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## STORIES OF IMPACT: CULTURAL WELLNESS CENTER

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We encourage you to share your feedback with us and tell us how you are using the tool or resource. Nexus Community Engagement Institute and our partners intend these documents and tools to introduce practitioners, funders, evaluators, and community members to community engagement and to give the field clarity in its language and principles. However, community engagement is not a field that can rely on written materials alone; it takes a community of practitioners to support one another in practicing community engagement effectively, meeting its challenges, and tapping the strengths within each unique context. We encourage you to seek out experienced practitioners to support you in implementing these tools, principles, and concepts.

Nexus Community Engagement Institute is available for consultation. Please contact us at [www.nexuscp.org/ncei](http://www.nexuscp.org/ncei) or email program director Avi Viswanathan at [aviswanathan@nexuscp.org](mailto:aviswanathan@nexuscp.org).

Nexus Community Engagement Institute is continuing the work of the Building the Field of Community Engagement (BTF) collaborative. The BTF collaborative was a partnership between Casa de Esperanza, the Cultural Wellness Center, Hope Community, Lyndale Neighborhood Association, the Native American Community Development Institute, and Nexus Community Partners.



# Stories of IMPACT

CULTURAL WELLNESS CENTER

## Building the Field of Community

**Engagement** is a collaborative initiative designed to magnify and elevate the power of community engagement to change the way problems are solved and resources are invested. Building the Field is bolstering the work of community engagement practitioners and encouraging other organizations to integrate community engagement into their work. As part of the project, the partners produced a film, *Community at the Center*, which discusses the core principles and values of this important work. They also host the Engaged Learning Series, which are community conversations on critical community engagement topics. This report is part of a series of tools and stories that document the partners' and other practitioners' expertise and learning. Find us at [www.buildthefield.org](http://www.buildthefield.org).

## Building the Field partners:

Casa de Esperanza  
Cultural Wellness Center  
Hope Community  
Lyndale Neighborhood Association  
Native American Community  
Development Institute  
Nexus Community Partners

Founded in 1996, the Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) is one of the primary community and cultural knowledge-production organizations in the Twin Cities region. The CWC promotes the understanding that African American people have the knowledge and experience that is needed to produce healthy and vibrant communities. The organization's core competency is in using culture to engage the community in improving the education, health and economic development of African Americans.

Based on the organization's successful history of engagement, CWC Executive Director Atum Azzahir was invited to create a program in the Saint Paul Public Schools to address the lack of parent involvement and student achievement among African Americans. School administrators reported that African American parents did not come to school other than to respond to a problem. Parents did not volunteer in the classroom or engage with teachers, often not even for annual school conferences. Rather than viewing this as a failure of the parents, the CWC began working to uncover the systemic barriers that were preventing African Americans from participating and to lift up the vision of success that African American parents had for their children. By 2014, the program had successfully engaged African American parents in a school system that once had almost no parent engagement.



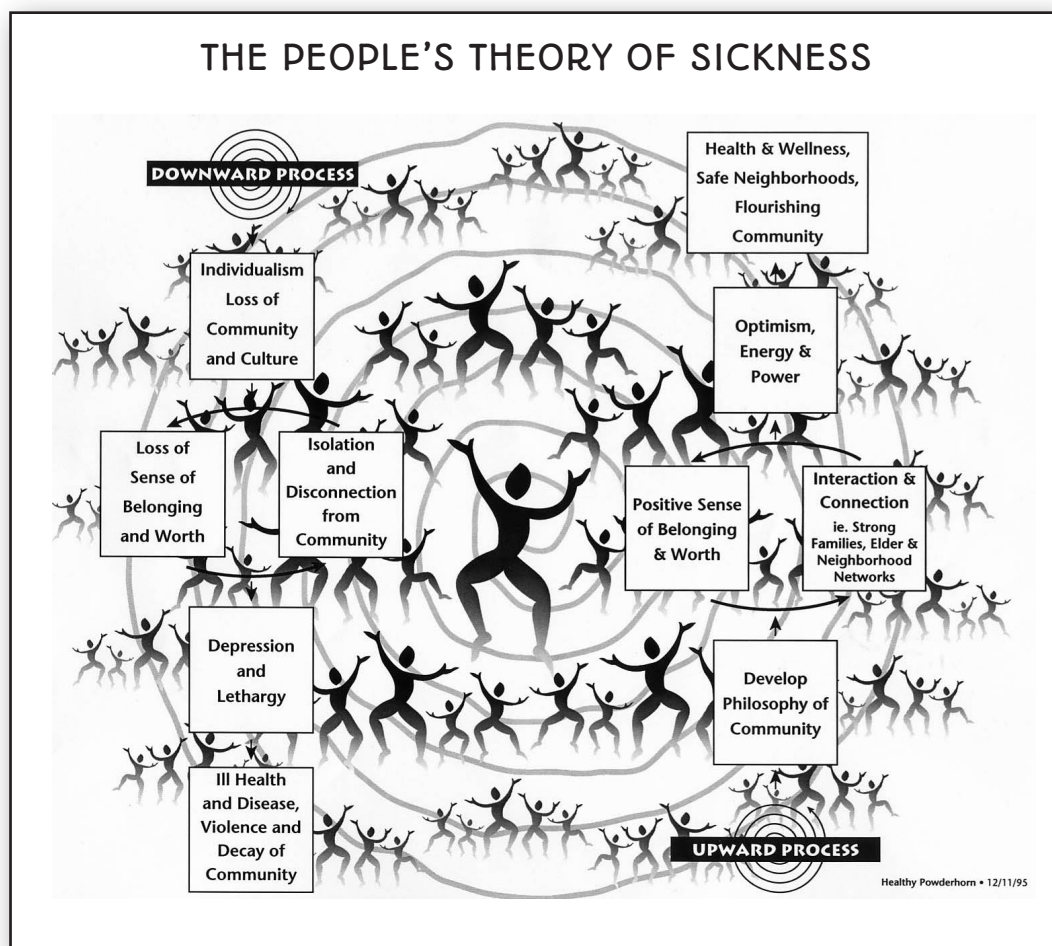
Children at Saint Paul's Maxfield Elementary School participate in a culture class offered by the CWC.

## A MODEL GROUNDED IN CULTURE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The model the CWC created for its work in the Saint Paul Public Schools emerged from decades of community engagement experience working in the multicultural, multilingual communities of South Minneapolis. In 1996, Azzahir and other community organizers facilitated dialogues with more than 1,000 people. In these deep learning sessions, people described an internalized sense of abandonment, disconnection, discrimination and many forms of oppression. Azzahir and the other cultural activists formed the CWC to unleash the power of citizens to heal themselves and build community. “We knew that unleashing the power also meant ending the culture of silence among African Americans and activating participation in community life,” she said.

Azzahir and others in her community sat with people on porches, at kitchen tables and in circles of listening as they articulated what is now called the People’s Theory of Sickness. It states that individualism, loss of culture and loss of community make people sick. The theory depicts what people described as a downward spiraling process, beginning with a personal sense of loss and grief, being denied access to opportunities, and being forced into passivity, isolation and aloneness. Twenty years later, the CWC can say that in contrast to the conditions that produce the downward process of the People’s Theory, connecting people to their heritage and culture promotes health.

On the lefthand side of the diagram, the People’s Theory depicts how loss of community and culture leads to poor health outcomes. On the right, it depicts how a shared sense of community leads to health and wellness.





# Stories of IMPACT

CWC staff, school administration, parents and children from Maxfield Elementary School. Principal Nancy Stachel said, “What we’ve created at Maxfield is a partnership between the school and the Cultural Wellness Center; we’ve worked together to infuse culture into the school culture. At the start we focused on parent and family engagement, knowing that we needed higher levels of parent involvement if we were going to be successful in raising student achievement. We have gone on to add culture classes for the students, we’ve worked together to support staff in their understanding of culture and the impact of culture in the classroom, we’ve engaged community elders in the work of supporting the school, and we’ve supported our parents in their personal development.”



## PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE SAINT PAUL SCHOOLS

In 2009, an elementary school principal from the Saint Paul Public Schools approached the CWC with a longstanding problem. As in many schools across the country, African American students at her school were failing to thrive: academic performance was low, attendance problems prevailed and teachers reported high rates of behavioral incidents. The principal invited the CWC to develop a program that would better engage African American parents in the school community to improve students’ academic performance. Research shows that students perform better when their parents are involved in the school, communicate with teachers and have trusting relationships with staff.

The goal was to engage both parents and students by connecting them with African American cultural beliefs, customs and symbols in their lives and in the school environment. Cultural connection was critical. Public schools often have a particular cultural disconnect for African American students and parents. “Many African American children have never seen anyone in a position of authority in their school who looks like them,” said Azzahir. In the Saint Paul schools, the CWC’s African American staff and volunteers instantly brought a connection to community that had previously been missing for African American students and parents.

*The CWC began working to uncover the systemic barriers that were preventing African Americans from participating and to lift up the vision of success that African American parents had for their children.*

## ENGAGING PARENTS THROUGH CULTURAL CONNECTION

Tiffany Fray is a mother of five young African American students in the Saint Paul Public Schools. She was one of a handful of parents who invited the CWC to work with African American parents at Bruce Vento Elementary School.

“When the Cultural Wellness Center first arrived, the children were running the school,” said Fray. She described a school environment that was not healthy or safe for students, parents or staff. Children regularly ran through the halls, damaged school property and cursed at teachers.

Furthermore, African American parents did not feel welcome at the school. When parents would come to the front desk, Fray said, staff would barely look at them. “We didn’t have communication or a sense of security and comfort with each other,” she said. The CWC hired Janelle Dodd, an African American woman who lived in the

community, to facilitate parent engagement. Dodd explained that the first step was engaging parents and students in African American culture as a means to help the students learn and grow. “Being connected to your culture gives you a higher standard for yourself,” she said. “Before I started at the CWC I knew I was black, I knew that I had a culture, but at the time I didn’t know what that culture was.”

Parents were invited into the CWC classroom to be present throughout the school day. They decorated the room to represent African and African American heritage, prepared projects and lessons for the students, and worked with children in the classroom. The CWC also supported parents in developing stronger and more trusting relationships with school administrators and teachers. These were the first steps toward deeper engagement in the schools.



Parents from Saint Paul's Promise Neighborhood initiative participating in CWC's rental assistance program.

# Stories of IMPACT

Parents and community members connected to the CWC's education work through Saint Paul's Promise Neighborhood.



## TRANSFORMING THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

To truly create a welcoming space for African American parents and students in the schools, the CWC had to transform the environment at each school. African American parents, volunteers and staff became a strong presence in the schools—by giving kids hugs in the hallways, being purposeful about the use of the cultural titles “Sister,” “Brother,” and “Elder” with students and staff, and helping to instill more visual symbols of African American culture throughout the school. CWC staff brought the ancient Egyptian word *hotep*, meaning “peace,” into the school culture. Students and staff throughout the building began to use that word as a symbol of African American presence in the school. “We teach the children to master themselves and monitor themselves. You should be able to stop yourself when there is a lack of peace,” said Azzahir. “We see the children practicing that. At this point, it is 180 degrees different.”

Culture classes at each school teach students about their heritage, and about the ceremonies and rituals that are a part of African American culture. African American students learn discipline and self-development through

these cultural teachings. Much of the curriculum is centered on three words: peace, order and discipline. These are core elements of what the CWC calls a resilient personality. “We teach students that you already have power in yourself,” said Dodd. “It’s already there—sometimes you just need someone to ignite it for you.”

## TEACHING PARENTS ALONGSIDE STUDENTS

African American parents are often perceived as not caring about their children’s education or as not having the resources to support their children’s development in education. At Bruce Vento, however, many African American parents wanted to participate in their children’s education, but they did not feel welcome in the school and had other life challenges that were preoccupying them.

Azzahir said that one of the barriers to participation for African American parents was that the cultural forms of African American authority were not recognized and visible in the school environment. To counter that, the CWC engaged a community elder in the classroom to reconnect African American parents to the school in a trusted relationship. The elder made visits to students’ homes



# Stories of IMPACT

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to establish a relationship outside of the school walls. “We tell the children that we are an extension of you,” said Elder Atum. “We will be in your classroom and we will also be in your community.”

That positive connection to a community elder outside of school allowed both students and parents to develop trust in the CWC as well as in the school staff. As they developed deeper relationships, parents talked about how few times anyone at the school had listened to them in the past. They also described other challenges, like housing and employment problems, violence in the home, health issues and more, that prevented their participation at school.

The CWC began to offer parent classes about how to navigate housing issues, write a resume and search for a job. At the same time, they offered parents the same culture and heritage classes that they offered the children, including concepts like problem solving and conflict resolution. These classes were another extension of cultural learning that helped parents develop their leadership skills while becoming more connected to the school environment. “We are not teaching people how to parent,” said Azzahir. “They know what they’re doing, they just need support.”

## PARENT ENGAGEMENT LEADS TO BETTER OUTCOMES

Data from Maxfield Elementary School, the first school the CWC began working with, shows that parents are more engaged in the school and that the engagement has resulted in significantly better outcomes for students. These changes in student and parent outcomes are influenced by many sources of support. The CWC acknowledges that, but the data confirm that parent engagement is key.

Between 2010 and 2013, Maxfield experienced a 350 percent increase in the number of parents who participated in annual goal-setting conferences for their children (from just 27 parents to 122 parents). In addition, the average attendance at school family nights grew from 64 families to 81 families, a 27 percent increase.

A parent survey conducted in 2012 shows that parents were no longer dissatisfied with their school experience. Ninety percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their experience with the school was excellent and 89 percent agreed that parent input was considered in making important school decisions. One hundred percent of parents who responded agreed or strongly agreed that they were aware of how the school system worked. Fray affirmed that the culture at Bruce Vento has also changed. “We put our warmth and energy here,” she said, speaking on behalf of the parents. “When you come in here there is no more chaos. It’s about being yourself.”

Student scores at Maxfield also show significant improvement. Third grade math and reading proficiency ratings, which are some of the best indicators of future academic success, show that Maxfield has improved dramatically compared to the average for the Saint Paul Public Schools. Between 2011 and 2012, for example, third grade math scores improved by 6 percent compared to 2.8 percent for all Saint Paul schools. Reading scores improved by 9.9 percent compared to 5.1 percent of all Saint Paul third graders.

Furthermore, there has been a remarkable decrease in the number of behavioral incidents among Maxfield students. Between 2010 and 2012, the number of student suspensions decreased from 39 to 22, a 44 percent reduction. Reports of physical fights between students reduced by 46 percent during that same time frame, from 24 to 13 fights.

For Azzahir, the statistics show what she has always known: that culture and community engagement are directly connected to schools being responsive to African Americans. “We help the parents and the students understand their culture,” she said, “and their culture gives them the resources to work better with institutions.”

The Saint Paul Public Schools have demonstrated that they believe in the model. The CWC is now working in five elementary schools as well as with every student in the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood, a community-wide initiative in which the CWC participates, that provides academic and social supports to children.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL CHANGE

Community engagement is at the heart of the CWC's school change model. Engagement is an active process that leads people of all ages or stages of development to make positive attitude and behavior changes. Parents and children now realize that they have something of value to contribute to the school and to the community. Some elements of the CWC's philosophy that make the organization's work successful include:

### CULTURE, TRUST AND HEALING

The CWC believes that without a connection to culture, community engagement is not possible for African Americans. All cultural communities that have a history of oppression and disenfranchisement need to heal and build trust before people will participate in institutions and systems. The CWC is a place to relearn the basics of healing by being in relationship with oneself and with others through an understanding of one's own culture. The linkages between relationships and self-knowledge create a web of activity that builds community naturally. The CWC worked with parents to explore personal issues beyond their children's education, giving them the support to heal themselves and their children. People are learning from and teaching their experiences with education to build a sense of community in schools.

### PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE SELF-STUDY

The CWC's model of personal and collective self-study helps students develop the vocabulary to stand up for themselves, the skills to self-regulate, and the courage to overcome the fear of rejection and criticism that so many of them express. Asking parents to commit to the same self-study builds a bridge between the generations and creates the environment for personal, familial and community health to flourish.

### HONORING THE ROLE OF ELDERS

The CWC's model honors the role of African American elders as cultural knowledge holders who serve as guides, nurture the children and deepen connections to community. "If you want to know who has final and ultimate authority in a community, you have to see if there are elders there," said Azzahir. "The elder, the grandparent and the great-grandparent—if those generational relationships are not intact, then the children are going to feel to a very large degree that there is crisis and instability in their lives." Every CWC school program is paired with an African American elder who works both in the school and in the community to reestablish the children's connection to and respect for elder authority.

### LISTENING

Listening is an essential practice used in ancient traditions to harvest knowledge from each person's lived experience. Time and again, parents and students in the Saint Paul Public Schools voiced the concern that teachers and administrators did not listen to them. When the CWC listened, staff were able to develop trusting relationships with families. "We will not always agree or disagree," said Azzahir. "But because we listen, they will tell us what's going on." With the trust the CWC builds, the organization can help facilitate better relationships between teachers and parents.

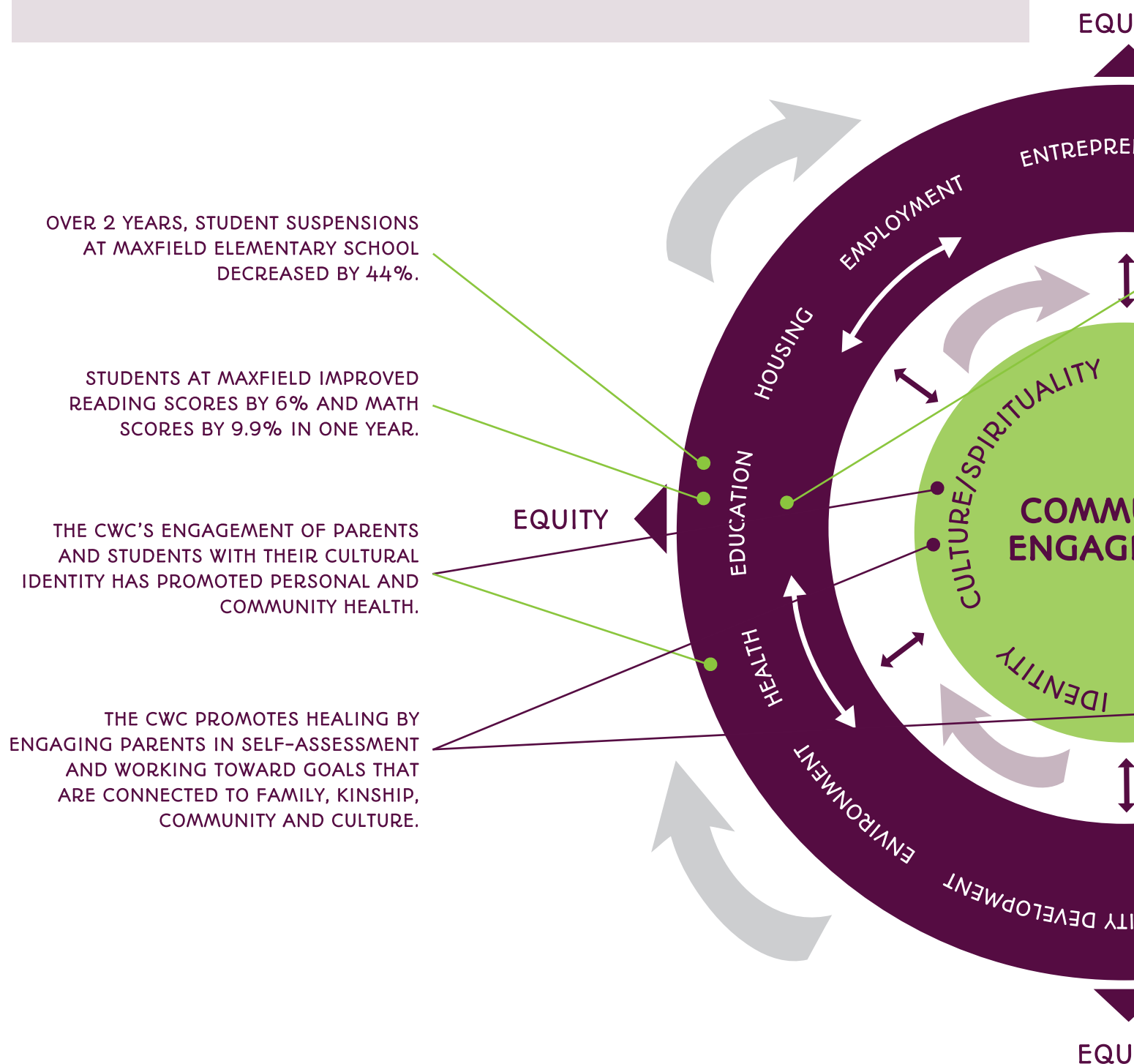
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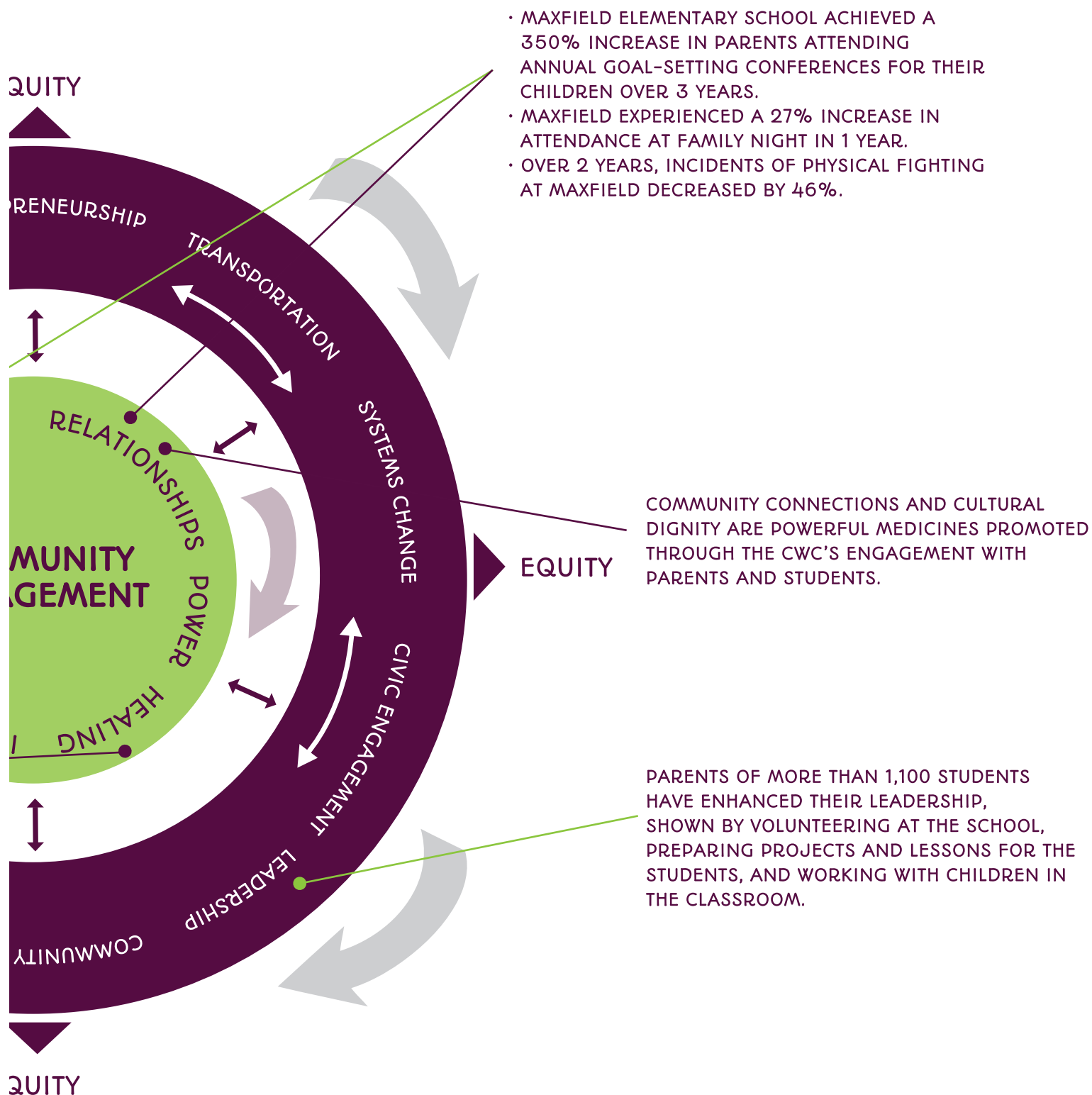
# Stories of IMPACT

## THE MODEL AT WORK: CULTURAL WELLNESS CENTER

This story is an example of how impacts build upon each other, as shown by the **Impacts of Community Engagement model** developed by the Building the Field of Community Engagement partners.



# Stories of IMPACT



# Stories of IMPACT



*The work would not be possible without Elder Ahmad Azzahir, Elder Mary K. Boyd, Bruce Vento Principal Scott Masini, Maxfield Principal Nancy Stachel and the African American community that guides the CWC.*

## HEALING THROUGH CULTURAL CONNECTION

For the Saint Paul Public Schools, where the majority of staff were European Americans, the partnership with CWC created a bridge of cultural connection and trust that the school could not create alone. The schools were a community where African Americans did not feel welcome or listened to, and where parents were isolated. The CWC built relationships and re-connected people to a strong, healthy identity, to common values, and to a sense of community. This foundation of connection led to the participation of parents in their children's schools and to better outcomes for African American students.

Azzahir remembers a sense of community in a legally segregated school for African American people. That sense of community is now missing for many African American children in their schools. As the CWC recruits parents, elders and neighborhood residents to actively take part in the systems that attempt to educate African American children alongside all other children, she asks African American parents to carry forward the work of their shared ancestors. The CWC is supporting parents to engage in turning around their children's education by accepting that they are their children's first teachers. By accessing the resources of their culture and heritage, parents can work with the schools as partners in the education of their children.



Maxfield Elementary students engage in the CWC's Center for Culture, Family and Leadership located at the school.