



Better Together:

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How inclusive design as a policy process impacts stakeholder understanding, ownership, and engagement in assessment and accountability innovation – Allen County, Kentucky Case Study

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INTRODUCTION



The school library was abuzz. Decked with red and blue party swag and littered with slices of sheet cake, the room quickly reached capacity with over 30 district leaders, educators, business and community leaders, students, and parents. They had gathered on a Tuesday afternoon in April to spend two and a half hours digging into data.

This was the scene at this research project's "Data Party," where we engaged a range of community stakeholders in participatory analysis of the data we had gathered on how Allen County Schools' (ACS) new assessment and accountability reforms were changing the relationship between the district and its community.

Since 2019, Allen County Schools has pursued a comprehensive effort to reorient systems of teaching and learning, assessment, and accountability to better prepare students to both follow their passions and improve the economic, social, and workforce challenges of the community. The district had made fundamental policy changes, such as defining graduation competencies in a Profile of a Patriot, and

"I wish all of our legislators could see this work because I think it would change their mind about assessment... that it is not a test score that defines [our students], but it's the work like this.... I would want them to see this work and to understand that it's for all students.

At all levels, all students."

– Teacher, Allen County-Scottsville High School

were shifting toward more hands-on, real-world, project-based learning and performance-based assessment in every classroom to help students attain the competencies. ACS was also beginning to change the landscape of accountability, using the competencies for student-level accountability and increasing transparency by building a public-facing dashboard that will include competency attainment other metrics important to the community.

What drew us to study ACS' reform effort, however, is the way the district has pursued systems change. Rather than pushing for change in a top-down manner driven by the Central Office, Superintendent Travis Hamby has sought to engage diverse stakeholders from the earliest stages of designing the Profile of a Patriot all the way through the design and implementation of shifts in practice, assessment, and accountability. He and his team intentionally sought input and created spaces in which students, teachers, administrators, families, and business and community members could co-create the reforms.

By pursuing systems change hand-in-hand with all those who are impacted by it, Superintendent Hamby hoped to create broad engagement and ownership of the

“We are having conversations with business owners and with industry leaders [about] wanting to prepare [students] for the workplace. ...It has really formed a great bond and partnership, and actually caused them to be involved more in our school. [They ask,] ‘How can we help? How can we be involved? What can we do?’”

– Central Office Staff, Allen County Schools

reforms. In doing so, he aimed to redefine “accountability” as a community-engaged process—shifting away from an externally-driven and punitive process and toward one that is reciprocal and marked by increased community participation and collaboration around academic progress.

Therefore, this project sought to uncover the relationship between ACS’ community-engaged process of systems change and its impact on community-facing outcomes such as engagement, satisfaction, trust, and ownership.

Our central research question was:

How are Allen County’s new assessment and accountability systems changing the relationship between the community and the district? Specifically:

A. Whose values, perspectives, and priorities are shaping the new learning, assessment, and accountability systems, and how are these perspectives included? And to what extent has the district included those historically held farthest from decision-making?

B. In what ways are community members becoming more active in contributing to vibrant student learning experiences (i.e. authentic, hands-on, deeper learning), and what can the district do to encourage greater engagement?

C. What is the impact of working collaboratively with stakeholders to design and steward these systems? Does it lead to better understanding, satisfaction, trust, and ownership?

Adding texture to our central question, a team of six ACS high school students formed a Youth Research Team for this project and pursued two related questions most relevant to their lived experiences:

1. What is the quality (how good) and equality (how widespread) of hands-on learning in Allen Co.-Scottsville HS school?
2. How does the quality of student-teacher relationships impact students’ learning experiences in Allen Co.-Scottsville High School?



Significance

These questions are relevant to any policymakers and education leaders seeking to create long-lasting and impactful education reform, including but not limited to assessment and accountability reform. It is well documented that reforms not co-created with local expertise risk being dismissed locally as “another fad that soon will pass,” resulting in minimum compliance with the reform rather than the internal ownership that is a necessary component of transformation at scale (e.g., Coburn, 2003; Morel et al., 2019). Therefore, other leaders can learn from what Allen County Schools has done well, and from their growing pains, in their efforts to achieve broad reform ownership and buy-in.

In addition, scholarship examining the intersection of education policy and equity shows how often a privileged group of powerful actors can “influence education without democratic input or accountability,” threatening equity (Hernandez 2020). Thus, education reforms that are not designed hand-in-hand with currently and historically underserved or oppressed groups run the risk of continuing the cycle of harm. In today’s changing landscape of federal accountability and oversight, lessons on how to bolster equity by co-creating policies with historically marginalized groups are paramount.

Lastly, in the current climate of political and

sociocultural divisiveness, policymakers need to understand what leadership actions can help reframe accountability away from a top-down compliance exercise that happens because of distrust; and toward a community-engaged process that builds trust.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Allen County Schools is a public school district in rural south-central Kentucky that educates approximately 3,000 students annually in five schools:

- Allen County Primary Center (ACPC), Pre-K through 3rd grade
- Allen County Intermediate Center (ACIC), 4th-6th grade
- James E. Bazzell Middle School (JEBMS), 7th-8th grade
- Allen County-Scottsville High School (ACSHS), 9th-12th grade
- Patriot Academy, a K-12th grade alternative school

ACS enrollment by race/ethnicity is roughly 90% white, 5% Hispanic/Latino, 3% two or more races, 1% Black or African American, and less than 1% of all other categories. Nearly two-thirds of the student body are classified as economically disadvantaged. Roughly one



in five students has a learning disability for which they receive an Individualized Education Plan. In 2024, 9% of high school graduates transitioned to college, just half the statewide average of 18% (Kentucky Department of Education, n.p.). Most ACSHS graduates transition directly to the workplace or some work-school combination.

In 2019, the Allen County school board named student-centered learning as a priority. Previously, the district had implemented some student-centered practices such as the workshop model for lessons popularized by Lucy Calkins, but as teachers who had been employed by the district back then told us, instruction was still predominantly whole-group lectures. The board was looking to re-engage students and hired Superintendent Travis Hamby, a leader with a bigger vision of student-centered learning through project-based learning and real-world application.

In January 2020, Superintendent Hamby brought together an initial visioning team including members of the board and other state and national leaders like the University of Kentucky Center for Next Generation Leadership. They decided that the district should begin by rethinking the skills that students really need to be successful in the modern global economy.

Rather than making key decisions behind closed doors, Superintendent Hamby recognized that top-down structural changes like mandating new graduation requirements or accountability metrics would not be enough to achieve their vision. Rethinking student outcomes and school design would require deeper shifts in how people understand the purpose of school and their role within it. Lasting change would require early and broad community engagement.

Despite the challenges of the ensuing COVID-19 pandemic, Hamby and his team led a community-engaged process to understand how the school system needed to change so that it could more fully develop the skills and dispositions students need to pursue their interests and address community needs. They went into the community to host multiple viewings of the movie *Most Likely to Succeed* and engaged students, parents, educators, and business and community leaders in conversation about what skills matter most. These efforts and subsequent rounds of community-engaged revision led to the development of:

- a Profile of a Patriot, defining the knowledge and skills (“competencies”) that all ACS graduates should attain,
- a Learner-Centered Instructional Model, articulating the kinds of classroom- and school-based experiences needed to help students develop the competencies listed in the Profile of a Patriot, and
- Success criteria, defining what mastery of each competency looks like (Allen County Schools, n.p.).

In 2022, just as this work was taking off, Allen County had the opportunity to join a larger statewide school reform effort called United We Learn. Launched by the Kentucky Department of Education, United We Learn aimed to engage local districts alongside state policymakers, national experts, and a coalition representing diverse Kentucky stakeholders to design a new model for state assessment and accountability (see [Appendix C: Background and Significance](#)). As part of this statewide initiative, ACS joined a community of practice with 17 other Kentucky districts serving as Local Laboratories of Learning (L3). L3 districts received training from the Center for Innovation in Education in our process of Inclusive Design using habits of inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity (Figure 1), and were tasked with engaging their own community stakeholders in inclusive design of local assessment and accountability models. Since ACS was already engaging its community around student-centered reforms, joining the inaugural L3 cohort presented an opportunity to influence broader systems change while supporting local work through technical assistance and shared learning with a community of peers.

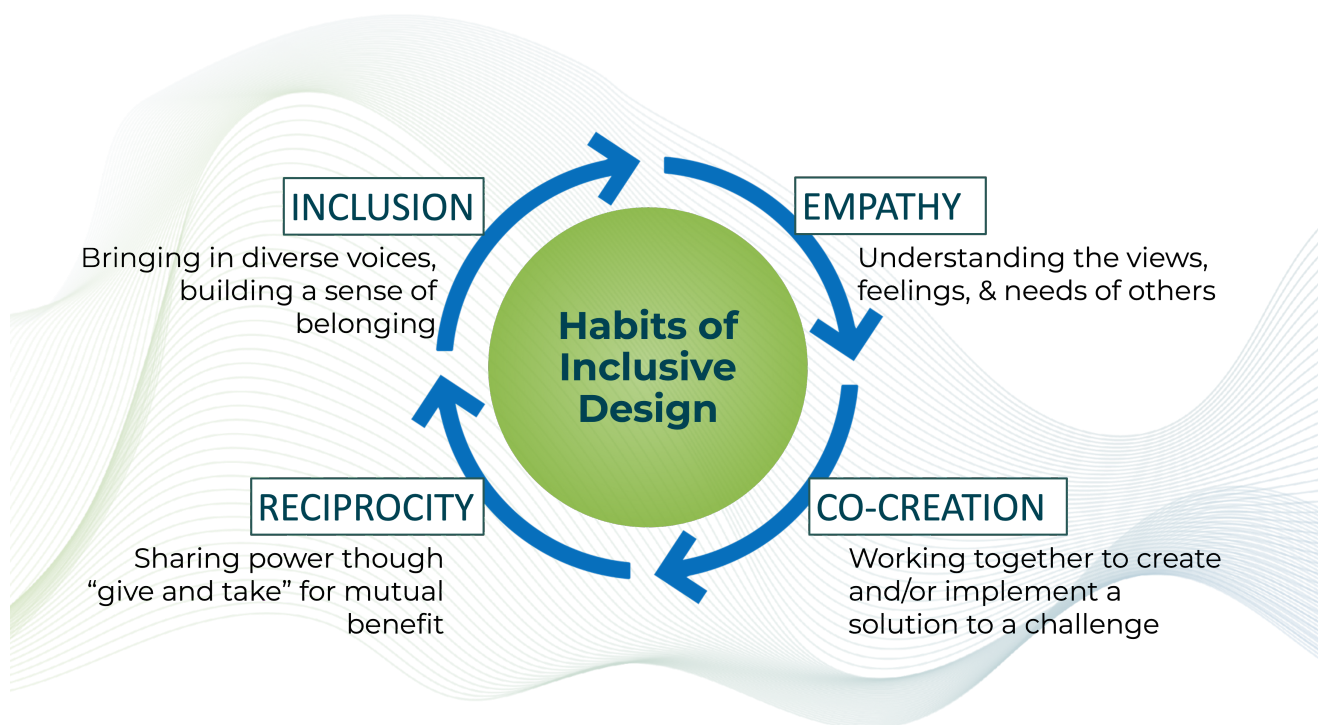


Figure 1. The Habits of Inclusive Design. (Center for Innovation in Education, n.p.)

Among other examples, Hamby and his leadership team embedded the 4 Habits of Inclusive Design in their L3 work in the following ways:

Inclusion: Hamby and his team identified diverse community voices that would be important to include in the reform effort. They recruited members to join an L3 coalition through a mix of district appointments, an open application, and by sending cold-call invitations targeting stakeholders such as parents, students, and low-income families who are least likely to have been involved in district activities in the past. As a result, the L3 coalition launched with 30 members, including teachers, families, community members, business leaders, and students.

Empathy: L3 coalition members conducted “empathy interviews” (CIE, 2025) with over 70 stakeholders in the community, targeting underrepresented groups, students, higher education faculty, and local government officials. They sought to understand how different individuals experienced testing and accountability in the district and

what are their common pain points. The interviews surfaced one pressing question that still needed solving: ACS had named new graduation expectations and prioritized student-centered classroom experiences, but how can they measure whether students are attaining the competencies, and how can they tell families and the community how well students are doing? This insight formed the basis of subsequent systems design.

Co-Creation: Through further discussions and design-based activities like storyboarding, the L3 coalition and the ACS leadership team worked together to prototype solutions to the challenges of measuring and reporting student progress on the Profile of a Patriot competencies. They identified universal project-based learning, common performance assessments, and a community-facing accountability dashboard as key goals for their L3 work.

Reciprocity: ACS leadership continued to engage the L3 coalition and additional stakeholders in ongoing feedback loops and cycles of Plan-Do-Study-Act as they developed

prototypes, including a set of end-of-year public exhibitions and defenses of learning through which students demonstrate mastery of Profile of a Patriot competencies, prioritized by grade span.

By the 2024-2025 school year when our study took place, every teacher had received training from PBLWorks in designing and administering “gold standard” project-based learning, every classroom was expected to do at least one performance-based assessment per year, and every school hosted at least one exhibition of learning in which students showcased their learning and Profile competencies in a public format open to the community. In grades K-6, every student prepared an exhibition, whereas public exhibitions were elective in the middle and high schools (although both schools are working toward greater uptake). The high school was also in its second year of implementing portfolios and requiring all seniors to complete a portfolio defense to a panel of educators and members of the broader community.

While the district initially focused on changing classroom practices and developing high-quality performance assessments, shifts in accountability were also underway. Through the culminating exhibitions and portfolio reviews, the Profile of a Patriot was already influencing accountability at the student level. The district was also transforming public reporting by engaging the L3 coalition to help articulate a common set of public-facing data related to the Profile of a Patriot. At the time of the writing of this report, ACS has contracted a data visualization partner to create a dashboard of publicly-facing metrics that matter, and was in the process of gathering feedback from the community. And while performance assessments of the competencies were not yet informing school-level accountability, the district is intently focused on improving assessment quality so that accountability at the school and district level could be reoriented around the competencies as well.

Most importantly, according to Hamby, the district is committed to reframing

accountability from a punitive system designed to expose failure to a system in which the district and its community are engaged in reciprocal conversations about progress and share next steps to drive continuous improvement. This requires having an education system that is oriented around outcomes that matter most to the community, and having mechanisms to bring the community in to see what’s happening and energize them. It also means creating space for different stakeholders to share their perspectives and for everyone to find a way to contribute to shared goals. Thus, Hamby believes that *how* the system is designed, implemented, and continuously monitored matters as much as the design itself.

“The L3 coalition launched with 30 members, including teachers, families, community members, business leaders, and students.”

METHODS

To answer our research questions, the research team collected quantitative and qualitative data during the 2024-2025 school year using multiple methods, including:

- Interviews and focus groups with 34 adult stakeholders including teachers, administrators, instructional coaches, district leadership team members, and business and community leaders;
- A survey administered to 330 parents and caretakers of current students;
- SenseMaker, an online tool through which we gathered 63 “micro-narratives” (short anecdotes about personal experiences) from various stakeholders (district leaders, educators, parents, students, and community members) and asked follow-up questions related to our research questions and hypotheses, and
- Youth participatory action research, which was led by a team of 6 ACS high school students and included surveys and interviews with high school students and teachers.

We briefly describe our methods and sample below, and in greater detail in [Appendix B](#).

Qualitative Methods and SenseMaker

Focus groups were primarily conducted in-person in role-alike groups (such as teachers, administrators and coaches, and business and community leaders, respectively), while one-on-one interviews were conducted online over Zoom. Focus group and interview protocols were derived from our research questions and asked about the roles individuals played in the development of ACS’ reforms, their perceptions of how others were included or involved, their perceptions of how the reform effort is going, and what impact the work is having on how people think or talk about the district.

SenseMaker was primarily conducted by engaging participants on the online platform while providing in-person technical support as needed. Participants were given the option

to type or record an audio response to the prompt:

“In 2-3 sentences, please tell us about a memorable moment or interaction you personally experienced (positive or negative) that is related to Allen County Schools’ efforts to create hands-on, real-world learning opportunities, exhibitions of learning, or a data dashboard. In that one moment or interaction, what happened, and what made it memorable?”

After sharing their story, SenseMaker respondents were asked follow-up questions designed to probe how constructs related to our research hypotheses (like inclusion, empathy, co-creation, reciprocity, trust, satisfaction, or ownership) show up in their story. Lastly, respondents answer demographic questions to help index the data and ensure sample representation.

For our qualitative methods, we selectively recruited stakeholders with direct experience designing or implementing ACS’ reforms. While not statistically representative of the full Allen County population, this approach prioritized relevance to our research questions. Broader representation was pursued through other instruments, including the Family Survey and surveys conducted by the Youth Research Team.

Family Survey

Family surveys were administered in-person to parents and caretakers who attended project-based learning exhibitions at the Primary Center, Intermediate Center, Middle School, and High School. Surveys were also disseminated to all ACS parents online using Parent Square, an online school communication system. Because several respondents reported having multiple children in the district, our survey sample represents a combined total of approximately 465 students, or 15% of the Allen County Schools student population.

Although we aimed for a family survey sample that is representative of the parent population in Allen County, we encountered some noteworthy limitations. We did achieve

racial representation: respondents were predominantly white with a small percentage of Hispanic/Latino respondents (4%), matching 2024 U.S. Census data for Allen County. However, we unintentionally oversampled females (corresponding to our observation that females were more likely to attend the school events at which we collected data) and parents of younger children (the Primary Center and Intermediate Center exhibition events boasted much greater family attendance compared to the events at the Middle and High Schools). Our sample is also not statistically representative of all ACS families eligible for free and reduced price lunch, although it is close (37% observed eligible compared to 44% actually eligible). Lastly, by oversight, we did not ask parents if their child receives Exceptional Child Education services, so we do not know whether our survey sample represents the actual population of students with special needs.

Youth Research Team

In addition to the methods above, a group of six ACS high school students participated in a Youth Research Team (YRT) supported by Dr. DiGiacomo. The YRT designed and conducted their own complementary study to the adult study, informed by youth participatory action research and consisting of a mixed method approach including surveys and interviews. The YRT surveyed 288 high school students (roughly one-third of the student body) and conducted 11 interviews with students (Kentucky Department of Education, n.p.). They also surveyed 40 high school teachers (roughly 75% of the teaching staff) and interviewed eight teachers. More information about the YRT methods and findings can be found in the complete YRT report in [Appendix A](#).



KEY FINDINGS

1. Collaboratively designing new systems of assessment and accountability with impacted stakeholders increases trust, satisfaction, and local ownership of reform.

Our analysis revealed that using Inclusive Design and its corresponding habits (inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity) to engage broad and diverse stakeholders in the design and implementation of assessment and accountability reforms results in greater levels of trust, satisfaction, and local ownership of the reforms.

a. District leaders intentionally included the perspectives of diverse stakeholders at several points throughout the design and implementation of the reforms.

Qualitative analysis of SenseMaker responses revealed that one-third of respondents shared positive stories about moments of inclusion—an impressive number since the prompt for stories was open-ended and did not explicitly ask for stories about inclusion. Of these stories about inclusion, two-thirds highlighted the inclusion of student voices and perspectives in shaping their learning experiences, and more than half described examples of community members' inclusion and engagement.

Across all SenseMaker stories, when asked who was included in the experience, the majority (60%) of respondents indicated that there were more “total newcomers” than “usual suspects” involved (Figure 2). This suggests that the district is reaching beyond its inner circle when involving people in the reforms.

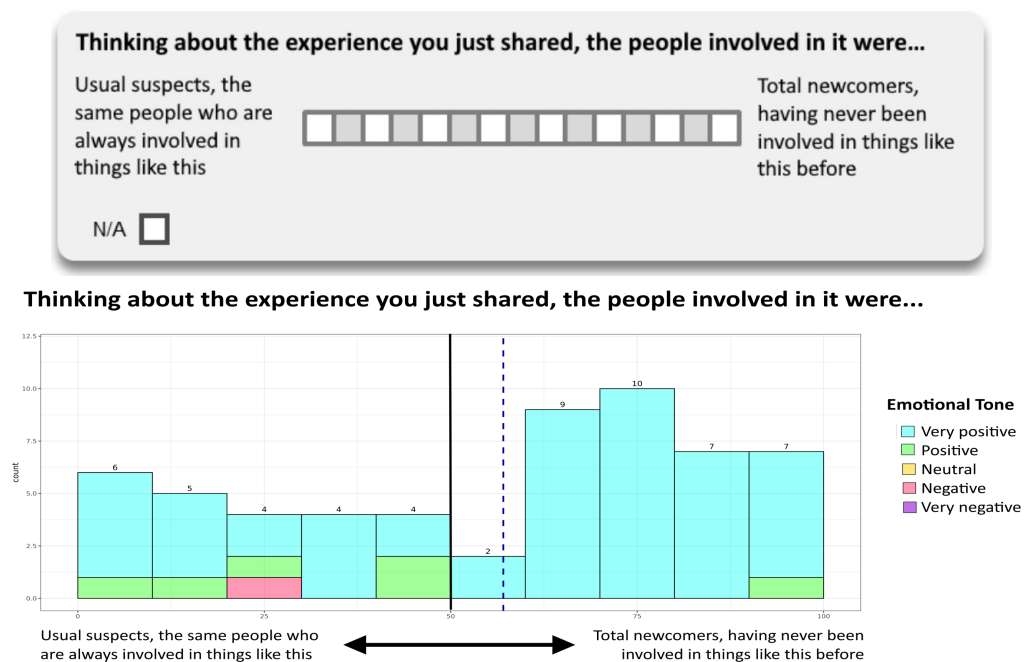


Figure 2. In the majority of all experiences shared through SenseMaker, the people involved were mostly “total newcomers.” N=58. Histogram counts represent how many stories were located in the corresponding region of the dyad scale. The closer the story was placed to the statement at either end, the stronger that statement is in the context of the story. Color indicates how respondents self-signified the emotional tone of their experience: blue=very positive, green=positive, yellow=neutral, red=negative, purple=very negative. The blue dotted line is the arithmetic mean.

In interviews, several members of Allen County's L3 coalition described various actions the district took to seek diverse, even hard-to-reach voices in designing the new systems. One teacher who was a member of the coalition described personally interviewing numerous stakeholders including administrators, support staff, teachers from every department, students, recent alumni, and even elected officials. She said, "That's what I have been most pleased about—that we didn't just choose to do this because a certain small group of 30 or 35 said, hey, this is what we should do. We really have included as many people as possible."

Similarly, local business leaders talked about how the district solicited feedback from both new and established businesses on what knowledge and skills graduates should possess, and how learning should shift to align with the changing workplace. Commenting on feeling included in these conversations, one business leader said they were "shown a lot of respect from members from different fields. That made me feel like I belonged."

Several teachers described the district's highly inclusive process for developing common criteria for performance assessments for Profile of a Patriot competencies, engaging not only teachers but also business community members and students in the design process. One teacher described it as a reciprocal process, noting that the district "took our opinions, and then they even brought it back to us to ask, 'does this match? Does this fit?'"

Several interviewees described intentional efforts taken by the L3 coalition to seek input from parents and caretakers, especially those at "the margins... the people we don't hear from." They described actions like hosting viewing parties of *Most Likely to Succeed* with families and community members to spark conversation; hosting a dinner at local restaurant; and conducting feedback sessions at the annual gift exchange with families needing assistance at the holidays. Some administrators noted that the schools frequently survey parents and ask for feedback during student exhibitions

of learning. An administrator and a teacher both shared examples of how parent input has helped the school improve their student exhibitions.

Representation of parent voices and values was corroborated by the Family Survey in which a remarkable 96% of parents and caretakers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "I feel that the district's goals and priorities match my personal goals and priorities for my child's education" (Figure 3)

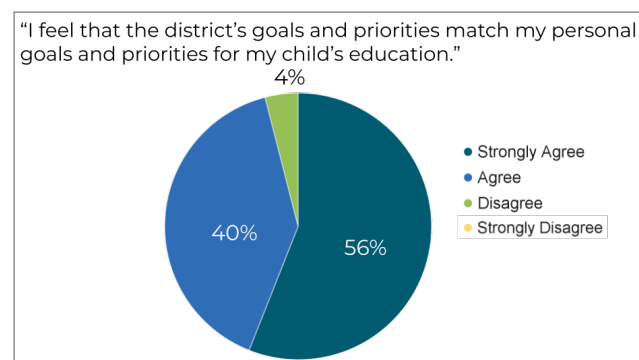


Figure 3. Overwhelmingly, parents feel the district's goals and priorities match their own. N=317

Taken together, we conclude that the district has taken substantial steps to include the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (students, family members, educators, and business and community leaders) when designing the assessment and accountability reforms.

b. Families, business leaders, and community members are becoming more aware of, and actively involved in, the education system.

One of Superintendent Hamby's overarching goals is to shift accountability from a state-driven punitive process to a community-engaged process, one marked by increased community participation and collaboration with the district around academic progress. Our research found early evidence that families, business, and community members are indeed becoming more aware of the reform effort and more actively engaged in it.

The majority of parents and caretakers who responded to the Family Survey had heard of ACS' Profile of a Patriot, and three-quarters said they were aware that ACS was trying to

bring more hands-on and real-world learning opportunities into its classrooms.

In interviews, numerous teachers, parents, and business and community members described concrete actions taken by the district, such as providing information, soliciting feedback, and forming active partnerships, that raised community awareness, involvement, and ownership.

Across the board, we heard that when business and community members were asked to participate in project-based learning, student exhibitions, and portfolio defenses, they showed up and were excited to be involved. One central office person summed it up, saying, “There is a willingness to participate. We have the mayor coming in next week... [and it took] just a phone call... I don’t think anybody’s told us no. We’ve gotten a judge, bailiffs... like, all right, let’s roll!” Several teachers indicated that because of this initiative, inviting community members into classrooms is “becoming more of the norm for teachers,” whereas many had never done so before.

Some interviewees saw heightened community awareness and participation as an initial step toward the kind of community-engaged accountability the Superintendent is driving toward. Aspiring to the high levels of engagement the community already has around school sports, one community leader said,

“What I think we have to work toward is letting the community feel that same level of ownership over the academic output, and over the pedagogy that occurs. And I think that as we continue to engage the community about more than, ‘hey, would you like to sponsor the football booster club?’ --and we instead turn that around to be, ‘hey, would you like to participate in a defense of learning?’... [We] really help everyone to have more ownership of the process.”

c. Among families, awareness and involvement were higher among some groups than others.

Although parents largely said they felt aligned with the district’s direction, we found that some groups of parents were more aware and involved than others.

Most parents who responded to our Family Survey felt they had a say in what happens in their schools. However, we found a significant difference in responses based on which schools their child attends. Whereas most parents with only younger children (i.e. parents whose children attend ACPC or ACIC only) felt they had a say in what happens at their schools, most parents with older children (i.e. those whose children attend JEBMS or ACSHS only) felt they did not have a say. Also, although the majority in both groups said they feel confident that ACS will provide a quality education for their child, parents of younger children were significantly more likely than parents of older children to feel this way.

When considering these differences at our Data Party, participants from the community mentioned that there is a prevailing sentiment that older kids should be more independent and that, as a result, parents of older students are less likely to proactively seek involvement. They also said that students’ and parents’ exposure to PBL and performance assessments is higher at the primary and intermediate schools (where all students are required to participate in an Exhibition of Learning) compared to the middle and high schools, where exhibitions are more often arranged by student interest or teacher invitation. And while senior defenses of learning are indeed required for all students, some parents commented that this is only a recent development and is therefore naturally experiencing growing pains.

Socioeconomic status also seemed to play a role in which families felt looped in. Compared to their higher-income counterparts, Family Survey respondents who said they were

eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch were significantly less informed: a minority (38%) of these families reported familiarity with the Profile of a Patriot (compared to 55% of non-FRL families) and fewer FRL eligible families knew about ACS' hands-on, real-world learning initiative. This finding mirrors well-documented, nationwide challenges in reaching low-socioeconomic households, and suggests that ACS should continue its intentional efforts to thoughtfully engage lower-income families. As one L3 Coalition member put it,

"It's going to take a while for parents and families who have historically been excluded from the conversation about expectations from their children's education. They're going to have to see those incremental changes as a result of their input. And I think as that happens, and as the staff in the schools continue to host these opportunities for conversations and for input, I think families are going to feel more empowered along the way."

d. Overwhelmingly, students, parents, teachers, and community members feel satisfied by the district's new direction and are committed to supporting it.

Parents

When asked to reflect on the direction the district has taken with its assessment and accountability reforms, a striking 93% of parents and caretakers said they felt confident that ACS will provide a quality education for their child. An equally noteworthy 92% said they felt personally committed to helping the district improve their schools.

While we can't directly compare these results to what might be "typical" in other districts, they nevertheless stand out compared to other national metrics such as parents' confidence in the public school teachers in their community (72% confident; PDK, 2022) and the general population's confidence

in American public schools (29% confident; Gallup, 2025). Even recent research by 50Can looking specifically at public school parents in small town or rural districts in Kentucky shows 76% were satisfied with the overall quality of education their child was receiving (50Can, 2024)— still not the nearly-uniform approval we recorded in Allen County.

Students

Students seem to share their parents' positive feelings about the district's shift toward hands-on, project-based learning. When surveyed by the YRT, the majority of high school students said they were aware of the shifts, and 4 out of 5 students offered positive comments about it (Figure 4). They also said PBL makes it easier for them to learn (86%), that it makes school more engaging (87%), and that it makes them more of a problem solver (85%). The minority of students who felt negatively about PBL gave reasons such as wanting more structure, feeling like PBL takes too much time, or simply preferring worksheets.

Younger students seem enthusiastic about the new direction, too, as reported by teachers and parents we interviewed.

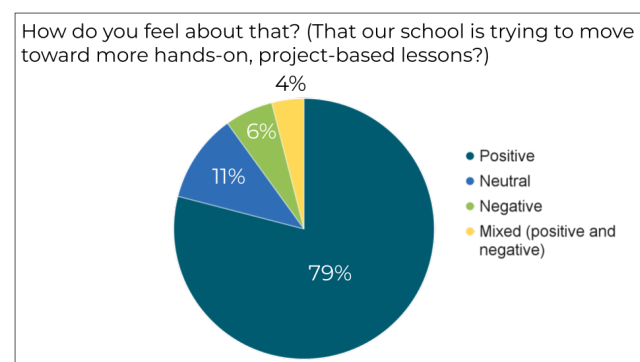


Figure 4. High school students feel positively about the district's shift to hands-on, project-based learning and assessments. n=259. "

The following anecdote, shared by a parent, is illustrative:

“I attended an exhibition night at the Allen County Primary Center. Darting ahead of my wife and me, my daughter ran into the gym, grabbed a bag of math manipulatives and could hardly contain her excitement as she began demonstrating her recent learning to us.”

Teachers

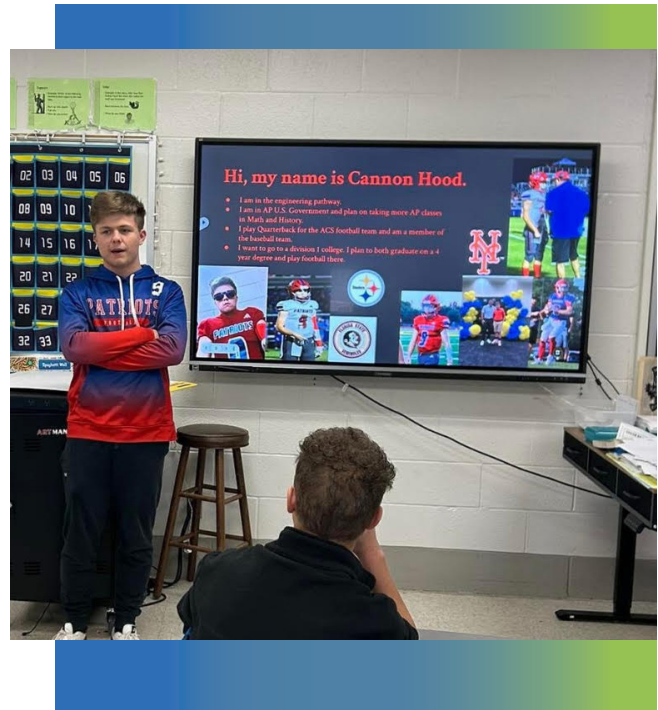
The majority of high school teachers also felt positively about the new direction, although a preference for project-based learning is stronger among career and technical education (CTE) and agricultural science teachers (92% prefer it) compared to teachers of core subjects (62% prefer it).

Several teachers we interviewed described experiencing personal and professional pride when seeing students present their learning at exhibitions and portfolio defenses - especially when they were students who had been struggling with traditionally teacher-driven instruction. One teacher, who is also a parent of an ACS student, said,

“I can see the difference in students. I can see that it reaches [students with learning disabilities], and it reaches my high achieving students, and it reaches my behavior and 504 kids. And so I can see the value in it.”

Community Members

Members of the broader community seem bought-in, too. One district staff member described receiving notes from local business leaders thanking them “for having this type of learning for the students.” Another interviewee told a story about a student receiving a job in a different town because the hiring manager saw he was from Allen County and appreciated the district’s emphasis on real-world learning and graduation competencies.



e. Positive community-facing outcomes are directly tied to the district’s inclusive design processes.

SenseMaker allowed us to draw direct comparisons between the district’s use of habits of inclusive design (inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity) and their impact on community-facing outcomes like trust and confidence, satisfaction, and ownership.

Overall, 82% of respondents shared about an experience or interaction with the district that they said led to an increase in at least one community-facing outcome, such as trust and confidence in the district, satisfaction with the district’s efforts, or sense of ownership or personal commitment to supporting district efforts.

When people shared about experiences that (according to them) included “total newcomers, people who have never been involved in things like this before,” they were significantly more likely to say the experience grew their trust and confidence in the district compared to experiences that only involved “usual suspects, the same people who are always involved in things like this.” In other words, trust and confidence increased as inclusion increased. The same statistically significant effect of inclusive practices was observed

Engaging stakeholders in co-creation was another habit of Inclusive Design for which we observed positive effects on community-facing outcomes. One in three SenseMaker respondents shared an experience that was primarily about people being “empowered” (Figure 6). These stories more often increased the respondent’s sense of ownership and personal commitment compared to stories in which people were primarily “informed” or “included” (89% positive impact for stories about empowerment compared to just 64% of all other stories). Thus, the more deeply people were involved in decision-making (a hallmark of co-creation), the greater their ownership and personal commitment to what was decided.

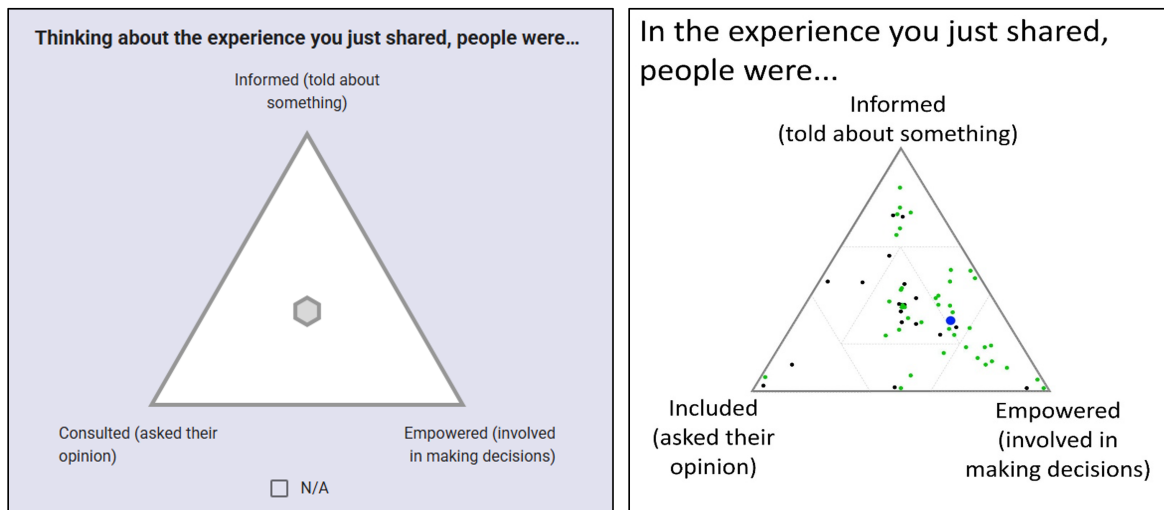


Figure 6. Stories in which people were involved in decision-making were more likely to increase the respondent’s sense of ownership and personal commitment than other stories. Each dot represents a story or experience shared by an individual. The closer the dot is to any corner, the more the respondent felt that description was true in the experience they shared. Green dots represent stories that increased the respondent’s sense of ownership and personal commitment to the district; black dots are stories that did not. The blue dot represents the geographic mean. n=61.

2. Systems change is long and complex, but it is bolstered by gaining buy-in and commitment from across stakeholder groups.

While evidencing widespread support for the district’s assessment and accountability reforms, our research also surfaced challenges and complexities commonly associated with systems change efforts. Even so, district’s attention to habits of inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity appear to be gaining levels of buy-in and commitment that will be necessary for growth and continuous improvement.

a. Educator mindsets and classroom practices are changing to support the new assessment and accountability model, but change at scale requires time, considerable investment in capacity-building, and alignment of policies and system structures.

While we found evidence that educator mindsets are changing to embrace the new reforms, we also observed that teacher support is not yet universal. Just two out of every five high school students said they experienced project-based learning in most of their classes—although students may have experienced it without realizing it. And even though almost all the high school teachers acknowledged that using PBL makes a difference in students’ participation and growth, nearly one in three still prefer a more traditional teaching style over the district’s new emphasis on PBL, especially among core content teachers.

Some core teachers expressed frustration with the amount of time PBL and performance assessments take up, both for planning and in class time taken away from teaching core content. Addressing a misperception that some teachers refuse to switch to PBL, one teacher said that perhaps they're not opposed to it, it's just that "they literally do not have the means to do it, because it takes so much extra time." An instructional coach noted, "One of the primary struggles with the teachers is [understanding], how does this standard connect to this [project or performance assessment]? And so then it ends up being an add-on. And then it fails."

Professional development and training have been key mechanisms for spreading adoption of PBL. Several administrators and some teachers described extensive professional development already underway, noting that every teacher in the district has participated in PBL trainings. At the same time, some teachers wanted even more access to professional development, while others yearned for more time to plan PBLs and to observe and collaborate with other teachers.

Administrators and coaches also noted the need for more training on how to align content standards with Profile of a Patriot competency development; how to design and score rigorous performance assessments; and how to help teachers (including CTE teachers) understand what high-quality, "gold standard" PBL looks like.

Still, we found early evidence that the district's attention to professional development and coaching is paying off, however slowly and steadily. For example, an instructional coach described being "blown away" when a teacher who had been struggling with PBL started using key terminology on their own, indicating a mindset shift. Another administrator acknowledged the step-wise nature of practice change, saying, "You have to get the excitement and the ownership of wanting to do PBL or a performance assessment [before] we can talk about rubrics and before we can assess."

We also identified structural barriers that hinder widespread adoption. Teachers pointed to misalignment between the reform and existing grading systems, transcripts, and state testing. One teacher urged the district to shift to mastery-based grading to improve alignment.

An administrator lamented the constraints of standardized testing, saying,

"After working with a group of teachers and applauding the work and effort they had put forth in implementing a PBL for their students, I was disheartened that they said they would be glad when it was over because they had a lot to 'cover' before testing."

Similarly, speaking about her daughter, one parent said,

"They also have to make the grades in the classes. My daughter said, 'Mom, this [defense of learning] is not on our transcript.' But the calculus that she's taking this year is. So why would a student want to do the defense of learning and spend a lot of time on it when they really still have to take that calculus test? That's stressful for them. It really is. We're not taking anything away from them. We're also not taking away the standardized tests. They're still living in two worlds."

Other teachers advocated for better overall coordination of school policies and schedules, so that teachers had sufficient time to plan PBLs and align them with core curricula; release time to observe other teachers' implementation of PBL; and the ability to keep track of when each class is implementing projects or performance assessments so as not to overload students.

b. The district's efforts at community engagement must continue reaching beyond the "usual suspects."

While several interviewees shared examples of business and community leaders becoming more aware of the district's reform effort and actively engaging in project-based learning and performance assessments, some noted that the same group of people tend to engage frequently, whereas other members of the community remain unaware and untapped.

Some business and community leaders attributed this gap to "growing pains," owed to the fact that the initiative is still relatively new. One said, "That's not anybody's fault. That's certainly not the school system's fault. But that's an ongoing effort that that we need to [keep up], to make more people aware of what we're doing."

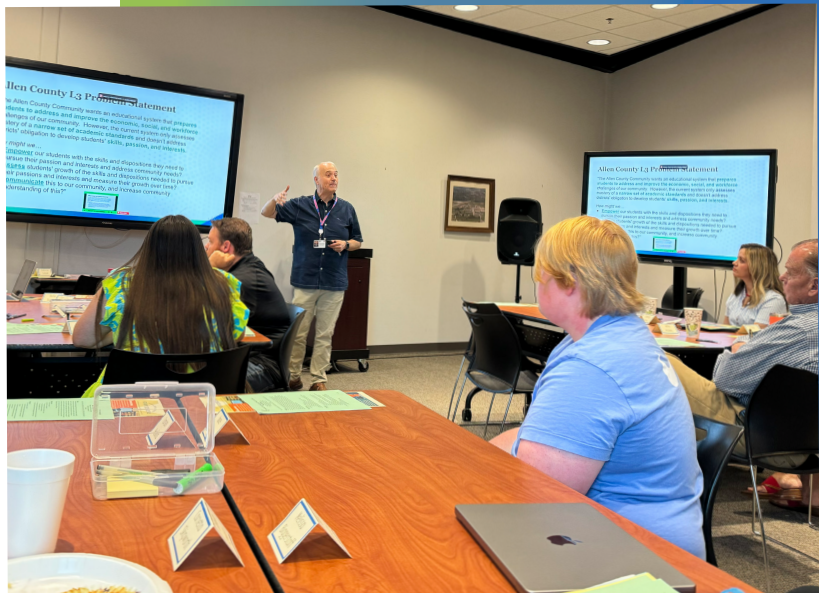
Another business leader pointed to the relatively small size of Allen County and encouraged the school system to reach into neighboring counties to support PBL.

Some teachers voiced a desire for more support to help them invite community members to participate in projects and performance assessments. One said that, for some teachers, doing so is intimidating and "a big deal." They suggested that the district could create a bank of community members to invite and encourage teachers to talk with their peers about who has been invited in the past.

When reflecting on how to broaden community engagement at the Data Party, several stakeholders suggested improving the content, format, and frequency of communications. Suggestions included:

- focusing on explaining why Allen County is pursuing this new direction;
- communicating about Profile of a Patriot results alongside (or as a counter-narrative to) press releases showing state testing results;
- leveraging social media and other communication channels; and
- increasing the number of times families and community members are invited to participate in projects and exhibitions, so that it more closely mimics community engagement in the athletics program.

Some members of the district's L3 Coalition also commented on a data dashboard they are currently creating to show progress on the Profile competencies. Not just available through the student portal, the dashboard will be open to the entire community to support ongoing conversations about whether the district is achieving the outcomes that the community has asked for.



c. Stakeholders who are included in the design and implementation of the new system are more likely to become champions and guardians, ensuring durability.

Even though the district still has work to do to expand teacher adoption and to engage the support of all families and community members in their reforms, there is early evidence that their intentional use of inclusive design is creating champions for the work that can help ensure its longevity.

Numerous stakeholders—teachers, administrators, district staff, parents, students, and business and community members—shared concrete examples of moments when they were included in the reform effort, experienced an “aha” moment, and subsequently became supporters. For example, several teachers voiced appreciation for being included in focus groups to design the new performance assessment system and have since committed themselves to supporting other teachers. Our own observations over the 18 months of this project showed that the stakeholders who had been involved as co-designers through the L3 project have continued to champion the work and actively engage in supporting it.

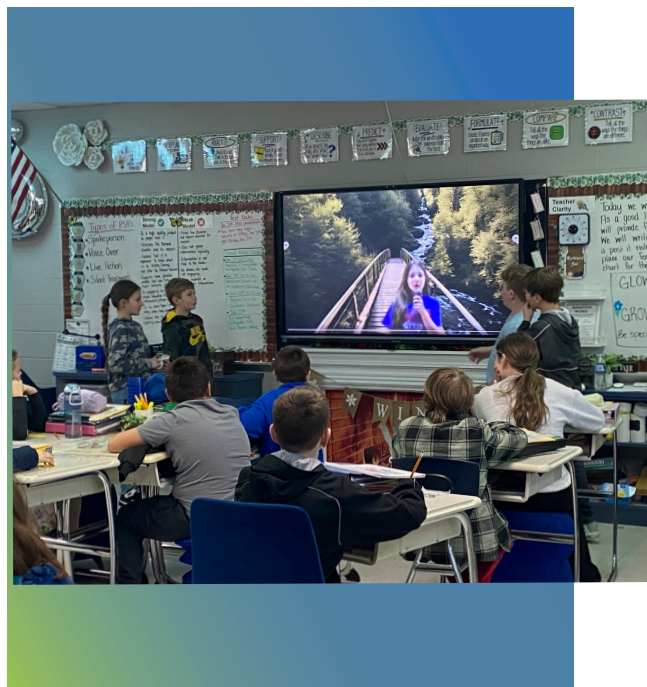
Some interviewees noted that participating in projects and performance assessments increased their support for the reforms because they could see the positive impact on students. One community member said that serving as a panelist for senior defenses of learning had “renewed my confidence that the work Allen County Schools is doing is working,” because they saw seniors who had previously struggled in their classes suddenly excel.

Students who have found success with PBL want to see it spread. For example, when they were asked why they joined the YRT, several of our student researchers acknowledged that not all of their classmates were experiencing high-quality PBL, and they wanted to help change that.

Of note, our data showed that even reluctant teachers are affected by the success of their students. One person described a pivotal

moment at a senior defense they attended:

“Both of the students [who presented] are students who have struggled with learning because of different reasons, but were able to articulate their learning of both math standard content and the durable skills they will need regardless of their postsecondary paths. The classroom teacher who led the students through this experience is one of the last teachers to buy into this work, but reached out to receive coaching around the work and then co-created vibrant learning experiences that students could speak about.”



3. The learner-centered nature of Allen County's reforms allowed community members to see and participate in the shifts in student learning, fostering buy-in.

The fact that ACS' reforms made learning visible through exhibitions and demonstrations, and that they invited families and community members to participate, helped raise awareness and understanding among a variety of stakeholders. Seeing shifts in student learning first-hand increased buy-in among students, teachers, and families.

a. The district's early effort to define graduation competencies was foundational to helping stakeholders understand and support the assessment and accountability reforms.

From the outset, the district prioritized a community-wide effort to define the competencies necessary for graduation, anchoring the reforms in shared values and expectations. Captured in the Profile of a Patriot, the competencies represent outcomes that matter most to the community, a set of expectations that is collectively owned.

Our interviews and SenseMaker responses surfaced examples of teachers, students, and parents using the language of the competencies to describe student learning. For example, one parent shared,

"My daughter recently presented her recycling project at showcase night. She was excited to share her learning of the content, but she was also able to explain how being an accountable collaborator and effective communicator made her project more successful."

Another parent invoked the competencies when describing their son's exhibition of learning on the topic of civil injustice. The parent said, "His ability to communicate his defense clearly and incorporate the various pieces of the profile was remarkable. He had a clear understanding of communication,

collaboration, global citizenship, problem solving, and resilience." These examples show that the competencies are foundational to how students and parents understand the ultimate purpose of ACS' reforms.

Some people went so far as to suggest that the competencies gave students and teachers a renewed sense of purpose. One teacher commented,

"To hear your kid that struggled when you had them as a freshman or a sophomore... and then they found what they loved, and now you've given them a chance to stand on the stage and share about what they've learned—that makes all the difference, because no longer is that child just a test score. You're seeing the child holistically and they are telling you what they have learned. And they know those competencies. They would say, 'I'm an accountable collaborator and here's why.' ... To me That's a win."

While we found broad enthusiasm for the competencies, we also surfaced growth areas where understanding and implementation of the competencies was not universal. One instructional coach said they hoped that one day, using the language of the competencies would "just be natural, like kids should be able to articulate it as well as the adults." They said that currently, understanding among teachers and students "isn't as deep as I would like it to be."

Teachers and administrators noted ongoing work to deepen students' and teachers' understanding of the competencies. One teacher noted that, for example, some teachers "don't really know what it means to be a resilient learner by [our] standards. They have their own definition, but it may not necessarily match up to what we're asking them to demonstrate." As we noted previously in Finding 2.a., ongoing professional development and training is a key strategy ACS is employing to deepen educator capacity for these reforms.

To further reinforce the competencies and increase transparency, the district is building a public-facing dashboard. As a member of the central office described it, the dashboard will exist outside the parent portal so that anyone in the community can view the district's progress. It will show things like the number and percentages of students that mastered each competency, at each grade level and building. That way, "we can provide clarity on how we're achieving those [competencies]," they said.

b. Project-based learning and performance assessments were key vehicles for parent and community inclusion and collaboration.

Project-based learning and performance assessments have emerged as powerful mechanisms for fostering authentic inclusion and collaboration between schools and the broader Allen County community. These approaches position students not only as learners, but also as contributors to public discourse—inviting families and community members into the learning process in meaningful and memorable ways. By showcasing student work in public forums and emphasizing real-world application, these practices help bridge the gap between classroom experiences and community values.

Our research team observed first-hand the high level of family engagement during the student exhibitions and demonstrations of learning we attended at the Intermediate Center and Primary Center, respectively.

Both were attended by hundreds of families. In fact, Primary Center had nearly 600 adult attendees even after a last-minute date change due to inclement weather.

A story captured through SenseMaker further highlights the depth of parent engagement in PBL and student exhibitions. One school staff member recounted a moment during Showcase Night when a mother, pushing a stroller, rushed into the building just as the event was ending. She exclaimed, "I'm so sorry I was late, but I HAD to come. My daughter has been talking about her project for weeks now and I promised her I wouldn't miss it." Her urgency and commitment underscore the emotional significance these performances hold—not only for students, but for families who feel invested in and connected to their children's learning journeys.

This level of participation reflects more than simple attendance; it signals a shift toward shared responsibility and mutual investment in student success. By making student learning visible and celebratory, project-based learning and performance assessments create recurring opportunities for families to engage, contribute, and affirm the value of what their children are learning and becoming.



c. The reforms scaled, in part, by making the shifts in teaching and learning visible and desirable.

Because project-based learning and performance assessments began as a voluntary practice change piloted by a subset of teachers, making the work visible through student demonstrations and exhibitions of learning became an important lever in scaling the reforms district-wide. These public displays of learning allowed a broad audience—including families, educators, and community partners—to witness firsthand how students are engaging with and applying the district's graduate competencies. The visible pride, creativity, and depth of student work serve as powerful testaments to the impact of the new system, helping to shift mindsets and deepen understanding among stakeholders.

A parent reflected, "I am always so touched at the amount of pride and effort students put into the products. I think this passion then is transferred to parents because they see how happy and proud their students are." This emotional connection not only validates the learning process for students and families, but also builds community-wide support. Similarly, a story from an educator highlighted how a previously resistant teacher experienced a turning point after observing the quality of student presentations: "It was a true light bulb moment for this educator!" These moments of realization reinforce the relevance and power of performance-based assessments as both instructional tools and community engagement strategies.

Community participation further strengthens this scaling effect. As one respondent shared, "It has been exciting to see community leaders share in this experience and become excited about what they see in their future employees." By involving local leaders in student defenses and exhibitions, the district is cultivating new advocates and champions for the work. These experiences demonstrate that the reforms are not only advancing student learning, but also building bridges across classrooms, families, and the broader community.

d. The district can improve stakeholder understanding and ownership of the reforms through more accessible and consistent communication.

A key opportunity for growth in Allen County's assessment and accountability reform lies in more clearly articulating and communicating the rationale—the "why"—behind the changes taking place, and also how various initiatives are connected. While community members have expressed broad support for the district's efforts, there is less clarity around the specific language and structures that have emerged as part of the system's redesign. For instance, although families enthusiastically attend public exhibitions of learning, terms such as "competencies," "defenses," and even "exhibitions" themselves are not yet widely recognized or understood.

A representative example of this gap can be seen in the high school's branding of its student exhibition night as "PatCon"—a creative blend of "Patriot" and "Convention." While the name resonated locally, it may cause families to miss the connection between the exhibition night with broader district goals. In fact, it is noteworthy that some parents said they were unsure whether their child had participated in an exhibition of learning, even though they were asked this question while attending an exhibition of learning. A lack of shared vocabulary can create barriers to full engagement, making it difficult to solicit meaningful feedback or invite deeper community participation.

This challenge was mirrored in the research process itself, as data collection was at times limited by participants' unfamiliarity with key terminology, such as project-based learning. Recognizing this, the pilot group of educators and leaders recommended we produce a short, accessible video—in the style of TikToks—to help provide context before we engaged parents in data collection (CIE, 2024).

Moving forward, Allen County has a valuable opportunity not only to clarify its messaging but also to position the community as co-designers of the learning and assessment

experience. By developing more accessible and everyday communication strategies and inviting families and local stakeholders into the design and evaluation of competencies, the district can build a stronger, more informed coalition of support. This approach would deepen understanding, foster shared language, and reinforce the broader cultural shift the district is aiming to achieve.

4. Researching the extent of inclusion, co-creation, and reciprocity between the district and its community is a process that, in itself, supports local accountability and durable systems change.

Once our project was underway, the research team quickly observed that, by engaging community members using habits of inclusive design in our research processes, and by calling attention to these habits in our research instruments, the research project was effectively serving as an intervention deepening ACS' practice of inclusion, co-creation, and reciprocity in its ongoing assessment and accountability reform.

While this effect was not intended, it is common in community-engaged or participatory research methods for which the benefits of enhanced relevance and application of the research outweigh the ways in which community engagement in the research process might skew research conclusions.

Therefore, rather than viewing this finding as a negative, we frame it as an asset that deepens local accountability and supports durable systems change. Trying to disentangle an unbiased, "pure" measure of the impact of co-creation in Allen County's reforms is not only impossible; it is less important than the ability of our research to directly support system improvement and lead to greater outcomes.

a. Collaboratively analyzing data at this project's Data Party inspired participants, creating momentum for the reforms.

Allen County participants felt surprised

and encouraged by the positive trends they identified at our Data Party, such as overwhelming support for the reforms by students, parents, and community members. For example, upon seeing a pie graph showing high levels of students' satisfaction with the district's new direction, one community leader said, "I'm surprised. I didn't think you could get 79% of high schoolers to agree on anything! So I think this [result] is really high and says a lot." Another participant said they felt "inspired" by the positive trends in the data, noting that collective analysis "helps create momentum" for the road ahead.

Some participants began to understand the impact of this work in deeper ways. Several participants noted feeling especially motivated by students' quotes about how this work has positively affected them.



Commenting on the impact felt by the community, one school-based educator wrote a SenseMaker entry they titled, “Shared Ownership of Educating Our Future Leaders:”

“I was so encouraged by not only by the numerical data, but by the quotes from interviews shared today during our data party. [One quote about increasing local ownership] really impacted me, especially coming from a district that has stressed community ownership over athletics but not academics.”

Other participants felt so encouraged by the results that they wanted to share the results with others to help sustain and scale the work. An administrator planned to take the data to their next leadership team meeting. An instructional coach planned to share the data with teachers who were more resistant to project-based learning, because they wanted them to see the impact and broad support for this work among parents and students. And a school Principal began organizing a similar Data Party just for their school immediately after our event!

b. Data Party participants took note of shortcomings evidenced in the data and began planning next steps for continuous improvement.

At several tables, participants identified communication as an area for growth and continued investment, noting that more work can be done to help greater numbers of stakeholders understand why Allen County is shifting learning, assessment, and accountability—and to understand what the shift entails. They brainstormed several solutions to increase outreach, buy-in, and participation, ranging from social media strategies to increasing the frequency of student learning exhibitions to be more akin to the frequency of athletic exhibitions. At the time of this report, Superintendent Hamby told us he and his administrative team were already working on clear definitions of common terminology that could be shared to improve communication and understanding.

Another area for growth identified by participants was the apparent discrepancy between how teachers and students each perceived the strength of student-teacher relationships. While the group felt challenged to identify “silver bullet” strategies to improve relationships, raising awareness of some students’ relational struggles with their teachers (and the impact those struggles have on their willingness to work hard academically) seemed an important step. As one school-based educator shared in a SenseMaker story they titled, “Relationships matter.... For real.... They might be the most important thing:”

“A memorable moment happened today when I overheard one of the student research members reflect on the data. He was discussing the importance of relationship and made the comment, ‘I mean, if you don’t want to have a relationship with your students, then why are you even teaching?’ This proud statement enlightened me as to how important relationships are to students.”

Data Party participants also voiced a desire for additional research to deepen collective understanding and continue supporting the assessment and accountability reforms. Suggestions included:

- Expanding the YRT surveys and interviews into the middle, intermediary, and primary schools to gain insights at different grade spans;
- Gathering more robust data and additional perspectives from business and community members beyond the “usual suspects;”
- Probing communication barriers with parents and families more deeply; and
- Pursuing a longitudinal study to understand how community and stakeholder perceptions are changing over time and as the work continues to mature.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1 . Education leaders should use inclusive processes during major system reforms, such as to redesigning systems of assessment and accountability, to ensure alignment to community values, gain buy-in, and increase sustainability and scaling.

From the finding that inclusive processes to redesign systems of assessment and accountability increases stakeholder trust, satisfaction, and local ownership of reform in Allen County Schools, we recommend that education leaders use these processes when pursuing any major systems change, such as assessment and accountability redesign, to build alignment with the values of the community. Doing so increases the opportunity for sustainability and scaling of new systems.

There are a range of inclusive processes that can be employed to begin to engage the community in system redesign. For state or district leaders who may have limited resources or capacity, focusing on habits of inclusion and empathy will bring them closer to understanding the aspirations and needs of the students, families, and communities they serve. For example, leaders and their teams can conduct empathy interviews to understand how diverse stakeholders experience the current system. Empathy interviews are different from conventional town hall meetings or “listening tours” in which leaders either endure broad-ranging public complaints or present a mostly-final concept for feedback with limited opportunity for revision. Instead, empathy interviews are one-on-one and focus on how people feel when they interact with the education system, not just their opinions about it (CIE, 2025).

Conducting empathy interviews has two benefits: first, it builds trust by making people feel genuinely heard. And second, it

helps pinpoint root causes behind problems that different people experience when they interact with the current system. Leaders can look across empathy data to identify patterns and prioritize strategies to address common themes. Training for conducting and analyzing data from empathy interviews can be done with limited resources. The process takes as little time as a few weeks at the front-end of the design process.

Another strategy is to create an advisory group that is representative of the diversity of stakeholders in their community, like Allen County’s L3 coalition. The role of this group can vary depending on the time and resources available to the state or district. A lower-lift role may be to engage this group in a strictly advisory capacity, consulting them for feedback at various points in the design and implementation phases. Where there are more resources and time available, the role of the group may expand to co-creation by employing design thinking processes such as root cause analysis, ideation, prototyping, and iteration (see, for example, Doorley, et. al., 2018).

Longer-term, as the leadership team becomes more adept at embedding inclusion and empathy in their reform processes, they can move toward more comprehensive processes aimed to create true reciprocity between the district and the community. For example, the state or district can continually assess the needs of the community through empathy interviews, not just at the beginning of the reform process. The leadership team might also create and sustain a diverse coalition that monitors the progress of the reforms in an ongoing way and can directly advise the leadership team on necessary changes. Like Allen County, they might embed measures of community engagement and participation in their accountability model to encourage partnership in service of mutual goals.

2. Policymakers should support inclusive design in reform efforts by providing funding and time needed to effect deep levels of systems change.

In alignment with our finding that systems change is a long and complex process that has the potential to create champions and guardians of the system, one policy implication is that policymakers should allocate funding and time to support the incorporation of inclusive design processes into reform efforts to attain deeper levels of systems change.

This begins with socializing the idea of inclusive design with policymakers. Continued advocacy around the importance of attending to deeper levels of systems change, coupled with concrete examples of impact like this report from Allen County, may help policymakers recognize the need for more inclusive processes.

Once state policymakers understand the importance of inclusive processes, they should consider how to use existing flexibility and funding streams to support it. For example, the U.S. Department of Education recently encouraged state education leaders to make full use of federal flexibility to improve their assessment and accountability systems, including the opportunity to consolidate funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). State leaders should heed this invitation in ways that direct federal funding to promote equity while building and sustaining community-oriented processes to support durable systems change.

Meanwhile, federal policymakers should consider how existing policy flexibility (such as the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority) and grant programs (such as the Competitive Grants for State Assessments) supporting assessment and accountability reform can better incentivize community co-creation by:

- providing funding (or preferential scoring in application processes) for robust plans for stakeholder engagement and

community co-creation,

- permitting sufficient time (as in multiple years) for community-co-creation, and
- attending to leading indicators of relational change, not just lagging indicators of student-level outcomes, in reporting requirements.

For example, the CGSA program signals the importance of community engagement in system redesign but does not yet provide explicit funding for community engagement, nor does it award preferential points for proposals with robust plans for community co-design or provide grant timelines that are long enough to build deep community engagement at the front-end. Allen County was fortunate to have received some support for its L3 work through Kentucky's CGSA award, which was unique in its emphasis on community co-creation. But Kentucky took a risk when it submitting an application with a vision bigger than CGSA's scoring criteria would suggest. To date, despite Kentucky and Allen County's measurable successes, no other state has put forward a CGSA proposal similar in its incorporation of inclusive design. To understand why, CIE talked with several state education agency leaders who said the policy and financial incentives simply were not there to propose something too far outside the box.

Lastly, the multi-year nature of systems change requires that funding extend beyond the initial investment. As policymakers see results, we advocate for more funding opportunities, especially those that provide ongoing funding to sustain inclusive and technical work.

3. Federal, state, and local policy should prioritize reforms that are learner-centered, hands-on, and performance-based.

In Allen County, the positive impact on community-facing outcomes was facilitated by reform that was hands-on and learner-centered. This system's reforms necessitated

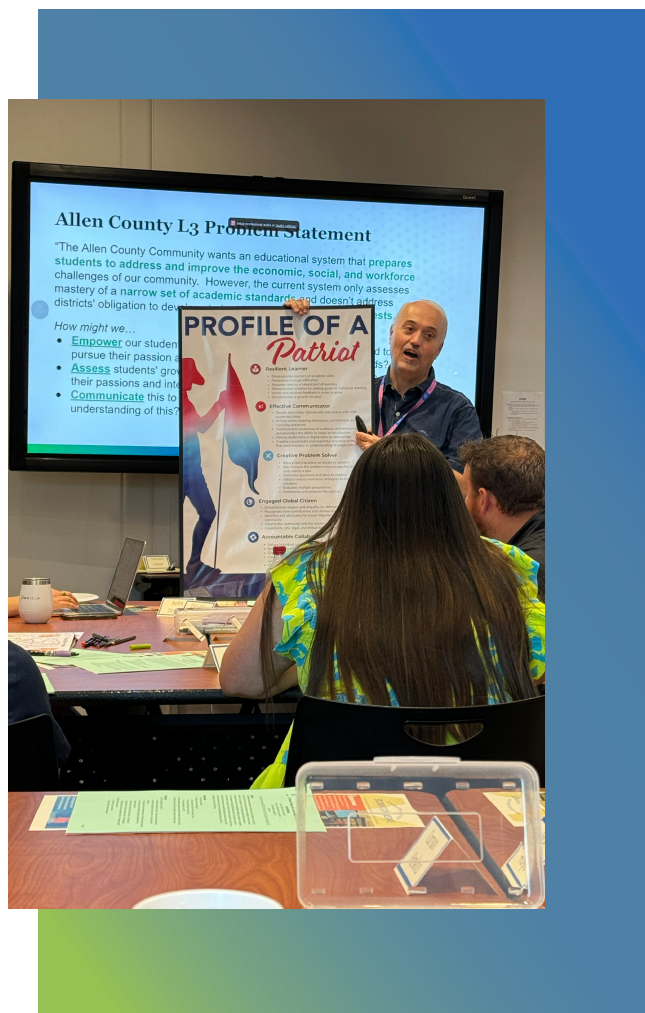
the involvement and understanding of families and community members. Given this finding, it is our recommendation that federal, state, and local policy should prioritize assessment and accountability reforms that build structure and practices that are learner-centered, hands-on, and performance-based. Assessment and accountability reforms that are grounded in performance-based learning and assessment, project-based learning provide opportunities for parents and community leaders to have a voice and role in their students' education, and can build strong means of engagement from students, as seen in our Allen County data.

The federal Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority (IADA) is an example of federal policy that explicitly named competency-based and performance-based assessments as examples of assessments that innovative states may consider incorporating into new state assessment and accountability models. However, IADA does not prioritize these kinds of reforms, and other requirements and technical constraints have made it challenging for states to pursue learner-centered reforms through this program (Blomstedt, et. al., 2024).

Policy that encourages learner-centered reforms should include components that support the development of parent and community engagement and knowledge, while also providing technical support to educators who are doing this work, including assessment literacy, and assessment and rubric design and implementation.

4. Federal and philanthropic entities should incentivize and fund research (especially youth-led research and research-practice partnerships) studying how systems change processes impact the relationship between education systems and the communities they serve.

Although the focus of this research project was



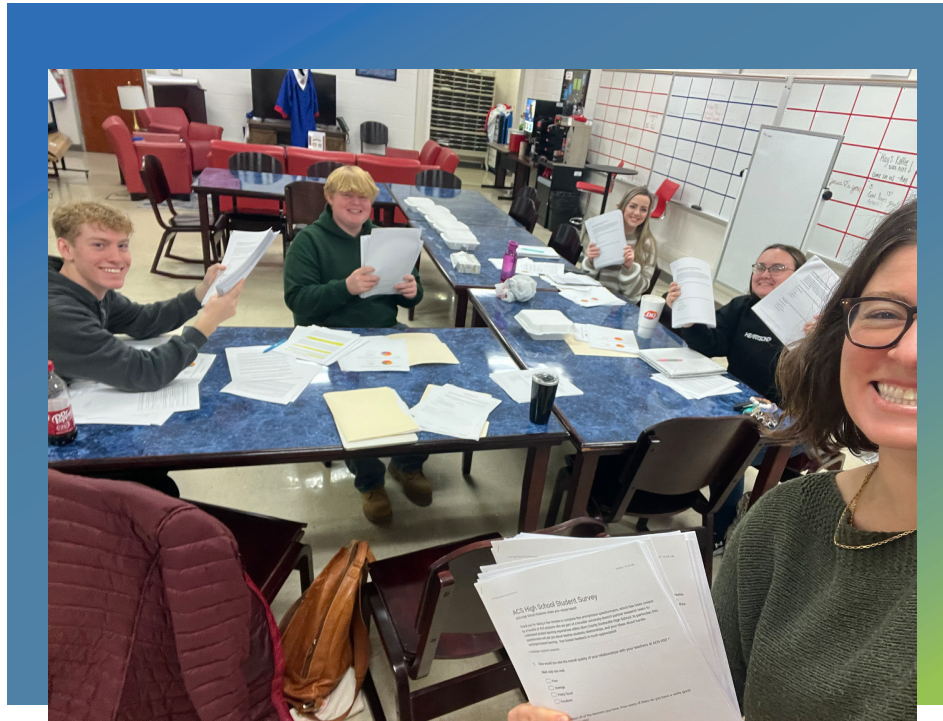
on the ways inclusively designed assessment and accountability systems build stakeholder trust and local ownership, by employing inclusive approaches to research, such as youth-led research and research-practice collaboration, this research team found that research methods can also serve as a means of bolstering local accountability systems. The research approaches used in Allen County, such as collectively designing the research focus and collaborative data analysis through a Data Party, helped create a foundation for next steps in the continued systems learning in Allen County.

Given this, we recommend that both federal and philanthropic research programs should incentivize research that looks at how systems change processes impact the relationship between school systems and the communities they serve. Inclusive, collaborative research methodology has the potential to provide invaluable insights into systems change, but

also require resources and time to implement them in an inclusive manner.

Especially in the face of the Trump administration's proposed 67% reduction in federal funding for education research supported by the Institute of Education Sciences next year (Elias, 2025), it is critical that remaining federal funding and philanthropic grant programs prioritize research projects with clear theories of change that address not only structural components but the deeper levels of relationships and mental models that lead to sustainability and scale.

Of particular value are research-practice partnerships and youth-led research. Through the work of this project, the research team saw that building a foundation for an inclusive research-practice partnership builds reciprocity amongst



the school system, community, and researchers. All three groups become central to the learning and understanding of systems change. Additionally, youth-led research deepened the research team's understanding of the work being done in Allen County. Their unique understanding and curiosity, called for the inclusion of questions that were not initially centered by the adults in the room, but ultimately came to deepen the findings and build connections between the classroom-work and the community-work. As such, the research-practice partnership created invaluable insights into the systems change that is occurring in Allen County.

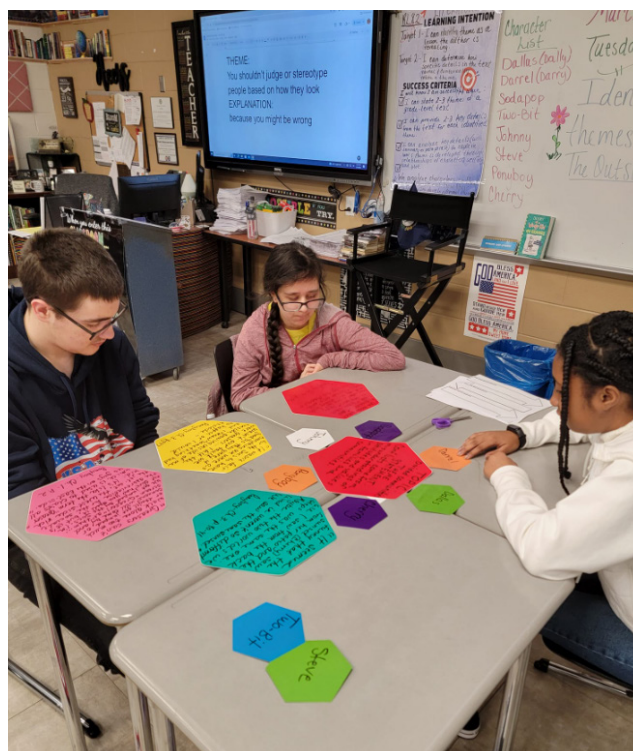
By incentivizing these inclusive approaches to research, federal and philanthropic research programs have the opportunity to gain a more in-depth understanding of systems change and the dynamics that exist between school systems and the communities they serve. Expanding this research to include more types of communities would also bring out more of the complexities and factors that need to be considered when building reforms for a variety of types of communities.

Closing

Through our study of ACS' reform effort, we learned that engaging diverse stakeholders as co-creators in assessment and accountability reform requires investment and ongoing support, but it yields benefits like increased trust, satisfaction, and local ownership—outcomes that bolster the long and complex process of systems change. Not only relevant to assessment and accountability reform, this report offers insights for district, state, and federal education leaders considering any kind of major policy shift. Our key lesson is that, if innovations in local and state assessment and accountability systems are to have a positive and durable impact, greater attention must be given to how those reforms are designed and implemented.

Education leaders must resist the false efficiency of top-down rollouts and instead pursue systems change through inclusive design. That means engaging communities through the habits of inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity from the start. Like Allen County, they should seek to include diverse perspectives in both system design and implementation; practice deep listening to understand real needs and problems that the new systems should address; and involve representatives of all impacted stakeholders in reciprocal conversations about what outcomes matter, what progress is being made, and how everyone can play a role in achieving shared goals. In doing so, the resulting systems will be better able to address needs, and stakeholders will have better understanding and ownership of those systems, leading to sustainability and scale.

Allen County Schools is still early in their change process, but we have identified early indications of durability, including remarkable levels of satisfaction and broad ownership across stakeholder groups. One community member echoed many when they said, “We’ve got a long way to go, but I do see that we are on the right path. It’s what’s best for kids to improve student outcomes. And it’s exciting.”



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About the Center for Innovation in Education

The Center for Innovation in Education is a national nonprofit organization that partners with districts and state agencies to create more equitable public education systems. We guide leaders through inclusive design practices that engage students, families, and community members to foster mutual commitments and create durable change. For more about our work, visit leadingwithlearning.org.

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Better Together:

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