

Rooted in Comunity: Minneapolis Public Schools Parent

Participatory Evaluation



Case Study Developed by Education First

Rooted in Community: Minneapolis Public Schools Parent Participatory Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

"We were making decisions privileging white, middle- income families. Parents of color were making rational decisions not to engage with the district because back then it felt like a futile process... With PPE, we share the findings and what we're going to do with parents' recommendations. That's how you start building trust."

- District Leader¹



Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) invested in the infrastructure to establish an inclusive process for Black, Brown, Indigenous and people of color (BBIPOC) parents to engage in the evaluation and assessments of their school system. The district, which serves nearly 60 percent BBIPOC students² and whose families speak over one-hundred languages,³ was inaccessible and distrusted by many parents, and were not transparent when it came to decision-making.⁴ Over the past decade, MPS has been able to transform its relationship with BBIPOC parents in the community by regaining their trust and sharing power in the evaluation and assessment process. This change occurred through the implementation of parent advisory councils (PACs) and parent participatory evaluation (PPE), which provide BBIPOC parents with the space, tools and resources to assess and understand MPS's policies and practices to nurture the creation of equitable learning environments for their children. Findings from the evaluation process also led to direct system changes driven by BBIPOC parents. These changes included amending curriculum and course offerings, increasing the budget for culturally responsive services like interpreters, increasing the hiring of BBIPOC staff, implementation of new trainings on restorative practices for teachers, and much more.

" First identify the leaders. Once identified, work with them so that they start to bring the families in. Organize them and listen to them. How do they feel in the district? What is working and what isn't working? What advice do the families have? PAC is the assessor of advice for the district." -Parent

So how did MPS center BBIPOC parents' voices to assess the district and drive system-level changes?

What infrastructure and supports at the district and community level were put in place to establish PACs and PPE?

and how can district leaders develop similar initiatives in their own school communities?

ESTABLISHING TRUST THROUGH PARENT ADVISORY COUNCILS

In 2012, MPS co-created parent advisory councils (PACs) with BBIPOC parents in direct response to many parents' desire for culturally affirming spaces to collectively assess if MPS's schools were meeting their children's needs and inform change for the better. By assessing systems collectively, MPS and parents gathered information to drive actions that increased student learning and academic achievement, closed opportunity gaps, improved student attendance, and decreased student suspensions, while promoting the visibility of BBIPOC students' experiences in MPS.⁵ To bring PACs to life, the Family Engagement Department worked with parents to develop a plan and budget for hosting monthly, two-hour meetings across six different communities: American Indian PAC (AIPAC), Black PAC (BPAC), Hmong PAC (HPAC), Latino PAC (LPAC), Somali PAC (SPAC) and the Special Education Advisory Council⁶ (SEAC). These spaces became more accessible to BBIPOC parents than traditional parent associations, where White, middle-class families often form the majority.⁷ Two representatives from each PAC also served on a district-wide PAC (DPAC) that meets monthly to build alliances across communities.

Family engagement specialists recruited more parents to join initially by helping them understand that "the relationship that they've had before [with the district] doesn't have to be the same now. [They] could actually make a difference."⁸ Specialists facilitated meetings in the languages parents speak at home and coordinated transportation, meals and childcare for attendees. Some specialists also opted to host PAC meetings in community centers, outside of MPS buildings, because parents did not yet feel a sense of trust with the district.⁹

Across PACs, parents collaboratively assessed their children's and their community's needs, identified growth areas for MPS and advocated for the district to take specific actions to promote equity, based on their assessment findings.

PAC advocacy led to notable achievements for BBI-POC communities across MPS. For example:¹⁰

- MPS now offers African American Studies, American Indian Studies, Asian American Studies, Chicanx/Latinx Studies, Hmong Studies and Somali Studies¹¹ as ethnic studies courses
- SPAC successfully advocated to create prayer spaces in schools for Muslim students
- HPAC convinced MPS to reinstate the Hmong language program to better meet their children's learning needs
- LPAC helped establish an Office of Latino Achievement
- SEAC successfully advocated for the creation of an additional three-school program to better serve preschool students with disabilities
- PACs helped advocate for new principals to be hired when existing school leadership was not meeting their communities' needs

PACs continue to be a critical lever in building trust with BBIPOC families and empowering parent leaders. Many parents grow from PAC members to co-chairs over time, and some PAC co-chairs have even gone on to be elected to the MPS Board of Education. Despite these wins, PAC recruitment, attendance and retention are still challenges.¹² To continue to engage more BBIPOC families in the assessment of MPS schools, the district expanded the foundational work of the PACS by training parents as community-based researchers. Through parent participatory evaluation (PPE), parent researchers gather data from parents in their communities about their perspectives and experiences with MPS as another avenue to effect the change parents want to see in the system.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK TO EXPAND POWER-SHARING THROUGH PARENT PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

In 2017, after five years of empowering parent leaders through PACs, MPS developed the parent participatory evaluation (PPE) through a unique partnership between the Family Engagement Department and the Research, Evaluation and Assessment Department. The idea sparked from the success of MPS' youth participatory evaluation (YPE) initiative that the district created in 2015, after the Office for Civil Rights asked MPS to examine its disproportionate rates of discipline for Black students.¹³ MPS' Research, Evaluation and Assessment Department trained middle and high school students on qualitative and quantitative methods for participatory research, and youth evaluators engaged with their peers to collect and better understand their experiences with school discipline.¹⁴ Through YPE, the district gathered more data about students' experiences due to the high return rates of peer-to-peer data collection. Because of this success, there was interest to leverage the five PACs to replicate a similar approach to participatory evaluation to better understand the experiences and perceptions of BBIPOC parents to inform system-level change.

To lead these efforts, MPS devoted staff within the Research, Evaluation and Assessment Department to lead the technical side of the evaluation methodology and devoted a staff person within the Family Engagement Department to support outreach and logistics of the PPE work. Both staff members worked interdepartmentally to coordinate efforts and lead in their specific areas of expertise. In doing this, MPS established the structures needed to pilot a PPE cohort with ten parent evaluators: two English speakers, four Somali speakers and four Spanish speakers, many of whom were members of PACs.¹⁵ The research process took three to six months to complete, and parent evaluators received a \$1500 stipend for their work. MPS defined the following PPE process:¹⁶

Embedding the PPE work through an interdepartmental partnership with the Family Engagement and the Research, Evaluation and Assessment Department led to a substantial increase in data collection from BBIPOC communities that directly informed district decision-making. The ten parent evaluators in the pilot PPE cohort collected data from 230 parents,¹⁷ and the following cohort of 51 evaluators in 2019 engaged with over 1400 parents across the Somali, African American, American Indian, Latino and Hmong communities. This increase in participation demonstrated the impact of the PPE approach, as the traditional survey that MPS administered in the same year had a low response rate of approximately 16% for parents of color and 11% for people who spoke a language other than English at home.¹⁸ Contributing to this increase was the flexibility of meeting parents where they are in the communities. Parent evaluators collected data in their homes, places of worship, grocery stores, malls, parks and community centers, and this flexibility increased parents' access to opportunities to assess their children's schools openly and honestly, and to contribute to data that informs decision-making.

Beyond increasing participation, PPE pushed the district to support data collection methods that align with the practices and values of BBIPOC communities and build the infrastructure for BBIPOC parents to authentically assess the quality of MPS schools. For example, acknowledging the deep appreciation for storytelling and longer conversations in MPS' American Indian community, American Indian parent evaluators conducted longer interviews (2+ hours) with fewer people, instead of shorter interviews with more people, because they felt it led to more meaningful engagement and authentic data collection.¹⁹ American Indian evaluators also used medicine wheels in participatory activities.²⁰ Hmong parent evaluators, who prefer reaching as many people as possible, gathered hundreds of responses to survey questions at Hmong cultural events.²¹ Somali parent evaluators, whose cultural practices emphasize a rich oral tradition, invited parents to participate in discussions on a Somali radio station.²²

Latino parent evaluators used participatory methods like sticker voting in Zumba classes²³. This shift in practice allowed parents to be more honest and their authentic selves in sharing their experience and desires for the district. As one PPE leader shared:

"I learned that our community functions better in conversation. We tried doing the surveys electronically and it didn't work. If we personally do it, there is more confidence. I can say I too am a mom and have needs, then they open up and have more trust. I can say the results are better when the parents are the researchers rather than hiring a company and paying millions of dollars. I wouldn't respond the same if it was a person who didn't understand my culture."

One common finding arose across all five parent evaluator groups was: the need to hire more staff - particularly teachers and school leaders - who look like and can speak the languages represented in the student body.²⁴ During interviews, American Indian parents stressed the need for teachers who could understand their cultures, noting that "Many times I have listened to students complain about racist remarks made [by teachers] in the classroom" and that "There were times when I felt so disempowered interacting with [school staff] and I had this sense of shame."25 Moreover, 87 percent of surveyed American Indian parents stated that it was "very important" for MPS to hire more diverse staff that are representative of the American Indian community.²⁶ African American parents shared that they wanted teachers in their children's schools who understand the "dynamics of their culture," emphasizing the importance of hiring and supporting Black teachers. They also learned that BBIPOC staff were often placed in disciplinary roles (e.g. Behavior Deans) in schools and that Black teachers were asked to be more involved in disciplining Black children than their peers.²⁷ In conversations with the Latino and Somali communities, parents expressed a need for more multilingual staff to better support them.²⁸ Somali parent evaluators also learned that many Somali families were choosing charter schools because they had more Somali staff than MPS.²⁹ In the Hmong community, 88 percent of surveyed parents indicated that it was



either "very important" or "important" to have Hmong teachers at their children's schools.³⁰ Both PAC and PPE initiatives helped establish a system for BBIPOC parents to assess the school system and work toward more equitable learning conditions for children. Although there are still many needs, concerns and aspirations that parents want to address, the transparency and accountability of the PPE process strengthened the sense of partnership that BBIPOC parents feel with MPS, building upon the relationships that PACs helped initiate. Many of the parent evaluators who participated in PPE now serve in PAC leadership positions.³¹ Furthermore, these initiatives built bridges between the Family Engagement Department and the Research, Evaluation & Assessment Department in the pursuit of co-creation of assessments with parents and communities. Through this partnership, the district pooled its resources and established the infrastructure needed to partner with parents to assess the conditions of learning and to make decisions based on the desires surfaced in parent-driven research. The PPE initiative has since moved from the district-level to the school-level, allowing parents to directly evaluate the conditions of their child's school.

BBIPOC parent evaluators used the data collected to prioritize recommended action steps for the district, which led to various system-level changes.

PARENT PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION PROCESS

| Train Parent Evaluators | MPS first guides parent evaluators through ten hours of training related to research methodologies, data collection and analysis. MPS staff help evaluators develop an evaluation plan, including a research question related to a problem affecting their community, data collection sources and a plan for analyzing and summarizing data. |
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| Identify Data Collection Plans | Evaluators review the plan with MPS staff to better understand the process and practice explaining to participants why evaluators are collecting information and how it will be used. |
| Create Culturally Relevant Data Collection Process | MPS staff support evaluators to create a culturally relevant data collection process to ensure that data collection methods are in line with the cultural values and practices of their communities. |
| Parents collect data and engage staff with findings | Evaluators go to their communities and collect data for between ten and fifteen hours. |
| Present findings and recommendations to district leadership | Evaluators bring the data back to MPS staff, collectively make meaning of the information and develop recommended action steps for the district. |
| Distr <u>ict leadership plan, align</u> budget and report progress | Evaluators present their findings and recommendations to the superintendent, school board and department heads. |
| | Finally, the district must share what they plan to do next. MPS aligns parents' recommendations with their budget process and reports back on how much progress was made over time. |

PARENT RECOMMENDATIONS LEADING TO CHANGE

| PPE Parent Recommendations | System-Level Changes (MPS Response) ³⁷ |
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| Smoother, consistent, proactive and positive communication from MPS staff in parents' home languages about their children | Doubled resources for interpreters and translation services³⁸ Hired a video storyteller to produce content in Somali, Hmong, Spanish and English³⁹ Increased use of non-traditional communication channels, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, to better connect with parents⁴⁰ Hired a new Ombudsperson to work with families⁴¹ |
| More parent input on school practices and discipline policies for BBIPOC students and students with disabilities to ensure more equitable learning conditions | Launched a discipline inquiry form for parents to submit questions or concerns to district leaders.⁴² Used data that parent evaluators gathered to inform the MPS Climate Framework, which became the basis for the values in the strategic plan they recently adopted.⁴³ |
| Training for parents on special education services | Created a video library of short, accessible trainings on IEPs to support the partnership between parents and case managers⁴⁴ Increased the working weeks of special education cultural liaisons to better support multilingual families⁴⁵ |
| Additional mental health supports for students | Increased their budget for mental health supports by \$2 million⁴⁶ Created a monthly "Mental Health Institute" for parents to learn more about various topics related to mental health⁴⁷ |
| Additional training for MPS staff to promote more cultural competence, knowledge of anti-bullying practices and trauma-informed care | Allotted \$800,000 of the district budget for equity training⁴⁸ Released a mandatory video training series for all staff on bullying⁴⁹ Planned and provided professional development for all staff on restorative practices⁵⁰ Amended the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) union contract to integrate restorative practices district-wide⁵¹ |
| Hiring and retaining more BBIPOC staff | Hired additional recruitment and retention coordinators to increase the number of BBIPOC staff across the district⁵² Created a high school pathway program to prepare a cohort of BBIPOC MPS students to become MPS teachers⁵³ Used PPE data to write language in contract negotiations to include protections for BBIPOC teachers⁵⁴ Plans to launch MPS' own teacher certification program outside of higher education to increase access for aspiring BBIPOC teachers⁵⁵ |
| Making the MPS academic experience better reflect and value the languages, cultures and histories of all MPS students | Included three language pathways - American Indian, Hmong and Spanish - in MPS' Comprehensive District Design⁵⁶ Increased course offerings in Somali and Hmong languages⁵⁷ Modified MPS calendar to include additional cultural holidays and events⁵⁸ Increased budget for culturally relevant art/artifact displays in schools⁵⁹ |

LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

For districts who want to bring parents in as co-evaluators of learning conditions, we encourage consideration of the following lessons in implementation of PACs and/or PPEs:

"One of the biggest challenges is that the families regain trust in the district. The previous leaders didn't take into account parents, and made decisions by themselves. Decisions were made during times when parents couldn't share their voice. It was a great barrier that we were not listened to the way we should have been. Now it is totally different. The superintendent comes to the community, comes to the events in the community, she is close to students and the families. If a superintendent sees the needs of the community, it means a lot. This is how we can really work together." - LPAC Parent Leader

Lesson #1: Beginning with PACs helps build foundational trust

Districts may prefer to implement PACs before jumping directly into PPE in order to have more time to build trust with BBIPOC parents and support their leadership and advocacy skills. Because there is no training required to participate in PACs, and PAC members can make a direct impact by attending one meeting per month, this option may feel more accessible and less intimidating for some parents. District staff can increase accessibility and recruitment success by providing meals, childcare, transportation, and by helping parents prioritize the topics they want to assess in schools. By putting parents' needs and visions at the forefront, district staff can increase the depth of their connections with the community and better support parents in conversations with district leadership. As parents feel more comfortable and empowered, PACs can become reliable spaces for district staff to recruit parent evaluators for PPE.³²

Lesson #2: Interdepartmental collaboration and resource sharing is paramount

Districts that wish to implement PPE should consider ways to put structures in place that allow for interde-

partmental collaboration and sharing of staff resources. The success of the PPE program in MPS depended on de-siloing departments within the school system to support collaboration that built upon the expertise of its staff. The Family Engagement Department brought its unique expertise in understanding culturally affirming engagement practices and meeting communities where they are, while the Research, Evaluation and Assessment Department brought technical assistance on research methods and participatory evaluation. The structures for collaboration that were put in place for this work continue to advance the inclusion of parents and the community in the evaluation process of schools. In fact, MPS recently launched its Family Friendly School Certification program, which collaborates across the Family Engagement Department to facilitate the process, the Research, Evaluation and Assessment Department to assist with the design and implementation of the certification process, and the Equity Office to ensure alignment with MPS equity goals and values.

Lesson #3: Participatory evaluation takes time

Because qualitative research methods require more time than traditional surveys, PPE can be staff- and time-intensive. Nevertheless, starting with a small pilot cohort can make initial implementation more manageable. MPS leaders believe that a district-wide model in which there are five or more cultural groups of parent evaluators can be possible for any district.³³ Districts may also consider an individual school site-based model after successfully piloting a district-wide model, but this typically requires more resources. Regardless of the model, district leaders must first hire the appropriate research staff to train parent evaluators. Research staff must have experience with qualitative and participatory research methods, express cultural humility (understanding that they may not be "experts" in how to best serve various communities), and be comfortable collaborating and building trust with BBIPOC families.³⁴ As with PACs, districts need strong family engagement specialists, interpreters and translators to support the PPE process. Overall, all staff involved in PPE must be patient and prepared to listen, pivot and provide parent evaluators with assistance as needed.

Lesson #4: Districts must make themselves accountable to BBIPOC parents

Because parent evaluators take the time to gather data on the district's behalf, MPS feels a responsibility to incorporate this information in their decisions. One district leader shared that, "As we're building trust and relationships with many community members, when you say you're going to do something, you have to report back on how much progress you've made. In a respectful way, you owe families an explanation of why you can't do something if you can't."³⁵ With transparency and accountability, districts can honor parent evaluators' work and make system-level changes that align with parents' feedback. This approach of power-sharing may feel uncomfortable for many district leaders and research specialists, since top-down accountability approaches have historically been the standard in public schools. Nevertheless, this shift in power dynamics is key to the success of PPE, and parents appreciate it.

CONCLUSION AND RESOURCES

When parents get the support they need to assess their children's schools, they are powerful agents of change. In the words of one MPS leader:

"Parent Participatory Evaluation is a phenomenal way to make change around equity. It de-politicizes conversations and is a really strong process to be able to collect multiple voices of color. It allows policy to move faster because you can hear directly from stakeholders. I've never seen anything else move systems, policies and practices like this."³⁶

For practitioners who are interested in replicating this work, we have compiled additional resources below. It is important to customize these to your community's needs and use them as a starting point for the structural changes needed to visualize a new form of assessment that centers BBIPOC families in the process.

- Parent Advisory Councils
 - Parent Advisory Councils Overview
 - Black Parent Advisory Council Video
 - <u>Hmong Parent Advisory Council Video</u>
- Parent Participatory Evaluation
 - Parent Participatory Evaluation Overview
 -Includes executive summary reports
 - <u>Parent Participatory Evaluation Program</u>
 Website
 - -Includes training videos
 - PPE Pilot Cohort Report -Includes research plan templates and sample data
 - Past PPE Presentations

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