



Community

Collaboration

Common Threads

# CHANGE

IS EMPOWERED BY CHALLENGE



Covid Community Coalition Projects

September, 2021 - August, 2024

Nothing is more detrimental to our mental health than isolation and uncertainty. These two factors combined in full force during the COVID-19 Pandemic. People across the world were anxious and fearful of the future.

As families, communities and cities responded to the crisis, Challenge of Tarrant County set its sights on maximizing federal funding allocated to Texas to address the impact of COVID-19 in our communities. This report covers the 17 projects completed by Challenge with funding from Texas Health and Human Services Commission and work and dedication of our Community Partners. These projects facilitated a localized response to a wide array of negative outcomes resulting from the pandemic, without relying on additional funding moving forward. As self-sustaining services, these projects will serve our community for decades to come.

***Change is empowered by Challenge.***



# 17

Covid Relief projects were completed by Challenge of Tarrant County's five Community Coalitions in cooperation with dozens of community partners and the Texas Health and Humans Services Commission. We extend our deepest gratitude to all who have supported and guided us throughout this endeavor, and with all who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights. Your dedication and commitment to improving our community serve as an inspiration to us all.



# Summary of Projects



Challenge of Tarrant County divided the individual projects into two categories:

## **Environmental/Systemic Change:**

- Playspace (10 projects)
- Mind Your Garden
- Protecting Our Youth Symposium

## **Stress Reduction/Trauma Healing:**

- Read to Play
- Family Wellness
- Wellness in Education through Art
- Parent Academy
- Trauma Informed Yoga and Mindfulness

The overall numbers served by the Covid Community Coalition Projects far exceeded our original goals.

To date, **10,413** adults and **12,806** youth have been served by these projects.



*Challenge of Tarrant County team members (L-R): John Haenes, LMSW, ICPS, COO; Abbie Byrd Hancock, MSW, CPS, Program Director; Joanna Letz, MSW, Family Recovery Court Coordinator; Jennifer Gilley, BS, M.Ed, Executive Director; Katherine Neale-Thomas, LMSW, CPS, Program Director; Michelle Gonzalez, MSW, CPS, Program Director; Melissa G. McCarthy, PhD, LPC-S, CPS, Director of Prevention Programming. **Not Pictured:** Erica Castillo, MSW, CPS, Program Director; Carolyn Hanke, Program Director, Claudia Perkins, BA, CPS, Program Director*



## **Community. Collaboration. Common Threads.**

The "three C's" that make up the Challenge logo represent the positive ripple effect that Challenge strives to achieve in everything it does. The overall goal of this three-year project was to create sustainable, on-going programs for the members of the community to experience the physical, social and mental health benefits of play, food, learning, reading, mindfulness, collaboration, and uplifting social interaction, regardless of economic circumstances or place of residence. We are, after all, connected by our common threads.

***Thank you to everyone who helped empower change through Challenge.***







# Playspace

## Empowering students through play and reading

The goal of the collaboration between Challenge and Kaboom! was to increase playspace equity for schools within Fort Worth ISD. The ISD carefully selected which schools were in greatest need and could benefit most from this type of community support. In all, 10 schools were identified to receive these environmental and systemic change projects.

Community members, students, parents, teachers, administration, school board members, school maintenance and outside community organizations participated in the process. Kaboom! led the design and build process of the playgrounds, notably with active participation from the schools and community. Students as young as four years old shared drawings of their dream playspaces with project organizers. Their ideas were integrated into every state-of-the-art playground design. Some schools involved students in the process by incentivizing their reading progress. Students were asked to read as many books as possible to help build their new playgrounds.

The ten **Play Space Projects** served **2,190** adults and **5,769** children. It is projected that **4,894** future students will benefit each year based on current school enrollment.



Before vs. After



Elementary School Partners	Build Date
W.J. Turner Elementary	6/9/2022
Western Hills Elementary	6/25/2022
S.S. Dillow Elementary	7/21/2022
T.A. Sims Elementary	11/9/2022
Seminary Hills Park Elementary	11/18/2022
Morningside Elementary	12/17/2022
Van Zandt-Guinn Elementary	6/2/2023
WM Green Elementary	11/30/2023
De Zavala Elementary	12/01/2023
Christine C. Moss Elementary	12/08/2023



*"The Playspace has affected our campus in a very positive way by increasing our desire to be outside doing physical activities with the new playspace equipment. Teachers have expressed how students enjoy being around such fun equipment and environment and teachers are using the playspace area for our House meetings interacting with our parents/families during school events."*

— Principal, Fort Worth ISD







# Mind Your Garden Urban Farm

Growing healthy food  
for families



The **Mind Your Garden Urban Farm** is located in the Glencrest neighborhood of southeast Fort Worth, Texas. Glencrest is located within an area considered to be a food desert, where fresh and healthy foods are scarce because one in three residents live more than a half mile from a large grocery store and there is limited public transportation. This neighborhood has only one small and one large grocer at its southern tip within a half mile of its borders.

The goals of this project were to create environmental and systemic change using the land purchased by Mind Your Garden to construct an outdoor kitchen, classroom, restrooms, a natural gas service line, and a rainwater harvesting system. This partnership focused on increasing access to healthy foods, teaching healthy food preparation, increasing understanding of growing food through demonstration gardens, and building community.



Steven and Ursula Nunez, the founders of the Mind Your Garden Urban Farm, provided invaluable resources, instruction, useful information, and their passion to educate neighborhood residents on how to take advantage of an urban garden. The University of Texas at Arlington and Texas Christian University also collaborated on the project by providing volunteers and expertise.



The **Mind Your Garden** project served **1,161** adults and their families through education and encouragement of home-grown nutrition in Fort Worth's southeast neighborhoods.

*"Mind Your Garden Urban Farm's mission is to help improve the health of the community through three pillars of access, education, and community. We address this challenge holistically by growing nutritious food (access), connecting people to their food systems while encouraging healthy eating habits (education), and fostering a community centered on wellness (community building)."*

— Rick Mauch, Star-Telegram

Mind Your  
**Garden**  
URBAN FARM



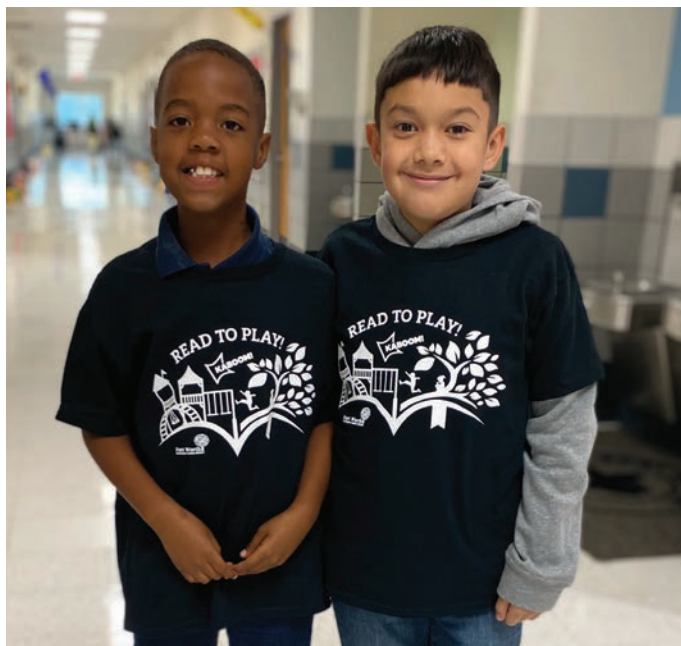


**Empowering the joy of reading.**



# Read to Play

## Helping students discover the power of reading



In a collaborative effort between Fort Worth ISD and Challenge of Tarrant County, the **Read to Play** Project provided 1,050 books to seven Title One elementary schools in the district. School officials had reported that as children began to return to the classroom, hundreds of library books, which had been checked out before the pandemic, had not been returned.

The goals for this project were to replace lost books and to provide incentives for students in the Read to Play program. This effort was in addition to initiatives by Fort Worth ISD and the City of Fort Worth to end childhood illiteracy. The books were selected by the FWISD librarians and focused on emotional health and character development skills to help students understand their thoughts and emotions, cope effectively with stress, persevere through challenges, increase their empathy for others, and develop skills to build new relationships with their peers.



In collaboration with Fort Worth ISD and community partners, the seven schools recorded **hundreds of hours** of reading by the students.

The **Read to Play Project** served **487** adults and **4,707** students. The **1,050** books reshelfed in school libraries will provide years of reading enjoyment and enrichment.



*When T.A. Sims Elementary students went on a field trip to the Fort Worth Zoo, all were wearing their Read to Play T-shirts. Students were excited about reading and were overheard talking about the books they had read with each other. Two of the schools in this program were in the Top Six of "Readers Become Leaders" and were recognized at an event in the community.*





**Empowering the positivity of play.**





# Family Wellness

## Connecting families with their school community

As an extension of the Playspace Project, the goal of the **Family Wellness Project** was to provide additional stress-reduction activities for students and their families. Collaborative planning for these events (schools, parents, students, community leaders and partners) fostered feelings of unity, camaraderie, a sense of common goals and general welfare for the neighborhood.

Challenge provided soccer balls and basketballs branded with school mascots to each enrolled student family to encourage both wider participation and stress reduction at home. Additional events such as health fairs, carnivals, literacy nights, and community pep rallies were organized to attract families back to their schools after hours, reminding them that their school is also a central gathering place.

Through a community partnership with **Made Greene**, playscapes were enhanced with the creation of vegetable, flower and sensory gardens. These "living classrooms" are used year-round to teach students how to grow, harvest and prepare their own vegetables and flowers.

Another Family Wellness project was the commission of hand-painted murals. Community partners came together with each school to paint murals enhance aesthetic appeal, promote school identity and pride, encourage creativity and expression, create learning opportunities, improve mental well-being, and strengthen community bonds.

The **Family Wellness Project** served **1,761** adults and **2,318** children in communities disproportionately impacted by Covid. **4,894** students will benefit in the years to come based on current enrollment figures.



*"Our Pre-Kindergarten classes planted potatoes in February, and the students were very excited to see them sprouted in May. At the end of the school year, the students had a potato celebration in which they made different things using potatoes. The garden area has been a great asset to the campus. It is a great resource that aligns with our state curriculum." — FWISD Elementary School Principal*





**Empowering wellness through art.**





# Wellness in Education

## Supporting teachers through art and community



As educators returned following the pandemic, Challenge of Tarrant County hosted weekly social gatherings to provide stress reduction and burn-out prevention. Through the power of communal art, teachers were encouraged to process their emotions, build resilience tactics, develop coping skills, improve communication and relationships with peers, and re-establish a healthy work-life balance.

As Challenge assessed the needs of educators created by the extra work to provide both online and in-person instruction, it became clear that teachers were under extreme pressure and were experiencing mental health concerns and burnout.

**Healing Through Art**, with art therapists from The Art Station, used artistic images and the creative process to help teachers and staff understand and communicate their thoughts, feelings, relationships, interests, concerns, and conflicts. Through creating and talking about art in a collaborative setting, teachers and colleagues built confidence, self-esteem, self-awareness, problem solving skills, expression of feelings, reduction of stress, anxiety, coping with traumatic experiences, and fostering creativity and unity among peers.

Through Wellness in Education through Art, Challenge of Tarrant County was able to serve **1,024** teachers and staff from Title I Elementary schools in FWISD and neighboring districts at the Saturday Open Studios.



*"It's no secret that teaching is a stressful and demanding profession. Having a time to decompress and learn mindfulness techniques was so helpful this school year. Being able to do that while making art made the process fun and less intimidating. Connecting with colleagues was the cherry on top! Thank you, Cally, and everyone at The Art Station for supporting teachers at Bruce Shulkey!" - Sara Montanez*







**Empowering deeper connections to education.**





# Parent Academy

Reconnecting families  
back to their schools



The uncertainties of the pandemic often made it difficult for parents and their children to re-engage with their schools. Challenge of Tarrant County worked directly with Fort Worth ISD's Parent Partnerships program to provide both in-person and online courses with a significant focus on behavioral health. Parents and caregivers felt better equipped to meet their child's mental health needs at home, to advocate for their child's needs at school and to be more familiar with services provided by FWISD that could increase their child's success.

Bryan Johnson, the Parent Partnership Coordinator for Fort Worth ISD, explained, "The classes were very productive and opened the eyes of so many parents. This was highly evident when parents began contacting campus leaders regarding the information obtained during the classes." Two courses facilitated by ISD family engagement specialists were titled **"Why Attendance Matters"** and **"How to Conduct Effective Parent Conferences."** Bryan wrote, "These courses were strategically selected due to attendance being a clear indicator for student success, and parent conferences being a great opportunity to develop a child's academic and social-emotional plan."



The four main course titles were:

- Why Attendance Matters
- Conducting Effective Parent Conferences
- Vocational Opportunities through FWISD's Career & Technical Education (CTE) center
- Mental Health Matters



The **Parent Academy** project served **2,485** adults with innovative re-engagement classes that will help them and their students take full advantage of their educational opportunities.

*"The highlight of this program was definitely the staff involved. Challenge of Tarrant County and Parent Partnership staff worked hard to stay on the same page and addressed any concerns with professionalism and in a solution-oriented manner. This approach allowed for creativity, hard work, and patience to be the focus." — Bryan Johnson, Coordinator, FWISD Parent Partnerships*





# Trauma Informed Yoga and Mindfulness

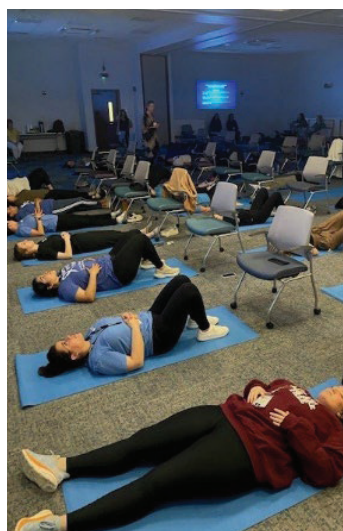
An evergreen, online resource for our community



Yoga and mindfulness have the power to liberate us as individuals, while also connecting us in the power of a community. In addition to the physical benefits of yoga, this ancient practice of movement, focus and intention has been proven to reduce stress, and ease symptoms of anxiety and depression. In collaboration with The Daily Well, Challenge of Tarrant County provided trauma-informed yoga and mindfulness training to counselors, intervention specialists, nurses, teachers, police officers, first responders and social service agency staff. Additionally, they produced a free, online yoga series that is available through The Daily Well's website. This self-sustaining project is being used by school districts, behavioral health organizations, hospital systems and the U.S. military as a mental health tool to address stress and trauma.



The goals of the Trauma-Informed Yoga and Mindfulness project were to reduce job related traumatic stress and provide an outlet for trauma healing in population groups disproportionately impacted by Covid. We have learned from studies that at least 70% of all Americans experienced at least one traumatic event and 100% were impacted in some way by the pandemic. We introduced on-demand, trauma-informed classes to many of our community partners by providing in-person yoga sessions and eight weeks of in-person certified mindfulness classes.



Four certified instructors provided their time, expertise and energy to the project, including The Daily Well's Lauren Wessinger, along with Fort Worth's Karmen Morales, Mahogany Wilson and Austin's Shawn Kent.



**Trauma Informed Yoga** has served — to date — **1,069** adults. Future participants, based on current online data, could exceed **30,000**.

*"I had never done yoga before, and honestly, I wasn't convinced that it would help me. However, after only one session, I realized that the movement and mindfulness had a huge impact on how I felt. I felt lighter, more intentional, and better able to handle whatever the day was going to throw my way."*  
— First responder, Arlington, Texas

The Daily Well





# Protecting Our Youth Symposium

## The response to the fentanyl crisis in our schools

**ONE PILL CAN KILL**

**SEPT. 2021**  
2 of 5  
laced with fentanyl

**NOV. 2022**  
6 of 10  
laced with fentanyl

**SEPT. 2023**  
7 of 10  
laced with fentanyl

*If a packet of sugar contained fentanyl (instead of sugar), there would be enough to kill over 500 people.*

**DEA Fentanyl Seizures**  
In 2023, the DEA seized more than 79.5 million fentanyl-laced fake pills and nearly 12,000 pounds of fentanyl powder. This amount is equivalent to more than 376.7 million lethal doses of fentanyl. So far in 2024, fentanyl seizures represent over 90.9 million deadly doses with 16,900,000 fentanyl-laced fake pills and 1,767 pounds of fentanyl powder.

**Waves of the Opioid Epidemic**

- 2000s:** 82 opioids, including natural, semi-synthetic and methadone, are illegally obtained
- 2010:** Heroin overtakes the opioid crisis
- 2013:** Synthetic opioids, including fentanyl, are being illicitly manufactured
- 2018:** Fentanyl-laced cocaine and meth become the drugs of choice

On April 18, 2024, professionals in education, counseling and intervention attended the **Protecting our Youth Symposium** on the Lena Pope campus in Fort Worth. This one-day event brought together leaders from education, public health, law enforcement and community organizations to take on one of the most destructive drug trends in America. Speakers included:

**Kristi Brooks**, Regional SAMHSA Director — *Introduction*

**Jamie Vasquez**, DEA's Assistant Laboratory Director  
*"A DEA Laboratory Perspective."*

**Eduardo Chavez**, DEA Special Agent in Charge  
*"The new 'F' word - Fentanyl."*

**Dr. Artee Gandhi**, Medical Director Pain Management, Chair Opioid Stewardship Program, Cook Children's Medical Center  
*"The Fentanyl Epidemic: What Caregivers and Youth Should Know."*

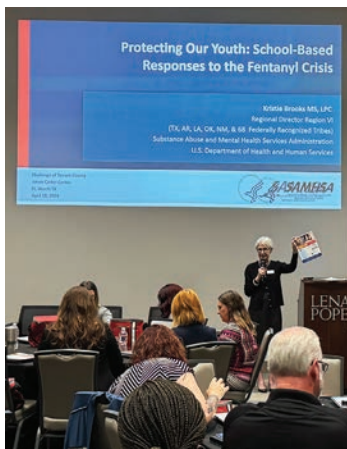
**Becky Tinney**, Director of Special Projects at Recovery Resource Council  
*"From Awareness to Action."*

**Dr. Nici Richardson-McFarland**, owner of Crown of Hope Counseling  
*"Grief and Loss in the Fentanyl Epidemic."*

**Tiffany Turner**, LPC-S, **Angela Lawrence**, Ph.D., LMSW, **Kevin McKinney**, MA, LCDC, **Michelle Broadwater**, LMSW  
*"Panel: School-Based Responses to Fentanyl Overdoses."*

In 2023, the overdose death rate in America from fentanyl topped 112,000 in a 12-month period for the first time, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Dec 28, 2023), with young people and people of color among the hardest hit. Drug policy experts say the magnitude of this calamity now eclipses every previous drug epidemic, from crack cocaine in the 1980s to the prescription opioid crisis of the 2000s.

The **Protecting Our Youth Symposium** provided **248** professionals with information and resources to take back to their schools and communities with the goal of impacting youth and families affected by the fentanyl epidemic and preventing future devastation. Those in attendance represented **46 school districts** across North Texas.



*"This was a great workshop with information I can take back to my campus." — "What an amazing day. Great presenters. Great information received. Challenge did an amazing job putting this together. Thank you!" — "Excellent presentations, valuable information. Each presenter held my attention for the full duration of their talk." — "Very informative. Very comprehensive and detailed. Lots of resources on one thumb drive."*

**We are especially grateful to our community partners, without whom we could not have accomplished these amazing and impactful projects.**

## COVID Community Project Partners



Mind Your



136 AW CSS - Air Force  
73rd Aerial Port Support - USAF Reserve  
Academy 4  
Air Force  
Americorp (Reading Partners)  
Atmos Energy  
Bank of America  
Bill R. Johnson CTE center  
Boy Scouts of America  
Boys and Girls Club Of Greater Tarrant County  
Boys and Girls Club Martin Branch  
C2 Global Professional Services  
C3 - Fort Worth Church  
Change Healthcare  
Child Care Associates  
CIS Lake Worth High School  
City of Fort Worth  
Cross Timbers Master Naturalist  
CTE Practicum Health science  
Destiny Church  
East Saint Paul Baptist church  
Echo Heights Neighborhood Association  
Equitable Advisors  
Exito Juntos - Tarrant County College  
Fidelity Cares/FIDELITY INVESTMENTS

Fort Worth ISD  
Fort Worth Housing Solutions  
Girls Inc. of Tarrant County  
Grace Temple Seventh Day Adventist Church  
Greater Fort Worth Area Negro Business  
and Professional Women's Club  
Chris Reeves  
Herring Bank  
Integrity Marketing  
Jetta Operating Company  
John Peter Smith Hospital Emergency Services  
JR Rangers Construction  
Junior Achievement of the Chisholm Trail  
Junior Enlisted Association (U.S. Navy)  
Junior League Fort Worth  
Lockheed Martin  
McMillan United Methodist Church  
Mineral Grove Real Estate  
Morningside Elementary School  
National Honor Society  
Navy (NAS JRB Fort Worth)  
North Crowley high school  
North Texas Ford  
NRC Fort Worth Military  
Omega Psi Phi Epsilon Alpha Chapter

Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.  
Parent Shield Fort Worth  
Poly Cheer Team/ Coach Gilbertson  
Poly Soccer Team/ Coach Olmos  
Randstad  
Reading Partners  
Reset IOP  
Ridglea Christian Church  
Sis To Sis  
Special Education Dept., FWISD  
Tarrant County College, Exito Juntos  
Tarrant County Community College  
TC Master Gardeners  
Team Nettles  
Texas Air National Guard  
Texas Christian University  
The Hills Church  
The KEY Church  
Truevine Missionary Baptist Church  
U.S. Navy  
University Baptist Church, Fort Worth  
University of Texas, Arlington  
UNT Health Science Center  
Western Hills High School Staff  
Witherite Law Group

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