

The Role of the Backbone Organization in Strengthening 21st Century Community Learning Centers



HOW MIGHT A BACKBONE ORGANIZATION SERVE TO INCREASE COORDINATION AND ACCESS TO PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR FAMILIES?

For 25 years, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program has provided afterschool and summer enrichment and learning opportunities to millions of youths who reside in communities that experience poverty. Although *community* is a formal part of the program's name, the degree to which 21st CCLC-funded programs engage more broadly in their schools and neighborhoods varies substantially from one program to the next. Partnering with community-based organizations to expand programming is considered a common practice for a 21st CCLC program. However, it is rarer for a 21st CCLC program to deliberately position itself within a larger community-based initiative aimed at comprehensively addressing the needs of students and families.

Collective impact initiatives are coordinated approaches to social issues wherein a dedicated backbone organization plays a pivotal role in facilitating collaboration among diverse stakeholders in pursuit of a common goal (Kania & Kramer 2011). In our study of promising practices across 21st CCLC programs, we identified instances of 21st CCLC programs operating within the larger contexts of collective impact initiatives. In exemplary cases, we observed 21st CCLC grantees even taking on the role of a backbone organization, spearheading collective impact initiatives and creating structures to ensure goal setting, data sharing, and continuous communication among partners.

With funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) conducted the **21st CCLC Integrated Service Delivery Study**, a 3-year project designed to:



Identify 21st CCLC programs that are integral parts of broader systems characterized by the coordination of multiple programs, activities, and services



Document strategies and approaches that support the coordination and integration of services; and



Explore how students and families may benefit from integrated and coordinated service delivery

This brief is part of a series highlighting exemplary strategies and approaches to service delivery that AIR observed in Illinois, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and Washington. Each brief resulting from the study summarizes key findings based on an initial center survey or a series of interviews and focus groups with 21st CCLC project directors, site coordinators, program staff, school administrators, partners, and teachers in a subset of centers demonstrating enhanced levels of service coordination and integration.

Extensive research has delved into the pivotal role of backbone organizations in effectively leveraging cross-sector partnerships in pursuit of addressing complex issues. When taken on by an existing non-profit, the backbone can provide crucial credibility and infrastructure to an initiative. However, the backbone organization may face challenges if its neutrality is compromised, leading to accusations of wielding undue power or control over the initiative (University of Michigan, 2020). Likewise, backbone organizations may oftentimes fall short in actively and authentically engaging the community's most affected members, which impedes the success of the overall initiative (Wolf, 2016).

In the cities of Newport, Rhode Island, and Chicago, Illinois, we've witnessed two backbone organizations—**Newport Partnership for Families (NPFF) in Rhode Island** and **Brighton Park Neighborhood Network (BPNN) in Chicago**—partnering with 21st CCLC programs to expand access to culturally competent and holistic services and supports for students, families, and community members. For 21st CCLC grantees aspiring to become integrated into broader service delivery systems, these exemplary backbone organizations provide valuable lessons. By joining an existing collective impact initiative, like NPFF, 21st CCLC grantees can join a larger network of programming, leveraging shared resources and expertise to amplify their impact. Alternatively, as seen in BPNN, 21st CCLC grantees may consider taking on the mantle of backbone organizations themselves, leading the coordination of supports

and services across multiple organizations to better serve the needs of their 21st CCLC programs' students and families. In either scenario, embracing the role of or partnering with backbone organizations offers 21st CCLC grantees an opportunity to enhance their effectiveness and extend their reach within the communities they serve.

Organizations implementing 21st CCLC programs that seek to become or collaborate with local backbones can consider adopting strategies such as these:



Building and leveraging existing relationships among partner agencies to foster and encourage collaboration, both within and beyond the initiative



Continually assessing community needs and strategically recruiting partners to effectively address those needs



Authentically engaging community members by including them in the process of creating a shared vision and elevating them as vital partners within the initiative itself

This brief delves deeper into these themes through the exploration of distinctive histories, contexts, and approaches to implementing collective impact initiatives employed by NPFF and BPNN.

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NEWPORT PARTNERSHIP FOR FAMILIES

In the city of Newport, Rhode Island, a collaborative effort among the city's numerous nonprofit organizations, funders, and local businesses has emerged to address some of the community's most entrenched challenges.

The Newport Family and Child Opportunity Zone (NFCOZ), led by the East Bay Community Action Program, showcases the significant benefits of collaboration for 21st CCLC programs. Operating within Claiborne Pell Elementary School, NFCOZ's 21st CCLC program has actively engaged in partnerships with local organizations conducting similar work. The aim is to collectively strengthen the program's quality of summer programs across the city while tapping into shared resources and support networks. The director of NFCOZ described a community "very used to and very comfortable working together on a variety of initiatives," highlighting the unique environment in which program providers prioritize collaboration and shared goals over competition and territorialism.

When exploring the enabling conditions that have fostered this collaborative environment among partners, the pivotal role of NPFF becomes apparent. Founded in 1990 with the financial support of the Rhode Island Foundation, NPFF has served as the backbone organization for a coordinated network of more than 60 agencies and businesses working to strengthen the Newport community and its families. Over the years, NPFF has capitalized on the variety of funders and community-based organizations present in Newport by creating a platform to coordinate service delivery, eliminate redundancies, and comprehensively address service gaps. NPFF has also served as catalyst for relationship building among its diverse partners. By facilitating open communication channels and hosting monthly membership meetings, NPFF provides opportunities for organizational leaders, like the director of NFCOZ, to meet others doing similar work and identify opportunities for collaboration and synergy.

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The structure of Newport Partnership for Families I think allows us to really know each other. And so, I always feel like there's somebody within an organization that I can call because I know who they are. It may not be the person that I actually need to speak to about that particular issue, but I know that if there was somebody that I needed to talk to down at Newport Mental Health or MLK Center, Boys and Girls Club, I knew a person to reach out to because of the structure of the partnership.

— Director, NFCOZ

Likewise, both NPFF members and the initiative's website emphasize the integral role of data-driven decision making in monitoring the progress of the initiative and its impact. To do so, **NPFF manages data sharing across organizations and partners**, including Newport Public Schools, and **conducts regular needs assessments** within the community. In recent years, NPFF has had to pivot its approach to service delivery and engagement to account for the community's influx of refugee and Spanish-speaking children and families. To address a gap in services for Hispanic and Latino families, for example, NPFF has supported the creation of the organization Conexión Latina, which now frequently assists other participating organizations in translating materials and providing support for English learners.



NPFF's success hinges on its ability to **foster trust among partners**. NPFF's status as a neutral party exclusively dedicated to supporting the initiative plays a pivotal role in fostering this trust, as an independent quality advisory for the initiative explains:

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It is really hard to be a lead agency among your peers when you're doing the same work. And the fact that they have a neutral [organization] that can look at things honestly, clearly, and bring that feedback to the group without it being seen as an agenda is very important.

— Quality Advisor, R3 Initiative

The establishment of a culture of trust among service providers engaged in similar work has greatly mitigated the potential turf wars or competition for scarce funding and resources that are often encountered in other communities with multiple community-based organizations. Notably, organizations in NPFF will oftentimes jointly apply for grants or respond to requests for proposal—a practice incentivized by funders such as the van Beuren Charitable Foundation, which actively strives to connect different organizations and encourages multiple collaborators on its applications. Likewise, organizations have successfully collaborated within the various initiatives spearheaded through NPFF over the years. Through these initiatives, organizations have come together through NPFF to tackle complex societal issues such as the need for equity in education and greater opportunities for workforce training or family and community engagement, and, notably, to address summer learning loss among elementary school students.

Among these initiatives, the Reading Reaps Rewards (R3) Initiative stands out as a prime example of how 21st CCLC programs can leverage the collective impact model to their advantage. Rather than relying solely on the 21st CCLC grant to sustain its summer program, NFCOZ at Pell Elementary School has successfully blended and braided additional funding from both the school and the R3 Initiative to implement a 6-week Summer Learning Academy. Collaborating with three other community-based organizations doing similar work, NFCOZ has also received curricular support and professional development from NPFF, ensuring a high standard of program quality. In the following section, we delve deeper into the pivotal role played by NPFF in spearheading the R3 Initiative.

Reading Reaps Rewards Initiative (R3): A Case Study of Collective Impact

The **R3** program, a collaborative learning initiative conducted at four different sites, including Pell Elementary School's 21st CCLC site, Newport County YMCA, the Boys & Girls Club of Newport County, and the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center, aims at addressing the "summer slide" for Pell Elementary kids. Before R3, these summer programs had previously applied separately to the same funders. Preceding the establishment of R3, these summer programs pursued funding individually from common sources, resulting in a lack of coordination and intense competition from finite resources. Recognizing this inefficiency, a funding officer at the Rhode Island Foundation advised these groups to collaborate on a unified proposal to the Safe Schools/Healthy Student grant funded by SAMHSA. R3 emerged from that work.



This whole infrastructure came out of the student success model funded by United Way of Rhode Island in the early 2000s. And the first thing they did was an inventory of who were all the people that were interacting with students in the schools and how do we bring them together and just talk about what are they doing and their sources of funding, which was smart, strategic, and they built from there. What came out of that I think was . . . every organization has their culture . . . they're getting better at not competing and including, [and] I would say I've seen growth in the last three years. Sometimes that's tested, but they're learning from their mistakes. Every time they test it and do something a little off, people push back, which I think is what you can see is the health of the relationship. — *Quality Advisor, R3 Initiative*

As the backbone organization, NPFF plays a crucial role in spearheading and overseeing the initiative. When R3 began, NPFF invited the partner organizations to **create a shared vision for the initiative, along with measurable goals**. Partner organizations then collaborated to define specific metrics for assessing impact, such as tracking the number of students who have attended the program for at least 20 days.

Likewise, **NPFF** regularly **supports the initiative's continuous improvement efforts** by administering feedback surveys to students, parents, and participating organizations and facilitating regular convenings for participating organizations to reflect on ongoing successes and challenges. **NPFF** strives to maintain consistent quality across program sites, ensuring that parents can confidently select any of the summer programs for their children:



What's nice about that is a family can choose the program that best meets their child's needs. Even though their classroom teacher may say, '*Summer Learning Academy is a great option for your child,*' they may say, '*But the MLK Center is my home base. That's where I want my child to go.*' Awesome. It's a high-quality program. They're going to have a great experience. It doesn't matter which program they go to; they're going to still have a high-quality experience.

— *Director, NFCOZ*

Finally, NPFF helps ensure the sustainability of the initiative by frequently sharing out its data to funders to demonstrate the initiative's impact. This practice ensures ongoing funding for the initiative and relieves community-based organizations of the task of identifying or leveraging their own funding sources. Consequently, individual sites can prioritize implementation of high-quality programming, yielding tangible benefits for the students served.

... organizations have come together through **NPFF** to tackle complex societal issues such as the need for equity in education and greater opportunities for workforce training

In conclusion, NPFF has emerged as an exemplary backbone organization, fostering collaboration, trust, and strategic coordination among diverse stakeholders in the Newport community. Through initiatives like the R3 program, NPFF has showcased the potential of collective impact initiatives to meaningfully engage 21st CCLC programs in implementing high-quality and data-driven programming.

In the next section, we turn to the example of BPNN to address another issue plaguing many communities across the country: the lack of culturally competent wraparound services for immigrant and refugee populations.

BRIGHTON PARK NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORK

The Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC) is a nonprofit organization deeply rooted in the predominantly Latino community of Brighton Park, located in southwest Chicago.

BPNC adopts a multifaceted approach to community capacity building, engaging in community organizing, providing mental health services, and facilitating access to various community resources. Moreover, BPNC has forged strong partnerships with Brighton Park's local public schools, where it implements comprehensive full-service community school programming. This community schools model, largely supported by funding from the 21st CCLC grant, is designed to improve educational outcomes for at-risk students through academic support, social-emotional support, violence prevention programs, enrichment programs, and mental health services.¹



Meeting the diverse needs of students and families solely through 21st CCLC and school funding presents a significant challenge. Fortunately, BPNN has been able to successfully mobilize the resources within the Brighton Park community to serve students and families more comprehensively. Recognizing the need in Brighton Park for broader social service support, particularly for its Spanish-speaking population, BPNC established the Brighton Park Neighborhood Network (BPNN) in 2012, through funding from United Way of Metro Chicago. BPNN, which is the first neighborhood network within Chicago, has since evolved from just a handful of community partners to a network of more than 70 member organizations, including other social service providers, 16 neighborhood schools, city departments, small businesses, and other community stakeholders.

BPNN's mission, according to its [website](#), is “to build the capacity of our community to dramatically improve outcomes for every resident by providing comprehensive support in violence prevention, education, health, and employment.” Various stakeholders involved with BPNN further articulated the initiative's focus on “comprehensive” or holistic supports:

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It started with the whole idea that our families don't only need one service; we need to have a different approach, a holistic approach to be able to serve the entire family and meet the entire family's needs.

I think the coordination of services . . . we do it well, and it's evident that it obviously is a great approach that we have to being able to serve the entire family and meet more than one [of the] needs of the family . . . That coordination of services allows us to be able to dig a little deeper and be able to meet those needs, whether it's more needs that that individual has or that the family has. So I think that's one way that that coordination of services can benefit the entire family.

— Director of Community Partnerships, BPNC

To ensure that the initiative focused on issues that mattered to the community, BPNN held **focus groups with community members** while drafting their vision statement. The needs that emerged from those focus groups then influenced the kinds of partnerships BPNN initiated. For example, when immigrant families identified a lack of workforce training opportunities, BPNC created a specific grant for vocational training programming, which the organization, Poder, ended up receiving. Since drafting that vision statement, BPNN continues to assess community needs, such as by conducting focus groups and collecting surveys.

Finally, BPNN further contributes to service coordination through management of the online referral tool Now Pow, which streamlines data collection and sharing between the 70-plus members of the network. As BPNN's data coordinators explains, Now Pow enables different organizations within the network to collect and share demographic data and referrals across organizations. Having a centralized location also enables BPNN to then generate reports and graphics that communicate the most pressing needs of the community and identify areas of potential coordination for the organizations in the network.

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A lot of the data that we get from Now Pow that these organizations use is, like for example, the number of referrals that are sent for certain services such as mental health service, SNAP benefits, the list goes on. **Using this tool makes it easier to facilitate these referrals for the use of services.** So, for example, like Centro Saran, if they make a referral to, for example, Poder's ESL classes, they're able to see those two . . . Both of them, including a third partner, is able to see that referral and they can better coordinate . . . other services that the client might benefit from. — *BPNC Data Coordinator*

Furthermore, BPNN's exemplary approach to **cultural competence** in its service delivery emerges as a model for how backbone agencies can meaningfully engage and uplift the communities they serve. A prime illustration of this is seen in BPNN's Promotoras de Salud, or Parent Health Promoters, who play a pivotal role in community engagement. These Parent Health Promoters, who are often parent or community members, are trained by BPNN to disseminate information about the health services available through the network within the broader community. We expand on this theme:

Empowering Communities: The Role of Promotoras de Salud

Promotoras de Salud (or health promoters) are community advocates trained by BPNC to spread the word about available health services and destigmatize mental health issues. On a given day, Promotoras will march block to block across the Brighton Park neighborhood, knocking on doors to survey each family's health needs. By going out into the neighborhood, Promotoras aim to connect with people who may be hard to reach through traditional means.

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This is an opportunity for us to really provide dedication but also collectively give awareness around what the resources are around mental health services, especially before it becomes a crisis, and do it in a way that's culturally attuned as well, so that folks know who the therapist is, or in this case who the therapist is that's going to be serving that adult, that parent . . . especially because the adults tend to have increased barriers for access to mental health services.

— *Executive Director, Centro Sanar*

On the organizational side, Promotoras also serve alongside service providers on BPNN's health subcommittee to discuss how to break down what they observe as common barriers to accessing health resources, such as immigration status or a lack of insurance. Health Promotoras also contribute to the greater decision making of the initiative by sitting on BPNN's larger steering committee.

This example further highlights the unique advantage of an organization serving as both a grantee of 21st CCLC programs and a backbone agency. Affiliated schools and 21st CCLC programs within the BPNC network gain increased access to the holistic 21st CCLC support and services provided through the Network. Coordinators at the schools play a pivotal role in acting as a switchboard, directing students and families to the necessary support or service (see *Coordinating Service Provision to Facilitate Access* brief for more details). BPNC's dedication to cultural competence also strengthens BPNC's approach to community schooling, with both emphasizing strategies for providing accessible, integrated services while still meaningfully engaging students, families, and community members.

Furthermore, the Network derives significant benefits from its partnership with its 21st CCLC programs. By offering programming within a school setting, 21st CCLC coordinators are actively encouraged by BPNN to cultivate strong, collaborative relationships with school administrators and teachers, thereby inviting schools to also become vital partners in the network. BPNN frequently leverages its community schools to host events, such as annual health fairs and in-school workshops, aimed at educating parents and family members. Across all schools partnered with BPNC, school principals are not only invited but also frequently participate in BPNN's education subcommittee. This level of engagement allows principals to contribute actively to decision making, share identified needs, and remain informed about available support and services in the community.

CONCLUSION

The case studies of NPFF and BPNN illuminate the pivotal role of backbone organizations in catalyzing service delivery systems. NPFF exemplifies how a neutral backbone organization can foster trust, collaboration, and address community needs. Likewise, through the active engagement of community members, BPNN serves as a model for backbone agencies seeking to meaningfully uplift and address the unique needs of the communities they serve. Both examples further emphasize the importance of authentic community engagement, continuous assessment of needs, and the fostering of cultures of trust and collaboration to achieve a lasting impact in collective impact initiatives.

For 21st CCLC programs seeking to enhance their offerings to students and families while ensuring long-term financial sustainability, engaging in or establishing their own collective impact initiatives is a compelling option. By joining existing initiatives or leading their own, 21st CCLC grantees can broaden their reach to students and families, access additional funding sources, and cultivate lasting partnerships with community stakeholders. This proactive approach not only amplifies the impact of 21st CCLC programs but also enables them to sustain their programming long after the grant funding runs out—a critical challenge facing the 21st CCLC community. The backbone organization, with its focus on mobilizing resources and sustaining partnerships, can be a meaningful way forward.



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