Childhood Prosperity Lab

Co-Design Summary Report: Understanding GPRA Data Outcomes with Parents/Caregivers

This report was created by Connecticut Children's Childhood Prosperity Lab, North Hartford Ascend, and University of Hartford Center for Social Research. This document was developed with support of the U.S. Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods Grant Program.

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Understanding GPRA Data Outcomes with Parents/Caregivers

North Hartford Ascend

NORTH HARTFORD ASCEND

North Hartford Ascend (Ascend) is a prenatal-to-career initiative to ensure children living in the North Hartford Promise Zone – which includes the Clay Arsenal, Northeast, and Upper Albany neighborhoods have the support they need to reach their full potential. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhood Grant Program, Connecticut Children's is facilitating a cross-sector team of early childhood experts, community leaders, community-based organizations, and residents to identify community priorities and enhance the academic, health, and quality of life outcomes of North Hartford Promise Zone residents.

CHILDHOOD PROSPERITY LAB

Childhood Prosperity Lab (the Lab) advances social innovations that support the optimal health, development, and well-being of children, families, and communities where they live, learn, work, play, and pray. Collaboration is key to our work. We partner with practitioners, service providers, families, and changemakers across Connecticut and beyond to improve child health outcomes. Our multidisciplinary team at Connecticut Children's brings expertise in family sciences, child development, public health, and more to drive impactful change. The Lab has three core components that are unique to our approach:

- Co-designing solutions in partnership with children, families, and communities using human-centered design approaches and methodologies;
- Strengthening family and community protective factors; and
- Advancing systems change to help children and families thrive in all areas of life.

PROJECT OVERVIEW & SCOPE OF PARTNERSHIP

The University of Hartford's Center for Social Research (CSR), housed in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, serves as the Data and Evaluation Co-Leads for North Hartford

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Ascend. Its co-lead, the Hartford Data Collaborative (HDC), supports nonprofits across the city in collecting, linking, and analyzing data to strengthen programs and services for Hartford residents.

In May 2025, CSR engaged the Childhood Prosperity Lab to understand how Human-Centered Design (HCD) could deepen the understanding of community and service provider perspectives. This partnership has since expanded to intentionally incorporate the voices and lived experiences of youth and families.

Promise Neighborhood grantees are required to report on Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) indicators. The GPRAs require agencies like Connecticut Children's to set goals, measure results, and report progress ensuring accountability and transparency in federal programs. As part of North Hartford Ascend, CSR measures ten GPRAs and prioritizes sharing data with residents and providers to elevate community voice, build trust between providers and residents, make meaning of the data together, and determine how to act on the data.

To make GPRA data more accessible and meaningful, CSR is creating a series of publicly available "GPRA Data Stories." A sample data story was shared with colleagues in the Ascend Data & Evaluation Workgroup, the Resident & Community Advisory Group (RCAG), and service providers to collect feedback on structure, language, visuals, and framing. One key recommendation from these groups was to directly involve youth and parents/caregivers in shaping how GPRA data is interpreted and used.

In response, two co-design sessions were planned: a session with youth and a session with parents and caregivers.

The following goals guided these co-design sessions:

1. Articulate the value
    - Why does the data matter?
    - What does the data mean?
    - Now what?
2. Assess the strengths, challenges, and opportunities for the understandability of the data
3. Generate the space for inquisitiveness and curiosity

The three GPRAs that were prioritized for the co-design session with youth included *Students Are Safe, Students Are Healthy, and Students Have Access to 21st Century Learning Technology*. For more information on this session, refer to the Youth Co-Design Session Summary available on the North Hartford Ascend website.

The three GPRAs prioritized during the co-design session with parents/caregivers, relevant to young people's daily experiences, included *Student Mobility, Access to 21st Century Learning Technology, and Support for Learning.* CSR's goals for utilizing HCD in this session included exploring potential root causes of the data from a parent perspective.

OUR APPROACH TO RECRUITMENT

The session was scheduled to take place on December 17th from 6-7:30 pm. The Lab partnered with Parker Memorial Community Center to host the session in the North End of Hartford, and catered a hot meal from a local small business. Participants were served dinner before the session, which was an opportunity for the team to get to know the participants and welcome them into the session space. After the session, attendees were compensated $50 for their participation and for sharing their experiences.

Our Approach to Elevating Community Voice

The internal team created a flyer (Appendix A) to spread the word about the opportunity. The recruitment flyer was shared through Parent Square, a centralized communication platform leveraged by Hartford Public Schools that pushes notifications and information directly to parents. Family and Community Service Providers (FCSSPs) stationed across the five Ascend schools (Milner, WISH, SAND, MLK, Weaver) helped to spread the word.

The team received a total of 30 registrations. Due to the need for prioritizing 10 participants across Ascend's five schools, they were selected based on whether their children/grandchildren attended one of the five schools, and then the grade level from each school. All registration information is saved so that the internal project team can reach out to interested participants in future sessions and keep them apprised of other opportunities to get involved with Ascend.

OUR APPROACH: METHODOLOGIES & FACILITATION

The Lab team members are HCD practitioners and utilize the LUMA framework. The Lab defines HCD as a methodological framework for centering the needs, goals, and perspectives of children, families, communities, and other key stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social innovations. Participants of the session were pre-assigned into two breakout groups based on their child's grade level and school.

Two innovation specialists from Connecticut Children's were assigned as lead facilitators for the small-group activities, with two team members from CSR supporting the session as note-takers. On the evening of the session, three registered parents attended, and additional registrations were completed on-site. A total of six participants attended. The children of these parents and caregivers were enrolled in either Wish Elementary or SAND Elementary School. To facilitate a more focused discussion, the internal project team decided to merge the two breakout groups into one larger group.

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Three HCD methodologies *affinity clustering, interviewing, and what's on your radar? Were implemented in the session.* Affinity clustering served as an icebreaker to help participants begin thinking about the GPRA topics and related questions. This was followed by interviewing, using simple open-ended questions to gather deeper insights into parents' experiences, observations, and perspectives on what is working well and what is not for their children.We then moved on to *What's on your radar?* – an activity where people plot items based on personal significance. Participants wrote responses on sticky notes and placed them on a concentric-circle diagram according to importance. Issues they considered most important were placed in the center, followed by secondary priorities in the middle ring, and tertiary priorities in the outer ring.

The *interviewing* and *What's on your radar?* activities were repeated for each of the three GPRA focus areas. After the small-group work, we reconvened as a larger group to answer any remaining questions and share next steps.

These HCD methods were intentionally chosen to gather deeper insights from participants and better understand the facilitators and barriers to GPRA's. Since the interview activity produced open-ended responses, we intentionally followed it with the "What's on your radar?" exercise to help narrow down and organize the emerging themes and patterns.

KEY LEARNINGS & FINDINGS

Student Mobility

Student mobility refers to students entering or leaving schools during the year, disrupting learning, relationships, and school climate. Ascend schools experience significantly higher mobility than the rest of the district, with 31.3 moves per 100 students between October 1 2024 and June 1, 2025. This level of movement affects both student stability and schools' ability to provide consistent support.

Parents described various factors contributing to student mobility:

- **Family changes, like divorce, often trigger school moves:** Changes within the family structure, such as divorce, often force students to move between districts, with one parent noting, *"Things just happen."*

- **Children unable to adjust to the new school environment, leading families to switch again:** Families sometimes enroll their children in a school they believe will be a good fit, only to move them again when it isn't. Some parents move their children out of Hartford schools seeking better opportunities, but challenges in other districts lead them to return. As one participant shared, *"Everyone wants to go to magnet schools, but not everyone can handle magnet schools."*

- **Mobility causes stress and adjustment challenges for students:** Parents emphasized the emotional toll mobility takes on students, including stress and difficulty adjusting to new environments. They suggested school tours as a way to reduce fear

before transitions. Participants stressed the importance of stability, with one stating, *"Parents should think about what's best for their children, keeping kids more rooted and grounded in their original schools."*

- **Parents appreciate and value the support from counselors, teachers, and FCSSPs:** Parents mentioned that school counselors, teachers, and FCSSPs play an important role in helping students understand what to expect when transitioning. Principals also play a role; for instance, a parent cited an example of when Principal McCoy (SAND) arranged transportation for a student who moved to the South End to prevent mobility, which was greatly appreciated by the parents in the school.

> **"I never knew this was a problem. Now, when I see a kid, I'll wonder what's their story?" - Parent/Caregiver**

- **Parents were interested in learning more about what drives student mobility:** Parents expressed curiosity about the source of mobility data and were surprised that schools do not document why students move. Comments included, *"I never knew this was a problem. Now, when I see a kid, I'll wonder what's their story?"* and *"A kid came to us from Wish late in the year, and I said, oh, he's school hopping."* Transportation and behavior were also cited as contributors to mobility, with one parent noting, *"If you go to a CREC or magnet school, they kick you out back to your home school."*

Access to 21st Century Learning Technology

Access to 21st-century learning technology means students have computers, the internet, and digital tools at school, at home, and in community spaces. This access supports completing assignments, exploring online learning resources, and building essential digital literacy skills. Ascend monitors this through the HPS Student Climate and Culture Survey item, "I have the technology I need to do my schoolwork." In the most recent results, 85.2% of 6th - 12th grade students in Ascend schools (MLK, Milner, Weaver) agreed they have the technology they need, similar to students across the rest of the district.

Parents described various factors in connection with access to 21st century learning technology:

- **Students have devices, but they don't always use them for learning:** Parents/caregivers shared that although students generally have access to devices, they don't always use them for educational purposes. One grandparent said, *"My grandson will use technology for non-educational things."* Families also said that free Wi-Fi would help students finish their homework.
- **Device access varies, and parents have mixed views on their values**: Elementary students receive laptops with reading and math programs, and Pre-K 4 students receive tablets, but usage varies by classroom. One parent noted, *"The students haven't gotten them this year because the teacher doesn't like using them."* Another shared, *"I personally*

liked the tablets because of the Brown Bear story… I personally thought they were beneficial for the kids."

- **Some parents preferred less reliance on technology for education**: Some parents expressed a **preference for handwritten work** and reduced reliance on technology. On one hand, parents wanted **greater access to technology and free Wi-Fi**; on the other hand, they also wanted some level of **supervision**, noting that children often end up using Wi-Fi for non-educational activities like playing games.

Student Support for Learning

Support for learning includes families helping children with reading, schoolwork, emotional needs, and college or career conversations. In 2024, parents of PreK - 8th grade students in Ascend schools reported very high engagement: 92.9% read to or encourage their child to read three or more times a week, 81.2% said their child reads independently that often, and 96.9% agreed with at least one of these statements. These results are much higher than the district's overall.

Parents described various factors contributing to student support for learning:

- **Parents described a range of reading practices and challenges at home:** For this GPRA, questions on reading were asked as all parents had kids going to elementary school. Parents pointed out various practices, the importance of, and challenges related to supporting reading at home. At SAND, **students are required to keep a reading log**. Children begin learning to read in Pre-K and kindergarten, and one parent said, *"Books take you places and expand your horizons."*
  Parents shared strategies such as **using sight words and pointing with a finger while reading**. They emphasized the **importance of consistency: "***The more you read to your children, the more they will be able to read back."* A parent mentioned, *"Even if it's 10 minutes, it's beneficial."* Someone else noted, *"Reading is bonding".*
  Parents also discussed the **importance of checking comprehension**. One parent shared, *"I challenge them to make sure they are paying attention and grasping what I read. I would see if they would correct me if I said something different than what I read."*

- **Single parents face barriers at work:** Single-parent households face a different set of challenges in reading to their kids. As one parent explained, *"Work can be a barrier. You want to be there but can't."*

- **Parents appreciated schools using incentives to encourage reading:** Schools **use incentives to motivate students**. At SAND, the library tracks how many books students read and awards prizes. At Wish, students read 1,000 books as a school, and the Principal and Assistant Principal dyed their hair. **Language support** was also mentioned. SAND has one ESL staff member, Ms. Cotto, and parents noted, *"The Spanish-speaking kids pick up English really quickly"* and *"Wish needs to bring this back."*

- **Engagement barriers, concerns about promotion without readiness, and strain on teachers and special education (SPED) supports**: Parents acknowledged that some caregivers struggle with literacy or motivation. Comments included:

- *"If the parent is willing to embrace the help."*
- "Parents who are invested in their children's education show up, but not others."
- *"Parents put too many expectations on the teacher, but don't do their part to help their children."*

Parents also raised **concerns about academic progression**. They noted that **Hartford does not retain students who are not ready:**

- *"They are not holding children back when they need to be."*
- *"Since when do you have to ask for my permission? They can't read."*

"Teachers do the job because they love what they do"
- Parent/Caregiver

Finally, parents expressed concerns about **SPED classes and the strain on teachers**:

- *"Right now, what we're doing is just keeping children safe, not teaching."*
- *"Teaching has been really difficult with all the different behaviors. You are putting out fires constantly."*
- *"Instead of being a teacher, I'm a para."*

OUR IMPACT

After the session, the Lab sent a quality and satisfaction survey to participants. Two participants formally completed the post-session feedback survey. Of the feedback collected:

- **100%** agree or strongly agree that the activities were engaging and interactive.
- **100%** agree or strongly agree that there were ample opportunities for their voice to be heard.
- **100%** agreed or strongly agreed that they felt a sense of community.
- **100%** expressed an interest in staying connected with Childhood Prosperity Lab for future co-design opportunities.

One respondent opted to share qualitative, open-ended feedback: *"It made me aware of student mobility and the collected data."*

NEXT STEPS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are informed by the session with Parents/Caregivers. The recommendations are intended to be considered as concrete next steps for North Hartford Ascend as the initiative evolves:

Recommendations for the Ascend System

1. Amplifying the existing support system from schools around student mobility

Many parents in the session were surprised to learn that student mobility is a significant issue in North Hartford. They asked why students leave schools and what actions schools are taking to keep them. Several parents suggested that when students transfer to a new school, families should be offered a school tour to help them understand the environment and see if it's the right fit. To support this, schools could create a "transition support checklist" that includes school tours, counselor check-ins, and peer-buddy introductions. Parents also recommended exploring more opportunities and providing assistance for principals and FCSSPs to proactively support families facing housing instability or custody changes, since these issues often lead to student mobility. Finally, sharing examples like Principal McCoy's transportation solution could help inspire collaboration between schools and highlight successful practices already in place.

2. Engaging the partner engagement work group (within Ascend) to strengthen support for students with special needs

The feedback on SPED classes and the strain they are putting on teachers should be shared with the partner engagement workgroup. In the previous co-design session, a recommendation was made to provide Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework (SFPFF) training for HPS to better support teachers. A component focusing on mental health and special needs could be added to these trainings to support students with diverse learning and behavioral needs.

3. Opportunity to strengthen cross-team collaboration within the family navigation and systems building work group (within Ascend)

All staff involved in Family Navigation within Ascend, especially those supporting school-age children and their families, should come together to review and reflect on the narratives shared by parents during the co-design session. Parents highlighted gaps in communication and limited understanding of school processes (e.g., mobility, technology use, reading expectations). These insights point to the need for more coordinated, family-centered communication models. The data from this co-design session and summary reports could be shared with the Family Navigation and Systems Building (FN&SB) work group; in 2026, the FN&SB Workgroup plans to bring together care coordinators, FCSSPs, and others involved in Family Navigation to share success stories, discuss challenges, and co-design solutions. Parents can also be invited to these sessions to ensure their voices remain central. This approach will strengthen the Family Navigation System overall by enabling shared learning and ongoing improvement.

Recommendations For Internal Continuous Quality Improvement Strategies:

1. Strengthen recruitment strategies for future sessions

Parent Square was an effective communication strategy for reaching families who might not have participated in a co-design session before. However, steps should be taken to keep registered participants engaged. Collecting phone numbers and making brief 1:1 calls can help families feel more informed about what to expect, the purpose of the discussion, and the venue. Improving

parents' comfort and familiarity with Ascend and the session logistics could lead to higher attendance among those who have registered.

STAY CONNECTED

- **Email:** *childhoodprosperitylab@connecticutchildrens.org*
- **Facebook:** Connecticut Children's Community Child Health
- **LinkedIn:** Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health
- ***Advancing Kids* Blog**

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Appendix A

Picture1: HCD methodology: *What's on your radar?*

Picture 2: HCD methodology: *Affinity clustering*

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Appendix B

The QR code for registration has been removed for the purposes of this report.