



Vancouver, WA: Strengthening Neighborhoods Through Student Resilience

Introduction

Though Vancouver, WA could be described as small-town America, it is a place where education and community leaders are thinking big and aiming to address difficult issues like intergenerational poverty. So when Vancouver Public Schools (VPS) came forward with data on student chronic absenteeism— defined as missing 18 or more school days each year – the district asked community partners for help with thinking outside the classroom to try and understand why kids were missing school.

Background

Located in Southwest Washington just across the Columbia River from Portland, Oregon, one way that Vancouver is earning a place on the map is through its public school system. Self-described as *innovative* and *visionary*, and with connections to national thought leaders through affiliations like the Coalition for Community Schoolsⁱ and the Economic Policy Institute’s Broader Bolder Approach to Education,ⁱⁱ VPS has a reputation of pioneering programs that promote excellence for teachers and students.ⁱⁱⁱ At the root of its success and as the school district looks to the future, plans are developed “*in concert with an informed, engaged community.*”^{iv} Community is central in Vancouver – where the VPS catchment is more than 23,500 students, representing great diversity and need. VPS students speak more than 75 different languages and 1 in 5 students live in a household where English is not the primary language.^v It is also a district where more than half (52%) of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch; an indicator of the poverty and economic hardships experienced by families.^{vi}

Why is addressing chronic absenteeism important?

Students who are chronically absent from school are at significant risk of falling behind academically and failing to graduate on time. Chronic absenteeism is an equity issue and particularly prevalent among students who face other challenges (i.e. low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities), and for whom school is particularly beneficial.¹

Story

Similar to others around the country, residents of Vancouver have felt the pains of the economic recession. But while the markets in other places have started to recover, families in Vancouver still find themselves in the middle of a housing crisis. Hitting low and middle-income families the hardest, housing data for the area reveal a higher rent burden and lower availability of units relative to national averages.^{vii} So when the school district noticed increased chronic absenteeism among its students it didn’t take long to connect the dots and realize that part of the solution for kids showing up to school includes meeting basic needs like stable housing, food security, and other fundamentals.

Building on a history of community partnerships, leaders from VPS rallied representatives from other agencies and organizations, forming the *Strengthening Neighborhoods Collaborative (SNC)*. The collaborative is a true example of building an Action Team with cross-sector relationships including the Vancouver Housing Authority, Council for the Homeless, Clark County Health Department, Southwest Washington Workforce Development Council, Southwest Behavioral Health, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Southwest Washington, and other community organizations. Midyear in 2014 the group came together and started brainstorming for a collective impact grant opportunity, but when that didn’t get funded the SNC decided to find a way to proceed with the work. Given varied areas of expertise, the Action Team identified

strategic approaches to align programs and coordinate efforts. The members of the SNC each discovered their unique role in addressing the issue of chronic absenteeism, and how that goal is linked to broader student success. Members of the SNC recognize *“We serve the same constituents time and time again, so the win-win is if we just embrace these families and have all the resources available to them it’s going to benefit all of us.”*

In addition to the multi-sector Action Team, a foundational piece to the SNC’s work has been the network of Family-Community Resource Centers (FCRCs). VOS began to scale its FCRC initiative in 2008 by connecting students and families with basic resources and services, through partnerships with more than 700 organizations.^{viii} The FCRCs have been key to transforming the overall school climate into a place that is welcoming, where there is trust, mutual respect, and genuine concern for students’ social-emotional development. Currently 16 FCRC locations are onsite at VPS elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as a mobile unit to reach parts of the community where school-based centers are not yet established.^{ix} Moreover, each FCRC is staffed with a coordinator who can help connect families to food, clothing, school supplies, health services, parenting support, childcare, early education, out-of-school time programs, and assistance with other unmet needs.

The FCRCs represent one way the community is tackling the difficult issue of intergenerational poverty – by investing in services and supports to create a positive school climate where families are engaged and students’ social-emotional development is prioritized alongside academic achievement. Because the SNC understands the connection between these factors, and by drawing on the relationships from the Action Team, the group has even been able to facilitate a Stable Housing Voucher Program to help families affected by the housing crisis. Families who met eligibility requirements are referred through the FCRCs to the program and receive housing vouchers in exchange for working with the housing authority to reach self-sufficiency and with VPS to improve attendance.^x To date, and through this expanded partnership, VPS has helped 20 households (27 students) secure stable housing. For students, having these basic needs met not only works to reduce chronic absenteeism, but also increases their likelihood of reaching important benchmarks such as high school graduation and gainful employment later in life.

Keys to Success

- Engaging education and community leaders as key stakeholders
- Demonstrating readiness to involve partners in a meaningful way
- Building trusting relationships with leaders and organizations across sectors
- Approaching the issue and potential solutions with an open mind
- Thinking about long term, sustainable impact

Conclusion

In the face of big community challenges like chronic absenteeism and intergenerational poverty, the Strengthening Neighborhoods Collaborative exemplifies how assembling an Action Team with cross-sector partnerships, as outlined in the [Partner Build Grow](#) strategy, can reduce duplication, leverage resources, and streamline momentum toward a common goal. In addition to sustaining critical programs, current efforts also are being directed at establishing data sharing agreements between agencies to hone in on student needs and problem areas, as well as to track progress and measure success. Through these and other efforts, the SNC ultimately is helping to improve the district and county systems that serve the community – not just to boost school attendance, but also to develop more resilient students and families.

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- ⁱ Blad, E. (2/24/16). "Community Schools Blunt the Impacts of Poverty in Vancouver, Washington." *EdWeek – Leaders to Learn From*. Accessed: <http://leaders.edweek.org/profile/steve-webb-and-tom-hagley-superintendent-chief-of-staff-community-schools/?cmp=eml-enl-eu-news1-RM>
- ⁱⁱ Broader Bolder Approach to Education [BBA]. (n.d.) "Case Study: Vancouver Public Schools (Vancouver, WA)." Washington DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Vancouver Public Schools, "About Us: Our Story and Mission." Accessed: <http://vansd.org/mission/>
- ^{iv} Vancouver Public Schools, "About Us: Our Story and Mission." Accessed: <http://vansd.org/mission/>
- ^v Vancouver Public Schools, "About Us: Fast Facts." Accessed: <http://vansd.org/fast-facts>
- ^{vi} Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington State Report Card, Accessed: <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us>
- ^{vii} Gillespie, K. (9/27/15). "Crisis in Clark County Rental Market." *The Columbian*. Accessed: <http://www.columbian.com/news/2015/sep/27/crisis-rental-market-vancouver-clark-county>
- ^{viii} Galvez, M. and Simington, J. (2015). "Housing and Education Partnership: A Case Study of Vancouver, Washington." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- ^{ix} Vancouver Public Schools, "Family-Community Resource Centers." Accessed: <http://vansd.org/fcrc/>
- ^x Galvez, M. and Simington, J. (2015). "Housing and Education Partnership: A Case Study of Vancouver, Washington." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.