

**GOALS, CHALLENGES
AND SOLUTIONS:
TARRANT
COUNTY
SPEAKS OUT ON
EDUCATION**



United Way
of Tarrant County



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INTRODUCTION



The quality of public education impacts a community in multiple ways. Not only does it prepare tomorrow's workforce, it boosts the economy and lowers crime rates, creating a stronger, safer environment for us all.

Our Mission

United Way of Tarrant County is on a mission to improve education in Tarrant County. Our bold goal is 20 percent more on-time graduations from United Way selected schools by 2020.

To find the best way to achieve this goal, we talked to the people who are on the frontlines of education every day: teachers, parents, childcare and higher education professionals, college students, volunteers and community leaders. We asked them what they thought were the biggest problems facing education in our community today and what would be the best ways to solve those problems.

We have summarized their answers in this report, identifying a handful of basic pressure points and outlining actions we all can take to realize our vision: a community that values education, supports teachers, and fights for the health and safety of children; and a school system that partners with that community to give every child an equal chance to learn.

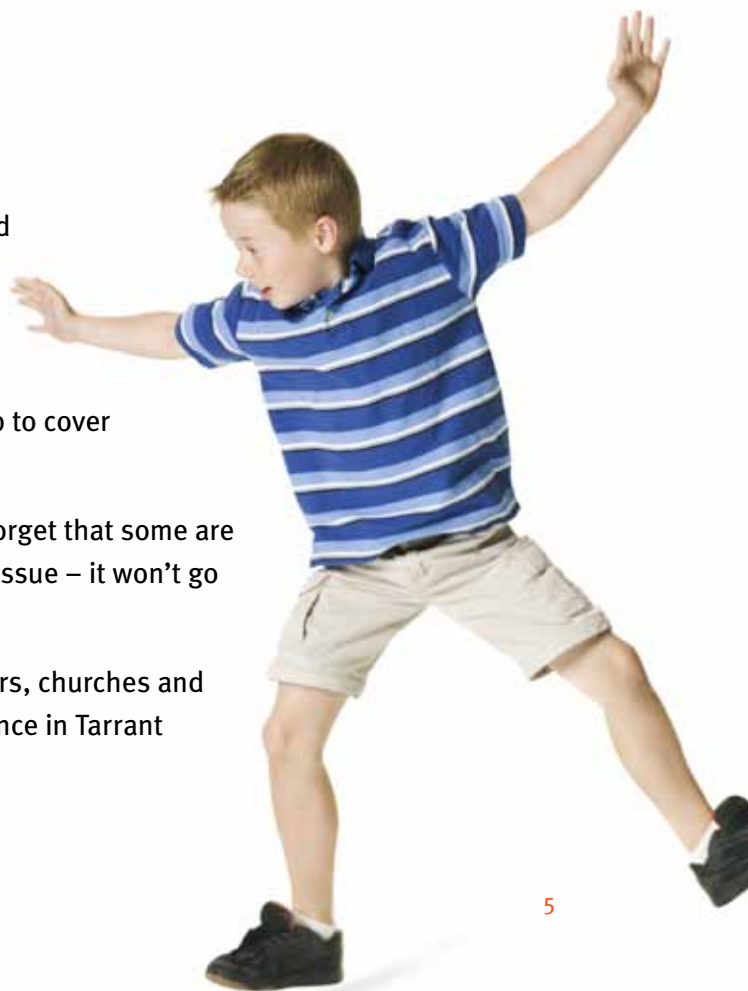
Working Together

Participants acknowledged that public education is a shared responsibility, and that schools should not be expected to shoulder the entire responsibility by themselves.

“Some of our faculty members are feeding kids out of their own pockets,” one person noted. “We need community help to cover these.”

“We tend to focus on being done raising our own kids and forget that some are still struggling,” another person said. “We can't ignore the issue – it won't go away because our kids have been successful.”

We need everyone – parents, teachers, school administrators, churches and nonprofits – working together to make our dream of excellence in Tarrant County education come true.





ABOUT THIS REPORT

Over the course of 16 months, United Way staff and Education Council volunteers talked with a total of **134 people**, from **49 different ZIP codes** in Tarrant County, in **16 different interviews** organized into group discussions.

Participants were **male and female**, and ranged in age from **teens to over age 75**. Income levels varied from less than **\$20,000 per year** to more than **\$100,000 per year**. Many, but not all participants, were already involved with United Way of Tarrant County.*

** We were unable to collect demographic information from every participant.*

Participants included:

- **Teachers** in Arlington, Birdville and Fort Worth Independent School Districts
- **Childcare professionals** in Arlington, Northeast Tarrant County and Fort Worth
- **Parents** in Fort Worth
- **Higher education professionals**
- **Students** from the University of Texas at Arlington
- **Regional** (Arlington & Northeast Tarrant County) **volunteers**
- **Volunteers** who signed up online in response to a national “Call to Action” to volunteer as mentors, tutors and readers
- **Community leaders** who attended the screening of the movie “Waiting For Superman” in October 2010
- **United Way of Tarrant County Young Leaders Society members**
- **United Way of Tarrant County board members**

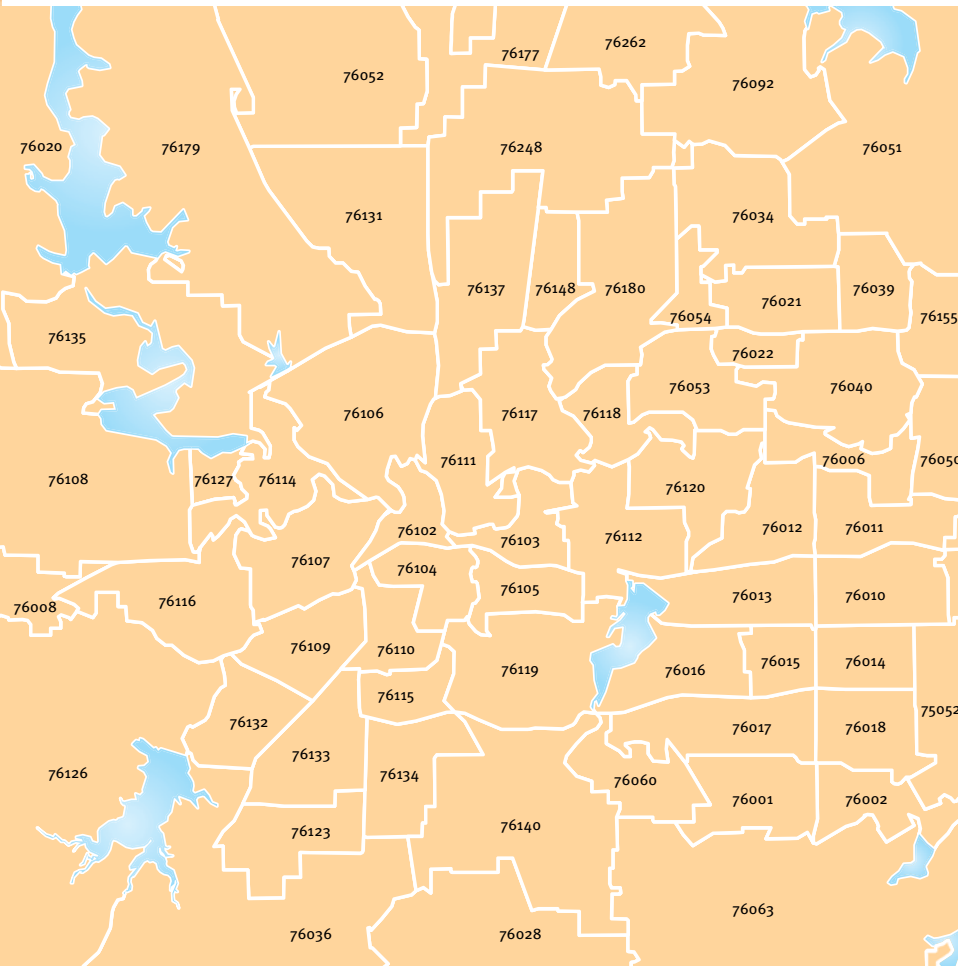
* We were unable to collect demographic information from every participant.

Race/Ethnicity

Caucasian/White	77
African American/Black	21
Latino or Hispanic	18
Asian	5
American Indian	0
Other	1
Total	122*

Primary Language

English	95
Spanish	12
Other	0
Total	107*



Number of People by ZIP Code

45232	1	76082	1
75044	1	76092	3
75115	1	76102	9
75205	1	76104	2
75261	1	76106	1
76002	1	76107	1
76006	1	76108	1
76008	1	76109	2
76010	1	76112	1
76011	2	76113	1
76012	4	76116	1
76013	1	76118	1
76014	1	76120	1
76015	4	76123	1
76016	4	76129	1
76017	5	76131	1
76018	1	76132	2
76021	2	76134	1
76039	1	76137	4
76051	1	76140	1
76052	2	76154	1
76053	2	76180	1
76054	3	76209	2
76063	1	76248	1
76073	4	Total	88*



WHAT WE LEARNED

Across the board, participants expressed a longing for a stronger sense of community. They feel disconnected; many mentioned they don't know their neighbors. In the same vein, several people mentioned there isn't enough communication between businesses and education, or between various community organizations. Some commented that the lack of community and the pervasion of media are causing a decline in basic moral values. There was a call for more opportunities to get the community together, but as one person pointed out, it's difficult to plan and fund such activities when basic financial needs aren't being met.

These themes of *community involvement, communication* and *financial stress* echoed throughout all the conversations. In total, we identified **eight main areas**, in both early childhood development and K-12 education, in which community involvement is most needed.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

1 Improve the public perception of early learning

Childcare professionals we talked to felt that the community – and especially legislators – didn’t understand the importance of early learning. Someone noted that funding for the younger ages is typically the first to be cut.

“Zero to three is paramount to the child’s success,” one childcare professional said, but added, “Childcare teachers are ranked just above the garbage men.”

Childcare professionals also stressed the different strategies required for educating children from birth to age 3, versus educating older students. They were concerned about the growing academic pressure on 3- and 4-year-olds, and shared stories of school districts taking in younger and younger students, even giving standardized tests to 4-year-olds. While everyone agreed it was important to prepare the children for school, they were adamant that an exclusive focus on academics was harmful, citing other skills, such as social interaction, as equally important – if not more important – at this stage of education.

Participants emphasized the need to communicate with school districts to determine

what’s necessary for school readiness, and then to achieve that readiness in a play-to-learn environment.

“Children who don’t learn through play don’t understand cause and effect,” said one childcare professional. “You can’t teach that theoretically, only through hands-on experience.”

“We’ve lost sight of the fact that more than intelligence goes to school...the whole child goes.”

2 Improve standards in childcare

There was a lot of talk among childcare providers about standards and licensing challenges. While there were various opinions on whether these requirements needed to be raised, enforced or merely clarified, it was agreed that professional development is vital: particularly training and education they can complete together.

“Every other state has a measure of quality and Texas early childhood does not,” one caregiver said. “I’m sick of the





minimum standards. Childcare is so standard driven.”

“It’s difficult to teach an undereducated childcare provider how to balance standards versus what children need,” said another.

Increase funding for childcare

Several childcare professionals felt the need for additional funding, saying “school districts get all the government money.” Top needs included facility improvement, caregiver training and care for children whose parents cannot afford to pay:

- One person mentioned United Way’s Days of Caring group volunteer program helped improve their childcare facility.

- Someone else mentioned childcare training programs like Camp Fire have been losing state and federal funding.
- Another person mentioned that some states have matching funding for childcare so low-income families can afford it, but Texas does not.

“Funding cuts always seem to start in this area because work with children from birth to age 3 is not valued,” one childcare professional said.

“We do the best we can, but then we have to consider the funding we have,” another childcare professional explained. “Do we look at the family need, or do we look at the dollars we need to stay open and to maintain quality?”

EDUCATION: K-12

Improve teacher support & impact

Many participants agreed that teachers have the skills and knowledge to help their students, but that they don't have the freedom or the resources to do it. "Just let us teach" seemed to be the mantra. Teachers and other participants felt there was far too much bureaucratic red tape, and were worried about a tunnel vision focus on standardized testing.

"Efficiency on testing has squashed students' learning," one teacher said.

Participants called for teachers to have more freedom to be creative, engage the kids and provide individual attention, but noted they are pigeonholed by legislation to teach one-size-fits-all curricula.

It was also pointed out that teachers are overworked and underpaid, and that micro-management from above implies leaders don't trust teachers' expertise. Another person mentioned the need for basic classroom resources.

"Even with working 70 hours a week, teachers feel as if there is still not enough time," a teacher said.

A parent said, "Changes in the school systems are not helping our teachers. If you hear the teachers talk, it is 'we need higher pay and more resources.' Well, what does that look like? And where does that come from? We invest millions of dollars in new sports facilities while our teachers have to buy classroom resources with their own money."

All these factors contribute to driving potentially great teachers away from the public school system. "There are too many people who would love to teach but are not willing to go into that pressure," a United Way board member remarked.

Several participants pointed out that teachers need additional professional development as well, to fuel their passion for education, to grow with the times, and to understand how to reach different kinds of students.

"They need to be able to adjust to kids from other cultures who come with different rule-sets that sometimes create friction," said a participant from Northeast Tarrant County.

"Teachers need to learn to work with different kids; not just teach to the middle, average kids with whom they are most comfortable."

Increase funding for broader curriculum

An overwhelming number of participants felt standardized testing is distracting from more important aspects of education, especially life skills, social skills, arts and culture. Many participants wished students had professional role models to look up to, such as local business and tradespeople, rather than celebrities and athletes. Some called for more high school courses on college preparation, dual credit and how to apply for college.

Some people mentioned a need for more help for struggling students, and more opportunities for advanced students.

“I feel like there is a lot of extra help...for kids who are at the lowest tier, are disadvantaged, or at schools that have not yet achieved recognized status,” one parent shared. “But once the school achieves this, often the extra programs disappear. For the average working family, we can’t always afford special tutoring sessions, but my kid still needs the help.”

All in all, participants across the board expressed an acute need for a variety of additional courses and resources in the school districts – which means either additional funding, or a reallocation of current funds.

“I just keep thinking about how much money we put into things like football,” another parent said. “If parents were as excited about getting their kids to learn...It could be better if we put some of that money somewhere else.”

Broaden the focus on higher education

“We have abysmal high school graduation rates in some parts of the county,” a community leader said. “One way to deal with this is to have better career training so kids who are not college bound can learn a trade to earn a livable wage.”

Several people noted the need to emphasize technical certificates and similar programs to students – not just four-year degrees and higher. Participants were concerned that high school teachers and guidance counselors are only teaching in a college-readiness model, while many students don’t want, need or qualify to go to college.

One higher education professional remarked, “Only 20 percent of jobs require a bachelor’s

degree or higher. Sixty percent of jobs require six months to two years of some type of skill-building.”

Strengthen collaboration with higher education and business

When participants were asked what they would like education to be like in their community, one leader responded that “education needs the connection with the community.”

A volunteer offered this advice: “If the schools would reach out to the community, they are likely to get their community’s support.”

Participants specifically called for business leaders to act as role models at junior high and high schools, feeling there would be fewer dropouts if business leaders explained the types of employees they are looking for, what types of education are required, how much students could earn in those jobs and what kinds of lives they could live as a result.

Participants didn’t want to burden teachers to research this, but believed it was up to business leaders and higher education professionals to offer the information.

One community leader pointed out another role businesses can play in improving graduation rates: “Get them to pledge to make sure the students they hire remain in school. Businesses must emphasize the importance of staying in school.”

“What happens in our schools affects our neighborhoods.”

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT and K-12 EDUCATION

Increase parent involvement

Teachers, childcare professionals and parents all called for more parental involvement, both in early childhood development and in K-12 education. One parent defined this involvement as “finding out what your child is learning and what we need to do at home to help him. It’s a constant conversation.”

“Kids need to see their parents engaged, involved, not just on the phone all the time or just dropping off and picking up,” a childcare professional said.

“If you go to the school regularly, then your child sees that and knows that you think it’s important,” a parent explained.

Participants discussed several challenges in getting parents involved, including lack of time, energy, money and access to reliable transportation.

“We have to remember we’re working with single mothers for the large part,” a childcare professional pointed out. “How can we expect them to add one more thing to what’s already been a very long day at work?”

Another concern was language differences. Spanish-speaking parents had great difficulty communicating with their children’s teachers. Teachers also said communication was a barrier at times.

“It’s hard when the teachers don’t understand you, when we don’t speak the same language,” said one parent. “We’re constantly battling with

the teachers, because parents are trying to learn English, but it takes time, and in the meantime you need to be able to communicate with the child’s teacher, and we can’t understand each other, and everyone gets frustrated.”

Some parents simply didn’t feel welcome:

“Sometimes I feel like [teachers and administrators] don’t want me there; like I’m there too much,” one parent said.

“Instead of the school being proactive, they make it more difficult for volunteers to participate,” a community volunteer said. “Schools are reluctant to ask for help.”

We also discussed creative ways to engage parents. Participants felt it was important not to burden parents with too many activities, but to provide hands-on experiences that show the parents what their kids have been working on.

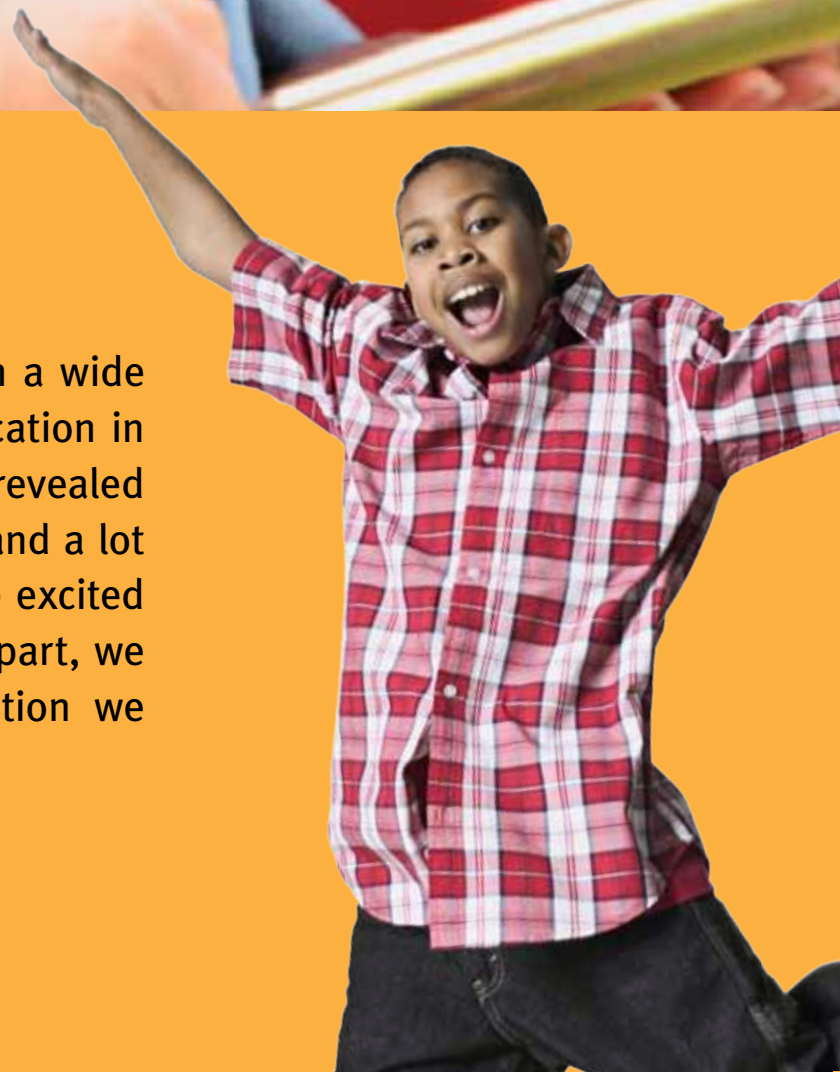
Both teachers and childcare professionals called for availability of some form of parent training in areas such as discipline and nutrition. One participant mentioned that divorced parents often undergo court-appointed co-parenting education, but new parents have little educational requirements or support. Childcare professionals were especially concerned about convincing parents to get their kids to eat healthy diets and to exercise.





TAKING ACTION

These conversations have shown a wide variety of challenges facing education in Tarrant County, but they've also revealed a lot of people willing to help – and a lot of ways in which they can. We're excited knowing that, if we each do our part, we can achieve the level of education we aspire to.



HOW EVERYDAY TARRANT COUNTY CITIZENS CAN HELP

Become an engaged parent

- **Take the time to get to know your child's teacher or professional caregiver** by attending events, or by reaching out and offering help, like volunteering in the classroom.
- **Learn how to use online systems** to track your child's academic progress.
- **Help your child with homework** and ask about other activities that can be done at home to promote your child's academic achievement.
- **Join the parent teacher association** and invite other parents to join.
- **Become familiar with school policies** related to dress codes, attendance, graduation requirements and other topics to make sure your child is in compliance.
- **Respond to school district surveys** about your school. It's your opportunity to express your opinion and provide feedback.

Educate yourself and others

- **Get free parenting tips and courses online** through organizations such as the Parenting Center (theparentingcenter.org) and the Texas AgriLife Extension Service of the Texas A&M University System (InfantToddler.tamu.edu).
- **See if your school has a Parent Academy** that offers parent education such as English-as-a-Second-Language and financial literacy classes. Parent Academies also help parents develop the skills needed to advocate for their children.

- **Learn about tutoring and mentoring programs**, resources available from local libraries, and community information and referral services such as United Way's 2-1-1 service.

Advocate for education with your representative

Parents can be a child's best advocates, so be sure to register to vote in all elections, and call, write or visit your legislator to ask for:

- programs that ensure more low-income families have affordable access to critical early childcare and development programs, such as pre-K, state-subsidized child care and Head Start;
- flexibility for school districts to use effective teaching methods that are appropriate to the age of the children (for example, early childhood versus elementary, middle school and high school students);
- options for school districts to offer programs that help students of all abilities prepare for the future, including those needing special education, life skills training, vocational training, as well as college preparation;
- incentives (such as higher pay, less restrictive curriculum, fewer students and less focus on testing) that school districts can use to attract and retain the best teachers, which is critical to a well-educated community and workforce.

“The vast majority of legislative changes that occur are due to something said convincingly to a legislator.”

HOW CHILDCARE PROFESSIONALS CAN HELP

Seek out professional development

- **Make time for you and your employees to take free online training** through organizations like the Texas AgriLife Extension Service of the Texas A&M University System (InfantToddler.tamu.edu).
- **Recommend the courses** to other childcare professionals you know.
- **Take advantage of community-based training** offered through Camp Fire USA, Educational First Steps and local community colleges and universities that offer childcare professional development.

Understand the standards

- **Familiarize yourself with childcare standards and regulations** through resources like Texas Child Care Licensing (www.dfps.state.tx.us/child_care).
- **Invite local representatives** from Texas Child Care Licensing to speak to your staff about licensing standards.

Reach out to your local school district

- **Invite a kindergarten or 1st grade teacher to talk** with staff and parents about topics relating to school readiness and how to help their children transition from childcare to school settings.
- **Obtain school district fliers or web information** about pre-K, kindergarten and special education programs to share with parents.

Ask your school district what level of preparedness their students need when entering kindergarten. Ask if the district offers free training or shares curricula with childcare professionals.





HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS CAN HELP

Partner with local childcare providers

Many districts have formed partnerships with childcare professionals, placing kindergarten teachers in childcare facilities. Is this a program your district can offer to childcare providers?

- **Suggest concrete ways** family members can support academic progress at home.
- At school, **provide families and others with meaningful volunteer opportunities** that are directly linked to learning.
- **Offer parent education** on topics such as financial literacy and English-as-a-Second-Language.

Reach out to families and engage them

- **Provide training for all school employees**, from bus drivers to principals, to ensure that families feel welcomed and needed as partners in enhancing their children's learning.
- **Offer workshops** that teach parents how to advocate for their children's school success.

Encourage other forms of higher education

Junior high teachers, high school teachers and guidance counselors can suggest that students consider pursuing technical certification or similar programs as well as four-year university degrees.

HOW BUSINESS LEADERS CAN HELP

Connect with schools to inspire students

Connect with junior high and high school students and explain your job, the lifestyle that job allows you to have, and the education it took to get you there. Explain what level of education and experience you look for in employees. Connect by:

- **Visiting** for a career day or job fair
- **Offering to speak to students** in a class related to your work
- **Inviting classes to take a field trip** to your place of business
- **Offering internships** to a few interested students
- **Providing engaging video material** depicting your workplace, responsibilities, opportunities and contributions to the community to be shared in classrooms
- **Using technology to set up video conferences** for Q&A in classrooms

Encourage working students

Many high school students must work to help support their family, and college or technical school students must work to pay for their education. Offer incentives for your high school and college-aged employees to stay in school. For instance, get them to sign a stay-in-school pledge when they are hired, or offer bonuses or tuition reimbursement based on grades. The Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce Distinguished Employers of Fort Worth Teens program is an excellent example of how businesses help students create a balance between school and work so they can succeed at both.

If each of us does just a few of these things, we can drastically improve education in Tarrant County, for a stronger community today and tomorrow.

Learn more and get involved at UnitedWayTarrant.org

Support working parents

- **Allow parents time to get involved** at their child's school.
- **Offer to help pay for childcare**, if possible. If you reach out to the childcare center, you may find a way to negotiate tuition by donating services or supplies.

Volunteer

Organize a Day of Caring with United Way. You and your colleagues can volunteer as a group to help out a local school or childcare center by collecting supplies it needs or helping update the facilities.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

United Way of Tarrant County sincerely thanks:

United Way Education Council members for their desire to find out the community's aspirations and thoughts on how to improve education for Tarrant County's youngest citizens. A special thank you to those Education Council volunteers who coordinated and facilitated group discussions.

Organizations that provided space where citizens could meet to share their thoughts on education:

Arlington Independent School District
Birdville Independent School District
Botanical Research Institute of Texas (BRIT)
Catholic Charities, Diocese of Fort Worth
Southside Church of Christ
Southside Community Center
Tarrant County College – Northeast Campus
The Resource Connection of Tarrant County
United Educators Association (UEA)
University of Texas at Arlington

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation for its community conversation guide development and training. The Harwood Institute is one of United Way Worldwide's signature partners for the Campaign for the Common Good and is working to accelerate the efforts of United Ways to build deeper relationships in communities and create lasting changes in education, income and health.

United Way organizations that shared their education reports, which were used as inspiration for this publication:
United Way of San Diego County
United Way of Toledo, Ohio
United Way Worldwide



United Way
of Tarrant County

The mission of United Way of Tarrant County is to improve lives across our diverse communities by prioritizing needs in education, income and health, forming innovative and effective partnerships with other organizations, and strategically raising and investing resources to make lasting change. For more information, go to UnitedWayTarrant.org

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