

# Deepening educator and system practices for student and family voice:

Insights from AAMA's Early  
Literacy Collaborative

## About This Brief

The student, family and educator co-design processes outlined in this brief are from the *Early Literacy Collaborative (ELC)* by Seattle Public Schools (SPS) Office of African American Achievement (AAMA). AAMA's ELC focused on two SPS elementary schools and set out to center justice-focused approaches in identity-affirming, culturally-aligned learning environments, as defined by Black students and families. This work is grounded in a community call to leverage family and community assets, increase culturally responsive instruction, and build parent power (*Our Voice Our Vision*, Cooley, et al., [2021](#)).

This brief serves as a process manual for educators committed to cycles of inquiry and impact with students, families, and communities. It offers a high-level template for engaging with students and/or families to improve instructional practice and relationships, grounded in their experiential knowledge, and is one of many AAMA engagement efforts. **While this year-long effort included design phases and iteration, this brief offers suggestions for engaging with your own school communities.**

[Visit the Research & Evaluation reports page for findings](#)

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For questions and more information about this document, please contact the following:

Dr. Mia Williams  
Assistant Superintendent, Office of African American Male Achievement  
[mparker@seattleschools.org](mailto:mparker@seattleschools.org)

### ABSTRACT

The student, family and educator co-design processes outlined in this brief are from the Early Literacy Collaborative (ELC) by Seattle Public Schools (SPS) Office of African American Achievement (AAMA). AAMA's ELC focused on two SPS elementary schools and set out to center justice-focused approaches in identity-affirming, culturally-aligned learning environments, as defined by Black students and families. This work is grounded in a community call to leverage family and community assets, increase culturally responsive instruction, and build parent power (Our Voice Our Vision, Cooley, et al., 2021).

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# Engagement and planning

## Bringing together collaborators, setting goals, and conducting invitation outreach

Families are children's first teachers and hold a critical role in their education. Intentional learning alongside families and students best begins with clarity about the community and educators we intend to invite into learning, as well as the topic or goal that we wish to collectively address. One place to start is with collaborator outreach, which involves identifying potential allies in the intended learning work with families or students.

### Early Literacy Collaborative Insights

The ELC design team established two driving questions to guide our inquiry: 1) What learning experiences, family and community resources, and educator practices support the development of critical early literacies, particularly for boys of African descent? And 2) How can educators partner with families and communities to foster joyous, critical literacy learning across a school system?

Potential collaborators include other teachers, parents, instructional assistants, mentors, community-based organizations, and coaches who may have interest in co-creating or learning about the effort. Seek out school leaders aligned with the work to sponsor the effort.

Another place to begin is selection of a central topic or outcome, which can be either inherited from a broader plan or goal or initially chosen as a way of bringing in interested collaborators (e.g., CSIPs). In whatever order, these often-simultaneous processes of finding educator allies and identifying a central topic are iterative and intertwined with one another.

Once collaborators and possible goals have been identified, there can be enough intention to invite students and families into the design. This involves **co-planning the type of learning structure that best suits the community and context (e.g., monthly online learning series, quarterly family leadership council, one-time community feedback event, semester-long co-design)** and conducting robust engagement with communities to invite them into a safe and transformative space.

Communicating a project's intentions and timeline to families or students often requires engaging in multiple forms of outreach that meet families where they are most comfortable communicating, and students in ways that support their instructional and peer experiences. Further principles of initial engagement and design are outlined in "practices and processes" on the next page.

### Early Literacy Collaborative Insights

We created a **timeline for planning and communication** engagement with families, students, and educators during 2021-22 Semester 2. Visualizing our trajectory, also served as a flexible project management tool – updating events as needed.





# Engagement and planning

## Practices and Processes

The following table outlines high-level practices and phases when engaging and co-designing with students and families, meant to apply to yearlong or short-term efforts and strategies.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>1. Bring together collaborators necessary to support learning with students and/or families by...</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ <b>Building from trusting relationships.</b> We initially relied on the strength of existing relationships for partnership in scoping a student and family learning effort, which enabled us to safely collaborate with (and critique) one another.</li><li>❑ <b>Promoting school leader readiness</b> Understanding the readiness of school leaders to center family engagement is key. Their comfort in sharing power with families and advocating for alignment within building-wide goals and strategies will be part of determining the scope of your learning with families and students.</li><li>❑ <b>Aligning goals to share the work.</b> Like much of our work, the ELC design team was constrained for time and FTE, reaching out to potential collaborators with aligned goals was critical to share the work in big and small ways.</li></ul> |
| <b>2. Choose a central topic and goal that generates a question you want to answer by...</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ <b>Understanding agency in goal setting.</b> Basing inquiry on a pressing, community-relevant question, is the best way to support mutual goals. Goals are often chosen as part a school or district strategy. Here, the approach can be a place for agency.</li><li>❑ <b>Planning long-term.</b> Early on in planning, consider short- and long-term outcomes (e.g., how to sustain family spaces if there is momentum and interest).</li><li>❑ <b>Selecting a method.</b> The right method (e.g., event, focus groups, co-design, interviews) for addressing your topic may vary in terms of direct benefits for participants and lack of background information. <b>Avoid re-engaging communities on the same content before showing evidence of change!</b></li></ul>  |
| <b>3. Identify and conduct invitation outreach to students and/or families through</b>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ <b>Varied communication.</b> Engaging families takes time and multiple modes of communication (e.g., individual calls, text, email, translation, printed flyers). A warm invite sets positive expectations, essential for strong discourse and relationships.</li><li>❑ <b>In-school student engagement.</b> Collaborating with staff to schedule time during the school day can ensure participation among a more representative group of students.</li><li>❑ <b>Compensation.</b> Whenever possible, offer compensation (e.g., stipend) for families' time, intellectual labor, and expertise!</li></ul>   |

" Calling to build a relationship is key where families feel 'held.' They feel like it's their space[... I] think it brings them closer to the work authentically.

**Dawit Alemayehu.**  
UW Fellow w/ AAMA



Discussion during building-leaders co-planning session

## Early Literacy Collaborative Insights

We selected the learning method of participatory co-design for this initiative. Co-design brings community, educators, and researchers together to design innovations that address problems of practice in learning and social equity (Roschelle & Penuel, 2006; Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). Co-designing with families of Black boys around sustaining home literacy practices meant creating an environment and affinity spaces where normative power dynamics could be disrupted and families' stories and experiences were centered as expertise (See Ishimaru et al., 2018; Bang et al, 2010).

# Trust and mutual learning

## Building relationships with and learning from the experiences of students and their families

“

I'm really big on communication. It's important for teachers to establish a relationship early with families, especially for Black boys ... I think my son does a great job with his current teacher. She's so invested in his needs and that plays a huge role in his success.”

*African American Mother,  
Emerson Elementary School,  
AAMA Early Literacy Collaborative*

Students and families are our best informants of challenges within and solutions for our school communities (e.g., Olivos, 2006). Here we posit that **how we engage and “set the table” for those we serve, is just as important as the input, inference and outcomes we collectively seek.**

We can consider a wide spectrum of engagement spanning from student and family input on content at one end and authentic co-leadership towards common goals on the other. Student and family input (e.g., surveys or feedback-based focus groups) can perpetuate normative power dynamics of schools as extractive spaces, especially for our families of color. While surveys and feedback forums are

useful – and when done well can yield a breadth of information – they also represent a missed opportunity for deeper connection and substantive joint-solutions.

Progress towards any goal moves at the speed of trust (Convey, 2008). Collaborative and inferential approaches aim to **uplift a welcoming and affirming environment where students and families are centered – meaning their priorities are reflected in the meeting content, time is focused on listening, the environment is one of open dialogue and mutual empathy (e.g., use of storytelling).** Both problems and solutions can emerge through the dialogue about people's experiences (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016). Ideally, these processes of interaction are carefully organized so families can engage with questions, reflect, build on past insights and refine goals and outcomes over time.

Curating a welcoming virtual or in-person space also supports in-depth dialogue. **This can involve starting meetings with music that invites multiple languages, sharing a meal, personal check-in/warm-ups with students and families or an iterative meeting structure where families convene multiple times.** The next page outlines some practices for uplifting nurturing and generative dialogues with inference cycles.

## Early Literacy Collaborative Insights

Sessions with students and families were recorded to support the effort's goal of identifying home-literacy practices. From hours of focus group transcripts, the team qualitatively coded using an inductive approach and presented data back to families during monthly meetings for feedback and to spark deeper discussion. **See the Appendix for questions and research report.**



*Emerson Elem. students around table for focus group, AAMA ELC*

# Trust and mutual learning

## Practices and Processes

- 1. Prepare for effective gatherings with students and/or families by...**
  - ❑ **Creating flexible spaces.** Meeting students and families in a setting of their choosing and offering multiple dates can allow for broader participation. Consider translation support and culture or language-based affinity groups.
  - ❑ **Communicating outcomes.** Be clear early on about initial goals, anticipated impact from focus groups or conversations and how information will be shared.
  - ❑ **Co-planning and -facilitation.** If a recurring convening structure, invite interested students or families into planning over time and collect feedback. If goal-setting is shared, co-plan the first meeting and support families and students in facilitation. This adds time but improves the content and effort reach.
- 2. Host gatherings with students and/or families by...**
  - ❑ **Setting the tone.** Acknowledging the broader harm of education systems can be one way to forge a new path for trust. Building in time for restorative and reflective moments can allow parents to re-orient their expectation of the space.
  - ❑ **Inviting joy.** Create a welcoming environment by starting with music (and if possible) providing food and/or time for families or students to socialize.
  - ❑ **Space for open dialogue.** Begin with storytelling, centering student and/or family voice in the room and make space for co-facilitation and process feedback.
- 3. Make sense of and value student (or family) gatherings by...**
  - ❑ **Recording.** Recording (via video, audio or facilitator notes), [gathering permission](#) from students and families, communicating boundaries around its use and planning for the level of analysis is important and honors family and student time.
  - ❑ **Analyzing data.** This can involve systematic, qualitative analysis of session transcripts or facilitator debrief on notes to surface themes, practices, and first-person testimony as well as sharing findings with students and families for input.

“

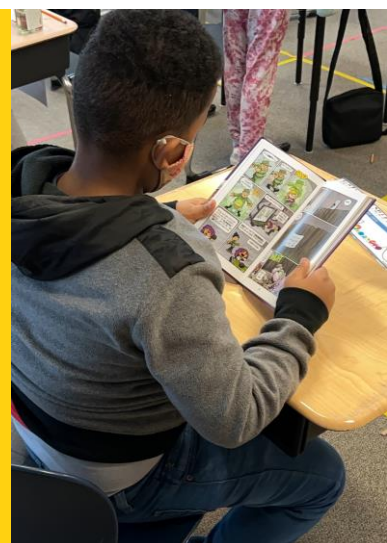
... important to set an atmosphere that [families] can relate to. And start off with the right question: 'how do you want be welcomed into a space?' Starting from that aspect of how to welcome people into our space and then translate that from *our* space to where it's *your* space.”

*Asosa Sailiai, SPS School-Family Partnerships*

“

I'm always going to be for healing and growth. Healing looks different for every person, but important because [I see] our parents experiencing a disconnect ... Is there is an opportunity for a restorative moment in sessions [to offer] a resource of healing? What could that look like to just honor that time? That way, parents also get comfortable with it, and it grows.

*Nichelle Page, SPS Office of African American Male Achievement*



*Olympic Hills Elem. student reading, AAMA ELC*



# Implementation and sustainability

## Using insights to change instructional- and system-level practices while building student and family power

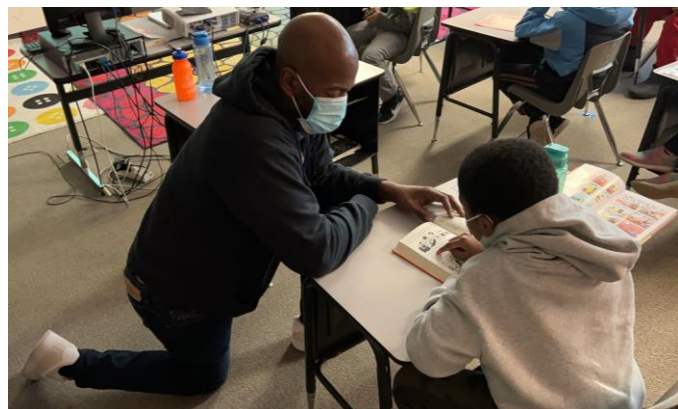
The systemic and seemingly intractable nature of racism in our education systems necessitates: 1) deep, **restorative, relationships** (grounded in co-investigation) with our families and students; 2) acknowledgement of racism and bias as **inter-generational**, having impacted (and impacting) parents and communities; and 3) strong implementation, with reach, that invites **accountability to communities**.

When co-designing with impact goals in mind, how can we improve the efficacy and sustainability of our practice changes?

Learning cycles with students and families ought to inform practices today and contribute to on-going, systemic change for years to come.

**Ensuring that insights live beyond the initial classrooms, living rooms, conference tables and screens where we convene** is not only an act of respect but an obligation. All too often families and students are asked to re-engage in the same

dialogue over time without evidence of meaningful outcomes. **One way to honor the time and intellectual contributions of our families and students is communicating impact and advancing the dialogue before re-engaging in a discourse that itself can perpetuate harm and re-traumatize.** Disrupting this dynamic also involves drawing from relevant, past data and taking the time to sit with inferences to cultivate action plans—a phase that may also involve student and family perspectives.



## Early Literacy Collaborative Insights

### Findings and Results

Our co-design process with families and learning sessions with students generated claims around literacy experiences, home literacy practices, and co-designed resources or artifacts (see Research Report).

- ✓ **Claim 1.** Black students and families, especially those of East African descent, desire culturally-grounded approaches to teaching and learning about their traditions, history, and home language(s) as a way to sustain their cultures.
- ✓ **Practice 1.** Using the tool of storytelling as a vessel for personal and family histories
- ✓ **Select Artifacts.** Generation of an online resource hub with documents, playlists, and books; establishment of a parent-led Telegram channel

### Partnership-driven Next Steps

AAMA's partnership with [Early Literacy, Third Grade Goal](#) enabled embedded in-school practices and routes to sustain family relationships and convenings:

- ✓ Co-planning professional development in 13 priority schools with Early Literacy Coaches
- ✓ Co-development of family literacy nights with Family Literacy Connectors and in-school, Bilingual Instructional Assistants
- ✓ Further support of in-school parent leadership spaces
- ✓ Sharing effort findings and process with SPS community

# Implementation and sustainability

## Practices and Processes

### 1. Communicate learning goals and student progress by...

- ❑ **Creating feedback loops.** Sharing back what was heard in a concise and actionable way for input and resonance is key. Later providing space for students and families to reflect on changes made from findings is a critical step in trust and accountability.
- ❑ **Intentional dissemination.** After engaging families in sensemaking with their data and/or themes, talk about how to share what you learned, meeting mutual goals and supporting implementation. Consider the primary audience for findings and the degree to which the communication medium (e.g., staff meeting, PD session, report, blog, family forum) reaches this audience.

### 2. Invite other educators to participate in the process by...

- ❑ **Supporting a strong reception.** Ensuring educators and/or system leaders are ready to receive information is another important step. At its best this is the work of establishing a culture of inquiry in your department, school or organization and supporting dialogue and mutual learning among educators and families.
- ❑ **Communication for value alignment.** Model the value and practice of family partnerships by communicating insights from family or student to educator audiences. Strong communication aims to reach those who are aligned and those who need evidence to buy-in. Humanize information with direct quotes, photos, and context, and where possible create opportunities for students and families to sit at decision-making tables, sharing their stories directly.

### 3. Build student and parent power by...

- ❑ **Nurturing the momentum.** If the engagement (one-time or series) has been robust and mutually beneficial, consider new resources or structures for continuing to learn together if possible. Creating warm hand-offs, time to celebrate and scaffolding any leadership transitions are ways to carry the work without stalling the momentum. Always good to launch any student and family engagement with short- and possible long-term goals in mind.
- ❑ **Supporting co-accountability.** Bring students and families into formative and summative measure conversations that have stemmed from insights learned.

“

The practices from this year, all the literacy practices that came out, that's part of where we start to narrow down some key strategies that we see doing with families and with some educators together on that committee and then deciding. You know, how we might want to then implement those in the classroom.”

*Libby DeBell, Principal, Olympic Hills*



*Olympic Hills  
Reading Block*



# Thank you

Thank you to the students, families, leaders, and educators at Olympic Hills and Emerson Elementary schools and the project team/co-authors who supported this effort! Much appreciation to amazing, Bilingual Instructional Assistant partners, Yemane Ghebremesih and Shukri Wehelie and Family Literacy Connectors Chaffawn Smith and Munira Teklu as well as our SPS central office, educator and building leader and University of Washington report reviewers. We would like to extend a special thanks to parent leaders and co-facilitators Addis and Rahel for your wisdom and instruction in leading our celebration and learning with educators. Deep gratitude for principals, Erin Rasmussen and Libby DeBell for your creativity, contributions, and deep care.



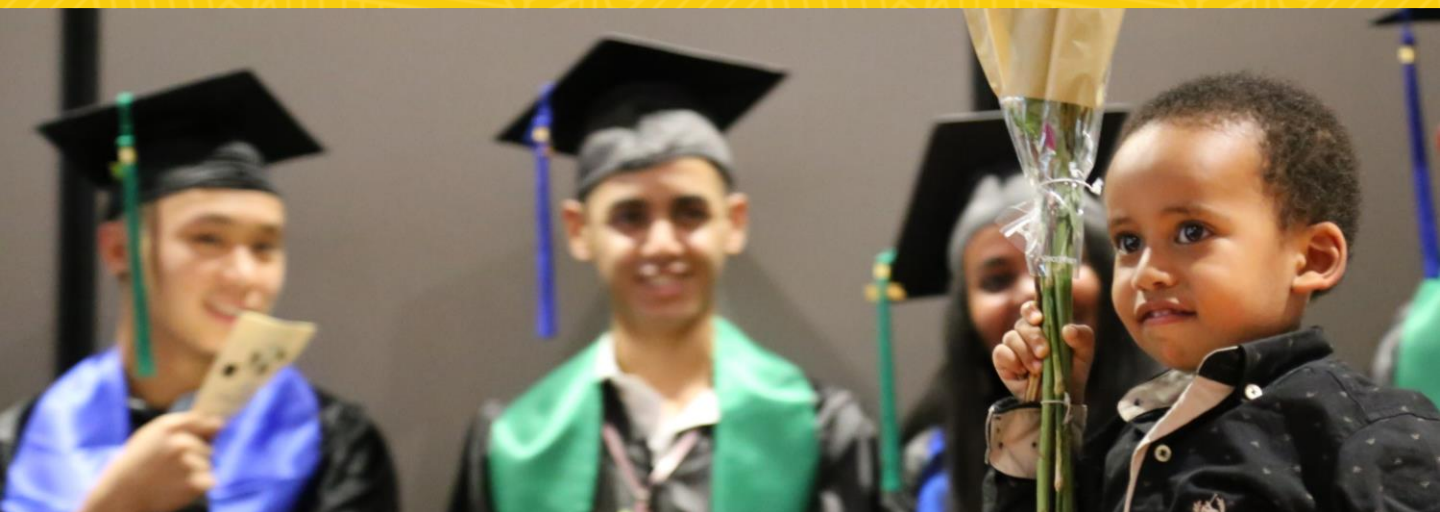
Seattle Public Schools  
Office of African American  
Male Achievement  
2445 3rd Ave South  
Seattle, WA 98134

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# Appendix

## Sample open-ended student questions organized by topic

The following are select open-ended questions for engaging primary and secondary students and in a broad set of in-school and home learning.

### ***Climate, belonging and joy***

- ***Reimagining schools.*** If you could design the perfect school – meaning a space where you love to learn – what would it look like? <sup>1</sup>
- ***Joy.*** At school, when is *learning* fun for you? [*follow-up*] Can you tell me more about that time and what made it fun? <sup>1</sup>
- ***Valued at school.*** Can you tell me about a time at school where you felt important? [*follow-up*] What was it about that space/person/experience that mattered? <sup>1</sup>

### ***Identity-connected learning and relationships***

- ***Identity exploration at home.*** Can you tell a time that you got to explore (or learn more about) your family history? If it was fun, can you share what made it fun? <sup>1</sup>
- ***Identity connected learning.*** Does the learning in your school include your family background? If not, what ideas do you have for your school to make learning more connected to your experience and background? And why does this matter to you (if at all)? <sup>1</sup>
- ***Educator relationships.*** Think of the best teacher you've had so far. What grade were you in, and what specifically did that teacher do that made them the best?

### ***Co-designing goals and engagement***

- ***Co-designing communication.*** You all have already shared some brilliant ideas and we will learn a lot here from one another! How would you want your teachers to learn from what we create together? (e.g., I'd want to meet with teachers)

*Note.* <sup>1</sup>Indicates questions written and piloted with 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, all other items among teens.

## Conversation Tips and Suggestions

- ***Selecting a facilitator.*** Consider the role of relationships and external perspectives when selecting a facilitator. Creating a safe space often begins with who is in the room. Also, important to consider is promoting educator capacity to process and deeply hear families – doing the work of translating stories to practice change. Using a mix of cultural and linguistic affinity spaces and educator-student-family spaces can support safety and joint learning.
- ***Validation and paraphrasing.*** Listen carefully and deeply, occasionally providing re-caps of what you heard. This is a great way to validate what is being said. By being affirming but neutral you can know if you heard it correctly without steering the conversation.
- ***Going deeper.*** Asking “what do you see (or feel, or experience) that makes you say that?” is a useful way to ask for more context in a neutral way. Gently encouraging students and families to share reasoning or stories underlying attitudes also comes with trust and time.
- ***Concluding ideas.*** When done sharing, as a closing question “What more can we find/What more can we know?”

# Appendix

## Select family items organized by topic

The following are select open-ended questions for families and in a broad set of in-school and home learning.

### ***Climate, belonging and joy***

- ***School connection.*** What does actually “being in community” with your school look like?
- ***Supportive environment.*** What does a safe and nurturing learning environment look like for you and your community? Are these reflected in your experience with your child’s school?
- ***Excited to Learn.*** What does it look like when your child is excited to learn and share their brilliance? What must be present for this to happen at school?
- ***Joy in subject area.*** When have you seen your child enjoying [subject area, e.g., “literacy”] ? And what made this joyful or successful?
- ***Joy in home-learning.*** Share a time at home when you saw your child joyful about a new discovery or learning? And what do they experience at home that you wish was present at school?
- ***Relevance.*** How (if at all) do you see your child’s [subject area e.g., “literacy”] learning show-up in daily life?

### ***Identity-connected learning and relationships***

- ***Identity at home.*** Please recall a time you talked about your history and culture (or experienced a cultural practice) that sparked joy for your child?
- ***Identity connected instruction.*** What cultural values or practices are central to you as a parent and which of these would you want your child to experience during the school day?
- ***Content-area Identity.*** How does your child’s math/literacy/art education learning connect with who they are?
- ***Educator relationships.*** What three things do you have (or do you wish you had) that establish good relationships between families and educators?

### ***Co-designing goals and engagement***

- ***Co-designing goals.*** What would you hope to create together (or learn family-to-family) over the next sessions and how might you want to share insights back to educators?
- ***Sustaining community.*** Are there ways you would like to maintain connections amongst each other as parents and with your schools (e.g., WhatsApp thread, ongoing in-person/virtual meetings, providing further feedback to educators next year)?

*Note. All items above were written for and piloted with a racially and ethnically diverse group of families of Black students in Seattle Public Schools.*