

Exploring Equitable School Partnerships

School environments should promote student growth and development regardless of race, ability, or family income. Best Starts for Kids' School Partnerships strategies support partnerships among schools, school districts, community-based organizations, young people, and families to ensure students feel safe, respected, and supported at school.

As these strategies develop, several models for equitable partnerships are emerging. This data snapshot reports on year 1 of a three-year evaluation (August 2018 through December 2021) exploring how equitable partnerships form, the types of changes they seek to enact, and the factors that support their success.

The challenge

Identify how to support and promote equitable partnerships among schools, community-based organizations, and others.

Best Starts for Kids is conducting an evaluation of equitable partnerships in programs funded with Best Starts investments. In equitable partnerships, accountability and decision-making is evenly distributed, regardless of differences in institutional power held by the partners. The hallmarks of such partnerships are shared leadership, effective coordination, and synergy within and across strategies and programs.

The goal of this evaluation is to identify how school districts and Best Starts can most effectively support such partnerships to accelerate systems change, improve school environments, and support success and safety for King County's students. To date, the evaluation has assessed 31 partnerships at nine schools.

Best Starts for Kids School Partnerships strategies

Active at 110+ school sites

- Healthy and Safe Environments
- Out-of-School Time
- School-Based Health Centers
- Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment/Services
- Trauma-Informed and Restorative Practices
- Youth Development

Different types of equitable partnerships are developing within and across Best Starts strategies.



Adapted from: Youth Development Executives of King County School & Community Partnerships Toolkit (ydekc.org/resource-center/school-community-partnership-toolkit/).

What we learned

- Equitable school partnerships develop in service of changes to systems, environments, and student well-being, especially in relation to racial and other inequities. For example, partnerships have emerged to expand access to services to marginalized groups and to address disproportionality in discipline.
- Strong relationships and trust are the foundation of equitable school partnerships.
- Factors with positive impact on the development and success of equitable partnerships in schools include school-wide shifts in leadership and decision-making, efforts to increase parent engagement, inclusion of students in leadership roles, and resource-sharing (space, meeting time, staff) to improve coordination and communication.
- Factors with negative impact include leadership and staff changes among partners, which disrupt relationships and trust; power dynamics within schools; and lack of capacity to provide services to students in need.
- Best Starts for Kids can support equitable partnerships by continuing to increase coordination and alignment in its granting systems and by accounting for the time and funding required to support partnerships over time.
- Schools, districts, and community-based organizations can support equitable partnerships by increasing and deepening student engagement, adopting change-management approaches that ameliorate the impact of turnover, and developing coordination structures that alleviate workload and support access to critical data.

What's next?

In years 2 and 3, our evaluation will follow how equitable partnerships develop and make a difference for kids. Focusing on the factors that support equitable partnerships, the relationship between partnerships and school-wide change, and the role that King County's processes and systems play, the evaluation will help us build a deeper understanding of how equitable partnerships succeed and how the connections between Best Starts investments affect awardees' impact.

This year 1 evaluation was structured around a deep assessment of partnerships at nine of 19 schools. Ongoing evaluation will include additional schools, as well as adding students, their families, and Seattle Public School staff to the participants.

Acknowledgments

The commitment and thoughtfulness of Best Starts for Kids School Partnerships Evaluation Advisors helped guide this work. This evaluation would not have been possible without the staff from dozens of Best Starts grantees and partner organizations. We are grateful for their commitment.

Best Starts for Kids thanks the following Puget Sound Educational Service District staff for their roles in the evaluation: Nathalie Jones, Hilary Loeb, Mona Mazraani, Cassandra O'Francia, Alessandra Pollock, Pamela Raya-Carlton, Sarita Siqueiros Thornburg, and other evaluation partners.

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