

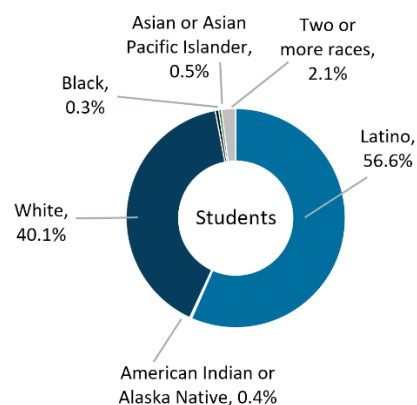
# BRIDGES COLLABORATIVE MEMBER PROFILE

## ROARING FORK SCHOOL DISTRICT



Organization Type: Public School District

<b>Location</b> Glenwood Springs, Carbondale, and Basalt, Colorado	<b>Population<sup>1</sup></b> 5,846 students (56.6% Latino, 40.1% White, 2.1% Two or more races, 0.5% Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.4% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.3% Black)
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<b>Size</b>
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14 schools, including four elementary schools, three middle schools, two K–8 schools, one K–8 charter school, and four high schools



### Integration in the Roaring Fork School District

The Roaring Fork School District’s opportunity to move school integration forward began with enrollment challenges in two individual schools. The two existing elementary schools in Glenwood Springs were overcrowded. Because overcrowding can impact classroom management and student achievement, the district opened a new elementary school in 2017. The construction of this new school south of Glenwood Springs presented an opportunity to redraw school enrollment boundaries to facilitate a more desegregated student body across the district. Although one goal of redistricting was to address overcrowding, another goal was to increase social integration within schools and encourage racial, ethnic, and socio-economic heterogeneity in student friendships and social interactions. Roaring Fork intentionally redrew district boundaries to ensure that student demographics in each school reflected the overall student population across the district because of the positive impact that a diverse student body can have on learning outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Colorado Department of Education Schoolview, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, R., & Nazaryan, A. (2019). *Children of the dream: Why school integration works*. Basic Books.



## Spotlight on Community and Family Engagement

The Roaring Fork School District has worked with its community to identify needs, resources, and partnerships that advance high-quality, integrated schools. The district has worked to balance school enrollment, integrate classrooms, create opportunities for parent mentors to support classroom instruction, and position staff bicultural/bilingual family liaisons at every school as part of significant investments in the Family Resource Center.

### The Family Resource Center and family liaisons

The Family Resource Center (FRC) was founded in 1995 to address the health and basic needs of Roaring Fork students and their families. The FRC provides wraparound services such as health care access, rent and utilities assistance, and free or reduced-price lunch support. The FRC offers families universal access to services in alignment with the research-based Family Development Services model. Any family identifying an unmet need can receive wraparound services and support. The FRC collects qualitative and quantitative data to learn what is working and where the center can grow in its efforts to provide services to families.

In 2009, the organizational structure of the FRC shifted to become a nonprofit arm of the Roaring Fork School District. Although significant support comes from the district, the FRC maintains a diverse funding stream from government grants (federal, state, county, local), government contracts, foundations, state associations, businesses, individual and community contributions, events, and in-kind contributions. FRC staff meet regularly throughout the school year to consider how best to pursue the department's goals and how to increase engagement and access to the center for students and families in the district. The FRC works toward continuous improvement, so when Latine families were using FRC services at a lesser rate than White families, the FRC advocated for decentralizing FRC services, which resulted in changes regarding where family liaisons were placed. Instead of having family liaisons at the center, they were placed within individual schools. This change increased the accessibility of FRC resources for families.

Bilingual family liaisons now act as youth and family support specialists within the schools. Their duties include connecting families with the FRC, advocating for students who could benefit from community resources, helping families navigate the school system, decreasing identified family stressors, and supporting family partnership opportunities. Because family liaisons are bilingual and are visible in their schools, they are seen as the "trusted messengers," increasing accessibility for families seeking support at their child's school and in the community.

The FRC facilitates a Family Advisory Committee (FAC), a delegation of parents, students, staff, and community members who "*center the experiences, concerns, and interests of families.*" The FRC works to ensure that FAC communication, feedback, and resources are accessible to all families. The FRC prioritizes Spanish-language facilitation at these meetings, or will facilitate them bilingually, to ensure that all families, regardless of primary language, use interpretation tools equitably. For example, having all families wear headsets that provide real-time translation affirms that language access tools are available for and needed by *all* members of the Roaring Fork community, including monolingual English speakers.

The FRC also facilitates the Equity Advisory Council (EAC). The EAC is a reflective, forward-thinking group that provides guidance, recommendations, and feedback to the Equity Steering Committee on its goals, projects, and progress throughout the Roaring Fork Schools. The EAC comprises diverse stakeholders including students, parents, staff, and community members who bring multiple perspectives, curiosity, and a desire for equitable experiences and outcomes for all members of the school community. The EAC has authored policies adopted by the Board of Education, such as the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Anti-racism policy and the Safe Haven policy that outlines how all students, regardless of their immigration status, are protected, welcomed, and supported in the Roaring Fork Schools community.

### **Balancing school enrollment**

In 2015, the district introduced a ballot initiative to build a new school to address overcrowding in Glenwood Springs schools, rebuild a school that needed a new building, and refurbish every school in the district. The ballot also included an initiative to build housing for teachers and other school staff. Once voters approved the bond to build a new school, the district needed to redraw attendance boundaries. This development presented an opportunity to balance enrollment in the Glenwood Springs schools with the goal of having similar demographics in all schools and contributing to school desegregation in the district. School leadership identified Latine households in the district by examining data on household language, race and ethnicity, and residency type<sup>3</sup> (e.g., high-density apartments, mobile homes). Before and during redistricting, district leaders prioritized achieving a more balanced student demographic composition, and they set plans to monitor housing trends to maintain school desegregation over time.

In the 2015 ballot initiative, school district leaders did not explicitly reference desegregation or integration in their messaging and communication with families and the public. Instead, they emphasized that building a new school would relieve overcrowding and address other facilities-related needs across the district. Although diversity was always a programmatic value, it was not explicitly mentioned in the bond campaign. By minimizing the emphasis on desegregation, which can fuel political tensions related to diversity-related initiatives, the district created the opportunity to foster community buy-in for changes introduced in the ballot.

### **Integrating classrooms**

School leadership recognized that getting a diverse group of students in the same building is only the first step. Students' experiences of social, cultural, and academic integration also need to be carefully supported. One way that Roaring Fork School District focused on student experiences was to adopt a Crew structure<sup>4</sup> to increase meaningful interactions and relationships among students and teachers and to increase student sense of belonging. Crew is a classroom structure that involves small groups of 10 to 15 students meeting regularly with a trusted staff member and their peers. Through the Crew

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<sup>3</sup> Residency type is not always an effective proxy for race/ethnicity, but in this particular context it was deemed to be one way to identify Latine households.

<sup>4</sup> Education.org. (2024). *Building the culture and structure of Crew*. <https://eleducation.org/core-practices/culture-and-character/building-the-culture-and-structure-of-crew/>

structure, Roaring Fork could support relationship building among diverse student groups as schools worked to further integrate classrooms.

Schools also discontinued the practice of providing pull-out intervention for English language development. Instead, they began providing differentiated support in the classroom. In addition, they leaned into heterogeneous groupings within classrooms as much as possible. Supporting a diverse student body requires intentionality to ensure that schools are meeting student and family needs. To do so, Roaring Fork fostered collaboration between the district and schools to connect low-income families with relevant resources and provide language support for bilingual families through their FRC. Roaring Fork maintains ongoing partnerships in service of this goal, including sustaining its Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education Department to support teachers and partnering with Valley Settlement, a local nonprofit that recruits, trains, and staffs predominantly Latine parents to be assistants in the classroom.

### **Implementing a parent mentor program**

In 2012, Roaring Fork began partnering with Valley Settlement, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to “listen to Latina families, and together create opportunities for early childhood and adult education, connection, and growth, so children and families can thrive.” Roaring Fork and Valley Settlement believe that greater participation from parents creates a welcoming school environment and contributes to parents’ investment in their children’s academic achievement and social integration. As part of this partnership, Roaring Fork collaborated with Valley Settlement to implement a parent mentor program. Parent mentors are Latine, and while they support all students in the classroom, they contribute to a sense of belonging and academic integration for Spanish-speaking students by working with them individually or in small groups.

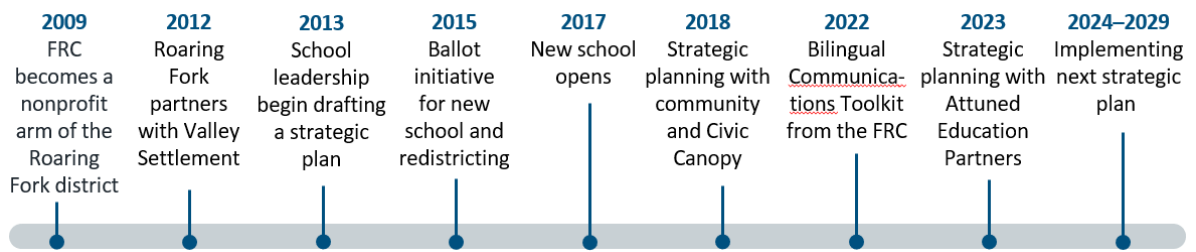
The bilingual, bicultural parent mentors increase Latine representation in the schools, which can help Latine students feel more comfortable connecting with teachers, school staff, and other students. Because the majority of teaching staff at Roaring Fork are monolingual and White, parent mentors can help Latine students in particular feel more confident in the classroom because there is another adult present who looks like them and speaks the same language that many Latine students speak in their homes. Another function of the parent mentor program is to facilitate partnerships and communication between families and teachers in the district. This can help reduce barriers to parent engagement due to language differences, especially for families who are new to the district. Roaring Fork also provides pathways for parent mentors to become full-time district staff members, helping to better align school staff demographics with student demographics.



### **What Factors Support Roaring Fork in Pursuing Integration?**

Roaring Fork’s extensive visioning process helped define the district’s goals, strategies, and policies. The district also emphasized linguistic inclusivity to ensure improved comprehension and communication for the many Spanish-speaking students and families in the district. Each of these factors supported progress on integration. Kelly Medina, director of Student and Family Services, identified the need to form partnerships between school and district leaders, students, families, and staff as essential for reaching shared goals and implementing strategies to achieve them.

## An intentional visioning process



Roaring Fork school leadership began a strategic planning process in 2013 and brought the plan to families, students, and teachers in 2018 to co-create a strategic plan for the school district. The district partnered with Civic Canopy, a non-profit organization that focuses on helping communities connect and problem solve together. At the start of the community-engaged strategic planning process in 2018, district leaders held 16 meetings with multiple groups, including students, teachers, family members, and other community members across the district. The goal of these meetings was to determine participants’ needs and expectations and to learn about their goals for students. This visioning process highlighted Spanish-speaking immigrant families’ needs, which previously had not been well documented, and the importance of facilitating stronger family partnerships as a means of increasing social integration. This information provided the district with evidence that early activities to support integration—such as partnering with Valley Settlement and investing in the Family Resource Center—resulted in practices that helped Spanish-speaking families feel more included in the school community.

Intentional feedback loops and ongoing communication with families anchor district decision making and support ongoing integration efforts. As a result of iterative and community-based engagement processes, family partnerships have become a source of ongoing feedback on initiatives and have contributed to continuous improvement within the district. The community engagement process was critical for district planning because it helped the district identify core components necessary for school and district improvement and informed the district’s approach to social integration, family engagement, partnerships, and community connection. Core components identified in the visioning process have helped the district increase students’ sense of belonging, improve academic performance, and contribute to other positive youth development outcomes related to students’ social integration.

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“A willingness to listen to and trust our families and try to expand our relationships and expand our communications is a key aspect of family partnerships” – *Robert Stein, former district superintendent*

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### Linguistic inclusivity

Spanish and English are the languages most commonly spoken in the Roaring Fork School District, with more than 50% of Roaring Fork students coming from Spanish-speaking homes. When schools communicate with families, students and parents must be able to understand the content and comfortably communicate their needs and concerns as they arise. The visioning process revealed the need for the district to foster a more bilingual environment. Roaring Fork uses the concept of *language justice* as the foundation for its approach to providing services, materials, and resources in Spanish and English. An approach based on language justice requires that everyone’s desire to

communicate in the language they feel most comfortable using should be respected and that language preferences should be accommodated whenever possible.

To address communication barriers, Roaring Fork works with the FAC to implement additional strategies and policies that support partnering or engaging with families and community members, regardless of their spoken and written language preference. In 2022, the district created a bilingual communications toolkit. The toolkit outlines best practices for creating a more linguistically inclusive environment.

**The Roaring Fork Bilingual Communication Toolkit for best practices for linguistic inclusivity includes:**

- having interpreters at important meetings;
- providing everyone with a headset to wear during all district- and school-level meetings, regardless of language preference (the visual of all audience members wearing headsets affirms that language access tools are available for and needed by all members of the community, including monolingual English speakers);
- providing bilingual staff with higher wages than non-bilingual staff to compensate for their language skills;
- generating a common language for sharing levels of Spanish proficiency among district staff members (e.g., to help staff indicate whether they have only conversational language skills or are capable of more technical tasks such as constructing an individualized education plan); and
- simplifying the Spanish-language materials from the district to minimize differences in interpretation across Spanish dialects, recognizing that Spanish speakers include families from Mexico and from different Central American countries, among others.

The toolkit is designed to support staff and district leadership as they interact with students and parents, but it is also intended to shift the culture of the school district and improve the school community's understanding of what it means to support bilingual families. So far, the toolkit has established norms and best practices, ensured consistency, and clarified expectations for all schools regarding internal and external communications.



## **What are the Next Steps for School Integration?**

### **Measuring what constitutes successful integration**

#### *Community-level social integration*

Panorama Education, an education technology company that focuses on measuring student academic achievement and well-being, collects data on student perceptions for the Roaring Fork School District. The district also utilizes Healthy Kids Colorado Survey to measure sense of belonging. According to the

data, Latine and White students' self-reported sense of belonging are similar, but Latine students still report lower social integration compared with White students. Other components indicating a lack of social integration among students include the lack of demographic diversity in advanced classes and extracurricular activities (e.g., student council, sports, clubs). Roaring Fork school leaders would like to see more interaction between Latine and White students to build a sense of shared community and bring students closer together. Despite the FRC's efforts to better support Latine families, community-level social integration is still a growth area for the district. District staff noted that there is not much social interaction between White and Latine students outside of school. As Superintendent Anna Cole noted, *"There is still segregation in the community outside the school: the adults aren't working, playing, or socializing together."* Because community dynamics often influence school dynamics, social segregation among families in the Roaring Fork broader community may affect the extent to which students within the school are interacting.

### *Academic integration*

Looking toward the future, Roaring Fork worked with Attuned Education Partners, a national organization that helps educators build capacity for equity in school systems, to design a strategic plan for 2024–2029 that is more actionable and emphasizes academic integration. The goal of increasing academic integration is to reduce differences in academic outcomes between racial and ethnic groups. Furthermore, by including more opportunities for feedback from the community and the FRC, the district hopes to ensure that both social and academic integration are integral aspects of the plan.

### **Mitigating the effects of turnover in a rural context**

Staff turnover can create challenges for integration and inclusion efforts because staff who oversee key initiatives may leave the district before ensuring that adequate resources are in place to transition responsibilities to remaining staff. Rural school districts are particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of staff turnover because they tend to have fewer staff on average than urban and suburban school districts.<sup>5</sup> Among other effects, staff turnover can disrupt strategic planning and programming, including integration-related initiatives.

For example, Roaring Fork began implementing an initiative to provide students with equitable access to community resources and connect them with the Department of Human Services, as needed. However, the initiative ended when the staff member who led it left the district. As Anna Cole observed, *"I think [that is] one of the things that is really tough about [a] rural context—when we struggle with turnover and staffing issues. We lose whole programs when someone goes."* It takes time to rebuild connections and partnerships, and sometimes replacing institutional knowledge or reviving program operations is not possible.

The challenges presented by staff turnover still impact the district as it works toward achieving sustainable school integration for its students. The 2024–2029 strategic plan for the Roaring Fork district outlines key priorities and initiatives that focus on linguistically and racially representative staff recruitment and retention strategies.

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<sup>5</sup> Ingersoll, R. M., & Tran, H. (2023). Teacher shortages and turnover in rural schools in the US: An organizational analysis. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 59(2), 396–431. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0013161X231159922>



## Lessons Learned

- A purposeful visioning process built around **community buy-in and engagement** can facilitate the future success of integration initiatives.
- An intentional **structure that builds capacity for equitable family engagement** can enhance communication with and involvement of families who historically have been less engaged in the school district.
- Regardless of the chosen outcome, **intentional planning and decision making that include all affected groups** is critical for integration efforts.