

RE-IMAGINING
SCHOOL COMMUNITY COUNCILS

A Product of the School-Community Partnership Design Circle
Salt Lake City, UT, September 2016

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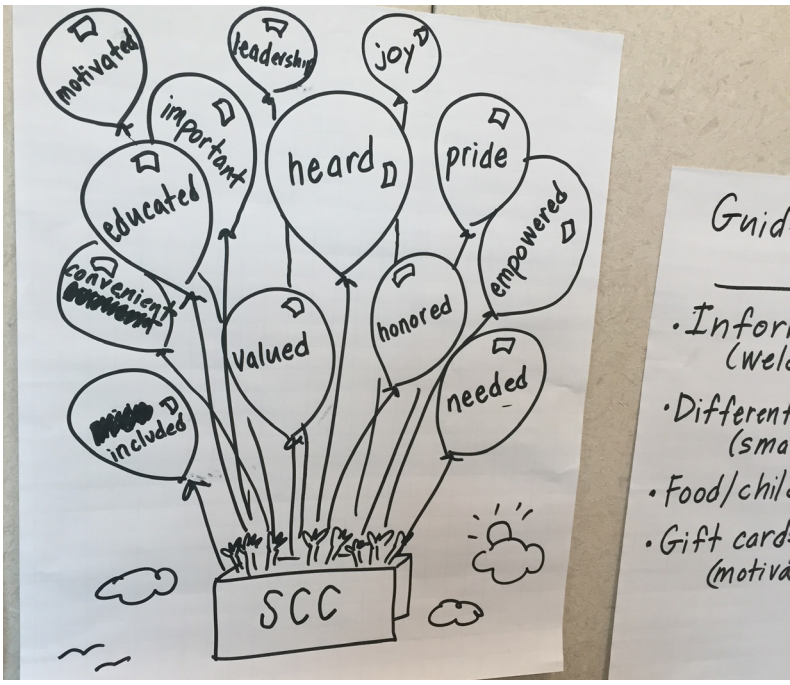
In July 2016, twenty participants came together for the School-Community Partnership Design Circle. Half were parents from Salt Lake City's west side neighborhoods, which are home to diverse communities of immigrant and refugee background, over 100 languages, and most of the city's Title 1 schools. The other half were educators from those same schools: administrators, teachers, counselors, and family advocates. The shared goal was to improve collaboration between schools and families in the Salt Lake City School District. Specifically, participants were charged with redesigning one of Utah's key spaces for parent voice and engagement: the School Community Council (SCC).

ABOUT SCHOOL COMMUNITY COUNCILS

SCCs are school-site decision making bodies made up of educators and parents. They are tasked with developing and monitoring an annual School Improvement Plan, focused on key academic and non-academic priorities. Improvement plans are ultimately approved by the local school board. SCCs are also charged with keeping the community informed about progress, and supporting digital citizenship.

For more information on Utah's School Community Councils and the LAND Trust Fund, visit: **www.schoollandtrust.org**

As an important part of the Improvement Plan, SCCs must lay out how they are going to use money earmarked for their school from Utah's LAND Trust Fund. Available funds are based on the school's size, and can vary from about $30,000 to over $100,000 per year. The LAND Trust Fund is made up of earnings from state-owned land, which are dedicated to supporting the state's public schools. LAND Trust dollars are targeted for activities that directly impact classroom instruction.



SCCs are elected bodies, but meetings are open to everyone. There must be at least four parents, one administrator, and one teacher. There is no restriction on how large an SCC can be, but parents must always outnumber staff by at least two. Parents and teachers are

elected by their peers as representatives of the broader school community.

The SCC was envisioned as a site for equitable parent-educator collaboration. It is designed to be a space in which parents have a direct role in making decisions about academic issues. When it is working well, it can be a powerful example of true school-community collaboration.



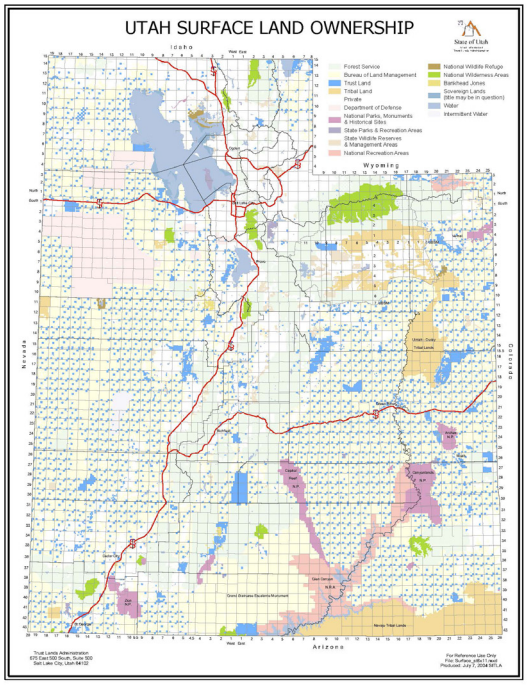
Unfortunately, many schools on Salt Lake City's west side have struggled to fulfill this vision. Parents and educators face an array of barriers to effective collaboration. These include language and cultural differences, fear and mistrust, and institutional systems that impede collaboration. In response to repeated calls for support, a group was brought together to collectively and creatively address this issue. The group was made up of experts in parent-educator collaboration: parents and educators themselves.

ABOUT THE DESIGN CIRCLES

The School-Community Partnership Design Circle is part of a national research project called the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC) based out of the University of Washington College of Education. Through participatory design-based research, the FLDC is supporting efforts around the country that re-center family voice and transform educational systems.

The Salt Lake City design circle met three times over the course of three weeks, for a total of 7.5 hours. Meetings were facilitated by Dr. Gerardo López, Professor and Chair of the Department of Education Leadership and Policy at the University of Utah College of Education. Partners included the Salt Lake City School District's Office of Family-School Collaboration, University Neighborhood Partners at the University of Utah, and the Community Advocate Network.

Week one focused on open, honest discussion about the challenges of school-community collaboration. Week two, the group turned its attention to learning about SCC's. The final week was dedicated to collaboratively reimagining and redesigning the SCC to effectively foster parent voice and school-community collaboration. *The guidelines that the Design Circle developed are shared in this report.*



There are currently 3.4 million surface acres of Trust Land in Utah, earnings from which are earmarked for supporting public schools.

Principle 1: Create a welcoming, community-oriented environment

SCC meetings can be alienating to families, particularly when parents and educators do not share the same language and cultural backgrounds. From meetings conducted in English, to packed agendas that leave little room for parents to raise new topics, to the formality of decision making processes, SCC meetings can make families feel out of place and unwelcome.

"It is really easy to get focused on the money, and SCC is not necessarily supposed to be about money. It is supposed to be about building our community."

— Participating Educator

Design Circle participants crafted an alternative vision of SCCs as informal, welcoming environments that honor parents' involvement and take advantage of the opportunity to build trust and relationships among families and school staff.





Realizing this vision means, first of all, making the space feel more **WELCOMING**, including:

- Food
- A comfortable room
- An informal atmosphere

Second, this means making the space **ACCESSIBLE** to all parents through:

- Live translation into all languages present
- Translation of all documents
- Daycare for small children

Third, this means focusing on **BUILDING COMMUNITY**, for example:

- Time dedicated to socializing
- Starting the year with a celebration

Finally, this means **VALUING** the contribution of parents and the time they are volunteering amid busy schedules, for example:

- Giving certificates of recognition
- Offering stipends/gifts to families
- Celebrating SCC members

Principle 2: Develop an inclusive process for incorporating parent and educator voice

The vision behind the SCC is that it is a place for *both* parents and educators to have a say in school decision making. However, participants in the Design Circle reported that this was not often the case. Most parents who attend SCC are asked to approve documents that have already been developed, rather than having a part in their development.

Design Circle participants strategized around how to create an inclusive process that involves both parents and educators in defining school priorities, strategizing solutions, and developing the final plan. The group made the following recommendations.

1. REFLECT SCHOOL DIVERSITY

The SCC needs to reflect the diversity of the school, particularly when it comes to language, cultural background, and country of origin. This takes active outreach to individual parents, and can be supported by offering stipends or other incentives that demonstrate respect for parents' time.

2. ADDITIONAL OFF-SITE MEETINGS

Because no small group can fully represent an entire community, there is a need to include parents who do not attend SCC meetings. SCC members could lead small, off-site sessions prior to SCC meetings, conducted in parents' native languages, which would help them set the SCC agenda and ensure all perspectives are included. This could also be done to gather input from teachers.

3. MAKE ROOM FOR ALL VOICES

Meetings should be facilitated to encourage participation by many parents and teachers (not only elected members), and to make room for everyone to speak their minds.

> *"I should be a part of creating this plan. When I'm at the SCC, I'm only given a document that is very strange to me and then I'm asked to sign it...I am not heard. I am not understood. I'm not a part of the process."*
>
> *— Participating Parent*

This can mean putting off planned agenda items and going "off-track" in order to make time for concerns to be raised, and actively soliciting input from quiet participants.

4. ENSURE PLAN IS SHAPED BY ALL PARTIES

The ultimate test of whether the process was inclusive comes in the form of the final product. Everyone involved must be able to see that their ideas influenced the final decision or plan, even if they do not agree with all the decisions made. Otherwise, people will disengage from the process quickly. This requires open-mindedness and flexibility on all sides.



Principle 3: Engage in regular communication and reciprocal learning

A common topic at the Design Circle was the need for regular, timely information about the SCC, and opportunities to learn more about the the topics under discussion. This is necessary if all participants are to be present and prepared to engage in dialogues with one another. Design Circle participants offered the following recommendations.

1. HELP THE COMMUNITY UNDERSTAND THE SCC

Both families and educators report a lack of understanding of exactly what SCC is. The name itself says little about its history and role in relation to the more commonly-understood PTAs or PTSOs.

2. GET MEETING INFORMATION OUT EARLY AND OFTEN

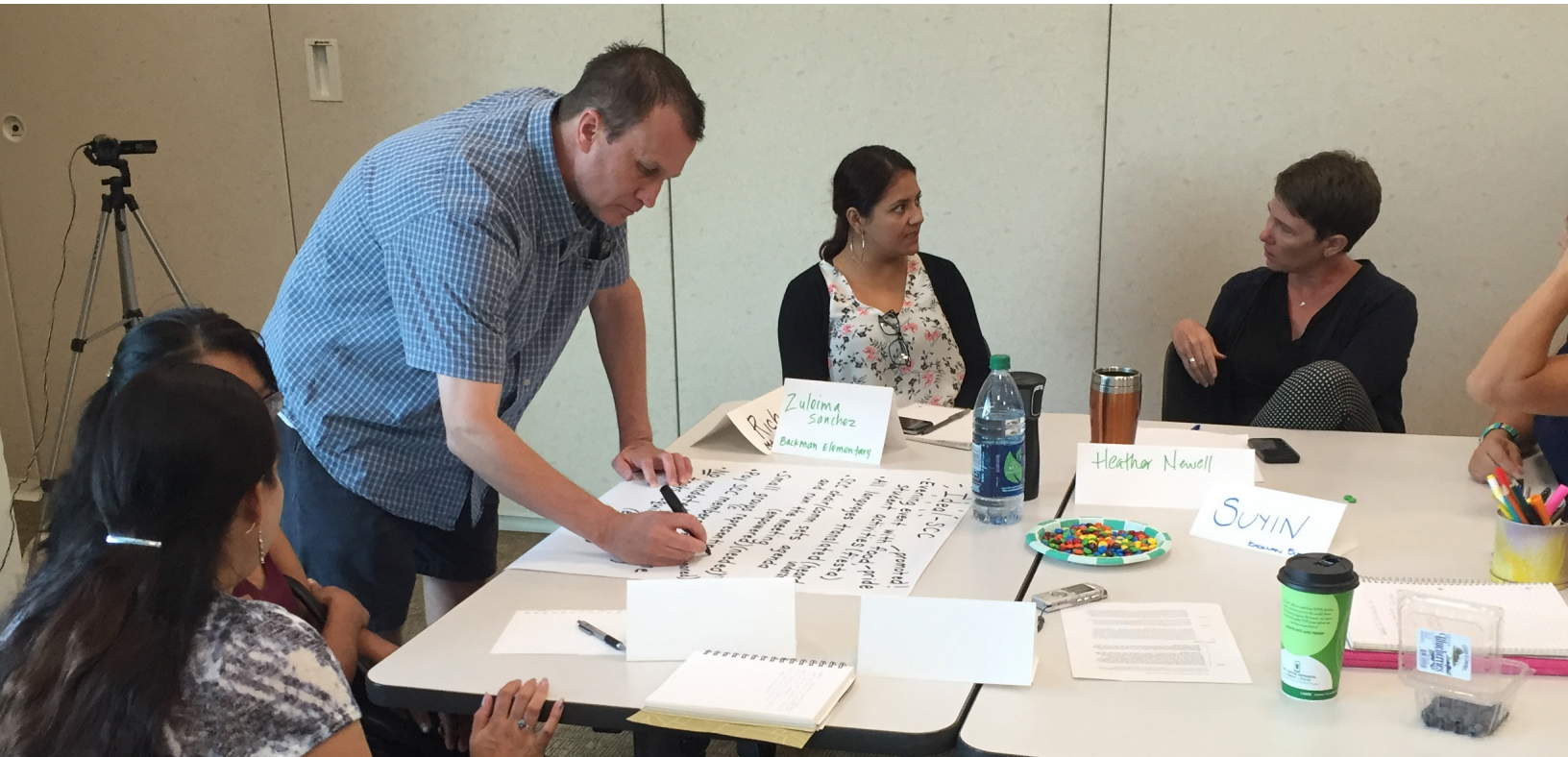
In order to make time to plan for and attend SCC, families need information on dates and agendas early. Dates should be set at the beginning of the year, with reminders and agendas sent out at least three weeks prior to meeting. Information should be shared in the person's preferred mode of contact (phone call, text, email) and preferred language.

3. SHARE INFORMATION ON DISCUSSION TOPICS PRIOR TO MEETING

The topics being discussed at SCC meetings can be complex. Parents and educators find it useful to have background information prior to the meeting so that they can educate themselves on the topic before discussing it.

4. USE SCC AS A SPACE FOR LEARNING

Even better than sharing information is actively learning together. Parents and educators have much to teach one another. Parents can help educators better understand the community context and the particular needs of students, while educators can share knowledge about the workings of the school system and questions of curriculum and pedagogy. This reciprocal learning lays the foundation for better collaboration and decision making on all sides.



CONCLUSION

As Design Circle participants made clear, family-school collaboration can be a difficult process. It requires patience, persistence, an openness to change, and a willingness to challenge our own assumptions about one another. At the same time, design circle participants reaffirmed the necessity of this work if we are to effectively support and educate all students. Moreover, through their efforts across the three sessions, participants proved that truly collaborative work in our schools is possible.

Family-school collaboration is a key priority for the Salt Lake City School District (SLCSD). It is an essential part of SLCSD's 2016-2021 Student Achievement Plan, and the district recently created an Office of Family-School Collaboration, led by Jennifer Mayer-Glenn and staffed by five specialists working with schools.

The School-Community Partnership Design Circle was just one step in what we hope will be an ongoing collaborative effort centering the voices of families and educators on Salt Lake City's west side. For more information, and to learn how you can support this work, contact Dr. Gerardo López at gerardo.lopez@utah.edu.

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This study is a part of the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC) at the University of Washington College of Education. The FLDC is a national-level participatory design-based research project aimed at re-centering nondominant families in racial equity efforts through the synthesis and co-design of research, measures, and practice to transform educational systems.

Partners:

- Department of Education Leadership and Policy, University of Utah College of Education
- Office of Family School Collaboration, Salt Lake City School District
- The Community Advocate Network
- University Neighborhood Partners, University of Utah

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