

Co-Creating Open Networks for Nurturing Engagement, Collaboration & Trust with Schools

WHAT is Project CONNECTS?

Picture this: every family is empowered to shape their child's educational journey. Through Project CONNECTS (Co-Creating Open Networks for Nurturing Engagement, Compassion, and Trust with Schools), we're collaborating with a wide range of partners to enhance family engagement, particularly during the critical transition-age years. Our goal is to improve the academic, social, and emotional well-being of students with disabilities, ultimately leading to more equitable post-secondary outcomes. Project CONNECTS is a technical assistance initiative that will be implemented in collaboration with several LEAs throughout Virginia.

WHAT organizations are involved?

This project is funded by the US Department of Education. The Partnership for People with Disabilities (PPD) at Virginia Commonwealth University is leading the project in collaboration with Formed Families Forward (FFF), the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC), VCU's Institute for Collaborative Research and Evaluation, and the Virginia Department of Education and its Training & Technical Assistance Center network, Virginia Tiered System of Support (VTSS) Research & Implementation Center, and Family Engagement Network.

WHAT are the project's key activities?

- 1. Community Conversations:** These conversations will take place with each school community to identify the needs of families, school staff, and community members. This input will guide the other activities below.
- 2. Trauma-Informed Compassionate Learning:** To deepen awareness of trauma and its impact on underserved families and students, at least 25 school personnel, community agency staff, and families per school site will participate in in-person and virtual co-learning opportunities.
- 3. Family Resilience Building:** A minimum of 15 BIPOC, military-connected, and/or kinship families in each school or LEA will receive enhanced 1:1 emotional, informational, and systems navigational support from a cultural broker and participate in pre-and post-questionnaires to gauge family resilience.
- 4. Family Training & Leadership Development:** A small group of family members at each school will participate in Parents as Collaborative Leaders (PACL) and Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC) training and leadership development activities.
- 5. Coaching for improved family engagement and student outcomes:** Systems Coaches will guide teams in developing continuous capacity, using evidence-based practices, and addressing factors that could negatively impact implementation.

HOW will school communities benefit?

In addition to participation in the activities described above, a range of short- to long-term impacts are anticipated. For example: **1)** Equitable family partnership resources/supports are improved and accessible to LEA's and families; **2)** Improvements in students with disabilities' academic, social, and emotional outcomes; **3)** Increased graduation rates and college and career entry for youth with disabilities in underserved families. Each school will receive a stipend (approx: \$2,000). Families will receive a monetary stipend for their participation in program and evaluation activities.



WHAT is the timeline?

Project CONNECTS plans to hold Community Conversations in partnering schools starting in the **spring of 2025**. Provision of family partnership training, technical assistance (TA), resources and strategies would begin in the **fall of 2025**.

WHAT is expected of partnering school communities?

Each partner school will be asked to identify a school lead and family member to support communications with all stakeholders, support family member recruitment/participation, support data collection for evaluation (see below), and assist in organizing meetings and trainings for staff and families.

WHAT kind of data will be collected?

Staff and families will be asked to share their input and provide feedback at several time points each school year by participating in surveys and interviews or focus groups. They will be asked to share details regarding their needs, feedback regarding the project activities they participate in, and surveys focused on their experience within the school community. Schools or LEAs will be asked to provide attendance and discipline data and access to the Virginia School Survey of Climate and Working Conditions and the Special Education Performance Report. This input is important as Project CONNECTS will respond to the changing needs of each school community. The primary project activities and evaluation components are outlined [here](#).

WHAT is the sustainability of this project?

Addressing systemic factors such as school culture, leadership practices, organizational and communication structures, and systems coaching can lead to more meaningful and sustainable improvements in teaching, learning, and engagement with families. Our partnering organizations will further equip LEA staff with knowledge, skills, and strategies to replicate with other schools and LEAs in their region. Project CONNECTS will develop a manual, toolkit and other user-friendly and widely accessible resources for disseminating information about this initiative; partnering LEAs input will inform each of these.

QUESTIONS?

If you have questions about this project, contact **Dana Yarbrough** (Project Director, Project CONNECTS; Associate Director, Partnership for People with Disabilities; 877.567.1122 | dvyarbrough@vcu.edu)