LEARNER ADVOCATE

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

A REPORT ON LEARNINGS AND REFLECTIONS

RE SCHOOL
COLORADO

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Overview

The **Learner Advocate Community of Practice (CoP)** is an initiative spearheaded by RESCHOOL. It brings together learner advocates from Colorado-based organizations who support **families and young people** in their communities to **access and navigate learning opportunities and resources**.

The CoP seeks to **connect** participants to **expand** the r**esources** available to participating collaboratives and organizations. In addition, participating in the CoP is a way for participants to collaborate and address the areas of strengths and challenges involved in learning and resource navigation.

Key Components and Structure

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Participants accessed peer-to-peer support and financial resources to support families, caregivers, and young people in their communities to access learning opportunities.

Participants met during virtual gatherings and accessed administrative and logistical support from RESCHOOL.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Participants engaged with relevant and iterative learning content throughout the CoP to support their work.

This content included introductions to frameworks, literature, and guest speakers from the field.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

$10,000 unrestricted stipend provided to each collaboration/organization in the CoP

$33,000 in learning dollars for families each collaboration/organization partners with as direct payments

$10,000 in grants available to each collaborative/organization to support the work of local providers in their community.

Organizational Profiles

RESCHOOL's selection process for the CoP consisted of the following priorities in selecting collaboratives and organizations to participate:

Organizations that primarily work with BIPOC and low-income families, kinships, and young people

Organizations that have mission, vision, and values that reflect the belief that families, kinships, and young people should have access to funding that allows them to choose their own learning experiences

Organizations that want to participate in a community of practice alongside two other organizations and RESCHOOL, sharing their experiences and learning in a collaborative space

Participating Collaboratives and Organizations

Garfield 16

The mission of the Garfield 16 School-Based Family Resource Center is to affirm, strengthen, and support families in Garfield 16. We aim to increase student achievement by supporting their progress towards the overall agency of personal wellness, productive citizenship, and intellectual development.

Cultivando

Cultivando is an organization that serves the Latino community in Adams County and focuses on community leadership to advance health equity through advocacy, collaboration, and policy change. Our work is based on our organizational values of community-led work, social justice, and collaborative leadership. We firmly believe that all people have the power to maintain fair and equitable systems and to ensure opportunities for their communities to thrive.
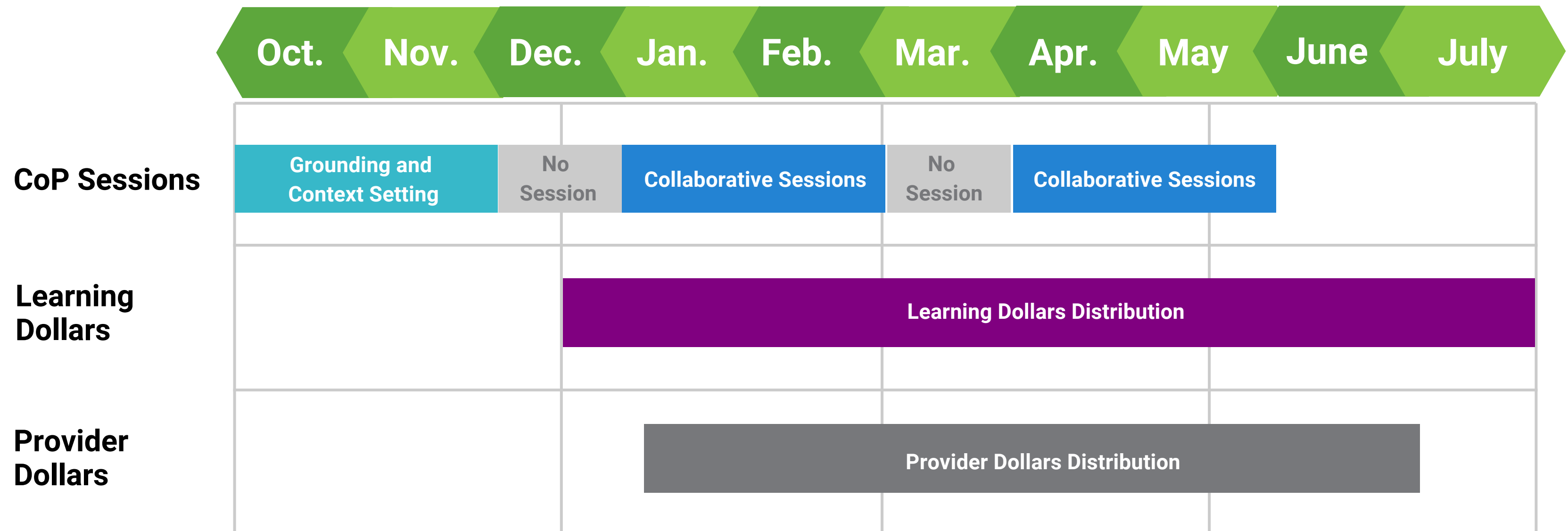
Foster Youth Collaborative

Cobbled Streets is 501 (c)(3) that focuses on providing experiences and opportunities for foster children while promoting healthy relationships with adults.

The Tennyson Center for Children works with every child and family impacted by trauma to realize their infinite possibilities.

Overview of Timeline

Participating collaboratives and organizations were asked to attend one monthly session, up to four hours, from October 2022 to May 2023. RESCHOOL prefaced the CoP by outlining that though this was the anticipated cadence, it was open to being amended based on the needs of the participants. The graphic below details the timeline of the CoP.

	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July
CoP Sessions	Grounding and Context Setting		No Session	Collaborative Sessions		No Session	Collaborative Sessions			
Learning Dollars				Learning Dollars Distribution						
Provider Dollars				Provider Dollars Distribution						

Guiding Questions and Process

RESCHOOL uses a discovery-driven process, the Future State Design Cycle, to help us capture data and develop insights. This process allows us to determine a hypothesis of a desired future state and to define and test assumptions in service of the desired future state. In doing so, our process is iterative and evolutionary-based.

We gathered qualitative insights through individual and organizational interviews, surveys, registrations, and meeting sessions. In addition, we partnered with MoCaFi, a fintech platform, to support in distributing learning dollars via debit cards and gathered quantitative insights from reports generated by their team.

01 How might we understand the opportunities and challenges of a decentralized approach to navigational support through utilizing a community of practice model?

02 How might we understand the support advocates/navigators need and the ways they depend on their networks?

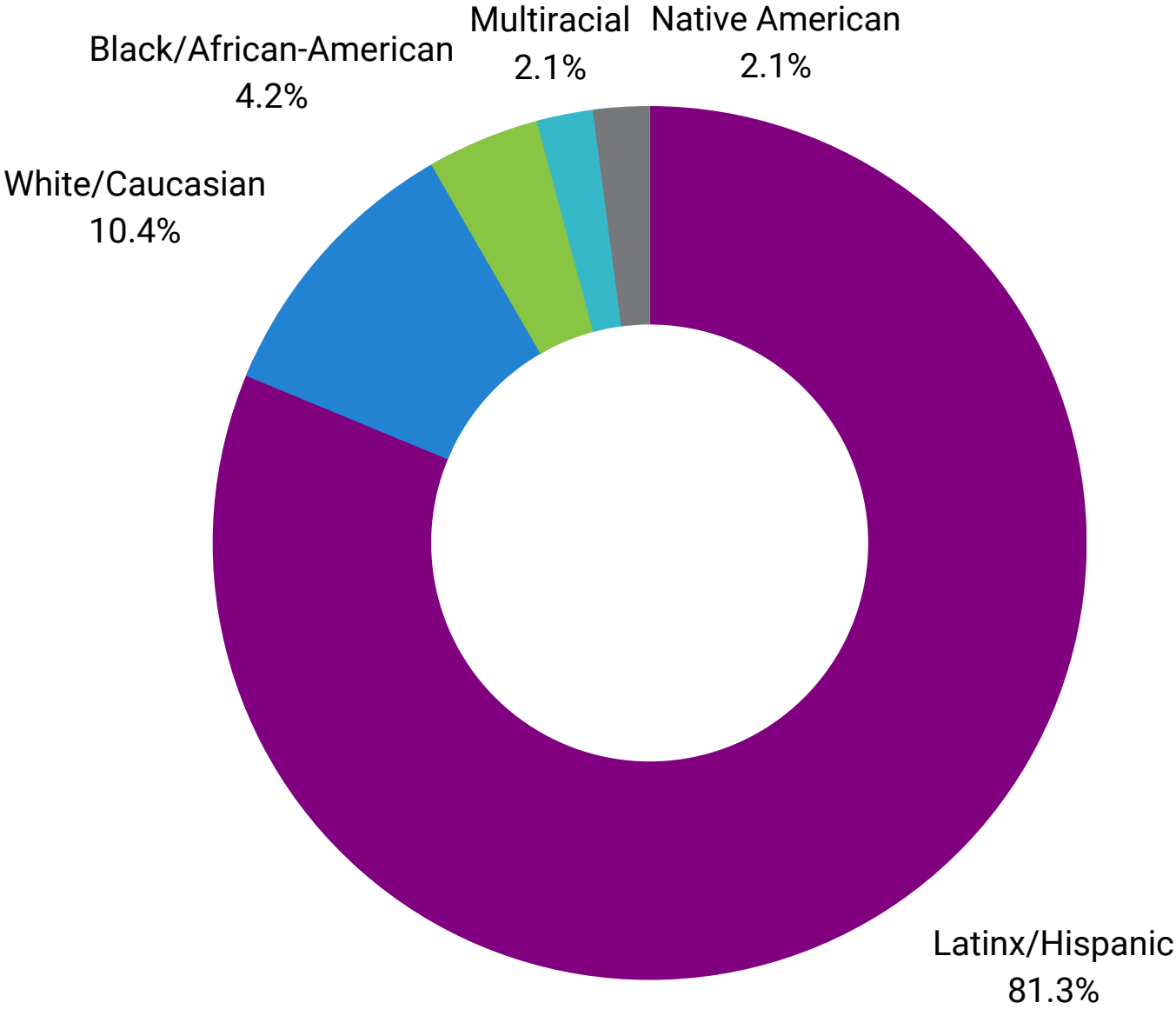**03** What are the opportunities and challenges of running a Community of Practice model?

At a Glance

102
Young people served through the CoP

47
Families served through the CoP

$99,000
Total amount distributed to families and young people

13 yrs old
Median age of young people served

Family Demographic Information

Black/African-American
4.2%

Multiracial
2.1%

Native American
2.1%

White/Caucasian
10.4%

Latinx/Hispanic
81.3%

Learnings and Insights: Areas of Focus

Context and Geography

Navigation

Collaboration

Timelines

Distribution of Funds

Reflections and Sentiments

Context and Geography

Each CoP organization's and participants' philosophy of care informed and influenced their varied approaches to engaging with their constituents and the larger CoP collective.
All organizations held young people's awareness and wisdom equally valuable to their parents', caregivers', and support systems' wisdom. Some organizations' approach to centering young people was centering the entire family as the families' well-being affects their young people. For others, students were the center of their work in ways where young people's autonomy, independence, and voices were valued concretely, and the families and caregivers followed the young person. Some decided to engage both families and young people together. Others decided to engage first with young people, with permission, and then to engage their families. Across all approaches, organizations were able to lead decision-making in their unique ways.

While CoP organizations represented a diverse array of geographies spanning urban, rural, and suburban areas, this particular diversity created a barrier to deep community building within the CoP session experience as the sessions were held virtually.
We heard from participants that the virtual environment could have been better for shared learning and that an in-person environment would be ideal for working and learning together. While many participants desired in-person experiences, location, timing, and competing priorities made it difficult to hold sessions in person. Some future explorations include examining questions of geographical breadth vs. depth.

Collaboration
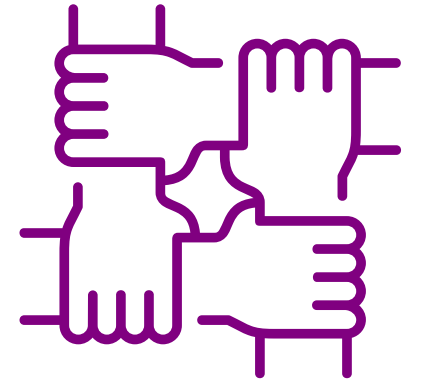
Flexibility, constant iteration, and responsiveness are key when running a Learner Advocate Community of Practice.

Throughout the CoP, participants played a pivotal role in shaping the agenda and structures of further sessions. Participants shared their reflections, ideas, and feedback openly and suggestions were incorporated into designing future sessions. RESCHOOL responded to participants and changed the meeting format and structure to accommodate the participants' desires, needs, and wants as part of the CoP.

Discussion-based sessions that allow ample time to share contexts, curiosities, and challenges create more opportunities for participants to engage with one another and problem-solve as needed.

In post-session surveys, participants shared that they were most engaged and enjoyed the opportunity to speak to each other across collaboratives/organizations, share their ideas, and listen to the experiences of others. When asked if there was anything to improve about the meeting structure in final interviews, all groups mentioned wanting more opportunities for information sharing from RESCHOOL as folks were in different parts of the process in distributing funding to families and young people

Distribution of Funds

- **Each collaborative/organization had the flexibility to decide where to distribute funds in their communities that worked best for their contexts, relationships, and missions.**
- **Learning funds were distributed to all families and caregivers via debit cards. Provider dollars were distributed via checks. The table below outlines each's approach to outreach and distribution.**

Foster Youth Collaborative

Outreach
- Hosted a luncheon with foster care professionals who brought ideas of who would potentially benefit from learning dollars
- Provided outreach to both foster caregivers and kinship caregivers

Learning Dollars - $33,000 total
- Selected 7 caregivers to receive funds
- Each caregiver received different amounts ranging from $3500 to $5500.

Provider Dollars - $10,000 total
- The Foster Youth Collaborative selected Vocal Coalition Youth Choirs (VOCO) to receive $5000 of provider dollars.
  - VOCO focuses on reaching young people who would not usually participate in choir and centers diversity within the choir in both their outreach and programming efforts.
- In addition, the collaborative selected the remaining $5,000 to be distributed to Cobbled Streets to support their work.

Cultivando

Outreach
- Held one-on-one meetings with families they serve to internally identify families for which this would be the right fit.
- Received referrals from families they met with for additional families who would benefit from learning dollars.

Learning Dollars - $33,000 total
- Selected 23 families to receive funds
- Each family received varying amounts between $1,000 and $3,000.

Provider Dollars - $10,000 total
- Cultivando selected themselves to receive provider dollars to:
  - Support them in expanding the resources they currently provide to their community.
  - Support them in offering other types of healing for the community through activities such as dance and healing circles.

Garfield 16

Outreach
- Gathered mental health professionals and advocates together to create a list of students they wanted to target
- Partnered with YouthZone to assist in student outreach and referrals
- Held 1:1 meetings with students and families

Learning Dollars - $33,000 total
- Selected 17 families to receive funds
- Each family received varying amounts between $2,000 and $3,000

Provider Dollars - $10,000 total
- Garfield 16 selected the Garfield 16 County Outdoor Program to receive provider dollars in the amount of $10,000 to:
  - Support them in student exploration around navigating 4-day school weeks.
  - Help alleviate costs around accessing outdoor activities.

Distribution of Funds (cont.)

Each organization had the flexibility to distribute funds in ways that worked best for their internal operations and communities, and thus, each decision-making process was unique.
While RESCHOOL supported the administrative and logistical components of providing outreach materials and distributing the learning and provider dollar funds to recipients selected by organizations in the CoP, organizations were responsible for deciding where to direct those funds. The decision-making process looked different for each group. In some organizations, decision-making was distributed equally amongst all the organization's participants. In others, a few key members led this process for their team. We learned that allowing space for each organization to decide their process created more opportunities for this scope of the CoP to be better embedded into their everyday work.

Families and caregivers could decide whether to receive funds on behalf of their young people as a lump sum in a single debit card or to receive individual debit cards for each young person in their care. The vast majority chose to receive funds as a lump sum.
To be attentive to varying contexts around family and caregiving relationships, CoP participants described the importance of offering their constituents choices in how they wanted to receive funds. One caregiver chose to receive individual debit cards for their young people to create teaching moments about financial responsibility, for example. All other families chose to receive funds as a single unit. Each context is unique, and thus, continuing to be as responsive as possible continues to be part of our learnings.

Distribution of Funds (cont.)
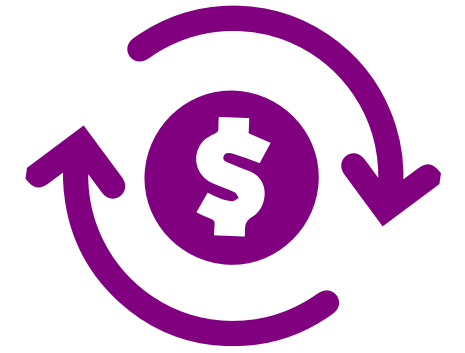
Families and caregivers who received learning dollars from 2 our of the 3 CoP organizations experienced delays in receiving their debit cards for various reasons.
At the onset of the CoP, learning dollars were anticipated to be distributed to families by December 2022, but some were instead distributed in early 2023. There were delays for several reasons, which included incorrect addresses, lost mail, and unforeseen mailing operation delays. For recipients who had address discrepancies, those cards were redirected to P.O. Boxes once the issues were known and then hand-delivered. One CoP organization decided to have all the cards sent to a single P.O. Box at the onset to hand deliver debit cards and did not experience many delays. By July 2023, all recipients received their debit cards.

Debit card delays impacted families' and caregivers' choices in deciding how they would spend learning dollars and CoP organizations supported their constituents around their various navigational processes.
We learned through CoP sessions from organizations that some of their recipients of learning dollar funds had to change their plans for learning dollars due to the delays. As the CoP organizations were the main points of contact for families and caregivers, creating spaces in the CoPsessions for participants to share what they were hearing from their constituents and how they were acting as a support in their decision-making provided space for troubleshooting and brainstorming as needed as a collective.

Navigation

Each CoP organization supported their families and caregivers in navigating the resources available through the learning fund. Organizations were fielding questions and requests about expanding the scope of the use of funds to include essential resources.
Each organization shared that their communities had needs for resources beyond what they could provide with the learning dollars. Some families and caregivers inquired about being able to use the funds on necessities such as rent, transportation, or family trips. Organizations utilized CoP sessions to discuss and push on the use of funds. These reflections demonstrate that the use of learning funds can be expanded to possibility include resources that impact a family's or caregiver's access to learning for their young person.

There are barriers to accessing learning opportunities that are specific and relevant, and families and caregivers also need resources to connect their young people with adequate programming for their needs.
CoP organizations shared that supporting their communities in accessing available resources varied depending on the needs of each family, caregiver, and young person. For some, though the funds were available, the supply of learning opportunities that could adequately accommodate their young person's needs was low. Furthermore, each organization also acted as learning providers for their communities and played multiple roles in supporting access to learning.

Timeline

To support CoP organizations and their communities well, it is essential to keep timelines around funding flexible so that organizations may be both responsive and proactive in resourcing community needs around learning.

In trusting that CoP organizations know how to serve their communities best, the suggested timelines RESCHOOL offered at the start of the CoP were starting points rather than solid cemented dates around aspects such as identifying recipients and spending down learning dollars.

Throughout the CoP, there was a deep awareness that trust is a crucial ingredient in navigation support and that it looked different for each organization and their communities, given their contexts and stories. One organization had to take its time building and rebuilding trust with its community due to fractured relationships in its larger community context. This caused timelines to be extended beyond the initial frame. Another organization was so well embedded in their community that the lines between being an organization and community members were blurred completely. In this case, the organization was able to get the learning dollars quickly to their community.

Furthermore, giving space for technical and logistical delays to be resolved also supported CoP organizations in supporting their communities well in that the "pressure" to get funding out the door was mitigated by valuing the process instead of the output. This supported collective learning as CoP organizations discussed their challenges and wins when meeting during the sessions.

Reflections and Sentiments
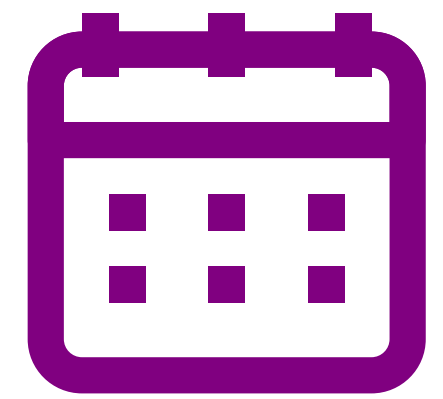
Each CoP organization expressed various reflections and sentiments regarding their experiences around the CoP and working with families, caregivers, and young people in distributing learning dollars.

For one organization, bringing the resources of the CoP to their community brought both gratitude and tension. There were more families/caregivers with needs than learning dollars available, and they turned to deep advocacy for their community during CoP sessions when hearing about the challenges, i.e., pushing against traditional and narrow ideas of what barriers to learning could be and expanding definitions.

Another organization shared that they thought the process would be different. They shared that they thought people would be jumping at the opportunity to receive learning dollars, but they were met with skepticism from their community instead. In response, they slowed down and took their time to work intentionally with young people and their families/caregivers as they committed to a process of trust building.

Furthermore, another organization decided to expand its reach and work with families outside those they already serve. This organization described the process as daunting since they were choosing a limited amount of families, and there was always another family with a greater need. They knew that many families needed their basic needs met, and learning dollars would have been supportive. This still connected those families to resources available and were able to connect more families to resources by reaching into their network.

Recommendations

Explore partnerships with organizations that support families, caregivers, and young people with accessing basic needs (ex., transportation, housing, food) is needed to expand the resources available to recipients of intended learning dollars.
Though learning dollars provide access to resources that can be used to supplement a variety of experiences, learning dollars continue to illuminate that resources to support learning are also resources used to provide basic needs that create the conditions for learning to take place both inside and outside of the home. As such, exploring ways to increase partnerships across sectors is needed.

While debit cards were intended to be a no-hassle approach to distributing learning dollars, having multiple options for parents and caregivers to receive funds is essential. Having various ways for funds to be delivered digitally, in person, or via mail is more responsive to suit the needs of the intended recipients.
There is no substitute for providing families, caregivers, and young people with options for receiving learning dollars in various ways that can support their needs. While debit cards were anticipated to be straightforward, there were still delays and errors with delivery and subsequent use that needed troubleshooting. In future iterations of a CoP, it would be beneficial to support multiple modes of distribution that include both digital and non-digital options. Learning more about how to provide resources in responsive and contextual ways is important to continue to explore and advocate in both this space and broader spaces of learning.

Recommendations

While this CoP brought a range of participants from different geographies together to share their similarities and differences in supporting their communities with learning, it is worth exploring having a geography-based CoP in the future to allow for more in-person community-building experiences.

We heard from participants that they would have liked in-person meetings to deepen their relationships with other participants from other organizations. As this CoP included participants from across Colorado, coordination and planning were difficult for in-person experiences. In the future, having a geographic constant could allow for more possibilities for brainstorming, community building and solution creation.

As each organization had a different community context and worked with a unique subset of families, caregivers, and young people, it might be beneficial to hold context-specific CoPs to go deeper in addressing challenges and opportunities at the level of community context.

Furthermore, having context-specific CoPs could allow for more intersectional supports within specific communities that included more community-wide approaches. For example, this could mean supporting a CoP that is focused on the varied experiences of youth who are in foster care or a CoP focused on a specific subset of learning needs, such as youth with learning disabilities. Being more specific with the nature of the CoP could allow for more specific approaches to understanding and working to identify solutions to the intersections of those experiences.