



2-GEN 2021 ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

Context & Introduction

In 2021, the Department of Human Services (DHS), Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ), Hennepin County, Hired, & Wilder Research worked together collaboratively to engage with families involved in the MFIP program.

A critical feature of our collaborative work was to design and activate “feedback loops” between parents, community organizations, county and state-level agencies that focused on two key areas of interest:

1. To gather experience and feedback about how to improve alignment & effectiveness of MFIP eligibility, employment services, and childcare assistance programs, and
2. To understand what families who leave MFIP with income (but are still within 200% of poverty) need support with, and use those learnings to inform the development and testing of an MFIP after care prototype.

The goal of engaging families in these two areas was to generate feedback within the collaborating partners and with families that would drive program, policy and practice improvements that benefit families, and for this work to generate possibilities for potential strategy innovation or adjustments that could be scaled to a greater number of families.

In carrying out this critical work with families, we spent considerable time as a team of partners designing, implementing and nurturing engagement with families, each partner with a set of strengths and roles.

The following document shares ingredients of how we engaged families and stimulated feedback loops between them and the collaborating partners in the 2-Gen Network this year. It pulls together several threads of conversation, learning, and input from across our collaborative team.

Values and guiding beliefs across collaborative partners

Though distinct in each of the collaborating partners organizations' exact missions and areas of focus, the common element and goal across our collaboration is the focus on improving programs/practice, systems, and policies.

In its role as a coordinator of this site in the 2-Gen Policy Network, a partner in the work, and a collective impact collaboration, NAZ leads with a focus and value on centering families in this work.

The following core values are the foundation of our NAZ work with families across the collaborative and serve as a critical binding agent when working in partnership with others and on initiatives like the 2-Gen Policy Network:

- **Focusing on Success for Our Children and Families:** we commit to doing whatever it takes so that Northside children of color realize their unlimited potential academically and in life. We do this by partnering with schools demonstrating an ability to accelerate academic outcomes and community-based organizations that effectively provide whole family wrap-around supports. Parents support their children and actualize their families' dreams by receiving partner services in addition to coaching, parenting education, and leadership training.
- **Advancing Racial Equity for All:** we commit to ending all forms of race-based disparities by first healing our own racialized trauma, understanding the impact of this type of trauma on others, ensuring equitable policies & practices, dismantling systems of oppression and privilege, and working towards wellness in our own minds and bodies alongside our families, schools and community.
- **Creating A Trusting Village:** we commit to creating trusting relationships with all our parents, scholars, co-workers, and collaborative partners as a key means of removing barriers and identifying opportunities for families and children to end multi-generational poverty. We earn trust by having integrity in all we do, being reliable in our follow-through, and exhibiting competency in the tasks at hand. In addition, we commit to breaking down silos, having transparent communications, resolving conflicts, fostering fun, giving grace to others, and striving for excellence in all we do.
- **Transforming Our Community Using Data and Learning:** we commit to hold each other accountable as team players to achieve breakthrough performance and results with children and families using data, innovation, compelling storytelling, on-going learning, and continuous improvement strategies– measuring our shared success by the achievements and well-being of children and families.

One of the most important guiding beliefs in the work of NAZ and within its partnerships is:

- **Families are leaders:** we believe that every family has assets and strengths. We believe a culture of achievement can only be built from within the community. We partner with families to set and achieve their goals, bolster their belief in themselves, and the expectation that their children will go to college.

On this foundation, we build the work with families and collaborative partners.

Direct Engagement with Families

Each collaborative partner engages families with their own unique approach, principles, style, skills, and goals.

The following sections offer insights to the approach we have brought to engaging families, leveraging key aspects of the training that NAZ staff receive and use to engage families.

Building relationships with families

Building strong, supportive and appropriate relationships with families is key to their success with NAZ. The role of a NAZ Family Achievement Coach is an extremely powerful and impactful one, and is crucial to fostering a culture of achievement.

Family Achievement Coaches support outcomes with families through their relationship by:

- Having “been there” themselves through shared life experiences
- Being able to offer opportunities
- Being persuasive about best-practice solutions that support achievement
- Being diligent and proactive about entering key data in our shared database so that our families’ story (successes, barriers, needs) are mapped out in real-time
- Understanding the culture of families
- Demonstrating consistency and commitment
- Utilizing Motivational Interviewing and other trained skills to elicit best thinking in families
- Using Expanded Hours policy, being able to connect with families outside of established work hours based on important family meetings, events, or schedule needs.
- Helping families understand challenges and recognize progress through consistently entering and using data
- Acting as a role model within the community, both personally and professionally
- Understanding clearly and deeply their Coach role and the NAZ values
- Being another trusted adult in the life of scholars
- Working with scholars to build on their skills, reinforcing self regulation and executive functioning

Language

NAZ and its partners have worked to shift language over time. We talk about families and not “clients”. We are their partners. It’s important to acknowledge our likeness, and support families as they evolve, grow, and increase their own and their child’s success.

NAZ has a unique and intentional vocabulary to reflect this philosophy. Examples include:

- Family (replaces “client”)
- Scholar (replaces “student,” “child,” “client”)
- Partner, Solution, or Opportunity (replaces “service”)

- Ecosystem = The partners, opportunities, and solutions all together that help drive change
- Achievement Planning (family or scholar) = replacement for traditional “case management” with a more family-focused, outcome-oriented approach

Keys to success in reaching new families

- Be thoughtful and intentional and work to understand the unique experiences of families
- Remain flexible in interactions, and keep trying new strategies with families until finding something that works
- Remember that families want what’s best for themselves and their children, regardless of the situation.
- Trust the belief that all scholars/families WILL succeed. This may be a new belief we are helping instill with a family. This belief is the cornerstone of our change process.

Keys to partnering with families

- Let families explain and tell, assume nothing, and be teachable.
- Always ask questions and be an active listener - let them provide the answers.
- Serve as a guide to them to arrive at the answer.
- Elicit and support parent’s goals (follow their lead) - Families/parents identify goals they want to work on and take ownership of them.
- Reinforce their goals.
- Encourage and be persistent.
- Provide access to resources and break down any barriers to achievement.
- Follow-through with families regarding goal progress.
- Hold them accountable for work towards goals.
- Push them to work harder on goals if necessary.
- Provide ongoing, consistent check-ins about progress.
- Reinforce what is working in the families’ lives.
- By exposing them to opportunities and resources that align with their goals, families begin to take control of their own lives.
- You will hold parents accountable by checking-in by phone or home visits, to find out how they are progressing.
- Be sure to build trust by always following through on your commitments to families.
- Remind parents about the goals they’ve set, connect these goals to outcomes, and give a push if families need to work harder on goals.
- Be encouraging, supportive, and look for any obstacles that may be hindering progress.
- Understand the obstacles they face and know what can be done for them.
- Be a sounding board for families to realize their own value.
- Be a “pattern recognizer” offering concern and support at the appropriate time.
- Don’t make promises that can’t be kept. Families are looking for genuine help. Be honest and clear about what one can and cannot do. Giving false hope is not productive.
- Be understanding, but not an investigator.

- Don't make promises that can't be kept. Families are looking for genuine help. Be honest and clear about what one can and cannot do. Giving false hope is not productive.
- Show up on time and don't cancel appointments.
- Do what you say you are going to do.
- Commit to partnering with each family.
- Be open and honest.
- Take action on their goals.
- Make sure families are part of the problem-solving process, and that this process is a discussion. Remember that families have experienced barriers with other organizations and may have been disqualified from services, put on long waiting lists, etc.
- Be available and accessible.
- Celebrate the accomplishment of goals, no matter how small they may seem.

Cultural Responsiveness

NAZ and partners are committed to inclusive practice, and are aware that as our reach expands, so will the client demographic that we serve. NAZ is also committed to hiring and retaining staff that reflect all of the cultures and languages of the families that we serve to the best of our ability.

NAZ staff are supported in their discovery and learning of working across differences, including gender, race, ethnicity, language, and orientation. Concepts of culturally infused practice are included in staff training, individual supervisions, and throughout agency policies and practices.

NAZ staff are allies and partners in their work with families. Staff are expected to learn, reflect on and understand the patterns and effects of oppression and injustice as it relates to work with families, access to services, and the change process. Listening and observing are key to this process, as well as a deep comfort with uncertainty and unknowing. Operating as a respectful and "informed not-knower" is key in the work with families. Also, it is important to understand the lived experiences of potential oppression as well as understanding one's own power and privilege in relationship to their families.

Being honest with self, the families, peers and manager are crucial components to providing culturally responsive and thoughtful engagement practices. We will evolve and learn, with an expectation of transparency and self-awareness.

Collaborative Engagement & Feedback Loops

“Activating feedback loops”

The act of moving towards collaborative engagement within a complex and layered set of partners, systems, and with families requires layers of collaboration within the partner group, and careful nurturing of that network. It is evident that the players all influence one another constantly and represent their own system that continuously evolves.

That system of partners is then intended to engage families in the process of moving programs, policies, practices through stages of policy and practice examination, consultation, prototyping/piloting, evaluation - all with the aim of moving towards improvements and outcomes for families.

This requires activating feedback loops to connect the work that partners do with each other and with families. These loops encompass: exploring areas of interest for improvement and innovation, identifying opportunities for learning, co-creating activities to learn and test, coordinating multiple interests and perspectives on gathering family leadership and feedback, evaluation of policy and practice, and so on.

The overall process of determining the goal for inviting feedback from families, the specific areas of interest and/or problems, the best method for getting feedback, and developing a collaborative approach to seeking their input and leadership from families took multiple forms over the course of this site’s time in the 2-Gen Policy Network.

In previous years (especially pre-COVID-19 and its limitations), this collaboration held in-person family meetings and events that were intended to:

- nurture relationships and trust between families and organizations,
- nurture systems-level engagement and conversation with families,
- connect families,
- create opportunities for better understanding of family experience and feedback on identified issues and/or opportunities for improvement,
- generate formal documentation of families’ experience and feedback that could be shared with collaborating partners responsible for shifting the systems and policies that support families.

One particularly effective example was a gathering of families that was designed, facilitated, and witnessed by a cross-section of collaborating partners in our site (NAZ, Hired, Hennepin County, and other employment service provider partners of Hennepin County).

Collaborative family engagement through key relationships

The 2020 - 2021 work plan years focused on gathering family feedback via one-on-one relationships with a family’s MFIP Employment Counselor at Hired and/or their NAZ Family Achievement Coach. In many cases, it was a collaborative effort between the two. Specifically, a NAZ Family Achievement Coach is co-located (literally located and working from within a partnering organization) within Hired, integrated into the team there, supported to partner closely with an Employment Counselor, and expected to understand and align with the culture of this partner (as well as NAZ’s culture) to better support families.

In this partnership, the Hired Employment Counselor and NAZ Coach have different roles and relationships with the family, and work together to determine who should take the lead on engaging families around specific goals and opportunities, presenting an incentive for engagement, taking the lead with follow up and reminders, extending gratitude for family input, and so on.

Also, the inclusion of the DHS policy team members at monthly meetings became an important symbol and action steps for further evolving the feedback loops between collaborating circles of people and organizations.

Collaborative family survey development during 2020 -2021

NAZ 2-Generation Policy Network partners (including the Northside Achievement Zone, Hired, Hennepin County, and MN Department of Human Services (DHS), as well as their evaluation partner, Wilder Research) developed and administered two online surveys in December 2020 and October 2021. These surveys were intended to inform a feedback loop, so that families' perspectives and experiences could inform potential changes to practice and policy (including the emergent after care prototype) and thus improve future families' experiences and outcomes. The methods and findings from these two surveys were reported separately.

In the development of each survey instrument, the 2-Gen partners took a rigorous collaborative approach. Representatives from each partner agency/organization contributed to the development of the survey instrument, including generating questions, and refining language. This collaborative approach was essential to ensure the surveys would generate relevant, informative, and reliable findings. Each partner brought their unique perspective (such as state-level policy, or family-facing provider role) to the process. Hennepin County and DHS partners were able to create and shape questions that would generate information most relevant to county- and state-level practice, while Hired and NAZ partners were able to bring forward their experiences working alongside families, and speak to what questions would be most relevant to their lives and worded so as to be meaningful and consistently interpreted.

The process of creating specific questions for the surveys challenged partners to identify gaps in their knowledge/understanding and think critically about what information they needed from families to inform their work: What do we not know or understand about the lived experiences of families who have been on MFIP? What questions do we need to answer before moving forward with a prototype?

For example, in the development of the first survey, partners wanted to develop a list of potential MFIP after care services, and ask families which services would be most helpful after leaving MFIP. But in the process of developing the list of potential after care services, partners realized they needed further guidance from DHS about which services could qualify as reimbursable under TANF guidance. The process of developing the survey instrument brought those important questions to the forefront.

Our team this year modeled the complex interactions and a system of mutual engagement very well, in support of numerous families, multiple initiatives, and challenges that were very

complex due to limited face-to-face interactions as a result of COVID-19 and with the aim of minimizing the burden for families as they contributed their time and insights.

Family survey planning sample outline

The following outline, shaped by Wilder Research, offers steps that might be involved in a collaborative survey development process. It provides a breakdown of the potential steps and questions for working with multiple partners in developing an approach to engaging families. The level of detail and complexity for each collaboration and audience can be determined based on needs and resources.

The technical development of the survey involved several planning and implementation stages. The 2(a) step (planning) shows a detailed breakdown of factors to be considered. Implementation and the later stages would likely have similar and corresponding components.

Sample Outline

1. **Intro**
 - a. Prepared by _____ for _____
 - b. Purpose(s) – why prepared? Who can benefit, and how, from doing Parent Engagement?
 - c. Sources of information
2. **Steps** – subdivided to show the elements to be included (or at least considered) in each stage
 - a. **Planning**
 - i. **Why?** Identification of the need: for what purpose(s) do we need parent engagement? What process(es) could it facilitate and/or what decision(s) could it help to inform?
 - ii. **What?** To meet this purpose, what information is needed? (and/or what kind of engagement is essential to facilitate the process?)
 - iii. Note: identifying the research questions (what information is needed, at what level of detail) is the first step, but not the same as identifying the actual interview/focus group/survey questions (exactly what wording to use when asking, and in what order to ask them)
 - iv. **Who?**
 1. Who is the best source to provide the needed information? Who has the relationships / lived experience / insights to provide the information that can be relied on as representative of the target population?
 2. Who should lead the effort (i.e., be the interviewer or focus group leader)? Who could take the needed notes?
 - v. **How?**

1. *How could we reach such a person/group? Who has relationships and trust with them to be able to credibly assure them that their involvement is of value to them and their community as well as to the organization desiring this engagement?*
 2. *What is the best method / medium to reach out to this person/group? (Phone / text / email)*
 3. *What kind of engagement? Participation in a meeting? Focus group (just one? Or are there likely to be significant differences that would require separate groups?) Individual interviews? Survey? (If possible, identify pros and cons for each method)*
 4. *What kind of documentation will be used? If a meeting, focus group, or interview, is a full verbatim transcription needed, or just detailed notes taken in real time and cleaned shortly afterward? Is it necessary to record the conversation? Could a recording potentially lessen participants' comfort with sharing honestly and openly?*
- vi. **When and where?**
1. *Is there a preferred time, or a time that would be bad, for asking this person/group to engage with the project? (time of year / day of week / time of day) What responsibilities and time commitments do we need to be respectful of, and plan around?*
 2. *If an in-person group or interview, what location will be familiar, trusted, and comfortable for the target population? Can they easily "see" themselves in this location? Is it accessible and convenient?*
 3. *Set a date or set of alternate dates (if meeting/focus group) or a window of time (interviews / survey), making sure there is enough time for data analysis and report preparation before results must be shared and decisions made*

b. Implementation

- i. *Preparation of the instrument (meeting agenda; focus group or interview questions including follow-up prompts; survey questionnaire) – must include informed consent language including how information will be shared / used. Ideally have participation from people who will use the results, to ensure information priorities are taken into account. Also have someone from the source group (or with close knowledge of them) review to ensure questions (terminology, other language issues) will be interpreted as intended.*
- ii. *Preparation of script for inviting participation (including follow-ups and reminders)*
- iii. *If in-person (meeting or focus group), consider the following:*
 1. *What are the arrangements for transportation, child care, and food?*

2. *Begin and end on time, if culturally appropriate (and know whether or not it is!)*
 3. *Consider the arrangement of space (circular seating? Open-centered vs closed table? Name tents?)*
 4. *Get permission if recording.*
- iv. *If survey: briefer is better. Closed-ended is easier to answer than open-ended, but be careful that closed-ended response options cover all likely responses, and/or include an open-ended “Other (please specify)” option..*
- c. **Data cleaning** *(could probably be included with data analysis)*
- d. **Data analysis** *(quantitative vs. qualitative; coding/grouping by theme; straight frequencies vs. crosstabs) – bearing purposes in mind*
- i. *If feasible, consider a participatory analysis approach that engages with community of focus or the participants themselves, to create shared meaning.*
- e. **Report preparation** – *again bearing purposes and audiences in mind: What level of detail is needed? What organizations will be on the receiving end? Include a methodology section? What are the limitations?*
- f. **Closing the loop**: *Follow up with parents about the results, how they were used, and (if possible) with what impact. If at all possible, share a summary of findings with them (not necessarily the same report prepared for practitioners).*

“Closing feedback loops”

Following the process outlined above, several steps were taken to further work and close the various loops between families and partners in the system - all important to utilizing the feedback that we received, stimulating consultation, and initiating action to impact programs, policy and practice.

Steps taken to follow up with families:

- **Families themselves became part of the information chain/feedback loop** for the first survey when, at the request of the DHS Commissioner, Hired convened a follow-up listening session between some participating families and the Commissioner and some state representatives from the Northside.
- The **written summary of findings** from the second survey was sent to families who participated in it along with a message of sincere gratitude for the engagement of families.

Follow up with partners:

- **Findings were shared outward to partners both at the local and state levels.** We especially used our Core Team (a cross section of our collaborating partners who meet regularly) to present and discuss the survey results, use the feedback from that discussion to further explore the results for more data/insights, create and refine a final summary to be shared within organizations.
- **Each collaborating partner was invited to share family feedback out into their organizational circles and networks,** with the goal of moving from discussion to potential action and improvements at the program/practice, systems, and policy level. For the state, the event was an example of a process seen as valuable for breaking down silos and instituting feedback loops as work is done on how to formalize/institutionalize such processes. It was helpful to the state to be able to identify a specific pool of families who could be reached out to quickly for feedback. The existence of relationships between families and trusted Coaches was important for this to be possible.
- **2-Gen partners have begun to apply what they learned from the family surveys** to their work on testing, iterating, and learning about an MFIP after care prototype, as well as the potential avenues for continuing their work moving forward into 2022 (beyond the 2-Gen Policy Network contract). This included both applying answers to some of their research questions (such as, which services and supports do families need most?) as well as identifying additional questions to be explored, or areas of answers that merited exploration in greater detail (such as the counter-intuitive result that responding families did not express a disinclination to participating in “another program” after MFIP).

The following message was shared with families that participated in our most recent round of engagement and serves as a fitting conclusion to this document.

“We would like to express our sincerest gratitude for your honest thoughts and feedback on the survey response that you recently submitted.

Your feedback will be used to expand and improve services for families. Your voice and experience are impactful and will help us make a difference in the lives of our families and communities.

Thank you again for your willingness to share.”