

LISC-BSC Partner Meeting Themes Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ)

Background

Wilder Research was hired by LISC to evaluate the overall Building Sustainable Communities program. In order to develop an evaluation plan that accurately reflects the context, needs, and goals of the different partner organizations funded through this program, Wilder Research met individually with each lead agency to learn more about their organization's work, evaluation goals, and community context.

This is a summary of the main themes from three meetings held by Wilder Research staff with NAZ and its partners. The first meeting was on January 28, 2014, with David Peebles. Two final focus groups were held on October 27, 2014 with seven members of the Parent Advisory Committee, and on November 4, 2014 with 6 representatives of organizational partners in the Housing Action Team.

This summary provides an overview of the discussions and a supplement to the full meeting notes (attached). It is also intended to serve as a feedback loop between Wilder Research and the partner organizations, ensuring that we accurately captured and interpreted the things said during our meeting. Once agreed to, it will also help to inform LISC staff.

Initial meeting

Activities and strategies

NAZ is a high-touch organization that seeks to improve the lives of individuals on the Northside through a focus on developing a culture of achievement among residents. While the strategy of NAZ is to have other community organizations and schools provide most of the actual services, NAZ works with community members to better engage and navigate those institutions and systems with the goal of better outcomes and increased self-sufficiency. NAZ is thus not providing social services, but they coordinate the work of service providers and lead the work to engage families in the Zone.

Engagement is at the heart of NAZ's work. It is led by "Connectors," who are themselves residents, and who provide persistent and consistent partnership with the families who are enrolled in NAZ. The Connectors help families identify their own goals, focused on the educational success of their children, and help provide the "push" to residents to help them through challenges and barriers in the system. As families identify challenges, Connectors help refer them to service providers who can help, and help coordinate teams of staff from all organizations supporting the child or family, to work together in their support.

Partner organizations also play a significant role. In addition to providing services to families who are referred from NAZ, they may also be proactive in referring people to NAZ to become enrolled. They have also begun to be proactive in serving families, rather than waiting until they see a problem.

Learnings to date

The LISC BSC work allows NAZ staff to connect to others in the region who are doing similar work, and provide and receive mutual support. David also reports that he is beginning to see some silos between organizations breaking down.

Interest in the evaluation

David does not have any significant worries or concerns about the evaluation. He feels it can help to show LISC the immediate outcomes of the work (specifically their work on out of school time, which LISC helps to fund). It can also document how NAZ's work aligns with the BSC vision, and especially its orientation toward long-term outcomes. It can also be a way of showing accountability, both to funders and to the community itself.

Final focus groups

Strategies for engagement

When asked what NAZ first did to get them involved, community participants described NAZ staff knocking on their door to discuss their child's education and college, as well as being invited by family or friends. One participant described being referred to NAZ by their child's daycare teacher. Community participants at the focus group talked very positively about the impact that NAZ has had in their lives, reporting that it has given them hope for their children's futures, helped increase their patience and be a better parent overall, helped guide the youth and give parents the tools to help their children succeed, and provided parents with support and "someone to fall back on" for help and guidance.

When asked what kinds of things NAZ works on in their community, community members listed a wide variety of activities, including career placement/training, childcare, housing, mental health and social support networks, parenting classes, financial stability, and school support for youths. These community participants described having some level of involvement in deciding what activities or topics to focus NAZ's work on through the parent advisory group, which provides a space for parents to give input and be aware of what's going on and what opportunities are available for them and their children. They also described how NAZ parents work with NAZ Connectors to set each child's goals and get help connecting with the necessary resources to help them achieve their goals. In the partner organization focus group, housing team representatives mentioned that it sometimes is a challenge to provide enough avenues to get feedback from community members. However, these organizational representatives tended to describe NAZ and its partners as being proactively responsive to the needs, concerns, and priorities of parents in order to adjust to the immediate need as well as shape their future work.

I would say a lot of our conversations end up around stuff we're hearing our families saying. [With] our leadership or action teams or meetings, a lot of times discussions are about something a family has said or observations of difficulties

they're facing – how do we adjust what we're doing to be more accommodating to what a family needs rather than what the program is stated to be. I would say families have a huge influence on the work we do. Certain cases come up on a regular basis where they call Michelle or Michelle's calling me– it's all how do we accommodate that and support needs and get our families to where they want to go. I'd say that's a huge part of conversations.

Relationship building

Asked about ways that NAZ has built trust with the community, parent participants cited NAZ's community presence (through outreach, community events, etc.), Connectors' presence and supportive role with the schools (such as by going to meetings with parents at the schools), as well as the support, guidance, and resources provided to families by the Navigators. With that trust, NAZ is not only able to build relationships with community members that are critical for their work, but also to help community members connect and build relationships with one another. This was frequently described as occurring through parenting classes, family nights, and the like. Community participants described how these connections created networks of support where they could speak about issues in their neighborhoods and work to address them together. They also mentioned how NAZ's work has made them feel more connected with the schools, as well as with a variety of other organizations in the area.

Impacts

Because of these connections, community members described being more connected to opportunities in their community, and being more holistically supported (e.g., with employment/ financial support, parenting support, youth education support, community building, etc.). More people are speaking out about and taking action on other issues in the community—in other words, people feel more empowered. These positive outcomes are in addition to youth being better students, better behaved, and more eager to learn, and there are now more avenues for youth to succeed in the community because of NAZ's work.

The importance of these connections and relationships was also supported by the housing partners. The organizational representatives reported having relationships with each other before NAZ, but said that they were able to augment these connections through NAZ's initiatives and network. Partner organization representatives said that their relationship with NAZ has helped them to learn more about what is going on in the community, has helped them have an increased awareness of needs in the community, and has helped support organizations as they work together to identify needs and the available resources to improve their solutions to the problems.

In addition to NAZ's partnerships helping facilitate cross-organizational work, it has also influenced how partner organizations listen to and work with the community. The presence of NAZ Navigators has helped them respond to the community in a more effective way, and helped them meet their own client needs through referrals to NAZ. The partnership has helped them procure funding, and helped them collaborate more effectively. In fact, when asked if partners have had much say in shaping the housing work of NAZ, one organizational representative said, "We had as much input as we could have possibly wanted."

Partner organization representatives believe that the housing-related work that their organizations do has been strengthened by their partnership with NAZ, citing how they are able to tap into the work of partner organizations and connect families to services and other supports, which makes their housing work more effective by seeing and supporting it more holistically. This also helps to keep families connected and less transient by getting them the supports they need where they are, the strengthened connections between NAZ, the families, and other organizations.

Finally, some organizational representatives believe that NAZ families' housing stability is improved by the housing organizations' relationships with NAZ and its other partner organizations, thus improving the community stability, overall, and the outcomes for children and families involved with it. Within this network of partners, organizational representatives described how they have greater peer support, learning from one another, seeing new ways of doing things, and drawing on everyone's different expertise, creating reciprocal relationships that mutually improve one another's work in the community. Partner organization representatives also noted how residents and organizations on the Northside are now more connected to each other and have built more trust with each other and with the community as a result.

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For more information

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