

# Policy Enactment During a Pandemic: How One School Responded to COVID-19 in Negotiation With a Nonprofit Partner

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*Policymaking is not linear or neutral, nor is it ever made or enacted in isolation, especially not during a crisis. Framed by theories on the contextual, interactive nature of policy enactment, this year-long, ethnographic study examined how an urban elementary school and nonprofit organization worked to address challenges made visible by the COVID-19 pandemic. Analyses explored how negotiations among the school, its nonprofit partner, and district shaped pandemic policy responses. Data included 35 transcriptions and eight field notes from stakeholder interviews and principal–partner meetings, and 128 external stakeholder artifacts. Findings showcase the policy enactment of family–school communication and access to remote learning, and limitations of the partnership due to structural and racialized processes. The discussion presents implications for educational policymaking in response to crises, highlighting the need to understand the external contexts and racialized discourses that are part of shaping those responses to be dynamic and “nonlinear.”*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, crisis management, family engagement, pandemic preparedness, policy implementation, policy enactment, principal leadership, school–community partnerships

SCHOOL leaders have been central to schools’ responses to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Netolicky, 2020). Since the spring of 2020, they have been devising new ways of supporting and connecting with families, managing ever-changing school schedules, providing new technology for students, and supporting teachers’ journey into online instruction (Grooms & Child, 2021). In essence, school leaders continually enacted new policies during COVID-19. However, they did not do so alone; policy is never made in a vacuum. In fact, local governments, neighborhood organizations, social service agencies, religious institutions, teachers, and families came together with school and district leaders to make sense of and create educational opportunities for students during the pandemic (DeArmond et al., 2021; Olson & Heyward, 2020; Opalka & Lollo, 2021). And it was not easy: education policymaking is both communal and political (Drake & Goldring, 2014). In turn, we asked, “How do external educational partnerships shape policymaking during a crisis like COVID-19?”

Prior research and theory underscore that the policy process—from designing a policy to its implementation—is not a solo activity (Coburn, 2005). In education, the

process includes negotiations among school leaders and a range of “external stakeholders” (Tuma & Spillane, 2019), including those from local nonprofit organizations as well as school district offices. Such institutions offer structures and resources that both support as well as constrain policy enactment (Burch, 2007). We use the idea of *enactment* purposefully here, indicating a focus on the “interaction and inter-connection between diverse actors, texts, talk, technology and objects (artefacts) which constitute ongoing responses to policy” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 3). Recognizing this discursive and contextual nature of policy enactment, and noting the limited research on educational responses to pandemics (Beauchamp et al., 2021; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Grissom & Condon, 2020), we questioned how schools, their nonprofit partners, and districts came together to shape and reshape educational policies during COVID-19. Given that schools were responding to the pandemic at a time of heightened racial inequities and national movements against racial injustice (Greenberg et al., 2020; Orellana et al., 2021; Rigby et al., 2020), we also questioned how racialized and deficit discourses emerged within partnership policy enactment.



To explore these questions, we designed a year-long (August 2020–July 2021), ethnographic study of one school partnership designed to address inequities arising from COVID-19, asking: Which external resources, structures, and discourses supported and/or constrained policy enactment developed in a partnership between one school, its nonprofit partner, and the local school district? How did their negotiations shape pandemic policy responses? By analyzing how pandemic policy unfolded through external partnerships, we argue this study presents insights about the larger political conditions, capacities, and collaborations that can shape crisis management and policymaking in education. We begin with a brief review of educational research focused on pandemic responses and how theories of policy enactment can expand our understanding. After describing the study’s methods, we explore the external resources and structures that supported the enactment of two policy sectors that became central to schools’ pandemic responses: family–school communication and access to remote learning. We also analyze how the external nature of the nonprofit partner (networked outside of the school’s community/neighborhood), existing structures of the district, and racialized discourses limited community engagement in this context. The discussion will draw implications for educational partnerships and policymaking, including how to capitalize on supportive efforts during crises, while also remaining focused on racial equity and grounded in one’s community.

### Conceptual Framework

Over the past year, researchers and educators alike have struggled to respond to the pandemic (DeMatthews et al., 2020), an ongoing crisis well beyond the experience or preparation of most schools and their leaders (DeMatthews et al., 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). This has resulted in a growing body of scholarship on COVID-19, most of which has documented (1) the impact on students, especially around academic achievement and mental health (Haderlein et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Savitz-Romer et al., 2021); (2) crisis-leadership advice for educational leaders and policymakers (Chang-Bacon, 2021; Lowenhaupt & Hopkins, 2020; Netolicky, 2020; O’Connell & Clarke, 2020; Rigby et al., 2020; Starr, 2020); and (3) educators’ concerns about the pandemic (Hamilton et al., 2020). Reports also documented policy responses—such as how many days of school were cancelled on average, what kind of remote learning was offered, or how schools reopened (Hoffman et al., 2021; Malkus et al., 2020)—as well as what educators and policymakers did to combat the disparate conditions experienced by diverse students in underresourced or “vulnerable” schools (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, p. 2).

Most relevant to our project, a smaller number of empirical studies have examined how school leaders responded to

COVID-19—or enacted policy—in the moment. This research has focused on within-school circumstances, despite the larger literature on crisis management suggesting that cross-institutional, community partnerships are an important part of pandemic responses (Tate, 2012). There are still too few studies on whether and how external contexts shape educational policymaking during a crisis (Beauchamp et al., 2021). After briefly reviewing existing research, we argue that theories from policy enactment can help fill this gap.

### *School Leader Concerns and Responses to COVID-19*

As schools and communities struggled through 2020, studies documented the concerns of school leaders and other educators. This research highlighted principals were most concerned about students’ mental health and social relationships; academic achievement; how to engage families; and how to address exacerbated racial and economic inequities, especially in access to technological resources (Hamilton et al., 2020; Pollock, 2020; Trinidad, 2021; Varela & Fedynich, 2020). Such concerns affected leaders’ decision making as they planned for 2020–2021. In a nationally representative sample of principals from April–May 2020, a majority reported that, on reopening, they would place a higher priority on emergency preparation, addressing academic disparities, ensuring students’ health/safety, and engaging with families (Hamilton et al., 2020). One study found the goal to enhance access to technology was met over time; differences across lines of race, income, and urban/rural contexts diminished from April–October 2020, but they did not fully disappear, especially for Black families (Haderlein et al., 2021).

Subsequent empirical studies of responses to COVID-19 highlighted principals’ new priorities. Since 2020, they have worked to devise new ways of connecting with families, providing technology for students, managing ever-changing school schedules, and creating professional development to support online instruction (Grooms & Child, 2021). One study found administrators across the globe adjusted to COVID-19 in four phases: (1) they first focused on children’s and families’ basic needs, for example, by arranging food distribution; then they (2) planned for remote instruction, (3) developed opportunities for deeper learning, and (4) reflected on their experiences to prepare for next year (McLeod, 2020). Other studies also highlighted an initial focus on well-being, demonstrating that principals prioritized the socioemotional health of staff, students, and themselves, for example, by disregarding old attendance rules or being flexible with accountability (Hayes et al., 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; Weiner et al., 2021). To do their work amid continued uncertainty, they drew on various leadership capacities (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021), regularly communicating with staff and families, delegating authority, and being flexible, caring, and resilient (Beauchamp et al., 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Murata et al., 2021).

Most of these empirical studies detailing principals' activities have been framed by theories of leadership and developed through retrospective interview studies. While this helps to document *what* leaders did during COVID-19—and highlights their foci on student well-being and equitable educational access—we know less about *how* they enacted pandemic policies, within their particular contexts. Moreover, few studies explored how leaders collaborated with partners or worked within school district constraints, despite scholarship recommending principals look externally for support during crises, particularly to address inequities (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, studies examining or demonstrating successful community engagement in education are limited, even more so when considering engagement during times of crises.

#### *External Partners and Educational Responses to Crises*

Among other recommendations, the field of crisis management suggests that educational organizations and external stakeholders should collaborate to facilitate decision making during complex and dynamic challenges (Grissom & Condon, 2021; Liou, 2015; Tate, 2012). Such efforts, which support resource acquisition as well as policy design, should be both inter- and intra-institutional. For instance, to prepare for pandemics, we need “persistent engagement and planning across political boundaries, health care providers, and educational institutions,” along with an intention to understand how resources are spread across contexts (or not) (Tate, 2012, p. 427). Crisis leadership also entails joint sense-making—for example, families, school leaders and teachers learning from each other—which supports the development of clear and informed policy responses (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

Existing research supports these theories. Analyzing one school's crisis response to the unexpected death of a student, Liou (2015) found that both flexibility and dynamic collaboration were essential; in this case, the school leader asked other schools for extra counselors when district officials were unresponsive, even though collaboration was not noted in their linear crisis management policy. Meanwhile, Weist et al. (2002) reported that schools that had partnered with community mental health programs felt more capable in addressing the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. Finally, in three studies about COVID-19, principals reported relying on their own colleagues and/or local businesses for ideas and resources, given a lack of coordination and information from public health and education officials (Hayes et al., 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Such research underscores the importance of better understanding the role of external partnerships in educational policymaking during a crisis.

#### *External Partnerships and Policy Enactment*

This work is framed by theories of policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012)—“a complex set of processes of interpretation

and translation, which are contextually mediated and institutionally rendered” (p. 142). Policy enactment is situational and ongoing, involving the allocation of resources, invention of procedures, exchange of ideas, and reorganization of relationships. In short, policy is not a simple legislative act; it is a sociocultural, discursive process that unfolds over time, shaped by stakeholders' interactions and context (Levinson et al., 2009).

Taking an institutional and community-focused lens to understand how schools responded to the pandemic is critical. After all, educational responses to crises are not just top-down mandates, but “transacted, challenged, and ultimately implemented by agents on the ground” (Trinidad, 2021, p. 68). Additionally, “how teachers teach and what students learn also turns in important ways on the interactions of governmental and nongovernmental organizations” (Burch, 2007, p. 86). External partnerships can shape the design and delivery of policy (Lowenhaupt & Montgomery, 2018). Consider that instruction itself develops not only through teachers' choices but also through the options presented to them by professional development workshops, curricula, and textbooks (Burch, 2007). Consider also how community-based organizations with social capital and close relationships among families can support the development of educational policies and practices (Dorner, 2011b; Warren et al., 2009). There may be even greater possibilities for addressing inequities amid a crisis through collaborations that take on “community infrastructuring,” “justice-oriented acts of necessity to share and reorganize resources in the moment” (Greenberg et al., 2020, p. 519).

That said, policy enactment often fails to fully engage family and community members as equal stakeholders in the process. Adequate attention is rarely given to the true engagement of the families and community members most affected, even when social justice and equity are professed by well-intentioned educators (Dyrness, 2009-2010). External partners and school leaders bring along discourses about the school communities they aim to support, including deficit perspectives (Glass et al., 2018; Perkins, 2015). School-community partnerships around Latinx community-parent engagement, for example, have been found to both rewrite and reinforce educators' deficit perspectives about students and their families (Ishimaru, 2014). Such perspectives in turn shape and reshape policy dynamically, such as when one public debate about a new bilingual program and discourses about the immigrant community resulted in a policy that ultimately privileged white English-dominant voices (Dorner, 2011a).

In summary, the design and implementation of policy is not unidirectional, where one person a-politically and alone implements a mandate. It is iterative, shaped by a range of people and institutions—including families and communities—and each one's resources, values, and discourses (Braun et al., 2011; Dorner & Layton, 2013; Tuma & Spillane, 2019). Calling this *policy enactment* underscores that the process is

neither top-down nor bottom-up; it is contextual, “dynamic and non-linear” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 6). In turn, the unfolding of educational policies during a crisis entails consideration of a school’s interactions with their external partners, their histories and contextual understandings, as well as the resources, structures, and discourses they both bring to and make within their context (see Figure 1).

### Method

This study used ethnographic methods to ask: Which external resources, structures, and discourses supported and/or constrained policy enactment developed in a partnership between one school, its nonprofit partner, and the local school district? How did their negotiations shape pandemic policy responses? The following sections and online appendices describe the research context, participants, data collection and analysis, researcher positions, and study limitations. (All person and place names that follow are pseudonyms. See Table 1 for key participants.)

#### Research Context and Participants

In July 2020, the executive director (Rose) of a nonprofit organization, *Teachers and Families Together* (TFT), sent an email to myriad friends and community members, including the first author, asking for volunteers for a new project she was designing at Randolph Elementary, a small city public school. Rose, a long-time resident of an affluent and mostly White neighborhood in Randolph’s greater metropolitan area, considered herself a nonprofit entrepreneur who wanted to use her privilege to eradicate racial disparities, especially in education. As a partner of Randolph and the district for decades, she repeatedly said they had to do “whatever” it took to support the school during the pandemic. As discussed in the findings, while Rose brought resources and opportunities to schools like Randolph, she often framed racial disparities as a result of individual behaviors and decision making as opposed to systemic factors. In turn, TFT framed families by what they thought they needed, as opposed to working alongside them. This framing frequently led to paternalistic policy recommendations reinforcing rather than disrupting racist structures and discourses.

*Teachers and Families Together.* For nearly 15 years, TFT has provided professional development and resources for teachers to visit families and develop partnerships for their children’s education, especially at “underserved schools” (website) in both historically oppressed Black and under-resourced rural districts throughout the region. This goal became accentuated with the pandemic. After witnessing schools’ struggle to connect with families and provide students with educational materials and technology in the

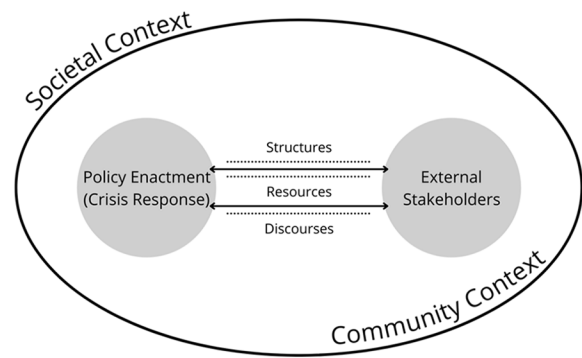


FIGURE 1. *External partners and policy enactment.*

spring of 2020, TFT devised a special project in 2020–2021 for what they considered their most needy school. Their goal was for “all students at Randolph to have the tools to successfully learn in person or remotely” (Project Overview). Despite being composed of predominantly White and affluent educators, staff, and leadership who were not from Randolph’s families or community, TFT considered itself to be a key school/community stakeholder. They hired a part-time coordinator, Jeff, who had been a first-grade teacher in the district and had recently finished his master’s degree in education and a well-regarded local civic leadership program. He was thrilled to work with Randolph, and also aware that as a White educator in a predominantly Black space, one of his central goals was to listen to the community.

*Randolph Elementary School and District.* Randolph was like many elementary schools in historically oppressed communities in segregated cities across the United States. A traditional neighborhood public school, Randolph served approximately 250 African American students in grades PreK–5; 100% qualified for free/reduced meals, 15% for special education, and 40% were considered “living in transition” (8/13/20 Transcript). The White principal, Dr. Smith, was in her second year leading Randolph but had worked in the district since her first teaching job about 10 years ago. The school was in a neighborhood characterized as having high unemployment and low life expectancy in comparison with nearby, mostly White suburbs. Experiencing many of the challenges of systemic racism in education, few students scored “proficient” on standardized state tests. Moreover, Randolph’s district faced many financial pressures due to long-time declining enrollment, structural inequities, decades of disinvestment, racial segregation, and growing competition from charter schools. In turn, Randolph lacked institutionalized school–community connections, including a working parent–teacher organization and accurate list of family contact information. While the district used



TABLE 1  
Core Participants

Pseudonym (racial background)	Position	Organization
Dr. Katie Smith (White)	Principal, with 1 year of experience	Randolph Elementary, school in local public city district
Rose (White)	Executive Director, with decades of experience managing nonprofit educational organizations focused on equity	Teachers and families together
Jeff (White)	Program Coordinator, part-time, hired specifically to manage new partnership project at Randolph	Teachers and families together

ineffective emails to try and reach families, Dr. Smith personally paid for a service to text them.

Despite such contextual challenges, 80% to 90% of Randolph’s teachers were retained from year to year; nearly half were African American. Moreover, the school was a tight-knit community, where many of the students’ parents or grandparents had gone; 80% lived in walking distance. In addition, the district leadership and budget recently had stabilized after years of political challenges. Dr. Smith was particularly proud of Randolph’s early childhood program and strong teacher retention. Dedicated to her school and continually working to understand the highly racialized context, she focused professional development on racial equity.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data collection occurred from August 2020 to July 2021, almost exclusively online using Zoom because of pandemic precautions. After deciding on an ethnographic approach, which was necessary to understand the day-to-day unfolding of policy (Ball et al., 2012), we started observing and, when possible, recording and transcribing weekly meetings (60–90 minutes). Three types of meetings formed our data set: (1) We observed Dr. Smith and TFT leaders, usually Rose and Jeff, when they met to discuss school needs and make plans; here, we tracked the partnership’s activities, negotiations, resource acquisition, discourses, and other barriers or facilitators to policy enactment ( $n = 17$ ). (2) We met with Dr. Smith to record how her school and district were managing the partnership and pandemic ( $n = 12$ ). (3) We met with Jeff, to follow-up on partnership activities from the coordinator’s perspective ( $n = 3$ ). While we were not able to fully integrate into the school space or with families—as would be typical in an ethnography—we did have other experiences that allowed us to triangulate data collection. Specifically, we interviewed one Black parent member of the district’s COVID-19 task force; observed TFT volunteer training and teacher meetings; volunteered at the school twice, interacting with educators and parents; and collected district, school, and TFT artifacts (see Table 2).

Data analysis was ongoing throughout the project. The first two authors and another scholar of organizational strategy met weekly to share data and assess the situation. Given our research questions about external partnerships and policymaking during a pandemic, our analyses focused on meeting transcripts. The process followed ethnographic methods per Emerson et al. (2011) (for details, see Supplemental Appendix A available in the online version of this article). Briefly, initial open coding and the literature review suggested two prominent policy areas: family–school communication and access to remote learning. Subsequent coding examined the resources, structures, especially prior and current policies, and discourses shaping these areas and, in turn, how external stakeholders intersected with pandemic policy enactment over time.

#### *Positionality and Limitations*

The first two authors developed this study after responding to Rose’s query for volunteers. Having known Lisa for over 10 years, Rose invited her to document TFT’s partnership, hoping the research could support other communities. Lisa came to the project as a White researcher with experience working alongside racially diverse communities on bilingual education policies, and as a parent who externally observed how the pandemic was exacerbating educational and racial inequities, as her own children “kept on learning” at their relatively privileged public magnet schools. Recognizing the need for additional expertise and experience working in contexts like Randolph, Rose also invited Kelly, an African American education researcher with experience on community-based projects examining the impact of health disparities and racial and social inequity on educational outcomes. Meanwhile, Blake, a White graduate research assistant, brought his outside perspective as a school board member at a different district.

While we sought to develop a thorough examination of this partnership including school, organizational, and community voices, our project was limited in three important ways. First, we focused on only two external partners: TFT and the local school district. Although we learned Randolph had other

TABLE 2  
Data Collected

Type of data	Number of instances
<b>Transcripts and field notes from semistructured conversations and meetings with the:</b>	
• Principal and TFT leaders	17
• Principal	12
• TFT project coordinator	3
• Volunteers	2
• District task force member (parent from different school)	1
Total field notes with transcriptions	35
<b>Field note observations (without recordings)</b>	
• Of TFT working group	2
• Of TFT teacher meetings	2
• Of TFT with other partners	2
• Of volunteer activities	2
Total additional field notes	8
<b>Artifacts</b>	
• TFT volunteer documents and correspondence	40
• TFT project documents, summaries, and reports	12
• TFT blog posts	3
• TFT parent surveys	2
• TFT teachers surveys	2
• Randolph weekly updates to family and staff from principal	67
• District reopening policy documents	2
Total artifacts	128

Note. TFT = Teachers and Families Together.

partners, the data set does not include their perspectives. This happened in part because our institutional review board approval limited us to meetings, interviews, and artifacts included as part of the TFT partnership. Second, due to district and TFT restrictions, our own concerns about overburdening research participants, and limits on time, we collected almost all data online, primarily observing Randolph–TFT meetings. Only twice did we personally experience policy enactment as it unfolded during a partnership activity. Third, limited school district support and extensive oversight by TFT restricted our attempts at engaging and incorporating family and community perspectives. While Kelly participated in parent meetings organized by TFT, parents were not formally consented for the research as TFT feared this would affect their relationships with the community. In short, we did not seek out family/community perspectives, although we recognize students and family members as key policy agents who would have further illuminated the pandemic policy enactment. In turn, the analyses only highlight Randolph’s and TFT’s negotiations and perspectives. Not only does this leave out students and families as central policy actors but also this foregrounds *White* experiences and perspectives about a *Black* context, a significant limitation further addressed in the conclusion.

## Findings

Throughout the 2020–2021 school year, Randolph’s external partner, TFT, and the local school district provided significant resources for their pandemic response. These resources—from volunteers to new technology—addressed some of the most exacerbated inequities; they helped develop Randolph’s capacity for consistent family–school communication and online instruction. Simultaneously, there were structures, particularly the district’s and TFT’s standard practices, as well as frequent and common deficit discourses, which limited the enactment of equitable policies. Perceptions of Randolph’s Black neighborhoods and community members as under-resourced and unreliable intersected with a value on responses generated outside, rather than inside, the community. Despite seemingly good intentions, TFT stakeholders often framed Randolph and its families in ways that relied on racialized stereotypes rooted in White supremacy and privilege and neglected the community’s own knowledge, assets, and experiences.

To analyze pandemic policy enactment, we start by describing how the Randolph–TFT partnership shaped two policy areas: family–school communication and access to remote learning. Within each area, we address our research questions by detailing the dynamics of policy enactment (Ball

et al., 2012), specifically, how external resources, structures, and discourses supported or constrained policy actions. Then, we analyze how negotiations among Randolph, its external partner, and local district shaped their pandemic response.

### *Partnership and Policymaking for Family–School Communication*

The biggest roadblock is not being able to find families. (Dr. Smith, 8/12/20)

Randolph’s public district, like many, had hoped to open schools for in-person instruction in August 2020. They convened a task force of educators, parents, and administrators with various subcommittees (7/24/20, District Plan). They surveyed families<sup>1</sup> in June, asking whether they wanted: in-person schooling, virtual schooling with district teachers, or self-paced virtual schooling. In July, caregivers were instructed over email to submit an online commitment form for each child (7/21/20, District Email). Families also got a prerecorded phone call reminding them to submit their forms by July 30. Then, on July 29, the district sent an e-newsletter to families: based on responses and increasing COVID-19 cases, they would no longer offer in-person schooling. Instead, families could choose virtual or self-paced, or for “families with the greatest need,” in-person support centers (7/29/20, District Newsletter). The district sent this information only by email and prerecorded “robo” calls.

By July 30, none of Randolph’s families filled out the commitment form online (8/13/20, Transcript). Dr. Smith explained she was not surprised. For one, they may not have gotten the messages; many caregivers had prepaid cell phones, so their numbers changed frequently (8/12/2020, Field notes). They also had high mobility rates, with many families moving frequently between households, in and out of the neighborhood. Moreover, few families regularly used email. Dr. Smith estimated that the district’s “mass communications” worked for just “1/16th” of families (8/12/20, Field notes). Her first step was to supplement the district communications with additional robo calls, text messages (for which she personally paid), and website announcements, but still she received only five belated commitment forms (8/13/20, Transcript).

In turn, the district directed school leaders to contact each family, so they could determine staffing and technology need. Connecting with families became one of the most important partnership activities: TFT committed resources and created structures with Randolph to contact families about school events, encourage attendance, and inquire about technology needs. However, there were also structures and discourses that constrained policy enactment around family–school communication (see Table 3).

### *Resources*

*Calling and Visiting Families.* When families did not submit the district commitment form in July 2020, Dr. Smith had to

fill out the online form for each student. This meant contacting about 230 families. To do so, she used resources from the district and TFT. From her school budget, she paid 10 staff extra compensation to call every phone number they had for each family; from this, they gathered 105 responses (8/13/20, Transcript). Then, TFT paid three school staff \$30/hour to visit the remaining families, joined by TFT volunteers. The TFT-Randolph pairs had two goals: determine families’ choice for schooling and obtain current contact information. They visited 107 homes over 2 days, missing only 22 students (8/12/20, Field notes). Paired home visits like these continued throughout the school year, to encourage attendance, obtain new contact information, survey family needs, or drop off resources provided by TFT like headphones, books, and pencil sharpeners (9/30/20, 10/16/20, Field notes).

*Orientation.* To distribute and provide training for students’ tablets and hotspots, and meet with families, Randolph planned socially distant, in-person orientations for each classroom the week before school began. TFT provided \$20 for each family who attended, to encourage attendance and make up for lost wages. To ensure families knew about their orientation, TFT volunteers called each one; they also tracked which phone numbers were working. Then, after each orientation, TFT called every family who did not attend; they offered another orientation time and tracked whether families planned to attend a sibling’s orientation instead (8/21/20, Field notes). By the end of orientation week, only 50 student resource boxes remained to distribute; TFT helped deliver those to families’ homes (8/28/20, Field notes). Dr. Smith reported,

The training sessions with the families . . . was one of the most important things that we have done so far to make this year a success. . . . It also gave us our first and possibly only face-to-face with our parents. . . . That connection can’t be overstated. (8/21/20, Transcript)

*Tracking Attendance and Family Needs.* As with many U.S. schools, attendance had been a concern at Randolph prior to the pandemic. In 2019, only 60% of students came the first day. However, in 2020, 72% logged into online school on the first day; by the end of the week, only eight students had never connected (9/18/20, TFT Newsletter).

Each morning once school started, a small army of volunteers called the homes of students who didn’t log on by 8:15 am, providing a wake-up call, tech support, words of encouragement, and building relationships with the people most critical to student success—the parents. (9/18/20, TFT Newsletter)

Dr. Smith attributed this success to TFT; none of her colleagues at similar schools had run an in-person orientation or had volunteers calling families, and none of them had such relatively high attendance.

TFT volunteers continued to call families to inquire about attendance and track families’ needs throughout the school year. TFT also took over texting families for

TABLE 3  
*Summary of External Stakeholders' Resources, Structures, and Discourses*

Supportive	Constraining
<b>Resources</b>	
District resources	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District funds for hiring extra staff</li> <li>• District tablets for students</li> <li>• District computers for teachers</li> <li>• District teams training</li> </ul>	
TFT resources	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TFT funds for hiring extra staff</li> <li>• TFT funds for families</li> <li>• TFT funds for teacher tech</li> <li>• TFT funds for student tech</li> <li>• TFT funds for student learning materials</li> <li>• TFT funds for texting service</li> <li>• TFT volunteers: calling, delivering items, visiting, tracking, reading to students</li> <li>• TFT volunteers: orientation prep</li> <li>• TFT volunteer: teacher Teams-tech support</li> <li>• TFT–CodePower family tech training sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TFT-code-power teacher teams workshops</li> <li>• TFT volunteer teacher tech support → only one teacher</li> </ul>
<b>Structures</b>	
District structures	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District tools for communication</li> <li>• District data systems</li> <li>• Full-time family–community specialist (FCS)</li> <li>• District → 1:1</li> <li>• District teacher professional development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District opt-in e-newsletter</li> <li>• District policies for summer staffing, for FCS hours</li> <li>• District October attendance report determined next year's staffing</li> <li>• District passwords</li> <li>• District device collection</li> <li>• District device distribution</li> <li>• District hotspot functionality and instructions</li> <li>• District choice of tablets (students), laptops (teachers)</li> <li>• District lost/ broken device policy</li> </ul>
TFT structures	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TFT home visit “pair” policy</li> <li>• TFT parent survey</li> <li>• TFT-Randolph parent group</li> <li>• TFT far-reaching network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TFT volunteers and network from outside Randolph neighborhood</li> <li>• TFT survey focused on tech needs</li> </ul>
School proximity to district office	
<b>Discourses</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnerships can make a difference, and “do what it takes” for equity</li> </ul>	Deficit-based discourses including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families are lacking</li> <li>• Families are absent</li> <li>• Families lack technology access and know how</li> <li>• Students lack vocabulary</li> <li>• Students lack giftedness</li> </ul>

*Note.* TFT = Teachers and Families Together.

Dr. Smith, so she would not have to spend her own money or time on that anymore. Based on a recent study (Heppen et al., 2020), TFT sent weekly texts to families about the benefits of attendance (10/16/20, Field notes). From the school and TFT perspective, these efforts to make additional connections with families seemed effective (but without interactions with families, we do not

know the impact of these policy actions). By the following June, they had much higher summer school enrollment and attendance in comparison with the district, which they attributed to their volunteer calling and tracking system (6/11/21, Field notes). Moreover, Jeff noted the secretary told him, “Families began calling proactively when their child needed to miss school. In



her experience, that was never the MO before” (5/28/21, Written Feedback).

### *Structures*

District policies around communications and staffing and TFT policies for home visits shaped family–school communication at Randolph. In contrast to the resources offered, however, some of these structures constrained the school’s attempts to equitably reach all families.

*District Communications.* During the pandemic, the district started new digital communication efforts. From June to August 2020, they sent out seven e-newsletters, and then starting in September, twice monthly. To communicate with families and store their contact information, the district used an online system. However, even though they had (some) families’ emails on file, the new e-newsletter was “opt in” only. That meant parents had to learn about it and sign up on their own. This issue, and the knowledge that text messaging was more effective for Randolph families—according to Dr. Smith and recent research (Snell et al., 2018)—meant the new informative e-newsletter reached few families.

*District Staffing.* Next, two different district structures regarding staffing shaped Randolph’s family–school communication policy enactment. First, schools in the district paid very few staff members over the summer; the principal was usually the only employee working in July. Therefore, when schools were instructed to obtain commitment forms from all families, Dr. Smith was the only one available, a significant task for one individual. She had to contact Randolph staff and offer extra compensation from her school budget. Second, the district had a policy where staffing for each year was related to daily student attendance as of October (9/11/20, Transcript). This resulted in a strong focus on *finding* students and accounting for their attendance before submitting this attendance report. Dr. Smith worried if attendance was low, she would lose teachers, and then have to “shift all my rosters, and all the kids” into new rooms (9/11/20, Transcript). This meant family–communications started to focus on compliance—getting students in their “seats” online—rather than relationship-building.

*District Family–Community Specialist.* Finally, the most critical structure related to family–school communication was the district-required position dedicated to working with families. Randolph’s full-time family–community specialist was to “facilitate parental and community involvement,” “improve attendance and student achievement,” and comply with “federal, state, district, and school policies” (District Job Description, 2021). While the position requested experience in building trusting relationships, almost half (9/22) of the specialist’s job functions focused on policy compliance,

for example: “ensure all timelines for required federal processes and documents are met.” Only 5/22 functions focused on community and family relationship-building, with little description or requirement for how to develop partnerships outside of school (3/12/21, Field notes). Moreover, Randolph’s family–community specialist was new to her role, although she had worked at the school for 4 years (8/12/20, Field notes). Perhaps because of these structural issues, she was relatively absent from TFT’s family–community relationship-building as COVID-19 persisted.

*TFT Structures.* TFT had specific expectations for their home-visit activities. Prepandemic, they required teachers to make home visits in pairs, and they did not use volunteers. In supporting Randolph’s home visits during the pandemic, this approach was renegotiated. Specifically, TFT offered volunteers to support home visits, but Dr. Smith required that at least one school staff member always accompany the volunteers. This allowed Randolph to cover more territory than they could without TFT support, but still ensure families encountered Randolph staff. However, all volunteers came from Rose’s personal networks; many were white and of higher socioeconomic status. Although she recruited former Black educators to provide feedback to the project and one Black board member to lead a TFT-created parent group in spring 2021, none of the volunteers came from Randolph’s own neighborhood.

TFT’s goals for home visits were also structured; they aimed to (1) help teachers and families collaborate to support student learning and (2) establish and build family–teacher relationships (TFT manual). Importantly, TFT materials highlighted relationship-building, but this goal was typically secondary to providing resources. TFT’s manual defined home visits by what families received (books, resources, and learning activities), not what teachers received or learned about families. Likewise, the structure of their early family–school communication efforts during COVID-19 was to provide *for* families, rather than learn *from* them. This deficit approach is one that is common in the traditional family engagement literature (e.g., Epstein, 2001), asking what can schools provide for families, rather than how schools learn from families? That said, TFT did implement a survey to assess parents’ needs (discussed further in the technology section) and in spring 2021, began a parent group that met twice/month.

### *Discourses*

Throughout the project, deficit discourses surfaced frequently during activities and conversations with TFT. While the existing structures, like TFT’s manual, suggested a discourse that families need things, emerging discourses also suggested parents were absent in their children’s education and children lacked academic capacity. In Rose’s appeals to recruit volunteers, for example, she highlighted how

families could not be found: “Try as the principal might, she can only find 50% of her students and families at this time” (07/29/20, Email). As another example, in one of TFT’s volunteer training sessions, Jeff referenced the (debunked) “word gap” experienced by students of color (McKenna, 2018), and a volunteer agreed by mentioning the lack of “gifted” youth at schools like Randolph (read: Black, urban). After we addressed this perspective with TFT (1/29/21, Field notes), they adjusted their training materials. Nonetheless, these examples demonstrate that discourses often highlighted Randolph families as “needy” or “lacking” rather than agentic policy agents. In turn, this shaped family–school communication efforts to provide what TFT thought parents needed, especially around technology, as discussed in the next section.

### *Partnership and Policymaking for Remote Learning*

It’s an immediate issue . . . [without technology], it will immediately derail everything. (Dr. Smith, 8/21/2020)

Randolph’s district began the 2020–2021 school year 100% online. To support instruction, they issued laptops to teachers and used Microsoft Teams as the platform (8/12/20, Field notes). For students, the district planned to provide tablets, for all, and hotspots, if needed. This was critically important at a school like Randolph, as TFT discovered via a parent survey at orientation that 15% of their families lacked internet access, 7% had only “occasional access,” and another 50% of families did not respond ( $n = 111$ ). That meant 22% to 65% could have needed hotspots. Jeff shared that throughout the year, volunteers and staff continued to discover students lacked a working internet connection: families’ access “waxed and waned” with “changing abilities to afford internet” (5/28/21, Written Feedback). Internet access, however, was not the only concern. From prior home visits, Dr. Smith and her staff knew many children shared their learning space. Additionally, Randolph teachers worried students did not have enough experience with the software and applications they wanted to use.

In turn, the partnership decided to focus on equity for remote learning. Similar to family–school communication efforts, TFT provided several resources, while external structures and discourses constrained equitable policy enactment.

### *Resources*

*Technology for Families.* Under Jeff’s coordination, TFT volunteers supported the creation, organization, cleaning, labeling, and distribution of technology for each Randolph student. They put together boxes for distribution at orientation that included the district-provided tablet; TFT-provided chargers, headphones, and pencil sharpeners; and

teacher-developed curricula and other class materials. In addition, TFT solicited a local organization, CodePower, to create a guidebook for families, with instructions for the tablet and connecting to Microsoft Teams (2/19/21, Artifact). Dr. Smith used this at orientation, along with her “cheat sheet” on district passwords, to show parents how to use the tablets. Afterward, approximately 75% of respondents indicated familiarity with Teams and Class Dojo, though only 57% felt confident in their ability to mitigate technology issues (Parent Survey,  $n = 111$ ). After an initial attempt failed (described in TFT structure section), CodePower subsequently offered three parent training sessions throughout the school year.

With volunteers facilitating technology distribution and support, Randolph teachers could focus on instruction (9/3/20, Field notes). Moreover, the principal could focus on leading:

Having a point person like Jeff, being a true project coordinator in that role, was incredibly helpful . . . he is essentially a member of my staff at this point . . . I tell him all of my needs, and I think about it from the 10,000 foot view . . . I can actually be a principal—I’ve never felt like that before. (9/11/20, Transcript)

*Technology for Teachers.* TFT also provided technology support. First, a TFT volunteer, who worked for a local technology company, sat with one teacher for 5 days at the beginning of the school year. Using a district tablet, she helped students with technology issues, getting them connected or helping them to open applications. This allowed the teacher to focus on her students and their lesson. Subsequently, the volunteer made a list of resources and ideas for Teams, which TFT shared with other teachers (9/10/20, Field notes). Second, TFT provided tablets, which were similar to the students’ devices, and device stands for teachers; both helped teachers better understand the student experience and communicate with them.

### *Structures*

*District Policies.* While the district shifted quickly and successfully to “1:1” (one device for each student), many of their new policies and procedures around technology constrained policy enactment for equitable remote learning. The first structural issue concerned access to and distribution of students’ tablets. In the rapid transition to online learning in spring 2020, the district provided ~10,000 tablets to their students. Although they encouraged families to return the tablets in early summer, many did not. Therefore, in August, they required principals to collect all tablets not yet returned; Dr. Smith had to find 98 missing tablets from Randolph. This process proved daunting: “I have this massive spreadsheet of why we don’t have their technology yet, and for the vast

majority of them, it's because we can't find them again" (Dr. Smith, 8/21/2020, Transcript). Nonetheless, after two weeks of calling and visiting students' last known addresses, Randolph obtained 50 missing devices. However, the district was not able to scan, clean, and send devices back to Randolph quickly enough. By orientation, Randolph still lacked 100 newly loaded devices. Teachers had to track which students still needed devices, and family orientations lacked the opportunity for hands-on practice (8/21/20, Field notes).

Next, the district's general lack of a policy or capacity to collect technology also affected students' and schools' access to chargers. When Dr. Smith picked up 150 tablets to distribute at orientation, she found the tablets did not have chargers. The district's technology officer told her many families had not returned them, and new ones were on back-order. This meant families would not receive a charger. In turn, Randolph staff decided to use the building's charging stations to charge devices, switching them every hour. Then, knowing that students could not learn without a charged device, Dr. Smith ultimately pulled all chargers from every station and gave them to families (8/21/20, Field notes). In addition, Randolph's physical proximity to the district office made it possible for staff to pick up equipment regularly. Four to five times a day, two staff members traveled to the office to get what they could: "sometimes they would come back with nothing and sometimes they come back with like 10" chargers (Dr. Smith, 9/3/2020, Transcript).

There were three other district structures in technology distribution and support that shaped policy enactment for remote learning. First, hotspots were not initially available and therefore not included in student resource boxes. Additionally, once received, Dr. Smith reported: "They're not quality hotspots . . . not meant for eight hours of streaming, let alone eight hours of streaming for four kids. So our families keep getting kicked out of the Teams calls" (Transcript, 8/28/20). Second, the district's instructions for the hotspots were confusing and unclearly printed (Rose, 7/25/2021, Feedback; Hotspot Artifact), and the district's passwords for devices were particularly long, especially challenging for younger students to remember. Third, there was an issue with device compatibility: the district provided elementary teachers with computers, but students with tablets. The Teams platform looked and worked differently on these devices, so teachers did not see what their students saw on the screen, a serious barrier to troubleshooting technology problems and enacting virtual learning.

Despite these challenges, the district did provide some level of teacher training for Teams, although the school had to supplement it. Dr. Smith provided an entry-level, "hands-on" workshop (8/12/20, Field notes): "I did a very brief introduction . . . and I'm not an expert on it at all. And so it was the bare bones basics, but my staff needed that" (8/21/2020, Transcript). She also rearranged the order of the district-designed back-to-school professional development days to begin with her workshops and end with independent

teacher workdays, allowing teachers time to play with the resources and learn by "doing the work" (8/21/2020, Transcript).

Finally, district policy required families to pay ~\$300 to replace broken or lost tablets, a steep price for Randolph's community. In practice, the district was willing to accept less, but only if families knew to contact the district office to indicate an inability to pay. According to Dr. Smith, this was never communicated to families (2/19/21, Field notes). In the end, the dean of students at Randolph expanded her role to address these structural issues; she became the coordinator, facilitator, and tracker of technology within the school.

*TFT Structures.* As mentioned earlier, TFT's and Rose's networks shaped the partnership's policy enactment. These networks were far-reaching and resourceful, which was helpful to Randolph. However, the management of these networks sometimes failed, for example, with CodePower. Although CodePower developed and implemented the guidebook and three training sessions for families, few family members attended. Moreover, CodePower failed to prepare and show up for promised teacher workshops. Multiple times, Dr. Smith scheduled and set aside teacher time for CodePower, as directed by TFT, but they cancelled. Jeff and Dr. Smith agreed this was the most disruptive aspect of their joint policy enactment. Dr. Smith shared, "I think we were trying to approach something with so little knowledge of what we needed and what they could actually provide, and those two things didn't really align, and so that support, I don't think was successful" (6/11/2021, Transcript). Ultimately, with TFT as an insufficient go-between, Randolph and CodePower were not able to develop a relationship and understanding about their respective needs, capacities, and time constraints.

### *Discourses*

Deficit discourses about families also shaped policy enactment around access to remote learning. Most significant was the continued talk about families' lack of technology. As Rose highlighted in emails to volunteers: "Sadly, Randolph epitomizes the digital divide" (7/29/2020, Volunteer Email). Such a focus, however, neglected the assets and technology experts who *did* live with students. Moreover, it ignored data obtained by TFT itself: 70% of survey respondents reported that they paid for internet access ( $n = 111$ ). This meant at least ~35% of the school population had steady access; also, recall that half of families did not take the survey, so this could mean that even more families had internet at home. Given these deficit discourses, TFT structured their parent survey around family *needs*; the first four questions were about access to the internet, with no questions about families' capacities or assets. By the end of the year, neither TFT, Randolph, or the district truly knew their families' technology capacity and access.



### Negotiations Toward Pandemic Policy Enactment

I was trying to be in that, in the middle of the tornado, directing traffic, but oftentimes I was just swept up with everybody else . . . flying around, hoping this works and hoping we don't destroy a village. (Dr. Smith, 9/2/20)

With these resources, structures, and discourses variously supporting and constraining policy enactment, Randolph's pandemic response came alive through the negotiations they had with—and between—their nonprofit partner and district, as they navigated the tornado-like environment. In both policy areas, Dr. Smith had to manage new resources from her district and TFT, amid some inflexible structures as well as deficit discourses. To answer our second research question—how did negotiations shape pandemic policy responses?—we present one situation surrounding smart tablets for preschool classrooms. This further demonstrates how, in this crisis moment, educational policies were enacted dynamically with external partners.

Randolph's district originally planned for all preschool and elementary school students to receive tablets for their remote instruction. However, for reasons unknown to our participants, as preschool teachers were preparing their online lessons, the district announced preschool students and teachers would *not* do remote instruction via tablets (8/21/20, Field notes). Instead, they would create packets and post them on the school website. Dr. Smith said the teachers were very “offended” by this last-minute change, feeling “this district does not care about pre-K and does not value what we do” (8/21/2020, Transcript). Besides frustrating teachers, this led to ever-changing and confusing communications with preschool families.

Besides calling the district office to express their frustration and look for alternate solutions, Dr. Smith shared this issue at her weekly partnership meetings with TFT. Immediately, Rose offered to fundraise and purchase devices for all preschool teachers and students. However, Dr. Smith knew that even if private funding was obtained, without official district approval, they could not use the technology. The district required specific software for digital safety, legality, and liability purposes. In turn, Rose contacted district officials, claiming they *had* to provide equitable access to remote learning, for *all* ages.

Ultimately, perhaps in part because of this and others' advocacy, the district switched plans again and provided tablets for preschool classrooms, but not before Randolph's preschool orientation had already been cancelled. The challenging logistics and frequent changes in district planning were one “the biggest headaches and also biggest disappointments” of the beginning of the school year for Dr. Smith (9/3/2020, Transcript). In general, she yearned for more proactivity from her district: “Just for once, I want to have enough time to make a real plan and put it into place and practice it and then perfect it before the first day, before the day it's being enacted” (10/23/20, Transcript).

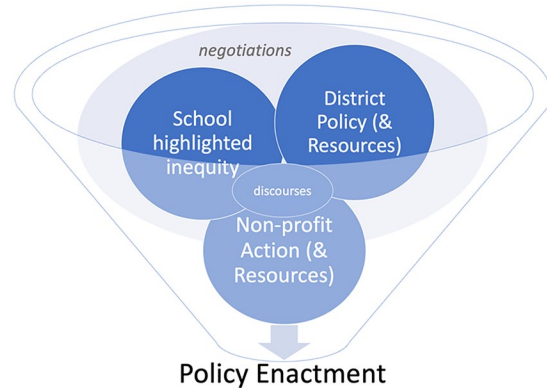


FIGURE 2. Policy enactment as negotiations among schools and their external partners.

This situation exemplifies the way negotiations and pandemic policy enactment occurred within Randolph's partnership, though not always in this order: the district had or changed a policy (within their existing structures); Randolph highlighted an inequity; TFT called upon their network to start devising solutions (using their existing structures); both the district and TFT offered resources (see Figure 2). The principal had to negotiate among the offers from the school's external stakeholders, considering what would be acceptable in the eyes of her district and her long-time partner, and hopefully students, families, and teachers. This all occurred in the context of other constraining structures and deficit discourses. In this case of the preschool tablets, Dr. Smith insisted that Rose not fundraise or purchase preschool tablets without first asking the district for approval. Dr. Smith could be forthright with Rose, as they had a long-standing relationship; she appreciated having an outside thought-partner with whom she could be honest and “vulnerable” during this crisis (6/11/2021, Transcript). Other times, though, she went along with TFT's approach to do “whatever” it took, to garner all possible resources for Randolph.

### Discussion

This study has revealed the dynamic, interactive aspects of educational policy enactment, particularly how resources, structures, and discourses from external partners shaped one school's actions around family–school communication and access to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Neither policy area studied here was shaped by only one individual and neither functioned in a linear, direct way. Policies were adapted over time, through partnership negotiations, and in ways that both supported and hindered equity for Black students and families. This discussion first reviews the study's theoretical conclusions, and then considers implications for research and practice, especially how to remain grounded in community and racial equity.



### *Partnerships and Policy Enactment*

Context matters in policy (Honig, 2006), and cross-institutional partnerships can support communities in a crisis (Tate, 2012). In this study, school policy was enacted with external partners that compiled multiple useful *resources* and generated or applied helpful *structures*. TFT's reliance on a wide network of expertise and volunteers, and their approach to embed an expert (Jeff) and multiple volunteers at Randolph, supported and adapted their policies on family-school communication and access to remote instruction. Together, they designed a new family contact list and process, and provided extensive support for technology distribution and training. Both Randolph and TFT believed their new policies had positive results, including higher-than-ever summer school attendance in 2021.

That said, policy enactment was negotiated among inflexible or inconsistent *structures* and deficit racialized *discourses* that were not highly responsive to the crisis or respectful of Randolph's students and families. This included the district's changing approach to remote learning, their lack of institutionalized family-school connections, TFT's inability to successfully connect Randolph and other partners, and TFT's external nature and focus on families' needs rather than their assets and knowledge. This led to such situations as a delay in remote learning for preschool students, ever-changing support from CodePower, and deficit-oriented interactions, like TFT's initial approach to volunteer training.

In these ways, policy enactment is not only contextual but also dynamic and nonlinear. Rather than a straightforward implementation of district initiatives—for example, the distribution of perfectly working devices from the district to each student via the school—we witnessed multiple negotiations stretched over weeks. Enacting policy during a crisis is especially dynamic, as conditions continually change. Dr. Smith felt she was always scrambling, often working within inflexible district mandates created without principals or families at the table (Murata et al., 2021). In such a context, working with an external partner can bring many needed resources to a school constrained by decades of divestment. However, educators, partners, and researchers alike must be vigilant to keep students and families truly at the center, an important implication of this study.

### *Implications for Practice and Research*

Reconsidering pandemic policy enactment as contextual and dynamic provides lessons for school-community partnerships and research. In this study, all stakeholders (including us as researchers) neglected the most central policy agent: students and their families. Unfortunately, this often occurs even when well-intended educators aim toward equity for marginalized groups; too often external organizations start projects based on their own ideas and goals (Dyrness, 2009-2010;

Perkins, 2015). In this case, TFT regularly met with Dr. Smith to see what she needed for Randolph, but no one brought students or families to the leadership team. Neither Randolph, its district, TFT, nor we as researchers effectively collected students', families', or neighborhood institutions' perspectives on family-school communication or their access to remote learning. This affected policy and practice: for example, not knowing which family members spent time at home with students, Randolph provided training for the caregiver who attended orientation, not the adult who would be with children during the day. Only toward the end of the project did TFT develop conversations with a few caregivers—but without support from Randolph's family-community specialist, who was supposed to lead such activities. We suggest this was due, at least in part, to existing racialized discourses and district accountability structures. That is, policy enactment focused on compliance, as well as tracking attendance, learning loss, and what Randolph's students lacked or needed, as opposed to developing community-centered practices *with* students and families.

Neglecting to include families in policy enactment is due to a general lack of perceiving families as policy agents (Dorner, 2011a). What if we, instead, focused on what families and children already have and do and how they learn or learned during the pandemic (FACT Team, 2020)? What if the parent meetings eventually developed by TFT had existed *before* the crisis hit, and been led by families and Randolph educators, not the TFT external network? Or what if parent meetings were the first step in the school's response to the crisis? To move forward, communities need sincere, shared efforts to engage and understand students' and families' experiences, perspectives, and current situations.

Collaborative, community-engaged education research—with an “explicit attention to researchers working in partnership with community, parent, youth, and educator groups pursuing change agendas focused on increasing equity and justice in education”—is essential to combat the issues documented here (Warren, 2018, p. 440). Beyond missed opportunities to work with and within Randolph's community, this project was only able to access—and thereby only portrayed—the perspectives of White/privileged educators and nonprofit partners about a predominantly Black community. In turn, it missed the center of the ethnographic story—a perennial problem in both ethnography and educational partnerships. If we are to address the system's inherent, historical, and racialized biases, and not reproduce their inequities, all stakeholders, including us as researchers, must admit: our knowledge base continues to be built by those in power speaking about and for marginalized groups. Future research like this project must include Black students and family members as equal team members and leaders from the very start. Representations like Figure 1 must highlight families as partners and agents in policy enactment.

## Conclusion

This study underscores the possibilities of school partnerships and contextual nature of policy enactment, especially in times of crisis, as well as the need for deeper engagement with local neighborhoods and community members. To “address the complex needs of the most vulnerable students,” it will take “grass-root associations” and myriad other actors “close to the field” (OECD, 2020, p. 19). We must consider how “to build stronger, more interconnected education ecosystems” for our children (Opalka & Lollo, 2021, p. 6) through more comprehensive and open approaches to policy and research. School–community engagement has the power to shape crisis responses and policy enactment—but to fully understand such an interactive, negotiated process, one must understand schools’ external partners, their resources, structures, and discourses as well as their students, families, and communities.

## Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank the partners of this project from both “Teachers and Families Together” and “Randolph Elementary,” as well as our other coresearcher, for their collegiality, expertise, and help in pulling this together. We remain in awe of the resiliency of neighborhoods and communities, and all the stakeholders we were able to meet through this project, and we hope the analysis here lends toward more equitable policymaking and educational opportunities for the future. We also appreciated the insightful feedback from our blind peer reviewers, as well as our friend, Dr. Lyndsie Schultz.

## Open Practices

Information about the data and analysis files for this article can be found at Dorner, Lisa M., and Harris, Kelly M. Educational Policy Enactment and External Partnerships During a Pandemic. Ann Arbor, MI: Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2021-12-30. <https://doi.org/10.3886/E158521V1>

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## Note

1. We use both “family” and “parent” to refer broadly to students’ caregivers who are actively raising a household’s child(ren). We concur with TFT on this point: “Parents and families exist in many forms: traditional two-parent, single-parent, same-sex parents, multigenerational, blended, extended, siblings raising siblings, and many others.” Our use of parent and family represent “any and all of these caregivers, whether biological parents, adoptive parents, grandmothers or grandfathers, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, or someone else involved in raising the child.”

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