Silicon Valley Out-of-School-Time Collaborative

The Issue

Out-of-school-time (OST) programs can have an important impact on students' academic and social development, boosting their chances for graduating from high school and succeeding in college. With those goals in mind, a group of funders created the Silicon Valley OST Collaborative to improve the quality of academic skill development provided by out-of-school programs for the region's middle and high school students. In 2013, the funders agreed to add an important but often overlooked element, development of noncognitive factors such as academic mindset, social skills, and learning strategies. Many of these skills are a natural fit for out-of-school settings and, unlike traditional academic skills development, can be cultivated in young people in a variety of ways that don't depend on specific academic content knowledge among staff.

Fast Facts

Type of collaboration: Coordinate funding

Established: 2010

Funders involved: Sand Hill Foundation, Silicon Valley Social Venture Fund (SV2), David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Sobrato Family Foundation

Shared goal: To develop the organizational capacity of OST providers and improve the quality and effectiveness of OST programming in the Silicon Valley

Funding committed by Packard to date: $622,500

How the Collaborative Worked

The Silicon Valley OST Collaborative, launched in 2010, supports nine local OST organizations to develop and strengthen academic skills for middle and high school students. It had three goals:

- To build the capacity of each participant organization to achieve a significantly increased level of organizational impact,

- To create a learning community focused on excellence in after-school and summer academic programming, and

- To advance the field of after-school and summer academic services, collectively aspiring to demonstrate and share models for effectiveness with others outside our regional area.

The nine grantees varied in terms of program type (e.g., after-school, summer school, charter school), program focus, grades served, organizational size, and the tenure of their executive directors. But all nine shared an explicit academic focus in their OST programming. Each organization received a $45,000 annual grant, an opportunity for some additional funding, and important nonfinancial supports: five "learning community" meetings per year that brought all nine executive directors and the four funders together; one to three seminars with national experts; access to Taproot Foundation grants; and a one-to-one mentorship between each executive director and a funder.

In the first year of the collaborative, funders met regularly outside of the learning community setting to plan and share responsibilities. Concerned that their consensus-style governance process was cumbersome and time-consuming, at the end of the first year the funders asked Ash McNeely, executive director of the Sand Hill Foundation, to take the lead. Each of the other funders ended up with supporting roles: the Silicon Valley Social Venture Fund (a donor circle) acted as fiscal sponsor; Packard brought strong experience with learning communities as well as knowledge about OST programs in other parts of the country; and the Sobrato Family Foundation, which came in later, contributed funds to provide for evaluations in the second and third years.

Mixing grantees and funders in an intensive series of learning community sessions is a very unusual feature of the Silicon Valley OST Collaborative. "I had initially been skeptical of learning together with funders and grantees, since this was not our typical way of operating" said Irene Wong, director of local grant making for the Packard Foundation. "But there's been real value in having both groups in a room learning together. It's built greater trust among everyone and given each of us stronger appreciation and understanding of each other's work." Sand Hill's McNeely agreed: "It's given grantees a relationship with funders that most of them don't have." She also emphasized that the time spent working together has led to an unusual degree of candor. "As funders, we've ended up being transparent about what we don't know, about what we want to learn, and about our own foundations' weaknesses."

Results

A three-year evaluation, conducted by Learning For Action Group, looked at the extent to which the Silicon Valley OST Collaborative succeeded in its goals of strengthening the grantee organizations and increasing program reach, quality, and effectiveness leading to better student outcomes. Among the findings:

- All grantees reported they improved their evaluation capacity, and at least two-thirds reported some or significant progress in each of the other areas of capacity.

- All grantees expanded the reach of their programs and the number of students they serve, for a collective increase of 27 percent. Many grantees achieved this by establishing new partnerships with other nonprofits or launching their programs in new school sites.

- All grantees expanded their programming to meet their students' needs, many by adding college prep supports to their curricula and a few by expanding the grade levels they covered in order to provide more continuous support to their students.

- Some grantees had evidence that student outcomes improved during the course of the initiative, while others have seen early signs of improvement.

- All grantees found the initiative's non-financial supports to be of even greater value than the financial support.

- For the funders, the initiative improved their practice by strengthening their commitment to funding capacity and operating support, providing multiyear grants, engaging deeply with grantees, and working in collaboration with other funders.
- Funders also deepened their knowledge of the OST field and strengthened their relationships with the local leaders.

Key Takeaways

Several success factors emerge from this work:

- **Clarify funder roles:** While the OST funders learned a tremendous amount in working by consensus, the collaborative became more efficient and effective once it asked one funder (the Sand Hill Foundation) to take the lead. The other funders also sought to differentiate roles so they, too, could focus on what they brought to the table.

- **Use external consultants selectively, especially when leanly staffed:** The funders relied on external consultants both to facilitate the learning community sessions and to help develop the overall strategy. The consultants brought a valuable point of view and important skills to the work.

- **Learn together as funders and grantees:** The evaluators helped the initiative define "moving the needle" in terms of community impact rather than focusing solely on organizational capacity. The evaluation also provided important information about which types of capacity building had contributed most to organizational change. Further, the executive directors and funders found substantial value in the amount of time they spent learning together, building trust, and helping each learn more about the other's work and perspectives.

- **Unrestricted funding provides needed flexibility:** Packard made an extra $25,000 available in 2013 to advance the grantees' exploration of adding non-cognitive skill development to the OST programs. As McNeely observed: "Every collaborative budget needs flexible, unallocated funding that can be brought to the table at an opportune moment to take advantage of group ideas and momentum."