Schools as Community Hubs

Aurora Public Schools

Submitted by Silvia Montenegro, ssmontenegro@aurorak12.org



Through the Destination APS strategic plan, Aurora Public Schools (APS) launched a coordinated, all-district effort to establish a deeply rooted culture of Belonging, Safety, and Care across every school building. Recognizing that academic success is inextricably linked to emotional and physical well-being, this systemic effort served as a core pillar of the district's Schools as Community Hubs strategy.

By weaving together robust foundational frameworks, APS successfully shifted school climates from standard operational spaces to true community ecosystems. The success of the Schools as Community Hubs framework relied on the intentional blending of national research and local community voice. The Schools as Community Hubs strategy pulled from Colorado's P-12 Family, School, and Community Partnerships (FSCP) Framework, Colorado Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (COMTSS), as well as the research of Dr. Karen Mapp and Dr. Joyce Epstein. When developing the strategy, the research was coupled with local community voices from the APS community.

To turn this district vision into localized action, every school within APS focused on building belonging through school-wide goals. Some schools focused on restorative practices, while others focused on embedding social-emotional learning or student mentorship structures. Schools actively integrated authentic student and family voices into systems and structures, transforming community members from passive consumers to active co-designers of school culture. Simultaneously, the district aligned its Family Liaison professional development directly to this focus. Family Liaisons were equipped with specialized skills centered on intentional, empathetic relationship-building, acting as the primary welcoming frontline for historically marginalized or disconnected families.

The systemic focus yielded measurable shifts in school climate and community trust across the district: 91% of APS families officially reported that their child's school maintained a positive and welcoming culture. Also, 80% of students expressed that they felt like they belonged in their school community. Beyond these data points, overall family engagement within school buildings grew exponentially.

The practices implemented to increase belonging were evaluated through progress monitoring, adjustment, and continuous improvement conversations. Implementation was not without challenges, as there was a significant amount of change management, skill building, and improvement of work throughout the year.

The success of that year's initiative successfully laid the critical foundation. Moving into the subsequent academic year, Aurora Public Schools planned to leverage this established trust to transition into research-based, high-impact engagement practices. For the following academic year, APS was set to focus on directly connecting family-school partnerships to student academic achievement.

The leaders of this initiative found that transformations in positive culture happened when the entire district moved in the same direction, intentional relationship-building with families and students took place, and family, student, and community voices were elevated and integrated into structures.