In Dallas Schools, Community Engagement Isn't Outreach — It's Infrastructure

Hise: District and local nonprofit have built operational systems that make volunteer help useful, consistent, and geared to what teachers want.



Tutor Oscar Yañez works with students at Bethune Elementary School in Dallas.
(United to Learn/Simon Luna Studios)



By Tim Hise | June 14, 2026

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A recent commentary by Chad Aldeman *(published in The 74, March 30, 2026)* highlighted research, drawn from focus groups in seven states, that found people in struggling school districts are not disengaged; rather, they run into walls when they try to get involved.

It's a structural problem that explains why community engagement efforts in schools so often fall short. School staffs are already stretched thin. Teachers and principals do not have time to manage unpredictable volunteers, coordinate one-off partnerships or repeatedly onboard outside groups that disappear after a single event. Even well-intentioned community support can become a burden if schools are forced to organize it themselves.

In 2017, leaders in the Dallas Independent School District and a local nonprofit, United to Learn, began approaching this challenge differently. Instead of treating community engagement as outreach, they treated it as infrastructure.

The idea was straightforward: If communities wanted to help schools, someone needed to build the operational systems that would make that help useful, consistent and geared to what educators actually wanted.

That meant creating processes that sound more logistical than inspirational. Principals identified specific school needs. Philanthropies filled funding gaps. Volunteer roles were clearly defined. Literacy tutors followed the district curriculum and were scheduled regularly during class time. Schools did not have to invent partnerships from scratch every semester.

Eight years later, in the 2024-25 school year, 2,064 volunteers gave more than 13,200 hours across 103 United to Learn partner schools in Dallas. These included 140 educators-in-training who

collectively delivered 15,000 hours of tutoring to 800 students across 23 Title I schools. Other volunteers, donors and corporate partners have supported projects identified by school leaders, including gardens, community pantries, refreshed libraries with hands-on learning and makerspaces, STEM labs and outdoor areas. This coordination matters because it helps ensure that community support strengthens the work schools were already doing, rather than creating additional layers for educators to navigate.

Here's what this model looks like in practice:

On a Tuesday morning, college student Oscar Yañez arrived before the first bell at Bethune Elementary, six minutes from his house, to work with second graders on phonics. As an education major working in United to Learn's Aspiring Teachers program, he is paid, has a regular schedule and was trained in the district's reading curriculum before he ever sat down with a child. Because Oscar visits the school three times a week, the kids at Bethune know him. When he graduates in December, he hopes to apply for a full-time teaching position at the school. According to fall-to-spring i-Ready assessment data, 91% of participating students improved their overall reading scores, and 62% advanced at least one full grade level in reading proficiency.

Clinton P. Russell Elementary had a state accountability rating of D two years ago. After the district promoted Chara Pace to principal, she led efforts to strengthen school culture, build camaraderie among colleagues and help teachers deliver high-quality curriculum more effectively. This built greater confidence, collaboration and trust. With intensive support from United to Learn, Russell has climbed to an A. Pace credits the partnership and its volunteers, along with a leadership development program that addresses leaders' mental health and helps to avoid burnout.

At Esperanza "Hope" Medrano Elementary, more than 100 volunteers came together to set up a community pantry and outdoor garden, a project conceived by fifth-grade teacher Karina Solis — the great-granddaughter of the woman the school is named after. The school was able to shape a project that meant something to its own history.

The district's role in all this matters enormously. Many districts struggle to translate community interest into support that is actually useful to schools. In Dallas, district leaders made a deliberate choice to open doors rather than keep people out. Early conversations between the district and the team that would later form United to Learn centered on a few simple questions: What did schools need and how could the community help? Together, they created a clear path for ongoing sustainable support aligned with school priorities. This approach is particularly important for historically underinvested schools whose leaders often hear promises from outside organizations that fail to materialize. School leaders in Dallas say this consistency matters as much as the individual projects themselves.

Maintaining it across what are now more than 124 schools is ongoing work. Schools' needs differ, resources are finite and sustaining trained volunteers and long-term relationships across so many schools and communities requires constant coordination and adjustment. Dallas's experience does not offer a simple formula, and it cannot be replicated through a single volunteer day or short-term initiative.

Aldeman's piece concludes by asking whether anyone is willing to build the infrastructure to convert the care communities feel for their local schools into something sustained and measurable.

Dallas suggests one possible answer. Community engagement becomes more effective when schools are not asked to carry it alone. Like curriculum, transportation or staffing, partnership itself requires infrastructure. Without it, community support can remain episodic and symbolic. With it, schools may gain something more durable: consistent capacity serving what students, educators and school communities actually need. It is possible to break the pattern. The question is whether other districts are ready to try.

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