

## **Tri-Project Initiative Evaluation Results**

### **Executive Summary**

The Tri-Project Initiative is a 3-year effort of the Saint Paul Children's Collaborative to address disparities in child safety and academic success by improving access to services for African American youth in three targeted Saint Paul neighborhoods: North End, Payne-Phalen, and Summit-University.

Each of the three projects (Building Future Leaders, East Side Heritage, and Project Voice) is comprised of an array of community-based organizations and child-serving systems (e.g., Saint Paul Public Schools, Ramsey County Human Services) intended to work in partnership to meet the needs of African American youth in the community.

Although each of the projects is unique in terms of the array of services provided and project infrastructure, all projects emphasize helping African American youth and families build connections to their community and integrate the use of cultural approaches to engage youth and families and help them build a stronger sense of cultural self-identity. As a result of the services and resources they receive, youth and parents are expected to have increased self-esteem and self-efficacy, greater involvement in the child's school, a greater sense of cultural self-identity, and a larger sense of empowerment. Project staff believe these changes in attitudes, beliefs, and values will ultimately lead to improved school behavior, greater academic achievement, and reductions in child protection involvement and out-of-home placements.

#### ***Evaluation approaches***

A multi-method evaluation approach was developed that incorporates demographic and service utilization data gathered by program staff, focus groups with youth and parent participants, key informant interviews with project staff and stakeholders, and analysis of reading assessment data for youth who participated

in Sankofa (a tutoring program common across the three projects). Changes in long-term outcomes were assessed for a smaller subset of youth participants whose parents consented to the release of data from Ramsey County Human Services and the Saint Paul Public School (SPPS) district.

#### ***Project descriptions***

##### **Building Future Leaders**

Building Future Leaders was a partnership between 3 key community-based partners, Ramsey County Human Services, and Saint Paul Public Schools. The project served the North End neighborhood, which offers few other community-based resources for residents in the area. Of the three projects funded, Building Future Leaders (BFL) was most connected to SPPS. However, limited time among SPPS staff working on the project and frequent turnover in District staff leading the initiative were two key project challenges. Although efforts were made in 2009 to move to a community-based outreach model, the project never built the infrastructure necessary to support this work and lost Collaborative funding in August 2010.

##### **East Side Heritage**

The project with the strongest connection to the community is likely the East Side Heritage Project, located in the Payne-Phalen neighborhood of Saint Paul. Many of the project staff, including the program coordinator, youth worker, and family support worker, have offices in the Merrick Community Center. Four key community-based partners are involved as partners in the project. While the project also works with schools and makes referrals to county agencies, these partners are not as closely tied to the project. A unique aspect of the program is their emphasis on direct community outreach. Instead of relying on referrals to come through partner organizations, the family support worker spends time meeting families in the

community through door-to-door outreach and follow-up calls with parents.

### **Project Voice**

Project Voice is housed at the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center and serves residents of the Summit-University and Thomas-Dale neighborhoods of Saint Paul. A variety of services are available to youth and families through the Hub, the physical location of the project office, including assistance from Ramsey County case managers, public health workers, and financial workers. The project uses a more formal, centralized intake process to identify the needs of youth and families referred to the project from schools and partner organizations. Referrals across the six partner agencies involved with the project are facilitated by the project coordinator.

### *Approach to services*

Each of the projects funded by the Saint Paul Children's Collaborative was charged with developing a way to provide coordinated services and supports to African-American youth from three targeted neighborhoods that would ultimately lead to improved academic achievement of youth, stability and safety within the home, and coordination across systems.

While each project is unique in terms of its location, partners, and service delivery approach, the three projects funded through the Tri-Project Initiative share a number of common service components and a commitment in working to strengthen the African-American community. The Network for the Development of Children of African Descent (NdCAD) is a common partner to all projects, providing tutoring for youth (Sankofa) and parent training workshops (Parent Power). There are also commonalities in the types of services available through each of the programs. Mentoring is a common service component across the three projects, but is provided by different programs. Each project also has a partner focused on helping youth and families learn about their African ancestry and culture.

The service delivery approach taken by the three projects is built on a philosophy to expand and enhance the resources available to youth and families within the community, while engaging and empowering families to utilize these services and supports. The three projects also share a philosophy that, by focusing on culture, youth and families will have greater a greater sense of cultural self-identity, as well as improved self-confidence and self-efficacy. In a review of the current literature, while culturally-specific services were shown to support healthy identity development and more enduring behavior changes, there was little information available describing how these factors then lead to improved academic success. There is a need for additional exploration of these linkages and reporting of lessons learned through culturally-specific initiatives in peer-reviewed literature sources.

### *Participant characteristics*

Based on information gathered through the Access database used by each project, a total of 753 youth were served by the three projects through June 30, 2010. This included 421 East Side Heritage participants, 263 Project Voice participants, and 69 Building Future Leaders participants. It should be noted that some participants who were enrolled in 2008, prior to the development of the databases, may not be reflected in these totals.

**All three projects served youth populations that included, but were not limited to, the priority demographic characteristics identified by the Collaborative.** The three projects were funded to provide services to African-American boys in Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> Grade who live in one of the three targeted St. Paul neighborhoods (Payne-Phalen, North End, Thomas-Dale/Summit-University). Most of the youth served were African American (96%), and two-thirds were boys (69%). Although most youth served (80%) were between the ages of 6 and 14, the projects also served youth who had not entered school, as well as youth through age 18. Most of the youth served by the projects (72%) attended school in the Saint Paul Public School district. Many of the youth lived in low-income housing with a single caregiver

and, among those with housing data available, approximately two in five families had moved within the past 12 months.

**A number of youth live and attend schools outside the neighborhoods targeted by each project.** Among youth with household addresses available, 61 percent of East Side Heritage and 58 percent of Building Future Leaders participants lived within the neighborhood targeted by the project. Fewer Project Voice participants (31%) lived within the Summit-University or Thomas-Dale neighborhood. Combined, the projects served youth who attended 86 different schools.

**Economic instability, limited transportation options, and social isolation were challenges faced by youth and families.** Project staff observed many participants experiencing difficulty obtaining employment and many families experiencing instable housing and periodic homelessness. They noted caregivers were often unaware of community events and resources, and lacked connections to both formal and informal sources of support.

### *Service utilization*

**The total hours of service youth received from each project varied considerably, ranging from 1 to over 800 hours.** About one-third of the youth enrolled in East Side Heritage (36%) and half of the youth enrolled in Project Voice (50%) received no more than 10 hours of services through June 2010. The average number of hours received per child was similar for youth enrolled in East Side Heritage (mean=59 hours) and Project Voice (mean=63 hours).

**Few of the youth received services from three or more partners within each project.** Across all the projects, most of the youth were served by one or two partners, rather than receiving a full range of services. Using the data available, it is not clear how well the utilization of services aligns with the actual needs of youth and families. Additional evaluation activities could be used in the future to determine whether most participating youth are typically interested in one type of support, or whether there are

barriers (i.e., transportation, limited program capacity, limited communication/ coordination between partners) that impede service coordination.

### *Participant outcomes*

**Very few of the youth were formally discharged from any of the projects.** Among the 41 youth discharged from Project Voice and Building Future Leaders, their project involvement ended due to successful completion of the program (39%), the child moving out of the area (32%), a family crisis (2%), or other unknown/ undefined reasons (27%). East Side Heritage did not formally discharge any youth from the project. The low number of youth discharged during the first two years of the project may indicate the need for greater administrative support to update the database, or a need for each project to establish a definition for discharge that can be used consistently.

### **Perceptions of staff, participants**

**Project staff and stakeholders reported observing positive changes among youth and parents.** Across all three projects, program staff who participated in the key informant interviews observed youth making gains in their reading levels, demonstrating better classroom behavior, developing new hobbies/interests, and improving peer skills. Project staff also noted a number of positive changes they had noticed among parents, including increased self-confidence, involvement/engagement in their child's school, and self-efficacy and engagement in accessing community resources.

**Parents who participated in the focus groups had overwhelmingly positive things to say about each project.** While it is important to note that the participants of the focus groups are likely to be parents who were among the most involved, and likely the most satisfied with their involvement, the parent comments give a voice to the experiences of participating youth and families. Their comments describe how their involvement with each project leads to the individual changes that, in the Tri-Project logic model, ultimately lead to greater academic success among youth and improved safety. A

number of themes emerged in the focus groups conducted with participants of each project:

- The emphasis placed on culture was important to parents and youth. Participants appreciated developing greater knowledge about their culture and felt it was important for youth to have adult African American role models.
- Participants became more engaged in the community and in the child's school. Parents described that gaining feelings of greater empowerment, self-efficacy, and self-confidence made them want to become increasingly involved in their child's education and in the community.
- Parents felt supported by the community and project staff. Parents frequently noted the projects helped them connect to different community agencies and learn how to access resources and request support.
- Improvements in youth reading skills were noted by parents and youth. Many of the focus group participants were pleased with the experience their child had through Sankofa, a culturally-specific tutoring program, and felt the program led to improved self-esteem, reading skills, and grades.

### **Reading assessment results**

A total of 195 youth participated in the Sankofa program, including 81 youth from East Side Heritage, 64 from Project Voice, and 50 from Building Future Leaders.

**Across most grade levels, more than half of the youth were reading below grade level when they began the Sankofa program.** This was true even among early readers; half of all Kindergarten students and nearly three-quarters of all 1<sup>st</sup> Grade students were reading below grade level when the program began.

**The number of youth reading above expected grade level increased at discharge and improvements in ready levels were made by students in most grade levels.** A total of 141 youth completed the Sankofa program and final reading assessment. The total number of youth who read above the expected reading level increased from

53 at intake to 62 at discharge. Overall, one-quarter of the youth who participated in Sankofa and were reading below or at their grade-appropriate reading level improved their skills to read at or above reading level at discharge. Although one-third of the participants (36%) continued to read at a level below that for their grade at discharge, most gained new reading skills as demonstrated by higher scores on the reading assessment scores.

### ***Evaluation participants***

A total of 42 Project Voice and 50 East Side Heritage participants were included into the evaluation. The demographic characteristics of this subset of youth were comparable to those of the total population of youth served. As observed with the full group of youth participants, the total number of service hours received by children enrolled in the evaluation varied considerably, with some youth receiving less than 10 hours while others received over 700 hours of service. Approximately one-third of the youth enrolled in the evaluation received services from three or more project partners.

### **Ramsey County Human Services data**

Data from the Ramsey County Human Services Department were analyzed to determine how many youth entered the child protection system or were placed out of the home after receiving project services.

**New child protection cases were opened for 10 youth, with only one of these children having been involved with the child protection system in the past.** One-third of the youth who were enrolled in the evaluation were involved with the child protection system prior to intake. As of June 1, 2010, child protection cases were open for only 7 youth (Figure 1).

**As of June 1, 2010, none of the youth were residing in an out-of-home placement setting.** A total of nine youth had a history of at least one out of the home placement prior to their involvement with the project. Only two children were placed out of the home for brief stays (1 day and 3 days) after receiving services (Figure 1).

## 1. Changes in child protection involvement, out of home placements

	East Side Heritage (N=45)		Project Voice (N=40)	
	N	%	N	%
<b>Child protection status</b>				
Open child protection case prior to intake	16	36%	13	33%
Open child protection case at intake	3	7%	3	8%
Currently involved with child protection (June 1, 2010)	3	7%	4	10%
<b>Out of home placement status</b>				
Out of home placement prior to intake	4	9%	5	13%
Out of home placement at intake	0	0%	3	8%
Out of home placement after 6 months of services (through June 1, 2010)	1 <sup>c</sup>	2%	0	0%

### Saint Paul Public Schools data

District data were obtained to assess potential changes in attendance, suspensions, and MCA-II test scores after project involvement.

**There is some indication that the frequency of suspensions decreased among Project Voice participants.** Suspensions were infrequent among the evaluation participants. However, there is some indication that among Project Voice participants, fewer youth were suspended after receiving services through the project (Figure 2). The number of participants whose attendance improved also increased slightly. Data from a larger cohort of youth are needed in order to determine whether these changes are significant.

**Most youth maintained the same level of academic achievement, based on MCA-II test scores.** A total of 27 youth had matched baseline and follow-up MCA-II reading scores available, while fewer (N=24) had eligible math assessment scores. Approximately three-quarters of the students maintained the same achievement level in reading (78%) and math (71%). One child demonstrated improvement on reading and math achievement levels based on these test scores.

## 2. Changes in school attendance, suspensions

	Pre-enrollment		Post-enrollment	
	N	%	N	%
<b>School Suspensions</b>				
<b>East Side Heritage (N=17)</b>				
Never suspended	13	76%	13	76%
Suspended once	3	18%	3	18%
Suspended more than once	1	6%	1	6%
<b>Project Voice (N=16)</b>				
Never suspended	9	56%	14	88%
Suspended once	5	31%	2	13%
Suspended more than once	2	13%	0	0%
<b>School Attendance</b>				
<b>East Side Heritage (N=17)</b>				
Attended 94% or more of days enrolled	9	53%	10	59%
Attended less than 94% of days enrolled	8	47%	7	41%
<b>Project Voice (N=15)</b>				
Attended 94% or more of days enrolled	6	40%	7	47%
Attended less than 94% of days enrolled	9	60%	8	53%

### Limitations

There are a few key limitations that should be taken into account when reviewing the evaluation results. First, while the long-term outcome measures used in the evaluation clearly aligned with the primary goals identified by the Collaborative when funding the Tri-Project initiative, they are also measures that are more resistant to change than some anticipated short-term outcomes (i.e., changes in perceptions of school, self-esteem). Second, the evaluation was designed to

focus on the experiences of youth participants and did not incorporate strategies to gather information about the types of services provided to parents or parent outcomes. Finally, results from this report should also be interpreted with caution, as the subset of youth who participated in the evaluation may not represent the broader population served by each project.

### *Lessons learned*

The interim report completed in March 2010 highlights some key lessons learned after conducting a series of key informant interviews with project staff and stakeholders. Many of these key findings continue to be relevant to the work of the projects today.

- The projects are unique in their commitment to providing youth and families with opportunities to learn about African-American culture and strengthen the community.
- Considerable time is needed for outreach and relationship-building with families.
- Improvements could be made to enhance the infrastructure of each project, including communication and coordination of services.
- Funding or other support is needed to support indirect service and administrative activities, specifically outreach and communication with system partners, care coordination, and evaluation activities.

A number of additional lessons learned were also identified through more recent evaluation activities:

- The projects provide services and support to youth and families who attend a number of different schools and live in neighborhoods throughout Saint Paul. This poses some logistical challenges in considering how to better partner with schools, provide outreach, and ensure transportation options are available to youth and families.
- Service utilization data show that many youth receive services from one or two partners. Partners may be more likely to refer youth and families to other agencies for services, but full coordination of services across partners occurs on a limited basis.

- The qualitative data gathered through focus groups and key informant interviews indicate youth and parent participants are experiencing improvements in self-esteem, increased engagement in school, and greater connection to the community. While these results are promising, these evaluation activities need to be expanded to identify if these types of gains are common among all project participants.
- Additional discussions are needed among partners in each project to clearly define expectations of successful youth and parent involvement and establish discharge criteria.
- Evaluation activities must be integrated into the work of all partners and include opportunities to capture both short- and long-term outcome data.

### *Conclusions and recommendations*

The three projects funded by the Saint Paul Children's Collaborative were charged with the difficult task of developing ways to coordinate services across agencies and systems to meet the needs of African-American boys and their families in key Saint Paul neighborhoods. It is important to recognize the work done by the projects to increase communication and coordination across all partners is an accomplishment in itself.

While the results of the quantitative outcome evaluation conducted for the Tri-Project Initiative are largely inconclusive (i.e., little evidence of project impact) in regard to the effectiveness of each of the three projects in impacting long-term change, qualitative data gathered through focus groups and key informant interviews suggest the projects are having a positive impact among youth and parent participants and providing services that address the needs of African-American youth. Participants felt greater self-esteem and self-confidence, reported being more engaged in the community and school, and had a stronger sense of cultural self-identity. While project stakeholders feel these attributes build a foundation to support academic achievement among youth and encourage stability in the home, more time may be needed to demonstrate the linkages between these short-term outcomes and long-term results.

The results of this evaluation show the work of the projects are leading to promising outcomes for youth and families, but that more work is needed to refine their efforts and examine the impact of the services provided. In doing so, the projects will likely need to address three major challenges: time limitations of project partners to make meaningful enhancements to their current processes, economic uncertainty and anticipated reductions and available funding, and the need to better integrate data collection and reporting into their service delivery model to assess outcomes.

Using results from the evaluation, Wilder Research has developed a number of recommendations for the Saint Paul Children's Collaborative Board and project staff to consider. The following recommendations suggest opportunities for the Board and its staff to work more closely with the projects to address ongoing project- and system-level issues:

- Identify and secure sustainable funding sources for project coordination and evaluation activities.
- Offer proactive technical assistance to support the projects, especially to address data sharing concerns common across partners.
- Create opportunities to work more directly with each project to partner with schools and child-serving systems when multi-level buy-in is needed.
- Consider redefining the evaluation sub-committee or establishing other workgroup to act as a learning community to clearly define how culturally-specific approaches are utilized by each funded project and share these lessons learned with key stakeholders.

There are also opportunities for the projects to reassess the effectiveness of their work, clarify enrollment and discharge definitions, and improve communication and coordination across partners. The following recommendations offer strategies to address challenges faced by all projects:

- Consider developing a multi-tier definition of project enrollment to differentiate between families who receive more intensive ongoing support from the project in a highly coordinated manner and those who are served by a single

program partner. Consider the importance of ensuring families see themselves as a participant within the full project (i.e., Project Voice) rather than of a specific service (i.e., Parent Power).

- Continue to consider new strategies to inform parents, community-members, and potential funders about the project.
- Revisit the population served by each project to identify strategic opportunities for targeted outreach to residents and enhanced partnerships with key schools.
- Revisit or establish common expectations around partner participation in meetings and communicating information across programs.
- Continue to offer opportunities for families to become involved in the community through events and consider ways to further engage families through volunteer experiences.

Finally, there are also opportunities to enhance the current evaluation framework:

- Develop data collection methods to assess parent/youth satisfaction with different program components and define successful completion of each component.
- Use a strength-based approach to more fully describe the assets of youth and families at intake, as well as changes in short-term outcomes.

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## For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Tri-Project Initiative Evaluation Results: A report to the SPCC Board and Tri-Project program staff*. For more information about this report, contact Melanie Ferris at Wilder Research, 651-280-2660.

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