



Vancouver, Washington

Strengthening Neighborhoods Through Student Resilience

Intro

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 school 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, community is important in Vancouver. One way that the town is earning a place on the map is through its public school system. Self-described as *innovative* and *visionary*, VPS has a reputation of pioneering programs that promote excellence for teachers and students.¹ The district serves more than 23,500 students who represent great diversity and great need. More than 75 different languages are spoken in the district and 1 in 5 students live in a household where English is not the primary language.² More than half (52%) of the students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, an indicator of the poverty and economic hardship.³

Story

As in other areas around the country, residents of Vancouver have felt the pains of the economic recession, especially in the housing market. 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.⁴ So when the school district noticed an increase in chronic absenteeism among students, it didn't take long to understand that meeting basic needs like stable housing, food security, and other fundamentals should be part of the solution for improving school attendance.

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.

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.⁷

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). VPS began to scale its FCRC initiative in 2008 by connecting students and families with basic resources and services such as food, clothing and out-of-school time programs, through partnerships with more than 700 organizations.⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁵ For students, having these basic needs met works to reduce chronic absenteeism and 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 SNC 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. Current efforts also are being directed at establishing data sharing agreements between agencies to hone in on student needs, 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 to develop more resilient students and families.

About this Project

This study illustrates the principles in [Partner Build Grow](#), an online tool that helps schools, community groups, health care providers, and others develop plans to sustain and strengthen school-based social and emotional development initiatives and mental health supports to help children flourish. A four-pronged strategy—Building an Action Team, Mapping Assets, Connecting to the Policy Environment, and Communications—the Action Guide includes tools, templates, examples, and resources.

Partner Build Grow was developed by [The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools](#) (CHHCS) at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health. CHHCS promotes child wellness and school success by working with schools and communities to bridge health and education so that kids are happy, healthy, and motivated to learn. With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CHHCS explored promising practices in school-community partnerships. The study is based on a conversation held with members of the community coalition in 2015 and follow-up conversations with coalition leaders; quotes that are not cited are from these conversations. For an in-depth look at these and other communities and to learn more about the approach, visit Partner Build Grow at www.actionguide.healthinschools.org.

“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.”

–SNC Members

¹ Vancouver Public Schools, “About Us: Our Story and Mission.” Accessed: <http://vansd.org/mission/>

² Vancouver Public Schools, “About Us: Fast Facts.” Accessed: <http://vansd.org/fast-facts>

³ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington State Report Card, Accessed: <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us>

⁴ 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>

⁵ Galvez, M. and Simington, J. (2015). “Housing and Education Partnership: A Case Study of Vancouver, Washington.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

⁶ Vancouver Public Schools, “Family-Community Resource Centers.” Accessed: <http://vansd.org/fcrc/>

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, “Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools.” Accessed:

<http://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>