



THE  
CULTURAL  
WELLNESS  
CENTER



# Families Motivated to Succeed

## *Impact for Parents and Children*

An evaluation conducted in partnership between the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood, The Cultural Wellness Center, and Wilder Research

NOVEMBER 2018

451 Lexington Parkway North | Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104  
651-280-2700 | [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org)

**Wilder  
Research®**  
Information. Insight. Impact.

## Summary and key findings

Families Motivated to Succeed is family support and rental assistance program facilitated by The Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) with administrative support from the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood and Wilder's Family Supportive Housing Services. In 2018, we conducted two focus groups with parents who participated in the Families Motivated to Succeed program. We wanted to learn from these parents about the impact of the program for them and their children.

In the focus groups, we asked questions about five different impact areas, including: being stable, involvement in children's education, children's experiences at school, parents' goals, and connection to culture. We want to stress that the findings in this report should not be viewed solely as direct outcomes of the program, but rather as outcomes of a larger community support system made up of individuals, families, and organizations; Families Motivated to Succeed is part of this larger community support system.

### “Key ingredients” for improving family stability: stable housing and a supportive community

Families in the program participate in the CWC's Navigation System and receive monetary rental assistance of up to 70 percent of their housing costs. The Navigation System is the approach developed by the CWC through which families in the program connect with each other, with their community, and with their culture. Through the Navigation System, parents and children have access to cultural education classes, life skills classes, parent support meetings, and community resources that are intended to support family stability. In the focus groups, parents made clear that it is both of these ingredients – the stable housing and the supportive community – that resulted in the positive outcomes experienced by them and their children while they were in the program.

### Outcomes of having stable housing and a supportive community

Parents talked about many outcomes that they attributed to having stable housing and being connected with a supportive community: they were more involved in their children's education, they saw improvements in their children's experiences at school, they achieved and were continuing to work toward their stability goals, they were connected to supports and resources in their community to help them reach their goals, and they and their children grew more rooted in their culture. We describe these outcomes – and how they are connected to the “key ingredients” of stable housing and a supportive community – in more detail later in this report.

## Contents

About Families Motivated to Succeed.....	1
About The Cultural Wellness Center’s Navigation System .....	2
From The Cultural Wellness Center: .....	2
Findings from the focus groups .....	6
About the focus groups .....	6
“Key ingredients” for improving family stability: stable housing and a supportive community .....	7
Outcomes of having stable housing and a supportive community .....	9
Conclusion and moving forward.....	13

## Figures

1. Navigation System theory of change .....	4
2. People’s Theory of Sickness and Disease.....	5
3. Number of hours that parents engaged with the Navigation System.....	6

## About Families Motivated to Succeed

Families Motivated to Succeed is a family support and rental assistance program focused on stabilizing family housing (to the degree possible in 24 months); connecting families to community and culture; and improving the school attendance of children in the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood (SPPN). As of 2016, The Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) facilitates the program with administrative support from SPPN and Wilder's Family Supportive Housing Services staff. Launched in 2014, this program was part of a statewide pilot initiative that examined whether stabilizing housing affects children's school attendance. The program serves homeless and highly mobile families living in the SPPN that have at least one child attending one of the four SPPN schools, which include Benjamin E. Mays Elementary, Jackson Elementary, Maxfield Elementary, and St. Paul City School.

Through Families Motivated to Succeed, the CWC provides family support and rental assistance for up to 50 families for 24 months. To be eligible for the program, families must complete an application and meet the following eligibility requirements:

- Families must have at least one child, enrolled in K-5, in one of the four SPPN partner schools.
- Families must be currently experiencing homelessness (lack a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence) or be highly mobile (moved more than once during the school year).
- Family's income must not exceed 60% of the Area Median Income as determined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (less than \$4,150/month for a household of four).
- Families must be eligible for transitional housing as determined by the Ramsey County Coordinated Access to Housing and Shelter (CAHS) Screening Tool.

Families in the program participate in the CWC's Navigation System (see the next page for details) and could receive monetary rental assistance of up to 70 percent of Fair Market Rents if not exceeding the formula-determined "cap" set by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Families also receive assistance with application fees, security deposits, and vacancy payments. Through the Navigation System, CWC staff act as life navigators for all families in the program.

## About The Cultural Wellness Center's Navigation System

The Navigation System is the approach by which families connect with other families in the program, with their community, and with their culture. Though the Navigation System, parents and children have access to cultural education classes, life skills classes, parent support meetings, and community resources that are intended to support family stability. Please see Figure 1 for the Navigation System theory of change, and Figure 2 for the People's Theory of Sickness and Disease – which is the theory of the health problem that the CWC aims to solve. The Navigation System is one approach developed by the CWC to solve this problem.

### From The Cultural Wellness Center:

“The Navigation System is The Cultural Wellness Center's approach to reconnect people to their culture, heritage, and community cohesion practices. It is rooted in the CWC's Community Care-Giving System, which is a culturally-based approach that lends direction and clarity to individuals in the rebuilding of communities. Through the Navigation System, the approach is implemented as a personal development model. The CWC Navigators designed this community care system to ensure that people are learning to be self-reliant as well as are able to receive and give care for each other – we help people help themselves. The Community Care-Giving System is the process the Navigators use to reinforce and re-establish cultural standards, values, and practices while building kinship networks of support.

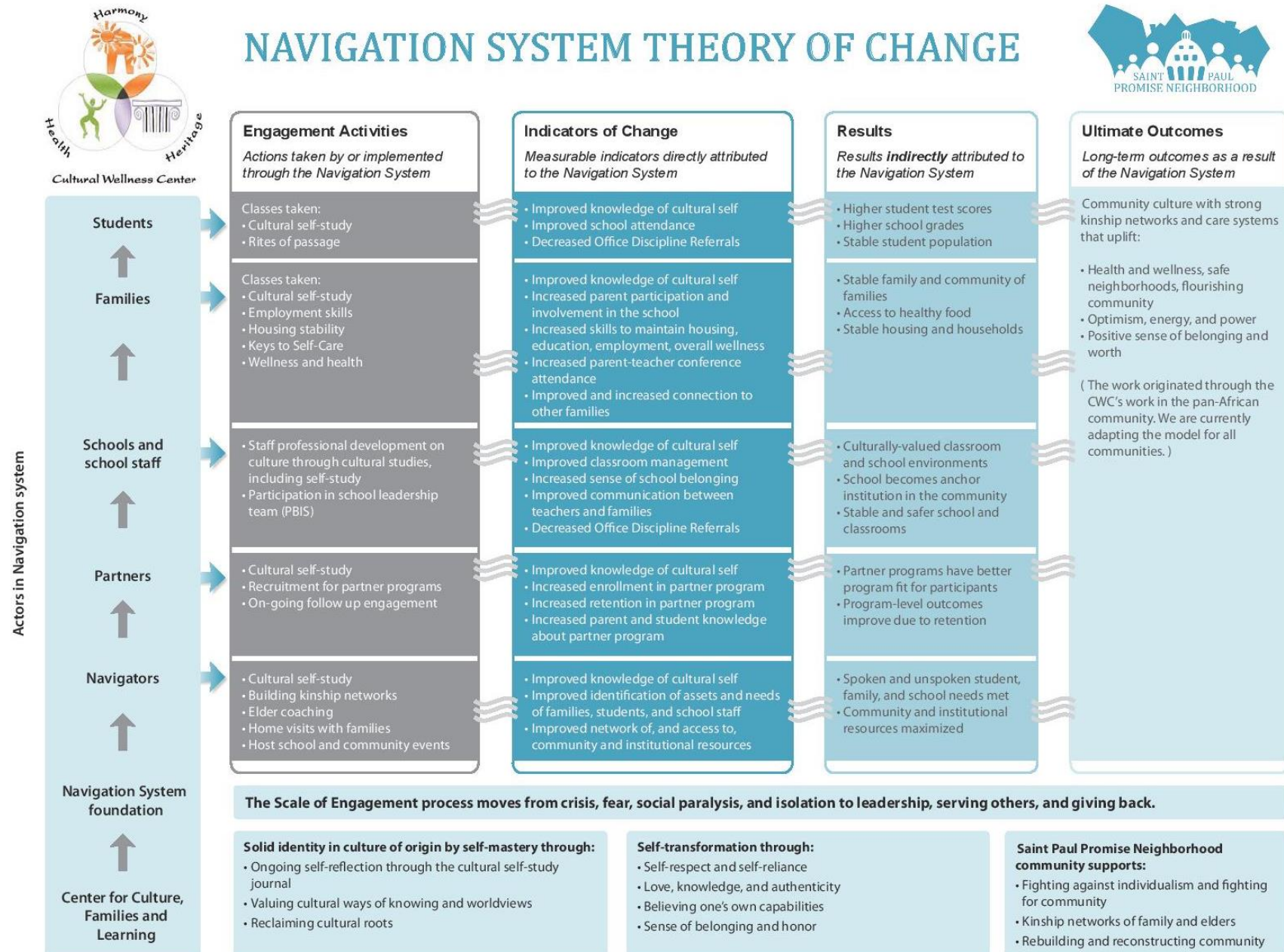
At the heart of the CWC's Community Care-Giving System is the CWC's evaluation plan of tracking “engagement.” The CWC works to “engage” people in a culturally based, supportive process, sustaining them to make positive lifestyle (that is, behavior and attitude) changes, which the CWC believes will improve their health and, eventually, that of their community. Because the concept of “engagement” is central to the CWC's work today, it has defined a scale of engagement, which delineates the various observed steps that people are taking in their work with The Cultural Wellness Center. First people move from crisis (participant is in need but passive) to a commitment to take personal responsibility for changing (their) health status. As people acquire new knowledge and skills they begin to change old behaviors, and eventually they recover and can give back to the community, completing the cycle (going beyond personal needs to give and care for others). We intend to show in the long-term the scale of engagement supports efforts of compliance and adherence that the health care systems and the educational system are trying to achieve.

For the CWC an engaged person is not just physically healthy, but emotionally healthy and stable, and also active in their own healing, grounded and able to care for themselves and others. Being “engaged” is a major outcome towards the organization’s goal of helping people “help themselves.” However, engagement is also an indicator of success toward the longer-range goal of cultivating a pool of healthy people to build and sustain a healthy community. We envision stopping the cycle of moving up and out, leaving only the most vulnerable to fend for self, and stopping the drain on human potential through early death, isolation, and loneliness.

Engagement is an active process which, when pursued, leads to positive lifestyle changes. These changes, when sustained, improve health. At The Cultural Wellness Center, “engagement” is seen as an outcome that is observable as a result of the work. It is also an indicator of the CWC's long-term goal: to place the person in charge of his/her own health and to improve the overall health of the community members by decreasing illness and disease. ” – **THE CULTURAL WELLNESS CENTER**



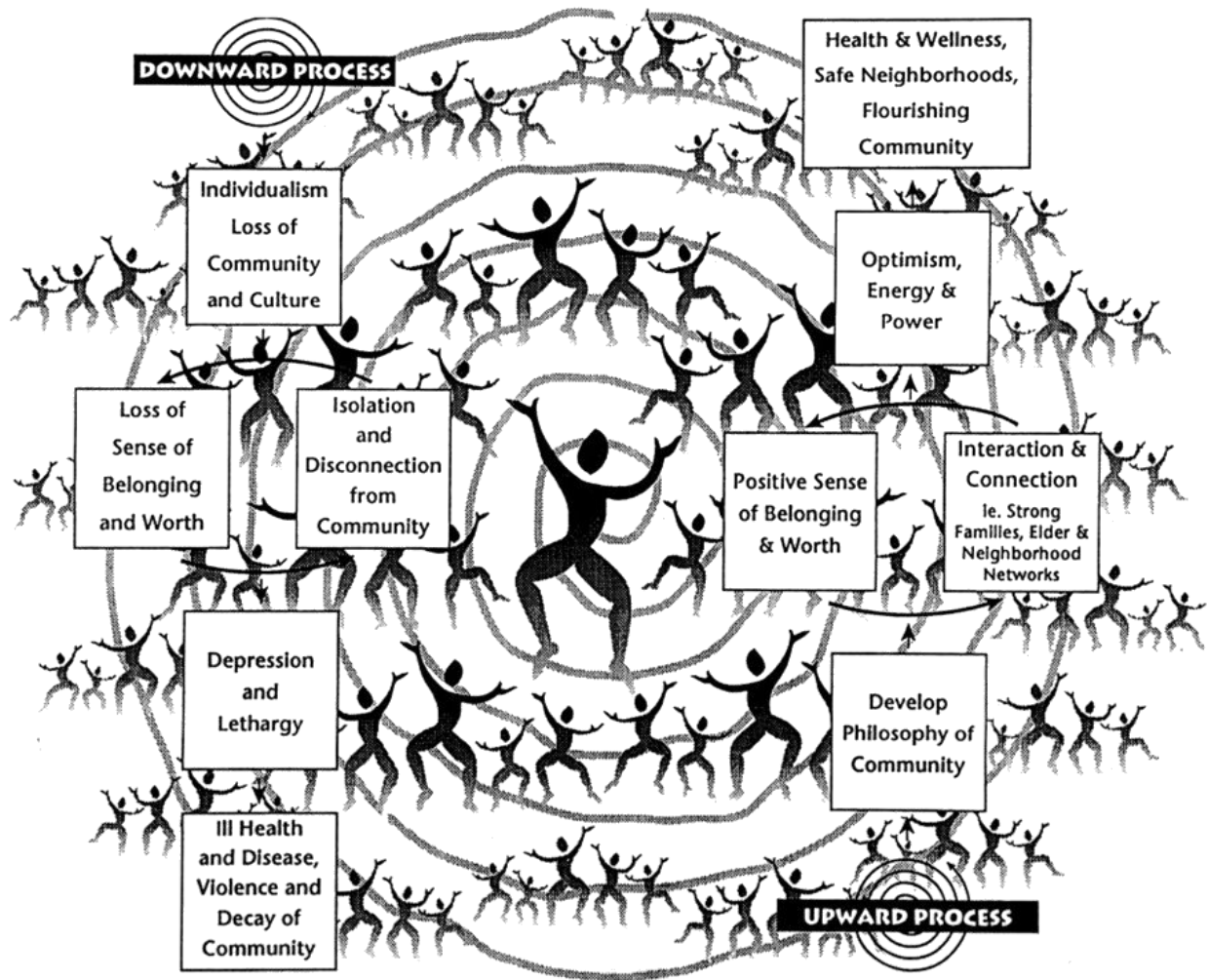
## 1. Navigation System theory of change



The indicators of change will be measured by the Navigation System beginning 2015-2016 school year. Please see SPPN results and goals document. Updated July 2015.

The People's Theory of Sickness and Disease (Figure 2) informs all of the CWC's work. It was created by the CWC after interviewing many community residents about their perceptions of health, and showcases a journey from "decaying community" to "flourishing community." By operationalizing the People's Theory, the CWC accompanies community residents through a personal health journey of connecting with their community and their culture.

## 2. People's Theory of Sickness and Disease





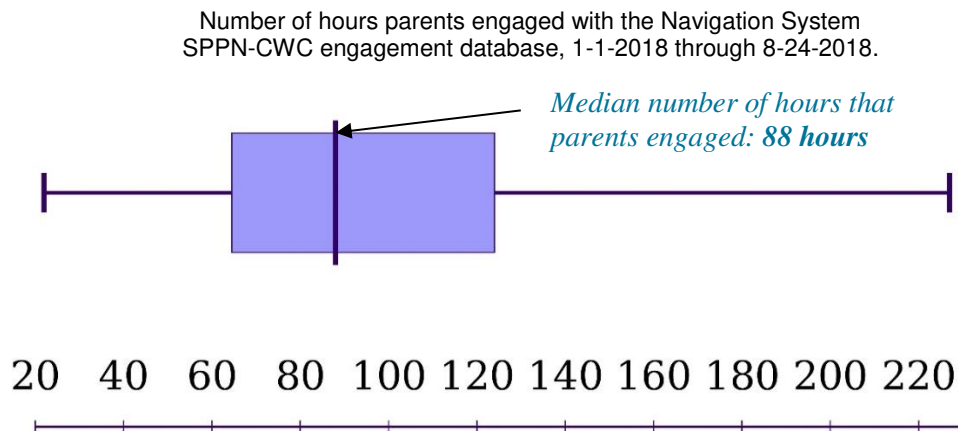
## Findings from the focus groups

### About the focus groups

We wanted to learn from parents about the impact of being in the Families Motivated to Succeed program for them and their children. In the focus groups, we asked questions about five different impact areas (which are aligned with the theory of change), including being stable, involvement in children's education, children's experiences at school, parents' goals, and connection to culture. We did two focus groups, one focus group at the Hubbs Center in the evening and another at the Wilder Center in the morning. There were 13 parents at the Hubbs Center focus group and seven parents at the Wilder Center focus group. Both focus groups were about 1.5 hours.

Parents who participated in the group had been in Families Motivated to Succeed anywhere from six months to almost two years. From January 1, 2016 – August 24, 2018, the number of hours that parents spent engaging with the Navigation System ranged from 22-227 hours, with a median of 88 hours. Please see Figure 3 for a box plot displaying parent engagement data.

### 3. Number of hours that parents engaged with the Navigation System



---

*The findings in this report should not be viewed solely as direct outcomes of the program, but rather as outcomes of a larger community support system made up of individuals, families, and organizations. The program is part of this larger community support system.*

---

It is important to note that while we asked about changes in parents' lives in the time they've been in the program, many parents were connected with the CWC and with each other prior to entering the program. Accordingly, the findings in this report should not be viewed solely as direct outcomes of the program, but rather as outcomes of a larger community support system made up of individuals, families, and organizations; Families Motivated to Succeed is part of this larger community support system.

We describe the major themes from the focus groups below. Our analysis suggests two key ingredients for improving family stability: stable housing and a supportive community. From these key ingredients, positive outcomes can be seen, including parents being more involved in their children's education; improvements in children's experiences at school; parents being connected to support and resources that help them to achieve their stability goals; and parents and children being more connected to their culture. Many parents talked about their desire to continue increasing their stability after exiting the program; in other words, exiting the program does not signal the end of these families' stability journey.

## “Key ingredients” for improving family stability: stable housing and a supportive community

### ***Stable housing***

Many parents talked about the benefits of having stable housing through the program. They said that with secure housing, they were able to proactively focus on other goals that would further increase their stability, such as paying bills, dealing with debt, improving their education, and focusing on gainful employment. One parent said, “Being in the program allowed me the opportunity to focus on school.” In other words, having a stable home provided a baseline stability so that parents could increase their family's stability overall.

*“This is the first time I’ve had my own place that I haven’t had a threat of losing, and I’ve been able to be proactive and maintain stability for me and my family. I don’t take that for granted.”*

*“Before the program I was homeless for 6-7 months and I couldn’t find anywhere to rent to me because I was jumping from job to job. This program has helped me stay on top of my bills and make sure that my kids’ education is good – and be able to run my own house.”*

*“This allowed me to catch up on a lot of debt, that was a main thing. There were things on my financial record that landlords did not like. The program allowed me to work on my bills, and now I am more confident that if I were to move, I would be able to stay on top of it.”*

### **Connection to a supportive community**

Parents in the focus group talked about the benefits of having a community of support that is fostered by the CWC among families in the program. This community includes CWC staff as well as other parents who are in Families Motivated to Succeed. It is important to note that many of the parents at these focus groups were connected with the CWC and with each other prior to entering the program. In other words, the program did not “create” this supportive community but represents one way that this community comes together. One parent explicitly pointed out that after the program ends, every parent who was enrolled can continue seeking support from the CWC.

*“There’s a sense of community. Even though I don’t see y’all on a regular basis, I know there’s a group of people that know what I’m going through and can relate, and we can share ideas with each other. There aren’t many places like that.”*

*“The women in this organization [The Cultural Wellness Center] are driven to succeed. They get on the phone and come to your house and make sure that you get to where you need to be – if you accept it and embrace it. They genuinely motivate us to succeed.”*

*“It’s nice to meet people who are in the same place and you can relate to on different levels and know that no one is going to judge you. We all are working on our life and kids and we have different goals, but this is a community where I feel accepted, and that does help. It is very much helpful to know that I can go to CWC staff for support.”*

Additionally, many parents said that being a part of this community meant that they could rely on CWC staff and other parents to check in on their children at school – which was particularly meaningful to parents. Some parents noted that their children behaved better in school because they knew that CWC staff or other parents in the program were there and would let them know about any misbehavior. One parent said that when she’s someone’s child misbehaving she thinks, “I know your mama and I’m not going to let you do that.”

*“I will say this, the staff feels like family. I can say my son is having a bad day at school and I know [a CWC staff person] will do something about it.”*

# Outcomes of having stable housing and a supportive community

## *More involvement in child's education*

Many parents talked about being more involved with their child's education after they enrolled in the program. This is not to say that parents were uninvolved before, but overall their involvement increased after they enrolled. Parents said that having stable housing meant that they were in a more productive mental mindset to engage with their children's teachers and other school staff; that the CWC staff let them know about upcoming events and about how their child was doing in school; and that they felt welcomed by CWC staff at the Center for Cultural, Learning, and Families (CCFL). The CCFL is a community room at each SPPN partner school where CWC staff host parent gatherings and teach culture classes with students.

*"It also gave me an opportunity – because I'm not so stressed – to actually engage [with my child's education]. Before the program, I would go but not be mentally there. It gave me the opportunity to mentally invest and develop a relationship with the teachers and staff and the people in the office and people at the CCFL."*

*"I got more involved because I was more knowledgeable as to what was going on in the school [because I was in the program]."*

*"Before the program I was involved with the school, but I am more involved now. I am always coming and sitting with them and going to the CCFL when they are doing the drums, and I am very involved now and I'm going to continue to be super involved."*

Some parents mentioned the benefits of having stable housing for engaging with their child's education outside of school – such as doing homework with them at home. With stable housing, these parents said they were less stressed or preoccupied with where they and their family will stay for the night, and can now focus attention more fully on their children.

*"It's hard to engage with your kids how you want to when you're stressed out about whether you can feed them tomorrow, or about whether you'll have electricity. They can't get the attention they deserve because you are stressed."*

*"It [not having stable housing] makes it extremely hard to focus. I would try to keep the routine as same as possible, but it was hard to focus on homework. I was cooking dinner but I wasn't really focused, and I had to tackle tomorrow's problem and I couldn't be in the moment with them."*

Additionally, parents mentioned that some teachers and school staff were more likely to approach and engage them because they knew they were involved with the CWC. One parent mentioned that being affiliated with the CWC lets teachers and school staff know that they are invested in their child's education.

*“When they see me with people connected to the CWC they are more likely to come and approach me, and it’s more of a networking thing for me. There’s something about the vibe that you give off when they know that you are involved in the CWC.”*

*“I think that the school staff knows that we are more knowledgeable, or they assume that because we are in the program we are going to be more engaged and more likely to communicate. When they see me they know me and acknowledge me.”*

### **Improvements in child’s experience at school**

Many parents said that their child’s attendance improved because of their stable housing and that their child’s behavior improved because of the community of parents and CWC staff who had a vested interest in their child’s success in school. One parent said, “The program helped a lot. With having to move a lot, it was hard on my children. Their attendance has improved.” Some parents also noted that their child’s academic performance improved after they got involved with the program, with one parent saying, “My son’s reading level went up five levels. He wouldn’t read to me before because I was in a bad place, and now he’s confident at reading.”

*“When you’re homeless or staying with somebody, everything is different. My kids never missed school when we were living with people, but it was different because they are worried about adult problems. Now they can just go to school and focus on what they have to at school.”*

*“Before I was in the program we were homeless. At the time I was bussing them and they were there every day but we weren’t on time. Now I have a car. They get to school on time.”*

*“With your kids being there, it’s like family approaching your children. It’s a different kind of trust and it was a lot of help for me. For the elders to be able to step in and do what I can’t, it helped my kids to have them there.”*

*“My son because he’s older, he identifies with the elders and other parents and he knows that they have the same expectations that I have and he knows that it is a community network. He values his own education and he knows he isn’t able to slip through the cracks or get away with misbehaving. He knows that he is supposed to behave a certain way.”*

### **Connections to support and resources for accomplishing goals**

As noted earlier, having stable housing allowed many parents to pursue other goals to further increase their family’s stability. These goals include paying off debt, getting a job that pays well, going back to school, and having adequate transportation.

*“I got a nice paying job now, [a CWC staff person] is helping me get back in school, and I’m working on getting a car.”*

*“I’ve been getting my credit together and taking care of all the debt collectors and trying to get that out the way.”*

*“I was able to focus on what I really wanted to do and I got a job, and I’m already promoted. The program just put me in a good spot mentally, seeing all of the successful women around. They helped me with the interview process. I was able to get my dream job and I’m already promoted.”*

When asked about resources or supports that were most important for pursuing or accomplishing their goals, many parents first mentioned the CWC staff and their commitment to supporting them. Some parents mentioned self-care classes taught by CWC staff people as important for helping them achieve their goals. A few parents also mentioned being connected with childcare and utilities assistance via CWC staff and that CWC staff have helped them navigate various government processes.

*“CWC staff will go through the fire for you and support you. You won’t be by yourself. [CWC staff person] is a resource because she genuinely loves and cares and will hold you accountable.”*

*“The self-care classes give you the support to do what you need. I was in the self-care class because I needed that mental and emotional support. To be around that table, it would give me motivation to keep moving forward. I knew that the extra support was there, just a phone call away. I knew that the struggle wasn’t just mine alone.”*

It should be noted that while many parents highlighted the support they receive from CWC staff, some parents said that they felt CWC staff did not fully acknowledge the difficulties and challenges in their lives that prevent them from going to classes or meetings. One parent said, “It feels like there’s not enough understanding sometimes about my life situation [from CWC staff].” Additionally, many parents said that the class schedule is difficult, suggesting that the CWC move it to earlier in the day rather than in the evening.

*“I’m a single mom and I have to take care of everything. It feels like I’m doing what I need to be stable, but if I miss a meeting or a class there is no expression of understanding, like ‘Okay, you were handling business.’”*

*“If I had gone to every meeting I would have gotten more resources and made more progress on my goals, but I was anxious and depressed and I didn’t want to be there. And I was told that I am not depressed. Don’t put off what I’m going through.”*



## Deeper connection to culture

Many parents said that they have a deeper connection to their culture because they have participated in culture classes and because they have been in a community of parents who are invested in learning about their culture. Many parents also said that they have learned from elders about how to engage their children in exploring their culture. It should be noted that a few parents were confused about the CWC's focus on Egypt in particular when teaching about culture, though parents did not say much more about why they were confused by this. The CWC may want to reiterate why they focus on Egypt when teaching parents and others about culture.

*"I was given the opportunity to go camping and we were out there for a week and we talked about our African heritage and our roots and things that were stripped from our culture. One of those things were waist beads. Something went off in my head and I wanted to learn more. It made me more conscious of myself. I found out a lot about my genealogy and my connection to being native to this land, so it was pretty cool and I wouldn't have thought to look into those things if I didn't go camping."*

*"Outside of school my kids have been learning things that are culturally-based, so it gives them more self-awareness and cultural wellness. For example, we go to the parent involvement day and we go to other groups like parent meetings and you get to learn from the elders about how to engage with your children and it gives you more tools. Now we understand that we are their first teachers and we are responsible for their spiritual and emotional growth."*

## Conclusion and moving forward

The stories told by parents during focus groups clearly show that they attribute their family's improved stability to having stable housing through the program as well as to the community of support that is fostered by the CWC among families in the program. According to parents in Families Motivated to Succeed, these are the “key ingredients” for improving family stability: a stable housing and a supportive community. The outcomes described in this report, parents said, occurred because of these two “key ingredients.”

As we talked with parents about the outcomes detailed in this report, many of them mentioned an additional “internal change” that occurred as a result of having stable housing and being connected to a community of support. Parents described this change in a number of ways — as a mental health improvement, as being more emotionally stable, as being more grounded in their culture, and as feeling more rooted in who they are as a person. Parents talked about this internal change as an intermediary step between the “key ingredients” and the outcomes they experienced.

We did not include findings about this “internal change” in detail in this report because our focus group questions did not ask specifically about it; however, we expect there is more to learn about this topic to fully understand the Navigation System and the work of the CWC. We suggest further inquiry into the nature of this internal change, how it comes about, and how it helps to result in other positive life outcomes – potentially through in-depth qualitative case studies with families who engage deeply with the Navigation System.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Cultural Wellness Center (CWC), Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood, and Wilder Foundation Supportive Housing staff for their guidance in the data collection, instrument development, and the report. We would like to thank Atum Azzahir, Ankhet Hesi-Ra, Pam James, Minkara Tezet, Susan Phillips, Jouapag Lee, and Adora Land.

Wilder Research, a division of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, is a nationally respected nonprofit research and evaluation group. For more than 100 years, Wilder Research has gathered and interpreted facts and trends to help families and communities thrive, get at the core of community concerns, and uncover issues that are overlooked or poorly understood.

451 Lexington Parkway North  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104

651-280-2700 | [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org)

## Wilder Research®

Information. Insight. Impact.

In partnership with



THE  
CULTURAL  
WELLNESS  
CENTER

