



Nurturing Social-Emotional Learning in Out-of-School-Time

Lessons Learned from the Silicon Valley Out-of-School-Time Collaborative

Acknowledgments

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For the full findings report, visit:
www.sandhillfoundation.org/collaboration/the-silicon-valley-out-of-school-collaborative/

Executive Summary

Introduction

About the Silicon Valley Out-of-School-Time Collaborative

The Silicon Valley Out-of-School-Time Collaborative (SVOSTC)¹ launched in 2010 as a Northern California-based regional capacity-building initiative for select organizations in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. Each of the nine member agencies serves secondary-aged students outside the formal school day through a variety of academic supports, including tutoring, academic advising and summer enrichment programs.

The Sand Hill Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, SV², and The Sobrato Family Foundation provided \$2.6 million in funding to the Collaborative from 2010-16.

Phase I (2010-13) focused on building organizational capacity to serve youth by leveraging the skills and network of Executive Directors, who engaged in five collective learning sessions per year on topics ranging from board development to program evaluation to staff management and leadership.

For Phase II (2014-16), the Executive Directors of the Collaborative agencies elected to focus on cultivating non-cognitive factors such as grit, character, and curiosity, among the youth they served, since these skills help young people succeed in school, the workplace and the community. After a five month planning process, the Collaborative members collectively selected three non-cognitive skills as the focus of their efforts: Academic Mindsets, Learning Strategies, and Social Skills.

- **Academic Mindsets** - Students' attitudes and beliefs about their academic work and ability. Young people with positive academic mindsets believe that they can improve their performance with more effort, that the topics covered in school are relevant to their lives, that they belong at school, and that they can succeed academically.
- **Learning Strategies** – Tactics that students use to help them to remember, think and learn. Young people with successful learning strategies have a robust “toolkit” to help them to learn new things, to set academic goals, and to manage their time.

¹ In this report, the SVOSTC is also referred to as “the Collaborative.”

² 2010-2014 only.

- **Social Skills** - Behaviors that allow students to interact with peers and adults in positive and productive ways. Productive social skills include the ability to cooperate with others, to be empathetic, to assert oneself appropriately, and to take responsibility.

The Collaborative adopted a mutually reinforcing set of trainings and supports for member agencies as they implemented non-cognitive skill building opportunities for youth in these three areas. These activities were intended to complement each other and help agencies put strong learning contexts in place, to help staff members understand the importance of supporting non-cognitive skills, and to provide teams ongoing support in implementing non-cognitive skill building activities.

The Collaborative engaged two consulting teams to support Phase II. Public Profit led the evaluation of the initiative and served as the project coordinator. As part of its work, Public Profit was tasked with improving capacity of member agencies to collect and use data to improve practice. Be The Change Consulting provided member-specific coaching and led the Professional Learning Community meetings during the 2015-16 program cycle.

Collaborative members provided non-cognitive skill building supports to 1,578 young people in 2014-15, increasing to 2,351 youth in 2015-16.

Importance of the Learning Context

The first step in implementing the non-cognitive skills initiative emphasized a rich learning context as the “fertile soil” for growing non-cognitive skills.³ Young people are more apt to develop key non-cognitive skills – including Academic Mindsets, Learning Strategies and Social Skills – when they are in environments that are physically and emotionally safe, promote peer interaction, and offer opportunities for mastery, youth voice, and choice.

To measure the strength of the learning context in each member organization, the Collaborative used the research-based Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA).⁴ Certified YPQA raters conducted visits to program sites, and member organizations were trained and encouraged to use the YPQA to conduct self-assessments of their program.

³ Farrington, C., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T., Johnson, D, & Beechum, N. (2012). Teaching adolescents to become learners: The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance. Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.

⁴ www.cypq.org/assessment

Collaborative members' learning contexts compared favorably to other out-of-school-time programs nationally. In 2014, members averaged a 3.93 out of 5 across the YPQA's four domains: Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interaction and Engagement, versus a national average score of 3.53. These scores improved in the 2015-16 program year to an average of 4.22 out of 5.

Collaborative members' learning contexts compared favorably to other programs nationally.

Staff members reported increased awareness of the foundational role that youth-centered practices play in building non-cognitive skills. Adult staff members were most likely to promote youth engagement by finding ways to provide young people with more opportunities for input and choice.

Building Staff Members' Ability to Support Non-Cognitive Skills

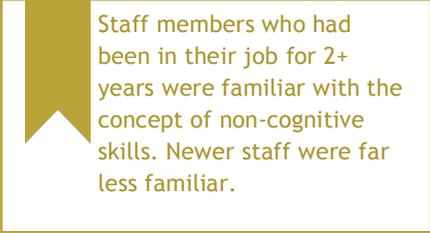
Non-Cognitive Skills Training & Knowledge

The Collaborative implemented staff trainings on best practices for developing and supporting youths' non-cognitive skills. "Foundations in Non-Cognitive Skills," developed by Public Profit and College Track, provided an overview of key concepts, helped staff discuss their current practices in non-cognitive skills development, and offered basic strategies to promote non-cognitive skills among their program participants.

The Collaborative adopted a trainer-of-trainers model in 2015-16 to equip member agencies to offer the "Foundations" training on site, addressing persistent challenges with staff turnover.

Staff reported that they gained knowledge about why developing youth's non-cognitive skills is important (93%) and about new practices to use when working with their youth (91%). They also reported that the training helped them to feel more confident in using practices to help youth build non-cognitive skills, especially Academic Mindsets (87%) and Social Skills (81%).

Staff turnover is endemic to the out-of-school time field, and Collaborative members also experience this phenomenon. Only one in five respondents to the SVOSTC staff survey had been with their current organization for two years or more. The remaining 80% had been with their out-of-school-time program for fewer than two years. Of this 80%, just over half (51%) were familiar with the term *non-cognitive skills*, suggesting out-of-school-time programs will need to continually orient their staff to the concept of non-cognitive skill development.



Staff members who had been in their job for 2+ years were familiar with the concept of non-cognitive skills. Newer staff were far less familiar.

Staff Supports for Youths' Non-Cognitive Skills Development

Staff training is only useful if they use their new knowledge to improve their practices with youth. We therefore looked for evidence that staff members were using specific practices to support non-cognitive skill development, such as reinforcing positive youth behavior expectations and encouraging youth to think about how specific non-cognitive skills could be useful in other parts of their lives.

Collaborative members reported that their staff focused on creating strong relationships between staff and youth, highlighting this aspect of the learning context as particularly important when supporting non-cognitive skill building. Unless they feel physically and emotionally safe, young people can't engage in higher order skill building activities.

Collaborative members also noted that they learned to be more explicit with youth about non-cognitive skills, taking care to link a particular activity with the sought-after skill.

“Before, we’d take our kids to the pool in the summer in the hopes that the experience would help them feel comfortable trying new things. Now we tell the kids, ‘We’re taking you to the pool to help you feel more comfortable trying new things.’ It helps us all to make the connection between program activities and skills we’re working on building.”

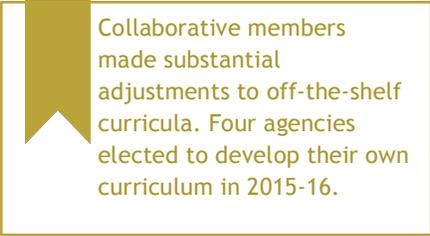
Member agencies found that they needed to assess and support their staff members' facilitation skills, so that they could successfully engage youth in non-cognitive skill building activities. Not all staff members had these foundational skills. Identifying and addressing this gap in staff members' preparation for facilitating complex discussions proved to be a challenge for the consulting teams supporting Collaborative agencies.

Implementation of Non-Cognitive Skills Curricula

Successes and Challenges with Off-the-Shelf Curricula

In 2014-15, all Collaborative members implemented one of three commercially available curricula that were aligned with the three focal skills and were backed by research. Most member agencies reported needing to adapt these curricula substantially to be relevant and engaging for their diverse youth populations.

In 2015-16, four members opted to develop their own non-cognitive skill building approach with the support of Be The Change Consulting. This option offered the most flexibility to members, and also entailed a substantial amount of staff effort to implement. Four members chose to remain with the off-the-shelf curricula selected in 2014.



Collaborative members made substantial adjustments to off-the-shelf curricula. Four agencies elected to develop their own curriculum in 2015-16.

Developing and Implementing a Tailored Curriculum

The four member organizations that decided to develop a tailored curriculum in 2015-16 saw opportunities to weave non-cognitive skill building into the fabric of their programs, rather than offering these opportunities as a stand-alone activity. The member organizations that adopted tailored curricula tended to focus on staff practices and programmatic structures, rather than on developing specific lessons for youth.

Notably, three of the four member organizations that opted to use the tailored curricula in the 2015-16 program year served high school and college students, for whom off-the-shelf curriculum may not have been as engaging.

Off-the-Shelf Curricula Were a Good Fit for Half of the Collaborative Members

The member agencies that continued to use off-the-shelf curricula tended to serve middle school aged youth. The existing materials may have been a better fit for younger students. Moreover, these agencies had less flexible program schedules, and so the briefer activities in the off-the-shelf curricula may have worked better. Finally, we note that three of the four member agencies that continued with the packaged curricula had substantial leadership shifts during the project period, potentially limiting the teams' ability to engage in time-intensive curricular development.

Benefits for Youth

As noted above, the Collaborative decided to focus on three key non-cognitive skills: Academic Mindsets, Learning Strategies, and Social Skills. The Collaborative assessed growth in this area through the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA), a research-based survey from the PEAR Center at Harvard. The HSA is a self-reported measure of young people's non-cognitive skill development.

Young people's 2015-16 Holistic Student Assessment surveys show moderate to large gains in all three of the Collaborative's focal non-cognitive skills.

Young people's 2015-16 HSA surveys show moderate to large gains in all three of the focal non-cognitive skills. Over three-quarters of youth reported "more" or "much more" confidence in their ability to reflect (76%) and to think critically (76%) – the two components of Learning Strategies. In Academic Mindsets questions, youth reported more or much more interest in learning (81%) and academic motivation (80%). In the domain of Social Skills, youth reported the most growth in relationships with peers (76%) and empathy (74%).

Youth in programs that implemented a tailored curriculum in 2015-16 reported stronger gains for select skills and mindsets than youth in programs using off-the-shelf curricula. This may be because Collaborative members that adopted a tailored curriculum used a more holistic approach to non-cognitive skill building.

In addition to the HSA scores, staff members observed improvements in young people's non-cognitive skills, such as their growth mindset (a key part of Academic Mindsets), youths' ability to manage their time, and to study for tests, two components of Learning Strategies.

Reflections & Lessons Learned

Summary

The experiences of the Silicon Valley Out-of-School-Time Collaborative offer several lessons for those considering a similar initiative:

- Create a safe learning environment for member agencies that explicitly encourages iteration and learning.
- Develop a robust strategy to address staff turnover at the executive, senior, and line staff level so that all members can participate fully.
- Provide clear guidance to member agencies about data collection and include regular touch-points between member organizations and the evaluation team.
- Plan for experimentation and iteration; there is no “one right way” to begin this work.

Organizational Capacity

The Collaborative sought to build member organizations’ capacity to implement high quality non-cognitive skill development activities and to strengthen their internal evaluation capacity. Member organizations had mixed success in reaching these two goals, with variations in organizations’ size, staff turnover, program culture, and ability to participate in Collaborative-led activities all playing into their capacity-building success.

As a whole, Collaborative members report that they deepened their ability to support students’ non-cognitive skills, witnessing improvements in staff members’ understanding of how to promote young people’s non-cognitive skill growth and staff members’ belief that non-cognitive skills benefitted youth.

Member organizations ranged in size and capacity to participate in Collaborative activities, affecting their ability to fully engage in all the Collaborative had to offer. Further, while persistent turnover of line staff in out-of-school time programs was a known issue, staff turnover at the executive and senior program leadership level posed a major – and largely unanticipated – challenge to the continuity of the Collaborative. The Collaborative responded with formal onboarding meetings for executive and senior staff and by making training and meeting materials widely available.

Lessons Learned: Organizational Capacity

- ✓ Plan for persistent turnover at both the line and leadership levels; anticipate regular “onboarding” needs for line staff, senior program staff and executive leaders.
- ✓ Ensure that member organizations have strong intra-organizational information sharing structures in place; help them build this capacity if needed.
- ✓ Plan for intensive, agency-specific support for implementation.

Members’ Evaluation Capacity

The Collaborative sought to improve members’ evaluation capacity as part of the initiative. Public Profit therefore provided agency-level evaluation reviews and on-demand evaluation capacity building services alongside Collaborative-wide evaluation activities.

The tools used for the Collaborative-wide evaluation were useful to member organizations, helping them to deepen their awareness of existing assessment tools and conceptual frameworks. The member agencies came to value the YPQA as a roadmap for quality practices and self-assessment.

Lessons Learned: Members’ Evaluation Capacity

- ✓ Bring on an evaluation team from the very start of the initiative’s earliest phase, or, better yet, in the planning phase.
- ✓ Plan to include evaluation capacity-building activities that can help improve participants’ familiarity and buy-in with the evaluation tools and processes; budget for substantial agency-level coaching.
- ✓ Use data templates so that different agencies submit data in consistent formats.

Key Features & Benefits of the Collaborative Structure

The Silicon Valley Out-of-School-Time Collaborative met quarterly throughout the project period in a series of Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings. These regular sessions were a core component of the Collaborative's success. Member agencies noted that it was helpful to be in a group with like-minded organizations that were struggling with the same challenges. Collaborative members praised the "safe space" created in the Collaborative, to which members could bring their challenges and frustrations.

However, the ambitious timeline for the initiative – to implement research-based curricula with fidelity in two program years – put a strain on Professional Learning Community agendas. The Sand Hill Foundation contributed additional funds to support more PLC meetings in 2016, offering more opportunities for members to meet. In retrospect, more time for relationship building and incorporating new staff would have been useful.

The Collaborative made a substantial strategic shift in early 2015, moving away from using only off-the-shelf curricula to a more flexible model in which member agencies could implement a curriculum tailored to their own needs and practices. This successful strategic shift required the Collaborative funders to demonstrate a high level of trust in the Collaborative members.

Lessons Learned: Key Features & Benefits of the Collaborative Structure

- ✓ Convene regularly so that members can stay engaged in the initiative and learn from one another.
- ✓ Allow for ample time for relationship building and practice sharing among members.
- ✓ Plan for change: the initial plans may not prove successful, so shifts in strategy and resource allocation will be needed.
- ✓ Work with organizations worthy of trust, so that stakeholders are all confident that strategic shifts are informed by partners' commitment to service quality and the well being of the youth they serve.

Successfully Implementing Off-the-Shelf Curricula

The Collaborative members' experience in implementing off-the-shelf curricula raised important issues about out-of-school-time programs' ability to implement these curricula with fidelity, and the usefulness of teaching non-cognitive skills for a limited duration.

Staff Members' Readiness to Implement Complex Activities

Some staff members were less able to guide a group of young people through complex lessons, which affected their ability to implement off-the-shelf curricula. This facilitation skill gap was sometimes interpreted by staff as a problem with the curriculum, rather than an issue with adults' ability to implement it well.

Suitability of Off-the-Shelf Curricula

While the Collaborative conducted a thorough review of materials available at the time, member agencies found that the materials were not well suited for high school and college students, particularly those in racially and ethnically diverse communities. Though Collaborative members were prepared to customize packaged materials at some level, at least half found those materials wholly insufficient.

Implications for Future Initiatives

The experience of the Silicon Valley Out-of-School-Time Collaborative shows that there's no "one right way" to begin supporting young people's non-cognitive skill development. Rather, similar initiatives are well advised to adopt an iterative approach from the start, likely beginning with adopting a few specific practices, trying them, then modifying over time as momentum increases. This might include adopting a specific non-cognitive skill-building curriculum, or identifying a few organization-wide practices to change.

What's critical for staff and funders is to build multiple opportunities for reflection and shifts into the initiative design, so that out-of-school-time programs can deepen and broaden their practice over time. The end goal is to implement high quality strategies that are relevant and engaging for young people, and that help them to build the skills and mindsets they need to succeed.

Lessons Learned: Implementing Off-the-Shelf Curricula

- ✓ In cases where an off-the-shelf curriculum will be used, purchase review copies for senior staff to ensure they align with young people's ages and interests.
- ✓ Early on, take a deep dive into member organizations' existing practices with youth, including staff members' group management skills.
- ✓ Keep up with the ever-evolving research about youths' non-cognitive skill development, and be prepared to use it to modify the initiative's approaches, curricula, or measurement tools.
- ✓ There is no "one right way" to begin this work; find approaches that are rooted in best practices and engaging for staff, and work to broaden and deepen from there.

Evidence of Impact

The evidence presented points to growth in young people's non-cognitive skills during the project period. Member agencies are better able to support young people's non-cognitive skill development than they were in 2010, and they have concrete plans to continue their supports for non-cognitive skills. Collaborative funders have reported a deeper understanding of how to support a complex, multi-member initiative.

For Youth

The large majority of young people who participated in non-cognitive skill building activities reported notable growth, particularly in Learning Strategies and Academic Mindsets. Youth generally reported greater interest in and motivation for learning; better critical thinking and reflection skills, and improved empathy and relationships with peers.

For Member Agencies

As noted above, Collaborative member agencies deepened and broadened their non-cognitive skill building practice over the course of the initiative. Seven of eight have concrete plans to sustain this work, continuing to provide staff training in non-cognitive skills and using the YPQA to monitor their growth over time.

"We plan to build on what we have learned during program implementation over the past few years, utilizing a similar timeline of activities and milestones as well as the Youth Program Quality Assessment to monitor the effectiveness of our strategy and our students' growth over time. Further, we plan to ensure there are contingencies in place for each activity and milestone [...]"

For Funders

The Collaborative funders reported that they have a different perspective about how to think about and design complex, multi-agency initiatives, particularly in looking at the time required to see sustained organizational change vis-à-vis the length of a typical grant cycle.

“Making individual grants to individual organizations is ultimately not as satisfying as the next-level approach we took here. Working at the network level – [undertaking] network weaving and capacity-building grant making – it takes more time but you get more for your dollar and it solves more problems. It’s hard to imagine not continuing this kind of grant making in the future.”

GLOSSARY

SVOSTC: Silicon Valley Out-of-School-Time Collaborative (“the Collaborative”), made up of nine organizations that serve middle and high school aged youth in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

Collaborative Phase I: The first phase (2010-2013) of the Collaborative, a professional learning community for nine Executive Directors.

Collaborative Phase II: The second phase (2014-2016) included ongoing supports for eight member agencies to implement non-cognitive skill building opportunities for youth.

Focal Skills: The non-cognitive skills that the Collaborative chose to focus on developing in youth:

- *Academic Mindsets:* Students’ attitudes and beliefs about their academic work and ability.
- *Learning Strategies:* Tactics that students use to help them remember, think, and learn.
- *Social Skills:* Behaviors that allow students to interact with peers and adults in positive and productive ways.

Learning Context: The environment in an out-of-school-time program that impacts how something is learned or taught. Youth are more likely to build non-cognitive skills when they are in a strong, positive learning context. Positive learning contexts are environments where young people are physically and emotionally safe, supported by peers and adults, have opportunities for meaningful interaction, and are engaged in high-quality learning experiences.

Member Agency/Member Organization: A youth-serving organization that participated in the Out-of-School-Time Collaborative. In most cases, we refer to the eight agencies that participated in the non-cognitive skill building initiative between 2014-16. We use the terms “member agency” and “member organization” interchangeably in this report.

Non-cognitive Skills/Social-emotional Skills: Skills, behaviors, attitudes, and strategies that are essential to success in school and work, but may not be reflected on typical cognitive tests. Non-cognitive skills include things like curiosity, persistence, and communication skills. We use non-cognitive skills and social-emotional skills interchangeably in this report.

Mutually Reinforcing Trainings and Supports: The set of inter-related workshops, trainings and coaching services available to Collaborative agencies designed to help them implement non-cognitive skill building activities successfully.

Out-of-school-time: Seasons and times when academic enrichment programs in the Collaborative offer their services, generally after 3pm on weekdays, on weekends and school breaks, and during summer.