



Productive Nonprofit Partnership Holds Lessons for College and Career Readiness Programs

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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:

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 student’s 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 PGCPs high schools.
 - 3. Providing students with meaningful work experiences:** Through a partnership between VPP and PGCPs’s 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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^a Investment Profile – Ready for Work. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://www.vppartners.org/investments/ready-for-work/>



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. Here, we present lessons learned related to the second strategy: Expanding the youthCONNECT model to improve students' post-secondary career and college readiness in Prince George's County Public Schools.^b These lessons are primarily intended to inform youth-serving nonprofit organizations looking to form partnerships with schools or other nonprofits.

While youthCONNECT was eventually implemented in both Suitland High School (SHS) and High Point High Schools (HPHS), this brief will focus specifically on operations within SHS. HPHS experienced persistent challenges trying to structure the initiative to meet the needs of harder-to-reach students. Drawing on information gleaned from interviews with VPP and the five nonprofit partners that make up the youthCONNECT at Suitland, we summarize lessons learned in creating and fostering partnerships and relationships with schools. We also describe the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on the work of the nonprofit partners, including the program adaptations made to meet students' everchanging needs. Child Trends' implementation evaluation of the Ready for Work initiative began before the global pandemic, COVID-19, reimagined in-school and community-based nonprofit partnerships, relationships, and collaboration. However, the lessons learned from Ready for Work about the importance of nonprofits partnering with schools or other nonprofits are still applicable to schools or school districts interested in implementing initiatives like Ready for Work that rely heavily on partnerships.

In sum, we identified five main takeaways from Ready for Work's nonprofit partnerships:

1. Nonprofit organizations should prioritize building strong relationships with school leadership and staff.
2. If nonprofit organizations partner with other nonprofits, they should leverage each other's services and supports to best meet students' diverse needs.
3. Partnered organizations should frequently communicate with all involved parties to ensure productive collaboration.
4. Nonprofit partners should find ways to build their data collection and evaluation capacity to inform programming.
5. The COVID-19 pandemic caused an unexpected need to alter the initiative's services. Moving forward, organizations should be prepared to adapt to any unforeseen changes in programming.

^b For more information on youthCONNECT, please refer to: 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; Sacks, V., Jones, R., Redd, Z., & Moore K.A. (2020, December). *Relationships with Caring Adults and Social and Emotional Strengths Are Related to High School Academic Achievement*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends; Sacks, V. & Jones, R. (2020, June). *Nonprofit organizations and partnerships can support students during the COVID crisis*. [Blog Post] Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.



Background of youthCONNECT at Suitland High School

Suitland High School (SHS) is a large public school located in the suburb of Suitland, Maryland just outside Washington, DC. To many in the community, the school is known for offering students special programs in visual and performing arts and career and technical education (CTE) programs, including construction and development, business management, barbering, cosmetology, and nursing.^c SHS has a student body of nearly 1,900 students, with 90 percent of the student population identifying as African American and 7 percent identifying as Hispanic. More than 55 percent of enrolled students at SHS qualify for free or reduced-price meals.^d After a thorough vetting process, SHS was selected as one location for implementation of the Ready for Work initiative because of its demonstrated buy-in, school reform culture, and stakeholder engagement. The school's aspirations and needs matched the initiative's goals, and the SHS principal was interested in how select nonprofits could support the needs of the school's diverse student body.

The youthCONNECT Network is comprised of VPP, SHS, and five nonprofit partners: Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection (Hillside), Latin American Youth Center's Maryland Multicultural Youth Center in Prince George's County (LAYC/MMYC), PeerForward (formerly known as College Summit), Urban Alliance, and Year Up-National Capital Region (Year Up-NCR). When selecting the organizations for the youthCONNECT at SHS Network, VPP drew upon its existing partnerships with local nonprofit partners. Four of the Network partner organizations—LAYC/MMYC, PeerForward, Urban Alliance, and Year Up-NCR—were members of the initial SIF-funded youthCONNECT Network, and therefore had established relationships with VPP and each other. VPP's range of nonprofit connections in the region and its knowledge of how certain nonprofits have collaborated with each other helped them assemble high-performing organizations to form the youthCONNECT Network. Similarly, VPP's diverse network of connections allowed the nonprofit partners more opportunities to engage with other stakeholders, expand their scope of work, and better see the collective value of participating in the network. In addition, one unique feature of the youthCONNECT Network is its ability to foster relationship-building among youth-serving nonprofits within a geographic area to better meet students' needs.

The intended goal of the youthCONNECT Network was for the nonprofit partners—in collaboration with each other and school leadership—to develop a set of shared objectives that align with the school's goals. The network and school leadership aimed to see improvements in categories such as student attendance and grades, 9th grade promotion rates, and Free Applications for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion. For more information on the types of

^c Prince George's County Public Schools Department of Career and Technical Education. (2020, October). *Career and Technical Education Programs SY 2020-2021*. https://offices.pgcps.org/uploadedFiles/Cards/career_academies/Announcements/CTE%20Course%20Listing%20by%20School_SY20-21%20%2010.7.20%20tw.docx.pdf

^d 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 https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/VPPDataBrief_ChildTrends_Sept2020-2.pdf



services each nonprofit partner provides, please refer to Table 1 below:

Table 1. youthCONNECT Partner Organizations at Suitland High School

Program	DESCRIPTION OF SERVICES
Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Caring adult provides mentoring and support at home, school, and work ▪ Job readiness training and job placement ▪ Tutoring and college preparation services ▪ Academic enrichment ▪ Life skills training
LAYC / Maryland Multicultural Youth Center in Prince George’s County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ongoing individualized case management and mentoring from a caring adult (mentor/advocate) ▪ Individual needs assessment and development of youth-driven goals ▪ Crisis support (social services, counseling, etc.)
Urban Alliance¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Professional development training, including workshops on pre-employment and communication ▪ Workshops are embedded in career and technical education classes and classroom teachers grade the assignment for course credit
PeerForward²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Training for peer leaders (11th and 12th grade students) ▪ Peer leaders operate school-wide campaigns that promote applying for college and financial aid, and that connect students with college and career information and supports
Year Up³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Job readiness skills training, including hands-on technical skill development and soft skills ▪ Courses eligible for college credits ▪ Professional internships ▪ Wraparound supports

Source: 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.



Lessons Learned

Below, we share some key lessons learned for the youthCONNECT at SHS Network partners while serving students as part of the Ready for Work initiative. These takeaways will be particularly beneficial for any nonprofit organizations looking to build partnerships with schools or other organizations.

Spend time building relationships and establishing buy-in with school staff to make sure goals are aligned.

Maintaining consistency across all parties' priorities, visions, and goals was instrumental in driving on-the-ground efforts in a collaborative initiative like Ready for Work. The nonprofit partners reported that being part of the youthCONNECT Network helped them become more integrated within the school community at SHS. To assist with integrating these external organizations into the school environment and achieving the initiative's objectives, VPP hired a Ready for Work in-school director to manage day-to-day operations related to youthCONNECT and to serve as a liaison between SHS staff and the nonprofit partners.^e The in-school director was crucial in helping the nonprofit partners form relationships with teachers, school administrators, guidance counselors, and other school staff members. Establishing close ties with the school's guidance counselors and one of the assistant principals helped the partners plan school events, refer students to services, and access data regarding college applications and FAFSA completions to track student progress and outcomes.

Some nonprofit partners highlighted the importance of ensuring alignment between the needs and priorities of SHS, the nonprofit partners, and VPP. However, obtaining school buy-in was challenging at times. The school leadership and administration often had priorities that took precedence over the nonprofit partners' needs and requests. Without consistent high-level commitment and promotion from the school and its leadership, the nonprofits had to work harder to obtain student engagement and investment.

Leverage other network partners, especially in filling student service gaps.

Being part of the youthCONNECT network strengthened relationships between the nonprofit partners and allowed them to pool their resources. The partners offered a wide range of unique services, which allowed them to work together to address the students' diverse needs. Organizations within the network referred students to other organizations if that partner offered services that could better address the student's particular need(s). For example, LAYC/MMYC, Hillside, Urban Alliance, and PeerForward could refer their graduating students to Year Up to ensure a continuum of career development supports. This range of unique supports and resources helped the nonprofit partners expand their scope of work at SHS and at other sites where they serve students. Although the nonprofit partners reported that their day-to-day work was mostly conducted independently of one another, they did collaboratively host venues at the school, such as career fairs and events to increase FAFSA enrollment.

^e Ibid



Engage in frequent and collaborative communication with funders and Network partners.

According to the nonprofit partners, VPP played a key role in cultivating positive and supportive relationships among the youthCONNECT Network partners. One nonprofit partner noted that VPP was unique in being both a funder and a thought partner, as they offered guidance and feedback in managing school-level relationships while providing funding for the nonprofit organizations.

One of the main ways in which VPP facilitated frequent communication and feedback was through monthly youthCONNECT Network meetings with the nonprofits and VPP. SHS school administrative staff often attended these meetings as well. Working on-site at SHS and holding frequent meetings allowed ongoing, open communication between all parties involved in the Ready for Work initiative because it ensured that meetings were readily accessible for all parties. One nonprofit partner reported that they would not have been as connected with other partners without the monthly meetings.

Find ways to engage with data collection and evaluation to offer insight into programming.

VPP also assisted the nonprofit partners in building their data collection and evaluation capacity. For instance, VPP and Child Trends hosted “data walks” for nonprofit partners, school staff, and other relevant stakeholders to share findings from an annually administered survey of SHS students. The survey collected information on topics like school culture, attitudes toward school, school engagement, healthy behaviors, relationships with school staff and peers, and youth employment. The data walk presentations were interactive in that participants split into small groups and rotated around five or six stations, each of which presented a specific finding from the survey. Participants then had the opportunity to share their reactions to the data and discuss any implications for their work with students. Many nonprofits found these presentations helpful. One partner said the data walks were “insightful” and offered a new perspective of how students perceived school climate.^f

The nonprofit partners suggested additional ways that VPP and Child Trends could have leveraged the data walks to better meet partners’ needs, such as supplementing high-level summaries with more detail on trends and outcomes for students. One partner explained that more specific, direct feedback would have helped them tailor programming to target more specific needs and outcomes. Additionally, some partners were concerned about sharing data and feedback with the appropriate stakeholders. A respondent suggested that making the data more accessible and visible to a wider audience of students, school staff, and stakeholders could have increased the overall impact of the data. Lastly, one nonprofit partner suggested involving students in a greater capacity in data walks—for example, by incorporating students’ reactions into programs and/or findings. In 2020, data from surveys about students’ experiences at SHS were shared with students for the first time in youthCONNECT programming. According to one nonprofit partner, while students were incentivized to fill out the surveys, allowing them to see the results is what facilitates and promotes real change.

^f For more information on data walks, please refer to: 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. https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/VPPDataBrief_ChildTrends_Sept2020-2.pdf



A culture of network coordination made adaptation easier.

The coordinated collaboration of nonprofit partners made it easier for nonprofits to adapt and respond to the unprecedented changes in schooling, logistics, and safety presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. On Friday, March 13, 2020, SHS held its last day of in-person schooling for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year, as PGCPs shut down its schools the following Monday. The widespread school closures and shift to remote work and education meant that SHS and the network partners had to make drastic changes in how they delivered services to student and engaged them.⁹

The time and effort that youthCONNECT network nonprofit partners put toward establishing healthy and frequent communication and collaboration prior to school closures made it easier to adapt to the pandemic. The monthly youthCONNECT Network at SHS meetings transitioned to a virtual format and partners started hosting collaborative virtual events and webinars. For instance, two partners co-hosted virtual workshops for students on FAFSA completion and filling out financial aid forms.

The youthCONNECT Network nonprofit partners worked with the school to update their supports and services to better address students' and families' needs during the pandemic. Some partners reported that communicating with SHS was essential in staying up to date with student contact information, and in reporting administrative data to track youth outcomes during the pandemic. Further, many partners added new metrics around COVID-19 in their data collection efforts to better assess students' and families' needs and well-being during this time. For example, one organization (LAYC/MMYC) conducted a survey with around 750 students and families in Washington, DC and Maryland—including a subset of students from SHS—to determine what needs families may still have resulting from and/or exacerbated by the pandemic.^h The youthCONNECT partners were able to successfully adapt their services to accommodate the immediate hurdles of the pandemic, and to assess and prepare for any long-term impacts.

Conclusion

Ready for Work's vision of creating long-term, sustainable change to improve students' college and career readiness required the partnership of many different stakeholders—namely, the youth-serving nonprofits; SHS leadership, administration, and teachers; the PGCPs school system; and VPP. As we learned from speaking with organizations involved in the youthCONNECT at SHS Network, it can be challenging for a collective-impact initiative like Ready for Work to achieve meaningful outcomes for students without buy-in and collaboration among all involved parties. youthCONNECT partners felt they were able to work together more effectively to serve students by engaging in frequent communication, aligning program

⁹ For more information, please refer to Sacks, V. & Jones, R. (2020, June). *Nonprofit organizations and partnerships can support students during the COVID crisis*. [Blog Post] Bethesda, MD: Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/blog/nonprofit-organizations-and-partnerships-can-support-students-during-the-covid-19-crisis>

^h Quinteros-Grady, L. (2021, May). *Reopening should not leave youths and families of color even further behind*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/local-opinions/dc-maryland-reopening-inequities-latin-american-youth-center/2021/05/06/595dd568-acf8-11eb-b476-c3b287e52a01_story.html



goals and milestones, and promoting transparency in data collection and outcomes with all stakeholders involved. As the Network’s response to the pandemic demonstrated, those processes will help foster an adaptable, resilient culture that effectively adapts to unforeseen changes.

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Endnotes

1. An adapted version of the Urban Alliance model is implemented at Suitland High School. The traditional model is an intensive year-long training and internship experience for high school seniors that also provides services for program alumni.
2. PeerForward is formerly known as College Summit.
3. A select number of program slots are reserved for Suitland High School graduates.



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