



## **Collaborating to Meet the Moment: Lessons Learned from Our Evaluations of Cross-Sector Partnerships**

March 15, 2020 marked the beginning of the COVID-19 “lockdown” when states across the country began issuing “shelter-in-place” orders, restricting public gatherings, and school systems were ordered to close, in an effort to stem the rapid spread of the deadly virus that upended our world and claimed the lives of over seven million people worldwide. Having approached the five-year anniversary of the lockdown, our team has taken a moment to reflect on the work that we engaged in to support clients, their partners, and communities who rallied to support student learning, teacher burnout, remote instructional needs, and gaps in access to basic needs.

As researchers, educators, systems leaders, and families continue to grapple with the pandemic’s unintended impacts on our young people and changes to our educational landscape, we believe it is important to (1) remember and honor the hard work of those who did their best to continue serving children and families during a dangerous and confusing time; and (2) remember the lessons that emerged, so that they can be applied, as appropriate.

The text that follows describes high level takeaways from our evaluations of collective efforts between staff at local educational agencies (LEAs), community-based organizations or nonprofits, and public or private funders who collaborated to meet the needs of students, families, and educators in the pandemic’s evolving context. These efforts entailed both public and philanthropic assistance to school districts and county offices of education, to update strategic plans, develop professional learning offerings, think through socioemotional supports for students, refine family engagement approaches, and more. While the sustainability of these shifts vary, several learnings and approaches hold true for the place-based and cross-sector collaborations our team continues to evaluate.

### **Accepting new support for sustainable change often requires additional work upfront.**

When evaluating public and philanthropic investments, we often hear from staff at LEAs and nonprofit or other community-based organizations that they took on the opportunity to receive additional resources without realizing the time, actors, and effort it would entail. Receiving interpersonal support from an external partner can feel like onboarding a new employee and entail committing to more meetings, in hopes of long-term support and/or eventual work reduction. Even the receipt of financial assistance alone can involve additional collaboration with colleagues in other departments to sufficiently meet funding and reporting requirements.



When funders and policymakers clearly communicate the expectations and time commitments their grants or initiatives entail, their prospective grantees are able to make more informed decisions about their participation and staffing. For example, if reporting requirements require data on student attendance, representatives for the LEA can work with their institutional researchers to establish this infrastructure and communicate needs in advance. Similarly, if an effort is focused on increasing communication with parents and guardians, being clear about the nature of these engagements may help potential grantees understand whether staff from family resource centers and/or educators are best positioned to provide context to strengthen implementation.

### **Knowledge of the local and systems contexts matters.**

When philanthropies and government agencies provide non-financial supports to LEAs, school and district staff often prefer an external entity (e.g., professional learning developer, technical assistance provider) with knowledge of their local context. Attention to contextual information has fostered relationship- and trust building, and may initially include local resources (e.g., business or college partnerships, availability of substitute teachers), family demographics, and community developments (e.g., policy shifts, access to public transportation). Once the partnership is established, the external partner's knowledge base should expand to include an awareness of recent and existing initiatives the LEA has undertaken, communication practices, and strategic plans, since it can influence implementation and sustainability. As one staff member at a school district explained, the technical assistance they received through a private investment "was a little bit of a slow start. But [the external entity was] wise in taking their time to gather information, to have conversations, to go through our current materials and stuff, because they were able to really enhance the work, not create new work." Stakeholders shared that this process helped develop shared understandings of the intended goals and generate greater LEA buy-in.

### **Prioritizing in-person gatherings can help strengthen relationships, build trust, and ultimately result in more effective collaborations.**

Many stakeholders have described virtual gatherings as useful for maintaining relationships, leveraging distant resources (e.g., guest speakers), providing flexible opportunities to engage capacity-strapped partners, and convening groups with fewer resources. The benefits are plentiful for those with stable internet access. However, in-person meetings are still deemed beneficial at the start of the relationship building process. This can be particularly true for collaborations with power dynamics at play or across entities from different locales. Further, in-person engagements can support efforts in "digital deserts" where internet access is limited or unreliable. As one LEA staff member explained, having an external entity join them in person



made the institution feel like “They're part of our collective team and not people that are off in another state that are dictating to us what we do.” In spite of this, external entities and LEAs alike must be mindful of any health concerns, accessibility considerations, and capacity constraints. In coordinating any in-person gatherings, both parties may benefit from open dialogue about meeting conditions that support full participation for everyone involved.

**Mindful and timely communication is essential for both efficiency and rapport across stakeholders.**

Communication styles, daily priorities, and perceptions of responsiveness can greatly vary across sectors. As such, these factors can underlie the efficacy of new partnerships in ways that may feel passive or otherwise hard to pinpoint in real time. To mitigate these potential issues, partners must be deliberate about developing shared communication norms, such as regular meetings, standard agendas, and clear next steps between check-ins (e.g., drafts to complete, when to follow-up on unanswered emails). Doing so may help alleviate stress for the LEAs that funders and external entities intend to support. Further, this stability lets partners know what to expect. While LEAs are no longer dealing with the same types of extenuating circumstances brought on over the course of the pandemic, staff across departments and levels generally continue to balance multiple, often competing priorities. Through clear, agreed upon communication norms, funders and other stakeholders can help move the work forward, demonstrate their interest in genuine partnerships with LEAs, and pivot when needed.

**Changemakers often look for shared learning and community.**

One of the most common suggestions LEAs and nonprofit or CBO staff ask SPR to share with funders is a request for exchanging best practices and lessons learned across those receiving similar philanthropic or government agency support. This can help LEAs to expand their understanding of what is possible through the opportunity, encourage collaboration and collegiality across those involved, and strengthen their understanding of the funder’s intended outcomes. In addition, those “on the ground” can vent, troubleshoot, and validate the experiences of the other practitioners doing the work.

We hope these themes prove useful to funders, non-profits, and other stakeholders hoping to support LEAs with their continued efforts to engage in institutional reform and/or support students. Our team welcomes readers to share additional learnings or related experiences by engaging with us on LinkedIn.