

# ENGAGING STUDENTS AND CAREGIVERS IN BUFFALO PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND PASADENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

JULY, 2023

Ryan Kapa, TNTP  
Jency Kanichirayil, TNTP  
Amy Shah, TNTP  
Kendyl Sullivan, TNTP  
Stephanie Kennedy, NIRN

## INTRODUCTION

Student voice. Family/caregiver voice. Community voice. These voices need to be included in implementation to allow for a clearer understanding of needs, exploration of new ideas, and the creation of equitable decision-making ([Engaging Critical Perspectives](#)), but how can they be captured and utilized in a meaningful way?



TNTP, a technical assistance provider in the Effective Implementation Cohort (EIC), addressed the need for increased community input in math curriculum implementation by initiating focus groups with participating students and caregivers in their **two districts**:



Pasadena Unified  
School District  
(PUSD)



Buffalo Public  
Schools (BPS)

In Pasadena, TNTP Analyst Dr. Ryan Kapa engaged students in small group discussions about their experiences and feelings about math. Building on the success of these student focus groups, TNTP replicated them with Buffalo students. Capturing student voices in both districts illuminated the need to hear from caregivers. **To date, TNTP, in partnership with the districts, has conducted over 30 student focus groups and 11 caregiver focus groups across both districts to make connections, bridge gaps in understanding, and continue building trust with the community.**

Findings from student and caregiver focus groups have influenced the communication and engagement strategies of TNTP, PUSD, and BPS in supporting the implementation of each district's chosen high-quality middle-year math curriculum.

### TNTP, in partnership with the districts, has conducted over



Student focus  
groups



Caregiver focus  
groups

- to make connections
- bridge gaps in understanding
- continue building trust with the community

# THE PURPOSE AND EVOLUTION OF FOCUS GROUPS

In planning for the EIC math implementation work, TNTP considered its organizational goals for authentic community and stakeholder engagement in relation to the academic work being done within school systems. Through those goals, TNTP acknowledges that quantitative data (e.g. state assessment data, diagnostic, and survey data) has historically outweighed and overshadowed the real experiences and perceptions of the people behind the numbers. In order to humanize data gathering and analysis, TNTP and the districts agreed that caregiver and student voices, measured qualitatively, would tell a richer story about the progress of sustainable implementation than one anchored in survey data alone. To develop a strategy that ensured stakeholder voices would be included throughout the implementation work, TNTP first partnered with districts to identify existing assets, systems, and structures that would be essential entry points for this work. Among those in Pasadena were school-specific community liaisons, multiple communication channels with direct lines to middle school students and families, active groups for Black and Latinx caregivers, and a student think tank, which regularly informed district decision-making and policy. Coordinator for Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development, Dr. Nadirah Nayo identified Pasadena's High School Leadership Think Tank as the highest-leverage entry point for gathering student voices, given the established relationship and trust already built with students in the group. With these assets in mind, the Pasadena Core Implementation Team set outreach goals for student and caregiver engagement

and identified active members of parent groups, who were representative of EIC priority student demographics, to sit on the district implementation team.

## PUSD HIGH SCHOOL LEADERSHIP THINK TANK

PUSD's Think Tank is a student-led initiative whose mission is to create a safe space for students to connect across campuses, raise consciousness about Pasadena's history, and to provide a platform through which students can create equity within the district and the region.

To learn more, visit the [Think Tank website!](#)

Dr. Kapa supported the team in considering protocols and processes that would effectively leverage district assets while also gathering a variety of data to gain a more comprehensive understanding of district conditions related to implementation. Apart from giving students a platform to engage, discuss, and learn from their peers about their math experiences, Pasadena and TNTP also recognized the significant benefit to teachers. By conveying students' experiences—in their own words—directly to teachers, it could help identify gaps in understanding and foster teachers' openness to the importance of and rationale for implementation activities such as professional development and teacher and coach learning cycles. Once student focus groups were up and running, the Pasadena Core Implementation Team worked to identify how to adapt those systems and structures best to address

caregiver and family engagement goals. In year one of the EIC (2021-2022), PUSD held and gathered data from nine student and three caregiver focus groups.

In Buffalo Public Schools, all work in 2021-2022 was conducted virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions, which prevented student focus groups from occurring as planned. The BPS district implementation team was able to learn from the student and caregiver focus groups being conducted in Pasadena during this time, including processes, protocols, and logistics that worked best and strategies for using and sharing data learned. The BPS team was then able to tailor and apply these learnings to the specific needs and context of their district. With the support of Dr. Kapa, BPS was able to hold and gather data from three student focus groups and one caregiver focus group in year two of the EIC (2022-2023).

## FOCUS GROUP ATTENDANCE

### Year 1 (2021-2022) Pasadena



Students

Caregivers

	Students	Caregivers
# of Focus Groups	9	3
# of Participants	45	13

### Year 2 (2022-2023) Pasadena

# of Focus Groups	23	3
# of Participants	171	27

### Year 2 (2022-2023) Buffalo

# of Focus Groups	3	1
# of Participants	20	2

# PROTOCOLS AND PROCESSES

Designing inclusive protocols and processes was essential for operationalizing focus groups across districts. Dr. Kapa leveraged sample focus group protocols from other TNTP project teams. He borrowed and adapted language to fit specific district contexts and shaped the introduction and group norms sections, which helped to explain who TNTP was to each group and what they hoped to learn from the conversations.

The Pasadena team, with the support of TNTP, began work on designing questions for each group. They started by identifying key topic areas to cover in each session. Student topic areas aligned with the student survey administered in the EIC, which allowed TNTP and the districts to track progress toward their goals over time. Initially, the TNTP team led the development of the questions and leaned on their internal teams for feedback after drafting the questions. The Buffalo team incorporated a similar process in designing the focus group questions. They also leveraged the district team to help refine and target questions to each audience to ensure they were gathering the most crucial information to support implementation.



## Focus Group Topics for Students:

Experiences in math

Perceptions of teacher skills and important qualities

Beliefs about math and their abilities



## Focus Group Topics for Caregivers:

Knowledge of their child's experience at school and in math

Communication with their child's teacher

Support provided to child by their caregiver outside of school

In Pasadena, Dr. Nayo leveraged district interpretation and translation services to ensure all participants could access information about the purpose of the focus groups and participate in their preferred languages. District coaches supported teachers in identifying students who would actively participate and were representative of the groups they are working with to close opportunity gaps, including Black/African American students, Latino/a/e/x students, students with thinking or learning differences, and multilingual learners.



"We were interested in parents' thoughts, ideas and perceptions of their own as well as their students' experiences in math. So we turned to our parent partners on the district implementation team to provide feedback regarding the types of questions to ask."



**- DR. NADIRAH NAYO**

*Coordinator for Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development*

*PUSD*

After each focus group period, the team refined the questionnaire to remove questions that were no longer relevant or did not yield helpful information, while also adding questions based on the information learned or to ensure the focus group facilitator could get to all the questions in the time. In PUSD, in Year 2, more questions were added for students around diversity, equity, and inclusion, to help the team learn more about whether they connected to the content and whether teachers were engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy. TNTP continued this process after each subsequent focus group period to continually improve the process.

## INITIAL FOCUS GROUPS

In Buffalo and Pasadena, increasing overall involvement with the community, specifically caregivers, and sharing findings with them remains an overarching goal. Initially, these engagements focused on sharing knowledge with caregivers about the curriculum and implementation activities in middle school. However, this quickly shifted to gathering data to deeply understand caregiver experiences related to mathematics instruction and their students, while defining what caregivers needed to support student success at home.

Within 10 minutes of one of TNTP's early caregiver focus groups in Pasadena, Dr. Kapa sensed that those in the room were eager to share their needs and questions about the math curriculum. Following the caregivers' lead, the focus group became a space for TNTP to listen and understand what caregivers needed from TNTP and Pasadena to bridge classroom and home connections. The conversation also dedicated time to sharing existing resources and activities available at the schools and ensuring caregivers were

aware of these opportunities. By the end of the session, the data showed what caregivers considered to be a successful implementation of the math curriculum, transforming TNTP's role, as Dr. Kapa describes, "**from a teller to a listener.**" TNTP, with Pasadena's support, actively worked on building consistent relationships and communication with caregivers, aiming to make them feel heard and valued by ensuring Pasadena delivered on its promises.

## FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

Student and caregiver focus group findings reveal important patterns regarding participants' experiences. Caregivers in both districts expressed a desire for increased communication from the district and teachers, particularly regarding their child's progress and any changes in the math curriculum. Caregivers expressed that they are providing additional support from home, such as tutoring, and emphasized the need for clear guidance on what their child should be working on to ensure their time is spent purposefully.

Students in both districts expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of connection between the math content and their interests or the "real world." PUSD students highlighted the limited opportunities for group work in math class and preferred more collaborative learning experiences. Furthermore, students desired diverse approaches to learning math, including incorporating art or science-based activities.

These findings underscore the importance of enhancing communication with caregivers, addressing and incorporating students' interests into math class, incorporating more group work opportunities, and providing varied and engaging math learning experiences. Both districts plan to continue conducting student and caregiver focus groups in the future and continually use findings to enhance their implementation work.

## How Are Districts Using Focus Group Findings?

“

“As a district we have continually collected data from various education partners. However, the focus group information that we have collected has helped us become more targeted and intentional in the use of the data. We use the information with the teachers, administrators and instructional coaches to redesign the learning spaces in order to meet student needs. For example, many students and parents have stated that students need more time to interact and talk with one another. So we have worked with the instructional coaches to help teachers implement research based discourse strategies that are intentional and provide teachers with observational data that can help improve their questioning strategies as well.”

”



**- DISTRICT IMPLEMENTATION TEAM**  
*PUSD*

“

“Our original focus was to include strategies that we are currently using. We have made a concerted effort to speak to the impact of those strategies, and to get teacher buy-in as we provide professional development, because they provide varying and engaging experiences for students. Teachers from Cohort 1 will be planning their modules collaboratively, in which they will be working together to fit the strategies directly into their lessons. This will be a collective group work session so the teachers are not working in isolation and there is a strategic thought process.”

”



**- DISTRICT IMPLEMENTATION TEAM**  
*BPS*

## Triangulating Data, or “Pulling it All Together”



“At TNTP, we regularly examine progress toward goals – ones we set internally for our projects and ones we develop as a part of work on the EIC project. While the required EIC data activities (e.g. student survey, classroom observations) offered us an opportunity to gauge the impact of our work, the BPS and PUSD implementation teams determined we had a need and desire to incorporate activities that would allow us to monitor our progress toward these goals continuously. Caregiver and student focus groups were a critical component of this continuous progress monitoring because they allowed our team to triangulate findings with data collected from surveys, classroom observations, coaching logs, and student achievement results.

As we pulled major themes from these other data activities, focus groups allowed us to confirm what we had previously analyzed or provide further evidence to strengthen the support we offered to teachers, coaches, and school districts. Ultimately, it also allowed us to regularly speak to two key stakeholder groups to assess how teacher practices were changing and refine our approach to implementation within the district.

Moving into year three of EIC (2023-2024), we are restructuring certain portions of this work in each district. In Pasadena, we are making changes to the student focus group component. After conducting three rounds of focus groups, we pulled consistent themes that students had described across the first two years of work. In year three, we will follow groups of eighth-grade students whose teachers will be first-time participants in our work closely throughout the year. Through brief student surveys (given five times per semester) and focus groups (given three times per year), we will ask them about the math instruction they receive each week and how it changes as teachers engage in the implementation efforts. We will also engage more directly with the district’s Family Engagement Department to streamline support and attend to sustainability. In Buffalo, the intention moving forward is to engage more directly with community groups suggested by parents we met with this year to boost attendance as we transition to more frequent focus groups and continuing time to meet with students.

These actions and strategies will help us track trends over time and continue our data triangulation efforts to inform the progress toward our goals.



**- DR. RYAN KAPA**

*Analyst*  
*TNTP*

## Top 5 Recommendations for Conducting Focus Groups

Are you planning to conduct focus groups with your district's students and/or caregivers? Consider the following reflections and tips from TNTP, PUSD, and BPS:



1

### **BUILDING TRUST WITH DISTRICT & COMMUNITY IS KEY**

Before directly engaging with students and caregivers, establish trust with district and community leaders who can help contextualize the needs of their students and community. Prioritize listening and learning throughout relationship-building efforts. Provide tokens of gratitude/incentives to honor participants' time and valuable contributions.



2

### **KNOW YOUR ASSETS, AUDIENCE, AND CHAMPIONS**

Identify system and community assets. Seek input from people in your organization, district, and the community to identify gaps in knowledge, better understand context, and tailor your questions to the audience you seek to engage. Whenever possible, identify Champions within the district who represent priority students' dimensions of identity and can be conduits for knowledge gathering, dissemination, and communication. A "Champion" is an implementation-related role occupied by people who (1) are internal to an organization; (2) generally have an intrinsic interest and commitment to implementing a change; (3) work diligently and relentlessly to drive implementation forward, even if those efforts receive no formal recognition or compensation; (4) are enthusiastic, dynamic, energetic, personable, and persistent; and (5) have the strength of conviction (Miech, 2018).



3

### **STRUCTURE, DESIGN, AND LOGISTICS MATTER**

When, where, and how a focus group is conducted impacts attendance, participation, and outcomes. Offer multiple opportunities to participate at varying times of day and in locations that are accessible and comfortable for participants. Who is in the room also matters: be mindful of identities and power differentials among focus group facilitators, observers, and participants. Provide translation and interpretation support to ensure all participants can engage in their preferred language. Partner with school-level staff to coordinate student focus groups whenever possible. Scheduling requires a long runway.



4

### **FOLLOW PARTICIPANTS' LEAD**

Don't be afraid to pivot in the moment to follow where a participant goes as they respond to a question. After focus groups, notice trends across conversations and adjust future questions to further investigate emerging experiences.



5

### **FOLLOW-UP AFTER THE FOCUS GROUP**

Continue communicating with the participants of the focus groups after they are over, such as sharing back findings, checking for understanding/clarity, and providing resources to address any immediate needs expressed in the focus group. These actions are important for maintaining trust and relationships with the community!



## Appendix

### Focus Group Sample Questions



#### Student Focus Groups

---

What has been positive about your experience in math class this year?

---

Does your teacher treat all students the same way?

- How do you know?
- Can you share any examples?

---

How often does your teacher use examples in math that reflect your identity, culture, and/or community?

---

What types of support do you need to be most successful in math class?

- How often do you receive this support?



#### Caregiver Focus Groups

---

What do you believe makes learning engaging for students? for your child?

---

Are these things present in your child's math classroom(s)?

---

What does it mean for a teacher to have high expectations for students in a math classroom?

---

Does your child's math teacher have high expectations for their students?

- (If yes) Please provide some examples.
- (If no) Why not? What do you believe is preventing the teacher from possessing these beliefs?

## REFERENCE

Miech, E. J., Rattray, N. A., Flanagan, M. E., Damschroder, L., Schmid, A. A., & Damush, T. M. (2018). Inside help: an integrative review of champions in healthcare-related implementation. *SAGE open medicine*, 6, 2050312118773261.

Farmer, S., & Perkins, Y. (2023). Engaging Critical Perspectives. Active Implementation Hub. Chapel Hill, NC: National Implementation Research Network, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.  
<https://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/resource/engaging-critical-perspectives/>