



Ready for Work's Lessons for Investors Interested in Supporting Initiatives Designed to Improve Youth Outcomes

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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.^a 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.^a 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.

^a 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.
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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 highlights the role of backbone organizations—or organizations that are involved in funding and implementing large-scale initiatives—for investors interested in assuming the role of a funder and facilitator in school-based initiatives. We hope that the lessons and recommendations provided here will shed light on how VPP built relationships and leveraged investments from key investors and innovators to build a successful school-based initiative.

The brief begins with an overview of key successes and challenges experienced during the implementation of Ready for Work. Next, we offer recommendations for investors in similar initiatives—based largely on key takeaways learned from the stakeholders who collaborated to support the initiative's continued efforts, including Suitland High School's (SHS) staff and administration, Prince George's County staff involved in programming, nonprofit partner staff, and investors.

We note that, while COVID-19 has likely reshaped the role of investors in initiatives like Ready for Work, the lessons presented here are still applicable to investors interested in learning more about Ready for Work or investing in similar initiatives.

Key Findings

Child Trends conducted interviews with VPP and key investment partners within Prince George's County who were involved in designing and implementing Ready for Work. Based on these interviews, we identified the following successes and challenges.

Successes in implementing the Ready for Work Initiative

Partners and stakeholders in Ready for Work stayed informed on the initiative's progress.

Ready for Work was designed to keep all involved parties informed about the initiative's successes, challenges, and progress on a routine basis. This regular sharing of information was facilitated, in part, by the multiple memoranda of understanding (MOUs) that VPP established with key stakeholders. By creating unique MOUs for each of the three strategies, VPP ensured that all stakeholders and partners understood and accepted Ready for Work's goals.

As both a funder and facilitator of Ready for Work, VPP was responsible for ensuring progress on the three strategies of Ready for Work and for ensuring that formal and informal reporting updates were shared with Ready for Work's investors. In addition, VPP coordinated site visits at Suitland High School to allow investors to see Ready for Work's implementation first-hand, and to meet key staff members and students involved in the initiative.

Organizations and individuals serving students were able to improve or expand upon existing programming.

Many stakeholders' participation in Ready for Work allowed them to improve or expand upon their existing programs for students via allocation of additional resources and opportunities



for networking and thought leadership. For example, under Ready for Work's Strategy 1, VPP helped CTE programs in the three high schools use student and teacher assessments to determine which teacher practices led to successful student outcomes (more details on data collection can be found below). VPP also set up "action plan" funding opportunities for CTE programs to enhance or sustain these practices. In addition, VPP helped school CTE departments develop an incentive system to better retain Teach for America (TFA) teachers within Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS). Previously, TFA teachers worked for an average of two years in PGCPS, but some stayed as long as four to five years after Ready for Work provided teachers with a \$10,000 annual bonus. This incentive system was so successful that PGCPS, along with other school systems across the nation, adopted this model from VPP.

Ready for Work's youthCONNECT (Strategy 2) nonprofit partners noted that participating in the initiative had increased their opportunities for expansion as a result of networking. As a funder and partner, VPP frequently networked across PGCPS to highlight the work of the youthCONNECT nonprofits, in turn increasing their visibility within the community. VPP also offered guidance and support to nonprofits looking to expand their scope. For instance, VPP partnered with a nonprofit capacity-building program so that leaders from organizations local to Prince George's County could improve their skills in evaluation assessments, grant writing, and grant management. The nonprofit program participants credited the development of these skills for helping their organizations double in size in terms of scale and staffing: Over three years, they went from serving 1,800 students per year to 5,000 students per year.

Increasing and expanding upon VPP and Prince George's County's employer partnerships was essential to increasing student employment opportunities. As part of the operations team for the Summer Youth Enrichment Program (SYEP) under Strategy 3, VPP brought in new employer partners and improved the existing program infrastructure. The new employer partners exposed youth to novel careers and experiences. For example, one partner, Industrial Bank—a Black-owned bank that focuses on investing in the Black and Latiné communities they serve—provided youth an opportunity to learn more about future careers and summer employment opportunities offered through the SYEP.

Stakeholders communicated clearly with each other and increased their collaboration on sharing knowledge.

Most respondents noted that Ready for Work stakeholders had engaged in clear and frequent communication and collaboration. As part of CTE quality improvement under Ready for Work, CTE teachers were connected to other external partners; some even began to form professional learning communities to share information and strategies to strengthen their pedagogy. VPP also helped teachers connect with "externship" opportunities through PGCPS parents in relevant industries. Through these externships, teachers could learn translatable skills to supplement their lessons to students. The youthCONNECT nonprofit partners also demonstrated increased collaboration with one another, holding joint school events like college events, sharing information about student supports and opportunities, and referring students to each other's services. This collaboration provided students with services that eased their



transitions from high school to post-graduation pathways. The nonprofit partners' successful collaborations were due, in part, to their lack of competition for funding: All partners were given a lump sum prior to their work in order to foster trust and collaboration to achieve a shared goal.

VPP fostered communication and collaboration between participating nonprofit organizations to ensure progress toward Ready for Work's collective goals. For example, VPP met frequently with nonprofit leaders, school staff, and employer partners to discuss action items, successes or challenges, goals, and ways for VPP to better support organizations and individuals working under the initiative. The nonprofit partners stated that VPP provided detailed and clear guidelines of what was expected of them under youthCONNECT. VPP also positioned in-school directors in both Suitland and High Point high schools to act as points of contact between nonprofits, school administrators, and VPP. Respondents noted that this position was crucial in streamlining communication between youthCONNECT partners and the school. In-school directors helped school staff become acquainted with youthCONNECT, allowing the nonprofit partners to better integrate into the school.

The culture of communication and collaboration fostered by VPP was essential in Spring 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced school shutdowns and a shift to virtual education. Despite the unprecedented challenges that followed, such as students' disengagement with virtual programming, Ready for Work partners creatively and flexibly adapted services to meet students' needs.^b For example, SHS began dedicating Wednesday afternoons to Professional Development Workshops, in which nonprofit partners could host drop-in events for students. The partners' flexibility and adaptability in the face of a worldwide catastrophe was a result of the successful communication and collaboration already established between partners.

Robust data collection and analysis informed the initiative and shaped its responsiveness to student needs and outcomes.

Ready for Work was a unique initiative that incorporated a wide range of data sources to track goals and student outcomes. VPP engaged Child Trends to administer a biannual survey to students at Suitland High School to understand their perceptions of the school climate, their peer relationships, their own social-emotional outcomes, and positive and risky behaviors. Child Trends shared information from these surveys with school staff, students, youthCONNECT partner staff, and other stakeholders at the end of each semester through interactive data walks in which participants were able to react to, interpret, and discuss findings in real time with evaluators and VPP staff to inform their ongoing work with students. Child Trends and VPP then merged academic performance data from school administrative sources, nonprofits, and the student survey to create a unique longitudinal data set to assess the youthCONNECT theory of change and examine outcomes for students served by youthCONNECT.

Data collection was critical to Ready for Work's success at SHS, as it shifted perspectives for stakeholders, especially school staff. For instance, when VPP shared with SHS the results of student surveys reporting that many students did not feel safe at school, the school made

^b Sacks, V. & Jones, R. (2020, June). *Nonprofit organizations and partnerships can support students during the COVID-19 crisis*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.



efforts to reassess school security measures to help students feel more secure. The exposure to rigorous data collection—and evidence of the utility of data—also encouraged SHS school staff to consider how they might use their own collected data to assess areas of improvement. With VPP’s guidance, teachers in the CTE departments began to use assessments to determine and improve the quality of their programs.

Rigorous data collection and evaluation are also important in creating a strong base of evidence for why an initiative is important for student outcomes. Funders interested in investing in initiatives like Ready for Work must have regularly collected data reviewed by all stakeholders involved in implementing an initiative. In turn, evaluators can determine what services and supports are working well and which need improvement.

Challenges in implementing the Ready for Work initiative

VPP experienced ongoing challenges with establishing stakeholder buy-in, both in the development and implementation stages of Ready for Work.

In the early stages of Ready for Work, some respondents noted that initial investor recruitment was difficult. Many local foundations and investors that had worked with VPP previously were based in Washington, DC and were hesitant to invest in positive youth development initiatives outside the city, despite the evidence of poor student academic outcomes and workforce development in the wider region. VPP was able to leverage the support of investors, foundations, and businesses involved in the Prince George’s County community.

According to respondents, obtaining buy-in at the school level was another challenge. School staff face their own day-to-day challenges and priorities, which made it harder for them to see the value in prioritizing Ready for Work. Without schoolwide support and involvement in the program, partners sometimes found it challenging to promote and advertise events for students, foster engagement among students in their work experiences, and refer students to youthCONNECT services. Several respondents reported that teachers—the adults who spend the most time with students—played an especially critical role in the initiative’s success. Some teachers were initially hesitant to welcome external organizations in part because of high turnover for these organizations within their schools. Hence, while teachers were eager to see improvements, many needed to build trust over time that the external partners would remain long enough to fully support the initiative.

Further, due to busy schedules and multiple parties’ involvement in the initiative, VPP found it difficult to coordinate calendars and schedule meetings for VPP, nonprofits, and employer partners to engage with school staff. These hurdles hindered trust between the schools, nonprofit partners, and VPP. Many staff members were wary of having external nonprofits serve students since these organizations do not always stay in the school long-term. Under Ready for Work, the in-school director played a key role in fostering trusting relationships between external partners and the school. This director had prior experience working in schools, understood school staff members’ unique challenges and stresses, and were keenly aware of partners’ needs for successful programming. The in-school director’s prior knowledge of school operations was leveraged to ensure that school staff were not burdened by programming requests.



Throughout implementation of Ready for Work, turnover among school, nonprofit, and county staff often created an atmosphere in which new people entered the initiative without a clear understanding of its strategies and goals. Respondents noted that a lot of time was spent onboarding new staff to the initiative, which slowed down processes and changed the dynamics of the work being conducted. For example, three years into implementation of Ready for Work, there was leadership turnover within Prince George's County; as a result, the initiative was no longer included as a priority item in the County's strategic plan. Ready for Work inherently involves systematic and institutional changes, so leadership turnover was an especially difficult barrier to overcome.

Data collection and reporting were slower than anticipated.

A major unanticipated cost of Ready for Work was the amount of time and energy needed to establish an MOU and data-sharing agreement with PGCPs. The district's leadership changed in the middle of finalizing the agreement, which caused further delays.

Because Ready for Work aimed to improve long-term student outcomes, some of our respondents were frustrated with the lack of consistently reported progress. Other partners who were invested in the outcomes wished to receive more routine updates on data collection and program evaluation efforts.

Recommendations

When implementing Ready for Work, VPP aimed to identify areas in need of improvement, address issues or concerns, and share learnings with relevant parties. VPP's model of investing and innovation allows for continuous improvement and learning, so Ready for Work's successes and challenges may inform future investments in cross-collaborative, school-based initiatives.

Below, we provide recommendations for investors looking to support similar initiatives, gleaned from VPP's experiences with Ready for Work.

Recommendations

- **Prioritize building and fostering relationships with partners.** For an initiative such as Ready for Work to be successful, partners must focus on establishing and fostering relationships, especially with schools and employers. One of VPP's tactics to bolster teamwork was to hold frequent meetings with stakeholders to create opportunities and space for sharing ideas and solving problems. Simply by increasing communication, these meetings fostered trust and stronger relationships between partners. In addition to strengthening relationships among the initiative's stakeholders, external organizations should familiarize themselves with the communities they serve. In particular, they should build personal relationships with community members to identify culturally relevant issues and solutions and provide the community opportunities to support implementation (e.g., encouraging their children to participate).



- **Make sure that initiative goals are clearly communicated and that partners know how their role contributes to the initiative.** In a multi-strategy initiative such as Ready for Work, stakeholders may find it difficult to keep track of goals and to see how various components of the initiative interact to create positive student outcomes. It's important to ensure that the initiative's goals are clearly stated at the outset of implementation and that stakeholders understand how their roles contribute to its overall functioning. Throughout its implementation of Ready to Work, VPP learned to ensure that school staff and nonprofit partners hear about outcomes of interest at the beginning of each year, and to explain how each outcome connects to Ready for Work's goals. This allowed school staff to see how their own work connected to the work of the initiative.
- **Understand partners' capabilities and objectives before setting goals.** Another challenge in implementing some of Ready for Work's strategies was that not all partners were ready for the proposed type of engagement or intervention. It is important to understand each stakeholder's strengths and weaknesses when thinking about an initiative's goals and implementation. This helps ensure that each stakeholder proposes a unique perspective and/or approach for meeting initiative goals, and ensures that the backbone organization understands how to coordinate programming and services to ensure that complementary programs meet youth's needs. In turn, understanding stakeholder strengths and weaknesses ensures that the backbone organization understands the staff transition plans that are in place, which could mitigate the substantial staff turnover challenge noted by our respondents. VPP and its partners recognized the importance of being aware that new initiative staff may have different priorities than previous partners. To mitigate the negative effects of turnover, VPP helped school staff more strongly buy in to the initiative, such that turnover would not result in widespread disengagement in Ready for Work.
- **Focus on how an initiative's implementation fits the needs of a community.** When VPP reached out to potential investors and stakeholders for Ready for Work, they made clear how the initiative's goals would align with those of investors and the community. Organizations interested in implementing a similar initiative must understand the school systems, governments, and businesses that shape the served community. Each involved party and organization must commit to help these community systems grow via their partnerships and capacity to serve youth.
- **Use data to inform each stage of an initiative.** VPP used existing data about PGCPs to assess the needs of the community and its youth, and to determine what services were already in place or should be enacted. Data can also foster buy-in for an initiative if investors and partners can see progress toward goals and understand where the successes and challenges lie before the end of an initiative. In the context of COVID-19, for example, using data to identify service gaps in programming for youth was crucial for the initiative partners in navigating unprecedented changes.



Conclusion

What's next for the sustainability of the Ready for Work initiative?

Throughout the initiative, Ready for Work's nonprofit partners became integrated in the school system and school staff began to rely on them for solutions and support on youth issues. Importantly, students also developed strong relationships with nonprofit partner staff. The increased trust and familiarity between school and nonprofit staff benefited all parties involved in Ready for Work. Ready for Work's success not only benefited the schools and their students, but also the nonprofits' ability to build capacity. One nonprofit partner even created a new alliance that stemmed from being a part of youthCONNECT.

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