



# Ready for Work's Lessons for Backbone Organizations in School-Based Initiatives

Megan Carney, Shantai Peckoo, Julie Gilbertsen, and Kristine Andrews

Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP) is a philanthropic organization that utilizes the venture capital model of investing to assist and partner with nonprofits in the Greater Washington, DC region.<sup>a</sup> In 2010, VPP created the youthCONNECT Network in the Washington metropolitan area—an effort to bring together high-performing nonprofit organizations to better the educational achievement, career outcomes, and healthy behaviors of youth ages 14 to 24.<sup>a</sup> In 2015, VPP added youthCONNECT to Ready for Work, its initiative to promote career- and college-readiness among high school students in Prince George's County, Maryland.

Ready for Work—a collaboration between VPP, Prince George's County, and five local nonprofit organizations—was a three-pronged strategy to improve student outcomes in three Prince George's County high schools: Suitland High School, High Point High School, and Oxon Hill High School. The three Ready for Work strategies are as follows:

1. Strengthen career and technical education programs.
2. Expand VPP's youthCONNECT model.
3. Provide students with meaningful work experiences.

This brief is one of five products that summarize key findings from Child Trends' implementation evaluation of the three Ready for Work strategies. The information in this brief is relevant for

<sup>a</sup> Investment Profile – Ready for Work. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://www.vpppartners.org/investments/ready-for-work/>

---

## Ready for Work: A three-part strategy

1. **Strengthening career and technical education programs:** This strategy focuses on enhancing the implementation of career and technical education (CTE) programming at both the system and school levels to strengthen students' technical and academic skills.
2. **Expansion of VPP's youthCONNECT model:** To improve students' readiness for post-secondary education and employment, this strategy focuses on strengthening the collaboration of a group of nonprofit partners and school leaders to provide wraparound services to students in Prince George's County Public School (PGCPS) high schools.
3. **Providing students with meaningful work experiences:** Through a partnership between VPP and Prince George's County Summer Youth Enrichment Program (SYEP), students are connected with local employers to gain meaningful work experiences before they graduate high school.



organizations that are keenly interested in becoming, or seeking, investors and innovators in collaborative initiatives that involve multi-sector partnerships. The recommendations provide insights on developing and maintaining community-based partnerships.

In this brief, we discuss lessons learned from VPP's role as the backbone organization for Ready for Work, a role in which VPP facilitated multi-sector partnerships for Ready for Work; we also provide an overview of factors that must be considered to achieve successful buy-in to a similar initiative. VPP stresses the importance of high-quality partnerships in its investments by adopting any role necessary to support collaborative initiatives. The findings here are especially relevant as organizations like VPP reimagine their roles as investors and innovators in collaborative initiatives after the global COVID-19 pandemic.

## Recommendations for Organizations Seeking Community-Based Partnerships

Although VPP's investment in Ready for Work has ended, much can be learned from its successes and challenges over the past six years. The following recommendations can help other organizations design and implement multi-partner, community-based initiatives aimed at improving student outcomes—or, more generally, any organizations interested in capacity-building, forming and fostering healthy partnerships, engaging and centering communities of color, collecting and assessing outcomes, and ensuring the ongoing success of a large-scale program or initiative like Ready for Work. Below are our recommendations based on what VPP and its partners have learned throughout the implementation process.

### **Diversify funding sources.**

Backbone organizations—organizations responsible for the implementation and funding of large-scale initiatives—should recruit a wide range of investors when implementing a long-term initiative such as Ready for Work; this can create funding structures that allow for long-term sustainability. Originally, Ready for Work had three primary investors that worked closely with VPP and supported the initiative's goals. From the beginning, VPP worked to grow its investor pool, recognizing that diverse stakeholders and partners for Ready for Work would help the initiative obtain support for future investment plans. VPP networked and leveraged current partners' and funders' networks to establish ongoing funding sources and community buy-in. In addition, they closely tracked which initiatives potential investors were already supporting to glean whether these current investments aligned with Ready for Work's mission. VPP recruited several investors by showing them how their work tied into Ready for Work and how their funding would be used to achieve the initiative's goals. Additionally, VPP reached out to "peers" of current investors: Having mutual partners is often a marketable point in fundraising. As a result of these ongoing efforts, VPP acquired a diversified set of funding sources—philanthropies, investors, private businesses, the Prince George's County school district, and the Prince George's County Council—to support the initiative's success and long-term sustainability.



## **Engage in transparent and frequent communication with stakeholders and provide guidance on their roles in achieving the initiative's goals.**

Clear and frequent communication between all involved parties is necessary for the success of an initiative with a wide range of stakeholders. As a backbone organization, VPP effectively kept stakeholders informed and up-to-date on Ready for Work developments, challenges, and events. For example, VPP created an in-school director position in Suitland High School (SHS) and High Point High School (HPS) to act as a liaison/point of contact between youthCONNECT's nonprofit partners, school staff, and VPP. These in-school directors were VPP employees who worked within the schools to build relationships with school staff and other organizations serving youth, and to monitor youthCONNECT's implementation. The directors were effective in ensuring coordination and establishing connections by making sure that VPP and its partners were aware of the schools' current events and priorities.

VPP also conveyed information regarding Ready for Work's progress, successes, and challenges to all stakeholders. VPP was honest and transparent in its reporting and took every opportunity to demonstrate the initiative's progress and challenges. For instance, VPP held multiple site visits at schools for current and potential investors to see the initiative in action and to meet school leaders, students, and nonprofit partners. In addition, VPP held investor forums for all Ready for Work and VPP investors, as well as anyone interested in learning more. These forums included public question and answer sessions, as well as time and space for private inquiries.

## **Support and build upon programming and strategies that already exist in the initiative's setting (e.g., a school system).**

As an external organization coming into schools to implement substantial changes, VPP recognized the need to be respectful and supportive of any work and efforts already being carried out within the schools prior to and throughout Ready for Work's implementation. Rather than immediately trying to accelerate transformation, VPP first prioritized building healthy, working relationships by learning about the schools' and nonprofit partners' preexisting strategies and attitudes. VPP aimed to create reciprocal relationships in which they both provided and asked for feedback. They were able to respect boundaries by deferring to school leadership and staff, nonprofits, and workforces housing the initiative.

To successfully enact change under Ready for Work, VPP provided strategic coaching and thought leadership to stakeholders serving youth in Prince George's County. As both a funder and direct beneficiary of Ready for Work's supports, the Prince George's County Council was a unique partner. VPP provided strategic assistance to county staff when organizing the Summer Youth Enrichment Program (SYEP) by training employers to collect feedback on youth's internship experiences through surveys and assessments. Along with the youthCONNECT nonprofits, VPP provided thought leadership by supporting data collection and evaluation capacity and by offering guidance on program delivery.



## **Meet frequently with stakeholders to foster collaboration, communication, and relationship-building opportunities.**

VPP describes itself as a backbone organization for Ready for Work and primarily aims to offer support and guidance to all other parties and stakeholders. A major component of this role has been to provide resources, largely in the form of time and attention. VPP proactively initiated and coordinated meetings with and between school, nonprofit, and stakeholder staff to discuss updates, concerns, and questions. They applied prior knowledge and expertise to help their partners work through issues and advance conversations more quickly than might have happened otherwise. One VPP employee emphasized that good backbone organizations should be able to transform conversations into actions by setting goals during discussions, checking in, and enforcing accountability on follow-through. This framework created an environment of action and accountability.

VPP originally held both separate and combined meetings for stakeholders and partners. Monthly operations team meetings about SYEP included staff from schools, VPP, and Prince George's County, and allowed attendees to share timelines and goals for the summer employment program. VPP also held monthly youthCONNECT meetings with partners at SHS (and later HPHS) to ensure that all staff were knowledgeable and up to date, and to foster relationship-building with the nonprofit partners. According to respondents, these meetings successfully integrated the nonprofits into the school environment. Lastly, VPP held monthly fundraising meetings with all stakeholders to talk about investments, the initiative's goals, and any status updates.

VPP continued to meet frequently throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Because school shutdowns required adapted programming, the team switched to larger weekly meetings with the Ready for Work nonprofit partners to discuss goals and progress, see how everyone was doing, and maintain cohesion among those involved in Ready for Work. One VPP employee stated that this shift was "one of the smartest things we could have done." Group meetings further fostered collaboration between stakeholders and partners and ensured that all parties understood the big picture of Ready for Work. Thus, while the pandemic resulted in several unanticipated changes to Ready for Work's programming, it also led to some incidental positive side effects.

## **Create, encourage, and monitor accountability among and between stakeholders.**

As previously mentioned, one of VPP's main roles was to mediate between the various stakeholders, a position that presented a few challenges. VPP wanted stakeholders to be generally aware of the work being done under each of the three strategies, which meant ensuring that the initiative's work was not siloed between partners. VPP often had to initiate communications between partners to facilitate collaboration. One respondent shared that VPP employees had frequently facilitated introductions between school staff, VPP employees, and nonprofit partners: "As a backbone organization, one of your lead roles should be to get people



who don't normally talk to each other to [interact] on a regular basis." This high standard of teamwork led to increased efforts to make sure that everyone agreed about decisions and actions made under the three strategies.

### **Uphold rigorous, continuous data collection to track progress and outcomes.**

VPP prides itself in its commitment to conducting objective project evaluations. They are a "learning organization," meaning they take time to identify potential areas of improvement, make those improvements, and share what they learn with their colleagues in the sector. VPP and its partners conducted rigorous ongoing data collection and evaluations to monitor the outcomes of Ready for Work. One of VPP's first steps in establishing its evaluation efforts included a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with PGCPs to gain access to school administrative data. The MOU allowed VPP to track student academic outcomes such as grades, attendance, and graduation rates. In addition, VPP commissioned an external evaluator, Child Trends, to evaluate youthCONNECT at SHS and (to a lesser extent) at HPHS. VPP and Child Trends used a range of data sources to best capture student outcomes, including administrative data from PGCPs, self-reported data from a survey of SHS students, and data collected by the youthCONNECT network at SHS nonprofit partners. By drawing on multiple sources of data, the research team was able to create a unique dataset that linked academic outcomes and healthy behaviors.<sup>b</sup>

### **Ensure that current plans and resources support a partnership or initiative's long-term vision.**

Ready for Work required collaboration between various stakeholders and partners. When implementing a large-scope project with various parties, backbone organizations should prepare for and adapt to unexpected changes and transitions. The cost to implement Ready for Work was higher than originally anticipated, particularly due to the time and energy required from staff members. VPP brought together several staff members with unique skills to implement Ready for Work, many of whom had multiple other commitments. Aside from the in-school director, no staff member worked full-time on Ready for Work, which created some challenges in information distribution and efficiency. Another organization looking to implement a similar initiative would likely save time and money by establishing a person or team to work solely on that initiative. In addition, delegating tasks more specifically (e.g., one person or team manages all data collection tasks for the entire program) would likely increase communication and efficiency.

Organizations implementing similar programs should also budget and plan for changes in the community they serve. Some Ready for Work stakeholders had unexpected changes; for instance, PGCPs structurally altered its CTE programming, which had been a large component of Strategy 1. Additionally, VPP decided to adjust Strategy 1 by utilizing and emphasizing Teach for America (TFA) after learning more about TFA teachers' positive impact on student

<sup>b</sup> Sacks, V., Jones, R., Redd, Z., & Moore K.A. (2020, September). *Data sharing, incentives, and relationship building are critical components of using data to support student success*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.



outcomes. In doing so, VPP provided TFA teachers with bonuses to incentivize them to continue working with PGCPs. While this approach effectively increased TFA teachers' average duration at PGCPs, it was also an unexpected cost. Similar initiatives should have sufficient resources and transition plans in place to ensure long-term adaptability and sustainability, which often entails a larger budget.

## Conclusions

As a backbone organization, VPP was responsible for monitoring progress toward Ready for Work's goals. To ensure the initiative's goals were met, VPP convened a range of unique perspectives and facilitated understanding, cooperation, and accountability among all stakeholders and partners.

One of the main responsibilities of a backbone organization like VPP is to advocate for the population being served. For VPP, this meant helping funders understand why their assistance was crucial to Ready for Work's success. VPP fostered connections with several stakeholders that would not otherwise have interacted with schools. They even submitted grant applications on behalf of the PGCPs' CTE department and Oxon Hill High School's Parent Teacher Student Association. Further, VPP ensured the publicity and visibility of Ready for Work by presenting its design, implementation, and outcomes to various audiences, and by interacting with relevant parties outside those already involved in the initiative. Ensuring the ongoing success of an initiative like Ready for Work requires thinking beyond the present stakeholders and clients and increasing awareness of why the initiative is crucial for the community being served—a strategy that continually fosters growth and new opportunities.

Throughout implementation of Ready for Work, VPP realized that a coaching role was more sustainable than doing hands-on work. One of VPP's main objectives was to get Ready for Work's stakeholders to work toward common goals—a time-consuming, onerous task. It took several years for all stakeholders to be on the same page about what needed to be accomplished and to work toward collaboration instead of competition. While these efforts were secondary to the initiative's more hands-on, outcome-oriented work, they were equally important to Ready for Work's success. Organizations like VPP should understand that facilitating change—through communication and collaboration—is sometimes as important as leading it.

## Suggested Citation

Carney, M., Peckoo, S., Gilbertsen, J., & Andrews, & K. (2022). Ready for Work's Lessons for Backbone Organizations and Investors in School-Based Initiatives. Child Trends.

<https://doi.org/10.56417/8788n9130a>



Venture Philanthropy Partners engaged Child Trends to evaluate its Ready for Work initiative from 2015 to 2020.