

Up and Down the I-5 Corridor How Housing Authorities in the Pacific-Northwest Created a Regional Collaboration to Further Housing-Education Efforts

By Abra Lyons-Warren

Introduction

On a recent day in Tacoma, representatives from four Washington state housing authorities and one from Oregon gathered around a table at a favorite local pizza place. After pleasantries and determining who's turn it was to pay and take notes, the group dug into a discussion about what a full-day convening of all of their partners—a cross-sector coalition of professionals working jointly to improve outcomes for children from low-income families—could look like. Over the next four hours, the King County, Seattle, Tacoma, and Vancouver Housing authorities, as well as Home Forward, Portland's housing authority, learned from one another, shared best practices, and asked for advice from their peers. “It’s a pretty amazing thing,” Jan Wichert, director of employee and resident services at Vancouver Housing Authority (VHA) said. “It surprised me that we were all so much in the same spot—that the things that were difficult for me were hard for them as well. It’s been a wonderful discovery how much effort the other housing authorities are willing to put into this work. And that it’s not any one of us that’s more enthusiastic about working together, that’s really all of us, and we’re all drawing good stuff from that, which is great.”

As familiar and obvious as the Pacific Northwest Housing & Education Innovation Team seems now, it wasn't always the case that intersecting housing and education in order to improve educational outcomes for low-income children was a logical undertaking. While individual evaluations of some of these five sites have taken place, broader national research in this area is still sparse. To help share some of the ground-breaking work happening around housing and education intersections, the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities' [Housing Is Initiative](#) conducted 24 interviews with housing authorities and their partners like school district staff, principals, city council members, superintendents, and nonprofit organizations. This report uses text and video to illustrate the importance of cross-sector work, the elements of successful partnerships, and what can be achieved with regional collaboration.

Why do this work?

Although there has been tremendous advancement in the field around the acceptance and promotion of housing as a foundation to improve life outcomes, the housing and education sectors do not collaborate in many communities. For King County, Portland, Seattle, Tacoma, and Vancouver, efforts to intersect emerged from a joint desire to see

children and youth achieve better outcomes, whether in terms of education or future self-sufficiency.

Education Is a Pathway Out of Poverty

Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) Executive Director Andrew Lofton believes that education is crucial for upward mobility and therefore felt it was critical to work with education entities, even though doing so was strictly speaking outside his purview. “We began to look at ways in which we could interact better with school districts,” he said. “Fundamentally, that came from our approach to how we serve our residents, and fundamentally we’re really thinking about how do we intervene with the whole cycle of poverty? What is it we can do to assist our residents to be successful?” Lofton stressed that no housing authority has a goal of getting people into public housing; the goal is to get them out, which is why SHA wants to find opportunities to help multiple generations of its tenants achieve success. One of those pathways out of poverty is education, an area upon which a houser can have a great impact. “I think it starts, again, from our fundamental belief that housing is a really important platform for success,” he said.

The Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) brought a similar thinking to its housing-education efforts. “We also seek to make [residents’] time with us transforming and temporary. We want them to come to us and succeed, not just as tenants, but as our mission statement contemplates, as parents, students, wage-earners, and builders of assets,” THA Executive Director Michael Mirra said. “We want this for grown-ups certainly, but emphatically for children, because we do not wish them to need our housing when they grow up. We count school success as an important part of that transformation.”

Playing to Each Sector’s Strength

Lofton was quick to say that SHA does not want to make decisions for the school district or impede its work. Rather, it wants to use its position to bolster education efforts. “We will never be, and we should not be, and we don’t want to be an educator—that is not our role from the Housing Authority’s perspective,” Lofton said. “But we do want to create the type of environment that people can get a better education. If they have a stable home, we think they could have a better environment in which they can do their homework, they have a better environment in which they can interact with their colleague, they have a better environment in which they can get exposed to more in-depth information and more in-depth teachings. So they have, now, a better chance to compete in the education world when some of those barriers where a lot of the energy has been focused on just to survive are addressed.”

Reducing the Opportunity Gap

Seattle Public Schools (SPS) Chief Strategy and Partnerships Officer Brent Jones agrees that the purpose of collaborating closely with SHA is to increase equity. By working together, the two entities are united in their focus to eliminate opportunity gaps and reach

students who do not have access to the same resources as their higher-income peers. “It’s great work,” he said. “It’s the right work.” The collaboration has allowed SPS to craft policies with a more attentive eye toward students from low-income families—a focus Jones’ superintendent has stressed the district will focus on going forward. “I think this is the issue of our time, to make sure that the students and families that have been on the fringes in terms of having access and opportunity are considered, and considered first,” Jones said. “It’s our number one focus, eliminating opportunity gaps.”

We Cannot Make Change Alone

For Home Forward, officials had a similar worry that, disproportionately, children of color in the school district were either falling behind their white peers or—in many cases—never starting from the same point at all. Rachel Langford, the associate director of education systems alignment at Home Forward, said such a reality in Portland was “unacceptable” and also acknowledged that it is “really difficult for the schools to solve that problem on their own.” [By the time a low-income student begins schooling at five years old, they are often already behind their middle- and higher-income peers.](#) Studies have shown that [the first five years are a time of critical learning because of how the brain develops.](#) Over the past several decades, research has also shown that [low socio-economic status hinders children’s development and school-readiness. Cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as environment, all have an effect regardless of socioeconomic status, but low-income children are more at-risk for poor development.](#) Low-income families are often less able to provide their children with the same quality of learning environments as parents with higher incomes, a factor that many researchers point to as [cause for the children’s lower academic performance.](#) It is logical, then, that the systems that interact with children in their earliest years could help better prepare them for the start of their formal education. THA’s Mirra agrees that “children who grow up in deep poverty bring challenges to the schoolhouse door that the fanciest classroom with the best-trained teacher cannot overcome on their own.” By housing families, THA is able to address homelessness and housing instability, and by partnering with schools, THA is able to support other goals like improved educational performance. Mirra started this work by asking, “How can THA spend a housing dollar not just to house someone, but to influence school outcomes?” He knew the housing authority was serving the most poor children in the city, meaning it houses, or pays to house, one out of seven enrolled public-school students and one out of every 4.5 low-income enrolled public-school students. By “serving them and their families, we’re deep in their lives,” Mirra said. And that gives the housing authority an opportunity to make a crucial difference.

In Portland, Home Forward believes that working with education entities attempts to address school readiness and also gives the Housing Authority their pitch as to why housing should be a partner in such efforts. Like THA and or any houser, Home Forward has access to children and families in ways other systems do not, since they go to sleep and wake up there. “We feel like our opportunity to engage families, and engage them early, and connect them to high-quality services, is a really valuable role that a housing authority can uniquely play in setting kids up to be more successful once they get to

kindergarten—and to supporting parents in those early years, as they are their child’s first teacher.” Lofton expressed similar sentiments: “We are a group that has a number of your students that we can work to support their stability, and then support their potential and their future, by working with you,” he said. Furthermore, like Langford, Lofton believes the school district should not be expected to improve outcomes on their own, and that partnering with SHA will help success come faster. “If we can understand some of the concerns, some of the pressures, some of the challenges that you’re facing in the classroom, there may be some areas that we can mitigate those from our contact with the residents,” he said. A housing authority can keep in contact with residents on behalf of an education system—reinforcing its messages like about attendance, disseminating information, and helping families navigate issues that may arise in school.

Then-Tacoma elementary school principal Janet Gates-Cortez echoed this thought from the educator perspective. “I was enthralled about the idea and love partnerships with schools because I believe, as many of the principals do, that we can’t do it alone. And I know that that’s a really common phrase, but really, it’s treating the whole child, and what does that look like? We—the schools and housing—have this shared vision of what that looks like and what our goal is, which really is to break that generational poverty cycle. And really to look at education as a focus for not just the students but also the parents.”

Joint Goals

Municipal leaders, like Vancouver City Councilmember Alishia Topper, saw a tighter partnership between housing authorities and school systems as a natural collaboration. “Expanding the roles between housing and education as an administrator in a school district, my ultimate job is to create partnerships that will remove barriers to learning. So, obviously, housing—or the lack of housing—can be an extremely large barrier for students and their families,” she said. “And as a city councilmember, obviously we’re looking at economic development and the vibrancy of our city, and if we don’t have an educated workforce, if we don’t have students making it to graduation, our city won’t be successful.”

School officials who specifically work with low-income families see the benefits, too. Melanie Green, the administrator of Title I engagement and family and community resource centers with Evergreen Public Schools in Vancouver, said that because the parents of some of these families work as many as three jobs, having a foundation of housing allows them “to focus on employment, on education, and creating a better life for themselves and their children. We see the impact of stable housing.” High mobility rates among students are not only a challenge for the ones who are frequently switching schools, but often [lead to worse academic outcomes for all students, not just those who move](#). “Once you have a stable group in a classroom, they can learn together and form relationships. “That observation isn’t purely anecdotal. As THA’s Mirra put it, “The research is pretty clear that turnover rates of that sort are ruinous to school outcomes for the children who come and go, and their classmates who have to sit there and watch it

happen.” Stable housing, on its own, bolsters a productive school environment; a more proactive housing authority can do far more to boost outcomes.

What a School Needs to Hear

While many entities agree in theory that they should work together, institutions like schools are often constrained by regulations as well as an engrained approach to how to help this target population. In Vancouver, the superintendent and the board adopted policies to address the challenges faced by low-income students. “If people don’t know where to start and they’re curious about it, and may want to engage, I would say that kids can’t learn if they don’t have a place to sleep,” Topper said. “They’re going to be worried about where they’re going to live, they’re going to be worried about where they’re going to cook their food, and housing is an essential need. And if you can create partnerships with your housing authorities, then you’re likely to have better educational outcomes for your students. So for educators, that’s our goal. Let’s get kids through the finish line to graduation.” Green, of Evergreen Public Schools, agreed: “Working with VHA is so vital for our kids and our families. Because if kids aren’t stably housed, then they won’t be successful in school. And so we come at it from an educator’s perspective: We want kids to come to school ready to learn, succeed, and thrive ... The partnership grew out of the natural idea that if our students are stably housed, they’ll be successful in school.”

Often, hearing it from your own peers is the necessary jumpstart. Both housers and educators interviewed said it was helpful to know your counterpart in another community, with similar structures and funding, was able to work on intersecting housing and education. Janet Gates-Cortez, a former principal at [McCarver Elementary School](#) in the Tacoma School District, gives tours to other educators and introduces colleagues to the partners McCarver has cultivated to help her professional peers envision how they can create their own partnerships in their communities. Mirra does the same when working with other housers to help them start efforts to improve education outcomes for low-income children. He advises that schools are most attentive when they hear from another school and encourages “intra-tribal communications” as the place to start.

For education entities that are hesitant to work with a housing authority, the case must be made for their value to the educational process. “People thought of us as a program, and I think had us kind of off to the side but weren’t thinking about the sheer number of children that we had contact with. We had [the kids’] attention, and the ability to engage and leverage that involvement,” Langford said, describing how she worked to get Home Forward a seat at the proverbial table. Housers may have to work hard to illustrate how they could assist educators. “I think it starts with a listening conversation where you ask the schools what they are struggling with, particularly what is outside of the school’s four walls, and figure out where the housing authority can be value added to that,” King County Housing Authority (KCHA) Executive Director Stephen Norman said. “The fact is that children spend only a small fraction of their week in school, the rest is spent out of the school either in the home or on the streets, and a lot of the future success of children is determined by factors outside of the school classroom, and that’s where housing authorities can help.” Housing authorities can help schools, he said, by communicating

with and coordinating with parents on behalf of educators. “Parental attitudes, parental behavior patterns, engagement between parents and schools is absolutely critical, and I think that’s where you can see real value added by the housing authorities.”

Of course, some reticence can remain. But there’s a compelling case these partnerships can make, one prong of which is that they not only strengthen educational efforts, but also guard against future bumps in the road. Housing authorities also have an intimate understanding of families’ cultural backgrounds, nuances that might escape schools. “We have scholars at all different ages and we are preparing Seattle’s youth,” Courtney Cameron, formerly of the Seattle Housing Authority, said, “We take that really seriously. And those youth come with multiple languages, with different understandings of community, with different needs, and we need to meet them where they are and listen, and then we need to act. And the future of the city depends on us doing our jobs well and listening to the students we serve.”

Still, whether a partnership begins with a small goal or a big mission, it’s important to be clear about what your organization brings to the table in order to assuage any reticence from your partners. “I think when you’re running a school your focus is education. So, when you have partners coming in saying that they want to support you with the educational goals, I think the natural reaction for school staff is ‘well, don’t you just do housing? What would you have to do with this?’” said Kisa Hendrickson, the chief engagement and partnership officer of Highline Public Schools. “So, it’s really a matter of outlining and being very clear: ‘Here’s our role, here’s your role, and here’s what they’re bringing to the table.’” In the case of KHCA, its education partners valued the partnership from the start, she said. “What I appreciate about King County Housing Authority is, I never got the sense that they were trying to step outside of their natural role or lane. It was really more about making the connections.” KHCA was also able to connect with families and students in a way school staff could not, Hendrickson acknowledged. “There’s an opportunity for the schools to go deeper with the families because of the staff that King County Housing Authority has.”

What a Houser Needs to Hear

For many housers, the main goal is to simply house people. KCHA’s Norman agrees a houser should first ensure housing is safe and habitable, but, he says, “that is by no means the end goal of what we are doing.” From there, a housing authority can help initiate a relationship with a school system by making a case with its resources: “We had housing dollars to offer. We weren’t an organization coming to the school district, asking the school district to do something for free, but we had a notable resource to contribute, and that got their attention.”

The philosophy going into these partnerships, said Lofton, has to stem from the notion that “the best chance that people have to succeed is to eliminate barriers and to provide them the tools to be successful.” Housing may be a necessary component of that aim, but it’s not enough, he said. “The path out of poverty is a difficult one at best, and we have consistently been challenged with that. I firmly believe that one of the ways that’s out of

that situation for people is education, a good education, and our students who live in our housing and go to school are behind and consequently have a more difficult job, more difficult challenge, in being successful adults and successful family members when they turn adults. To change that trajectory is worth an investment of our time and our resources now, and I think it has proven that it is a good investment and pays off.” In other words, organizations can use the stability of housing as a foundation to improve other outcomes. Or as KCHA’s Norman says, “You have to have stable housing for school success. It’s a necessary but not sufficient piece of the puzzle.” In order to create a generation of children growing up in poor households who can be upwardly mobile, Norman agrees with Lofton about the crucial need to invest: “It starts with understanding that it is absolutely essential that there be coordination between housing and schools, and place-making in the community.”

“I think it’s wonderful also to see the Housing Authority think long-term. That the students who are living in their housing right now have a secure place to live so they can focus on education, and when they graduate, Andrew Lofton and the Housing Authority want to make sure that they’re set up to thrive and they won’t need the Housing Authority services in the future. So I think that their future long-term thinking is wonderful and really emphasizes the use of this—the importance of this partnership. The School District side, that the School District has always recognized that there is an achievement gap and have been trying to address that, but this year specifically they are leading with that we are not serving all students. The data shows that there is a significant achievement gap between black and white students, or white students and students of color, so they see this partnership—I think our leadership sees this partnership as in a really important part of eliminating the opportunity gap. So I think there’s some really strong connections we can make and this partnership—I think we can be a model to other partners, not just in the housing field, but how do we set ourselves up to really think critically about how we provide our services, what barriers exist, and how can we create better access so we can really serve each and every student and show that, I think that Seattle Public Schools is looking into eliminating the opportunity gap, and there are some schools that have been able to minimize the gap. So we’re trying to learn from them, trying to see how the Housing Authority fits in to this work.

Kathlyn Paananen, Education and Housing Manager, Seattle Public Schools

“I was going to add one other piece—just the similar geography. Getting these two huge organizations to work together across the city for the first time, we talked a lot about shared geography, so schools are located across the city, the majority of students in Seattle attend Seattle public schools, and housing is across the city. So we did a lot of work up front to put data sharing agreements in place, a multi-year memorandum of understanding, so ensure that we could have appropriately shared information related to the outcomes for those youth. So we could see where there were gaps as Kathlyn was talking about, we could figure out then how to address those gaps together knowing that we’re long-standing partners; schools aren’t going anywhere, housing isn’t going anywhere, and we

have really complimentary missions in terms of serving youth, which is powerful in the partnership in the partnership that we have together to then determine, you know, what action do we want to take related to supporting the youth that we share across both systems.”

—*Courtney Cameron, Education and Housing Manager, Seattle Public Schools*

“I think this is the issue of our time, to make sure that the students and families that have been on the fringes in terms of having access and opportunity are considered, and considered first.”

—*Brent Jones, Chief Strategy & Partnerships Officer, SPS*

“I think that the cross-sector collaboration is going to be the future of this country and of this work. We can’t be housers, educators, and healthcare providers. We need to be really leveraging the strengths of each sector, and sharing information, and sharing resources to best impact the results of the people trying to access each of our individual programs.”

—*April Black, Deputy Executive Director, THA*

“I think we ought to be willing to make that investment, that choice of saying ‘We’re going to invest in our kids, we’re going to invest in our future, and we’re going to work as hard as we can to level the playing field for those individuals.’ It should be unacceptable for us to look the other way, or to not be willing to take another risk—to challenge ourselves to create something better. So I believe in the partnership.”

—*Stephen Norman, Executive Director, KCHA*

Forming A Partnership

Housing Authorities in the Pacific-Northwest have long been held up for their work collaborating with other systems, but even they needed time to assemble these partnerships and make progress toward improving outcomes.

Timeline

In 2008, the Vancouver Housing Authority (VHA) was already working closely with local governments and other community partners throughout Clark County to address issues of affordable housing and homelessness. And by 2013, VHA was working with Vancouver Public Schools as well as the Evergreen School District to support students experiencing homelessness. But it was a local crisis in December 2014, in which an apartment complex housing low-income families gave 150 residents 20-day notices to vacate, that truly spurred VHA to deepen its collaborations. At the time, Vancouver had a 2 percent housing vacancy rate and the highest rental increases in the nation. The school district reached out to VHA and together they mobilized to find housing for the impacted families. The agencies worked together to change city policies around eviction notices

and the housing authority was able to change some of its own policies around preferences for Section 8 vouchers (a long-term housing subsidy), giving priority for assisted slots to homeless families with children in school. “This would not have happened if we did not have trusted relationships with our housing partners, relationships that have been built on many difficult conversations that put children's needs at the center,” Tamara Shoup, the director of family engagement and family-community resource centers at Vancouver Public Schools, said.

Not all communities have such a watershed moment: Partnerships that accomplish change usually do not form overnight. Indeed, VHA and their partners had already been working together for six years when they came together to tackle a pressing crisis. The Seattle Housing Authority’s Andrew Lofton describes his organization’s partnership with Seattle Public Schools as “a long courtship in some respects.” They navigated some staffing changes at the district and nurtured conversations and interactions to build a relationship before the partnership “really took off,” Lofton said. Tacoma had some similar obstacles but was able to deploy data to show the school district that the two organizations served the same children and would be more effective in their efforts if they worked together. And for Home Forward, it has been about moving the work from episodic and individual pilots to an intentional agency-wide plan. “The focus of [our strategic process] is going to be on systems alignment and systems-level impact, and when I say that I mean getting beyond the sort of well-funded site-based work. Because, while that feels good and is a great success to point to, we have so many incredible examples—especially in Washington—of what all the ingredients of those programs are. For us, we really want to look at equity, and what’s scalable,” said Rachel Langford of Home Forward.

Is it best to start with a small goal or a big plan? To Ted Dezember, senior resident services manager for educational initiatives at KCHA, it made sense to begin the partnerships with an achievable, discrete goal and see what kind of long-term relationship could grow from there. “Our philosophy was if we can come together and decide on a problem and implement a program to address that problem, out of that we’ll build relationships and, you know, the partnership with the school district will get more robust as a result of that specific project that we wanted to do. So we did that.” The housing authority didn’t immediately articulate “our vision and mission of educational initiatives,” Dezember admitted. His organization had been involved in early learning programs and out-of-school activities but was more focused on individual outcomes rather than an overarching philosophy. Conversely, Seattle “took the approach to really use their money and do a lot of internal work, and really think critically about their role, and what they can do,” he said. “And now they’re at a spot where they’re like ‘OK, we’ve done all this, now we want to do stuff. We want to do programs,’ and we’re like, ‘we have this array of programs,’ and now we’ve done all that internal work.”

Director of Resident Services Jenn Ramirez Robson of KCHA also said she valued a gradual approach to building partnerships. “Once you figure out the right players, you figure out the right ins to creating the relationships. Sometimes it can be harder to break through, but once you do, you’re partners. There has been a feel of more collaboration

and less competition—although that certainly occurs. People are more open to when there’s a benefit for making their own programs look successful. Then the turf issues seem to fade away.”

Who Should Be Your Partner?

When Michael Mirra first became executive director of Tacoma Housing Authority, he said one of his first stops was to ask the school district how THA could help. From there, the two entities began discussions that led to the current partnership. The collaboration was certainly helped by Marilyn Strickland, Tacoma’s mayor from 2010 to 2018, who made the success of Tacoma’s schools a priority. King County Housing Authority started with superintendents, but because KCHA encompasses 19 school districts rather than just one (as many housing authorities match up with), KCHA also initially reached out to community partners with overlapping interests like Head Start. One of the resources housing authorities can often offer as an in-kind donation is space. In King County, Head Start needed additional space for classrooms and that was easy for KCHA to provide and an easy way for the two entities to partner and pursue a joint goal of more opportunities for low-income children. “The approach really started with developing relationships with the leadership and understanding two things: One is that the partnership works best where we can truly, incredibly be perceived as value added by the school system, and by the parents,” KCHA Executive Director Stephen Norman said. Similarly, Seattle Housing Authority started by reaching out to Seattle Public Schools’ superintendent, but did not immediately strike a partnership. Work started to move more quickly when a deputy superintendent became interested and began to champion the effort. With the partnership cemented, SPS has been able to replicate that work with other entities. The district works with the City of Seattle to appropriately implement tax levies meant to boost educational outcomes and ensure that investments happening in schools are supporting the city.

And in Portland, where encouragingly the community was already engaged in collective impact work around early childhood and school readiness, Home Forward saw who it wanted to partner with, but did not receive an immediate welcome. “It was great we didn’t have to reinvent the wheel, but we just had to sort of elbow our way in because we weren’t seen as an obvious education partner,” Langford said. The housing authority “kind of invited ourselves to those tables,” she said, and over time was able to take a leading role in the community on issues like attendance and early kindergarten registration. “Now that we’re at the right tables and have the right relationships, and are less in a place where we have to elbow our way in and more in a place where we’re being invited, that I believe that once we have more of those internal systems in place, it’s really going to flow,” Langford said.

Turning Collaborators Into Long-Term Partners

Part of the task is transforming informal relationships into formal ones. “I would say that, more or less, we’ve always had a partnership,” said Kisa Hendrickson, the chief engagement and partnership officer for Highline Public Schools. But in the case of King

County, the formal crossover began when a coalition of community partners in the school district, including a community development organization and other groups, formed the [White Center Promise](#). From that grew a collaboration between the school district and the King County Housing Authority, which allowed them to deepen support of students not meeting their education outcomes. “It’s been an evolution, but what’s been great is to see the partnership deepen through the years.”

“There are students from all over who come with all kinds of barriers, whether they be academic or not, that impede a student’s learning or ability to learn. And to think that a school or a school district can address all the needs that a student comes with—because they’re human beings, we’d be kidding ourselves and we’d burn ourselves out...So it’s really a matter of teasing out what your partners are bringing to the table, and identifying the supports we need and how the partners can support the students.”

—*Kisa Hendrickson, Chief Engagement and Partnership Officer for Highline Public Schools*

“Instead of working in isolation, potentially causing duplication of services—or worse, deserts of service for some people—when we come together and spend time together, and talk about the work that we’re currently doing, leveraging existing capacity, we can shift our work so that we can create that continuum to support all kids. So, there aren’t those deserts of service, or we don’t have duplication of efforts that are happening, and that is literally spending time together.”

—*Stephanie Cherrington, Executive Director of Eastside Pathways*

Elements of Success

While the work will likely never be complete, these five communities have made great strides in mitigating poverty. Importantly, every site attributed successes to the partnerships they have forged. As this report has already illustrated, building these relationships is not always easy and takes time, but having common objectives with partners is critical to creating partnerships and achieving outcomes. “Really building that relationship, building some trust, building some real common themes, was really crucial to having that relationship take off,” Seattle Housing Authority’s Andrew Lofton said. Mirra of the Tacoma Housing Authority had the same experience and also described an important part of building partnerships: to let each partner be the specialist in its respective area. For example, THA felt it was important to adopt performance measures used by the school district in deference to their expertise. “We didn’t have any interest in second-guessing that,” Mirra said. Partnerships, according to Lofton, also allow for a “cultivation of the ideas, and the cultivation of the ability for people to see the commonality of what folks were trying to do—to create a path to success, to allow people to be successful, to take head-on difficult issues, like the education or the opportunity gap that was being experienced by students of color versus the majority students. To have, you know, very frank and thoughtful conversations about what that was about, what was contributing to it, and what we as two institutions could do about it.”

Mutual Objectives

Out of all of these partnerships, one unifying lesson is the importance of establishing joint goals. That can help a mission as well as strengthen a partnership's impact. Seattle's housing authority initially approached work with its public schools by stressing their commonalities in terms of overlapping populations—a good way to help a potential partner see the utility of working together. But the housing authority then realized it needed to define the common goals both entities wanted to achieve and figure out how each organization's assets could support those goals. Looking back, King County Housing Authority agrees about defining joint goals but also stresses “starting small and being really, really clear about what your end goal is, and ensure that whatever the end goal is, you're making logical steps to get there,” KCHA Director of Policy and Intergovernmental Affairs Megan Hyla said. Overall, KCHA wants children to be successful in a number of long-term outcomes, which means the time necessary to fully measure success is at least 20 years. To help address this challenge, KCHA infuses its work with short-term outcomes to measure along the way. And KCHA Director of Research and Evaluation Sarah Oppenheimer encourages new partnerships to bring in research and evaluation as early as possible.

Having agreed-upon goals is especially important because organizations evolve over time. “A lot of places of connection change over the years,” said Matthew Gulbranson, the community partnerships director of the Puget Sound Educational Service District. “But I think the strength of that is that we recognize what we both bring to the table, the importance of that, and how we both have this regional impact, and this regional role.” What matters most is the mission. As Gulbranson put it, “It's about leveraging your community voice and the impact, and how important it is to keep that front and center in the work.”

These partnerships have imbued in their participants a sense of possibility, as well as deepened their recognition of their own limitations and where they can benefit from the work and expertise of others. “What we've learned is, over time, really being able to understand what we can and cannot do,” Ted Dezember of KCHA said. “We are housers, we are a housing authority, and what we're designed to do is make sure that people have high-quality housing and safe communities. We're not an education agency.” Stephanie Cherrington—the executive director of Eastside Pathways, a KCHA partner—agreed: “What that really means is that every organization has their mission of work. They need to retain that mission of work. They need to continue to offer direct service. King County Housing needs to continue to make sure that people have housing, while at the same time understanding what they can tweak in that mission of work to align and support that agreed upon common goals of the partnership. So those reinforcing activities are really important.” Ultimately, the lesson learned is what can and should a housing entity contribute, that housing agencies are “in a position to be a portal to those families,” distributing information, hosting activities at the community spaces at their sites, convening stakeholders, and other ways to further goals.

Defining Success

Some elements of success are tangible, if not quite long-term: Do families have stable housing? Are attendance rates going up? Are more students reading on grade level? Vancouver's Topper said these types of agreed-upon metrics are "quantifiable evidence that [efforts] are working." From there, she defined success of the joint work with VHA as, "Are we able to really negotiate and work out any kind of hiccups or problems that we're having with the programs?" While that may be harder to attach a succinct indicator to, looking at the daily, weekly, and monthly actions of the partnership can help answer that question. For Topper, the "ultimate indicator" is systems change. In Vancouver, policy changes such as voucher priorities have been one systems-level transformation the partnership has achieved. While the organizations continue to work on long-term goals, Topper said their "policies are aligned and we're both working towards mutual goals" with signed agreements and parties that understand the expectations of the partnership.

But even with some of the easier metrics to define and agree on, much of this work to improve educational outcomes for low-income children remains difficult to gauge. "I think success is a hard thing to measure," said King County's Stephen Norman, whose housing authority has data sharing agreements with three school districts. "For one thing it's very longitudinal, and you don't know for probably for a decade or more what the actual outcome will be with the students that you're trying to assist. The second thing is it's such a multivariable question that it's hard to sort of figure out what of the various things that are happening is actually moving the needle, or what combinations of things that are actually happening are moving the needle."

Data Sharing

Although the five sites are in various stages with their use of data sharing with partners, all agree it is essential for success. In Tacoma, then-McCarver principal Janet Gates-Cortez said it took the elementary school and THA a year and a half to get their boards to sign off on their data-sharing agreement, but it showed the strength of the partnership. The data in Vancouver has been vital for the success of their programs because the schools and the housing authority uses it to see if they are meeting their intended goals like improved attendance or reductions in mobility. Rachel Langford of Home Forward has used data to track progress, but also has leveraged it to strengthen existing partnerships and create new ones. It's important, she said, to be "able to show, in pretty short order, when you invite us to the table, we get something done." Home Forward began with a data-sharing agreement covering just kindergarten enrollment in a single district. Because of the subsequent success, the partnership was able to dramatically expand its data-sharing. "We went back and asked for a much broader data-sharing agreement which we have now—I can't name everything we have on it, but it's got behavior, you know, academics, and attendance, discipline, you name it. So now the door is open for us if we want to explore different areas," she said. Oppenheimer credited a [data-sharing agreement template](#) crafted by the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities as well as guidance released by the U.S. departments of Education and Housing and Urban Development. "I think all of those things are in great service toward

bringing leadership from education and housing to the table, and seeing the utility in having those cross-sector data-driven conversations.”

Metrics

Evaluation points are key when thinking through what to put in a data sharing agreement and what to do once you have one. The research team at King County Housing Authority agreed data sharing is an essential component for success, with the understanding that as much work as getting a data sharing agreement signed can be, it is not where the work ends. Oppenheimer wants communities to focus on what can be accomplished with the data. Talking as partners about what the data means, looking at trends, and using the information to design or change initiatives is key. What’s the right approach? “I would say starting small and then building out the measures [for an individual program],” she said. Speaking like a true researcher, Oppenheimer said she thinks bringing in the research, evaluation, and measurement staff—whether in-house or through a partnership—early in the process is better. KCHA has had to evaluate programs after they’ve already begun, for example because an initiative began because of a partner priority or performance gap area. But, Oppenheimer said, when able to talk metrics at the beginning, organizations can plan, rather than trying to go back to figure out what the data is saying. She also wants to create safeguards for future staff: “I think that bringing those data sharing agreements and data-driven conversations to the table early on definitely can make the program planning and partnership process that much better for housing authorities and school districts that are coming after us,” she said.

And while some communities, such as Seattle, have since narrowed what data they are sharing compared with when they started, Tacoma actually had the reverse issue. One important lesson is that there can be issues if you don’t know how to measure your progress before you’ve begun collaborating. “I think we needed to have a better idea of what we were trying to impact before we deployed something, because I think that I find ourselves asking really good questions as they come up, and then finding that we weren’t asking that question of the residents, and if we were, we weren’t capturing it in our system,” said April Black, the deputy executive director of THA. “Being more thoughtful from the beginning about really what we’re trying to find out would save a lot of time.” For example, for a project hoping to get more people involved in traditional banking systems, the partnership didn’t start out measuring how participants banked. “Now we’re finding that a pretty simple way to define it is, ‘were they unbanked at the time that they came onto the program and then they get banked, and start having checking, savings, and regular use of their financial accounts?’ Well, you have to ask whether somebody has a checking or savings account at the time that they apply to know whether they changed that reality while they were on the program.” Better data makes for better accountability, but sometimes it’s unclear at the beginning what to collect. For communities that have the capacity (meaning for partnerships without dedicated data staff, this may be onerous) broad data collection can later be refined when it is determined what is actually useful. Home Forward struggled to do so in the early childhood space because so many different systems interact with children that age. School readiness involves the education sector

and their metrics, while developmental screenings involve the health sector and their metrics, highlighting the importance of cross-sector collaboration.

Collecting good data is also useful for taking a close look at how components of a partnership are funded and staffed—and reassigning resources when necessary in a smart way. KCHA has begun to examine their allocation of resources across their education efforts to try and ascertain if it's the right level of investment. They believe it is important in the short time for potential shifting, but also in the long term if their grant funding changes.

How to Sustain Partnerships

Creating partnerships takes time and work, but so does sustaining the relationship. “It takes really being focused on what we want to see as the outcome, but it really is about that relationship piece, which is a core value that I have,” said Gates-Cortez. That, she said, means recognizing that your organization doesn't have all the answers. “It's really about putting things into place, taking a look at what is working, what's not working and we need to toss it or we just need to tweak it a little bit—but just doing whatever it takes to keep pushing that dream forward.” A long-running partnership can only work if an organization learns to rely on its collaborators—that's what can turn a partnership on paper into one that truly cements lasting change. In Seattle, those relationships have changed and improved over time. “I think what's new now is we are focused,” said Brent Jones of Seattle Public Schools. We have a strong working relationship. I think we are on the same page about what needs to be done.”

Educational Programs Coordinator Cara Ianni at KCHA said communication is paramount to building trust. Green, of Evergreen Public Schools in Vancouver, concurred. There, she and her colleagues encountered a classic challenge for education and housing sectors: the differing definitions of homelessness presented by HUD and the Department of Education. Through “open communication and transparency” as well as the understanding that all partners are coming to their work with good intentions, they have been able to “tackle those hurdles.” KCHA has had success with being intentional about bringing its partners together, in the same room, as well as making concessions to hold meetings at times and in locations that will accommodate schedules. “It sounds like common sense but often times it doesn't happen,” Green said. Once the trust is established, the partners ascertain each other's strengths and the best way to handle future efforts. Jenn Ramirez Robson of KCHA has seen the impact this kind of relationship-building has had: Now it's not just KCHA staff and school district staff that are jointly planning, but because the housing authority has done good work, more potential partners are reaching out. In her work with KCHA, Ianni has seen the work become about “planning together, helping to collectively solve each other's problems and challenges.” Another KCHA employee, Youth Programs Coordinator Ken Nsimbi, who does more work on the ground, said partners like after-school providers tell him they are pleasantly surprised at how involved the housing authority is. KCHA's other partners agree. Hendrickson said KCHA's “ability to connect to resources has been huge,” noting that KCHA has access to resources that the district doesn't necessarily.

Just as Langford described how data was important for confirming accomplishments, Cherrington said following through with commitments is critical to the success of a partnership. “Clearly define the commitment that that entity is willing to make for that effort. The more you put into it, the more you get out of it... And that dedication and that openness to the possibilities and being willing to make changes is—I cannot emphasize enough how important that is in actually coming up with solutions, and then ultimately acting on those ideas for resolutions and better outcomes for kids,” she said. “So they—whoever it is around the country—they need to be willing to not only just show up at the table, because we have people who show up at the table and just sit there, and that’s not going to cause a solution, that’s not going to bring up a solution. They have to come with the mind shift that is that shared responsibility.”

Striking a partnership with another major institution in your city can undergird an effective collaboration, but it’s not enough. Langford explains that achieving systemic impact requires sustainable relationships at every level from front-line service providers to executive directors. She described how, under the umbrella of a partnership between her housing authority and the local library system, they maintain relationships with librarians to get information shared with the community, while also working at a different level to have unit inspectors bring books for families with them, to working with the local government entity to take pilot programs and scale them.

Institutionalize it!

Once communities have done the difficult work to create a partnership and initiatives to achieve change, it is critical they make sure their joint work is durable enough to survive staff changes and the passage of time. “People are going to come and go... it’s really important to get executive buy-in and understanding that whoever replaces [current staff] at some point down the line, that same dedication is there, so that they can just kind of slip into the work that is already existing inside the collaborative,” said Cherrington, who works with KCHA.

In Vancouver, Topper said she and VHA and Evergreen Public Schools have also confronted the question of sustainability beyond the tenures of individual staff. “How do you know you’ve really got it? It’s when it happens even if you’re gone tomorrow,” she said. It means having “those understandings, those agreements, having things in writing, having policies in place, procedures that other people can just step in and pick up the work.... So you make it such a big part of your work that without it you would feel lost. That’s how you institutionalize it.” Green said she thinks Vancouver has already achieved this. “Our housing and education programs don’t hinge on one or two people being in place. I know that if Jan [Wichert] leaves from the VHA, someone will fill in that role.”

As part of sustaining foundations that are built, leaders recognize they need to do more to familiarize new staff with the partnerships—to really focus on institutionalization. One way to aid that, said Gates-Cortez, would be hosting more robust orientations for new

staff. “What’s the roles, what’s their responsibility, how do they overlap with each other, who needs to communicate with each other? So as it gets larger, you know, asking that question, ‘who else needs to know about this?’” she said. Inserting these partnerships into the DNA of their component organizations not only helps with institutional knowledge and longevity, but also to drive current efforts within an organization. Seattle Public Schools has worked to move from having one-to-one relationships with partners to getting more holistic involvement from the entire staff. James Bush, director of school and community partnerships at SPS, said, “Building those systems, building those connections, and getting beyond that one-to-one personal relationship to an institutional relationship, and I think we absolutely have an institutional relationship, institutional partnership, that is going to be able to withstand changes in leadership at either organization if people will be able to pick up the book and know kind of how we did it and what were the elements that were key to our success.”

Strategic Planning and Strategic Inclusion

The strategic planning necessary to run a successful partnership and the on-the-ground outreach required to make sure it helps the people it is meant to, go hand in hand. “One of the first things that we’re going to do is focus groups with our residents, and understand what their needs are, and how we can better meet them, and I see this as really integral to the success of the education programming,” said Langford. “Because again, I’m looking to work at the systems level and find, beyond the mail, the best way that we can intentionally engage with the folks that we’re serving.” This is where the access to residents a housing entity has can really contribute to a partnership. From a school perspective, a partnership “enables us to build relationships with our families, because leaders in the housing sites speak the language, and come from the same culture and community,” said Hendrickson of Highline Public Schools. “If those leaders are connected to the school and to the school district, they’re able to go out into the housing communities and bring other families to the table and give them information.” Hendrickson said the number of possible interactions and interventions has increased beyond what school officials previously thought possible, which resulted in more opportunities to improve outcomes of vulnerable students. “More importantly,” Hendrickson said. “I think it’s brought that family-community voice to the table, that I think isn’t always there.”

Thinking about what systems need to consider for children to be successful, Janet Gates-Cortez cited a concept she calls “second backpacks”—something that students bring to school that isn’t really visible or heard: “We need to know that anything that kids bring with them to school we need to be able to work with, in terms of knowing who they are, what their strengths are, what their interests are, and how do we reach them so that they’re fully becoming engaged in school?” Doing that means ensuring that parents or guardians are working with the students, too. Accomplishing that means recognizing that partnerships don’t have every answer, that families can fill in the blanks. It’s about “recognizing parents for the knowledge that they have about their children, and ideas about what works, and resources that they can bring in that partnership,” Gates-Cortez said. “A partnership is really about having equity in that relationship, and having that

shared purpose that's clear." One way housing-education partnerships accomplish this is by bringing education to where families live, such as having after-school programs on-site, thus reducing barriers to participation from transportation needs.

From there, building a robust strategic plan can be a complicated undertaking made of various strata of interlocking goals. "Because this is a systems-level partnership, and because we're looking at the whole spectrum of ages, and we're looking at all of our students, one challenge is getting to clarity around our short, medium, and long-term goals for each of those subgroups," Courtney Cameron, then of Seattle Housing Authority, said. But even getting to the point of setting different goals at different levels of the partnership took months, she said. First her partnership had to take the time to "know who our students are, where they live, how they're doing, what they want and desire, how we can support them, and then how we track progress."

Partnerships not only present an opportunity to improve student outcomes, but to assist families and tighten the fabric of communities. To do that, prioritizing their involvement in the decisionmaking process is important. "If we're really going to change outcomes for marginalized communities than we need to embed them in the processes that we're using, whether that be funding, or whether that be policy work, or whether that be just decisions on what's actually happening," said Gulbranson of Puget Sound Educational Services District. "That really is key to doing business as unusual, and doing it with that race equity lens, and doing it with that anti-racist lens."

But for all aspects of the work, Cherrington believes it is critical to plan with the community and ensure they stay involved and are kept in the loop. "We have to make sure that we have multiple voices at the table, that we are including—in the solution-making—all of the different communities in the community, cultural communities, diverse voices that are coming in, and then more broadly communicating back out to invite more people in—but also to communicate how we're doing towards the work we said we're going to do."

Cross-Sector Hiring and Trainings

As these partnerships have matured, it has made sense for organizations to hire dedicated staff to ensure their benefits can be fully realized. Seattle, for example, "took a capacity building approach, which is different than some other housing authorities in other parts of the country," said Cameron. That meant hiring someone to remain in contact with the school system on a daily basis. In this case, it made sense to hire Cameron, who formerly worked for the school district. She and her counterpart at SPS "help each other with the language across both systems, with understanding the bureaucracies, and understanding where the opportunities exist to deepen our partnership." Advantages of that include the ability to quickly pursue grant opportunities, assemble cross-systems teams and focus groups, and more. Another area where KCHA has prioritized hiring dedicated staff is data.

Sometimes, one partner will hire an employee from another, which can help tighten bonds between the organizations and ensure their internal knowledge is complementary. Mirra, for example, hired a Tacoma Public Schools assistant superintendent “who was very excited about the discussion we wanted to have” as the first manager of the housing authorities’ education project. “It gave us a professional educator from that world who knew that world intimately, spoke their language, had their trust, and I think the relationship blossomed during that period.”

In Seattle, those cross-trainings and cross-hires have really paid dividends. “The great part about it is, we’ve actually swapped staff. Some staff are working for Seattle Housing Authority, then a year later they’re working for Seattle Public Schools, so we know each other’s systems, and we already have existing relationships that we leverage,” Jones of Seattle Public Schools said. “So there’s daily meetings, there’s weekly meetings, it’s becoming very structured and we have a rhythm of business together.”

That’s not the only way to share knowledge across systems. James Bush’s team at Seattle Public Schools works with more than 300 partners and tries to provide them with professional development opportunities so that they are aligned with the District’s strategic initiatives and to help establish continuity between students’ in-classroom experiences and out-of-classroom activities. It’s important, he said, that “whatever program they’re doing, if it’s robotics class, that they know what pillar of our organization that they’re working on. That’s systematizing a lot of the work that we do.” Importantly, SHA staff has participated in on-site trainings at Seattle school facilities, and Portland’s housing authority has also held cross-trainings. In the last year, SHA and SPS have made held programs and done presentations for counselors/family support workers at 22 schools, SPS McKinney-Vento liaisons, and SHA departments/staff, as well as improved staff skills and shared understanding of key issues affecting SHA students through joint participation in approximately 10 professional development sessions on topics like supporting English Language Learners, cultural responsiveness, undoing institutionalized racism, and trauma-informed practice.

Another way to deepen cross-sector collaboration is to involve partners in the hiring process. In Tacoma, for example, Gates-Cortez said she was looped into the hiring process for a liaison position at the housing authority that would have some involvement with the education partnership, as well as other positions. It has been helpful, she said, “just being able to have input as far as taking a look at who would be a good fit with being able to work with principals, or work with teachers, and then on the THA side taking a look at someone who would be a good fit in understanding housing systems, and processes, and approaches, and guidelines, and then together, being able to have that match and move forward, and having that time built-in.”

Strong Leaders

While partnerships are all about collective effort, they often require strong leadership to get off the ground and remain aloft. Hendrickson said that leaders in her region “aren’t afraid to be bold and try things that aren’t really the traditional way of doing things, but

that achieve the results that we're looking for." Vancouver also had strong champions for the work. "These housing programs have complete support from our district administration," said Green of Evergreen Public Schools. "Our superintendent has been on board since the very beginning and just wanting to see this happen because he knows the challenges our families and kids face and he sees this as a way to support those goals in a different way than what was previously possible."

In places that have less strong leadership, Hendrickson advised that professionals like directors or principals who want to ignite a collaboration to "just do it. Especially at the director level, or the executive director, or chief level, it's really easy to just sit around and talk about doing it, but to just go out and not be afraid to make mistakes, and not be afraid to evaluate ourselves and then reset where we need to."

Collective Impact

A partnership is designed to get more out of its constituent parts than they would on their own. But how do partnerships know they're achieving their full potential? In King County, the partnerships strive for five elements for "[collective impact](#)," said Cherrington of Eastside Pathways. They include abiding by a common agenda; centering work around data; reinforcing activities; community outreach and communication; and maintaining a "backbone entity" to "helps convene, facilitate, guide the strategy of the partnership." Cherrington said that the difference between collaboration and partnership and Collective Impact is usually—with collaboration and partnering—"it's usually around a project or a program. The idea behind Collective Impact is we're driving toward systemic change."

"If a promising practice comes up, we can elevate it in a way that can impact more than just the one school, and for me I'm a systems thinker; how do we elevate, promote, and inspire folks to go in a direction that will help more than just who is right in front of you?"

—James Bush, *Director of School and Community Partnerships at SPS*

"I think it's about being really nimble and flexible and being able to say, "you know what, this isn't working, so stop and figure out how to work better."

—Kisa Hendrickson, *Chief Engagement and Partnership Officer for Highline Public Schools*

"You could almost think about it as sort of a sphere of influence, so where do we have a sphere of influence to improve outcomes? We've really thought a lot about that and have identified basically three levels. There's the family level; we can do things to support families in a very sort of ground-level approach. We have a sphere of influence in schools because we have, in some school districts and some schools in particular, we have a really large proportion of our students attending a particular school or particular school district, so to some degree we can influence the types of supports that are needed inside the school. And then the last is the community level; we can do things at a community-wide level to increase outcomes too, such as working with the United Way, or our local educational

service district, to create a community-wide attendance campaign so that we're raising the dialogue and conversation about the importance of school attendance across the entire community that would have ripple effects down to our families and residents." and then edit to also have "I think another thing is to engage your constituents, your community. From a school district perspective, it's about engaging our families, community members, and students, to see if what we're doing is helping you—is it impacting you? It's bringing the constituents to the table to be part of that decision-making. I feel very strongly about that because they're the recipients of the goods or the services, so if what we're doing, we're scrambling around and we're doing all this stuff—and it's not resonating, it's not doing any good for them, why are we working? Who are we doing it for? So it's really about that communal and collaborative approach to this work, and I think that's been a strength of this area."

—*Ted Dezember, Senior Resident Services Manager
for Educational Initiatives of KCHA*

Regional Collaboration

Disagreements on pizza toppings aside, the four Washington state housing authorities and one from Oregon that form the Pacific Northwest Housing & Education Innovation Team all agree that their bi-monthly meetings are worthwhile.

Before they settled on the name Pacific Northwest Housing & Education Innovation Team, the group initially thought to meet because they are all housing authorities with the [Moving to Work](#) designation, with meetings first occurring between King County, Seattle, and Tacoma housing authorities. When the group started to think about a joint research project, Home Forward was brought into the fold in 2014. Phone meetings to explore widening the partnership began in the spring of 2015 and Vancouver Housing Authority was added to the collaborative. When the gatherings became more formal in the spring of 2015, the team was still calling themselves the MTW Policy, Research, and Evaluation Group. The five housing authorities met every other month with phone calls in between through the Spring of 2016 as they started to discuss "education-focused frameworks with the idea that a similar approach could be applied to other areas such as health or economic opportunity," Rachel Langford of Home Forward said. The housing authorities in King County, Portland, Seattle, Tacoma, and Vancouver don't use the exact same approaches to improve educational outcomes for their residents, but every agency and their partners is committed to the mission. The team formed with an education focus in early fall of 2016 because they all share a desire to meet regularly to identify ways that PHAs can most effectively leverage housing as a platform to improve educational outcomes for the 48,000 residents 0-18 years of age that their agencies house. The Innovation Team seeks to identify promising practices, develop policy recommendations, improve mechanisms for data sharing with education partners, track similar metrics and indicators, share and align to common metrics of success, design ways to take effective

programming to scale, and engage with and learn from other PHAs and education partners.

Most recently, the group met on January 19, 2018, over the phone, because they could not make schedules work for an in-person rendezvous. Representatives from all five housing authorities and a colleague from Seattle Public Schools—the group is still working out how best to incorporate education partners into the collaborative—came prepared to discuss their current and potential future work around moving the needle on outcomes for the kindergarten to third grade ages. One of the most valuable parts of the collaborative is hearing what’s working—and what’s not—for each community. “What’s really nice is that rather than having to go through executive directors, or department directors, or something, it seems like within these five agencies we all know our peers,” April Black of Tacoma Housing Authority said. “We all know their emails, their direct numbers—become acquaintances of each other. We can call each other up and get a call back and have frank conversations about how things are really working, and what they’re thinking about.”

At these gatherings housing authority staff that focus on education have spent more time talking about programs geared toward elementary students, while staff working on policy and research have focused a bit more on partnerships with the local community colleges or employment groups, Black said. The professional peers help each other dig through challenges and best practices for topics like privacy, data sharing, and program evaluation. Although the team has a regular meeting schedule, multiple members noted that they reach out and talk to each other more frequently. “By building relationships across housing authorities, we connect far more than every other month just with phone calls, and with opportunities to touch base, or ask questions, or a point of advocacy that we want to check with somebody else, funding opportunities and other things,” Courtney Cameron then of Seattle Housing Authority said. “We have the support of each of our own organizations to take the time to do that every month—to meet for three to four hours—and it’s absolutely been beneficial to supporting the work in the region.”

The Innovation Team started its initial gatherings by discussing tenets of a successful partnership and what that means for their ongoing work. Each member shared what they thought was working particularly well in their respective communities and what they wanted the other housing authorities to know about. As the group was still forming, it took some time for the members “to get beyond ‘this a good idea,’ to ‘so now what are we going to do with it?’” Jan Wichert of Vancouver Housing Authority said. But now, she thinks the collaboration has a “pretty good framework.”

Learning From Peers

The geographic proximity mixed with like-minded values created the perfect environment for the Innovation Team to form. As Executive Director Michael Mirra of

Tacoma Housing Authority said, “With our public housing authority neighbors in shouting distance just up or down the freeway...[the group’s] become a good arena for comparing notes, comparing data, exchanging ambitions.” Seattle Housing Authority has also taken the information, latest research on challenges and what people are facing in the group to then to inform their partners at the school district, Executive Director Andrew Lofton said. Rachel Langford of Home Forward saw immediate effects when she became part of the team: “I’ve brought back those lessons and shared them with my organization as we start to think about how to leverage the work more,” she said. Langford recalled when the Team did a site visit in Vancouver how valuable the experience was for her. “We just got to see one of their fully baked, fully loaded site-based efforts there, which was fantastic. And I think we all were just scribbling down notes about community building,” she said. After that visit, Educational Programs Coordinator Cara Ianni from King County Housing Authority followed up with Vancouver about their budget and other questions to consider starting a similar program in King County.

One of the other most useful components of the team that multiple members stressed is the fact that it has created space to discuss what’s not working. “When you hear about how organizations are doing, you don’t hear about what failed, or what was really hard, or what you thought was going to be awesome and it turned out to be a flop,” said Langford. And what’s great about this group is now we’ve built enough trust over the last year that we’re not afraid to talk about the stuff that we might even be well into and have questions about its effectiveness and get ideas from each other about how to change course.” The interchange of ideas and the opportunity to get feedback on challenges has helped Seattle Housing Authority “sort through and work through some of the problems” they’ve encountered, Lofton said.

Moving the Work Forward

The Innovation Team has shown its members that discussion won’t only help them form a better regional partnership, but also have an impact beyond the Pacific-Northwest. “There’s just been a lot of cross-pollination,” said Rachel Langford, “and not only sharing of best practices, because that’s important, but I feel like that’s what we all do sort of on the national scale.”

The meetings, attendees said, have allowed them to think differently, from a higher perspective, about their everyday work. “The questions that are generated out of those meetings are what’s most interesting to me because of that cross-sector type of thinking,” said Black of THA. “We think very differently than those who are in the school systems, and when the counselors come, or the McKinney-Vento liaisons come from the school districts, they, you know, those people are also focused on students and housing but in a different way than we are, and I think it helps us get out of our box and think a little bit differently. I think that that’s how some of these programs have been developed, actually, through understanding what the questions are from the school district level.”

Those questions help drive improvements to programming on the ground level. “So what examples can we bring to the data sharing, being an important piece of infrastructure?”

asked Cameron. “What examples can we bring to some of the other elements that have been identified? And what might we add to that body of work? One thing, and I’ve brought this up in that collaborative, is really concerned about the question of scale and replication, and what questions we need to be asking as a housing authority with our education partners is what is worth scaling and replicating? Ultimately, success is dependent on answering that question.” You’ve got to do other things to even get to that question, but if we don’t answer that question well and understand the data related to a particular project, and whether it was successful or not, we can’t even get to the scale or replication.”

Coordinated Efforts

Through the team, joint discussions can lead to joint efforts, like an idea the group had to pool funding to pay for a research project by an outside evaluator. “I’m eager to see where that will lead us,” said Mirra of THA. It also shows how partnerships can save money and be more effective by combining resources. Although the group is not currently pursuing this option for a variety of reasons, they recognize the potential. Black said, “There’s been some—it’s almost like some buying power in that, where we’re not having to pay to have new models built every time, we’re able to see how the model worked for one housing authority and then just paying to have our data inserted into the same model rather than reinventing the wheel.”

Not only is the pooling of funds useful, so is the pooling of data. “There’s been a lot of good thought that has gone into how can we really show not only the outcomes, but how can we sort of agree upon defined leading indicators?” said Jenn Ramirez Robson, Director of Resident Services of KCHA. “At the end of the day, often times when you’re looking at these you’re trying to say the same thing and measure the same things. But it’s a challenge to make sure that what you’re measuring actually makes sense.”

And then there’s the value of seeing how your peers with similar structures and funding have achieved something—which, particularly for housing authorities in the same region, can provide important lessons. “We are, most of us, in Washington. So, when one housing authority has had success with something, we know at least the schools they’re working with should have the same kinds of limitations as schools we’re working on, and that helps,” said Jan Wichert of VHA. “For instance, when we were doing our data sharing agreement I could show Vancouver Seattle’s data sharing agreement and say, ‘see, this is how they did it,’ and that was really great. You know, it wasn’t like Vancouver didn’t want to, but knowing that another school did it makes it easier for everybody.”

The same is true for educators working with other educators: It’s not only about identifying similarities, but also differences. “It keeps you out of your bubble, to see what other people are doing,” said Kisa Hendrickson of Highline Public Schools. “Are there things that we could be improving on? Are there things that we’re doing really well that we can share with other people? It’s really important in our area as well, South King County, because we have a pretty high mobility rate, and we know our students and

families are going to our bordering school district.” Because students may move back and forth throughout school districts in the same region, communication is key to keeping track of those youth.

Joining together for political outreach as a group has amplified the Innovation Team’s voice. For example, after the four Washington state-based members of the team wrote to U.S. Senator Patty Murray, she asked them to write about some of the education and housing work going on in the state from which others around the country might learn.

Ultimately, the meetings are about producing a lot more than just discussion, troubleshooting, and information-sharing. This past summer, for example, the members tested out doing a joint initiative with each site hosting a summer reading contest for residents. “Portland blew everyone out of the park,” said Wichert. Over the past six months, the Team has worked on deciding on common measures all five sites would use and then also employing common programming in each community.

Funding

Partnerships bring great value to housing authorities, school systems, and other organizations, but they also require investment—not just of time, but often of money.

The funding part of the equation certainly doesn’t need to be there at the outset, interviewees stressed. “Informal partnerships” can generate a lot of good, Courtney Cameron, then of the Seattle Housing Authority, said. “There are conversations that happen together at City Hall, identifying the fact that many students are shared whether there’s a data sharing agreement or not, understanding that a majority of students attend a particular school in a particular community, that it may be a good idea to invite a principal into a community, it may be a good idea to work with residents of a community to help interview teachers that may be hired at a particular school,” she said. That kind of collaboration can happen “regardless of funding. I think that requires a relationship, it requires time, it requires commitment, it requires listening to students, families, and residents, and understanding needs.”

Making these informal strides can matter a lot for securing funding once a partnership is ready to grow. “I think once people get started, they’re more opportunities for funding,” said Vancouver City Councilmember Alishia Topper. “So if you can get by with a staff and the resources you have, and you get something established, it’s very appealing for community partners to step in and support your work. So it’s really just taking that first baby step.”

A more formalized partnership generally involves things like data sharing, which binds both halves of a partnership in a multi-year commitment. While organizations don’t necessarily need extra funding to make those agreements work, having additional positions focused on that area can help a great deal. “I think the commitment of foundation funds to support the position I fill over multiple years is a huge advantage,” Cameron said, “and likewise the School District knowing that Kathlyn [Paananen,

Education and Housing Manager, Seattle Public Schools] is able to invest time and build a relationship, and connecting with schools, and knowing there is stability with her position allows her to move quickly and get time and attention from leadership across the district.” Having these extra positions, Cameron said, allows for more bandwidth to innovate and move quickly.

In a resource-constrained environment, housing authorities have to be nimble in finding the funding to dedicate to partnerships. One piece of the puzzle is the Moving to Work designation, which allows housing authorities some flexibility in how they use their federal funds. King County’s Stephen Norman said his organization has sought out “efficiencies in what we can accomplish in other areas of the operation,” which has freed up money for partnerships. “Some of [the funding] comes from the schools—although the schools have difficulty freeing up a lot of money for things that happen outside of the four walls,” he said. There have also been other federal grant opportunities. “We were part of a regional application by seven of the school districts in south King County, which is the poor end of the county, that received a \$40 million Race to the Top grant from the federal government, and I think the fact that the schools and Housing Authority were partnering and targeting schools within the region that were serving a lot of low-income kids strengthened the application.”

A similar mix of funding can be found in Vancouver. “We’ve used our existing staff and we’ve utilized the school’s existing staff, so one I’d talk about with other housing authorities is looking at the infrastructure you have and what you can do with that,” said the VHA’s Jan Wichert. “Truly, mostly what we’ve accomplished has been accomplished with the staff we have and the structure that we have.” On top of that, though, the Vancouver partnership has received funding through foundations like the Community Foundation of Southwest Washington. And Vancouver also passed a levy that will provide housing funding. “So that’s new funding, but that’s very difficult, it’s quite an accomplishment to get it done,” said Wichert. Still, she stressed that these extra streams supplement what is already a robust program: “What I’d think about for other housing authorities is, take a look at what you got before you decide that you need a lot of extra. It doesn’t need to be fancy, you know, and you can do quite a bit with what you already have.”

Housing authorities everywhere have hard decisions to make: What is the best way to serve resident needs now and in the future? In Tacoma, Michael Mirra has said he believes every housing dollar spent is not just for putting someone in a dwelling, but to support a myriad of other goals—education included. That’s why the Tacoma Housing Authority has made the decision to dedicate some of its resources to its partnership with Tacoma schools.

Still, there thankfully has been an influx of foundation funding in recent years, one that interviewees acknowledge is unique to that part of the country. “We’re fortunate that the Pacific Northwest division of [the Bill and Melinda] Gates [Foundation] understands the local context and the urgency around the crisis of housing affordability in our city,” Cameron said. “So I think that there’s a true commitment to this region and thinking

about innovation and new ways of thinking about how to address this issue that has become even more urgent and even more visible in different ways.”

Interviewees said that foundation funding was useful for jump-starting innovative projects—and now is helping them grow their partnerships into sustainable arms of their overall work. Jenn Ramirez Robson described that evolution: “One of the shifts that I think I’ve seen with the Gates funding for the housing and education partnerships is it’s gone from funding discreet programs and saying, ‘well, partner on that and we’ll call that a housing and education partnership,’ to saying ‘well, what would it take to really interweave what you do together so that when this particular set of funding goes away that it just becomes part of your DNA that you’re going to partner and work together.’”

One outgrowth of the involvement of the Gates Foundation has been the investment in a series of convenings with housers, schools, and related groups organized by topic, such as adverse childhood experiences and attendance. After the initial meetings participants have had continuing conversations. KCHA’s Ted Dezember is glad to see these interactions happen. “They’re all working on the same thing, they’re doing it differently, and they’re coming together to share their learning, and approaches,” he said. “There’s things happening specifically in their own school and strategies have been shared. And that’s a direct by-product of hearing that presentation, and thinking about that model, and how that might be applicable to some of our schools.”

While some interviewees said foundation money has helped spur their collaborative work, they are committed to trying to continue work even if investments recede. Andrew Lofton said SHA would continue to do the work regardless. But as budget cuts for education and housing deepens, it is difficult for organizations to fund efforts. “Currently right now, we’re in a tough situation,” Brent Jones of Seattle Public Schools said. Because the state has been facing a budget deficit and hasn’t funded the school district, “we have a 74-million-dollar gap. Ideally, we’d like to continue that [partnership] work, ideally we’d try to repurpose funds to support this work, because we know that the student population is super important, to provide those services. But without that funding from sources like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, it’s going to be difficult for us to continue. Seattle Housing Authority has also been a partner in providing funding, so we need to sustain that. So that’s our biggest piece right now, to sustain our current funding. We’ll try to be creative in finding ways to do some fund development to enhance our programs, but right now our focus is on sustaining what we have.”

Making the case to local officials can also be important, interviewees stressed. “We have a really strong relationship with the city of Seattle,” said Jones. “The Department of Education and Early Learning is a key partner for us. They have provided us funding for different items, the mayor has been gracious in trying to provide a revenue source for us. He recently had a summit, a mayor’s summit, where he brought together all the different sectors around supporting education and from that summit we’re hopeful that he’s going to provide some more funding for us. We have a very generous citizenry. They pass levies consistently. So, some of those funds are supportive of all the work we’re trying to do as well.”

While the housing authorities and school systems of the Pacific Northwest are now strong believers in cross-sector partnerships, they admitted the idea may not be obviously worthy of investment to officials elsewhere. In part that's because this work takes many years to see definitive results. "Until there's solid evidence, until there's absolutely some rewards that we can point to say 'this has been successful and here's what it has done,' it will be a challenge for people to want to divert resources to this. And that's fair," Lofton said. "But if you believe in supporting your residents, if you believe in creating a path to self-sufficiency, I think this is something one has to take a look at." Part of the point of the Seattle partnership, he said, is demonstrate the value of such undertakings.

"I think the investment in capacity, while sometimes difficult to see in the short-term, pays off absolutely in the long term for doing things that you could not have done otherwise to reach the ultimate impact that you want to have."

—*Courtney Cameron, Education and Housing Manager, Seattle Public Schools*

Challenges

As with any new endeavor, partnerships between housing authorities, education systems, and other entities are works in progress. Even collaborators who have been working together for some time are still encountering obstacles, learning lessons, and making changes to their practices. "This is a new effort that both institutions are engaged in and are attempting to forge," Andrew Lofton said of the work between the Seattle Housing Authority, which he leads, and Seattle Public Schools. "And in that newness, as in anything, there're just lots of challenges, lots of things you don't know that you run into that are surprises, and lots of differences because the institutions work in their own field in lots of different ways." It has taken time, he said, to get a sense of how day-to-day operational issues will be reflected in the policy work, since SHA and Seattle Public Schools bring different perspectives to the work. Lofton raised a point also echoed by Janet Gates-Cortez, of the Tacoma School District—that before partners can learn lessons from each other, first they need to learn to speak the same language. That doesn't just mean utterances, acronyms, and terms of art, but also the core ideas of how another field works. Michael Mirra of the Tacoma Housing Authority concurred: "We learned school districts and housing authorities, in some ways, are their own tribes, with their own language, and that was a difficulty." Jan Wichert of VHA echoed the concern about squaring two different organizations' approaches and cultures. "Where it got a little difficult was when it got down to the nitty-gritty, and we realized that our system is less flexible than we thought it was, as is the school system," she said. "When it got difficult was probably months into it, when we would come up against roadblocks. And that's where our relationship with the partners that we work with and the idea of really keeping our eye on the common goal mattered so much."

One example of a language barrier is FERPA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, a law that education officials know intimately but that is less familiar to housing staff. Lofton said navigating FERPA has been a challenge for his staff. "We spent a lot of

time trying to figure out how to get information [from schools] in a way that would protect the privacy rights that people had to do, but also would give us some data to say ‘here’s what’s going on.’ And that’s proven to be very, very delicate.” Fortunately, SHA worked out data agreements with the school system that allow the housing authority to collect good metrics. “It has been revealing to us of how our students are doing, and what are some of the challenges they’re having, and what are some of the things that we can actually do about that from a Housing Authority perspective?” Because the school district and the housing authority each have their own rules on the sharing of data, “it sometimes feels like the KGB and the CIA exchanging information, and having to puzzle out all of the barriers for that,” Mirra said. “My general advice in drafting those kinds of agreements is do not start with the lawyers.” It has taken time, but housing and education entities in the Pacific Northwest—and many other communities across the U.S.—have data sharing agreements with partners that satisfy these important requirements of protecting students and families, while also obtaining consistent, accurate information that’s actionable.

Melanie Green, the administrator of Title I engagement and family and community resource centers with Evergreen Public Schools in Vancouver, also mentioned a few disconnects the partners had to consider. Most important was the definition of homelessness for Section 8 voucher referrals: The Vancouver Housing Authority had used the HUD definition, while the schools relied on the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act definition. “Making sure that we had a clear understanding of what homeless was and how it’s defined and making sure systems aligned—that was a challenge we had to overcome and have communication on, but we came to an agreement,” she said. Wichert echoed that concern. “When it came time to share data in a way that was productive, it just took a lot of work,” because of VHA and the school system’s different “homelessness” definition. “But we worked through it and have had enough successes now that when we hit a bump we figure there’s going to be a way around it, we just need to figure it out.”

One challenge specifically faced by housers is choosing between place-based and mobility approaches—whether to bring programs to housing sites or to help families move to areas with better services, and how to do both well. At King County, for example, “we feel very strongly that those approaches need to be balanced, and we invest in both,” said Megan Hyla. “It’s important to us that our families have the choice to live in a good school district. If they choose to live next to grandma and auntie in a not-so-great school district that’s their choice as well. As long as those families truly have that choice, that’s where we believe that our residents are going to make the best decisions for them.” But that makes it incumbent for KCHA to ensure its collaboration with local schools is compatible with both approaches.

Some of the challenges involve agencies’ tendency to favor certain traditional priorities—in the case of housing authorities, focusing on the essentials of providing safe, affordable housing. “It’s hard to get your head up and look at that really big, broader picture,” Hyla said. While this widening of perspective has become natural to KCHA, Hyla imagines it would be a challenge for other housing authorities. “Housing and

education is such a big issue and big challenge for so many of our communities that it can become overwhelming very quickly,” she said. “And so when you’re tackling one overwhelming problem, and then add in another, it can feel a little bit—it can feel like mission creep in some ways, and it can kind of make you question your agency direction.”

Housing authorities also think about how these partnerships can benefit families whom they do not directly house but provide with housing choice vouchers. Providing programming to developments owned and operated by the housing provider is one of the first reasons to partner with a housing entity: It reduces barriers like transportation, safety, and comfort levels for families to participate. But those families aren’t the entire population being served. Because place-based initiatives happen at public housing sites, it’s easy for families utilizing Section 8 vouchers to be left out. In Portland, Rachel Langford said Home Forward has trouble intervening with voucher participants. “Outside of the administration of the voucher we have really limited ways to touch those families, and that’s something we’re really working to solve because two thirds of the students who are receiving our assistance are receiving it through the Housing Choice voucher program,” she said. “So in our mind, if we’re really going to make progress in our goal of helping change the trajectory of kids growing up in our housing, and doing our part to disrupt intergenerational poverty, we’ve really got to figure out how it can meaningfully work with our voucher families.” Cara Ianni brought up the same concern. “A lot of what we do on our sites is really hard to translate to a diffused population of voucher holders, so that makes it challenging.”

Still, housing authorities are making strides in serving their voucher families. While it is certainly harder to connect with this population, housing authorities still have access to those families to promote improved educational outcomes. At the very least, a housing authority will connect with a family during the annual recertification process, where many housing authorities use that time to talk about the importance of attendance or get families connected to resources, like free or very low-cost internet. In Tacoma, Mirra had his staff use that time to ensure residents were signing up for and therefore eligible to take advantage of Washington state’s College Bound Scholarship, a program that pays for students to attend public in-state college as long as they met some basic requirements—and importantly for THA—as long as they sign up by the end of 8th grade. “When we started this, for lack of that miserable bit of paper shuffling, by the end of the 8th grade, almost half the children in the state and Tacoma were missing out on this transforming promise,” Mirra said. “When we understood that, we thought to ourselves, “we’re paper shuffling. That’s what we do. Every year we do paper shuffling with all our families. We make them sign these certification forms, leases, new leases, applications, blood oaths, and we resolved to sign up 100 percent of our 8th graders every year—and we have gotten it done, now, several years in a row, by taking the College Bound Scholarship paper shuffle, putting it at the bottom of our paper shuffle, and taking advantage of the law of nature. That a normal human person on this planet’s surface who has just signed four pieces of paper is probably willing to sign a fifth. And that was a very good experience for us, that a housing authority is able to be influential at a relatively low cost.”

Throughout the rest of the year, many housing authorities send out paper mailings, emails, text messages, and post flyers in frequented locales. To improve kindergarten registration, Home Forward used posters, flyers, mailers, and staff knocking on doors to reach families that they had worked with school districts to identify who had a child eligible for kindergarten and for which school. The Housing Authority was able to compare the registration from that year with the previous year where there was no outreach and saw “a really remarkable gain,” Langford said. “It was also was a real foot in the door for our partners, for them to see how we could be effective in this broader community campaign.” The following year, Home Forward residents had even greater registration and ended up raising the rates by over 14 percentage points, which was more than the biggest school district’s results for children not housed by Home Forward. In King County, staff send out mailings, make calls, utilize social media, do outreach to community venues, and have now added a line on applications to ask residents about their preferred methods of communication, Robson and Ianni said. This is where partnerships, like with community centers or libraries, can be especially useful. Many housing authorities also enlist residents to help with efforts, like Seattle and Vancouver housing authorities’ walking school buses which escorts children to school by establishing safe and effective walking routes through neighborhoods; often residents—even those without children—volunteer to be a part of the initiatives. And with data sharing, some housing authorities are able to use partially disaggregated or completely individualized data to tailor services for specific families, regardless of if they are public housing or section 8 residents.

Sometimes, the paperwork that undergirds partnerships can create alarming amounts of work. While many large housing authorities’ geographic reach encompasses one school district, for some, their bounds include many school districts which can make data sharing much more challenging. “One of the things that we struggle with is that we think of how much time and bandwidth it takes to put into data sharing with one school district,” said Sarah Oppenheimer of KCHA. “For a regional housing authority such as KCHA where we have 19 school districts, the thought of how we would ever staff 19 data sharing agreements is a little baffling. So I think one of the things that we’ve been thinking is ‘there’s got to be a better way,’ right?”

Sharing data and metrics with partners can be difficult, but the Innovation Team also had the idea that sharing regionally would increase the field’s knowledge and help with efforts on a broader level. However sharing that data wasn’t easy, because the various organizations used different software programs to examine the data, as well as different metrics. “In the case of King County they have so many school districts, so that’s pretty significantly different as well, and then Portland is in a different state.” Right now, Black said, the partnership is trying to get access to statewide data and possibly work with a different evaluator.

Assessing the overall success of a partnership is its own, significant challenge. There are many quantitative ways to do that, like looking at graduation rates or attendance patterns. More difficult is finding a process to successfully evaluate qualitative factors. “One of the things in particular that we’re interested in understanding is really the evolution of the

partnerships, and seeing what changes over time,” research analyst David Forte of KCHA said. “So we’re doing intentional pauses to have a conversation with district partners, with program partners, and asking specific questions in a repetitive sense to see what changes over time they’ve noticed as kind of the people on the ground doing the work with the school district, with the kids, with the teachers.” The purpose of this process is to document and understand what makes an effective partnership between a housing authority and a school district.

And then there’s the issue of recognizing whether an experiment or initiative is ultimately cost-effective. “I think part of the challenge for education initiatives and for any innovation agency—or any of our programs within our agency—is figuring out when is the data enough to say, ‘we either need to really make a pivot in this program or we need to discontinue this?’” said Oppenheimer. It’s not clear what the right answer is, but she said what matters is that you have the right data and partners to make the right call. “Getting us to a place where we feel like, ‘this wasn’t working, we piloted it, we learned from it, so it’s really useful in that regard, but we’re going to go in a different direction,’ those are hard learnings, and I mean, to be frank, I don’t know that we’ve completely mastered that. But I think we’re working towards it.”

The greatest challenge of all may be finding ways to continually improve these partnerships. “What’s the way for housing authorities and school districts, once they decide what a highly effective partnership looks like, what’s the process and strategy going to be to continually come together and talk and to meet so that there is continuous growth occurring in the partnership, it’s not a stagnant thing?” asked Ted Dezember. Systems-level change is fundamentally different than a housing authority or school system’s usual focus on discrete tasks, said Matthew Gulbranson of PSESD: “A lot of times, what can happen is that if you have certain deliverables with certain projects, with certain grants, with certain funders, it tends to silo you, and it tends to put a focus on your project that is kind of contained.” Translating that mindset into more expansive work “is problematic when you’re trying to do bigger, regional work,” he added. “Systems change takes a long time, and a lot of funding is short periods of time. So there’s a lot of tension that happens in that.”

Sustainability of effort will always be one of the weightiest tasks for partnerships. “How do you institutionalize these relationships?” asked Stephen Norman. “Because you have turnover with principals, you have turnover with superintendents, and that’s why you just have to continually document and engage with everybody in the school district so that this becomes, on both the Housing Authority side and the School District side, an understanding that having good, stable housing is as important as having a school bus system in terms of actually getting kids to school. On the flip-side, within the Housing Authority, we look at the challenge of how do we put this into the Housing Authority’s DNA, and that is communicating and communicating and communicating with staff what is the ultimate goal here, which is around the success of these children.”

“I think the biggest challenge is that public school systems are so beleaguered and so under siege in terms of lack of resources and other challenges they’re dealing with, that it’s sometimes hard to get their attention or keep them focused.”

—*Stephen Norman, Executive Director, KCHA*

Is This Work Replicable?

These housing authorities and education partners have clearly shown that intensive collaborations can work in the Pacific Northwest. But are these gains possible in other regions or states with different strengths and different needs? “I think this type of collaborative work is possible in any community,” said Melanie Green of Evergreen Public Schools in Vancouver.

The successes in Washington State and Oregon can be traced to dynamic leaders, a culture of collaboration and experimentation, and other factors. The strides these partnerships made could be echoed elsewhere, even if the organizations in question don’t have the same built-in advantages. The right philosophy is essential. “I think that they’d need to approach the work with that larger umbrella and larger mission and goal of setting aside their jurisdictional boundaries, and really working towards a larger goal,” said Megan Hyla of the King County Housing Authority. “I think as long as they have that mindset in the forefront that that would help them.” But just as important as an ambitious vision is a manageable start. An important approach to a partnership is starting small, several interviewees cautioned. Doing so helps establish trust and may be more likely to set collaboration on a sustainable trajectory of growth.

While it’s true, as April Black said, that communities in the Pacific Northwest are extremely receptive to the work that partnerships of housing authorities and school systems want to do, she said that isn’t the only factor for the success they’ve seen. “I think that there’s a closeness between the executive directors here that helps them have conversations about the problems that they’re facing and how they might be able to solve them, rather than them working alone,” she said. Other potential partnerships, then, can accomplish a lot by opening and maintaining lines of communication, even if their communities are less supportive than those in Oregon and Washington.

While interviewees agreed that every community faces its own challenges, they believe that their partnerships could be mimicked elsewhere. “For other housing authorities, if you were going to replicate what we’ve done, you’d have to take a look at what the structure is at the schools that you serve, and what would be a way that housing could help them the most,” said Jan Wichert of VHA. In any community, however, making sure disparate systems can come together means identifying the right stakeholders. “I think our success has come from knowing the key players in the community to bring to the table and having the willingness to come to the table and have difficult conversations,” Green said. “And really looking at our systems and how to align them.” The particulars of each partnership can be molded around community-specific goals. “I expect the program models need to be intimately local to account for what’s going on on the ground,” said Tacoma Housing Authority Executive Director Michael Mirra.

However, he said, almost every region has a few things in common. “Most communities have a housing authority and a school district who share those challenges,” he said. He said that they just need to get together and have a productive discussion.

The mission that bonds together a partnership of housing authority, school system, and other organizations should drive any area’s attempt at success, suggested Sammi Iverson, an elementary school housing assistance case worker at THA. “The model [of McCarver Elementary] could be extremely successful [elsewhere], but I think it has a lot to do with the landscape, with the willingness to partner, the willingness to make commitments, and the willingness to work with this vulnerable population, so it’s going to hit multiple spots to see success... We’re all really trying for the same outcome, which is to stabilize students, and to see progress in the lives of families and kids. And that’s something that I don’t think anyone would have a hard time getting behind.”

While interviewees acknowledge that their work is aided by sympathetic legislators in Oregon and Washington, they do not believe that having an elected official as a champion is necessary for success. What you do need, said Vancouver City Councilmember Alishia Topper, is strong local leadership. “You need a leader and a champion within your school district, and you need a leader and a champion within your housing authority,” she said. “If those two people can find a way to really spark up interest within the two organizations, it will be successful.” Communities can get a leg up on this work even if they do not have help or attention from a politician—and then, when ready, make the case to one. “If you have the relationships with your Congressperson and you’re able to go show them that exact intersection between housing and the education front, and show that you have a great relationship with your school principal, and your McKinney-Vento liaisons, and really get them out there to see what that looks like, and to show them people who’ve been impacted by your programs and your partnerships—that makes a huge difference,” said Megan Hyla of KCHA.

An interest in throwing new things at the wall helps, too. “I think there’s an ethic here of a willingness to experiment and a willingness to reach out and look at non-traditional ways of supporting our clientele,” said Lofton. “So, with that ethic, then I think that that generates opportunities to do new things and to be a little bit creative, and to take some risks where otherwise you wouldn’t. I do think that the housing authorities here have traditionally been in that kind of mode of wanting to reach out and branch out and do things differently.” In Seattle and the rest of the Pacific Northwest, housing authorities and their partners have been willing to do this. Other regions hoping to emulate the city’s success may want to emphasize creativity and risk-taking, too. As Courtney Cameron explained, “What is unique about the way that we’re trying to work is we’re trying to take the best idea that can be replicated, that can be scaled, and try to take that forward.” This daringness isn’t simply in the water, Janet Gates-Cortez stressed. It’s a result of the choices of leaders—choices that leaders in other parts of the country could make, too. “Part of why it’s happening [in Tacoma] is because of the mindsets of the Michael Mirras, and the superintendent, that really values innovation and recognizes that how we’ve been doing it has not been getting the results that we want.”

No matter what, any partnership takes time—something any community can invest. “I would say it takes a year to really develop the partnerships and relationships related to a particular group or neighborhood or school. I think it takes more than a year to do that across the system,” said Cameron. And organizations should ensure they are ready first. “I think there’s some initial work that each agency has to do within themselves first before forming the partnership,” said Kathlyn Paananen. “I like that [our] partnership started with goal-alignment—so what are the overall Seattle Housing Authority’s missions, what’s the School District’s mission? ... I think there needs to be some thoughtful, critical thinking within each agency first, and some support to really make this work happen.”

Although it’s not necessary for partnerships that have not yet begun, data can elucidate challenges and point the way toward some solutions. “What I would say to those school districts [considering a partnership with a housing authority] is ‘look at your data, what is the data telling you? Where do investments need to happen?’” said James Bush, the director of school and community partnerships at SPS. “And you can use that information to help build bridges with city or county municipalities, housing authorities, and being able to speak to what the issues are—and then pivot that to what are the opportunities for us to make an impact in improving student outcomes and building from that.”

Ultimately, though, what will drive a successful partnership is passion and a commitment to a larger mission of improving outcomes. “I don’t know that there’s anything unique here that can’t be done anywhere else,” said Stephanie Cherrington, executive director of Eastside Pathways. “[If staff can] see the opportunity, they see the potential, and they’re bringing that personal passion and commitment, and bringing to bear the skills that they have... when the work gets really hard, and we have to hold each other accountable, that’s when we start leaning in on that relationship with each other.”

Collaborations between housing authorities and educational and other systems will be increasingly important around the country because the role of public housers is fundamentally changing—which KCHA’s Stephen Norman interprets as a moment of opportunity housing authorities anywhere could seize. Because of the changes to federal housing stock, if housing authorities “get away from worrying about whether the roofs are water-tight and whether the boilers are working, they can start to shift back to what is the real mission of housing authorities, which is around social impact,” Norman said. “And there is arguably no more important role for housing authorities and public housing than to ensure the children growing up in subsidized housing don’t become the next generation of applicants to public housing.” This work will be replicable, because it needs to be.

As for the Innovation Team, its approach of knowledge-sharing is replicable in other settings and is worth pursuing. “Coming from a school world, I come from the world of professional learning communities, I really think there’s going to be value from this group continuing to come together and really kind of build our own learning agenda,” said Ted Dezember of KCHA, who described the Innovation Team’s efforts to build a set of best practices that officials elsewhere could adopt. “It would be a common vocabulary

and a common approach that we could use together, and we might be able to communicate that to the rest of the country in a better way.”

The members of the Innovation Team stressed that, ultimately, to attain the benefits that they have enjoyed by sharing information and experience, the most important thing to do is ensure that meetings occur regularly. If there’s a high concentration of housing authorities in a region, there’s nothing to stop them from getting together—they have similar organizational structures, funding arrangements, and leadership. “I most definitely think that it could be replicated,” Dezember said.

Conclusion

While research on the intersection of housing and education needs to increase, the concept of why such work is critical has become more and more accepted across fields. For the housing authorities in the Pacific-Northwest and their partners, this has made a difference. “When Tacoma Housing Authority started its education project about seven years ago, we did not have too many templates. And we had to really make it up as we go, and spent a lot of time explaining why a housing authority was interested in education,” Mirra said. “And we don’t have to spend that time now, because we feel there are a growing number of other housing authorities and school districts who understand the value of their partnerships. So, we feel like we have a lot of company.” Mirra believes this shift has happened for several reasons, including national convenings to bring partners together, but mostly because people are simply realizing that in fact, housers and educators do have a lot to work on together.

Communities looking to engage in this critical work to improve educational and life outcomes for low-income children and families should engage in partnerships to be more effective and more efficient with their efforts. Determining joint goals with partners and then utilizing tools like data sharing and establishing metrics are a must; having consistent and open communication as well as following through with intents is also essential. After that is sustaining that work by nurturing your partnership and institutionalizing the work across every level of an organization, from front-line service workers to executive directors. Every community has its own needs and unique set of challenges, but there are general best practices that are applicable to any current or potential partnership looking to engage in this work. Jan Wichert of VHA encourages communities to maintain efforts despite the challenges: “Just keep at it, it works. I think that the thing that we have in common with educators, the thing that we all want, is for the lives of the folks we serve to improve. And we see very clearly that we can do that better together. And not together like we’re partners, together like our systems work together. That’s how we’ll do this better. And that’s really important, and that makes it worth the hard work.”

Credits

Interview contributions by Amber-Lee Leslie

Videography by Matt McDaniel & Felix Banel

Web design and video editing by matt

This report made possible by funding from MacArthur