



Lessons for Partners in School-Based Initiatives From Ready for Work at Suitland High School

Julie Gilbertsen, Shantai Peckoo, Megan Carney, 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.^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 24.¹ 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 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.
-



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 will be useful for schools or school districts interested in learning from a case study of how an initiative like Ready for Work was implemented. The lessons learned from Ready for Work can help schools and their leaders better understand their role in such an implementation.

Partnerships between schools and nonprofit organizations have previously been found effective for bolstering youth's college and career readiness, a priority agenda item among many secondary schools across the nation. Recent research has pointed to growing gaps in the current needs of the workforce, and a lack of career skills and education among youth plays a large role in this gap.^b A report by UNICEF and World Business Council for Sustainable Development's Future of Work warned that young people lack the necessary skills for future employment and that employers are struggling to hire staff that meet their company's needs. The report recommends that business play a role in providing youth with the skills they need to have successful careers.^c School partnerships with employers and community organizations may help address gaps between employers' needs and potential employees' skills by engaging youth in their communities and exposing them to job opportunities.

The brief begins with an overview of Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) and Suitland High School (SHS) to contextualize some of the successes and challenges experienced throughout the initiative's implementation. Next, we highlight several reasons for the success of Ready for Work at SHS, which implemented all three strategies and had the most comprehensive adoption of the initiative's youthCONNECT model. We then describe some challenges from implementing Ready for Work at SHS—and lessons learned from those challenges—to improve implementation of similar initiatives.

For this brief, we obtained data from interviews with Prince George's County administrators, PGCPS staff, SHS faculty and staff, and VPP staff (collectively referred to as "respondents" in this brief), all of whom have varying degrees of involvement in the Ready for Work initiative and/or the implementation of Ready for Work at SHS specifically.

A note on COVID-19

Child Trends' implementation evaluation of the Ready for Work initiative began before the global COVID-19 pandemic required a reimagining of in-school and community-based nonprofit partnerships, relationships, and collaboration. However, the lessons learned from Ready for Work about schools' role in fostering relationships with community-based organizations are still applicable to schools or school districts interested in implementing initiatives like Ready for Work that rely heavily on relationships for success.

^b Education Strategy Group. (2017, August). *Destination known: Valuing college and career readiness in state accountability systems*. Retrieved from <https://edstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Destination-Known.pdf>

^c UNICEF and WBCSD. (2021, July). *Empowering the workforce of tomorrow: The role of business in tackling the skills mismatch among youth*. UNICEF. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/media/103176/file/Empowering%20the%20workforce%20of%20tomorrow.pdf/>



Overview of Prince George's County Public Schools and SHS

PGCPS is a large public school district located in Maryland within the Washington, DC metropolitan region. The district houses 208 schools and centers, serves more than 136,500 students, and employs approximately 22,000 employees. PGCPS is recognized for its college- and career-readiness programs, so many of its schools had a solid foundation for Ready for Work's services.^d Of the three high schools involved in Ready for Work, SHS housed the most comprehensive implementation of youthCONNECT. SHS is a large magnet school located in Suitland, Maryland, best known for its career and technical education (CTE) and visual and performing arts programs. Around 90 percent of students at SHS are Black, about 7 percent are Hispanic, and more than 55 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.^e

Reasons for Ready for Work's Success

The success of Ready for Work required buy-in from many different stakeholders. From our evaluation, we gleaned three critical components for facilitating Ready for Work's overall success at SHS: hiring an in-school director with relationship-building experience in education and nonprofit spaces to cultivate buy-in among all stakeholders, fostering an environment that facilitates and champions collaboration and communication, and providing opportunities to build the capacity of school staff and administrators. In this section, we provide an overview of how these components facilitated success for the three Ready for Work strategies at SHS.

VPP designated an in-school director to improve school buy-in by coordinating and fostering inter-partner and school-partner relationships.

For Ready for Work, youthCONNECT at SHS brought together five nonprofit organizations (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]), each of which offered different services and supports to provide wraparound services to students. This collaborative design required a focus on building inter-partner and school-partner relationships. To facilitate these relationships, VPP created an in-school director position to meet with SHS administrators and staff, nonprofit partner staff, and VPP staff to discuss the initiative and to engage stakeholders on how best to implement aspects of the Ready for Work strategies while maintaining leadership engagement.

VPP stationed the initiative's in-school director, a VPP employee, within SHS to serve as a liaison between the school and nonprofit partners. The director was a central source for personnel involved in the initiative and provided thought leadership to school administrators

^d About PGCPS. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.pgcps.org/about-pgcps>

^e 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.



and staff to promote effective collaboration and communication. SHS leadership emphasized the foundational role of the in-school director in keeping Ready for Work's mission at the forefront of the school's agenda by serving as a thought partner who often assumed any role necessary to facilitate success, including participating in activities led by nonprofits or providing professional development to SHS staff. The director prioritized ongoing communication with school staff and nonprofit partners about the initiative's progress. In addition, the in-school director communicated critical information about SHS and its students back to VPP and nonprofit partners. This transfer of information about school culture, climate, and student body was essential in ensuring that the initiative's programming met students' and SHS' needs. It allowed VPP and its funders to improve implementation by routinely identifying resource gaps and areas that require additional support.

The in-school director successfully facilitated school buy-in and established collaboration among nonprofits and SHS.

In describing a successful in-school director and liaison, our interview respondents noted several key attributes: (1) the ability to communicate information without being intrusive, (2) comfort with addressing unanticipated events, (3) an understanding of public education and extensive experience working with youth, (4) the ability to identify and report on schools' and youth's needs and provide implementation updates and next steps, and (5) experience facilitating collaboration and communication between all stakeholders with frequent meetings and check-ins.

Further, the in-school director improved buy-in among the nonprofit partners and SHS administrators. In particular, the director leveraged prior experiences in education as a principal to ensure that all parties' concerns, perspectives, and suggestions were heard and listened to. For example, SHS staff felt empowered to co-define areas of need within the school and student body.

The in-school director coordinated and/or led frequent meetings between and among nonprofit partners to facilitate relationship-building and teamwork. Monthly operations team meetings kept the community abreast of the initiative's efforts by including representatives from Ready for Work, school staff, Prince George's County staff, county officials, and local colleges. These meetings were highly beneficial for increasing collaboration and information-sharing among the various parties involved in the initiative. VPP encouraged school staff to lead these meetings, but someone from VPP was always present to offer supportive peer guidance when needed or requested.

Successful buy-in from school leadership was also instrumental to the initiative's success.

Interviewees cited SHS leadership's involvement and commitment to Ready for Work as a key factor in facilitating effective collaboration. The initiative's implementation required time and dedication from all stakeholders involved, including school staff. In addition, SHS leadership set an example for other staff and teachers: Their enthusiasm and support of the initiative's



efforts were necessary to achieve schoolwide buy-in. SHS leadership ensured that all in-school facets of Ready for Work ran smoothly: They carved out time to work on the initiative, provided physical space for the nonprofit partners, and regularly met with VPP and participating nonprofits to discuss the initiative's progress.

Ready for Work provided professional development opportunities to SHS staff.

VPP and SHS leadership understood the importance of supporting teachers in addition to students. VPP made teachers aware of relevant conferences, small group dialogues, and one-on-one meetings that might be of interest to their professional goals. These discussions and presentations exposed staff to teaching techniques and relevant subject material to pass on to their students. The small group dialogues and one-on-one meetings also encouraged teachers to voice their concerns and questions and to collaboratively identify solutions. The impact of effective school initiatives on (and by) teachers is often overlooked. In interviews, SHS leadership emphasized the importance of teacher enrichment by explaining how professional development improves teacher performance and morale. VPP collaborated with SHS's teachers throughout implementation of Ready for Work to build their teaching capacity and skills.

Ready for Work at SHS used evaluation data to inform the school's response to students' needs.

Child Trends was an external evaluator of Ready for Work; one of our roles was to administer a student survey to better understand student needs and outcomes. This survey shed light on unique student perspectives that are not collected through any other assessments. For instance, the survey gave the school insight into students' perceptions of safety, bullying activity, depressive symptoms, and risky sexual behaviors. SHS then used this information to inform and make changes. For example, student safety and security were one major concern; the survey results indicated that many students often did not feel safe at school, which signaled to the school administration the importance of improving security measures.

Challenges and Recommendations

While Ready for Work was successful in the aforementioned areas, it had several implementation challenges that offered lessons for future school-community partnerships. The following are based on reports and suggestions from the initiative's key stakeholders and fall under four main categories: buying in to Ready for Work's long-term vision, building trust with external organizations, prioritizing teacher involvement and commitment, and preparing and reacting to changes in the initiative's key players.



Foster the long-term vision of an initiative like Ready for Work with advance planning and buy-in from school leadership.

Ready for Work was a long-term initiative designed to create lasting, systemic change—not an easy, quick task—and some of the initiative’s goals were predicted to take years to materialize. Interview respondents described the school system as reactive to immediate concerns and needs: Short-term, pressing issues often take precedent over long-term goals. Ready for Work’s focus on strategy was, at times, at odds with this culture of urgency. Further, SHS leadership had several priority items that often took precedent over Ready for Work’s programming. School leadership dealt with several urgent matters every day that required their immediate attention, which created challenges for VPP and its nonprofit partners in advancing the Ready for Work initiative. VPP met frequently with both nonprofits and school leadership to center the initiative’s strategy and long-term vision.

To facilitate a long-term approach, we strongly recommend that schools prepare for such initiatives prior to implementation. Schools should be cognizant of the time, resources, and effort required to collaborate and plan with external organizations to build and implement such an initiative. In addition, all school staff should be included and involved in the initiative from its outset, as early buy-in fosters willingness among staff to dedicate the continuous time and effort needed for initiative-related tasks. In these planning conversations, schools should meet internally to discuss their needs, how these needs intersect with the initiative, and how the initiative can meet such needs. Schools must have realistic, clear, and honest conversations about school and student needs; about outcomes that can be achieved feasibly; and about the timeframe for achieving these outcomes.

Create trust between schools and external organizations by building relationships prior to implementation.

Establishing trust between school staff, nonprofit partners, and VPP was an initial hurdle. Because VPP and its nonprofit partners were external organizations, some SHS employees were concerned that they lacked an understanding of the SHS school community and culture. To partially mitigate this concern, VPP held frequent meetings with SHS staff and leadership to discuss the initiative’s goals and objectives, thereby building a foundation of trust as a precursor to effective collaboration. Trust began to form once SHS staff saw the value of VPP and its nonprofit partners, and the partners learned more about SHS’s student body and culture.

Similar initiatives should start building relationships prior to implementation. Organizations that plan to lead initiatives like Ready for Work should expect external agencies to educate themselves about the school’s priorities, needs, and culture. In return, school staff and leadership will need to determine how their priorities align with those of external organizations and with their role in the initiative.

The demands of partnership-based initiatives may occasionally engender conflict and friction. For example, VPP often hosted Ready for Work funder site visits at SHS for current and potential investors to learn more about the initiative and its progress. However, these site



visits sometimes conflicted with school staff schedules and/or school events and occasionally led to last-minute changes in planned site visits. In the future, such initiatives might require a formal agreement between all parties involved in planning and facilitating site visits. External organizations should respect school needs and boundaries, but schools should also provide adequate time and space for visits to occur; last-minute changes in plans can challenge relationships with the individuals and institutions that provide financial support to the initiative.

Solicit involvement and commitment from teachers to maintain a successful initiative.

While all interview respondents agreed that teachers were critical to Ready for Work's success—after all, teachers engage with students daily and are best equipped to identify their needs—the initiative had early challenges engaging teachers, for various reasons. One respondent suggested that greater levels of teacher collaboration and involvement in the initiative's planning stages could have increased buy-in. Ensuring that teachers understand the initiative's goals and strategies—and understand their role in achieving the mission—is just as important as leadership involvement. Unfortunately, teacher involvement was not always a priority in Ready for Work, which led to varied levels of teacher awareness of and participation.

Teachers are usually eager to see their students improve. However, many found it challenging to adjust their preexisting teaching methods and mindsets to better align with Ready for Work's mission. Some teachers were likely unclear about what Ready for Work was, or what it required, and others were skeptical of the initiative's interruptions of everyday school routines and schedules. To counter this challenge, VPP met with SHS administration and teachers to review the initiative's updates and results, and to show teachers how they would be involved with, and affected by, the services provided. The Ready for Work evaluation data provided new relevant information to SHS administration and staff, which inspired many to become more invested in the initiative and its overall success. One role for teachers in Ready for Work was to refer students to the services offered by nonprofit partners; however, teachers were more willing to do this once they understood these organizations' offerings. Teachers' referral rates increased with time and accumulated knowledge, allowing students greater access to the nonprofits' supports. One respondent attributed the success of Ready for Work to greater buy-in among teachers: If teachers are on board with a school-nonprofit partnership, they will help keep it going.

Prepare for staffing changes on the initiative's key roles.

Leadership and staff changes across PGCPs and SHS presented temporary setbacks for Ready for Work. In particular, new staff needed time to learn about the initiative's goals, programming, and stakeholders. These staffing changes temporarily interrupted the flow of programming, as midstream alterations were confusing for partners working within SHS. Bringing in new nonprofit program leads and coordinators midway through implementation posed the same challenge, especially if these individuals were assigned to work within SHS. As previously mentioned, it took time to build trust and relationships between the school and external



organizations, and the introduction of new nonprofit programming staff required additional effort and time to cultivate relationships with school staff and leadership. Similar initiatives can ease transitions by ensuring that all long-term staff are highly aware of, and educated about, the initiative so that the burden of training and educating newcomers falls on more than just a few individuals.

Conclusion

As the site of Ready for Work's first full implementation, Suitland High School's successes and challenges contain useful lessons for implementation of similar initiatives—especially those that aim to improve students' college and career readiness through the acquisition of technical and life skills. Dedication, collaboration, and communication were required from all Ready for Work stakeholders to provide SHS students with access to employment opportunities, life skills, and technical career skills. In addition, through concerted efforts to foster collaboration—including VPP's investment in an in-school director—Ready for Work was able to advance its goals of expanding CTE and youth employment opportunities, and deepening school and nonprofit relationships and partnerships.

Suggested citation

Gilbertsen, J., Peckoo, S., Carney, M., & Andrews, K. (2022). Lessons for Partners in School-Based Initiatives From Ready for Work at Suitland High School. *Child Trends*. <https://doi.org/10.56417/4105t704r>



**Venture
Philanthropy
Partners**

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