



# Common Bond

Lauren Gardner & Caroline McAndrews

Advised by Megan Fath | 2015-2016

Over the last 40 years, Americans have become segregated geographically by class.

As a consequence, access to opportunity has been divided along these same boundaries, which perpetuates inequality over time.

—*Our Kids* by Robert Putnam

## INTRODUCTION

Prior to 1970, neighborhoods in America were generally diverse by class, if not race. But over the last 40 years, Americans have become segregated geographically by class, which greatly affects schools zoned by neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> Despite being one of the most diverse cities in the US, New York City has one of the most segregated school systems in the country. And while this division is due to many factors, it has become most severe along socioeconomic class lines.<sup>2</sup>

Research has shown that diverse classrooms reduce racial bias and promote complex reasoning, problem solving, and creativity for all students. If this doesn't happen at an early age, it can affect a child's ability to succeed later on in life.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this perpetuated inequality does not just hurt the disadvantaged. Research suggests that the more unequal a society is, the worse off

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<sup>1</sup> Putnam, Robert. 2015. *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>2</sup> Kucsera, John. 2014. "[New York State's Extreme School Segregation: Inequality, Inaction, and a Damaged Future](#)." UCLA Civil Rights Project.

<sup>3</sup> Wells, Amy Stuart, Lauren Fox, and Diana Cordova-Cobo. 2016. [How Racially Diverse Schools and Classrooms Can Benefit All Students](#). Century Foundation.

everyone is. This means shorter life spans; higher rates of mental illness; higher crime rates; lower social mobility; lower levels of trust, political engagement, and happiness; lower test scores in math, reading and science; and greater economic instability.<sup>4</sup>

We see growing inequality as the number one problem of our time, and the root cause of many pressing social issues in America today. We set out to identify ways to counter the effects of school segregation, first by focusing on building strong relationships between youth from different socioeconomic classes in a way that mimicked integrated neighborhood bonds; and ultimately by honing in on parents as a key barrier to these relationships. This paper will detail the process we used to arrive at key insights and develop our final intervention: Common Bond—a method for educators to engage parents in protecting diversity—both in and out of the classroom.

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<sup>4</sup> Pickett, Kate and Richard Wilkinson. 2009. [\*The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better\*](#).

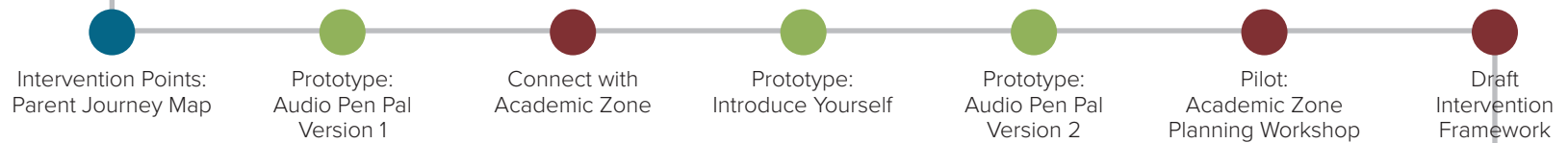
New York City has one of the most segregated school systems in the US.

—UCLA Civil Rights Project

“Diverse classrooms reduce racial bias and promote complex reasoning, problem solving, and creativity for all students.”

—Century Foundation

MARCH  
2015



APRIL  
2016



# THE PROCESS



# THE PROCESS: DISCOVER

We were initially inspired to focus on this issue by Robert Putnam's book *Our Kids*, which details the growing class divide in America. He points out that rich and poor Americans are living, learning, and raising children in increasingly separate and unequal worlds, removing the stepping stones to upward mobility. Neighborhood schools that once housed children from all different backgrounds are becoming increasingly segregated. As a result, social safety nets for children that used to exist are gone. Ultimately, segregation skews children's perceptions of the world and undermines their potential for success in this increasingly complex world—regardless of which side of the divide they are on.

To test some of the theories laid out in Putnam's book, and understand how these issues manifest in New York City, we spoke with teachers and experts working on inequality, as well as read studies and listened to media coverage of these issues. During this process, we discovered insights that helped define our problem space and shaped our initial prototypes.

**Any interaction and exposure between children who don't often leave their neighborhoods would be beneficial:** Teachers confirmed that children do not often get outside their neighborhoods in their daily routines. Programs which have children from different schools and neighborhoods work on a project together can be a good entry point to this issue, and those with a role for parents are even more successful.

**But exposure isn't enough to truly cross class divides:** The *This American Life* podcast hosted a series featuring attempts that have been made to cross class divides between schools in New York City. One common mistake was to expose children to students at better or worse resourced schools and hope that the interactions alone would be enough to obtain the benefits of diversity. Unfortunately, these attempts backfired by making students in poorer districts feel the lack of what they had, and in some cases they gave up hope that they could overcome their situation. It also did not work for students in better-resourced schools, who came out of the experiences feeling lucky they weren't at the other school, but with little empathy for the other side.

# THE PROCESS: DEFINE

Based on this initial research, we decided that the problem we wanted to address was how children in New York City are isolated within their class and race groups, creating a gap in understanding between them and perpetuating these divides later in life. We narrowed our audience to middle school students from different socioeconomic classes, with a secondary focus on adults surrounding these children, including parents, teachers, and youth program administrators.

When thinking about the opportunity gap between rich and poor students, we saw needs on either side of this divide. For poor students: How can we increase access to activities and mentors that are lacking? For rich students: How can we unveil the invisible aspects of privilege and leverage their access to lower barriers of entry to these opportunities for the other side?

We conducted several interviews and exercises to explore the following initial research questions:

- What are the real and perceived similarities and differences in the lives of children in upper and lower

class neighborhoods? How do children interact between these, if at all?

- How much do children interact with those from other neighborhoods? What is the level of interaction? How often does it occur? Where / in what contexts does it occur?
- How do children form relationships with each other, especially in diverse group settings?

These research activities included:

**Observations:** In classrooms, playgrounds, and parks, we watched to see how children self-divided themselves and what the make-up of these groups was according to gender, age, estimated class, and race. We also noted how children of different estimated classes and races interacted with each other.

**Network Diagrams:** We asked over 40 students to create diagrams mapping their closest relationships using a concentric circle format, placing those people they are closest to near the center of the circle, and grouping

these people by how they knew them (i.e. school, sports, after school programs, family, neighborhood, etc). We then asked them questions such as, “Why did you put friend A closer than friend B?” “How did you become such close friends with friend A?,” as well as “Where does each of these friends live?”

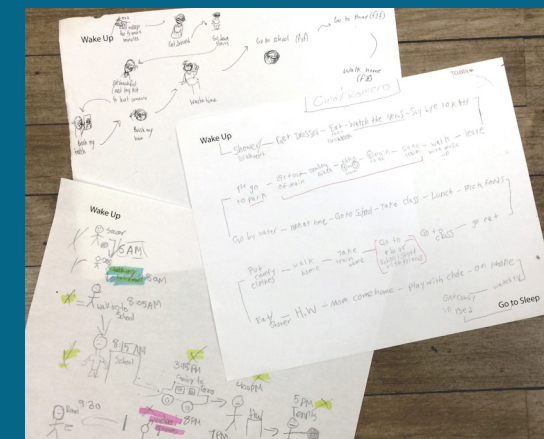
**Journey Mapping:** Lastly, we asked the same students to map their daily routines, from when they woke up to when they went to sleep, and to note how often they left their neighborhoods, interacted with friends, and engaged in online interactions.

We arrived at several key insights as a result of these activities:

**Children form relationships largely based on their environments:** Children rarely left their neighborhoods and formed friendships mostly with children at school or who they knew from growing up in the same place.

**When given the opportunity to do so, kids form diverse friendships easily:** In cases when students were given a chance to interact regularly with children from

## Network Diagrams



## Journey Mapping

other backgrounds, they seemed to have no trouble connecting and forming relationships. We did learn, however, that this was more true for elementary school children than those in middle school.

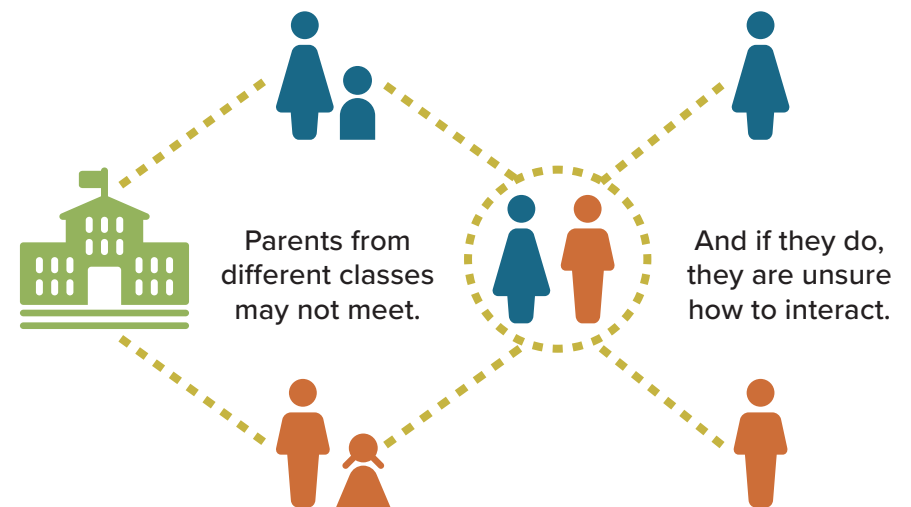
**Middle school-aged children have already begun to form mental models around class and segregation:**

While we initially looked at middle school-aged children because of their ability to get around the city on their own (therefore enabling them to take part in activities we might design in other neighborhoods), we realized that they had already begun to form biases and stereotypes about children outside their neighborhoods.

We also followed up by interviewing teachers about what we discovered. In addition to confirming the ease with which kids form diverse relationships, something that kept coming up again and again—from both educators, as well as behavioral experts we spoke with—is that even in diverse settings, parents can be a barrier to the growth of these friendships. We revisited the data from our initial prototypes and discovered the same: **parents segregate their children by class,**

**through their intentional and unintentional decisions regarding their child's social and academic lives.**

We realized that any effort to bring kids together across class will fail if we don't start with parents, so we re-focused our problem space on bringing parents together first. We conducted interviews and observations to gain a deeper understanding of the problem and arrived at two major findings that guided our prototype design:





## The Problem:

Parents segregate their children by class, both intentionally and unintentionally.



### **It is difficult for parents from different backgrounds to meet:**

In a diverse school, parents from different classes often don't cross paths due to their different schedules and availability. For example, parents who have flexible work hours or stay at home during the day are able to pick their kids up after school and meet similar parents in the process; whereas parents who have less flexible jobs put their children in after-school programs which last until later in the evening.

### **When parents from different backgrounds do meet, they struggle to get to know each other:**

Parents are more comfortable interacting with those most similar to themselves and become wary about how to reach out to others for fear of offending or not fitting in with them.

# THE PROCESS: DESIGN

We set out to develop an activity or tool that enables parents from different classes to better communicate and relate to each other through their children. To validate and further explore the extent of this problem, we conducted several prototypes with parents in diverse settings, both within and across class lines.

We used ideation exercises, including 100 Ideas—in which we paired interest, skills, and problems—to generate prototype ideas. We narrowed those down using idea scenarios, in which each promising idea is developed into three potential executions. We also conducted a competitive audit of those doing similar work in the field in order to identify gaps that weren't being addressed. Using all these tools, we narrowed down to four ideas that we tested with parents.

**Diversity Scenarios:** We developed case scenarios mimicking how class issues get discussed with children and shared them with parents to explore how they talk about diversity.

**Introduce Yourself:** Over the course of five days, parents

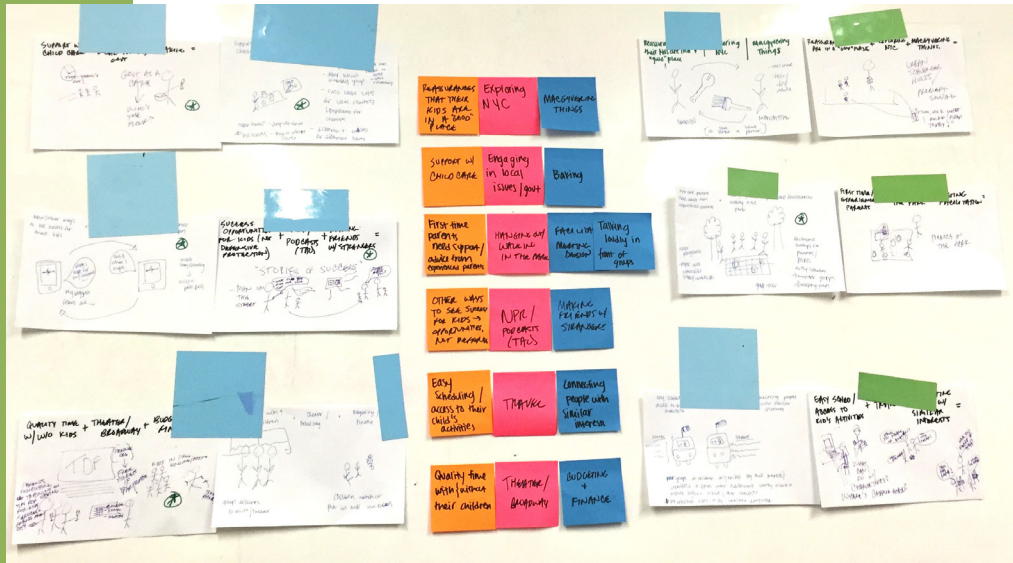
attempted to introduce themselves to someone they didn't know at their school, with 2 or 3 prompting questions to help them get to know each other. At the end of the challenge, they were asked to fill out a brief follow-up survey about their experience.

**Audio PenPal:** For a week, two parents who didn't know each other answered questions sent to them via text by recording their responses on a voice memo, and sending them to us. We then swapped the stories so that each parent could hear the other's answers.

**Digital Storyshare:** Based on our learning from Audio Pen Pal, we ran a storyshare with parents whose children were in the same class. We expanded on the initial questions and incorporated more reminders and "automated" features.

From these tests we learned that:

**Even when parents value diversity, other priorities outweigh it in their decision-making:** When parents make decisions that impact their child's social lives, they



have several competing priorities. We heard over and over that diversity was important, but priorities like the child's interest, scheduling, and accessibility outweigh diversity.

**Parents talk about diversity in different ways:** Parents have different ways of understanding & talking about diversity that can create misunderstandings if they meet for a conversation without any context or guidance.<sup>1</sup>

**In-person introductions are a major time burden:** Parents have busy schedules and feel overwhelmed during their daily routines at school, such as pick-up or drop off. Even when provided with prompts, they were

<sup>1</sup> Milton J. Bennett. "Becoming Interculturally Competent." In Wurzel, J. (Ed.). (2004). *Toward multiculturalism: A reader in multicultural education* (2nd ed., pp. 62-77). Newton, MA: Intercultural Resource Corporation.

not willing to take extra time to meet parents they did not know during these opportune moments.

**Parents feel unsure about how to relate to other parents unlike themselves:** Parents were uncomfortable approaching and reaching out to those from different class backgrounds. They were afraid of saying the wrong thing, offending someone, or felt intimidated by another parent.

**Digital platforms allow parents to make initial introductions:** Tools that allowed for flexibility were a good way to allow parents to make initial introductions. They liked the low time investment, as opposed to in-person meetings during busy times at school.

**Parents connect over children:** In digital storyshare, the strongest feedback we received was in response to the connections parents made over the joys and challenges of parenting or their child's school.

**Parents are more comfortable meeting in person after meeting virtually:** After the initial introduction, parents were interested in meeting in person and wanted to have learning objectives from the process, on which they could build a future relationship.

# THE PROCESS: DEVELOP

Using the insights and feedback gained from our prototypes, we conducted a pilot with Academic Zone, an after-school program in Brooklyn run by Justin Taylor. The program is housed at PS 20, a public elementary school in gentrifying Fort Greene that shares a building with Arts & Letters, a public school with controlled admissions. Over the past 5 years, the demographics of these schools have diverged, with 30% of Arts & Letters students requiring free lunch, compared to 70% of PS 20 students.<sup>1</sup> Despite being housed in the same building, students from the two different schools rarely have a chance to interact.

Academic Zone is the only after-school program that has students from both these schools, in addition to two schools nearby. Children in the program have formed friendships regardless of their backgrounds or what schools they spend the day at. We saw this as an ideal setting to test whether our ideas would work. For his part, Justin was interested in building a parent community to support the program and further the friendships grown between the children.

<sup>1</sup> [NYC Department of Education Demographic Snapshot, 2015-2016.](#)



Academic Zone students in art class.



With Academic Zone, we set common goals for the pilot and decided how each activity would work in their context.

We began by meeting with Justin to share ideas and plan. The pilot lasted for one month, and involved the following activities:

**Planning Workshop:** In order to get Justin's team on board, we led a planning workshop in which we reviewed the elements we would be testing in the pilot and generated ideas for how they would work in the context of Academic Zone, including what role the children would play.

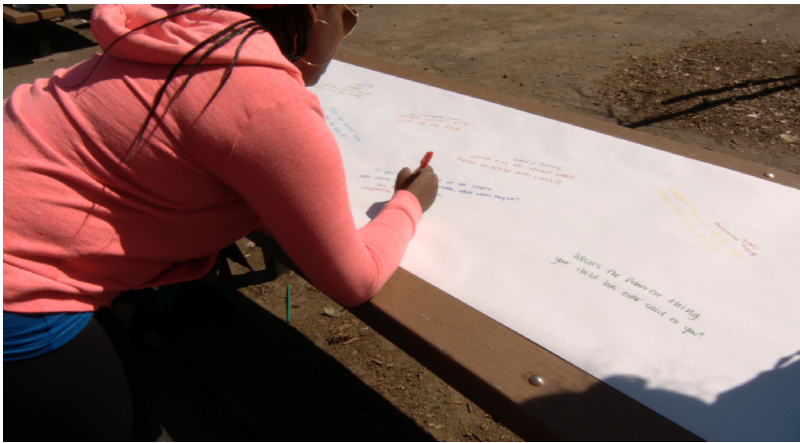
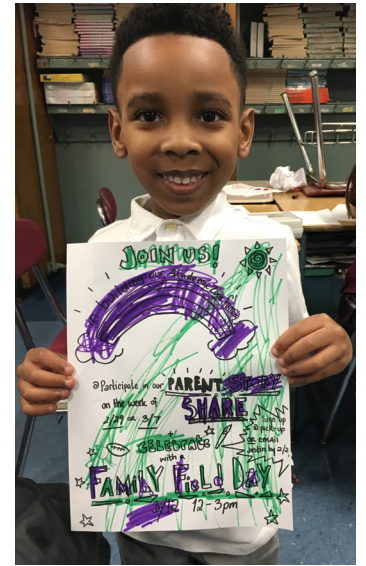
**Digital Storyshare, Round 1:** We paired interested parents based on class, and they received a different question about their experience as a parent via email and text every other day. They then responded with a voice message to each question, which was then emailed to their partner. They also received their partner's response via email the next day. This first round was administered by Justin so that we could get a sense for whether or not it was feasible to have an educator implement this tool in addition to his or her daily activities running a program.

**Collaborative Forum:** We initially thought that all participating parents would meet in-person as a group. They would start by meeting their digital storyshare partner in person, and sharing lessons from the previous week's activities. Afterwards they would collaboratively discuss ways they could use their involvement to build more of a community around Academic Zone. However, Justin and his team thought a Family Field Day would be a more appropriate way to introduce parents to each other and participate in the activities that their children do every day at Academic Zone, like art, football, chess, and track.

**Digital Storyshare, Round 2:** This second round was run by us in order to simulate an automated digital experience and measure the difference in participation from Round 1.



Students in the art class at Academic Zone made flyers to promote the Family Field Day and Parent Storyshare.



Activities such as these discussion tables, a vision board for Academic Zone, & a family lunch provided opportunities for parents to get involved.

Kids and parents were invited to play relay games and paint a community mural.

## Metrics

We surveyed parents who participated in Digital Storyshare at the beginning and end of the exercise to see if their likelihood of connecting with other parents had changed, and conducted short surveys with parents at Field Day. We also interviewed Justin before and after the pilot on both his experience as an educator and his observations on changes in parent behavior.

- Half of the families whose children attend Justin's program every day participated in the Field Day - much higher than the typical 30% of parents who regularly show up at PTA meetings.
- Every parent who filled in a survey at Field Day, save one, signed up to participate in Round 2 of the digital storyshare.
- Six parents—half of those who attended the Field Day—met for the first time during the Common Bond activities and set up playdates afterwards.

# 50%

of participating parents met for the first time during the pilot activities, and set up playdates afterwards.

## Reflection on Pilot

We learned how to make it easy for educators to use the intervention, how to get parents involved, the crucial role of children, and the best role for the staff team to play.

### *Role of Staff and Team*

- As the people who ultimately implement the intervention, it is crucial to build buy-in and ownership on the part of the staff and team and allow them to tailor the intervention to their context.
- After-school programs (and any spaces focused on kids) can be chaotic, and those who work there are good at functioning in those environments; however, it means that any structured pieces of the intervention need to be more automated or fit well into a chaotic environment.

### *Digital Storyshare*

- Parents were initially paired across class based on

their income answers in the first survey, or across different schools if they declined to answer about their income. We learned that a stronger connection can be built if the pairings can be based on existing diverse friendships that their children have, as identified by the educators who see them every day.

- There needs to be a sense of accountability to the storyshare partner, the educator, or the children, as the response is lower when they only feel accountable to an outside facilitator.
- This system needs to be as automated as possible since it was very difficult for Justin to run this on top of his other responsibilities. Participation quadrupled in the second week when we simulated an automated system.

### *Collaborative Forum: Field Day*

- Parents aren't used to being asked to participate in their kids' activities. Giving parents name tags and inviting them to participate pulled them into the day.



- Without programming, parents default to familiar, comfortable behaviors, basically sending their kids off to play and finding a spot where they could wait until it was time to go home.
- Parents who do participate in the activities with kids, end up participating more in the events of the day.
- Events need to be facilitated throughout the day to engage parents and begin to pair them across class. In the pilot, these included open discussion questions, vision boards for the program, and a family lunch.

### *Role of Children*

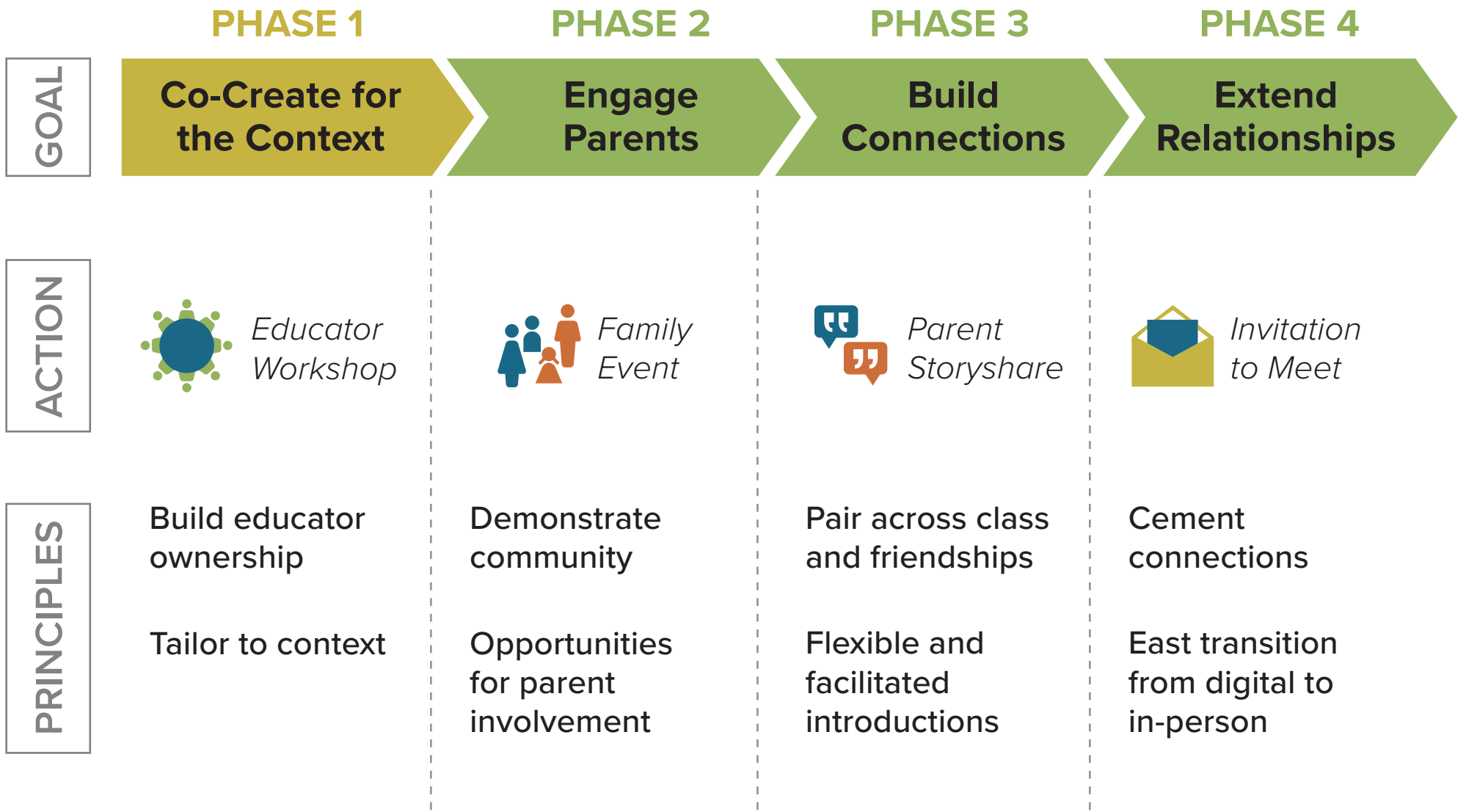
- The intervention needs to be built around the kids. This was the only thing that drove parents to participate
- Kids enact social pressure
- Everything should to be marketed to the kids, but built for the parents

The outcomes of this pilot process and the lessons learned shaped our final intervention, Common Bond.

Community mural at Field Day



Parents at Field Day



# Common Bond

a method for educators to engage parents in protecting diversity—both in and out of the classroom



# THE INTERVENTION

Common Bond is a method for educators to engage parents in protecting diversity, both in and out of the classroom. It's important to note that this method is intended for schools and programs that already have—or our fighting to maintain—a diverse student body. The hope is that by allowing parents to experience the joys & benefits of diversity, they will become advocates for preserving it. As the common bond between parents in diverse settings, kids are at the core of this method.

Common Bond is composed of four phases:

- A Co-Creation Session that builds buy-in and support from educators and key stakeholders who will use the method;
- An event that Engages Parents in the process;
- A digital storyshare tool that Builds Connections between parents; and lastly
- A plan to Extend Parent Relationships over time.

## Phase 1: Co-Create for Context

In the first phase of Common Bond, we start with an educator who is looking to engage parents in new ways. We learned from our efforts trying to get traction in schools, that a method like this needs to have a champion—someone who has authority with both kids and parents. Because the method is then led by this champion educator and other administrators, it's important to get buy-in and investment from everyone involved. Guided by the Common Bond facilitators, they generate ideas for how to tailor the method to their context.

At the end of this phase of Common Bond, teams leave the workshop feeling confident taking ownership of the process.

## Phase 2: Engage Parents

In the second phase of Common Bond, Engaging Parents, educators host a Family Event where both kids and parents take part. During our prototypes, we

realized that in order to increase participation, and before parents felt comfortable in more personalized one-on-one interactions, there needed to be an event that established a common goal and invited parents to get involved.

This second phase challenges parents' expectations of their role in the school or program, and gets them excited about being more involved.

### **Phase 3: Build Connections**

In third phase of Common Bond, the goal is to connect parents with a digital story-sharing tool that pairs them across class, and when possible based on their children's existing diverse friendships. In our research, we saw that in-person meetings were a major time burden for parents who had very busy schedules. We also saw that even when parents are together normally—for example at pick-up or drop off—they don't have or take the time to connect with other parents they don't know. And while some parents are comfortable going from an event like Field Day to setting up future meetings, most needed an intermediary step. What did work was something that was flexible—could fit anywhere in their busy schedules—and facilitated—to

make them comfortable.

The impact of this phase of Common Bond is in the way parents reveal their shared connections despite their different class backgrounds.

### **Phase 4: Extend Relationships**

The last phase of Common Bond builds relationships by providing ways for educators to suggest ideas for opportunities to meet - either formally through their child's school or program, or with an informal, low-cost playgroup where kids can act as wingmen. We learned that the digital storyshare can only take parents so far. So in order to cement these connections, parents need to be invited to get to know each other in person. All of the parents who participated in our Parent Storyshare prototypes wanted to meet up, but didn't know how to transition from digital connections to in-person interactions.

By providing parents with ideas and the opportunity to take things further, this phase of the method is crucial for allowing the parent relationships to take root, and ultimately support their children's diverse friendships.

# THE PROCESS: DEPLOY

We've shared this tool with parents and educators in other diverse schools across the city to see if it could benefit them, and all of them asked us when we can do it at their school. Right now, most of the people working on school segregation in New York City are focused on diversifying classrooms, but it's clear that educators want a way to ensure that their efforts do not go to waste. The strength of Common Bond is that it can be tailored and adapted to individual programs and schools, and we will be working to further develop the method with them.

Beyond those we've managed to speak to, we also see a great need for this method across the city. There are seven New York City schools that are implementing a pilot diversity program to see if controlled admissions can be an effective way to ensure diversity, as well as three school districts that are in the middle of re-zoning efforts to desegregate highly divided schools within the same neighborhoods. There are also many other schools that are trying to manage and maintain diversity in rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods.

## *Next Steps*

Moving forward, we will be building on our partnership with Academic Zone, as well as further developing relationships we've begun with [IntegrateNYC4Me](#), PS 113 in Brooklyn, as well as other partners who have expressed interest in using Common Bond.

We hope to further test and refine the method and develop some kind of platform, toolkit, or other deliverable that can be disseminated to educators throughout New York. We will also be building out our website to include maps, tools, and resources for parents, educators, and others who are interested in and working on this problem.

# LESSONS LEARNED

We learned an incredible amount over the last year about not only school segregation, students, parents, and relationship-building, but also about human-centered design and design for social innovation.

**Designing with Communities:** We experienced the extreme challenge of identifying communities to work with and gaining acceptance and buy-in from them in the process. Several times over the course of the year, we would begin relationships only to find that our partners could not sustain their interest or commitment over time. In the future, we would start earlier and identify champions who could act as a bridge for us into a community.

**Defining the Problem:** We came to deeply value working with users to understand a problem and develop solutions. Time and again, we were reminded that what we think might be the problem - even when based on experts and research - is not necessarily what the community understands the problem to be. Defining the problem correctly is essential to designing effective solutions.

**User-Based Solutions:** We learned to listen and understand ideas that come from the community, even when those ideas weren't initially how we thought the problem should be solved. While the initial instinct is to just better explain or push our own idea, we learned to listen to feedback and adapt more useful and appropriate solutions that the user actually needs and wants.

## CONCLUSION

We took this project on in the hopes that we could make some kind of impact on the growing trend of inequality and division that is plaguing this country. We believe that unless children can deeply experience the rich benefits of diversity early on, they will not be able to effectively solve the complex problems facing our nation and our world. While we ended up in a different place than we began - focusing on parents instead of children themselves - we are excited to see where this project can go and how it can make that impact we truly believe is possible.

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Lauren Gardner  
lgardner1@sva.edu



Caroline McAndrews  
cmcandrews@sva.edu



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[commonbondnyc.org](http://commonbondnyc.org)