

The state of NAZ partnerships at the starting point

Results from two baseline surveys of Northside Achievement Zone partner organizations

Background

The Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) began in 2008 as a collaboration of community organizations. Its mission is to build a culture of achievement in a geographic Zone in North Minneapolis to assure all youth graduate from high school college-ready. In 2009, NAZ contracted with Wilder Research to independently evaluate its work. This report summarizes findings from two surveys that document starting points for the functioning of the overall collaboration, its action teams, and the organizations in the NAZ Connect pilot.

Collaboration Progress Check-in Survey

This survey was completed in January 2010 by members of the NAZ Steering Committee and three Coordination Teams. It addresses the health of the collaboration that coordinates the overall structure and service networks of NAZ, and what factors assist and challenge its effectiveness. At the time of the survey, NAZ was in an intense period of growth and change. The findings reflect conditions at that single point in time, and should not be interpreted as characteristic of NAZ's entire history.

Functioning of NAZ as a whole

On each of the seven NAZ guiding principles, at least two-thirds of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that NAZ's operations are consistent with its principles. The main reasons given for organizations to participate in NAZ included improving services and outcomes for clients, and building better partnerships with other organizations. A few also hoped that funding available through NAZ would help them strengthen or expand their programs.

Functioning of working groups

On all items, the majority of respondents reported that individual working groups were also operating in accordance with NAZ guiding principles.

Factors that affect implementation

Common challenges to the implementation of working group ideas included the time commitment needed to

participate, and a shortage of funding to support programs. Some also cited factors relating to the complexity of the collaboration itself. The factors most cited as helping to implement work group ideas were communication, collaboration, and information sharing within the collaborative. A variety of other factors were mentioned, but none by a significant number of respondents.

When asked what they felt was going well within the working group, respondents most often mentioned good communication and respect for others and for differing opinions. Other common themes included workgroup members' commitment to and support for the project, and the perception that the initiative and/or workgroup was making progress.

Collaboration Experience Questionnaire

Part of the survey included items that have been shown to be related to effective collaboration. These are grouped in six domains. The strongest rating was for an *important and realistic purpose*, followed closely by *effective communications*. The lowest ratings were in the domain of *resources*, where human resources were rated highly, but few felt that their workgroup was adequately funded to accomplish its objectives.

Opportunity Network Survey

This survey assessed characteristics of organizations participating in the NAZ Connect pilot, their connections with children and families in the Zone, their alignment with NAZ goals and with each other for delivering effective services, and what strengths or capacities might need to be built or supported. A representative from every agency enrolled in NAZ Connect was asked to complete the survey. It was completed in February and March of 2010.

Organization characteristics, staff, and budget

The pilot organizations answering the survey varied in size, type, clientele, and the extent to which their services focus on the geographic area of the Zone. Annual budgets range from less than \$1,000 to more than \$15 million per year. For most, at baseline, NAZ was a small part of their overall operations.

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Alignment of pilot organizations with NAZ purposes

Eighty-eight percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their services help youth in the Zone become college ready. Sixty-six percent agreed or strongly agreed that NAZ provides support and infrastructure to help their organization build new relationships with other organizations. In this baseline measure, only 37 percent believed that organizations in the Zone were currently working well together to serve children and families.

Network Analysis

Network analysis of survey results shows that groups of similar organizations appeared to be working well together to meet NAZ goals, although there were few links between groupings. Few organization representatives stated that they were pursuing joint funding for NAZ activities. Early childhood related organizations and a grouping of out of school time programs appeared to coordinate efforts to combine resources and knowledge.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, participants both in the working groups and in NAZ Connect expressed confidence in NAZ and its potential to create positive changes for their clients and the community at large. Survey results show the following opportunities to strengthen the work of NAZ as it moves forward:

Support two-way communication. Help representatives in working groups identify ways to gather input from multiple levels of their home organizations to feed input into the planning process.

Help working groups use research in planning.

Support working groups' knowledge and use of relevant research for planning.

Facilitate team-building to promote open communication, trust, and clarity about roles.

Some aspects of team-building take time to develop, and others were low due to the intense growth and change in NAZ at the time of the baseline surveys. Support for team-building and for work group leadership may be helpful.

Address the scarcity of resources. The main concern of working group members was a scarcity of time and funding to do their work. NAZ should seek further information about these concerns and work with committee members to ensure they have the necessary resources .

Address service fragmentation. This is one of the major challenges NAZ has pledged to address, and it is clearly visible in the responses to the baseline surveys. As NAZ moves forward in implementation, it will be important to monitor results of follow-up surveys to measure progress.

Encourage joint needs assessment. Most NAZ pilot organizations did not work with each other to assess the needs of community residents. This is one important step in the improved coordination of services. NAZ leadership should ensure that working groups help to promote this activity as the pilot develops.

Seek ways to strengthen connections among organizations within clusters. Some clusters show strong networks among organizations, while in others some organizations report no links to their peers. NAZ should help build relationships where they are weak.

Promote connections among clusters to strengthen the pipeline. Some clusters prepare children for later success (for instance, early childhood organizations prepare children for success in K-12 education). At baseline, early childhood organizations had few connections with other clusters, including K-12. As the NAZ pipeline is built, its success will depend on developing strong connections through which organizations earlier in the chain can receive feedback about the success of their students in the next links along.

Next steps

In planning for the 2011 follow-up surveys, it will be important to address both confidentiality and timing. Baseline surveys were confidential, which helped to ensure participation and frank feedback. However, it also prevents targeting assistance to specific points where it may do the most to help. The timing of follow-up surveys need not match the months in which they were given in 2010, but should be determined based on when the results will be most representative and when the findings are most needed to help shape ongoing planning.

For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Northside Achievement Zone: Results from two partner surveys*. For more information about this report, contact Ellen Shelton at Wilder Research, 651-280-2689. Authors: Natalie Alizaga, Ellen Shelton
December 2010

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