



# Partnership Spotlight: Project UNITE

A collaboration between the University and Minneapolis Public Schools

The MPS-CEHD Partnership Spotlight series aims to highlight CEHD researchers and practitioners that exemplify collaboration throughout the research process with partners in Minneapolis Public Schools.

In Fall of 2021, Minneapolis became one of the first public school districts in the country to require an ethnic studies course to graduate from high school. Project UNITE (UNderstanding Identity Through Education) has two main goals:

- Understand the impact of taking an ethnic studies course on students' identity development, academic achievement and well-being, and
- Explore whether students build bridges between the classroom and the community through civic engagement and having conversations with family or friends.



Sarah Gillespie  
PhD student and Culture and Family Life Lab employee



Gail Ferguson, PhD  
Director, Culture and Family Life Lab

*“Having a positive, collaborative lab culture within the Culture and Family Life Lab allowed us to focus on building relationships and trust with our partners in MPS early, before posing a specific research agenda”*

The success of this project required a positive and intentional mindset from the outset. Having a positive, collaborative culture within the Institute of Child Development’s Culture and Family Life Lab helped to facilitate the flexible approach needed for this project. This mindset allowed the researchers to focus on building relationships and trust with their MPS partners early, before pursuing a shared research agenda. Once it was time to generate research questions, this was done collaboratively, starting with district research priorities and working backwards from there.

## LESSONS LEARNED

From Sarah Gillespie and Gail Ferguson, University researchers with Project UNITE:

### START EARLY, START TOGETHER

- Build relationships with partners. Find out what they are interested in finding out and how.
- Familiarize yourself with district IRB policies from the start. They are often more stringent than the University’s.
- Establish common terminology and definitions.
- Put in the groundwork to know who you need to talk to in order to get things done.
- Start with district priorities and work backwards towards research questions with partners.

### STAY FLEXIBLE

- The types of data collection that will be most beneficial may surprise you.
- Bring methodological options to the partners, but be open and flexible in approach.

### EARN TRUST

- Send meeting agendas and products ahead of time for review and preparation.
- Have a plan to share results with all partners, including students and teachers that were involved.
- Include student voices directly in the development of study materials.

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