to their students?”

From personal experience, Chicago student Janet Gomez observed that elite test-entry schools breed a culture of vicious competition rather than friendly camaraderie. While the elite school she briefly attended was nominally integrated—it had a diverse student body—the cultural expectation among students was for each racial/ethnic group to stick with its own kind. White students were privileged and their perspectives were assumed to be the norm. Gomez’s experience showed the importance of creating school cultures that embrace the whole child. Academic excellence is one part of that culture, but without creating a sense of belonging and affirmation for all students, including cultural affirmation, the school experience will alienate many young people.

Panelists also called for the creation of new kinds of accountability to meet unmet needs. First of all, more stakeholders need to be involved and held accountable for supporting children’s growth and development. Panelists favored expanding [children’s cabinets](#) to

more locales. “We are looking for technical ways to hold the schools accountable without any mechanism for making sure they have adequate partners in communities and in the public, helping them with the tough job of making sure all our kids get what they need,” said brightbeam CEO Chris Stewart.

Within schools and districts, accountability can’t be separated from equity. “We know that [accountability] requires equitable distribution of resources within the district,” said CAP’s Jimenez. “It requires rich and inclusive curricula, it requires teachers that are trained in inclusivity, and trauma-informed teachers that are masters of the subjects that they teach.”

Much more transparency and accountability is needed at the school district level to see how resources and opportunities are being allocated to schools. “I don’t think districts are always transparent,” noted Christy Hovanetz of ExcelinEd. Are districts fostering reinvestment in disinvested schools and neighborhoods? Too often they follow the path of least resistance, which gives more to those who already have. New federal fiscal reporting requirements are beginning to reveal more about how districts allocate their funds to schools, but we’re just starting to see the tip of the iceberg.

We need to develop other strategies, too, to expose the deeper levels of students’ experiences in schools—whether they are being intellectually challenged, whether they have adults and friends they trust, and



more. Parents also want to be able to hold districts and schools accountable for basics like making them feel welcome in school buildings.

We need data that measures the equity of students' opportunity to learn. And when opportunity to learn is denied, adults must be held accountable. "Whether the educator really connects to the child has a lot to do with whether young people get access to certain programs," moderator Zakiya Sankara-Jabar observed.

We also need more opportunities for bottom-up accountability. Stewart described visiting a Seattle school where each student, family and teacher sat down to collaboratively set

goals and then backward plan assignments and learning experiences. Students, teachers, school leadership and families could see each student's progress on an online platform.

"Students who had felt left behind by the previous system could go into a school where it was all under their control—the outcomes, the progress, the system for monitoring and tracking. They owned it. It was their accountability, not just for the system or the school or the educators, but for themselves, all together." The transparency of shared progress and goals kept everyone on the same page.

GROWING EDGES

Can we hold all schools and all students accountable to the same set of standards? Panelists were divided on this question. "The one-size-fits all ranking and rating system we have in D.C. is ridiculous," observed Serve Your City's Cook. "We have to be more pragmatic about the challenges that face different students, different families, different schools. I've seen the outcome of using this broad-stroke approach, and the damage and harm it causes."

But others countered that some schools have greater success with high-need students than others, and all schools should be pushed to account for the progress of their students. "We spend \$700 billion a year into the educational system, that should come with some strings attached, meaning there should be forward progress," said Stewart. "Students are victims of low expectations, lack of clarity around standards, incoherent educational practices—none of which have anything to do with their home life."



TOWN HALL 4:

Supporting the Whole Child in a Post-Pandemic World

“Students need to feel safe and heard by teachers and counselors. We can add meditation, create gardens, eat real food, [reduce] or eliminate police presence and have peer mediators to help work out issues between students.”

— Jovan Manning
EdLanta student leader

“The bottom line is really relationships. We need to rebuild relationships.”

— Robin Lake
Center on Reinventing
Public Education

“SEL can’t be a checklist...it can’t be an add-on to an already crammed curriculum, it actually has to be embedded into the everyday experiences and interactions of folks. Reclaiming SEL from harmful control and management tactics and actually placing it into what community is sharing with us.”

— Cierra Kaler-Jones
Communities for
Just Schools Fund

“We cannot do this work with a shortage of staff, with a lack of resources.”

— Jason Allen
brightbeam activist and founder
of the EdLanta Student Coalition

TOWN HALL 4:

Supporting the Whole Child in a Post-Pandemic World

COMMON GROUND

Our panelists all recognized the depth of the difficulties facing us in the wake of pandemic school closures. Young people are hurting. While remote learning was a [blessing for some](#), everyone—children, youth and adults—struggled with the constraints imposed by pandemic lockdowns. Early research indicates that rates of depression and anxiety [doubled among young people](#) across the entire globe.

Young people need spaces to heal. They need opportunities to build and rebuild relationships with peers and adults. Schools have not always done a good job of offering those spaces or making relationships a high priority.

Conventional approaches to accountability in schools have pushed out some of the very things we need most in schools right now: time to play and socialize, arts education, opportunities for students to share their stories. We need to recognize that academic and social-emotional learning (SEL) go hand-in-hand. Rather than focus on implementing an isolated program, schools need to think more deeply about integrating the two. Schools can deliberately enhance the relational value of every interaction young people experience at school.

Schools can also be more mindful of the impact their academic practices and curricula have on children's social and emotional well-being. Ethnic studies—as mentioned in our first Town Hall—not only gives students deep historical perspective, it also fosters a sense of pride in cultures often overlooked in a more traditional, Eurocentric approach to world and U.S. history.

Fundamentally, schools must let go of the assumption that social-emotional learning and academic learning are separate. “They have to go together,” said Robin Lake, of the Center on Reinventing Public Education. But currently, most schools are not capable of marrying SEL and academic learning, nor are they prepared to support the individual passions and interests of each student. “Trying to get schools to just shift along those lines is going to be the work of the next five to 10 years.”

GROWING EDGES

While participants agreed that schools should minimize police presence and should redirect funds for school police officers into peer mediation and other SEL practices, some participants wanted police completely eliminated from schools. Others supported keeping some police, though fewer than are present now.

A related challenge involves separating SEL curricula from policing children, said Communities for Just Schools Fund's Cierra Kaler-Jones. Too often, commercially-available SEL curricula overfocus on forcing children to adapt to biased expectations rather than on creating culturally-affirming systems and structures that allow children to lean into and deepen the social and emotional skills they have already learned.

Participants also had different perspectives about assessing student well-being and trying to measure the effectiveness of SEL practices in school. While all panelists agreed

greater attention must be paid to student well-being, some panelists feared efforts to assess student well-being could hurt students more than they help. Kaler-Jones encouraged everyone “to disrupt the status quo in our measurement and assessment” by asking students, families and communities what they want measured, and using tools like participatory action research.



PROMISING PRACTICES

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ASSESSMENT

Throughout our town halls, participants noted that mutual, bottom-up accountability demands we observe, measure and communicate with families about much more than a narrow set of student outcomes. Parents and community members want to know the details of students' [opportunities to learn](#)—the quality of curriculum, instruction, support and challenge students receive in their day-to-day classroom experiences.

Student surveys offer windows into both students' emotional and academic experiences at school. In a followup interview, TNTP's Dan Weisberg described surveying third-graders and learning a great deal from them about their experiences. "They are very discerning consumers. They can tell you when their teachers are having a bad day or Mr. X doesn't want to be there—they know that—or if someone really loves them and cares about them."

Importantly, though, such surveys should be selected or created thoughtfully and with close attention to protecting individual students' privacy.

Another important avenue of information comes from teacher assignments and student work samples. These can be analyzed—even using machine learning—to gauge whether they ask students to perform challenging tasks. As TNTP's 2018 report, [The Opportunity Myth](#), showed, far too many teachers are not assigning students grade-level work. When

students experience boring, unchallenging classroom assignments, they either disengage or are shortchanged without even realizing it. They can earn A's and B's, unaware they are missing the chance to learn what they need to know for college. Then, as college students, they find themselves wasting time and money in remedial classes. "In the really negative space it's just out-and-out fraud. It's not their fault; it's our fault," said Weisberg.

In addition to analyzing student surveys and teacher assignments to improve the learning experience, adults in schools can also rethink how they communicate with families about their children's performance. Though educators know the key milestones that predict future success for students — like fluent reading by the end of [third grade](#) and successful completion of [Algebra 1](#), ideally in [eighth grade](#) — parents don't.

Instead of the hodgepodge of report card grades, standardized test scores and occasional parent-teacher conferences that schools now use to tell families about their children's progress, families need to know whether their children are meeting these and other key milestones. And, if not, what plan teachers have in place to help their children get on track, and how families can help.

"This wouldn't take a billion-dollar investment," Weisberg said. "The real impediment to doing this is being willing to be honest and straight with parents about kids being off track and being willing to take responsibility for getting kids back on track in partnership with parents."

When considering taking into account more sources of data, it's important to remember our panelists' concern that traditional forms of assessment and research are shot through with bias against communities of color. They also value some kinds of knowledge and devalue others. To eliminate these biases, new accountability measures should be developed in full partnership with families and communities, with a recognition that sometimes transparency itself produces change. All these new measures—including regular feedback from parents and communities—can be part of a school-culture shift toward continuous improvement.

WHAT MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY CAN LOOK LIKE: EAST BAY CAN

In 2011, the Marcus Foster Education Institute partnered with three other Oakland-based, youth-serving nonprofit organizations to launch the East Bay College Access Network ([East Bay CAN](#)) in three of Oakland Unified School District's most under-resourced high schools. They were supported by a California funder who wanted to invest in building a college-going culture in Oakland schools. East Bay CAN's mission was to ensure every Oakland Unified senior completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the essential gateway to all federal and many state and college financial aid programs. At East Bay CAN's launch, only 40% of Oakland Unified seniors were completing the FAFSA by the March priority deadline.

By 2014, East Bay CAN had grown to include 11 nonprofits and all 15 of OUSD's high schools and made remarkable progress: that year, 70% of Oakland Unified seniors completed the FAFSA. Subsequently, central office leaders took on the work and by 2017 they had increased FAFSA completion another 15 percentage points, to 85%. "Once they

embraced the practices and held people within the district mutually accountable, they got completion rates up to unprecedented levels," said Alicia Dixon, Marcus Foster's executive director.

How did East Bay CAN make this happen? By relying on the [principles for improvement](#) laid out by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. They focused tightly on a single, commonly-defined problem, envisioned a common definition of success within a relatively short timeframe, and built culture and community focused on solving the problem. Bringing the right people together to attack a narrowly defined problem got results.

But before the results happened, exploring the problem unearthed some troubling assumptions among the people involved. "It was very strategic of the group to focus on financial aid and financial aid application numbers," noted Arianna Morales, improvement initiatives director with Marcus Foster Education Institute. School personnel often reacted with surprise, thinking it was not the highest-priority problem they faced. But it was actionable, and it forced school personnel to confront their own biases and assumptions.

"It brought out all sorts of demons...all sorts of 'reasons' why it was impossible to talk about financial aid," Morales said. School staff openly admitted, "We only talk to students with this GPA or above about college," bluntly stated, "not every student needs to go to college," or incorrectly assumed that students going to community college did not qualify for federal financial aid.



East Bay CAN brought money, relationships and a new mindset to the task of building college-going culture in schools. By starting with FAFSA completion, the collaborative was able to break up silos that kept teachers from talking and connecting with the youth-serving nonprofits that also worked with their students. “We were trying to cultivate partnerships in the school to make sure one person wasn’t solely responsible for getting all the students to complete their financial aid forms,” said Morales. “Tracking that one number forced people to create more collaboratives, to get teachers talking with one another.”

They were also able to foster analysis and reflection on practice without making people feel personally attacked. “That’s a huge barrier that should not be ignored,” said Dixon.

When East Bay CAN launched, schools’ main strategy to get students to fill out the FAFSA was to hold evening events with food to encourage them to come in with their families and complete the form. But few students attended. As the collaboration deepened, someone from the district realized that all Oakland Unified seniors must take a class in government and economics, which became the time when every senior could be pulled out to work on their FAFSA form. Shifting to an in-school completion strategy brought the numbers up sharply, and it would never have happened without the external push to examine internal practices.

AGENDA FOR ACTION

Our town halls launched a wealth of better conversation. Now it's time for people in power—funders, policymakers, elected officials—to listen and respond. Here are five concrete actions leaders can start taking that will move us closer to the equitable, mutually accountable schools and systems that can improve our schools and help our young people achieve their goals.



ROOT OUT BIAS. Move away from Euro-centrism in schools, both in curriculum and in the social experiences of students. As long as school curricula, culture, disciplinary practices—and educators themselves—hold bias, all the data we gather about student experiences and outcomes will reflect the impact of those biases. Not only are source data biased at the root, but those who interpret and analyze that data often rely on frameworks like [deficit thinking](#). It requires a deep historical perspective and a [racial justice lens](#) to see the true potential of our young people and the real depths of the challenges they face.



PUT STUDENTS FIRST. Our panelists agreed that truly student-centered accountability would look very different from the accountability systems we have seen enacted so far this century. Mutually accountable systems hold adults responsible for creating excellent, equitable learning conditions for students, including strong, integrated systems for social-emotional learning

and support. They encourage schools to create school cultures of warm relationships and high academic expectations—the combination that [research tells us](#) best allows children to excel and thrive. They must do all this while building strong protections for students' data privacy and clearly communicating with families. In the future, the shift toward personalized learning and much more individualized instruction will likely encourage states, districts and schools to shift toward working closely with students and families to tailor goals and measures of progress to each student.



BUILD CULTURES OF ADULT ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN SCHOOLS.

As Atlanta educator Jason Allen noted, “The achievement gap is an adult performance gap.” All too often, students are paying the price in test anxiety, lost instructional time and narrowed curriculum. To more effectively hold adults accountable, states and districts can focus on building [strong principal pipelines](#) and teaching those principals how to [transform school culture](#). As the example of East Bay CAN shows, creating mutually accountable partnerships between schools and community-based organizations, focused on [continuous improvement](#), also creates greater adult accountability within schools.

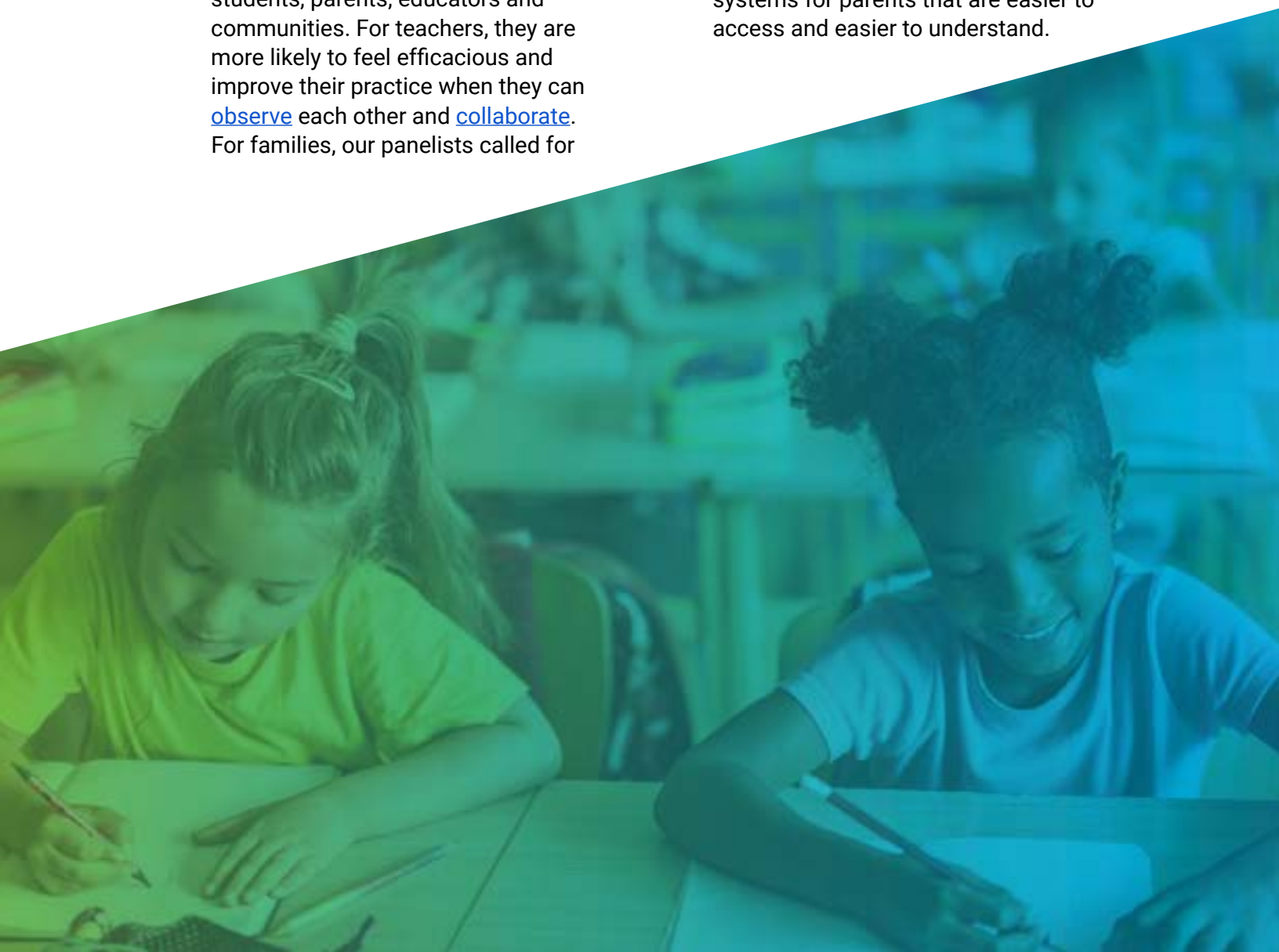
**HOLD EVERYONE, NOT JUST SCHOOLS, ACCOUNTABLE FOR CHILD JUSTICE.**

We've learned that accountability for student learning extends far beyond the school walls. [Children's cabinets](#) are a promising tool for engaging all the systems involved in ensuring children have what they need to thrive. When all the local systems—schools, child welfare, juvenile justice, public health and more—sit at the same table to coordinate supports, children are better set up for success in school.



EMBRACE TRANSPARENCY. Creating more and better ways to share how our schools work will benefit everyone: students, parents, educators and communities. For teachers, they are more likely to feel efficacious and improve their practice when they can [observe](#) each other and [collaborate](#). For families, our panelists called for

even more windows into young people's experiences at school, so they know whether students are being treated respectfully and taught effectively. Student surveys, samples of teacher assignments and student work can provide these deeper levels of transparency. For greater equity across the system, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act does [require](#) districts to detail their per-pupil spending by school, and they are required to report on absenteeism, suspensions and expulsions, and the extent to which students have access to advanced coursework. But our panelists called on states and districts to create information systems for parents that are easier to access and easier to understand.



CONCLUSION

After decades of top-down accountability mandates without attention to equity, our panelists want fresh thinking about student-centered accountability. They want to see systems create bottom-up, mutual accountability, where students and adults constantly strive to improve their performance. Our panelists want transparency in everything from district finances to classroom practices, so parents and community members can ask hard and necessary questions about who has and does not have access to opportunities and resources.

In a mutually accountable, bottom-up system, families would clearly understand what they need to do to ensure their children's ambitious dreams can be realized. They would know whether their children's schools are providing the supports and opportunities needed to excel and thrive. They would have the information and the ability to hold schools and systems accountable should they fail to deliver for their children.

Unfortunately, schools, districts and states have poor track records when it comes to acting on information and recommendations from parents and grassroots communities. As Communities for Just Schools Fund's Cierra Kaler-Jones noted, "It's irresponsible to say we want to engage the community but not actually ever implement whatever communities are asking for!" Our hope is that this report can inspire real change for the better.



BIOS

TOWN HALL 1



ZAKIYA SANKARA-JABAR

([@ZakiyaChinyere](#)) was most recently brightbeam's national director of activism. She is the co-founder of Racial Justice NOW! and prior to that served as the national field organizer at Dignity in Schools Campaign. Zakiya came to organizing, advocacy, and policy work organically as a parent pushing back on harmful school discipline policies that disproportionately impact Black students and their families. Zakiya's organizing and advocacy acumen has led to significant policy changes at the local and state level in the state of Ohio. Zakiya has worked in communities all across the country sharing tools, strategies, and skills with Black parents to shift education policy and practice.



ADRIANA CERRILLO

([@CerrilloAdriana](#)) recently served as a brightbeam activist and is a veteran community leader. She currently serves on the Minneapolis Board of Education. Since moving to Minneapolis from Florida in 2013, Adriana has taught an American Basic Civics program to youth learning to engage with politics, collaborated to bring Know Your Rights presentations to local communities and introduced the Sanctuary Now platform before the Minneapolis City Council to protect immigrant and refugee rights. Aside from her passionate career in activism and advocacy, Adriana is a mother, grandmother, guardian and business owner.



ALICIA DIXON

([@marcusfosterei](#)) is executive director at the Marcus Foster Education Institute. Alicia has an expertise in developing and implementing comprehensive, multi-sector initiatives addressing the most pressing social justice issues of our times. Alicia holds a bachelor's degree in microbiology from UC San Diego and a master's degree in public health from UCLA. Alicia is responsible for implementing MFEI's new systems-change strategic vision. Her professional experiences extend across the nonprofit, for-profit, government and philanthropic sectors.



CHRISTINE SAMPSON-CLARK

([@CSC4NEAEXEC](#), [@NEAToday](#)), a special education teacher in Trenton Public Schools, was elected to the National Education Association (NEA) Executive Committee in July 2019 for a three-year term. The NEA Executive Committee includes the NEA president, vice president, and secretary-treasurer, plus six members elected at-large by the Representative Assembly. Sampson-Clark began her career in education 30 years ago as an education support professional and since then has taught in special education programs and alternative education programs, and also provided literacy intervention through the Reading Recovery program.



DAN WEISBERG

([@DanWeisbergTntp](#), [@Tntp](#)) has recently been tapped to become top deputy to incoming New York Schools Chancellor David Banks. Prior to that he served as Tntp's chief executive officer overseeing Tntp's executive team and all aspects of the organization's operations, strategy, and growth. Before Tntp, Dan served as chief executive of labor policy and implementation for the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), the country's largest public school system.

TOWN HALL 2



MARIKA PFEFFERKORN

([@MapTrueNorth](#), [@TCIAMN](#)) is co-founder and solutions and sustainability officer of the Twin Cities Innovation Alliance and executive director of the Midwest Center for School Transformation. Marika has successfully co-led campaigns to end discriminatory suspension practices in Minnesota schools, to remove the presence of police in Minneapolis and St. Paul schools, to increase investment in indigenous restorative practices in education and community settings and is currently supporting In Equality in helping education and criminal justice systems provide quality and continuous education for justice involved youth during COVID-19.



PAIGE KOWALSKI

([@paigekowalski](#), [@EdDataCampaign](#)) is executive vice president for the Data Quality Campaign. She leads a team of passionate advocates to advance education data policies at the local, state, and federal levels that meet the needs of individuals and improve student outcomes. Before joining DQC in 2008, Paige managed several national data initiatives for the Council of Chief State School Officers and participated as a managing partner of DQC in its early years. Paige also has significant state and local experience through her tenures with the University of California, the City and County of San Francisco, and Chicago Public Schools.



KAREEM WEAVER

([@KJWinEducation](#)) recently served as a brightbeam activist and is a senior visiting fellow with the National Center on Teaching Quality. He is also a member of the Oakland NAACP Education Committee. Formerly an award-winning teacher and administrator in Oakland, Kareem continues advocating to ensure all Oakland children, especially Black and Brown children, get the support and instruction they need to learn to read.



NATASHA DUNN

([@brightbeamntwk](#)) recently served as a brightbeam activist and is a longtime leader in Chicago's South Shore community. She has engaged parents citywide on issues in both early childhood and K-12 education. She is a co-founder of the [Black Community Collaborative](#), a group of Chicago Public Schools parents pushing for equity in schools and city services.

TOWN HALL 3



LAURA JIMENEZ

([@amprog](#)) is the director of standards and accountability at American Progress. Previously Jimenez served as the director of the College and Career Readiness and Success, or CCRS, Center at the American Institutes for Research, or AIR, which supports states in implementing their CCRS priorities.



CHRISTY HOVANETZ

([@ExcelinEd](#)) is a senior policy fellow for ExcelinEd focusing on school accountability policies. Christy served as the assistant commissioner at the Minnesota Department of Education and assistant deputy commissioner at the Florida Department of Education. She has worked in education policy for the state of Florida since 1999 serving as the director of evaluation and reporting, director of Reading First and a policy analyst for

Governor Jeb Bush.



CHRIS STEWART

([@CitizenStewart](#), [@brightbeamntwk](#)) is the chief executive officer of brightbeam. He was named CEO in April 2019, after formerly serving as chief executive of Wayfinder Foundation. He is a lifelong activist and 20-year supporter of nonprofit and education-related causes. In the past, Stewart has served as the director of outreach and external affairs for Education Post, the executive director of the African American Leadership

Forum (AALF), and an elected member of the Minneapolis Public Schools Board of Education where he was radicalized by witnessing the many systemic inequities that hold our children back.



MAURICE COOK

([@mcSYCdc](#)) recently served as a brightbeam activist and is the executive director and lead organizer of Serve Your City DC. Raised in Maryland and DC, Maurice was the first male in his family to attend college, eventually earning a master's degree. His love of his hometown, coupled with his frustration with the systemic racism experienced by Black and Brown youth in DC and throughout this country, drove Maurice to create Serve Your

City in 2009 and to step up as a leader with Ward 6 Mutual Aid when the pandemic struck in March 2020. He lives on Capitol Hill with his wife, Jackie.



JANET GOMEZ

is a student at Benito Juarez Community Academy in Chicago, Illinois, and a student leader with Mikva Challenge, a national action civics organization leading the way in developing tomorrow's civic leaders. In summer 2021, Janet served on Mikva's Chicago Public Schools Student Advisory Council, which developed recommendations the district will consider as it completely revamps its school accountability framework.

TOWN HALL 4



ROBIN LAKE

([@RbnLake](#), [@CRPE_UW](#)) is director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) a non-partisan research and policy analysis organization developing transformative, evidence-based solutions for K–12 public education. Her research focuses on U.S. public school system reforms, including public school choice and charter schools; innovation and scale; portfolio management; and effective state and local public oversight practices.



CIERRA KALER-JONES

([@cierrajade](#), [@justschools](#)) is director of storytelling at Communities for Just Schools Fund. Cierra previously served as an intern and then fellow with the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans. She was also the previous Education Anew Fellow with Teaching for Change and Communities for Just Schools Fund.



JASON ALLEN

([@jballen5](#)) recently served as a brightbeam activist and is a special education teacher in Georgia. Jason has worked in education for over 15 years as a teacher and leader servicing students, families and communities. He empowers Black male educators to advocate for social justice through his work with Profound Gentlemen. As an education activist and blogger (EdLanta), Jason actively speaks and writes on ways to improve educational outcomes. He is a member of the Association of American Educators (AAE) and an AAE Foundation Advocacy Fellow.



JOVAN MANNING

is a middle school student at 7 Pillars Career Academy in Atlanta, and a member of the EdLanta Student Coalition. Jovan advocates for greater adult attention to student engagement and a focus from school and district leaders on preparing middle school students not just for high school, but for life.