

A Story of Leadership: Greater Washington Community Foundation



Learnings in Making Higher Education a Community Priority

This story is part of a larger series by Informing Change for the College Futures Foundation to support community foundations that are working to reduce gaps in college success. As an outgrowth of Informing Change's evaluation and learning partnership with the College Futures' Community Philanthropy Initiative (CPI), these stories explore and share lessons learned from community foundations that are leaders in promoting and supporting higher education.

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RAISE DC: FILLING A FUNDING & DATA VACUUM

Raise DC is an initiative supported by a number of foundations, including the Greater Washington Community Foundation, to find and address choke points in the District of Columbia's (DC) pipeline that carries young people from cradle to career. To do this, Raise DC:

- Engages institutional and community stakeholders in responding to data through action plans, including reconnecting disconnected youth, broadening pathways to high school graduation, and understanding and addressing challenges to postsecondary completion.
- Facilitates data exchange among different education institutions, including early childhood education, middle schools, high schools, and higher education institutions, to illuminate areas of high need, in particular, related to transitioning from one stage to the next.

Each of Raise DC's focus areas—increasing kindergarten readiness, reconnecting disconnected youth, and increasing high school and postsecondary completion—has a Change Network, a coalition of organizations and institutions tasked with affecting and documenting change, some of which overlap across Raise DC projects.

Currently Raise DC is a sizeable operation with its own dedicated staff, but the story of its origins is rooted in the community foundation's willingness to play a leadership role in addressing the area's low rate of college success. Raise DC emerged following a time-limited funding effort called Double the Numbers, a Gates Foundation-funded coalition for increasing secondary and postsecondary students' credential attainment. When the Gates Foundation investments shifted from regional work to a national strategy, the Greater Washington Community Foundation

DATA REVELATION: A RALLYING CALL

A critical step in building community support for Raise DC was understanding and communicating the education landscape's most pressing issues, and the community foundation has taken a leading role in doing this. In 2007 the community foundation used discretionary funding to commission a study on disconnected youth, that is, youth and young adults who are neither in school nor working. The study found that there were around 7,000 disconnected youth in DC at that time—and that an additional 1,000 young people were disconnecting every year.

The results shocked the DC education community, and reconnecting disconnected youth became a rallying cause for local political leaders as well as educators in charter school networks and DC Public Schools. From this collective energy came DC's first youth ReEngagement Center, a place where out-of-school youth can enroll in and seek support for education programs that enable them to complete their high school credentials. The Disconnected Youth Change Network works in conjunction with the Community Partnership for Postsecondary Attainment to prepare young people for successful careers.

convened players from the local collaboration with the Mayor's Office of DC to create a plan to maintain and even grow this coalition-building at the local level.

STOKING PUBLIC SECTOR DEMAND FOR A SOLUTION

Two previous attempts at collective impact around education reform had started and then stalled, due in part to turnover within the DC Mayor's Office of Education and staff changes at key government agencies. The community foundation knew that collective impact work could not be successful without strong organizational buy-in from government stakeholders, including the Mayor's Office of Education, city agencies, and the DC Public Schools. Thus, the community foundation entered this work determined to address a primary challenge: getting local government involved in and supporting its efforts to bridge the tenuous transitions in the education pipeline.

Learning from earlier failures in securing lasting government buy-in (while ensuring the work wasn't solely held within government), the community foundation and other collaborators chose to house Raise DC within the Mayor's Office for the initial two years, in order to make the fledgling organization highly visible and with easy access to the relevant political decision makers. This early integration into city government ensured that individual government actors connected with and understood Raise DC's relevance to their own work, as well as facilitated Raise DC's ability to respond—and appeal—to multiple political agendas.

“Like it or not, DC is still a government town and if you don't have government as partner, you're probably not going to make a difference.”

– Benton Murphy, Senior Director at the Foundation

“DC is strongly rooted in local politics and political dynamics. Every time there's a switchover from one mayoral administration to the next, you basically have a sweeping of the table. Anything that had been happening previously was considered old news and we had to start everything from scratch.”

– Benton Murphy, Senior Director at the Foundation

INCUBATING A MODEL FOR EDUCATION SYSTEMS CHANGE WORK

Embedding Raise DC in the Mayor's Office for two years established a critical level of government buy-in and stoked the demand for its mission and goals. But for sustainability, the initiative needed a different home. After two years Raise DC moved from the Mayor's Office to space at the community foundation's headquarters. The community foundation's support at this point in the young initiative's life transitioned to in-kind support, including office space, back office administrative support, and continuing active roles for a few Foundation staff. In this capacity, the community foundation served as a crucial incubator to Raise DC. The President and CEO of the community foundation, Bruce McNamer, sits as a co-equal member of Raise DC's Leadership Council alongside other philanthropic, government, business, and nonprofit leaders.

Raise DC's close proximity to the community foundation's education and workforce program officers created a strong, symbiotic relationship between the two entities beyond a traditional funder-grantee relationship, enabling the community foundation and Raise DC to align their activities and strategies, while also providing Raise DC with the independence to cultivate its own expertise and niche in the education landscape. Staff recall the evolution in their thinking: “Seeing Raise DC as less of an external body that just happens to be living here with us and more of a strong partner around issues that we share has been an evolution over time.”

THE POWER OF FOCUS

The community foundation's ability to concentrate attention and resources to create Raise DC was born in a time of scarce resources. In 2010, the economic downturn left the community foundation with fewer discretionary funds and diminished staff capacity. The tightened resources prompted community foundation leaders to prioritize its grantmaking activities. White papers developed by staff with community input successfully argued for coordinating grantmaking in three focus areas: education, workforce development, and safety net services. These three priorities continue to guide community foundation grantmaking today.

As education and workforce program officers discussed how to maximize their strapped resources, they realized they could accomplish more through funding a coordinated initiative like Raise DC that would address a spectrum of issue areas, particularly those they articulated as priorities, as well as the linkages between them. Staff prepared a proposal to the community foundation board for supporting Raise DC, a process which cultivated community foundation staff buy-in for Raise DC as well as the Board's.

“We had a lightbulb moment where we said, this is an opportunity for us to break through some of these siloes and think about using Raise DC as the center point, to knit a lot of these various streams together.”

– Benton Murphy, Senior Director at the Foundation

The community foundation's initial grant for operational support for Raise DC was short-term, and current support consists of in-kind support and funding from many of the foundation's donor-advised funds. Staff say it has been a relatively easy transition to move from discretionary funding support to donor-advised funding. Several board members who had been involved in determining the strategic direction of the community foundation's grantmaking were among the first donors to support Raise DC with their donor-advised funds. Donors are also encouraged by Raise DC's ability to secure funding from other foundations.

FACING PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

The community foundation's commitment to Raise DC, while also ensuring there would be involvement from a wide range of stakeholders, has faced numerous challenges. Staff share a few lessons they have learned:

- Partnering with public agencies is critically important for collective impact work in education and workforce development. If a public agency partner appears to be weak or poorly managed, the other partners need to be creative and determined in finding ways to work with them. “Philanthropy is really undersized for the size of our population for this region, so we're highly dependent on local government to support a lot of this work,” says Benton Murphy. “If a government agency or department is not stable and a strong partner, it's a big challenge for us.”
- Standing up for the needs of local youth in a highly educated, highly competitive labor market is difficult but inspiring work. Finding a niche where the community foundation's work can make a clear, measurable difference has been a helpful approach. There is a constant flow of talented young people into Washington DC to pursue internships and public service careers, making it particularly difficult for DC public school students to compete for plum entry-level positions. “There's such intense competition for jobs that local people can very easily be crowded out,” says Benton Murphy. To ease this for a targeted group of youth, the community foundation works to link disconnected youth with credential opportunities, including one-year programs, to help increase the number of local residents landing good employment opportunities in a competitive labor market.

- Everybody likes to be part of a success, and with a broad geographic mandate extending to suburban northern Virginia and Maryland, the Greater Washington Community Foundation has had to consider ways to participate in education and workforce collective impact efforts in its areas outside of urban District of Columbia. Following the successes of Raise DC collaborative work, the community foundation is now applying its learnings in different ways in the suburban contexts, for example, leveraging existing partnerships to address community concerns about public education infrastructure and sponsoring convenings, including one town hall designed for parents.

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