

**LIFE**

LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE  
for FAITH AND EDUCATION

**GROVE**



## **Partnerships Between Faith Communities & Public Schools**

**A Vibrant Ecosystem Poised for Deeper Impact**

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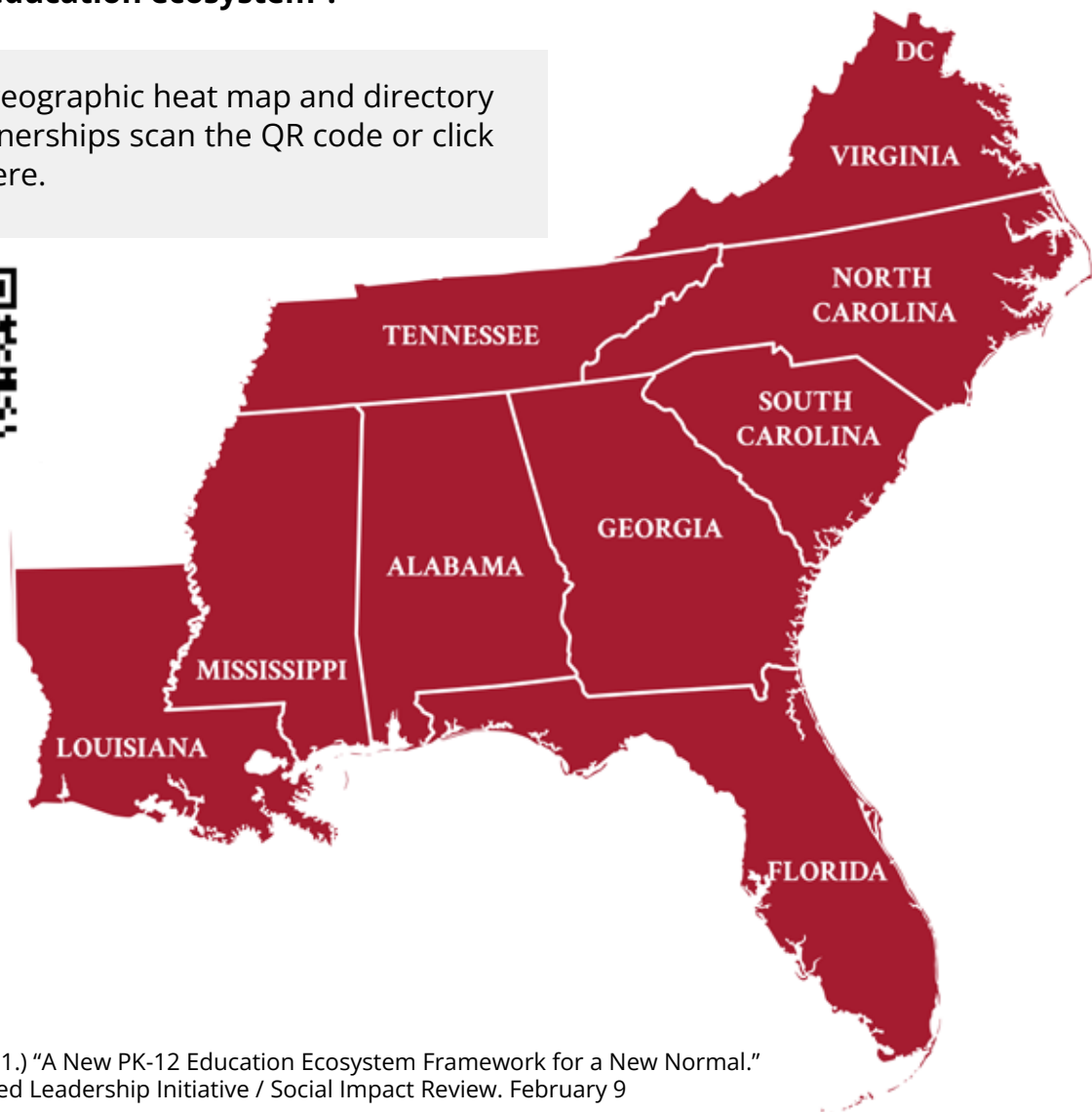
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## 01. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across nine Southeastern states, houses of worship of every size representing many faiths in urban, suburban, and rural communities are deeply engaged in public education. Their efforts range from tutoring and mentoring to family support, teacher encouragement, and school-based service, respecting the legal bounds of church and state. Yet despite this widespread activity, the landscape of faith-school partnerships, i.e., collaborations between faith communities and public schools, remains largely undocumented, little understood and unevenly supported. This report, commissioned by The Leadership Initiative for Faith & Education (LIFE) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, explores the work and scale of faith and education partnerships, the patterns shaping them, and the supports required for this field to grow. This landscape represents the first in a series of regional reports documenting faith and education partnerships across the country.

In total, more than **1,550** partnerships were identified across the region, including small volunteer-driven efforts, multi-congregation collaborations, and large-scale networks anchored by school district offices or intermediaries serving as a hub for faith community volunteers. The findings make one point unmistakable: **faith communities, including churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, are already a significant component of the public education ecosystem<sup>1</sup>.**

To see a geographic heat map and directory of all partnerships scan the QR code or click the link here.



<sup>1</sup>Irvin Scott. (2021.) "A New PK-12 Education Ecosystem Framework for a New Normal." Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative / Social Impact Review. February 9

**Through a series of 55 interviews with local educators and faith community volunteer coordinators, along with web-based research, four top takeaways emerged:**

**Large Scale Resource for Education**

Faith communities stand out as one of the largest-scale education support resources available, with 1,550 faith community-school partnerships active in nine southeastern states and D.C., comparable to the number of schools supported by <sup>2</sup>Teach for America (approx. 515) and Communities in Schools (approx. 1,000) in the region.

**“Hands and Feet of Faith”**

Interviews with school partners and faith community providers consistently represent that the priority for the faith community volunteers is service, not proselytization.

**Backbone Organizations<sup>3</sup>**

Innovative nonprofit intermediaries in Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia coordinate collaboration between local schools and in some cases hundreds of congregations, bringing guidance and training for volunteers to strengthen the educational impact for students.

**Opportunity for More Impact**

While the number of faith-school partnerships found (1,550) is substantial, the number of public schools in the southeast potentially benefitting from assistance <sup>4</sup>(18,693) and the number of local faith communities <sup>5</sup>(104,072) available to support schools stands far greater.

The vast majority of faith community volunteers are not professional educators. Sterling examples of faith-education partnerships include engagement with education nonprofits that bring training and resources to amplify the service even further.

<sup>2</sup>Teach for America and Communities in Schools data sourced from the organization’s websites and interviews with program’s offices.

<sup>3</sup>Backbone organizations are separate organizations from the participating faith communities and schools. As FSG’s John Kania describes, “Backbone organizations plan, manage, and support the initiative through ongoing facilitation, technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the initiative to function smoothly.” John Kania and Mark Kramer. (2011). “Collective Impact”. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter.

<sup>4</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” 2023–24, Final Version 1a.

<sup>5</sup>The Association of Religious Data Archives, U.S. Religion, 2020 State Report

## Several themes emerged consistently across the landscape:

### **Structured academic programs strengthen quality and alignment.**

The clearest academic gains appeared in partnerships connected to established literacy or tutoring models. These programs provided volunteers with training, materials, and assessment tools that congregations could not build on their own and allowed school-based teachers to integrate school volunteers directly into instructional goals.

### **Intermediaries and anchor congregations dramatically expand coordination.**

Communities with intermediaries had far more scalable partnerships. These entities matched congregations to schools, maintained district relationships, provided training, and created shared learning spaces that individual congregations cannot sustain alone.

### **District and state engagement offices shape accessibility and sustainability.**

Where engagement offices were well-structured and proactive, partnerships flourished. Where they were absent or understaffed, congregations struggled to navigate school systems, and promising opportunities remained siloed or dependent on personal relationships.

### **Most faith communities measure activities, not outcomes.**

Partnerships overwhelmingly track what they do (e.g., hours volunteered, snacks provided, books read) rather than change in student learning or school climate. This is not to suggest a lack of interest in impact; it reflects limited access to simple, manageable tools that help congregations reflect on their work without requiring formal evaluation systems.

### **Rural scale, effectiveness and visibility can be advanced through intermediaries**

In rural communities, congregations often serve as key civic anchors and keystone public school partners. Rural-focused intermediaries and nonprofit academic programs may be particularly effective at increasing academic supports for rural students and the scale and visibility of partnerships

### **Congregational diversity is limited but essential for field growth.**

Most partnerships identified were Christian and often racially or economically homogeneous relative to the school populations they served. Opportunities exist to engage non-Christian congregations, elevate leadership from historically underserved communities, and strengthen cross-cultural capacity among suburban congregations.

Taken together, these findings reveal a field marked by deep commitment but constrained by gaps in coordination, infrastructure, and accessible support. What emerges is a clear opportunity for field-building: to strengthen the structures around congregations rather than asking congregations to assume roles they are not equipped to fill. With additional support, faith community and public school partnerships have the potential to positively impact student achievement. Volunteers are working incredibly hard; strategic support will ensure those efforts see even more concrete results for students and communities.

## 02. WHY A REPORT ON FAITH COMMUNITY-PUBLIC SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS?

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When Donna Gaines moved back to Memphis, she expected familiar streets and rhythms. Instead, she found a city where educational and economic challenges had intensified, nowhere more evident than in a local elementary school where too many children struggled to read and classrooms were stretched thin. What she witnessed was not just a literacy problem but a community-level question: **What does it mean for neighbors, especially congregations, to help shoulder responsibility for their children's learning?**

At the same time, her husband, Pastor Steve Gaines of Bellevue Baptist Church, was wrestling with a similar question from a faith perspective: if a congregation is called to love its neighbors, what does that require in the context of public education? These reflections led to *Bellevue Loves Memphis*, a service effort that revealed just how much practical energy and compassion congregations could mobilize. Volunteers showed up in schools, listened to teachers and families, and began to see both the depth of need and the shared desire across the city to help children thrive.

As Donna spent more time in schools, she saw the same pattern repeatedly: early literacy was key to changing students' academic trajectory, students' potential was clear, and the gap between their promise and their reading skills was widening. This raised a focused question: **could churches, with their relational networks and volunteer base, help students reach reading proficiency in a way aligned with public school priorities?** That question eventually grew into ARISE2Read.

The highly successful ARISE2Read program now serves more than 700 second graders across the city of Memphis, Tennessee, with the full endorsement of the public school district. The program measures the percentage of students reading on grade level using pre- and post-tests. In one reported period, the percentage of students reading at or above grade level increased from 9% (pre-test) to 66% (post-test). In another report, 74% of students in the program were on grade level at post-test compared to only 18% of students not in the program.

The Memphis story is not merely an origin story for a single program. It illustrates a broader truth: faith communities and public schools share commitments to children, play parallel roles in community life, and can strengthen learning when they coordinate their efforts. What began as simple presence evolved into structured literacy support showing that deeper impact is possible when congregations have clear pathways to contribute.

**This report seeks to make a hidden landscape visible to map patterns across states, identify opportunities and constraints, and show what becomes possible when congregations and public schools step toward one another with humility, structure, and shared purpose.**



### 03. FRAMING

Across the Southeast, faith communities have long supported public schools through mentoring, tutoring, family assistance, and encouragement for educators.

**Yet despite this activity, the field remains under-documented, fragmented, and unevenly supported.**

Most districts do not maintain comprehensive records of congregational partners, and many congregations carry out their work quietly, without formal programs or visibility beyond their immediate communities. As a result, the true scale and character of partnerships across the region remain largely unknown.

This report seeks to provide a clearer view of that landscape in nine states plus the District of Columbia: **Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.** It examines more than **1,550** partnerships identified across eight states and analyzes the structures, practices, and conditions that shape how congregations engage with schools. The goal is not to promote a single model of partnership. Rather, it is to understand what currently exists, where the field is strongest, and where congregations and schools would benefit from more aligned supports.

### Three realities make this landscape especially timely.



Public schools in the region continue to face significant pressures, e.g., academic recovery needs, educator shortages, and persistent resource gaps, while also serving as central anchors for their communities.



Congregations remain one of the most stable volunteer bases in many cities and towns, particularly in rural areas where nonprofit infrastructure is thin.



Leaders across sectors increasingly recognize that effective partnership requires more than goodwill; it requires structure, alignment with school priorities, and culturally grounded practices that respect the diversity of public school communities.

### These dynamics raise essential questions:

- How widespread are faith-school partnerships today?
- What types of support are congregations providing?
- What patterns distinguish partnerships that are consistent, aligned, and sustainable from those that remain informal or short-lived?
- What kinds of infrastructure program models, intermediaries, district offices, or reflective tools help these partnerships strengthen school culture and student learning?

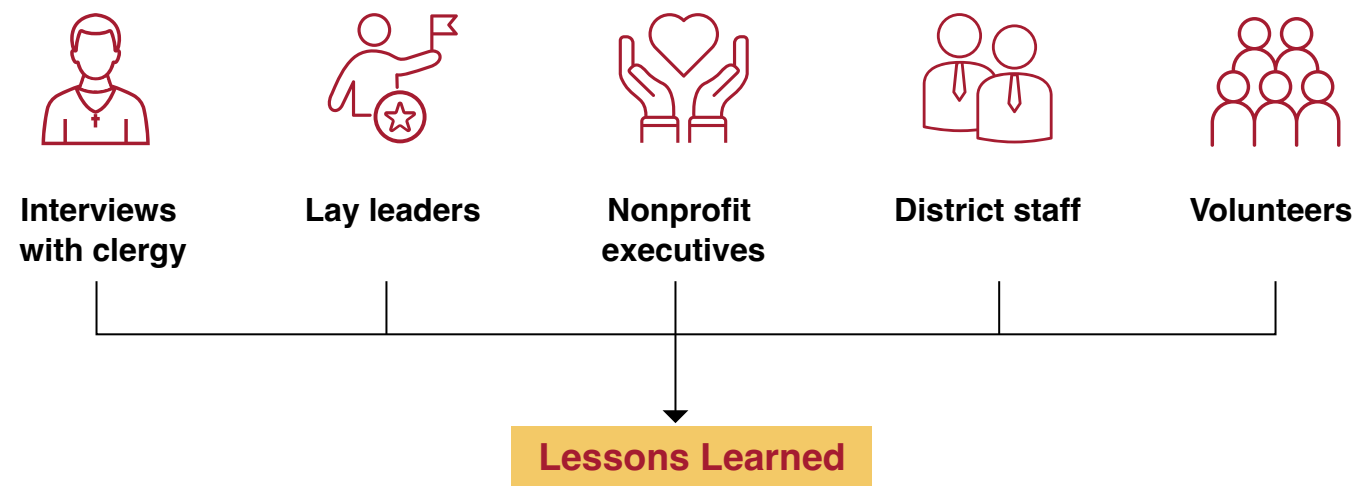
This report addresses those questions by integrating qualitative interviews, online research, meeting notes, and data from large-scale networks. Together, these sources form a comprehensive portrait of a field that is active, earnest, and growing, yet constrained by limited coordination and inconsistent access to high-quality programmatic and structural supports.

The sections that follow describe the landscape, highlight recurring themes, and outline opportunities to build a more coherent, equitable, and well-supported ecosystem for congregational engagement with public schools across the Southeast.

We trust this report will lay the foundation for follow-up studies covering all regions of the US, with the aim of helping faith communities and schools strengthen their support of students nationwide.

## 04. METHODOLOGY

This landscape analysis integrates multiple data sources to create a broad, detailed picture of faith-based and public school partnerships across nine Southeastern states. The goal was not simply to count partnerships, but to understand their character, structure, challenges, and enabling conditions. To do that, the study combined qualitative interviews, web-based searches, and information from large-scale partnership networks.



These conversations clarified how partnerships begin, how they evolve, and what motivates congregations to participate. Leaders described the deep strengths they bring as well as the unique challenges they face. (See Appendix for interview questions.)

Web-based analysis, including a specifically designed large language AI model, supplemented the interviews by identifying partnerships that might not emerge through conversation and referrals alone.

A significant component of the data set came from eight large, structured networks in South Carolina (*Heart4Schools* with 671 faith community – school partnerships), Tennessee (*United4Hope* and *Arise2Read* with 178 and 43 partnerships respectively), North Carolina

(Congregations for Children serves 155 partnerships in Eastern NC, while Love Out Loud engages 39 in Winston-Salem, and One Christian Network coordinates 23 in Wilmington), Florida (Foundation for Orange County Public Schools supports 102 partnerships while Light Orlando supports another 60), and Virginia (For Richmond serves 37). These eight networks stand somewhat apart from the more localized, informal partnerships found elsewhere. Including these datasets expanded the sample size and highlighted structural conditions that influence partnership quality and scale.

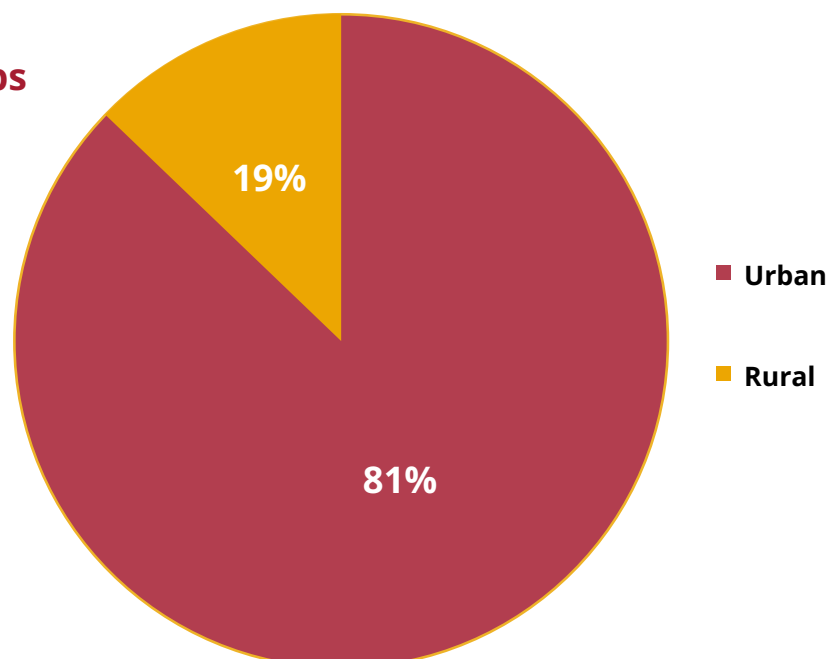
Together, these sources formed a mixed-methods portrait of a field that is active, relationally grounded, and widely distributed across states. While the landscape is undoubtedly broader than any single research effort can fully capture, the methods used here provide a substantive foundation for understanding the scope, structure, and potential of faith-school partnerships across the Southeast.

## 05. THE LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW: WHAT DID WE FIND?

Although this landscape is built on qualitative insight, the quantitative patterns across the nine-state region clarify the scale and character of faith-school partnerships. More than **1,550 partnerships** were identified through interviews, web research, and data from large networks. Even with gaps in web visibility, especially among rural congregations, the number underscores that faith communities already play a significant yet largely overlooked role in public education.

Partnerships appeared in major metropolitan centers, mid-sized cities, suburban corridors, and rural communities. This geographic diversity shows that congregational engagement is not tied to any single demographic, political context, or theological tradition. What varied most was visibility. Urban and suburban partnerships were easier to locate, often because congregations posted updates online or districts maintained partner lists. In contrast, rural partnerships, though often deeply embedded in community life, were less likely to document their work publicly, making them more difficult to identify.

### Urban vs Rural Partnerships totals for the southeast, graphically displayed



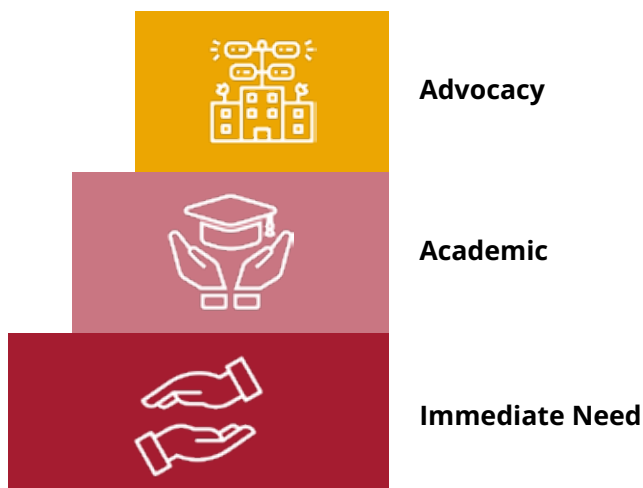
## State Partnership Totals



When examined state by state, patterns emerge. Some states displayed concentrated activity in specific cities, often linked to strong intermediaries or district engagement structures. Others showed scattered pockets of engagement driven by individual relationships rather than coordinated systems. A few states contained large networks that dramatically expanded the count, while others reflected smaller, localized efforts.

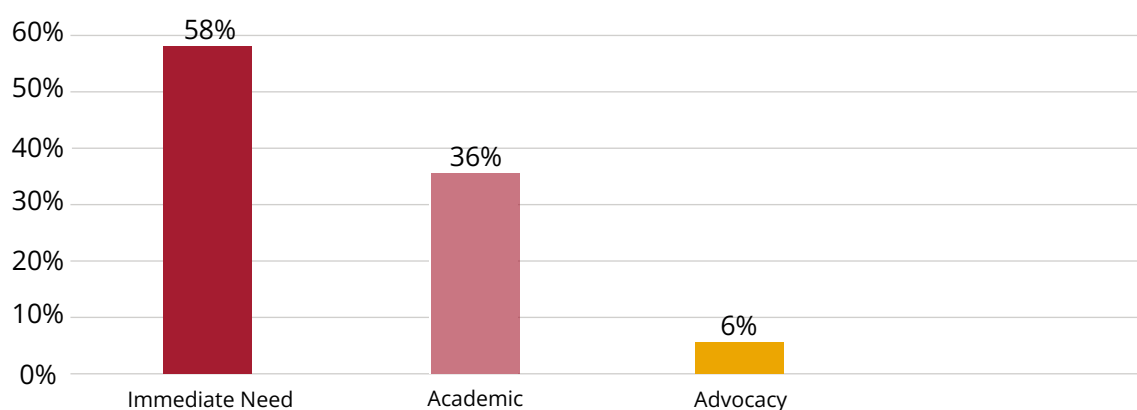
Based on its prior work, The Leadership Initiative for Faith and Education (LIFE) at Harvard Graduate School of Education provides an organizing framework that classifies common faith community and public school partnerships into three tiers: **Immediate Need**, **Academic**, and **Advocacy**. Through *Immediate Need* work with schools, faith communities provide direct assistance, such as meals, supplies, teacher appreciation, and family engagement. These efforts reflect congregations’ relational strengths and their responsiveness to identified needs. *Academic* partnerships focus on tutoring and mentoring, ranging from informal, relationship-based support to structured literacy programs grounded in evidence-based methods. Through *Advocacy* partnerships, faith communities organize to support a school district policy or advocate for increased funding at the state legislature or directly with elected representatives, leveraging congregations’ longstanding trust within their communities.

### Activity Tiers of Faith Community – School Partnerships



According to our research, most faith community – school partnerships in the southeast focus on Immediate Need supports, for example providing meals and school supplies. Academic partnerships focusing on tutoring and mentoring represented the next largest category. Advocacy efforts engaging public officials was significantly less common, but when present, tended to have meaningful influence.

## Partnerships by Activity Tiers



At first glance, the activity focus of urban and rural faith community-school partnerships appears broadly similar. Among rural partnerships, 92.7% address Immediate Need compared with 81.8% of urban partnerships a gap of 10.9 percentage points while 50.3% of rural partnerships focus on sustained Academic interventions such as tutoring, mentoring, and literacy programs, compared with 51.8% of urban partnerships, a difference of just 1.5 percentage points. That near-parity on the Academic dimension, however, is largely the product of a single intermediary organization. Congregations 4 Children (C4C), a UMC-affiliated network in North Carolina, accounts for 100 of the 164 rural partnerships in the dataset and, prorated across its urban and rural schools, contributes approximately 64 of the 82 rural Academic partnerships in the full dataset. When C4C is set aside, the remaining 64 rural partnerships include only 18 with an Academic focus 28.1% compared with 51.8% of urban partnerships, a gap of nearly 24 percentage points.

### Is it more difficult for rural partnerships to provide academic supports because they have less access to academic tools, programs and nonprofit partners?

Two observations from this data merit further exploration. First, C4C demonstrates that large-scale, academically-focused networks of faith community-school partnerships are achievable in rural settings. With 100 rural partnerships coordinated through a single intermediary, C4C has achieved a geographic footprint and programmatic consistency that individual congregations acting alone rarely attain.

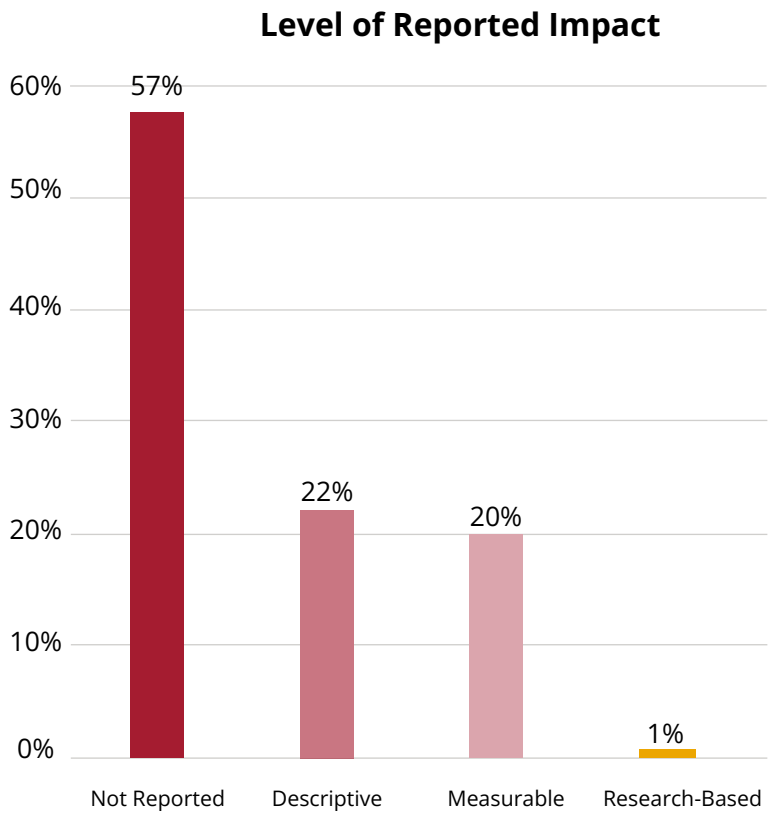
Second, and relatedly, the C4C data suggest that the oft-observed gap between rural and urban faith communities in providing academic supports may be less a function of rural capacity or willingness than of the presence or absence of an organizing intermediary. Where such infrastructure exists, rural faith communities appear capable of delivering academic programming on par with their urban counterparts. Both observations point toward intermediary development as a high-leverage strategy for strengthening rural faith community-school partnerships.

# Reporting of Effectiveness

To explore how faith-school partnerships understand and describe their effectiveness, this report uses a four-level descriptive impact framework rather than a formal evaluation model. This approach recognizes the wide variation in partnership types and avoids overstating evidence where rigorous data may not exist.

<b>Level 1</b>	Captures programs that describe activities without reference to outcomes.
<b>Level 2</b>	Includes partnerships that report descriptive information, such as numbers served or general claims of benefit, without measurable impact.
<b>Level 3</b>	Reflects partnerships that point to some form of measurable educational or school-related outcomes, often self-reported.
<b>Level 4</b>	Includes efforts that have been externally evaluated or analyzed using a research-based approach

This framework is not intended to rank programs or determine effectiveness, but to offer a common language for examining how impact is currently understood and communicated across partnerships. Many initiatives, particularly those centered on relationships, trust, or volunteer service, may produce meaningful effects that are difficult to quantify, especially in early stages. By organizing impact descriptions along a continuum, the framework provides a practical entry point for partnerships to reflect on their work, consider what evidence they gather, and identify opportunities to deepen learning about what is making a difference for schools and students over time. The “Levels of Reported Impact” graph, drawn from a survey of 345 randomly selected partnerships, suggests that most partnerships do not formally track effectiveness.



## 06. IMPACT LESSONS

### Reflecting On Impact

One of the clearest insights to emerge from this landscape is the degree to which congregations engage deeply in public education without publicizing or systematically evaluating their program's impact. Many leaders framed their school partnerships as an extension of core faith tenets rather than programmatic interventions. The emphasis was on presence, relationship, and service rather than on measurable outcomes. Because congregations are motivated by faith commitments and the desire to demonstrate care, the act of showing up is itself the point--not the documentation of impact that typically accompanies nonprofit or philanthropic efforts. As one faith leader noted,

**“ I know we are doing what God has called us to do. Families in our community are struggling with hunger so we’re showing up to support students in public schools with feeding programs. It’s a beautiful thing to see the relief in a family’s face when their child won’t be hungry during the school day. ”**



This orientation means that the most common forms of tracking impact involve activity counts. Congregations might mention the number of students they tutor, the snacks they provide for testing days, or the hours volunteers spend reading with children. None of this diminishes the significance of the work; indeed, these contributions are often essential supports in schools where staff are overextended and resources scarce. But the resulting picture is incomplete, making it difficult for educators, funders, policymakers or other congregations to understand the deeper value or potential of these partnerships.

Some congregations have sought outcome data, for example tracking student progress on reading proficiency, and have found their partner school district unable or unwilling to share the information. In other cases, congregations have managed to access data by collaborating with an established education program. (See “Higher Impact Partnerships” below.)

To prepare for thinking about evaluation and impact measurement, congregations can start with a process of structured reflection: time to reflect on what they are trying to accomplish in the first place, and how do they know they are getting it done.

This reflection opportunity became apparent during the interviews and one-on-one conversations.

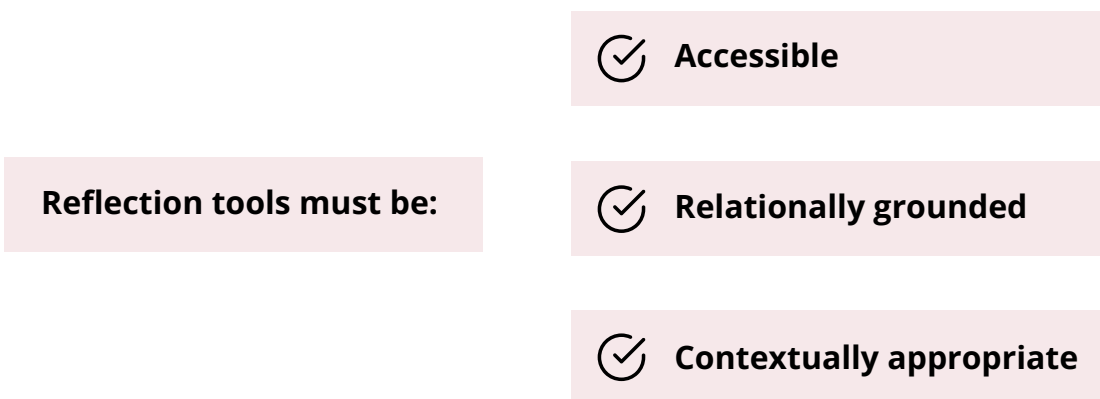
For example, numerous conversations went to another level by asking faith leaders two questions:

### “What’s going well in your work?”

### “What’s happening that makes you know it’s going well?”

The questions allowed leaders to pause and reflect on something that perhaps their busy, daily work doesn’t naturally give them space to consider. Yet they quickly went to more nuanced reflection that brought observations about student attendance, parent or teacher positive feedback, tutors noting that a student was reading more fluently, etc. Such reflection can help congregations clarify the impact they aim to create and track their progress.

This is a space where field-building support can offer enormous value. Developing practical, user-friendly reflection tools tailored to faith-based partners will enable deeper thinking about their work. These tools would not replace formal evaluation. Rather, the tools would help congregations gain more clarity into how they could begin to measure impact in ways that support student achievement and motivate volunteers.



## Higher Impact Partnerships Are Linked to Established and Centralized Programs

Across the landscape, the strongest and most consistently impactful partnerships were those connected to established academic programs, most often structured literacy tutoring models grounded in research. Congregations participating in these programs described a level of clarity, confidence, and alignment that differed sharply from more informal efforts. A curriculum, training framework, and simple assessment tools gave volunteers a clear sense of what to do and why it mattered. Teachers welcomed volunteers whose work integrated directly with instructional goals, and students received consistent, academically aligned

support tailored to their needs. Temple Emanuel, a synagogue in Greensboro, North Carolina, partners with public schools to tutor students in Advanced Placement (AP) exams. Several test preparation companies have research-based tools to support this tutoring. Volunteer congregants can plug into those existing tools and ensure high quality support for students. Congregations repeatedly emphasized that structured programs eliminated ambiguity. Volunteers knew how to run a tutoring session, which methods to use, how to gauge student progress, and what next steps were appropriate.

Even congregations with long histories of informal mentoring noted that training through an established model elevated the quality of interaction. Volunteers were no longer simply reading with a child; they were using targeted strategies shown to strengthen literacy. This clarity also improved volunteer recruitment. Leaders observed that individuals intimidated by tutoring felt more willing to participate when they understood that training and a proven method would support them.

Teachers and principals echoed these benefits. Structured programs reduced the burden on school staff to determine how to integrate volunteers into classroom instruction. They increased trust, as educators knew volunteers were following consistent, research-aligned approaches. Programs that offered ongoing support and easy-to-use materials strengthened this alignment further, allowing volunteers to meet varied student needs while staying rooted in evidence-based practices.

These models highlight an important ecosystem insight: **congregations often have the relational commitment and volunteer energy needed to support schools, but they lack the capacity to design curriculum, develop training, or create assessment systems.** Partnering with established programs solves this challenge. Expanding access to these models, especially for smaller or rural congregations will strengthen the field.



### Exemplar Centralized Programs

Kahn Academy SAT Prep (<https://www.khanacademy.org/digital-sat>)

Kids Hope USA (<https://kidshopeusa.org/>)

Reading Partners (<https://readingpartners.org/>)

## 07. AMPLIFYING STRUCTURES

### Intermediaries

A key insight from the landscape is the multiplier effect created when an anchor congregation or backbone organization coordinates partnerships across a city. Whether a large, well-resourced church or a nonprofit intermediary, these entities function as connective tissue between congregations and districts, enabling scale far beyond what individual churches can achieve alone.

### United4Hope

One example is the **United4Hope** program in Nashville. United4Hope launched in 2011 as the education initiative of the Operation Andrew Group with a goal of building a structured, citywide network of church school partnerships in Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS). Over the past decade, it has grown into one of the largest and most coordinated faith-based volunteer ecosystems in Tennessee. Currently, more than 170 churches across Middle Tennessee are participating, representing over a dozen denominations and congregations of every size from 100-member neighborhood churches to megachurches with thousands of weekly attendees. Together, these congregations partnered with 70+ public schools, primarily in MNPS but increasingly in surrounding districts such as Franklin Special School District.

**Scale:** Across the network, United4Hope has recruited thousands of volunteers, collectively contributing tens of thousands of hours annually.

Activities span four structured pillars:

- **Student support, including tutoring and mentoring**
- **Staff encouragement**
- **Family engagement**
- **In-kind contributions ranging from classroom supplies to food resources.**

In one district-level report, United4Hope volunteers logged over 10,000 tutoring hours in a single school year, with several schools reporting weekly literacy support across multiple grade levels.

The initiative has also strengthened school-community stability. Principals consistently cite United4Hope as one of the district's most dependable support networks.



**- Dr. Adrienne Battle**  
Superintendent,  
Metropolitan  
Nashville Public Schools

**“Our schools depend on reliable partners, and United4Hope has become a pillar in this work.”**



## Heart4Schools

The South Carolina Baptist Convention's Heart4Schools initiative grew out of a simple but consequential insight: strong partnerships with public schools begin by asking school leaders what they need and then responding accordingly. Launched in 2013 through a small number of pilot efforts, including a reading initiative that demonstrated sustained improvement for participating students, the program evolved as churches saw the impact of aligning their support with the priorities of educators. As one Heart4Schools leader explained, "What really changed everything was deciding that our role was not to tell schools what we wanted to do, but to ask them what they needed. We go in with no agenda other than to serve.

**"When schools see that you're there to support their mission, trust grows."**

-Faith community program director

Today, Churches provide a range of non-instructional supports shaped directly by school input, including reading buddies and mentoring, weekend food and hygiene assistance, material support for foster and kinship care families, and consistent encouragement for teachers through notes, meals, and classroom supplies. Supported by statewide training, regional coordination, and small grants, the initiative emphasizes realistic commitments and long-term presence allowing churches to serve responsibly while remaining responsive to local context.

The initiative's rapid growth has been driven less by centralized recruitment than by intentional, low-barrier on-ramps for churches across the state. Leveraging existing regional associations, Heart4Schools shares local stories of impact, provides practical guidance for engaging principals, and helps congregations assess volunteer capacity before committing. This peer-driven, distributed approach has enabled churches of varying sizes and settings to participate in ways that fit their context, contributing to steady expansion over the past decade while preserving trust with schools and consistency of support.

### Scale

Heart4Schools partners with 671 public schools in South Carolina, reaching approximately 55 percent of schools statewide across urban, suburban, and rural communities.

## Congregations for Children (C4C)

In 2013, public school teachers and district administrators who were members of United Methodist churches in Eastern North Carolina shared with their Bishop, Hope Morgan Ward, that poverty was keeping many local children from learning. From that insight, and drawing on their Christian calling to fight poverty, they founded Congregations for Children (C4C), which supports nearly 160 faith community-public school partnerships.

C4C churches start by visiting the school and asking teachers and principals what their needs are. **Grounded in the schools' priorities, C4C supports partnerships in five ways:**

1. Advancing literacy in elementary schools
2. Providing basic needs
3. Increasing church and community involvement through positive role models
4. Supporting care for the total school, e.g., through treats for educators and beautification projects on school grounds
5. Advocating public policy that supports equitable education.

For example, in the towns of Hallsboro and Chadborn, United Methodist churches learned that many parents worked three jobs to make ends meet and did not have enough time and resources to get to laundromats. The churches responded by outfitting their schools with washers and dryers and organized Wash Teams to clean, dry and fold students' laundry every week.



### Scale

Congregations for Children supports 158 partnerships in eastern North Carolina, 100 of which are in rural communities

Meanwhile, at the state legislature in Raleigh, 50 C4C congregations have advocated with state leaders for more than a decade on behalf of equitable funding for low-wealth school districts. According to C4C's director Jo Wainright, "C4C aims to be the hands and feet of Jesus, and our main goal is to show love."

**"The partnership of Harbor United Methodist Church is both important regarding educational purposes and meaningful to the heart of each child they meet with."**

-Madeira Billingsley, 3rd Grade Teacher,  
Mary C. Williams Elementary School, Wilmington, NC



## School Leaders Report Benefits from Intermediaries:

- **Increased volunteer reliability**
- **Improved coordination**
- **Deeper alignment with academic priorities**
- **Richer volunteer training**
- **Streamlined communication**

Intermediaries help congregations engage respectfully and effectively in public school settings, clarify expectations, and provide support when issues arise. This reduces risks such as volunteers inadvertently disrupting instruction, offering services misaligned with classroom needs, or inadvertently crossing the clear and important legal boundaries that separate church and state. By establishing shared frameworks, intermediaries ensure that volunteer energy is directed in ways that strengthen, rather than complicate, the school environment.

### Exemplar Intermediaries

For Richmond	Richmond, VA	<a href="https://www.forrichmond.org/">https://www.forrichmond.org/</a>
Love Out Loud-WS	Winston-Salem, NC	<a href="http://www.loveoutloudws.com/">http://www.loveoutloudws.com/</a>
Congregations for Children	Eastern North Carolina	<a href="https://nccumc.org/c4c/">https://nccumc.org/c4c/</a>
One Christian Network	Wilmington, NC	<a href="https://onechristiannetwork.com/">https://onechristiannetwork.com/</a>
Foundation for OCPS	Orlando, FL	<a href="https://foundationforocps.org/faithbased/">https://foundationforocps.org/faithbased/</a>
Light Orlando	Orlando, FL	<a href="https://www.lightorlando.org/">https://www.lightorlando.org/</a>
Heart4Schools	South Carolina	<a href="https://www.scbaptist.org/heart4schools/">https://www.scbaptist.org/heart4schools/</a>
Arise2Read	Memphis, TN Nashville, TN	<a href="https://arise2read.org/">https://arise2read.org/</a>
United4Hope		<a href="https://operationandrew.org/united4hope/">https://operationandrew.org/united4hope/</a>

In communities with strong intermediary models, the level of engagement is notable. A single coordinating entity can recruit congregations, match them to schools, provide training, and maintain district relationships. This centralization creates efficiencies, consistent expectations, and clearer communication. Schools benefit from having one point of contact instead of navigating numerous individual partnerships, while congregations benefit from structured entry points, guidance, and training resources.

## Anchor Congregations



Anchor congregations functioning as informal intermediaries play a similar role. Congregations with administrative capacity, credibility with district staff, or the ability to convene other churches often become stabilizing forces in the ecosystem.

Without such coordination, partnerships tend to remain small, individualized, and dependent on personal relationships. Schools without prior relationships may be overlooked, and congregations willing to engage may not know how to begin. Districts also struggle to manage numerous independent partnerships without central support.

### Exemplar Anchor Congregations

Annandale Community Church, Annandale, VA (<https://accacares.org/>)  
Buckhead Church, Atlanta, GA ([www.buckheadchurch.org](http://www.buckheadchurch.org))  
Dar Al Hijrah Islamic Center, Falls Church, VA (<https://hijrah.org/>)  
Willowbrook Church, Huntsville, AL ([www.willowbrook.org/missions/](http://www.willowbrook.org/missions/))

## District and State Offices as Force Multipliers

One of the most consistent findings across the landscape is the outsized influence district and state community-engagement offices have on the strength, accessibility, and sustainability of faith-school partnerships. Where these offices are well-structured, responsive, and equipped with clear expectations, partnerships tend to flourish. Where they are absent or under-resourced, congregations often operate in isolation and promising opportunities remain unrealized.

### In districts with strong engagement offices

Congregations experienced clarity rather than confusion

Staff provided guidance on appropriate volunteer roles

Congregations received updates on school needs

Community stakeholders gathered with district leaders to align priorities

These districts recognized that partners require clear entry points, maintained information on schools seeking volunteers, and communicated how congregational support could align with academic goals while respecting legal boundaries. As a result, congregations understood where to begin and what was expected, and schools benefited from more organized, consistent support.

Several districts demonstrated strong models of this approach. In school systems like Orange County (Orlando, FL) and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, engagement staff not only welcomed faith partners but actively convened them. Principals and district leaders shared academic priorities, provided training, and explained how congregational efforts could complement district initiatives.

The absence of such structures produced the opposite effect. In districts without a dedicated engagement office, congregations do not know whom to contact or which schools need support. Partnerships form primarily through clergy-principal relationships, which created meaningful engagement. But this leaves schools without existing relationships overlooked.



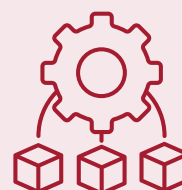
**State education departments** also shaped the ecosystem. Some states offered clear guidance on legal parameters for faith-based engagement, helping congregations understand constitutional boundaries. In states with this infrastructure, congregations expressed greater confidence engaging with public institutions.



### Exemplar State Education Department

Florida Department of Education – Faith Based & Community Outreach

**Strengthening district and state infrastructure** is an important field-building opportunity. Tools that help districts and states articulate expectations, onboard partners, outline legal parameters, and maintain communication would benefit the entire landscape. Such investments do not replace the relational nature of congregational engagement; they allow it to thrive within a coherent, equitable, and well-supported system.



## 08. EMERGING TRENDS AND GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

### ADVOCACY IS RARE, BUT POWERFUL

**Advocacy emerged as one of the least common, yet powerful, forms of faith-school partnership.** Most congregations do not engage in policy or systems-level work, focusing instead on *Academic* and *Immediate Need* supports. Yet the few examples that do exist demonstrate significant influence when congregations engage thoughtfully.

In Tennessee, clergy partnered with Stand for Children and organized congregational support around a district governance issue when the state considered taking over the local school system. The framing presented by the clergy and Stand for Children was nonpartisan and rooted in community values, arguing that families deserved a school system accountable to local residents and that equity required decisions grounded in local knowledge. Their mobilization helped stop the takeover. This example is notable because it shows what becomes possible when congregational leaders examine systemic issues through commitments already present in their community work.

The landscape suggests advocacy often grows out of Immediate Need engagement. Volunteers who tutor students year after year observe patterns like limited access to specialists, teacher turnover, or inadequate instructional materials that prompt deeper questions.

- **Why are certain schools staffed with less experienced teachers?**
- **What policies shape resource allocation?**
- **What drives frequent use of substitutes?**

**These realizations highlight how *Immediate Need* volunteering exists within larger systems that influence student outcomes.** A few congregations described such service-to-systems shifts. One congregation in Georgia tutored the same students for multiple years with inconsistent results. Reflecting on the experience, they recognized that instructional instability not student motivation was the primary challenge. Teachers cycled in and out, disrupting learning. The congregation eventually began exploring the causes of teacher attrition and worked with parents and educators to advocate for improvements. Their advocacy emerged not from ideology but from proximity: direct engagement made systemic problems impossible to ignore. As one volunteer noted,

**“We were tutoring 20-30 kids every year. But now we’re working to help improve the overall school for 400 kids!”  
- Volunteer in Georgia School District**

The findings do not necessarily suggest all congregations should engage in advocacy. Many do not see themselves in that role and prefer to focus solely on service. But the examples show there is room for congregations that want to understand and address the systems shaping local educational conditions. What these congregations need is not partisan direction but clear guidance, trustworthy partners, and frameworks linking their observations in schools to broader systems-level discussions.



Field-building efforts can support system-level change by offering tools that help congregations reflect on what they see, understand underlying systems, and discern when and how to engage responsibly. Partnering with existing advocacy organizations like Faith Acts for Education, Stand For Children or The Expectations Project can help congregations take next steps. Such support can normalize the idea that service and systems thinking are connected and help ensure that when congregations do participate in advocacy, they do so constructively and in alignment with the needs of students and educators.

## **Rural Partnerships: Harder to Find, Critically Important**

**Rural faith-school partnerships emerged as one of the more challenging scopes of work to identify; not because the work is absent, but because it is less visible.**

Some rural congregations lack updated websites or active social media. As a result, online searches may only capture a small portion of activity. Yet the interviews made clear that rural partnerships are often among the most deeply rooted and trusted relationships in their communities.

In rural areas, the school is often a central civic institution, where families gather and community identity is reinforced. Congregations often serve a similar role, acting as long-standing anchors. These overlapping roles create proximity: many clergy know teachers personally, volunteers know students and their families, and congregations respond quickly when needs arise. According to Jo Wainright who leads Congregations for Children (C4C), an intermediary serving nearly 160 rural and urban partnerships in North Carolina, “Rural congregations are smaller, closer to the students, more aware of their needs, and quicker to help.”

Despite this relational depth, rural congregations face constraints distinct from those in suburban or urban settings. Nonprofit infrastructure is limited, leaving fewer partners to support food needs or academic enrichment. Many congregations also have fewer financial resources, making it harder to sustain efforts like stocking food pantries or purchasing tutoring materials.

**Rural invisibility has implications beyond documentation. When partnerships are not publicly visible, funders may underestimate rural need or overlook the work already underway. Without a clearer view, the field risks reinforcing geographic and class-based inequities that already shape educational outcomes.**

Rural partnerships often lack access to structured academic programs that support things like evidence-based literacy instruction. Yet when supported by an intermediary with rural expertise, like Congregations for Children in North Carolina, rural churches appear as likely to provide academic programming as their urban counterparts. (See “Activity Tiers,” page 10) Rural leaders expressed a desire for program models adaptable to their scale that are simple enough to implement without dedicated staff, yet strong enough to support student learning.

These findings point to a significant opportunity: to bring rural partnerships into fuller view and to design supports that recognize their distinct strengths and constraints. In many ways, rural partnerships exemplify the relational depth, trust, and shared commitment that faith-school partnerships aim to cultivate more broadly. By supporting rural intermediaries and developing tools tailored to rural contexts, the field can strengthen work already central to many rural community ecosystems.





### Economic diversity further shaped partnership patterns.

- Suburban congregations with larger budgets or higher-income membership often had more capacity to augment their volunteering with material support, e.g., providing classroom computers and library donations, while congregations in lower-income areas contributed through consistent presence, volunteerism, and relational engagement.
- Both forms of support are valuable but reflect different capacities, underscoring the need for structures that elevate relational strengths alongside financial resources.

### Racial, economic and religious dynamics within faith community - school partnerships

The vast majority of partnering congregations identified across the Southeast region were Christian, reflecting the area's demographics. (According to PRRI, in 2024, Americans who identify as Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu in total account for 6% of the population.)<sup>6</sup> Yet even within this majority, patterns of racial and socioeconomic homogeneity were evident especially in suburban partnerships where predominantly white, middle- or upper-income congregations partnered with schools serving racially diverse or predominantly Black or Latino/a communities.

### Interviews showed that congregations serving cross-cultural communities approached their work with sincerity and a desire to be helpful.

Still, volunteers often entered contexts where they had limited understanding of local histories or family experiences. Many leaders described strong, respectful relationships with schools, including examples of shared leadership with staff, incorporating teacher input, and ensuring volunteer efforts aligned with the school's vision. These examples demonstrate an asset-based approach that views schools and families not as recipients of charity but as partners with expertise and agency.

While religious demographics across the nine states we studied map to the high representation of Christian-supported partnerships, the limited presence of Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist communities suggests untapped opportunity. These traditions have deep commitments to service, justice, and community care, as represented by the parent engagement supports provided by Dar Al Hijrah Islamic Center in the Arlington County and Fairfax County Public Schools (VA). Their inclusion enriches partnership ecosystems by broadening cultural perspectives, diversifying volunteer pools, and strengthening community representation.

<sup>6</sup>2024 PRRI Census of American Religion (May 5, 2025)

Strengthening the field will require support structures attentive to these diversity dynamics. Congregations serving communities different from their own may benefit from additional resources on cultural nuance and historical context. Elevating the leadership of congregations rooted in communities most affected by educational disparities can also help balance representation and voice.

**A more diverse partnership ecosystem racially, religiously, and economically would better reflect the pluralism of public school communities and enhance the field's ability to meet the varied needs of students and families.**

## Congregationally Sponsored Charter Schools

A smaller but notable theme involved the rising interest among some congregations in sponsoring or launching public charter schools. This trend is most visible in politically conservative states where pastors perceive a supportive climate for exploring faith-adjacent charter models. Several leaders articulated a sense of urgency rooted in political timing, suggesting that the current configuration of state legislatures and national leadership creates a window during which faith-led charter initiatives might be possible.

Historically, the legal precedent has been clear: public charter schools must remain non-sectarian. Past attempts by religious schools to become public charter schools required the removal of explicit religious identity. Yet the interest now emerging among some congregations goes beyond moving religious schools to public charters. Clergy in several states are asking whether it is possible to start new charters directly out of their congregational infrastructure while remaining compliant with non-sectarian requirements. Interviews suggest that while the legal boundaries are well known, the pastoral energy behind exploring these possibilities is real.



The recent Oklahoma Supreme Court decision, *St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School v. Drummond*, U.S. Supreme Court (2025), blocked the establishment of a religiously affiliated charter school. The decision reminds the field that these boundaries remain legally enforced. But conversations with congregational leaders revealed that the ruling has not extinguished interest; rather, it has heightened the need for clarity. Clergy we spoke to expressed some confusion about where the lines are drawn, what might be permissible within state law, and how these questions intersect with the mission of their churches.

While congregational charter schools may not become widespread, the next five years are likely to see increased experimentation, legal challenges, and public debate. Centralized support organizations do not need to advocate for or against these efforts. Instead, they can serve as a trusted source of contextual information, helping congregations understand the legal and educational landscape without practicing law. Providing clarity about student-centered best practices, would serve congregations well and help ensure that faith-based engagement in public education remains constructive and legally sound.

As the field grows, it will be important to acknowledge the full range of existing models, including those that are uncommon or complex. Congregationally sponsored charter schools highlight that faith-school partnerships do not take a single form and that communities will continue to seek solutions that reflect their histories, capacities, and core beliefs about public education.

## 09. ECOSYSTEM OPPORTUNITIES

The following ecosystem opportunities outline practical, high-impact steps that can strengthen faith-school partnerships across the Southeast by improving coordination, expanding access to effective supports, and ensuring more equitable, sustainable engagement.

### 1. Expand Access to High-Quality Academic Supports

Increase the availability of proven literacy and tutoring models that congregations can adopt with minimal lift. Provide regional and virtual training so volunteers receive strong preparation without logistical barriers.

### 2. Strengthen Intermediaries and Local Coordination

Invest in organizations that match congregations to schools, maintain district relationships, and offer training. In communities without intermediaries, especially rural areas, light lift supports, e.g., a website listing congregations supporting schools and schools seeking faith community partners, can help partners match and coordinate their work.

### 3. Deepen District and State Engagement Infrastructure

Build district-wide systems for matching volunteers to schools and communicating needs consistently. Develop clear guidance for schools and congregations on legal parameters, volunteer roles, and partnership pathways.

### 4. Promote Simple and Accessible Reflection

Equip congregations and schools with easy-to-use volunteer reflections and periodic debriefs between school leaders and congregational partners.

## 5. Broaden and Diversify Congregational Participation

In addition to growing and deepening partnerships with Christian congregations, intentionally engage non-Christian congregations, and elevate leadership from congregations rooted in communities most affected by educational inequities. The field should identify and support more faith community public school partnerships in rural communities.

## 6. Invest in the Connective Tissue of the Ecosystem

Prioritize funding for the core amplifiers--academic programs, intermediaries, and district engagement offices--while also supporting regionally accessible training and shared tools that any congregation or district can use to begin or strengthen partnerships.

## 7. Invest in Impact Measurement and Scaling Best Practice

Develop the field's infrastructure to assess impact while sharing what works in different contexts.

# 10. CONCLUSION

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This landscape analysis reveals a field full of promise, rooted in the longstanding commitment of faith communities to care for children and families. Congregations are present in classrooms, hallways, and school offices across the Southeast, offering encouragement, support, and relational stability in communities that need it most. Their contributions are significant, even if they are often under-documented or understated.

At the same time, the field needs structure. It needs accessible training, reflective tools, connection to high-quality program models, thoughtful engagement with cultural and racial dynamics, and pathways to learn together. It needs micro-grants, district guidance, and statewide support. It needs intermediaries and anchor congregations that can organize and scale efforts in ways that honor local context while improving consistency and quality.

A volunteer from a congregation in Virginia in this study was paired with a third grader who had fallen behind in reading and rarely spoke above a whisper. Week after week, the volunteer showed up sometimes just to read, sometimes simply to sit with him. Midway through the year, the boy arrived clutching a book he had practiced at home, asking if he could try reading it aloud **"all by myself this time."** He stumbled, corrected himself, and kept going until he reached the last page. When he looked up, the volunteer said his face carried a quiet pride that needed no explanation. To the volunteer, and hopefully the student, it felt like a real turning point. Stories like this, repeated across hundreds of faith community and public school partnerships, are a reminder that while the field needs structure, coordination, and better data, the heart of this work is still found in simple, steady human connection one child, one volunteer, one act of presence at a time.



## About LIFE and Grove

### **Leadership Initiative for Faith and Education (LIFE) Harvard Graduate School of Education**

The Leadership Initiative for Faith & Education (LIFE), based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, advances an interfaith, inclusive approach to improving educational outcomes and reducing persistent disparities by strengthening partnerships among public schools, communities, and faith-based organizations, while supporting the spiritual lives of students and educators. Grounded in rigorous research, LIFE generates and shares evidence on how faith-school partnerships support student learning, educator well-being, and effectiveness, and translates that knowledge into leadership training for educators, school leaders, faith leaders, parents, and caregivers. By identifying effective models and helping cultivate new partnerships where they do not yet exist, LIFE builds local capacity to address concrete needs such as literacy, math fluency, and ensuring every child is known by a caring adult while strengthening communities and promoting widespread student success.

### **Grove Collective Foundation**

The mission of Grove Collective Foundation is to increase economic and social mobility by equipping innovators with teams of experienced social entrepreneurs who can help them accelerate their sector-changing ideas. Solutions for the world's most pressing social challenges are often envisioned by leaders of the nonprofits, universities, and companies meeting those challenges every day. But unfortunately, those leaders are often too busy running their organizations to move the big idea, so it never leaves the drawing board. Grove is a nonprofit social-impact organization that provides entrepreneurial capacity to help partners move their big idea from concept to concrete.

## Acknowledgments

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Most importantly, we want to acknowledge the many faith leaders, teachers, principals, and school and district leaders across the Southeastern United States who are doing the quiet, faithful work of partnership every day. In congregations, classrooms, and community spaces, you are building bridges that expand opportunity through tutoring, literacy efforts, student support networks, and relationships grounded in care and hope. Your work often goes unnoticed, yet its impact is profound. This report exists because of your leadership and your belief that when schools and faith communities collaborate thoughtfully and responsibly, children and families flourish. We are honored to draw inspiration from your example and are hopeful that this research will support and strengthen your efforts in the years ahead. Now, onward to the next region of the US!

To see LIFE's research paper "Faith in Education Renewal" scan the QR code below



## 11. APPENDIX

### Faith Communities in Southeastern States (2020)

State	No. of Faith Communities (2020)
Alabama	10,756
D.C.	753
Florida	17,528
Georgia	12,924
Louisiana	6,600
Mississippi	7,182
North Carolina	16,200
South Carolina	8,208
Tennessee	13,399
Virginia	10,477
<b>Total</b>	<b>104,027</b>

Source: The Association of Religious Data Archives, U.S. Religion, 2020 State Report

### Public Schools in Southeastern States (2023-24)

State	No. of Public Schools (2023-24)
Alabama	1,524 schools
D.C.	245 schools
Florida	4,229 schools
Georgia	2,327 schools
Louisiana	1,316 schools
Mississippi	1,032 schools

North Carolina	2,716 schools
South Carolina	1,270 schools
Tennessee	1,905 schools
Virginia	2,129 schools
<b>Total</b>	<b>18,693 schools</b>

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2023–24, Final Version 1a

## Faith Community Public School Partnerships Landscape Analysis Interview Guide

- Tell me a bit about the work you do with schools/students/families/teachers?
- What are one or two things that are going well? What are you proud of with your program?
- What are one or two things that you wish were going differently?

If you could wave a magic wand to dramatically increase impact of faith education partnerships, what would you do?

- Do you have an existing community of people who do similar work?

If so, what is helpful about that?

If not, what might you find helpful about being connected to people locally or nationally who are doing similar work?

If there was a convening of those who do similar work as you, what types of sessions or content would make that helpful?

- What does it look like at the end of a day/week/school year if you feel you've been successful?
- How do you keep track of whether or not work is successful?
- Do you have positive or inspiring stories or examples that you'd like to share (anonymously without using names of children or families)?
- Do you have any other questions for me?
- Do you have suggestions of other local faith community and public school partnerships we should contact?