

## **Saint Paul Children's Collaborative Tri-Project Initiative**

### **Early lessons learned**

In 2008, the St. Paul Children's Collaborative (SPCC) began a 3-year initiative (the Tri-Project Initiative) to reduce disparities in academic achievement and child protection involvement among African-American youth in three targeted St. Paul neighborhoods: North End, Summit-University, and Payne-Phalen.

Each of the three funded projects (Building Future Leaders, the East Side Heritage Project, and Project VOICE) was designed to increase academic success, improve family stability, and enhance partnerships between communities and child-serving systems.

Common elements across all projects include:

- A focus on serving African-American boys
- An emphasis on helping youth and families build connections to their community and existing resources
- The use of cultural approaches to engage youth and families and build a stronger sense of cultural self-identity
- Common program elements (i.e., tutoring, parent training, culturally –focused events/workshops)
- Partnerships between community-based organizations and child-serving systems (i.e., schools, county human services)

#### ***Evaluation activities***

A focused literature review on effective collaboration and key informant interviews with 28 stakeholders were conducted for this project. The purpose of this report is to capture information about early lessons learned by each project since funding began in 2008, identify challenges to program implementation, describe early indicators of project success, and consider opportunities to improve and enhance collaboration between partners.

#### ***A collaboration framework***

A significant body of literature identifies the key characteristics of successful collaboration, common barriers to collaborative efforts, and strategies to prevent or minimize the impact of these challenges. Four factors that seem most relevant to the work of projects funded by the SPCC include: purpose, communication, decision-making, and resiliency. These characteristics of successful collaborations are briefly described below:

- **Purpose:** Partners have a shared vision and commitment to a common target population.
- **Communication:** Strategies are used that encourage frequent and open communication and trust across partners.
- **Decision-making:** A consistent process is established where all partners share in decision-making and have responsibility for adhering to decisions.
- **Resiliency:** Partners understand the need to adapt to changes in political climate, community needs, funding, and leadership over time.

#### ***Stakeholder perspectives***

While stakeholder perspectives varied based on the project they were involved in and their level of involvement, there were more commonalities than differences in their perspectives. The following consistent themes emerged during the key informant interviews with project representatives and the SPCC Board.

#### ***Alignment between project goals and activities***

Across all projects and stakeholder groups, there was a common understanding of the intended goals of the three projects identified by the SPCC Board. Those interviewed felt the focus on improved academic achievement and increased family stability is important and addressed both directly and indirectly through program activities.

Other key findings include:

- Stakeholders felt their program components help youth and families develop a stronger sense of cultural self-identity, engage in new opportunities, seek resources and support, feel empowered, develop advocacy skills, and build connections to the community; all of these benefits contribute to success in the youth-focused goals areas.
- Building relationships, providing outreach, role modeling, and facilitating connections to community resources were identified as important ways they provide services and supports to families.
- A number of stakeholders specified their approach to service delivery empowers families to access community resources, not simply to provide services to the family.
- All projects have worked to enhance their partnerships with a variety of child-serving systems, but full collaboration between community organizations and established systems has proven difficult.

### **Partnership between families, programs, and systems**

The stakeholders interviewed described their accomplishments and challenges to effective partnership and collaboration at three levels, the: 1) individual (relationships between project staff and families); 2) project (relationships among project partners); and 3) system (relationships between projects and key child-serving systems).

At each level, the goals of partnership and strategies used to develop relationships are somewhat different, as are the amount of success each project has experienced.

Other key findings include:

- Parent engagement and recruitment was seen as critical to success, but the three projects have taken different approaches to provide outreach and build relationships with families.
- Most stakeholders felt it was incredibly helpful, but not essential, for outreach staff to be African American. Stakeholders felt the approach taken

by staff was critical to successfully engaging families.

- The long-term relationships built with families and connections staff facilitated between families and community resources helped families avoid crises and empowered families to seek these resources independently.
- Many of the partners knew of one another before the projects began, but many did not have a history of working together. While the level of collaboration between partner organizations varies by project, all felt there were opportunities to work more effectively across agencies and enhance existing partnerships.
- While all projects made efforts to refer youth to the types of services and programs they need, overall the level of service coordination across all projects was relatively low.
- To varying degrees, stakeholders from all projects identified a need to improve communication between partners.
- Overall, project stakeholders agreed that it takes considerable time and effort to build relationships with schools and county agencies, but that multi-level buy-in is essential.
- Data sharing concerns, decision-making procedures, flexibility in service delivery, and hiring/staffing practices are challenges for collaboration between projects and larger child-serving systems.

### **Use of culturally-specific approaches in service delivery**

One of the most important and unique characteristics of these projects is their focus on culturally-specific programming. When culturally-specific approaches are used, stakeholders felt they helped youth and parents develop a greater sense of cultural self-identity, a sense of optimism in their future, and deeper connections to the community.

The culturally-specific strategies used by each project fell into three main categories: the integration of cultural concepts into specific services, use of mentors and informal role models, and emphasis on building a stronger community network.

## **Parent/youth outcomes**

Some stakeholders felt it was too early to know how well the projects were working. While they felt they were doing the right types of activities to support youth and families, they did not know whether their work would ultimately result in academic gains for children and an improved home environment for the family.

A number of program stakeholders described changes they were seeing in youth and parents. Common outcomes observed by staff across all three projects included a greater sense of hope and optimism among youth and parents, improvements in students' academic achievement, and greater parent involvement and engagement in the community.

## **Implementation accomplishments and barriers**

Across all projects, common accomplishments and barriers were identified. However, the degree to which each outcome had been achieved and each barrier had impeded service delivery varied significantly across project.

Some of the key accomplishments identified by stakeholders include:

- New relationships are being formed across organizations and systems that help the projects offer a comprehensive array of services and resources to families.
- Working with other agencies helped them reach families who would not have otherwise sought services, and helped families who have felt isolated in their community.
- Improved coordination between schools and community-based organizations was also considered an early accomplishment by some stakeholders, but all agreed this work could be improved.
- Stakeholders are noticing observable changes among youth and families, such as improved reading and classroom behavior among youth and indications of greater parent participation in school. Stakeholders also noted parents and youth displaying greater self-confidence, better

ties to the community, and more hope and optimism for their future.

A number of common environmental, system, and program barriers were also identified.

- Changes in the state and national economy are having a major impact on family stability in the three targeted neighborhoods.
- Transportation to services continues to be a significant barrier for some youth and families.
- Sustainability of the Tri-Project Initiative is a concern among all projects and the SPCC Board.
- Despite representation of the SPPS district and Ramsey County Community Human Services on committees and partnerships between these systems and individual projects, data sharing practices continue to be cumbersome and confusing to project staff.
- All projects felt communication was hampered by a lack of administrative staff time and different expectations and project vision among partners.
- Although stakeholders from all projects agreed that direct outreach to youth and parents was the best way to engage families, relationship-building through face-to-face contact takes significant staff time.
- Due to delays in evaluation funding, project staff have been going back to parents to gather consent from participants. While staff will continue to work on this task, it is time-consuming and there is some concern about the number of families who will ultimately participate.

## ***Conclusions and recommendations***

The information gathered through the key informant interviews highlighted a number of key lessons learned during the first 18 months of the projects.

A number of early accomplishments and ongoing challenges were commonly identified by project stakeholders:

- Culturally-appropriate approaches show promise in engaging and supporting youth and families.

- Significant time and effort is needed to develop relationships with families and build connections within the African American community.
- Additional support to projects around infrastructure expectations and data sharing practices may help program implementation.
- While interagency partnerships have been established, full collaboration has not occurred.
- Sustainability strategies are needed, especially in order to support project leadership and infrastructure.
- Clarify data sharing procedures across programs, as well as between programs and systems. Data sharing practices continue to be an area where additional education and problem-solving is needed. Greater technical assistance from the SPCC Board may help the projects clarify how to appropriately share data.
- **Consider using a self-assessment to determine ways to increase collaboration within each project and across the Tri-Project Initiative.**

Building on the projects' accomplishments and developing strategies to address ongoing challenges may be helpful to each project in moving forward, as well as to the Board as it considers ways to support both current projects now and those they fund in the future.

Based on the information gathered during this qualitative evaluation, Wilder Research has developed the following recommendations for the SPCC Board and funded projects:

- **Develop clear strategies to improve communication across project partners.** To varying degrees, all projects identified a need to improve both formal and informal communication across partners. While there was willingness among partners to coordinate with one another, stakeholders felt each program was accustomed to addressing problems internally and were less likely to bring concerns forward to the larger group.
- **Continue conversations to define and describe how culturally-specific approaches are being used throughout the Tri-Project Initiative and contribute to improved outcomes.** An emphasis on culture and building community is an integral part of all three projects, but is unclear whether there is a shared understanding of how this philosophy and approach guides the work of project staff and contributes to improved outcomes among youth and parents. There is interest in ensuring all partners and stakeholders have the same shared vision of their collaborative work and the ability to clearly articulate the importance and impact of using of culturally-specific approaches when communicating with potential community partners and funders.

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**For more information**

This summary presents highlights of the *Saint Paul Children's Collaborative Tri-Project Initiative: Early lessons learned*. For more information about this report, contact Melanie Ferris at Wilder Research, 651-280-2660.

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