

Village East Community School and RISE Colorado
A Parent and Community Engagement Case Study

Grades

K-5

District

Cherry Creek School District
Non-Charter

Location

Aurora, Colorado

Student Demographics

777 Total Students

33% Hispanic/LatinX

36% Black

18% White

6% Asian

7% Two or More Races

<1% American Indian

<1% Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander

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Introduction

All equity-based frameworks presented at the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) Schools of Choice (SOC) Unit 2021 Equity Convening stress empowering and centering parents and communities in school design and improvement. These frameworks include Culturally Relevant-Sustaining Pedagogy (CR-S), Targeted Universalism (TU), and Culturally Relevant Trauma-Informed Care (CRTIC). The Center for Reinventing Public Education (2020) published a report on four grassroots social advocacy groups that supported Black and LatinX parents in achieving meaningful engagement during the pandemic. They proposed the question to schools and authorizers, “at a time when they are depending on parents to partner in their children’s education like never before, are they willing to give parents a real voice at the table?” (p.8). The advocacy groups are The Oakland REACH in Oakland, California; Parents Amplifying Voices in Education, or PAVE, in Washington D.C.; Kids First Chicago; and Parent Revolution in Los Angeles. The report provides implications for family-led policy that are useful to charter schools, authorizers, and other organizations: don’t wait for a crisis to develop relationships with families; help families navigate a complex system;



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create feedback loops with families; equip families with the skills and power to elevate their concerns and craft solutions (pg. 8).

RISE Colorado is a parent advocacy group that serves Aurora Public Schools and Cherry Creek School District in Colorado.

According to their website, RISE Colorado “runs one holistic program with three unique phases to educate, engage, and empower families. We work with low-income families, families of color, and refugee and immigrant communities to put those most impacted by the opportunity gap at the forefront of the movement for educational equity” (para. 1). RISE published a post-pandemic assessment titled *Our Stories, Our Time* (2020) that included the voices of over 1,000 families, most of whom are immigrants and refugees. Their findings confirmed the disproportional impact of the COVID19 pandemic on impacted communities they serve and rapidly responded with direct services and support, including rental payment, food, and health care access. The needs assessment also revealed that “RISE Family and Student Leaders want to have active involvement in ongoing planning and decision making efforts. This will ensure their voices are heard and centered, so their needs are met to ensure all students receive the excellent education they deserve” (pg. 12). Parent and family recommendations were synthesized into these

findings: create a welcoming and inclusive learning environment for students and families of color, create a robust communications plan centering on family and student voice, prepare teachers to support students experiencing trauma, and be ready to talk about race.

These recommendations are compelling as they evolved from family and community leaders sharing their voices through a culturally responsive feedback structure that included the hiring and mobilizing of a team of community navigators from the Bhutanese Nepali, Karen, Karenni, and Tigaru Communities. This aspect is imperative; communication structures need to remove barriers and promote access. Last, the RISE Colorado (2020) report provides a list of recommendations for collaboration and trust between districts/schools and families:

- Validate families’ lived experiences by listening to their stories and showing them they are cared for because families have been through A LOT during the pandemic.
- Provide holistic wrap-around services through community partnerships to support families with food, mental health, housing assistance, and direct cash.
- Shift mindsets and behaviors to recognize that

marginalized families of color are partners and experts in their children's education.

- Develop a network of community partners and trained family liaisons to support essential needs and connections to vital services.
- Trust students and families as experts and create space for honest communication and authentic collaboration. Co-create solutions with students and families to ensure that the education system transforms to address challenges and better meet the needs of all students (pg. 16).

These practices were utilized in the RISE Colorado and Village East Community School partnership in Aurora, Colorado. Their goal was to improve student outcomes through parent engagement.

Village East Community School Outcomes

Village East Community School (K-5) is the most culturally and linguistically diverse school in the CCSD; it serves Aurora, Colorado, a designated refugee resettlement community. Figure 1 displays the school's total enrollment over the past three years. It reveals that the overall enrollment dropped 10% during the 2020-2021 school year, with a significant loss in Kindergarten. Village East Community's enrollment is approximately 80% Black, LatinX, Asian, and multirace students.

Village East Community has struggled with student achievement data and is not performing comparably to other CCSD elementary schools; however, Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate overall improvement during the 2018-2019 school year. The school made achievement gains and met growth targets in most grades and content areas. 2019 CMAS achievement data reveals that Asian students are the highest performing students followed by White students, with slight gaps for Black and LatinX students in ELA and larger ones in math (Figure 4). Figure 5, however, displays that growth is more comparable across subgroups with the largest discrepancy between Black and White students in ELA growth (i.e., ten growth percentiles).

Figure 1. Village Academy Enrollment by Grade Level 2018-2021.

	2018-2019 Total Enrollment	2019-2020 Total Enrollment	2020-2021 Total Enrollment
K	143	141	111
1	135	130	123
2	114	129	111
3	142	117	121
4	118	139	105
5	116	115	126

From the Colorado Department of Education. Schoolview, Data Center.

<https://www.cde.state.co.us/schoolview>

Figure 2. Village East CMAS Achievement Results 2018 and 2019

Grade Level	2017-2018 Actual Achievement Proficiency		2018-2019 Achievement Proficiency Targets		2018-2019 Actual Achievement Proficiency	
	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math
3	21%	13%	26%	18%	20%	25%
4	22%	6%	27%	11%	30%	7%
5	29%	18%	34%	23%	31%	17%

*Red = No Growth, Yellow = Growth but Target Unmet, Green = Target Met

From the Colorado Department of Education. Schoolview, Data Center.

<https://www.cde.state.co.us/schoolview>

After receiving a state rating of “Improvement” for several years, Village East Community received a state rating of “Performance” on their 1-Year 2019 CDE School Performance Framework (SPF). This rating indicates that the school was on an upwards trend in improvement before the COVID19 pandemic. Village East Community School’s principal, Mia Robinson, led the community through unified improvement planning (UIP) (2021). The team determined some of the most pressing root causes of priority performance challenges to be teachers’ lack of understanding of childhood trauma and stress and an absence of culturally relevant teaching (pg. 1). The major improvement strategies (MIS) identified for the year are improving positive and equitable school culture and climate and strengthening school and parent relationships. The main vehicle of this MIS is the school’s partnership with RISE Colorado.

Figure 3. Village East CMAS Growth Results 2018 and 2019

Grade Level	2017-2018 Actual Median Growth Percentile		2018-2019 Median Growth Percentile Targets		2018-2019 Actual Median Growth Percentile	
	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math
4	32	30	37	35	58	37
5	37	44	42	49	53	47

*Red = No Growth, Yellow = Growth but Target Unmet, Green = Target Met
 From the Colorado Department of Education. Schoolview, Data Center.
<https://www.cde.state.co.us/schoolvie>

Figure 4. Village East CMAS Disaggregated Achievement 2019

Subject	Ethnicity	Student Growth Percentile (SGP) Count	Median Student Growth Percentile (MGP)
English Language Arts	American Indian or Alaska Native	N<20	-
	Asian	N<20	-
	Black	56	48
	Hispanic	72	57
	Two or More Races	N<20	-
	White	43	56
Math	American Indian or Alaska Native	N<20	-
	Asian	N<20	-
	Black	55	47
	Hispanic	72	38.5
	Two or More Races	N<20	-
	White	44	45.5

Figure 5. Village East CMAS Disaggregated Growth 2019

Subject	Ethnicity	Student Growth Percentile (SGP) Count	Median Student Growth Percentile (MGP)
English Language Arts	American Indian or Alaska Native	N<20	-
	Asian	N<20	-
	Black	56	48
	Hispanic	72	57
	Two or More Races	N<20	-
	White	43	56
Math	American Indian or Alaska Native	N<20	-
	Asian	N<20	-
	Black	55	47
	Hispanic	72	38.5
	Two or More Races	N<20	-
	White	44	45.5

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Findings: Parent and Community Engagement and Village East Community School

The goal of the Village East Community School and RISE Colorado engagement project was to connect the school with the community during the 2020-2021 school year when some families were opting for in-person instruction while others were opting for remote teaching. The pandemic caused Village East Community School to be, in Mia Robinson's words, "not a whole community," which drove an even greater need to focus on how students were received and heard (Chan & Zuckerberg Initiative, 2021, para. 8). Village East Community School and RISE Colorado designed and launched the RISE Together Recovery & Re-Entry Approach.

Staff collaborated to generate a survey for parents that mined feelings of connectedness, belonging, and being valued to begin the work. Questions were scanned for bias and cultural context, revised several times, and ultimately translated into several languages. Families were able to answer questions via a written survey or 1:1 phone call. Second, a group of 5th-grade leaders worked with staff to generate a similar student survey. School leadership used the data to Village East Community School's back-to-school plan.

Also, Village East Community School and RISE launched the RISE Family Engagement Program and the Power, Privilege, and Intersectionality Learning Series as part of the reentry and recovery approach. The Family Engagement Program offered two types of engagement avenues: Parent Opportunity Gap Night((POG) and Family Learning Nights (FLN). POGs engage families in conversations about the opportunity gap in public schooling (i.e., the disparity in access to quality schools many students experience). FLNs offer families guidance in supporting their children as learners. The Chan & Zuckerberg Initiative (2021) reported that " Village East Community School staff recorded a significant increase in parent participation between their first POG Night and the subsequent FLN: while 145 families logged on for the POG Night, 201 families signed up for the FLN" (para. 12). When schools engage in honest and open conversations with families and communities about the challenges and barriers in education, trust is built and engagement can deepen.

In addition to the culturally relevant survey of the community and POG and FL nights, a RISE Colorado School Partner met with the Village East Community School Parent Teacher Community Organization (PTCO) twice a month during the 2020-2021 school year. The first week of the month, the RISE partner would guide the parent engagement team in a skill-based activity. The second week of the month, the partner supported the parent engagement team in facilitating the entire staff through the same learning activity. Examples of learning activities are “asset mapping to explore businesses and places of worship/support in the community...and crafting Stories of Self and Stories of Us to connect/share with families” (Colorado Department of Education, 2020, para. 4). These practices built the cultural capital of staff while optimizing the assets and wisdom of the parent engagement team and RISE partnership. Overall, Village East Community School reported that parents surveyed felt more connected and felt like they had a more substantial purpose at the school after implementing the 2020-2021 recovery plan (Chan & Zuckerberg Initiative, 2021).

Village East Community School is continuing its commitment to deep community and family engagement, as evidenced in its 2021 UIP. For example, Village East Community School implements a family engagement program called Academic Parent and Teacher Teams (APTT) with all Kindergarten through Second Grade classrooms; parents and teachers met three times this year to discuss student growth and achievement. Also, the Family Literacy Program supports parents in language acquisition and practices to support learning at home.

Implications for Colorado Charter Schools

Enrollment at Village East Community School would have been even more impacted by the COVID19 pandemic if solid parent and community engagement strategies were not in place. Conclusions from this case study indicate that parents and community members should play co-creators in their children's education. Co-creation includes providing all parents explicit and relevant opportunities to engage, offer feedback, make decisions, lead, and govern.

- Partner with community organizations dedicated to racial equity and family advocacy; they can guide the organization through culturally relevant communication strategies, outreach, professional development, etc.
- Use culturally and linguistically responsive methods of collecting data and feedback from parents, students, and the community; use these methods (multilingual surveys, focus groups, and 1:1 phone calls) as an opportunity to listen deeply to the community.
- Use structures such as Village East Community School's (APTT, POGs, and FLNs) as alternatives to traditional Parent-Teacher Conferences, and guide teachers to have more authentic and

intimate connections with families to support student achievement.

- Build liberatory thinking in educators, transforming their assumptions and beliefs about their capacity, students, and families, including understanding where they currently fall on the cultural responsiveness continuum and where they want to land. Use tools that operationalize "liberatory thinking." It should be clear what biases, misconceptions, or ineffective practices the system needs to transform.
- Furthermore, schools are encouraged to use these tools for self-reflection and talent development.
- Augment School Accountability Committee (SAC) and designate cultural and community-specific SACs to focus on success and accountability for specific identities.
- Augment Board of Director (BoD) committees and provide Black, Indigenous, LatinX, Asian, and Middle Eastern community members and families the opportunity to review budgets, monitor curriculum for relevancy, etc.
- Create and develop robust leadership pipelines and partnerships in the community to hire and retain Black,

Indigenous, LatinX, Asian, and Middle Eastern teachers and leaders.

- Provide parents with opportunities to engage in equitable discourse about their students' experiences; use a specific conversation protocol to facilitate unbiased discussions.
- Provide parents with opportunities to partner in their children's learning, such as curriculum and content nights.
- Explicitly build teacher capacity in understanding the challenges and barriers Black, Indigenous, LatinX, Asian, and Middle Eastern students and families experience.

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