

Conference Proceedings

2025

*Staying true
to the mission.*





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Staying True to the Mission

“You are actually changing someone’s life when you do this work.”

- Dr. Karen Mapp



Letter from the President

Staying True to the Mission

When we came together in Charlotte, North Carolina for the 2025 Families Learning Conference, many of our 600+ attendees were grappling with change and instability brought about by the rapidly evolving education landscape across the country. In our opening session, I had the chance to remind those dedicated professionals that we must demonstrate our grit in these uncertain times by doubling down on our commitment to the children and families we serve.

The heart of the work we're all engaged in is our collective belief in the power of education to transform lives, lift families out of poverty, and strengthen communities. That work is vital. It is urgent. And it has important implications for the future we want to see.

To that end, I asked attendees to take a moment to consider the question: How will you commit yourselves to staying true to the mission for children and families? Their responses can be found within the pages of these proceedings; they reflect our shared purpose, meaning, and passion to access the potential within every child, every adult learner, and every family.

Our communities should be places designed to respond to the needs of families, and our conference sessions demonstrated practical ways of elevating family voice as a central facet of all local, state, and national family learning programming. Several recurring themes emerged over the course of the conference:

- **Family literacy and multigenerational learning are essential to responding to the literacy crisis our country is facing.** Approximately 58.9 million adults struggle with low literacy, and the children of parents with low literacy have a 72% chance of experiencing low literacy themselves. The only way to face this challenge is to implement intergenerational solutions that tackle both facets of this crisis simultaneously.
- **Home-School-Community Engagement is a strategy for achieving transformational outcomes for children, adult learners, and families.** A deep commitment to optimizing partnerships is at the core of innovation and scaling learning. Engaging in work through a holistic approach is a proven strategy resulting in stronger impact for children and families.

Our Mission

NCFL works to eradicate poverty through education solutions for families.

Our Vision

Establish coordinated and aligned family learning systems in 60 communities, built with and for families, to increase education and economic outcomes and create thriving communities.

Families Learning Conference

Nov. 2-5, 2025 | Charlotte, NC



- **Family and parent leadership is fundamental to discovering the most promising solutions to school and community challenges.** When parents and families have the opportunity to engage as leaders, they build trust, strengthen relationships, improve decision-making, and build better learning experiences.
- **Storytelling, research, and evaluation are key to shifting the narrative and ensuring that families' lived experiences become drivers for innovation.** Bringing qualitative and quantitative data together through storytelling ensures research findings come to life in ways that advance what works and allow children, families, and communities to see what works and build a shared vision for community and system transformation.

I want to express deep appreciation to all presenters, organizers, and fellow attendees whose dedication to family learning and education made this year's conference meaningful. I believe that the exchange of ideas and best practices that took place across these four days will strengthen our movement to advance multigenerational learning opportunities for children and families. I heard many attendees express their appreciation for the opportunity to network, collaborate, and be inspired by like-minded colleagues from across the nation.

Additionally, our conference would not be made possible without the generous support from our conference sponsors—including Toyota, the Heising-Simons Foundation, PNC Grow Up Great, Google, and the Mebane Foundation—whose contributions made this year's event a success. Their support enabled attendees to engage in the sessions and seminars detailed in these proceedings and to strengthen the skills, strategies, and practices they will carry into the year ahead. As we look forward to next year's Families Learning Conference, we are excited to build on the momentum created this year and to deepen our shared commitment to the children and families we serve.

With gratitude,

Felicia C. Smith
President & CEO
National Center for Families Learning



Staying True to the Mission

During the conference's opening session, attendees were given the opportunity to consider how they'll commit to working on behalf of children and families in the coming year. Below is a representative sample of some of their commitments.

In 2026, Families Learning Conference attendees committed to...

- *Supporting my community through intentional coaching.*
- *Creating opportunities for multi-generational learning opportunities despite funding uncertainties.*
- *Doing everything I can to help families in need, even if my personal time and funds are needed.*
- *Building families as co-designers.*
- *Supporting programs doing the work.*
- *Centering those with lived experiences.*

- *Offering fun, low-cost programs for families and helping motivate/encourage parents.*
- *Staying true to myself and my values.*
- *Making sure teachers are supported so they can serve families with quality education and resources.*
- *Doing what's best for my students.*
- *Seeing each family as unique, hearing their story, and serving them with the most respect and passion.*
- *Continuing to learn from others for effective ways to engage and support family learning*
- *Speaking up for those who don't have a voice.*

- *Forging ahead and continuing to do the work regardless of the climate; committing to brave, bold, intentional action.*
- *Joyful service and advocacy.*
- *Telling radical, true, honest stories about our communities.*
- *Seeing the child and not the test/assessment scores.*
- *Meeting families where they are and working with them continuously to meet their goals.*
- *Supporting capacity-building for partner agencies.*



Executive Summary

The three-day NCFL conference brought together nationally renowned educators, researchers, policymakers, and community leaders to reaffirm a powerful truth: transformative learning across the educational spectrum must be grounded in strong relationships and shared leadership with families. From keynotes and panels to practitioner-led sessions, participants underscored that family engagement is not a programmatic add-on but the foundation of equitable and thriving learning ecosystems.

In a time of rapid technological advancements in AI, shifting policy landscapes, and growing uncertainty for families furthest from opportunity, presenters emphasized that lasting progress depends on trusting relationships, culturally responsive strategies, and solutions built with families, not for them. The conference reinforced the field’s collective commitment to advancing educational opportunity as a pathway to economic mobility – staying true to NCFL’s mission to support families in breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty through learning.

Cross-Cutting Themes

- Building relational trust as the cornerstone for effective family engagement.
- Centering family voice, leadership, and lived experience.
- Co-design and co-create to drive system transformation.
- Cultural wealth and community assets as foundations for learning and improving.
- Two-way, culturally responsive communication.
- Removing structural barriers to engagement.
- Community-level solutions and ecosystems of support.
- Data as a lever to highlight the need for equity, shared learning, and possibilities.
- Successful AI and technology innovation requires human connection and ethics, not just technical skill.





PRE-CONFERENCE

Workshop Session | Sunday, November 2

Workshop Leaders:

Marc Porter Magee –
50CAN

Marcus Brandon –
CarolinaCAN

The State of Educational Opportunity: What 20,000 U.S. Parents Want Schools to Deliver

Parents are clear about what they want from schools—but are policymakers listening? In this session, 50CAN CEO & Founder Marc Porter Magee unpacked findings from *The State of Educational Opportunity in America: A Survey of 20,000 Parents*, an unprecedented 50-state study conducted with Edge Research. Drawing on insights from one of the largest parent surveys ever conducted, this discussion explored what families prioritize for their children's education, how those priorities differ by state, and what trends are shaping the future of learning opportunities nationwide. Attendees learned how to access and use the full 200-page report—including state-specific data and question-level detail—to inform strategy, advocacy, and decision-making.

Key Takeaways:

- **Inequality is not just about grades but also enrichment opportunities.** Results revealed that students who are the farthest behind in grades have the least opportunity to participate in out-of-school activities.
- **Unmet demand for college and career readiness options.** Parents across all income levels want more college- and career-readiness courses, with low-income families expressing the largest gaps in access—only 20% can access AP courses, while nearly half (48%) want more options.
- **Parents want greater mental health support across school levels.** Parents across all grade levels reported low satisfaction with student mental health supports received, with ninth-grade parents reporting the lowest satisfaction and elementary parents reporting the highest at just 42%.
- **Low-income families participate less in learning support programs.** Household income is inversely related to levels of tutoring enrollment, summer camp participation, and high school student involvement in internships and work-based programs.
- **Students most in need of tutoring are least likely to receive it.** Tutoring is used most often by students earning B and C grades, even though parents of D and F students report the greatest desire for tutoring support. While participation remains low overall (about 24%), tutoring programs can effectively catch up students who fall behind. The discussion also highlighted a common view in the U.S. of tutoring as a form of punishment. Thus, increasing tutoring participation requires a change in perceptions among families and educators.
- **State-by-state comparisons reflect distinct strengths and gaps.** Representative samples from all 50 states reveal real differences in parent priorities and access patterns. For example, Indiana scored high in school satisfaction and school choice but lower in afterschool activity and tutoring participation.
- **Full report available:** <https://50can.org/education-opportunity-survey/>.



PLENARY SESSIONS: KEYNOTES AND PANELS

Opening Keynote | Monday, November 3

Keynote Speaker:

Dr. Rebecca Winthrop –
Director, Center for
Universal Education,
Brookings Institution;
Adjunct Professor,
Georgetown University

Track: Research and
Evaluation; Family
Engagement

What Does AI Do for Student Engagement?

Dr. Rebecca Winthrop, a leading global expert on education and family engagement, shared insights from her recent research and book, *The Disengaged Teen*, exploring the growing issue of student disengagement and its relationship to learning, motivation, and mental health. Dr. Winthrop also addressed the potential impact of AI on engagement, emphasizing that it depends not on the technology itself, but on how families and educators guide its use—ensuring it strengthens motivation, creativity, and belonging rather than replacing human connection.

Key Takeaways:

- **Engagement is critical.** Dr. Winthrop described how psychological dimensions – behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and motivational - work together to shape student engagement. Her research demonstrates that engagement is a fundamental driver of student achievement, persistence, and well-being, leading to stronger academic outcomes, healthier relationships, and greater motivation to learn.
- **The four engagement modes.** Based on her research, Dr. Winthrop defined four “modes of engagement” that reflect how students interact with learning opportunities and challenges.
 - Resisters challenge learning but also demonstrate agency and resilience.
 - Passengers comply behaviorally but lack a connection and curiosity for learning.
 - Achievers are highly motivated but may struggle with resilience and creativity.
 - Explorers demonstrate curiosity, initiative, and adaptability—skills most predictive of long-term success.
- **Developmental shifts.** Her research shows a steady decline in students’ love of learning from elementary to high school, with an associated shift in their reported opportunities to engage as Explorers (less than 4%) by middle and high school years.
- **AI’s role in supporting engagement.** Dr. Winthrop noted that AI tools can enhance student engagement by expanding opportunities for creativity, exploration, and personalized support – if used with clear guidance developed by families and educators. She emphasized that AI should be a tool for deepening learning, not a substitute for curiosity or critical thinking.
- **AI literacy as family literacy.** Families and educators can play a critical role in shaping whether AI strengthens or weakens engagement. Dr. Winthrop encouraged educators and families to co-create a shared understanding of AI to support safe, creative, and productive use, which will serve to amplify technology use for building community connection rather than individual isolation.
- **Call to action.** Families, educators, and policymakers must work together to ensure AI supports exploration, creativity, and community-based learning.

“We were not at the table when social media was designed—we must be at the table for AI.”

- Dr. Rebecca Winthrop



PLENARY SESSIONS: KEYNOTES AND PANELS

General Session AM | Tuesday, November 4

Keynote Speaker:

Dr. Karen Mapp –
Harvard Professor of
Practice, Harvard
Graduate School of
Education; Faculty
Director, Education
Policy and Management
Program

Track: Family
Engagement; Research
and Evaluation

Equipping Educators to Build Transformative Family Partnerships

Dr. Karen Mapp, renowned for her pioneering work on school-family partnerships and developing the *Dual Capacity-Building Framework*, delivered an energizing keynote urging educators to move beyond creating “random acts of family engagement” toward embracing engagement as a key strategy for meeting learning goals. Mapp’s message emphasized a need to shift mindsets about families - from one that centers on biases, deficits, and checking boxes to an asset-based approach grounded in listening and lifting up.

Key Takeaways:

- **Engagement as strategy, not goal:** Family engagement should not exist apart from instructional priorities. Mapp challenged educators to align every family engagement effort directly with school priorities and learning goals in particular, replacing one-off engagement events with intentional opportunities designed to promote partnership.
- **The research is unequivocal:** Decades of research confirm that effective family engagement improves academic achievement, attendance, and social-emotional outcomes. Mapp’s updated publication, *Everyone Wins!*, demonstrates that authentic partnerships benefit not only students but also families, educators, and entire school communities. She also noted studies showing that schools with strong family engagement cultures before the pandemic better maintained attendance, academic progress, and community trust during and after school closures.
- **Involvement vs. engagement:** Traditional family involvement approaches often rely on one-way communication and transactional relationships; true engagement prioritizes collaboration, shared power, and co-design. Schools that “lead with their ears” rather than their mouths create authentic two-way partnerships, which improve outcomes.
- **The Dual Capacity-Building Framework:** Originally developed in 2013 and updated in 2019, this framework identifies essential conditions—trust, respect, integrity, and competence—that build capacity in both educators and families. Engagement succeeds only when organizations provide the structures and supports for these relationships to thrive.
- **Training gap:** Few educators have been trained on how to do family engagement, underscoring the need for pre-service and professional development programs that build practitioners’ relational and cultural competence.
- **Equity and respect:** Mapp highlighted the level of disrespect faced by many families across generations - particularly Indigenous, immigrant, and marginalized communities – negatively impacting student learning. She stressed that engagement begins with valuing family cultures and knowledge instead of assuming a lack of experience and interest.
- **Power shared is power multiplied:** Sharing decision-making authority with families strengthens schools rather than weakening them. “When you share power, you generate more power,” Mapp reminded the audience.

“Engagement is both an act of equity and of hope.”

- Dr. Karen Mapp



PLENARY SESSIONS: KEYNOTES AND PANELS

General Session PM | Tuesday, November 4

Moderator:

Dr. Felicia C. Smith –
President and CEO,
National Center for
Families Learning

Panelists:

Dr. Russell Booker –
Chief Executive
Officer, Spartanburg
Academic Movement

Dreama Gentry –
Founder and CEO,
Partners for Rural
Impact

Cecilia Gutierrez –
Managing Director
and Portfolio Lead,
Blue Meridian

Track: Policy and
Impact; Family
Engagement; Family
Leadership

Stronger Together—Communities as Catalysts for Advancing Education and Prosperity

Moderated by NCFL's President and CEO, Dr. Felicia Cumings Smith, this keynote panel brought together three leaders working at the intersection of education, philanthropy, and community transformation. The discussion explored how locally driven, place-based partnerships are building systems of opportunity that connect education, workforce, and family well-being. Panelists emphasized that sustainable community change depends on trusting local leadership, integrating cross-sector collaboration, using data for learning rather than compliance, and embracing courageous leadership in worrisome times.

Key Takeaways:

- **Communities as the “unit of change”:** Gentry described how Partners for Rural Impact centers resident-driven planning and deep community engagement, ensuring families and residents define priorities for improving education and health outcomes.
- **Building the “nest”:** Booker referenced the chicken-and-egg paradox, a longtime argument over the right roles and strategies for schools, to make the compelling point that the “nest” is the most critical - the foundation - to build the civic infrastructure needed for children and families to thrive. This collective community mindset led to Spartanburg's *Movement 2030*, an effort to unite schools, businesses, and faith leaders around shared goals for literacy, health, and workforce readiness.
- **Place-based investment:** Gutierrez explained that Blue Meridian aggregates philanthropic capital to make significant, large-scale, long-term investments in leaders and communities who are defining their own visions for upward mobility.
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Communities achieve greater impact when sectors such as education, business, faith, and government co-design strategies and share responsibility for results rather than operating in silos.
- **Community-defined planning:** Rural and urban communities alike benefit when residents identify local assets and challenges. Effective facilitation pairs community wisdom with data analysis to identify evidence-based solutions.
- **Data and storytelling:** Booker and Gutierrez stressed the dual power of data and narrative. Quantitative metrics attract investment, while family stories reveal the lived impact of change. Both are essential to sustaining support.
- **Highlighting failures along with successes:** This panel highlighted the importance of transparency with funders – and identifying funders with shared values – in terms of sharing what is working and what is *not* to prevent replication of ineffective strategies.

**“Rural communities don’t lack potential—they lack access.
Our job is to remove those barriers.”**

- Dreama Gentry



PLENARY SESSIONS: KEYNOTES AND PANELS

General Session PM | Tuesday, November 4

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Stronger Together—Communities as Catalysts for Advancing Education and Prosperity

Key Takeaways (continued):

- **Family and youth leadership:** Drawing on frameworks from Dr. Karen Mapp and Dr. Dana Suskind, Gentry underscored the importance of valuing family voice in community spaces as a means of developing skills and comfort to then become community leaders.
- **Courageous leadership:** In polarized times, courage means centering children and families, working across ideological divides, and continuing the work despite fear or fatigue.
- **Sustaining transformation:** Panelists closed by encouraging participants to care for themselves and one another, recognizing that systemic change is generational work that requires persistence, hope, and shared leadership.

Closing Thoughts

- **Shifting the narrative:** Gutierrez noted that we need a different paradigm for how we work together and that we can get closer to our collective goals by investing in communities in ways that build up all children and families. Smith noted that this captures the spirit of NCFL's Family Learning Community vision, which has taken root in 14 communities across the country with more in the pipeline.
- **Trusting local voices:** Throughout the session, panelists shared their belief in the power of trusting communities to lead, even when it challenges traditional systems and structures. Smith reiterated that community-based approaches can only succeed when they are informed and guided by the knowledge and needs of local families.

“Prosperity cannot happen in a community unless we align education, workforce, and community supports.” – Dr. Russel Booker

“We cannot fund programs—we must fund ecosystems.” – Cecilia Gutierrez



PLENARY SESSIONS: KEYNOTES AND PANELS

General Session AM | Wednesday, November 5

Moderator:

Dr. Felicia C. Smith –
President and CEO,
National Center for
Families Learning

Panelists:

Grace Hoyt –
Global Product
Partnerships, Google

Dr. Tasha Austin-
Williams –
Principal, Deloitte &
Touche

Holly Walters –
Chief Information
Officer and Group
Vice President of
Information
Systems, Toyota
Motor North
America; Member,
NCFL Board of
Directors

Track: Policy and
Impact; Family
Engagement

AI, Education, and the Workforce—What Educators and Families Need to Know

This dynamic cross-sector panel examined how artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping education, work, and family life—and how schools, employers, and communities can ensure AI expands opportunity rather than deepens inequity. Corporate and education leaders shared insights on digital safety, responsible AI use, and workforce readiness, emphasizing the shared responsibility among schools, families, and industry to prepare learners for a rapidly changing world.

Key Takeaways:

- **AI is already part of everyday life:** Hoyt explained that AI quietly safeguards billions of users daily by blocking phishing scams, securing browsers through Google's *Safe Browsing*, and automatically vetting mobile apps—acting as a “digital immune system” that prevents harm at scale.
- **AI as a partner, not a threat:** Austin-Williams emphasized reframing AI as an enhancer of human judgment. Educators can use it to reduce repetitive tasks (like grading) while redirecting time toward student connection and critical thinking. She encourages learners to use AI to *challenge* ideas, detect bias, and expand perspectives rather than replace creativity.
- **Critical thinking and trust:** Walters described Toyota's multigenerational approach to digital transformation, from production-line innovation to executive training. She stressed that AI should remove unnecessary tasks, elevate human problem-solving, and reinforce critical-thinking skills for all ages.
- **Making AI literacy accessible:** Austin-Williams urged schools to simplify and “de-mystify” AI through storytelling and hands-on exploration. Using plain language and inclusive data design helps families and educators engage confidently without fear.
- **Bridging the digital divide:** Hoyt highlighted Google's *Family Link*—a parental-control tool empowering safe exploration—and noted that partnership with educators and family organizations like NCFL is essential to reach underserved communities effectively.
- **Ethical and trustworthy AI:** Austin-Williams outlined Deloitte's *Trustworthy AI Framework*, which promotes fairness, transparency, accountability, reliability, and data security. Walters added that user awareness, such as understanding cookies, ads, and privacy settings, is foundational to ethical use.
- **Community education and intergenerational learning:** Both Hoyt and Austin-Williams emphasized intergenerational approaches, from youth teaching grandparents digital safety to family AI-literacy sessions that build collective competence.

“AI will not replace educators—but educators who use AI will replace those who do not.”

- Grace Hoyt



PLENARY SESSIONS: KEYNOTES AND PANELS

General Session AM | Wednesday, November 5

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Track: Policy and
Impact; Family
Engagement

AI, Education, and the Workforce—What Educators and Families Need to Know

Key Takeaways (continued):

- **Preparing for the future workforce:** Walters reminded participants that technical proficiency must be paired with “soft skills” such as creativity, communication, and collaboration. These human skills ensure that technology serves people—not the other way around.
- **Closing message:** Panelists agreed that AI is a human *tool* whose value depends on human guidance and education. By combining ethical design, the wisdom and knowledge that comes with engaging educators and families, and responsible guardrails, communities can ensure AI promotes equity, empowerment, and opportunity for all learners instead of isolation and bias.

“The future workforce must be able to solve problems, adapt quickly, and collaborate with technology.”

- Holly Walters

“We need to prepare students not for the jobs we lost, but for the jobs we cannot yet imagine.” - Tasha Austin-Williams



PLENARY SESSIONS: KEYNOTES AND PANELS

Closing Keynote | Wednesday, November 5

Keynote Speaker:

Dr. Iheoma Iruka –
Professor, Gillings
School of Global
Public Health and
Founding Director,
Equity Research
Action Coalition,
University of North
Carolina at Chapel
Hill; Member, NCFL
Research Advisory
Council

Track: Family
Engagement;
Research and
Evaluation

Continuing the Work of Family Learning for Equity and Flourishing

Dr. Iheoma Iruka reflected on the essential role of authentic relationships, family partnerships, and community collaboration in advancing educational equity and child well-being. Drawing from her research with the Equity Research Action Coalition and the national Black Family Survey, she urged educators, practitioners, and policymakers to center families' lived experiences, honor cultural wealth, and promote systemic equity. Her message called for a renewed commitment to connection, healing, and empowerment as the foundation for families and children to flourish.

Key Takeaways:

- **Relationships as the foundation of thriving:** Across all stages of development, strong, supportive relationships between children and adults serve as the primary buffer against adversity and the strongest predictor of success.
- **A “crisis of connection”:** Educators, parents, and youth are facing burnout and disconnection. Addressing mental health and restoring trust across families and communities must be a national priority.
- **Four E’s of engagement:** Dr. Iruka’s framework for promoting family engagement includes *exploration* (understanding families’ dreams and fears), *education* (equipping them with knowledge of their rights and opportunities), *expectations* (believing in children’s and families’ capacity to thrive), and *empowerment* (creating conditions for families to act on aspirations).
- **Centering equity and cultural wealth:** Advancing racial and social equity begins by recognizing and building upon the cultural assets and strengths present in every family. Dr. Iruka emphasized that centering Black families in research and policy benefits all communities.
- **Bilingualism and cultural traditions as strengths:** Encouraging families to maintain home languages and cultural traditions reinforces identity, belonging, and intergenerational connection, which are key ingredients for lifelong learning. As example, Dr. Iruka noted that many Black families engage in shared family activities involving music and movement to inspire joy, creativity, and foster a strong sense of positive identity, and that these aspects of family culture are not extras but essential to well-being.
- **Hope and dreaming as social justice:** When families can dream about the future, they act toward it. Sustaining hope is critical to generational progress and community transformation.
- **Inclusion of fathers and male caregivers:** Programs must intentionally engage fathers and male role models as vital partners in family engagement and child development.
- **Addressing trauma for generational healing:** Healing personal and intergenerational trauma enables families and practitioners to better support one another and sustain long-term change.
- **A call to continue:** Concluding with Maya Angelou’s poem “*Continue*,” Dr. Iruka encouraged participants to persist in compassion, humility, and purpose—carrying forward the spirit of family learning to build equitable futures.

“Family voice cannot be an afterthought; it must be the starting point.”

- Dr. Iheoma Iruka



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 1 Highlights | Monday, November 3

Presenters:

Dr. Ye (Jane) He –
Professor, University
of North Carolina at
Greensboro

Jocelyn Turner-
Whitlock – Research
Assistant, University
of North Carolina at
Greensboro

Inga Siler – Research
Assistant, University
of North Carolina at
Greensboro

David Sisk – Director,
North Carolina,
National Center for
Families Learning
(NCFL)

Track: Research and
Evaluation

Showcasing Family Engagement Excellence: Lessons Learned from North Carolina SFEC

Presenters shared insights from North Carolina's Statewide Family Engagement Center (SFEC), a multi-year collaboration between NCFL, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and regional education partners. The team described how asset mapping, rubric-guided reflection, and public recognition of exemplary family engagement practices helped schools and districts build stronger systems of partnership and trust with families.

Key Takeaways:

- The 2023-2025 North Carolina Statewide Family Engagement project, led by NCFL, focused on family engagement efforts to support public schools across NC regions/districts through partnerships with Book Harvest, Parents as Teachers, and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG).
- **NC SFEC Asset Mapping Process:**
 - The project centered around applying a strength-based, structured process to family engagement by identifying existing skills and resources and encouraging stronger community-driven strategies.
 - SFEC partners performed online scans for published practices, held listening sessions, and conducted interviews with schools and community partners to document examples of family engagement excellence and identify common challenges across districts.
- **Key NC SFEC Practices:**
 - Recognize exemplary practices, groups, and partnerships. Public recognition motivated and reinforced the value of collaboration across districts, agencies, and systems.
 - Use of rubrics, self-assessments, and reflection tools. These tools helped schools evaluate and improve their engagement strategies.
 - Build trust. Use two-way communication. focus on family-identified priorities, encourage parent leaders and co-leading.
 - Ensure sustainability: Creating authentic long-term systems requires developing family engagement in policy and practices, statewide protocols for engagement and support with families and agencies, and data reviews opportunities with families.
- **Lessons Learned:**
 - Celebrate existing assets and school/community efforts to promote family engagement.
 - Provide support structures for collaboration.
 - Use common protocols to support consistency and sustainability.
 - Partnerships are key – community organizations, LEAs, and SEAs to leverage resources.

“We are not just waiting here for people to come to us. We are collaborating, partnering with our community — we are going where people are, and that’s how engagement really happens.”

- Dr. Ye He



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 2 Highlights | Monday, November 3

Presenters:

Natalie Hicks –
IN*Source

Tabitha Jackson – MSD
Warren Township
(Indiana)

Tracks: Family
Engagement, Research
and Evaluation

From Barriers to Bridges—Leveraging Lived Experience to Foster Authentic Family Engagement

Presenters from Indiana's Statewide Family Engagement Center (SFEC) shared strategies for transforming family engagement from transactional activities to authentic, co-created partnerships grounded in lived experience. Through examples from district initiatives and audience reflections, they highlighted how centering family voice, addressing barriers, and building relational trust can shift systems toward inclusivity and shared leadership.

Key Takeaways:

- **Family engagement as collaboration.** Presenters emphasized that effective family engagement is built through trust, co-created goals, shared leadership, and welcoming, accessible school environments. Family engagement is most effective when families are viewed as partners with expertise rather than as recipients of services.
- **Centering lived experience.** The session highlighted the role of *People with Lived Experience (PWLE)* by emphasizing that individuals – often parents and families – with firsthand knowledge of school systems can guide more equitable and culturally responsive engagement practices.
- **From transactional to transformational partnerships.** Authentic engagement occurs when families are not only invited in but actively shape, lead, and co-design the decisions and systems that affect them.
- **Flipping systemic barriers into bridges.** Families often face obstacles such as language access, transportation and childcare needs, work schedules, past school trauma, and non-welcoming school climates that limit meaningful engagement. Schools can improve relationships with families by using the 8 Ps of Parent Engagement, which include more positive, proactive strategies to support families, such as multilingual communication, flexible opportunities (hybrid and Saturday programming in addition to family nights), celebrating family knowledge, and building relational trust.
- **Using SFEC survey data for improvement.** The SFEC survey helps schools and districts gather actionable feedback from families and staff, connecting data, goals, and action to strengthen engagement practices. Collecting and sharing the feedback with families and parent councils creates accountability and promotes continuous improvement in family engagement practices.
- **Lessons learned.** Presenters noted that families gained awareness of available community resources, and staff better understood families' priorities, including the importance of social belonging for younger students and academic/career development for older students.

“Families know firsthand what their students need... Every family has experience and expertise - whether it is what we think is the right way - every family has something to bring to the table.”

-Tabitha Jackson



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 3 Highlights | Monday, November 3

Presenters:

Jeana Wallace, Thorn Hill Education Center

Kay Combs, Thorn Hill Education Center

Anna Kaiper-Marquez, National Center for Families Learning

Tracks: Family Literacy, Family Engagement

The 5th Component of a 4-Component Model: Meeting Family Needs in Times of Crisis

Presenters explored an essential “fifth component” of family literacy programs: meeting families’ basic needs to fully participate and thrive. While the existing model components are critical and well-established, many families experience crises that disrupt access and engagement to learning. The session highlighted the importance of wrap-around supports, strategies for identifying and addressing needs, and examples of how community partnerships strengthened program impact in times of crisis.

Key Takeaways:

- **The core Four-Component model remains central.** This model, supported by 35 years of research, demonstrates that family literacy programs jointly improve literacy outcomes for children and their parents in four critical areas: child language and early literacy development and school readiness, as well as adult literacy and language development and relational social capital for families.
- **Adding a fifth component accounts for basic needs.** Many families encounter barriers to fulfilling basic needs, which are not addressed in the Four-Component model. Challenges with housing, food, mental health, financial resources, childcare, English skills, and transportation – a clear reflection of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs - substantially affect children’s learning and reduce participation in family literacy programs.
- **Strengthening the model and long-term outcomes.** The Family Foundational Support component creates a strong base for adult education, child education, parent time, and PACT Time®. These supports form wrap-around services, creating a bridge to stability that increases family literacy program attendance, retention, and overall literacy of children and adults.
- **Implementing the fifth component.** A four-step implementation framework helps guide staff to recognize needs and offer supports:
 - Assessment of family strengths and barriers.
 - Navigation to needed resources (housing, food, childcare, healthcare).
 - Collaboration with community partners.
 - Empowerment to help families move from crisis toward stability.
- **Real-world examples illustrate effectiveness.** In response to April 2025 flooding in Kentucky, Thorn Hill Education Center, a regional adult/family education center, responded by opening its facility and offering wrap-around services, including relocation services, supplies, wellness support, and adapted educational programming. Attendance and retention in their family literacy program increased substantially.
- **Partnerships make the fifth component possible.** Family literacy programs can draw on existing community assets and organizations, such as housing coalitions, food and clothing banks, childcare and transportation providers, and health and mental health agencies to leverage multiple sources of funding and support.



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 3 Highlights | Monday, November 3

Presenters:

Wendy Falb – Executive Director, Literacy Center of West Michigan

Karrie Roy – Director of Operations, Literacy Center of West Michigan

Cara Glass – Director of Instruction and Curricular Design, Literacy Center of West Michigan

Tracks: Family Leadership; Family Engagement

Learners as Co-Designers—The Method and Three Projects

Presenters from the Literacy Center of West Michigan described how co-design—a learner-centered, participatory form of human-centered design—positions adult learners as equal partners in shaping literacy and community programs. Through three project examples, they illustrated how co-design transforms both systems and mindsets by elevating lived experience, building trust, and ensuring that educational and social innovations are grounded in the priorities of the communities they serve.

Key Takeaways:

- **Learners as decision-makers.** Co-design moves beyond human-centered design by engaging learners as *decision-makers* in every stage of program development, rather than as the subjects or recipients.
- **Six mindsets.** Adopting co-design requires six interrelated mindsets—curiosity, valuing many perspectives, embracing ambiguity, learning through doing, building partnerships, and cultivating hospitality—to create safe, inclusive environments where participants can take risks and share openly.
- **Co-design model.** The presenters reviewed a specific co-design model with six phases (building conditions, immersion & alignment, discovery, design, testing, and refinement) that provides a practical roadmap for organizations seeking to work with families rather than for them. The authors pointed to <https://www.beyondstickynotes.com/> as a starting point resource.
- **Examples of co-design in action.** Presenters reviewed three projects where the use of a co-design approach enhanced the process, engagement, and outcomes.
 - *Library Redesign Project.* Families helped re-imagine local branches through listening sessions and walk-throughs, resulting in greater use of libraries, more culturally relevant materials, and shifts in librarian and leadership mindsets about community partnership.
 - *Grand Rapids Public Schools ombuds office.* In collaboration with a school-district ombudsman, co-design listening sessions with multilingual families revealed that they were unaware of the ombuds office or found it inaccessible. While the project is ongoing and still in the co-design ‘build the conditions’ phase, families have made initial progress by recommending that the ombuds hold office hours in schools and create multilingual materials. The outcome has improved trust and visibility among families.
 - *A Health Literacy Initiative.* Applied co-design to curriculum creation for multilingual learners, producing practical, hands-on lessons such as a medical “scavenger hunt.” Participants developed confidence navigating health systems and contributed data to county needs assessments, influencing local policy.
- **Evidence of impact.** Across all projects, co-design created conditions for shared ownership, deeper understanding of systemic barriers, and measurable increases in family engagement and leadership capacity.



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 4 Highlights | Monday, November 3

Presenters:

Dr. Maggie Hanna –
Assistant Professor,
Eastern Michigan
University

Alexis Thomason –
Family Leader and
Child Welfare
Advocate, Maryland

Track: Family
Leadership

The Power of Family Leadership as Cultivated Through Practitioner–Parent Communities of Practice

Presenters reflected on their participation in *Activate National!*, a three-year NCFL-led initiative that cultivated family leadership among Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) families and practitioners in early childhood education. They highlighted how they have applied key features of the program to their professional and personal lives. Their reflections emphasized how lessons from *Activate National!* can inform participatory research, educator training, and system-level efforts to strengthen family-school partnerships.

Key Takeaways:

- **Building a learning community for early childhood families.** *Activate National!* - a national network of early childhood parents and practitioners - focuses on developing solutions to early childhood inequities by integrating practices of long-term cohort learning, co-design, and communities of practice to sustain trust, accountability, and continuous learning.
- **A focus on shared power and family voice.** Presenters described how the *Activate National!* model's focus shared power and authentic family voice informed their later work in higher education and community settings.
- **Embedding practices in work and life.** Applying the principles of co-design and shared leadership helped practitioners and families collaborate on new projects, ranging from local literacy initiatives to research on family engagement for teacher preparation.
- Presenter reflections underscored:
 - *Family leadership as a lever for equity:* The value of treating families, especially those most impacted by inequities, as changemakers who can push systems toward more inclusive and culturally responsive practices and policies.
 - *System-level challenges:* Presenters noted persistent barriers in early childhood systems, such as limited early educator preparation and investment. Overcoming these challenges requires integrating family leadership into broader systems of professional learning and policy development.
 - *Building with intention:* Sustaining family leadership requires intentional structures that honor lived experience, redistribute power, and connect emerging leaders across settings through continued mentoring and recognition.
 - *Real-world program applications:* Both presenters described how they continue to apply Activated-informed principles in PK-12 contexts, educator preparation programs, and policy work, extending the program's impact beyond the initial cohort experience.
 - *Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a model for shared leadership:* The "Growing Together" project illustrated how educator-caregiver teams used PAR to co-investigate challenges, design action projects, and influence changes in school communities and teacher preparation coursework.

***"When I do the work that I do, I really carry with me the enormity of—
and I'm very humbled by—this job as a parent."***

- Dr. Maggie Hanna



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 4 Highlights | Monday, November 3

Moderator:

Dr. Steve Sheldon,
Johns Hopkins School
of Education

Panelists:

Jessie Coffey, Nebraska
Dept of Education

Latisha Hensley,
Charlotte-Mecklenburg
Public Schools

Dr. Emily Markovich
Morris, The Brookings
Institution

Judith Wilson, Jefferson
County Public Schools

Tracks: Research and
Evaluation, Policy and
Impact

Parent Advisory Councils: Elevating Family Voice and Leadership in Education

Parent Advisory Councils bring family voice into education decision-making, yet questions remain about their impact and inclusivity. The panel brought together researchers and practitioners to explore what is currently known about parent advisory councils, including results from a recent NCFL survey of parent advisory council members. Panelists identified barriers to creating and participating in parent advisory councils, shared knowledge of promising practices, and discussed how advisory council structures can be reimaged to more authentically engage and empower diverse families.

Key Takeaways:

- **Parent/family recruitment.** Recruitment efforts can vary and fall under two broad categories: open calls for participation through strategies such as social media, letters, and e-mails or through informal efforts such as leadership-driven invitations or parent word-of-mouth. Both approaches combined can help ensure that the advisory council is representative of the population of families it is serving.
- **Barriers to family participation.** Parent advisory councils often are impacted by family constraints, including time, transportation, language accessibility and child care. Addressing these barriers by providing access to transportation, childcare, and language interpretation is important for consistent participation. Assessing family needs before the advisory council commences can help identify the supports needed.
- **Incentivizing participation.** In addition, whenever possible, it is essential to provide stipends or gift cards to ensure that parents can participate fully in their roles. Being compensated for their knowledge and experience is an important demonstration of their valued role and encourages sustained participation. Funding sources may include grants, donations, and Title I and Title IV funds.
- **Improving authentic engagement opportunities.** Some parents express frustration that advisory councils can function more as symbolic gestures rather than being genuinely included in decision-making or goals. Panelists shared strategies to address this within the design of councils, such as having parent members serve as co-creators and collaborators, helping shape council agendas, and even leading council meetings.
- **Focal issues.** Parent advisory work often centers on key challenges in the community, such as access to transportation or school choice. These discussions present opportunities for parents to become leaders, learn how to navigate systems, communicate effectively, and engage with governance processes.
- **Connecting with existing structures.** Councils such as the Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council and the Title I Family Advisory Council can play key roles in shaping policy and practice when intentionally supported and clearly connected to decision-making structures.



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Tracks: Research and
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Parent Advisory Councils: Elevating Family Voice and Leadership in Education

Key Takeaways (continued):

- **Guarding independence.** In some systems, advisory councils risk becoming extensions of leadership rather than independent partners. Efforts to “depoliticize” councils and empower families as advocates strengthen their credibility and impact.
- **Recommended practices.** Effective councils maintain open communication, develop families’ advocacy and leadership skills, help them understand policy and funding decisions, and create dual capacity with both the practitioners and parents serving on the panel.



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 5 Highlights | Tuesday, November 4

Presenters:

Dr. Emily Markovich
Morris – Project
Director, Center for
Universal Education,
Brookings Institution

Richaa Hoysala – Senior
Research Analyst,
Center for Universal
Education, Brookings
Institution

Track: Family
Engagement; Research
and Evaluation

A Trust Pulse Check—Tools and Strategies to Foster Trust Between Families, Students, and Schools

Dr. Morris introduced the Trust Pulse Check, a practical framework and set of tools for strengthening relational trust among educators, families, and students. Summarizing a six-year, 20-country global research collaborative focused on relational trust in schools, Morris outlined why trust is essential for family-school partnerships, along with the seven elements that collectively shape relational trust. She shared findings from “pulse check” studies showing that families and students generally report high trust in educators; conversely, educators often indicate lower trust in families, particularly around perceived follow-through and communication. The session provided practical strategies for improving these relationships—such as empathy interviews, feedback loops, shared vision-building, and culturally responsive communication—and emphasized the need for systems-level commitment to embed trust-building practices in everyday school routines.

Key Takeaways:

- **Relational trust is foundational for family engagement and student success.** Research shows trust affects students’ sense of belonging, engagement, and persistence, and it also influences teacher retention and school improvement.
- **Trust is shaped by beliefs, decisions, and actions.** Families’ and teachers’ prior experiences with schooling strongly influence how they interpret school interactions, whether they choose to engage, and how they show up.
- **Seven elements of relational trust emerged from global research.** Dr. Morris highlighted common factors across countries and cultures - *Shared vision, culture of listening, respect, care, integrity, competence, and interactions/communication*. These elements make trust observable and measurable in daily practice.
- **Common gaps include integrity and follow-through.** Across countries, families and teachers noted that schools often collect input but do not close the feedback loop, which effectively reduces transparency and undermines trust.
- **Practical strategies can strengthen trust.** Examples include empathy interviews, student-centered home visits, two-way celebratory postcards, multilingual communication practices, community working groups, and tools such as the Conversation Starter and School Planning Rubric. Regularly using these practices with students and families led to stronger collaboration and student outcomes.
- **Educator and family perceptions of trust differ.** Pulse check data show families and students generally trust educators more than educators expect, while educators often perceive low family engagement as lack of care rather than barriers.
- **External factors shape trust ecosystems.** Transparency in decision-making, social media dynamics, policy debates, safety concerns, and community crises all influence family and educator confidence in schools.

“Trust changes everything—engagement, well-being, belonging, and whether children and families feel seen. Without it, nothing else moves forward.” -

Dr. Emily Markovich Morris



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 6 Highlights | Tuesday, November 4

Presenter:

Dr. Ivory Toldson,
Howard
University

Tracks: Research
and Evaluation

Possibility and Statistics: Discovering Hidden Family Strengths and Opportunities Through Asset-Based Data Approaches

This session introduced the Possibility and Statistics framework, a transformative approach that focuses on uncovering existing strengths, resilience factors, and untapped potential within families and communities. Participants learned practical methods for identifying “positive deviants”, or families succeeding against the odds, and how to use both quantitative metrics and qualitative narratives to amplify family assets. Dr. Toldson demonstrated how this human-centered approach to data can help practitioners design more effective, culturally responsive interventions that honor family wisdom and foster genuine partnership in supporting children’s success.

Key Takeaways:

- **From collecting deficits to assets.** The session points to the importance of moving data frameworks from being deficit-oriented (e.g., describing families via their risk factors), which limits our understanding and misses opportunities, to discovering family assets and possibilities.
- **Changing mindsets.** Breaking the cycle of a deficit mindset will involve a reframing of the data and shifting questions from deficit oriented like “why are these families struggling?” to strengths-based such as “how are some families thriving despite challenges?”
- **Possibilities over probabilities:** Reframing data from a lens of probability, which focuses on what is likely to happen based on past trends, to one of possibility, instead exploring what could happen if conditions change will several strategies including:
 - Shifting a focus from needs to asset mapping that outlines existing strengths and resilience within families and communities.
 - Honoring families’ funds of knowledge which is the practical knowledge and skills families have through their lived experiences.
 - Recognizing a community’s cultural wealth, or their cultural capital (such as having families from different backgrounds and language proficiencies).
- **Changing the traditional statistical paradigm.** Data mining should shift from inferential statistics to inquisitional statistics, where we more closely examine positive deviants and individual differences. By studying families or individuals that achieve despite challenges provide insights into resiliency characteristics.
- **Steps in applying a human-centered data framework** include:
 - Collecting good data- combine numbers with stories.
 - Humanize metrics- bring context and empathy into the data by talking to the people behind the numbers.
 - Reframe questions- investigate how institutions and context affect family success.
 - Thoughtful analysis- challenge deficit narratives.
 - Compassionate understanding- acknowledge the entire journey of families not just outcomes.
 - Leading with belief- approach policies and change with hope and commitment.



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 6 Highlights | Tuesday, November 4

Moderator:

Maddie Myers – Vice President,
Community Affairs Manager, PNC Bank

Panelists:

Barbara Cantisano – Literacy Program Manager, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

David Sisk – Senior Program Officer, National Center for Families Learning

Track: Family Engagement

Libraries as Catalysts for Family Learning: A Conversation with NCFL, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, and PNC Bank.

In this panel discussion, facilitator Maddie Myers guided a conversation with representatives from the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) on how libraries serve as modern hubs for family learning. Panelists described how cross-sector partnerships—particularly those between PNC Bank, NCFL, and local library systems—expand access to early literacy programs and strengthen families’ roles as co-learners. The dialogue showcased examples of bilingual programming, mobile outreach, and community-based strategies that connect families to resources, build trust, and foster a culture of lifelong learning.

Key Takeaways:

- **Grow Up Great.** PNC Bank’s signature early learning initiative has reached over 10 million children since 2004 by promoting school readiness through bilingual literacy materials, family workshops, and partnerships with libraries nationwide.
- **Far-reaching access.** The Charlotte Mecklenburg Library operates 21 branches and two mobile units, offering literacy and digital learning programs that reach over 400,000 children annually and serve as accessible community gathering spaces.
- **Co-design for better programs.** Through collaborations like *Learning Together* and *Miguel y Sus Amigos*, libraries and NCFL work to co-design family literacy programs that equip parents to be active participants in their children’s education.
- **Creative access:** The *Learning Together* program extends access to underserved areas through mobile library visits and bilingual sessions that integrate story time, play-based learning, and family coaching.
- **Sustainable focus:** Sustained, multi-year investment from PNC allows libraries to plan long-term, embed early literacy into broader family engagement strategies, and build consistent relationships with families
- **Libraries as community resource centers.** Libraries are evolving into comprehensive community learning centers—offering not only books but also digital literacy training, family workshops, and connections to essential resources.
- **Shared commitments.** The panel emphasized that successful partnerships depend on shared vision, trust, and commitment to family-centered approaches that meet families where they are—in language, culture, and geography.

“When you show up in a community, the community doesn’t want you ...for just that one year, then you leave, and nothing else happens... PNC [has] multi-year funding and ...allows us to do the work that we need to do... to build that trust.” – Barbara Cantisano



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 7 Highlights | Wednesday, November 5

Presenter:

Monica Dixon,
Search Institute

Tracks: Family
Leadership

Unboxed: Reimagining Family Engagement as a Co-Designed Experience

This highly interactive session explored a relationship-centered model that positions families as essential drivers of student belonging, engagement, and success. Drawing from rigorous research in relational trust, developmental science, and culturally responsive engagement, participants learned how to redesign their approach to family partnerships by focusing on what matters most: the quality of the relationship, rather than the quantity of involvement.

Key Takeaways:

- **Relationships are key.** Participants explored why relationships are the foundation for youth thriving, trust-building, and equitable systems and how to shift from transactional outreach to transformative partnership, especially with families often excluded by school systems.
- **5 C's framework:** Cultivating trust between organizations and families requires:
 - *Character:* The organization operates with integrity and honesty and parenting adults view the organization as trustworthy.
 - *Commonalities:* Parenting adults feel welcome as they engage with the organization because there are shared interests, backgrounds, cultures, and experiences.
 - *Consistency:* Communication and protocols are predictable and parenting adults know there will be clarity and follow-through in their engagement.
 - *Competence:* The work of the organization is high-quality and families believe engaging with the organization is purposeful.
 - *Connection:* Individuals within the organization intentionally exhibit respect and care toward families and opening communicate and families feel a sense of belonging.
- **Create a continuum of engagement options.** Activities that engage families fall on a continuum from lighter touches such as holding family event nights, asking for donations, and having families chaperone/volunteer, to higher impact activities such as family leadership workshops, parent advisory councils/shared governance. Communication can range from broad one-way approaches such as newsletters to more personalized two-way communication strategies such as personalized phone calls.
- **Strategies for building community trust.** Schedule community walks where staff learn about their families' communities by exploring the area together; hold community conversations; or simply walk together to create initial conversations and build relationships and trust.
- **Strategies for increasing family communication.** Build communication between staff and families: Ensure translators and translated materials are present; use asset-based approaches; train staff on creating listening sessions with families, clear communication, and co-creation methods allowing families to meaningfully engage.



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 7 Highlights | Wednesday, November 5

Presenters:

Jeff Fantine –
Executive Director,
National Coalition
for Literacy

Rachel McDonnell –
Director, Jobs for the
Future

Track: Research
and Evaluation;
Policy and Impact

Breaking Barriers to Adult Literacy Access—Insights from U.S. Adults with Low Literacy

This session shared findings from the *All In: Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network* research initiative, which investigated adult literacy awareness, access, and participation across the United States. Presenters discussed the scope of literacy challenges revealed by recent PIAAC data and explored how the *All In* study contributes to national understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives—policymakers, employers, and adult learners. The discussion highlighted systemic barriers that limit adults’ access to learning opportunities and the critical need for increased awareness, cross-sector collaboration, and flexible service delivery models.

Key Takeaways:

- **Rising literacy challenges:** National data show a growing share of U.S. adults struggle with literacy—rising from roughly 20% to 28% of the population, or about 60 million people.
- **Limited service reach:** Outcomes indicated fewer than 10% of adults with low literacy are currently served through formal adult education programs.
- **Policy gaps:** Surveys of policymakers reveal that most underestimate the extent of the literacy challenge and assume the U.S. is performing well compared to other nations. Few recognize that literacy rates have been steadily declining.
- **Employer awareness:** The study revealed that employers are more attuned to the issue and acknowledge its financial and productivity implications—estimating billions in annual revenue loss due to low literacy among workers—but many remain uncertain about actionable steps they can take.
- **Learner motivation and misconceptions:** Among 2,000 adults with low literacy surveyed, 94% wanted to improve their skills, but 80% knew little about available programs. More than half mistakenly believed adult education programs require payment.
- **Confidence and support matter:** Learners cited self-confidence and encouragement from family and peers as key factors that motivate enrollment and persistence.
- **Preferred learning formats:** Most adults expressed interest in online or hybrid options, emphasizing the need for flexibility and access beyond physical classroom settings.
- **Family connection:** Study findings showed that parents were particularly motivated to improve literacy to better support their children’s learning—reinforcing the link between adult education and family engagement.
- **A need for advocacy:** Participants urged the field to raise public awareness of adult education, reduce stigma, explore innovative delivery models (including adult charter schools), and advocate for system-level funding and policy reform to expand equitable access.

“Children of parents with low literacy have a 72% chance of experiencing low literacy themselves and are more likely to live in poverty.”

– Jeff Fantine



CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Concurrent Session 7 Highlights | Wednesday, November 5

Moderator:

Nancy Cable –
Executive Director,
William R. Kenan, Jr.
Charitable Trust

Panelists:

Ricky Hurtado –
Z. Smith Reynolds
Foundation

Sally McCrady –
PNC Foundation

John Denning –
John M. Belk
Endowment

Track: Policy and
Impact

From Insights to Impact—Philanthropy’s Evolving Role in Education and Family Engagement and Learning

This panel explored the evolving role of philanthropy in strengthening educational opportunity, family engagement, and community well-being during a period of financial instability and federal rescissions. Nancy Cable guided a discussion with three foundation leaders who described how their organizations approach systems change, balance long-term commitments with crisis responsiveness, and sustain partnerships with nonprofits amid growing need. Panelists emphasized the importance of relationships, trust, and advocacy in navigating today’s funding challenges while ensuring that philanthropic investments continue to generate impact at the community level.

Key Takeaways:

- **Philanthropy in context:** Panelists acknowledged the difficult landscape shaped by reduced federal and state funding, requiring foundations to be both responsive to immediate needs and strategic about long-term systems change.
- **Systems-level focus:** Hurtado emphasized that progress is rarely linear; real change occurs when relationships, timing, and community leadership align. His foundation prioritizes coalition building and advocacy to strengthen early care, education, and equity initiatives statewide.
- **Corporate philanthropy:** McCrady described PNC Foundation’s 20-year focus on early childhood education through *Grow Up Great*, which combines corporate giving, employee volunteerism (40 hours of paid time off annually), advocacy, and parent engagement programs. Despite progress, access remains uneven, underscoring the need for sustained collaboration.
- **Education and workforce alignment:** Denning shared how the John M. Belk Endowment promotes alignment among K–12, higher education, and workforce systems. Its three pillars—access, completion, and workforce relevance—support educational pathways that lead to family-sustaining careers.
- **Emerging priorities:** Cable noted that the Kenan Trust’s work has expanded from educational attainment to include wraparound supports such as affordable housing, given its strong correlation with student success and family stability.
- **Challenges and resilience:** Regarding North Carolina in particular, all panelists noted the strain caused by State budget impasses and federal clawbacks, which have forced many nonprofits to close programs or reduce staff. Funders are striving to remain steady partners while maintaining their fiscal responsibility.
- **Collaboration and advocacy:** Speakers agreed that community storytelling and coalition advocacy approaches are critical for influencing policymakers and preserving funding for education and family engagement initiatives.



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Track: Policy and
Impact

From Insights to Impact—Philanthropy’s Evolving Role in Education and Family Engagement and Learning

Key Takeaways (continued):

- **Promising practices:** Examples included PNC’s *Buzzword Pittsburgh* collaborative, which links museums, libraries, and family centers to expand children’s vocabulary through shared learning experiences; Belk’s *My Future NC*, a statewide partnership aligning education and workforce sectors; and, from the Reynold’s Foundation, Hurtado highlighted their strategy for “building the public will” with grant partners that involves creating coalitions, such as Western North Carolina Early Childhood Coalition, focused on ensuring policy makers understand the challenges in their communities.
- **Practical funding advice:** Building authentic relationships with foundations, understanding each foundation’s history and mission, tailoring proposals to *their* strategic priorities, and clearly demonstrating (and defining) your impact were cited as the most effective ways to secure grants. Foundations value concise storytelling supported by credible data and evidence of community connection. Panelists also emphasized the critical step of “doing your homework” to fully understand their focus areas and assess the fit between your organization and the foundation.

“In terms of early childhood education, ... when you looked at all the research ..., what it means to a child's lifetime trajectory to have access to high quality early childhood education, we became convinced that this was the place for us to focus.”
- Sally McCrady

“Our work is really essentially based on a belief that ... as more people acquire more skills and knowledge, it allows them to be more successful in businesses ...and in their lives.”
- John Denning

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