You Cannot Pick Up Spilled Water:

Report on the Seattle Housing Authority &
Seattle University Center for Community Engagement
Education Collaborative

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Findings: Practices that Support the SHA/SU CCE Collaborative

- Encourage Leadership at Every Level
- Cultivate Trust
- Build a Culture of Accountability
- Mitigate Difference in Culture & Process
- Invest in Authentic Relationships
- Seek Alignment in Vision & Values
- Exercise Collective Power
- Adapt
Executive Summary

The purpose of this study is to identify how Seattle Housing Authority (SHA), Seattle University Center for Community Engagement (CCE) and community partners have collaborated successfully over the course of the Choice Neighborhood Education Collaborative. Based on interviews, observations and review of documents in this study, the evaluators identified nine practices that have played key roles in the collaborative:

**Seize the Collaborative Window:** Both institutions were well-positioned to take advantage of the collaborative window when it opened, and both had collaborative entrepreneurs who had the capacity and networks needed to bring together key stakeholders and resources.

**Invest in Authentic Relationships:** SHA and CCE encourage staff across their organizations to build strong working relationships. Both SHA and CCE describe the relationships in the collaborative as authentic and sustained.

**Seek Alignment in Vision and Values:** SHA & CCE have identified alignment between their institutions’ respective values and vision. The connection between housing and education feels like a “natural fit,” and the executive leaders make intentional efforts to understand how their respective work overlaps.

**Build a Culture of Accountability:** SHA & CCE have built a culture of accountability that emphasizes shared responsibility, shared data and shared focus.

**Mitigate Differences in Culture and Process:** Both organizations take steps to mitigate differences in organizational culture by surfacing different expectations, norms and constraints and adjusting to each institution’s “ways of doing things.”

**Encourage Leadership at Every Level:** Leadership is evident at every level of the collaborative. Members of the executive team engage in regular dialogue and signal their support of the work. Staff work closely with families, emphasizing their ability to advocate for themselves and their children. Faculty at Seattle University are also empowered to connect their teaching and research with the work of the collaborative.

**Cultivate Trust:** Trust is clearly essential to the success of the SHA/CCE collaborative, and is supported by people consistently showing up, listening actively, and keeping the promises they make.

**Adapt:** Adaptation plays a critical part in collaborative. From the beginning, key leaders have embraced ambiguity, demonstrated humility, emphasized flexibility, and encouraged reflection, curiosity and experimentation.

**Exercise Collective Power:** As SHA and CCE look towards the future, sustainability for the collaborative lies in part in the network of relationships, communication and shared leadership formed over the past decade. The collaborative now has the opportunity to build the capacity of youth and families to lead and advocate for themselves.
I. Introduction

Since 2013, Seattle Housing Authority (SHA), in cooperation with Seattle University, Seattle Public Schools, the City of Seattle Parks and Reaction and several non-profits, has implemented a coordinated approach to ensure low-income children in the Yesler neighborhood have access to early learning programs, tutoring, summer academic enrichment programs, college preparation mentoring and scholarships.

Collaboration among the partners, including a strong working relationship between SHA and the Seattle University Center for Community Engagement (CCE), has been a key component to the success of the project.

The purpose of this study is to identify how SHA, CCE and the community partners in the Choice Neighborhood Education Collaborative have collaborated successfully over the course of the project. The goal is to identify what has worked and to make recommendations for continuing or replicating the collaboration in the future.

II. Background

In 2011, Seattle was one of five cities selected by the U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to receive a combined $122 million for housing redevelopment and comprehensive neighborhood revitalization through the Choice Neighborhoods program. A key initiative of the Obama Administration, Choice Neighborhoods was designed to provide flexible resources for local leaders to help transform high-poverty, distressed neighborhoods into mixed-income neighborhoods with affordable housing, safe streets, and good schools for every family (Bostic & Tate, nd). The Seattle Housing Authority received $30 million for housing and community development in Yesler Terrace, Washington State's oldest public housing developments located on 32 acres adjacent to the downtown business district and historic Chinatown-International District.

SHA had been planning for redevelopment of Yesler Terrace since at least 2006 when it formed a citizen review committee to guide the project. The SHA Choice Neighborhood plan included the replacement of 561 public housing units at Yesler Terrace with a mixed-income, transit-oriented community with access to employment, services and recreation. The plan also focused on residents' access to financial stability, quality health care and quality education leading to college or a living wage. The citizen review committee, charged with making recommendations on the redevelopment efforts, included residents, affordable housing and smart growth/sustainability advocates, city agencies and service providers. Kent Koth, Executive Director of the Center for Community Engagement at Seattle University, was invited to serve on the committee early in its formation.

Simultaneously, Seattle University was exploring opportunities to deepen its approach to service learning and enhance engagement between the university and the surrounding neighborhood, which includes Yesler Terrace. Kent Koth invited colleagues from SHA to join the advisory committee related to the university’s community engagement efforts. When the Choice Neighborhoods grant began, SHA asked Seattle University to serve as a key partner in the plan. At the same time, Seattle University, through the facilitation of CCE, launched the Seattle University Youth Initiative as an intensive university-wide effort to empower and support children and families within a neighborhood encompassing 100 square blocks adjacent to the university campus (Yamamura & Koth, 2018, p. x).
With the opportunities presented by Choice Neighborhoods award, SHA and CCE formally partnered on the educational goals embedded in grant. Together, in concert with other community partners, SHA and CCE formed the Choice Neighborhood Education Collaborative tasked with supporting a “cradle to career and college” academic pipeline for residents. The goal of the collaborative was to increase the number of children enrolled in evidence-based early learning programs, the number of children entering kindergarten ready to learn, and the number of youth who graduate from high school and are ready for college.

CCE’s Seattle University Youth Initiative (SUYY) served as the project’s backbone entity. Additional partners include Seattle Public Schools, the City of Seattle Parks and Reaction and several non-profits including Catholic Community Services, College Success Foundation, Neighborhood House, and the United Way of King County.

### III. Methods

This study used a developmental evaluation approach to understand which components of the collaborative have contributed to its success to date. According to Patton (2014), developmental evaluation is designed to inform and support innovative and adaptive development in complex, dynamic environments. Unlike more traditional forms of evaluation that try to predict and measure the outcomes of a program, developmental evaluation is intended to support learning and adaptation within situations of high complexity and uncertainty, and is often used in the early or transitional stages in social innovations. Developmental evaluation can be particularly useful for collaborations, allowing the evaluation team to integrate diverse perspectives from different parts of a system or network.

Components of this evaluation included (1) semi-structured interviews with twelve key stakeholders:

- **Seattle Housing Authority**
  - Director of Development
  - Director of the Office of Policy & Strategy Initiatives
  - Community Service Administrator
  - Education Engagement Specialist
  - Executive Director
  - Supportive Services Coordinator (2)

- **Seattle University**
  - Associate Professor, Art & Art History
  - Deputy Director, Center for Community Engagement
  - Executive Director, Center for Community Engagement
  - President

- **Bailey Gatzert Elementary**
  - Principal

In addition, the evaluators conducted (2) observations of key meetings, (3) reviewed relevant documents, and (4) situated the evaluation in a review of academic literature on collaboration.

The evaluators began by consulting closely with stakeholders at CCE and SHA to establish the parameters of the evaluation and identify stakeholders for interviews. Data collection took place from
the Spring of 2018 to the Fall of 2019. The evaluators transcribed and coded the interviews and drafted the report, which was reviewed by key stakeholders. This final report is primarily designed for the uses of SHA, Seattle University and community partners involved in the collaborative as they look towards the future.

IV. Findings

Forming an interorganizational collaboration often comes from a realization that one organization or resource cannot solve a complex social problem alone, and a hope that coordinated and combined effort among more entities will lead to better outcomes. Researchers who have studied the outcomes of such collaborations have found that collaborative arrangements may help organizations be more effective in spreading risk, building capacity, acquiring and leveraging resources, and addressing complex social problems (Tsasis, 2009).

While the potential outcomes of such collaborations have been well-documented, the social processes that underlie successful collaborations are less understood (p. 6). In a recent review of the research, Gazley (2017) points out that we know a great deal about the "why" and "what," but much less about the "how" of interorganizational collaborations.

This study focuses on how SHA and CCE successfully collaborated to design and deliver the Choice Neighborhood Educational Collaborative. Based on the interviews, observations and review of documents in this study, the evaluators identified eight key practices that supported the collaboration between SHA and CCE.

Finding 1: Seize the Collaborative Window

The Choice Neighborhood Educational Collaborative formed when leaders from SHA and CCE took advantage of a window of opportunity that opened for both organizations in 2011. Studies of interorganizational collaboration characterize this “collaborative window” as the confluence of four relatively independent streams: the problem stream, policy stream, social/political/economic stream and organizational stream (Lober, 1997; Takahashi & Smutny, 2002). For SHA and CCE, all four streams converged. There was widespread recognition of a problem; technical expertise needed to develop a solution; the political will to enact solutions; the social, political and economic context favorable to address the program; and two lead organizations that were open and willing to incorporate external factors and partners in their decision-making.

The presence of a collaborative window alone does not necessarily result in partnership formation (Takahasi & Smutny, 2002). Fortunately, both partners had done considerable work and were well-positioned at the right time. While SHA had been asking big questions about the redevelopment of Yesler Terrace, Seattle University had been engaged in a “profound effort” to reformulate the university’s longstanding approach to service learning. Like SHA, CCE had already actively solicited ideas and input from their stakeholders and had built strong lines of communication with partnering institutions. As one participant asserted, the collaborative “would not have happened in the way it happened...without this groundwork being laid.”

Researchers also stress that need for "collaborative entrepreneurs" who recognize the collaborative window and have the “capacity and networks to bring together relevant, important, and appropriate stakeholders and participants” (Takahashi & Smutny, 2002, p.168). When the Choice Neighborhood grant opportunity opened, the executive leaders of SHA and CCE were poised to respond. Participants in
the study also noted the many positive and effective ways that executive leaders from both institutions responded to the opportunity, including demonstrating their commitment, showing up consistently and engaging actively and thoughtfully in the early planning meetings.

**Finding 2: Invest in Authentic Relationships**

Effective and sustained collaborations depend on the establishment of a network of relationships, or what Gazley (2017) calls a “dynamic collaborative ecosystem.” SHA and CCE encouraged staff across their organizations to build positive working relationships and allowed staff the time needed to get to know each other through formal and informal interactions. Consistent staff and partner meetings fostered communication and emphasized dialogue. Staff from SHA and CCE regularly “showed up” at resident meetings to listen and engage. Building rapport takes both time and skill, and participants noted both as essential to their work.

The relationship between SHA and CCE was often described as unique, and one to be valued and emulated. Participants from SHA described past experiences with other university partners that were heavily transactional, and they expressed appreciation for Seattle University’s more engaged approach. Both SHA and CCE described the relationships among their staff, and between staff and residents, as authentic, sustained and transformational.

**Finding 3: Seek Alignment of Vision and Values**

Participants noted strong alignment between the values and vision of the two lead organizations. Prior to the collaboration, SHA and CCE had each been thoughtful in the development and articulation of their organization’s respective approaches. For SHA, this involved close attention to the educational challenges faced by low-income residents. For CCE, this meant asking critical questions about how the university could support youth and families in the surrounding neighborhood. Early on, a shared focus on improving the educational outcomes for residents became a central organizing principle. Participants noted that collaboration between two institutions focused on housing and education felt like a “natural fit.”

As natural as the collaboration felt in the early days, it still required a great deal of planning and coordination. Here, SHA and CCE drew from shared values including a commitment to inclusion and equity, learning, innovation and cooperation. As they began to plan together, the executive leaders of both organizations sought to understand where their respective work overlapped. This period of discovery was intentional and characterized by openness and curiosity about each organization’s assets and strengths. Once the grant was received, SHA and CCE held joint sessions to consider “provocative approaches,” asking: how do we translate this into the concrete outcomes that we really want to see? What resources do we each bring, and how do we align them to achieve our goals? Openness and curiosity continued at every level as CCE and SHA staff consulted each other and sought the perspectives of the families and students in the neighborhood throughout the planning and implementation of the collaborative.

**Finding 4: Build a Culture of Accountability**

The collaborative required continuous effort to mitigate the competing demands that the stakeholders experienced. Many respondents noted that everyone in the collaborative had many “polarities” or competing pulls on their time. SHA and CCE regularly asked partners to focus on the families and
students in the Yesler area and to align their work to shared goals and objectives, even as they recognized the larger contexts and demands of their work.

The alignment across partners was also influenced by the establishment of a shared culture of accountability. Here CCE and SHA emphasized shared responsibility, helping everyone understand their essential roles in meeting the objectives and encouraging them to take ownership in the process. Accountability was reinforced by regularly sharing data, interpreting the results, and working together to adjust and develop solutions.

**Finding 5: Mitigate Differences in Culture and Process**

Both organizations took steps to mitigate the differences between the different organizational cultures and lines of accountability at SHA and CCE. The organizations work on different budget cycles, so both had to pay attention to the timing of key decisions and outputs. SHA also noted the restrictions placed on public monies, and the contrast of the timing and demands of the federal bureaucracy with that of the University and other community partners. Many noted the importance of surfacing and addressing different norms and practices, at times adjusting “ways of doing things” so that the collaborative work could succeed.

**Finding 6: Encourage Leadership at Every Level**

Effective collaboration involves engagement and action by individuals, teams and organizations (Gazley, 2017), and participants emphasized that leadership was expected and encouraged at every level of the collaborative. Executive leaders of both organizations, including Andrew Lofton, the CEO of SHA and Father Stephen Sundborg, President of Seattle University, were vocal in their support and often present in the collaborative. The joint meetings held by executive staff of both organizations fostered dialogue and signaled to everyone that the leadership team supports and values the work.

The staff created strong patterns of ongoing communication and consultation with colleagues and with families. Many participants specifically noted how the Education Engagement Specialist acts as an “incredibly powerful” part of the collaborative. As someone fully embedded in the schools, in the community, with SHA and with the collaborative, she has close relationships with those most affected by the work. She also plays a key role in bridging systems and empowering families to advocate for themselves and their children. She described her approach, emphasizing the importance of recognizing leadership of the community,

> Start from the community. Don’t come up with your own program please. Trust the community. They know what’s better for them, for their kids. Give them an open platform that they can walk into and help you and guide you to the job that you want to do.

Faculty at Seattle University also noted that CCE has empowered them to take leadership in improving and integrating aspects of the collaboration into their teaching and research. For faculty who are inclined towards community engaged research and education, CCE plays an important role in connecting faculty with community partners and supporting faculty to “engage their students mindfully” in the community surrounding the university.
Finding 7: Cultivate Trust

Within the research on collaboration it is widely accepted that without trust, collaboration will not succeed. The power dynamics that exist between organizations, and the ways in which the nonprofit and public sectors forces competition between entities, can erode trust and encourage territorial behaviors. (Mulroy 2003, p 58).

Trust building in collaboration is rarely easy, and requires constant nurturing as well as flexibility and adaptation to circumstances (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Trust in the collaborative was associated with factors already mentioned above such as commitment, planning, time and patience, and space for diverse voices. One participant noted that CCE staff were “really good listeners” who paid attention to the needs and interests of partners, students and families alike.

Trust was also reinforced through consistency and follow-through. People in the collaborative were committed to doing what they said they were going to do, regularly reinforcing the kind of “trust-building loop” that sustains trust over time (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). In large and small interactions, members of the collaborative showed up and lived up to their mutual expectations.

Finding 8: Adapt

Adaptive leaders "create the conditions that enable dynamic networks of actors to achieve common goals in an environment of uncertainty" by embracing ambiguity, sharing leadership, leading with empathy, learning through self-correction, and creating value for the network (Torres, Reeves & Love, 2013, p. 34). Research suggests that such adaptive leadership may be a critical aspect of successful collaborations over time (Gazley, 2017).

Adaptive leadership played a critical part in the SHA/CCE collaborative. From the beginning, key leaders embraced ambiguity, describing the ways that they worked collectively to evolve their thinking and approach even as they were moving the work forward. Others emphasized the role that flexibility and humility played, noting the times when they saw partners step back and make room for each other’s strengths and contributions. Reflection, curiosity and experimentation were also essential, as SHA and CCE encouraged each other to consistently question what they were learning and what they needed to shift.

V. Conclusion & Next Steps

Even as participants reflected on the successes over the past eight years, they are asking important questions about the future of the collaborative. How do we make sure that new staff and new partners are fully engaged? When the federal grant monies end, how do we fund this work? How do we scale this model, reach more people and encourage the development of similar partnerships? How do we sustain this collaborative over time?

As many noted, the answers to the questions of sustainability may lie in part in the relationships and networks that have been cultivated and strengthened by the practices highlighted in this study. Because of this work, the future of the collaborative is no longer dependent on just one or two people. Instead,
the strength of the collaborative is embedded in the strong networks across SHA, CCE and the community partners who have been empowered to lead from where they are in the work. As one participant noted, this level of commitment and communication between the partners also “sets a good framework” for helping anyone who joins to support, continue and enhance the work in progress.

As new sources of funding are sought, the partners can still “do a lot that does not require money.” The institutions and partners can continue to demonstrate their commitment to the collaborative, continue to make time for new and ongoing relationships, intentionally cultivate trust, engage in shared planning and communication, and encourage leadership at every level of the collaborative.

For the next phase, sustainability also lies in building the leadership capacity of community members and increasing collective power. As participants noted, hundreds of families and students are already exercising their power to advocate for themselves within the school system and beyond,

Once they’ve interacted with a powerful institution like the school, they will do the same in other places. This will impact their ability and their children’s abilities in all kinds of ways. [We] are intentionally building peer leadership for youth and families so that someday [we] won’t be needed there. And if those families then are teaching other families as they come in, that is powerful in a million different ways. That is sustainability.

Looking forward, members of the collaborative may consider how they can build and expand on the strengths of relationships and networks that this work has created, bringing community members together to develop solutions and advocate for change and improvement in the systems that impact their lives.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX

Interview questions:

(1) What is/has been your role in the collaborative?
(2) What other partners, besides SHA/SU, have helped to build the network? How would you map the network?
(3) What do you believe is successful about the collaborative?
   a. What has led to this success?
   b. What have you done that has worked?
   c. What have others done that has worked?
(4) In reflecting on the partnership, can you tell me about any experiences that were challenging, and that may have led to learning opportunities for you and the other partners?
(5) What has changed over time as a result of the collaborative?
   a. What has changed for the partners?
   b. What has changed for the children, youth and families? In your opinion, do families feel like their lives have improved because of this partnership? Why or why not?
(6) If you were giving advice to colleagues who wanted to start a similar partnership, what advice would you give them?
(7) If you were giving advice to your successors in the collaborative, what elements of the working relationship would you encourage them to maintain?