Engaging a Global Network to Curate and Disseminate Evidence About What Works to Improve Family-School Engagement

A Case Study of the Center for Universal Education’s Family-School Engagement Playbook Effort
The Brookings Institution is a nonpartisan, nonprofit public policy think tank based in Washington, D.C. Housed within Brookings, the Center for Universal Education (CUE) focuses on identifying solutions on a global scale to deeply entrenched education inequalities. CUE’s approach to problem-solving involves distilling evidence from and for global audiences, making its insights from evidence actionable with practical tools and technical support, and shaping policy conversations. In CUE’s own words,

CUE’s approach to achieving impact is to undertake high-quality and evidence-driven research, particularly in substance areas where a quorum of information is not available, is limited, or is a novel application; participate in processes, meetings, and policy dialogue to provide technical advice as independent experts; and use partnerships, networks, and relationships to engage and disseminate recommendations, as well as bring about new voices and opportunities. (CUE, 2018)

This case study, which traces the development of a playbook CUE developed during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic to improve family-school engagement practices, illustrates one example of CUE’s approach to developing and disseminating research. This effort is part of one strand of work that CUE undertook for a project under the BHP Foundation’s Education Equity Program portfolio. (See page 16 for more details about the BHP Foundation program.)

According to CUE, creating opportunities for families and educators to come together and build a shared vision of what a quality education looks like can be an important precursor to school improvement and—eventually—system transformation. As CUE explains, meaningful collaboration between families and educators to improve alignment across their beliefs about the purpose of education “is a powerful way for schools and families to shape the deep structures guiding how schools operate” (Winthrop et al., 2021). At the same time, many schools around the globe lack knowledge about how to build strong relationships with families. CUE’s conversations with parents and educators confirmed that these groups often have limited resources to support effective dialogue and engagement with one another.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, CUE was working to fill this gap with a smaller playbook rooted in its prior research on how to rapidly accelerate or “leapfrog” progress in education (see Winthrop, 2018). When the pandemic forced school closures and abruptly disrupted learning, it also increased global demand for guidance around how to build home-school connections to support distance learning. For
school leaders and teachers who worked with students living in poverty who had limited or no access to technology, the need to identify innovative solutions for supporting parents, families, and students was acute. CUE seized this moment to pivot toward a larger-scale, global curation effort with a network of collaborating organizations, the Family Engagement in Education Network (FEEN), which it convened for this purpose.

The resulting Collaborating to Transform and Improve Education Systems: A Playbook for Family-School Engagement (Winthrop et al., 2021) was designed to meet this need by developing the existing evidence base for how and why schools could improve their family-school engagement practices and disseminating promising strategies already being used in the field. The types of evidence CUE collected and packaged for the Playbook included academic literature, data from CUE’s own qualitative research that it conducted in partnership with the FEEN, and learnings from its ongoing conversations with stakeholders. The original Playbook was published in October 2021 and is available online. Since its release in English, the Playbook has been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, and French. CUE has since started working on an updated version, which is slated for release in 2023.

The purpose of CUE’s Playbook is to provide guiding principles, user-friendly tools, and a suite of strategies supported by evidence that education leaders around the world can adapt to improve family-school engagement practices in their own contexts. Structurally, the Playbook consists of several core elements: a synthesis of literature on family-school engagement, CUE’s findings from its global research about the importance of understanding gaps and overlaps between parents’ and educators’ beliefs about schooling, and “conversation tools” that school leaders can use to drive productive conversations with families and teachers.

In this case study, we explore the development and early dissemination of the original Playbook and the work CUE did to cultivate its relationships with the FEEN as the work progressed from summer 2020 to fall 2022. The information presented here is drawn from a series of staggered interviews with key stakeholders involved in this effort (see “Summary of Methods” for details). We begin with a summary of the strategies CUE leveraged to curate and disseminate the evidence in the Playbook. We conclude with a discussion of challenges that CUE and the FEEN encountered, reflections related to the BHP Foundation’s Education Equity Program theory of change, and lessons that may be applicable for other organizations undertaking similar work.

Overview of CUE’s Evidence Curation and Dissemination Efforts for the Playbook

CUE regards the process of cocreating tools and resources, such as the Playbook, with interested stakeholders as essential for achieving the product’s intended impact. To achieve global impact with local relevance—as it is attempting to do with the Playbook—CUE collaborates with partners around
tries and one global private school chain ultimately contributed to its development. The FEEN, which CUE describes as a community of practice, continues to grow, and had reached over 100 members in fall 2022.

Table 1 summarizes the FEEN organizations that participated in data collection for this case study; it provides a sense of the reach of the FEEN. Table 1 also shows example strategies that FEEN members contributed to the Playbook.

**Key Strategies for Curating and Disseminating Evidence**

In this section, we describe key strategies that CUE leveraged to curate and disseminate evidence for improving family-school engagement in the Playbook. Evidence, as we mean it here, refers to CUE’s summaries drawn from academic literature, key strategies, and data from interviews or focus groups with FEEN organization leaders. Evidence serves to support the potential impact of strategies and actions described in the Playbook.

### Table 1

**FEEN Member Organizations Participating in Our Interviews and Examples of Contributions to the Family-School Engagement Playbook**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Organization(s)</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Example Strategies in Playbook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Grable Foundation&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;,&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; Kidsburgh&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;,&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; Butler Area School District&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Private sector, NGO, government</td>
<td>• Parents as Allies Program (referenced as a case study in the Playbook)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>El Cajon Valley School District&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>• Annual parent engagement survey</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Building parents’ skills through the Parent University program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Australian Schools Plus&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>• Building school leader and teacher capacity for family-school engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>Young1ove&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>• Weekly text messages and calls to strengthen learning at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>RedPaPaz&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Parent organization</td>
<td>• Online resource hubs for parents</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parent-led advocacy campaigns to address education concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>The Akanksha Foundation&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>• Teacher home visits</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Workshops for student-parent relationship building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>The Michael &amp; Susan Dell Foundation&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Private sector</td>
<td>• Text messages with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>Education Scotland&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>• National action plan on parent engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>Doncaster Council&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>• Parent engagement volunteers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Interviews or focus groups with leaders of FEEN organizations in fall 2021.
<sup>b</sup> Interviews or focus groups with leaders of FEEN organizations in spring/summer 2022.

**NOTE:** The example strategies are not an exhaustive list of the strategies contributed to the Playbook by each organization. They are intended to represent the types of strategies in the Playbook. Some of the listed organizations also contributed data to the Playbook gathered from their implementation of the Conversation Starter Tools.
The organizations CUE recruited were (1) those that had collaborated with CUE on past projects and (2) others with a reputation for work focused on family-school engagement.

From our interviews, we observed three shared qualities among FEEN member organizations: (1) an established or emerging commitment to family-school engagement, (2) an orientation toward use of evidence to inform decisionmaking, and (3) organizational reach or influence. These qualities, which we describe in the box, motivated FEEN members’ interest in partnering with CUE to improve family-school engagement and, as we describe in the next section, enabled CUE to conduct data collection on a global scale.

Shared Qualities of FEEN Member Organizations

Commitment to Family-School Engagement

Most FEEN organizations in our sample were already champions for the cause, had created innovative family-school engagement practices, or had a history of supporting parents and families. Many were motivated to capture, distill, and share lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic about effective family-school partnerships.

- **RedPaPaz** has two decades of experience organizing parent advocates across topics, especially at the intersection of children’s rights and health.
- **Cajon Valley, Doncaster Council, Education Scotland, Australian Schools Plus**, and the **Akanksha Foundation** had strategies they had been using for years to bring parents and educators to the same table.

Interest in Evidence

Most FEEN members expressed interest in improving their own approaches and using evidence to support decisionmaking in education. Nearly all were enthusiastic about the opportunity to contribute to a global research project that would—in turn—enhance their capacity to make a local impact.

- **Education Scotland** had already compiled a regional guide to improving family engagement from evidence (see Education Scotland, 2016).
- **Younglove**, now **Youth Impact**, worked with CUE in a Real-Time Scaling Lab with Botswana’s Ministry of Basic Education to pilot an evidence-based teaching program (Arenge and Robinson, 2019).

Influence and Reach

Most FEEN members have influence within large networks of educators, policymakers, and/or leaders within the nonprofit sector. Most FEEN members have the reach and ability to influence decisionmaking.

- **Australian Schools Plus** supports more than 175 schools and is part of several networks that already supported school-family engagement.
- **In Southwestern Pennsylvania**, the **Grable Foundation** plays a central role in a complex web of interconnected networks that includes school leaders and superintendents across 40 districts—and its collaborators on the Parents as Allies Project: Kidsburgh, IDEO, and HundrED.
- **The Michael and Susan Dell Foundation** in India works with officials and stakeholders who support large networks of schools in several states.
Leveraging Data Collection at a Large Scale and Curating Evidence Through Coproduction

FEEN members’ commitment to family-school engagement, their beliefs about the importance of evidence, and their organizational reach translated into interest and capacity to facilitate CUE’s data collection on a large scale and to participate in CUE’s process of coproduction. Although CUE’s relationship with each FEEN partner differed, Figure 1 depicts a simplified version of how CUE’s data collection efforts unfolded during the development of the Playbook through two representative partnerships with FEEN members (i.e., Doncaster Council in the United Kingdom and El Cajon Valley School District in the United States). CUE replicated similar interactions many times over with most of the FEEN members in our sample.

Although our model shows only activities related to the construction of the Playbook, CUE and FEEN members collaborated on a range of other activities that we did not depict in our figure, including coauthoring articles and blog posts and codelivering presentations on family engagement.

Our model demonstrates the FEEN (orange ring) as consisting of a network of member organizations (blue circles), each with its own smaller networks of jurisdiction leaders or schools (blue rings). Although CUE’s evidence-gathering efforts...
also involved sources outside the FEEN, including literature and data from interviews and focus groups from non-FEEN members (dark red), we understand that CUE compiled three main types of data in collaboration with the FEEN. These are formal qualitative data from surveys and focus groups (solid blue lines), FEEN members’ contextualized strategies for improving family-school engagement (solid blue lines), and insights from conversations with FEEN members about what works best to support improved school-family engagement (orange dashed lines).

In summer and fall 2020, working through the FEEN’s respective networks, CUE surveyed nearly 25,000 parents and more than 6,000 teachers. The purpose of these efforts was to explore the values and beliefs held by parents and educators about education—and how well these aligned—to better understand ways these stakeholders could work together toward a shared vision of school transformation (Winthrop et al., 2021).

CUE designed the original survey items (white dashed line) but encouraged FEEN members to contextualize the questions for their intended audiences by translating and adjusting the language when necessary (dotted blue arrows). In some contexts, including FEEN regions in India and Colombia, contextualizing the survey items involved not only translating the questions into a different language, but also making the concepts accessible for parents from different backgrounds. While FEEN regions in the United States and United Kingdom were able to administer the survey online, other FEEN participants, including Young1ove in Botswana, which conducted the survey by phone, required a simplified questionnaire. Likewise, the FEEN facilitated CUE’s ability to conduct 54 focus groups with parents and 36 focus groups with teachers and to conduct interviews with 50 decisionmakers across 15 countries.

In the Playbook, CUE presents and compares results from its surveys across various jurisdiction clusters. CUE further distilled these findings into five “top insights” relevant for improving family-school engagement practices for readers of the Playbook. As explained in the next section, the FEEN members who participated in these efforts described the results and feedback they received from CUE as beneficial for their own efforts to support family-school engagement.

CUE simultaneously encouraged FEEN members to contribute to the trove of on-the-ground strategies to inform understanding of the breadth of family-school engagement practices across the globe (e.g., “the strategy landscape”). CUE’s intent was to elevate specific strategies that aligned with its theory of how parental engagement can be leveraged into school transformation. From FEEN members and other sources, CUE originally identified 534 family engagement strategies. As CUE explains in the Playbook, “We cast a wide net, gathering strategies already backed by robust evidence as well as newer ones developed during the pandemic that were promising but lacked external evaluations” (Winthrop et al., 2021).

As CUE also explains in the Playbook, each strategy aligns with one of four key motivators or goals for improved family engagement related to school improvement and transformation: (1) improving attendance and completion, (2) improving learning and development, (3) redefining purpose for students, and/or (4) redefining purpose for society (Winthrop et al., 2021). From the original set of strategies, CUE selected 62 to showcase in the Playbook.

As CUE was designing the Playbook, at multiple stages, it validated its findings and learnings against the collective wisdom of the FEEN. According to those we interviewed, CUE’s conversations with FEEN members helped shape the structure and content of the Playbook to improve its utility for practitioners. The leaders of FEEN members we spoke with referred to this process as coproduction. As one leader explained, CUE researchers “pulled people across the world together to have a real conversation about family engagement, . . . and they listened. I thought they would maybe pat me on the head, but they listened and valued what we had to say—and used that to drive the Playbook.”

Another leader said, “Here were [CUE] researchers who listen to those on the ground in the course of important conversations. They took what they heard and learned to shape the frame and their questions. Along the way, they shared with us their findings, checked their findings against our understanding. ’Does this make sense? Is it useful?’”
For many FEEN members, having access to an evidence base that validated and, in some cases, featured their work was extremely valuable.

Throughout spring 2021, CUE continued to review and refine its findings and theories from the literature about family-school engagement, which shaped its interpretations of the data it compiled from conversations with FEEN members individually (small orange dashed arrows in Figure 1) and collectively (large orange dashed arrows). At the same time, CUE maintained editorial control over the contents of the Playbook (purple). From the resulting global compendium of evidenced-based strategies and survey tools that have been piloted in multiple contexts, CUE’s intention is that end-users can construct their own local approaches for improving school-family engagement.

Providing Organizations with Immediate and Tangible Benefits

The FEEN members we spoke with explained that they joined the FEEN two reasons: (1) the opportunity to participate in research that would raise the profile of family-school engagement in their own contexts, or (2) access to a global learning network that acted as a sounding board for their own initiatives.

FEEN members who joined prior to the release of the Playbook described the benefits of participating in CUE’s survey to gauge alignment between parents’ and educators’ beliefs about education in their own jurisdictions. Participants described the survey as “innovative.” Several FEEN organizations met one-on-one with CUE to review their jurisdiction’s results, a process most described as especially meaningful. As one FEEN member said, “[CUE] would break down the survey and meet with us separately, and we would apply [what we learned] to knowledge and growth in our district.” The same leader explained that surfacing a disconnect between parents and teachers has enabled their organization to more effectively advocate for increased investment in school-family engagement.

For many FEEN members, having access to an evidence base that validated and, in some cases, featured their work was extremely valuable. Several leaders of FEEN organizations mentioned that, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, they found it challenging to shift local leaders’ focus back to family-school engagement, but having their work featured in the Playbook helped keep their programs off the chopping block. As one FEEN member explained, “the Brookings label and the entire partnership has been a blessing for us as a team.”

FEEN members also appreciated learning from one another on an international scale and the camaraderie they discovered in doing so, which CUE facilitated by bringing FEEN members together for quarterly workshops. FEEN members were eager to reflect on their approaches to identify gaps and learn about new strategies that they could adapt to enhance family-school engagement in their own contexts.

As one interviewee from a region with more-established family-school engagement programming explained, “Although we have contacts in many countries, the FEEN offers us a much wider network to be a part of to hear what is going on across the world.” Interviewees from regions with less-established programming appreciated being able to reach out to others to troubleshoot the challenges they were experiencing. In short, CUE noted that FEEN members felt part of a community in which, typically, there is a lack of resources, attention, and support for those championing family-school engagement.
Valley. Meanwhile, in December 2022, Kidsburgh partnered with CUE to present its work on the Parents as Allies Program with 40 superintendents in Southwestern Pennsylvania. From this presentation, Kidsburgh recruited 13 additional school districts to the Parents as Allies program—bringing the total number of districts it is working with to 22.

Designing the Playbook to Be Adaptable for Audiences in Different Contexts

FEEN member leaders reported that CUE’s ability to mobilize so many “high-impact” partners came down to two factors: (1) coproduction and (2) the nature of the Playbook itself, which CUE designed to the specifications identified by FEEN to support usability. As one FEEN member leader explained, “It’s not just ‘here are the tools.’” Rather, it is about, “How can you modify to your own context? At different points, different people are linking into [the Playbook] and utilizing [those resources] in the way that meets their needs. It isn’t a one size fits all. It’s not, ‘here is a program. Go implement it directly.’”

At the same time, as explained by another FEEN member leader, the Playbook accommodates practitioners who may lack the time to start “from scratch.” This leader emphasized the importance of being able to give education leaders and practitioners a suite of ideas they could build or adapt for their own context by entering key words into the Playbook’s online search feature. Her colleague added, “We cater to over 20 schools. Every community is very differ-
CUE acknowledged hosting hundreds of workshops with FEEN members as a critical step in supporting their use of the Playbook.

The demographics of each community are different, and every community has its own set of problems. This Playbook has given us a bouquet of strategies to pick from. You evaluate it. Does it fit the problem we are trying to solve? Can we tweak it?

Modeling a Contextualized Approach to Dissemination That FEEN Members Emulated

CUE’s approach to evidence dissemination does not simply rest on getting the Playbook or components of the Playbook into the hands of potential users. The process involves partnerships and ongoing support between FEEN members and their own network of end-users, similar to the process CUE used in developing the Playbook. The ways that FEEN members implement the Playbook and disseminate it throughout their broader networks are both highly dependent on the context. Still, there are similarities, which we describe below.

Depending on the goal of the “mobilizer” (e.g., CUE, FEEN member), the Playbook may be disseminated in its entirety or in components (i.e., literature review and summary of findings, the strategies, or the survey of parent/educator beliefs). Many FEEN members reported sharing or highlighting specific elements from the Playbook with their network of school leaders or project teams comprising parents and educators from select school sites. In general, FEEN members hosted awareness sessions and training for school leaders in their networks as one of their primary mechanisms for disseminating the Playbook. Often, FEEN members invited CUE to these workshops to present its evidence, underscoring the importance of family-school engagement.

Following these awareness sessions, some FEEN members worked with jurisdiction or school leaders to implement or continue piloting CUE’s Conversation Starters (i.e., family-school engagement surveys). Others provided school-based teams with a summary of why family-school engagement is important and gave leeway to adapt strategies from the Playbook—or develop their own—based on the needs of their local school community. FEEN member leaders characterized the types of support they provided end-users as shaped by their interactions with CUE: hands-on and contextualized. In some CUE worked directly with local authorities to design strategies for schools in their context. We summarize these and some of the other strategies FEEN members were using (or said they intended to use at the time of our interviews) to mobilize the Playbook in Table 2.

Providing Fully Individualized, Flexible Support Directly to FEEN Members

CUE directly supported the work of individual FEEN members as they developed and began implementing locally contextualized plans for disseminating the Playbook to diverse groups of stakeholders. Multiple FEEN member leaders described the importance of CUE’s flexibility and willingness to adapt to their constraints and structures—and engage them along “the journey.” As one leader explained, CUE personnel have “made themselves available for workshops, Zoom meetings, to be available to communities.” In fact, CUE acknowledged hosting hundreds of workshops with FEEN members as a critical step in supporting their use of the Playbook.

Early Impacts of CUE’s Playbook Curation and Dissemination Efforts

At the time of our interviews, most FEEN members were still in the early stages of exploring ways to assess the impact of the changes they were making in their jurisdictions stemming from their involvement with CUE and their work on the Playbook. A few FEEN members described their intentions to
Another FEEN member explained how the process of engaging parents in problem-solving led parents and school leaders to ask themselves, “What could we do that we aren’t already doing to address a problem?” In this case, they settled on a plan to engage fathers more deeply by hosting cornhole tournaments, an idea that started small but expanded into a series of open-gym days accompanied by informal conversations about such topics as mental health and raising boys.

TABLE 2
Summary of Key Playbook Mobilization Efforts

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<tr>
<td>Directly piloting or supporting implementation of elements aligned with the Playbook</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing Playbook with government officials or using to inform policy</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disseminating Playbook to others in network</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conducting trainings or workshops for school personnel: coleading workshops with CUE</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecting schools to CUE for implementation support</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing results or data through media, social media, or other channels</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing derivative tools (i.e., rubrics, graphics, surveys, etc.)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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NOTE: This table shows activities FEEN members had already undertaken or planned to undertake as of the time of our interviews.

Interviews occurred in fall 2021, before mobilization in most contexts was underway.

Still, several FEEN members provided anecdotal evidence of improvements in family-school engagement practices in their jurisdictions stemming from their use of the Playbook. For example, one district leader in Southwestern Pennsylvania described a scene from a planning meeting with parents, saying, “They were grateful to talk about the purpose of school because . . . [as] one lady said, ‘No one has asked me what the purpose of why I send my child to school is for all these years.’”

Challenges to CUE’s Evidence Curation and Dissemination Efforts

Despite these early impacts, CUE and members of the FEEN encountered several challenges in their

rely on “softer” measures of impact, such as more parent involvement in school government structures, embedding family-school engagement requirements in school improvement plans, or allocating a budget for family-school engagement. Others said it might be years before they are able to measure concrete changes or improvements.
efforts to develop and mobilize the Playbook. We summarize these below:

- **First, despite the adaptability of the Playbook**, FEEN members felt that more contextualizing and usability supports were needed to make the Playbook actionable for practitioners. They noted that the contents of the Playbook may be harder to adapt to some contexts than others, including contexts that place less emphasis on research and use of evidence-based practices. These leaders stressed the importance of creating simple (and shorter) messages for school leaders and policymakers that demonstrate the clear value of “what’s in it for them.”

- **Other leaders described difficulties related to translating the tools in the Playbook.** These FEEN member leaders talked about needing to pare down the language by using simpler words and phrases. As some FEEN members explained, the content in the Playbook might seem “overwhelming” even for school leaders. One FEEN member suggested that “having some kind of a one-pager that is more accessible to practitioners might be helpful.” CUE project leaders recognize the need to find ways to “help make knowledge and research travel easier on the ground.” CUE is working toward this goal in the next iteration of the Playbook.

- **Another challenge was the reality that FEEN membership grew quickly, and with it grew the demand on CUE to work closely with each organization.** This demand was unanticipated and therefore difficult to meet. By spring 2021, CUE reported “having so much interest that we are turning people [and organizations] away.” Managing all the relationships and ensuring a clear point of contact with FEEN organizations became critical. CUE reported trying to manage expectations while assessing its project team’s bandwidth and capacity to support FEEN members. Not all members were able to receive individualized services and support in fielding surveys during the data collection process or in mobilizing the Playbook; for example, CUE could not copresent with all partners or strategize with each partner about how to best reach practitioners in its region.

- **Several FEEN member leaders described challenges of getting practitioners—especially school principals—to believe that relationships with families are essential for school transformation.** As one leader explained, for some school leaders, family-school engagement is just another “thing on their big checklist of things to do.” Even if they were able to garner school-leader buy-in, one FEEN member leader questioned whether their district would be prepared to provide enough support to meet the goals the district would set for improved engagement with families.

### Relevance to the BHP Foundation Education Equity Program’s Theory of Change and Concluding Remarks

This case study is one in a series intended to illustrate aspects of the BHP Foundation’s Education Equity Program theory of change (see the appendix). This narrative shows that, through an approach that involves **building and leveraging a network of dynamic partners** committed to a common cause, CUE was able to **curate evidence about improving a key aspect of education**—namely, family-school engagement. The curation effort led to a Playbook that **increased the availability of data and evidence** on what had been an understudied topic.

The Playbook presents the evidence base for family-school engagement and provides a selection of tools and strategies that decisionmakers in schools and districts can use to inform their approach to collaboration with parents for the purpose of boosting academic achievement and well-being. Early anecdotal evidence from FEEN members suggests that their efforts to implement and disseminate the tools and strategies in the Playbook through awareness sessions, presentations, workshops, and individual-
ized supports are leading to valuable reflection and conversations among schools and parents.

However, the future of CUE’s work with the Playbook faces several unknowns, with implications for the BHP Foundation’s program theory of change. Recall that one factor motivating CUE to focus on family-school engagement was the COVID-19 pandemic. Worldwide, school closures increased the global demand for guidance about how schools could build home-school connections. One unknown, then, is to what extent any momentum or motivation for prioritizing family-school engagement generated by the pandemic can be sustained and capitalized on over time. Moreover, while efforts to mobilize the Playbook may remain strong, it is unclear what effect this work will have. This includes whether such efforts will help any of the FEEN member jurisdictions adopt practices and policies that promote family-school engagement and whether they will encourage non–FEEN member jurisdictions to champion these reforms.

The road from providing and disseminating evidence to using evidence to inform policy and practices is long. It is difficult to predict the amount of time needed for large-scale change and interim outcomes (in the form of a shift in mindsets, behaviors, and decisions) to manifest. More difficult to assess is the time scale for seeing long-term student-level outcomes and being able to attribute any changes in students’ educational attainment directly to activities related to family-school engagement inspired by CUE’s Playbook. The extent to which dissemination of best practices will occur with fidelity is also unclear. On the one hand, local contextualization may enhance the efficacy of efforts; on the other, some strategies might lose efficacy as they are adapted and disseminated.

CUE is currently working on an updated version of the Playbook, which is intended to remedy some of the challenges we highlighted in this case study. According to CUE, part of this revision effort involves identifying alternative formats to share information, including more audiovisual content. The idea is to streamline the amount of content in the original Playbook to make it simpler to use and more practice-oriented.

Network members perceived immediate benefits to connecting with other organizations working toward a similar goal.

Considerations for Organizations Undertaking Evidence Curation and Dissemination Efforts

For organizations considering engaging in similar evidence curation and dissemination efforts, this case may offer some points for reflection.

Consideration 1: First, organizations seeking to curate and disseminate evidence in education may want to adopt or adapt CUE’s approach of assembling a network of organizations already engaged deeply with the topic. By assembling a network of like-minded organizations with specific attributes, CUE was able to draw on the collective knowledge and experiences of the FEEN on the topic of family engagement. Furthermore, CUE strategically combined its research and evidence curation undertaking with mobilization efforts to deploy FEEN members in data collection activities. As FEEN members administered the parent and teacher surveys and as they conducted interviews, for example, they were helping CUE gather perspectives and, at the same time, generating demand for the Playbook and ensuring a user base. Meanwhile, network members perceived immediate benefits to connecting with other organizations working toward a similar goal.

Consideration 2: Organizations seeking to adopt CUE’s strategy may need to invest considerable time and resources up front to establish a network patterned after the FEEN. CUE is a well-regarded organization. It can draw on established networks and partners from other research it has
undertaken, and it has the brand and convening power to attract additional influential partners, each with its own local networks. Other organizations may encounter a challenge in trying to replicate CUE’s strategy. An organization with less-established partnerships may need to invest time and resources up front to build a network it can leverage. Moreover, even for CUE, which is accustomed to playing an active role in convening peer learning forums and providing technical advice, there was a limit to the time and effort it could devote to engaging with each partner organization and helping them connect with one another. If adopting CUE’s networked cocreation or dissemination approach, an organization should first assess its capacity and consider articulating the level of (individualized) support it can provide to its network members.

**Consideration 3: Organizations seeking to engage a network of partners in curation and dissemination efforts should be prepared to collaborate genuinely.** FEEN members valued CUE’s leadership and authority and, at the same time, praised its sincerity in asking for members’ input. CUE allowed FEEN members to adapt tools and processes according to their context. CUE iteratively consulted FEEN members on various aspects of the Playbook during development and implemented their suggestions. The result was a product not just designed for an audience, but earnestly coproduced with that audience. Seeing their contributions in the published Playbook helped FEEN members champion the resulting product.

**Consideration 4: Organizations should be aware that a knowledge product, however grounded in real-world strategies, may still require distillation and translation to be usable to practitioners.** Despite working closely with the FEEN and featuring practical strategies and case studies of implementation in the Playbook, CUE learned that the product needs to be accessible to practitioners who may not have a background in research. FEEN members requested workshops and support materials to help district and school partners apply the content to their practice. Organizations seeking to undertake similar evidence curation and synthesis work should be prepared to grapple with the tension between (1) rigorously documenting evidence and generally being thorough, and (2) developing products that can be easily mobilized among and digested by practitioner audiences.
APPENDIX

The BHP Foundation Education Equity Program Theory of Change (Fall 2018–Spring 2023)

The program’s initial theory of change, developed in fall 2018 and current as of spring 2023, is shown in Figure 2.

As described in published reports of the RAND Corporation team’s independent evaluation of the program (Master et al., 2021; 2023), the figure “summarizes the core investments made in the first phase of the program, as well as the anticipated timeframe for impacts. It describes how the funded partners are collectively engaged in varied activities to enhance educational equity through the use of evidence.” Such activities extend from generating evidence about new innovations to curating and disseminating effective strategies, building capacity to leverage evidence in decisionmaking, and advocating that societies and systems provide an enabling environment for more-informed investments in education and learning. Within the first five years of the funded activities, the program expects to see outcomes that are interim in nature. These include greater availability of evidence and data, empowered thought leaders engaged in more-informed decisionmaking, and the establishment of networks of purposeful collaboration. Long-term impacts are expected to take more time to manifest.

Figure 2 and our case studies to date reflect the initial program theory of change. As of early 2023, the program has been developing a more fine-grained articulation of its theory of change and pathways toward intended impacts.

FIGURE 2
Education Equity Program Theory of Change (Fall 2018–Spring 2023)
This case study is based on research funded by the BHP Foundation as part of an overall study of its Education Equity (EE) program investment. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the BHP Foundation. The BHP Foundation is investing in global education programs and initiatives focused on leveraging evidence and testing transformative innovations to improve access and equity in systems of education globally. The program prioritizes initiatives “with the potential to spur transformative ‘step changes’ in educational practices at-scale, and to achieve these goals primarily by using evidence to enhance the quality of decision-making, investments, and educational practice” (Master et al., 2023). These initiatives are led by five partner organizations:

1. the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution (CUE)
2. the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)
3. the Global Business Coalition for Education (GBC-Ed)
4. Teach for All (TFALL)
5. UN Women (UNW).

The RAND team is evaluating the BHP Foundation EE program investment during a five-year period, from 2019 to 2024. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess program impacts, share formative insights to inform its continuous improvement, and provide recommendations related to its strategy and the BHP Foundation’s theory of change (see the Appendix for details). RAND researchers’ first evaluation report was published in 2021. An interim findings report is being released in spring 2023, and a final report is planned for late 2024.

The case studies are one component of the RAND team’s evaluation. Each case study describes the arc and implementation of single-partner initiatives that are illustrative of the BHP Foundation’s theory of change (fall 2018–spring 2023). Through our cases, we seek to demonstrate the BHP Foundation’s theorized pathway between one or more categories of program activities (e.g., curating evidence, disseminating evidence-based strategies, developing capacity) and one or more interim outcomes (e.g., increased availability of evidence, more-informed decisionmaking, networks, and empowered local actors) as articulated in the program theory of change to date. Given the brief time frame of each case study (i.e., data collection spanning one year), each report is limited to documenting early signs of progress toward interim outcomes.

To select the focus for each case study, we considered the activity or activities and pathway(s) that each BHP Foundation–funded partner could best or uniquely illustrate. We approached the partner with the case study idea(s) to elicit input. Studying implementation involves collecting data at the level at which activities are implemented; as such, we asked the funded partner to identify and connect us with a local in-country partner performing the on-the-ground work that we would highlight. This process likely yields case narratives that are positive or successful examples of partners’ work. For more details on methods, see the brief methods summaries included in each case study.

We believe this series will be of interest not only to the BHP Foundation and its program partners, but also to policymakers engaged in global education, organizations interested in implementing educational change efforts, and other foundations interested in investing in global educational change.
Summary of Methods

The contents of this qualitative case study are primarily drawn from two rounds of interviews and focus groups with a total of 15 representatives from 11 FEEN organizations that were involved in the development of the Playbook and/or its mobilization. We interviewed participants in fall 2021 and again in spring and summer 2022. Additionally, we drew on interview data from biannual focus groups conducted from spring 2020 to spring 2022 with key project personnel from CUE. Our interviewees were referred to us by CUE personnel. Although we would have liked to interview more FEEN members and downstream users of the Playbook, such interviews were beyond the scope of this case study as it was originally conceived. We acknowledge this as a limitation.

Finally, we reviewed documents that CUE submitted to the BHP Foundation as part of the project (e.g., funding proposals and annual reports), as well as publicly available documents produced by the organizations and efforts featured in this report, including CUE’s original Playbook. We used information from these documents to provide context about CUE’s efforts and to inform our description of the technical aspects of the Playbook and other initiatives described here that we learned about through our interviews with FEEN members.

In preparation for this report, we recorded and transcribed all interviews. We coded the notes in Dedoose, a cross-platform internet application for mixed-method data analysis, identifying the strategies employed by the FEEN and CUE during evidence synthesis, key actors, challenges and facilitators, and preliminary outcomes. We abstracted and analyzed our data by subtopics to identify themes. Prior to its publication, we provided a draft of this report to representatives from CUE for fact-checking and portions of the report to respective FEEN members.
References


Center for Universal Education, homepage, undated. As of February 27, 2023: https://www.brookings.edu/center/center-for-universal-education/


CUE—See Center for Universal Education.


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About This Report

This case study documents the work that the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings undertook between summer 2020 and spring 2022 to produce and disseminate a Playbook that synthesizes insights and strategies from the literature and around the globe that schools can use to improve their family-school engagement practices. As part of this effort, CUE created the Family Engagement in Education Network (FEEN), a global network of partners, to support Playbook development and mobilization. The purpose of the Playbook is to provide education advocates and leaders with practical resources to improve collaboration between families and schools and create opportunities for shared vision-setting. The Playbook increases the availability of evidence on this previously understudied topic in an accessible form for practitioners.

As we explain in this report, CUE engaged in three key strategies during the development phase of the Playbook: convening a network of collaborators (the FEEN), engaging this network in large-scale data collection and coproduction, and providing the collaborators with tailored technical support. As a result, when it came time to disseminate the Playbook, CUE had already created a built-in group of ambassadors for a product tailored to end-users. Additionally, it had modeled an approach to sharing evidence and providing technical support that FEEN members could emulate in their regional dissemination efforts. After the Playbook’s release in fall 2021, in addition to supporting the dissemination efforts of FEEN and its extended networks with guided workshops, CUE shared the Playbook at external conferences and events.

CUE’s Playbook emerged in the context of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, which caused a global surge in the demand for innovative strategies school leaders could use to bolster home-to-school communication with families, especially to those living in poverty with limited or no access to technology. Although the long-term impact of CUE’s efforts is uncertain, the Playbook has added to the knowledge base of practices that school systems can use to improve family-school engagement. The FEEN continues as a community of practice for peer learning and advancement of family, school, and community engagement.

RAND Education and Labor

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. The case study was sponsored by the BHP Foundation as part of an overall study of its Education Equity program investment. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the BHP Foundation.

More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to Elaine Wang (ewang@rand.org), and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to education andlabor@rand.org.

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