**Responsible Use of Data and Technology in Education:
Community Engagement to Ensure Students and Families Are Helped, Not Hurt**

Community engagement has always been an important component of K-12 education, from involving parents in their child's individual experience to systemic decision-making. As the use of data and technology has increased, so has the need for schools and districts to engage the community in how to use data and technology responsibly while not sacrificing students' privacy and civil rights. Without this important work, the potential harms can include creating inequitable access to opportunity, sharing of personal information, and use of data to punish rather than help students. Community engagement around these issues has been viewed as more challenging due to the complex, technical, and legal nature of the work; obstacles which were exacerbated during COVID-19, given the speed at which new technology and data collection were implemented. However, it is more important than ever to engage communities to ensure that data and technology meet the needs of students and families without sacrificing their safety and well-being.

What is Community Engagement in Education?

Community engagement in education is the involvement of stakeholders outside the school system in decision-making processes. In the case of education data and technology, it is especially important to engage the people about whom the data is being collected, shared, and used – which means students and their families. Community engagement can span a range of involvement and authority, beginning with basic information sharing to offering advisory opportunities to empowering communities with decision-making authority. It can take a variety of forms like surveys, focus groups, town halls, and advisory/governing councils and can occur at different levels of the educational system, from the school to the state education agency.

What Does Community Engagement Look Like During COVID-19?

The pandemic has exacerbated long-standing challenges in involving community members in decisions about using education data and technology. In spring 2020, the majority of school districts rapidly shifted to remote learning, which limited opportunities for public engagement and increased privacy and security vulnerabilities, all of which led to increased community concern. Similarly, there was some but not enough community engagement around how data and technology are needed to support plans to reopen schools, whether in-person or virtually, for the 2020-21 school year. As COVID-19 expands the information that schools collect and share (e.g. information about students' symptoms or COVID testing results), it is important to consider how the community is engaged in those decision-making processes as well as the role of consent, given its limitations, to address related privacy concerns.

What are the Best Practices Engaging Communities to Ensure Data and Technology Helps Students and Families?

Research is clear that parent engagement improves the effectiveness of students' education and can increase families' buy-in to school and district practices, yet a recent survey of parents from CDT shows

that only four in ten parents have been engaged on issues of data and technology. To change this dynamic, the following issues need to be addressed:

- **Identify a clear purpose for community engagement:** To solicit meaningful input and engender public trust, decision-makers should set and communicate clear goals and expectations around the purpose for community engagement and how the information they receive will be used. If families expect that feedback will be used for advisory or decision-making purposes, decision-makers must be willing to utilize the feedback in this way, even if it involves changing tactics or slowing/stopping work.
- **Engage communities early in the decision-making process:** For engagement to be most effective, it should take place early in the decision-making process. This builds trust and buy-in among families as it offers transparency into how data and technology are being used, and gives them an opportunity to shape decisions from the outset. Engagement efforts that take place after decisions have already been made or are in response to a negative event like a data breach are still important but will be less successful.
- **Proactively communicate with families:** Research indicates that parents trust schools to protect their child's data, but grow concerned as they learn more about what data is collected and used. One key element of effective community engagement is to be transparent and proactively communicate with families, so they have accurate information upon which to base their input.
- **Build capacity among communities to help them engage:** Students and families may lack technical and legal capacity to fully understand certain aspects of how data and technology may be used while protecting student privacy. To gather valuable feedback, especially on highly technical issues, it is important to spend time at the outset building understanding.
- **Prioritize inclusivity within community engagement efforts:** Parents are not a monolith, and research suggests that they have significantly different views across demographics like race, income, and geography. Therefore, it is important to design a community engagement process that accommodates all parents, including offering multiple modalities for input (e.g., in-person meetings, survey, seat on committee), is accessible to speakers of multiple languages, addresses barriers to participation (e.g. meals, child care), and honors cultural differences.
- **Consider role, & limitations, of consent:** Historically, families have engaged with school officials on issues of data, technology, and privacy solely when asked for their consent. Consent should not replace meaningful community engagement. It is often limited in its effectiveness because use cases change, consent forms may not be clear, there may not be equitable alternatives available, and certain uses of student data should never be permitted, even with consent.

While these are general best practices, during COVID-19 they have become even more important as the use of data and technology in education has increased dramatically, prompting greater concerns about potentially harmful uses of data and technology. Gathering community buy-in at the outset, as new technologies are deployed, will help address these concerns and allow educators to maximize the benefits of data and technology for students and their families.