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Building Connections: Student Parent Support Worker Pilot Project

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Executive Summary

Youth from low-income neighborhoods experience considerably diminished educational outcomes (e.g., high school graduation), compared to those living in more affluent areas. These inequities in educational achievement are exacerbated by factors such as gaps in service delivery, systemic barriers to access, lack of communication between stakeholders, duplication of resources and a lack of coordination in community services. While there are community programs that exist to help youth overcome these barriers, what is sometimes missing is a person to help connect these programs with the people who could benefit from them.

The Pathways to Education Program in Ottawa, along with host agency, the Pinecrest Queensway Community Health Centre and several cross-sector stakeholders across the city have been working toward using collective impact to address the inequities in academic achievement rates among low-income communities in Ottawa. Collective impact is a method that involves bringing together different groups or individuals that are working toward a common goal. The name of this specific collective impact initiative is Equity in Education.

The Pathways to Education Program provides a comprehensive set of academic, financial, social and one-on-one supports that have increased graduation rates in partnering communities (Pathways to Education, 2017). While some elements of the Pathways model such as academic, extracurricular and leadership supports are already found in low-income communities in Ottawa, it was determined through community consultations and asset mapping that the critical component of a Student Parent Support Worker (SPSW) is often missing. This worker acts as a liaison between students, parents, schools and communities; builds trusting relationships with youth; and coordinates supports that meet the individual needs of students/families. To fill this identified gap in service delivery, Equity in Education applied for and received funding to hire an SPSW to work with youth living in two social housing neighbourhoods in Ottawa.

The sample size in this pilot was very small (21 students) so further research is needed to confirm the findings but there are indications that the pilot was successful and had a positive impact on the participants.

The effects of the pilot were measured in terms of the impact the SPSW had on:

- Student and family's awareness of and access to supports
- Service coordination for students, their families and the host organizations
- Preliminary academic outcomes for participating youth

A process evaluation related to the engagement of stakeholders in the collective impact initiative was also conducted. A common agenda and common language seem to be the expected next steps in moving the work forward. Stakeholders have stated that they are ready to begin identifying and working on specific action areas at both the neighbourhood and city-wide levels and are open to contributing their resources and expertise to the initiative.

Participating students and parents identified that their awareness of available services increased over the course of the SPSW program. Students also expressed an increased willingness to attend community programming and a willingness to stay for longer periods of time as the programming seemed more relevant. Students were also inspired and motivated by the presence of an adult who was interested in their academic progress. Host agencies reported that the SPSW became a critical link in their neighbourhood, through which students could connect directly to the community at large rather than in a fragmented way as had previously been the case. The host agencies also reported increased capacity in two areas: providing outreach to hard-to-reach youth and parents, and connecting directly with schools.

As previously mentioned, further research and evaluation is needed to understand the SPSW role in greater detail and the mechanisms and best practices that are proving to be most effective. The impact of the SPSW role on different subgroups of students also needs to be explored further to understand how to best support varying demographics of youth. In addition, further investigation is needed to understand how systemic barriers manifest differently for various subgroups of at-risk youth so that the collective impact initiative can advocated for policy and systems changes.

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Introduction

Equity in Education was established in January 2016 to convene stakeholders through a collective impact framework with the common agenda of working together to eliminate the educational achievement gap for low-income youth living in Ottawa. The Student Parent Support Worker (SPSW) pilot project was the first project implemented by Equity in Education and aimed to address gaps in service delivery identified by Equity in Education stakeholders. The position was modelled after a similar role in the Pathways to Education Program which had been responsible for delivering comprehensive programming to youth in the west end of Ottawa since 2007. The Pathways to Education Program is a well-known model of comprehensive supports for youth living in low-income communities, designed to enhance their engagement and persistence in high school and support them through a successful transition to postsecondary education or meaningful employment.

From January to December 2017 an SPSW was hired to work in two priority neighbourhoods. The SPSW was expected to assist in building the communities' capacity by:

- Helping students and parents to access community resources and supporting them as they navigate the school system
- Creating a stronger connection between the school and students and their parents
- Helping students and parents build on their strengths by facilitating access to school/community resources and opportunities
- Providing supplemental support to programming currently taking place in the community
- Building upon the network of resources, mentors and youth leaders in these community

This paper details the process and student outcomes related to the SPSW pilot. In addition, this research paper evaluates the effectiveness of the collective impact process in the engagement of stakeholders in the Equity in Education initiative.

Background

The Pathways to Education Program was implemented in 2007 by the Pinecrest Queensway Community Health Centre (PQCHC) in the west end of Ottawa. Prior to 2007, fewer than 52% of youth living in social housing within the Pathways Ottawa catchment area graduated from high school within five years (Pathways to Education, 2017). Between 2007 and 2012, with the support of the Pathways program, 83% of Pathways students from these same neighbourhoods graduated in five years or less. This is close to the provincial graduation rate of 86.5% (Ministry of Education, 2017a). The success of the Pathways program in

Ottawa and in the 19 other communities across Canada in which it operates, shone a spotlight on the type of community-level change that can happen when adequate investment and cross-sector commitment is coordinated in supporting youth from low-income communities.

Since January 2016, with the support of Pathways to Education Canada and the Ontario Trillium Foundation, PQCHC has been exploring how it could reach more students across the city of Ottawa. Stakeholders in Ottawa decided to explore the possibility of establishing a collective impact initiative called Equity in Education. Equity in Education was created to bring together stakeholders with the common agenda of eliminating the educational achievement gap for low-income youth in Ottawa. Stakeholders included representatives from local school boards, community health and resource centres, agencies aimed at serving youth, funders and youth with lived experience. It is the belief of stakeholders in Ottawa that a collaborative approach, which builds on communities' assets and leverages the great work that is already happening across the city, can make a measurable and sustainable difference in raising graduation rates in low-income neighbourhoods.

Rationale for the Pilot

Reasons for leaving school generally fit into two categories: push factors (e.g., school environment, the student's school experience), and pull factors (e.g., personal circumstances outside of the school which result in a student's detachment from the school) (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer and Cosio, 2004). While factors such as attendance, behaviour and course outcomes (also known as the ABCs of school drop-out) are the most predictive indicators of high-school drop-out rates (Allensworth and Easton, 2007), the process is not quite so linear. Students who ultimately drop out normally do so at the end of a long disengagement process from school. The beginning of this disengagement can present itself as early as elementary school through withdrawal and unsuccessful experiences. (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr and Godber, 2001). Further, community-based pull factors, such as low socioeconomic status, single-parent households, being alone during the critical after-school hours and low proficiency in English can also increase the likelihood of dropping out with childhood socioeconomic status being the single strongest "predictor of long-term income and educational achievement" (Levin and Riffel, 2000).

Academic support, such as tutoring, is important but certainly not the only, or most crucial element to ensure academic success in high-risk students. Students must be given opportunities to build work habits that support academic success such as persistence, focus, and sustained attention and engagement, as well as opportunities to build and develop prosocial behaviours and social competencies such as goal-directed behaviour, collaboration, problem solving and teamwork (Gottfredson, 1998). Further, close mentoring and ongoing monitoring of student performance as well as attention to and support for personal problems that may affect academic success, even indirectly, are essential elements of successful drop-out prevention programs (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

It is critical that students are provided with caring and supportive environments that foster the opportunity for them to build relationships with teachers and peers. This can contribute to consistent student attendance, one of the primary indicators of student engagement (Gottfredson, 1998; Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003).

Comprehensive mentoring support has been shown to have a positive impact on drop-out prevention, attendance, test scores and grades. This type of program should include positive role models who are available to support academic success, act as an advocate for the student throughout the school system and link them to necessary community services outside of the school (Klima, Miller & Nunlist, 2009). This type of tailored service, which is based on individual needs, challenges, strengths and goals provides children and youth with the “just right” challenge, an important element of effective drop-out prevention programs that helps students believe in their abilities, hone their social competencies, and address individualized concerns (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

The REL West educational research facility in the United States has outlined a set of promising practices that they believe can contribute to a successful transition to high school and, ultimately graduation (REL West/West Ed., 2015). These practices include using data to identify at-risk students and providing supports based on student need.

In summary, the likelihood that at-risk youth will experience academic success and remain engaged can be increased by the following:

- Tracking student progress
- Building strong relationships with students and their families
- Advocating for at-risk youth
- Helping students and families navigate, and meaningfully engage with, the school system
- Connecting youth and families to resources and supports available to them that meet their individual needs and build on their unique strengths
- Ensuring that there are facilitated communication channels between stakeholders involved in providing supports that would encourage real-time communication between stakeholders involved in supporting the student

Collective Impact (Practical Implementation)

Kania and Kramer (2011) define the core conditions of collective impact as a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and backbone support. However, years of experience with diverse communities has shown that it may be more complicated. Theoretical

frameworks regarding collective impact are fairly well developed but implementing them on a practical level has proven to be challenging. This challenge may be due to the fact that “community wide, multi-sectoral collaboratives cannot be simplified into collective impact’s five required conditions” (Wolf, 2016). Best practices within the field of collective impact are emerging daily. Some are proposing an evolution to the framework to account for these emerging trends and learnings (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016).

Creating Strategic Learning Opportunities to Move the Work Forward

“Strategic learning” has been identified as an emerging priority for collective impact initiatives. However, Cabaj and Weaver (2016) recommend that instead of focusing on a strategic measurement, we should be looking at the opportunities for strategic learning.

Kania, Hanleybrown and Splansky Juster (2014) propose several mindset shifts that will allow for partners to move forward in collective impact. First is that partners must focus on the process, not just solutions, as continuous learning is an essential element of a collective impact approach. They also suggest including cross-sector and cross-generational perspectives as well as giving some attention to facilitating good working relationships among those involved.

With this in mind, Equity in Education implemented two separate strategic learning opportunities at both the programming and systems levels.

1. A tangible intervention (SPSW Pilot) based on research and stakeholder feedback
2. Cross-sector city-wide stakeholder meetings

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) provided funding to rigorously evaluate the pilot and the process of effectively engaging stakeholders in the collective impact initiative.

Piloting a Tangible Intervention (Creating a Strategic Learning Opportunity)

Equity in Education applied for funding to pilot a tangible intervention in two priority communities in Ottawa. The intention was to provide a strategic learning opportunity for stakeholders. It was the belief that piloting a tangible intervention, and thus taking the initiative from the convening stage to the action stage, would both increase stakeholder engagement and improve student outcomes.

This pilot project allowed Equity in Education to develop systems and a structure, and to test best practices. The aim was to advance the development and sustainability of the collective impact initiative at a macro level that would in turn facilitate scaling the initiative citywide. This project also enabled Equity in Education to further involve stakeholders by meaningfully engaging them in tangible interventions and sharing the lessons that arose through the pilot. Piloting the first prototype also enabled Equity in Education to avoid one of the common errors of social innovation: “not starting” (Seelos & Mair, 2016).

The need for this pilot was emphasized during a multi-phase program evaluation, the goal of which was to measure how well Ottawa’s after-school programs are being implemented. Process evaluation surveys were completed by a total of 182 participants and 24 staff across nine sites within the city of Ottawa, including rural, urban and suburban sites. The areas where the programs are struggling are the result of limited staff capacity. There was also a clear deficit in communication between staff and participants’ families, teachers and communities and variation between sites.

All this was taken into account when choosing a direction for an initial intervention to pilot.

Student Parent Support Worker: An Intervention Based on a Pillar of the Pathways to Education Program

The Pathways to Education Program provides a comprehensive set of academic, financial, social and one-on-one supports that have increased graduation rates by an average of 85% in partnering communities with 71% of these graduates moving on to postsecondary education (Pathways to Education, 2017). While some elements of the Pathways model, including academic, extracurricular and leadership supports, are already found in low-income communities in Ottawa, the critical component of a Student Parent Support Worker (SPSW) is often missing. This worker acts as a liaison between students, parents, schools and communities. The SPSW builds trusting relationships with the youth and coordinates supports that build on the strengths and meet the individual needs of students and their families. The pilot was modeled on an existing role within the Pathways program that provides many of the supports outlined in the literature as best practices. However, the Pathways program, and other evidence-based models of support, have traditionally provided these supports within a single program implemented by one agency or organization.

This pilot intervention is unique as it was part of a collective impact initiative that attempted to coordinate wraparound supports from existing resources offered by different stakeholders. Within the current Pathways to Education Program there are many factors that facilitate service delivery such as; clear lines of communication amongst the separate pillars of support,¹ internal collaboration facilitated by cross-team meetings and the added benefits of being under the umbrella of a community health centre that offers comprehensive supports for youth and their families.

A logic model for this intervention was created by students from the Faculty of Policy and Program Evaluation at Carleton University. This logic model captures the intended outcomes for the community-based SPSW prototype pilot (Hart, Bracewell & Ogundipe, 2017) (See Appendix 1).

¹ The Pathways to Education Program works alongside the local school system within a community to provide academic, financial, social and one-on-one supports to address the barriers that low-income youth can face.

Setting/Delivering Agency

Neighbourhood selection was based on the following census track data and ranking relative to other neighbourhoods in the city:

- Percentage of population that did not complete high school (25–64 years)
- Percentage of population in the bottom quintile of income
- Percentage of population living in low income
- Grade 6 Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) scores of elementary schools in catchment area
- Percentage of single family households
- Percentage of newcomer/immigrant population
- Unemployment rates
- Percentage of children low in one or more areas of Early Development Instrument (EDI) scores

Four school boards provided five-year graduation rates (number of students who graduated within five years of beginning high school) for students living in the same neighbourhoods as those in the pilot project. Students in these neighbourhoods had a 70.8% five-year graduation rate, which is nearly 16 percentage points lower than the provincial average of 86.5% reported by the province for 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2017a).

In addition to the need demonstrated through census track information and school board data, existing resources and programming capacity factored heavily into the neighbourhood selection process. This was because the SPSW would need to be able to connect eligible students and families to existing resources and programming.

It was decided that this project would run out of the Banff Avenue and Confederation Court Community Houses in Ottawa. Community houses are social service organizations situated within social housing neighbourhoods. Their primary purpose is to build strong community connections by providing community-based services and supporting the local citizens. They accomplish this by providing a wide breadth of programming for the area's most vulnerable residents. The community houses are adjacent to residential units and are therefore embedded within the fabric of the community, which facilitates outreach to students and parents alike.

Program Structure

A Student Parent Support Worker was hired in January of 2017 and had the following responsibilities:

- Providing outreach to and connecting with eligible youth and their families to register them in the program and gain a deeper understanding of their unique strengths and challenges.
- Working with students and their families to help them navigate and deal with issues at their schools. Through this work they also assisted in developing relationships and partnerships with the schools.
- Connecting students and families with academic and mentoring supports, as well any other supports and community organizations that could help them address and remove barriers to success in school.
- Acting as a liaison between the organizations, institutions and supports the youth and their families to ensure clear lines of communication are established.
- Being present at programming taking place at the host organizations (Banff Avenue and Confederation Court Community Houses) to build rapport with youth and their families, to be a mentor for youth and a resource for their parents.
- Supporting existing programming at host and partnering agencies to meet the needs of participating youth. This included academic support as well as social recreation, job search, support, career exploration and mentoring programming.
- Creating additional programming/workshops to meet the needs of participating students and their families.
- Identifying resources and assets available in the communities as well as gaps in service delivery.

A 2017 York University report found that Black students in Toronto were much more likely to be enrolled in applied courses than other racialized students or White students (James & Turner, 2017). Although there was no concrete data for Ottawa, anecdotal evidence indicated that this may be the case in Ottawa as well. Most of the youth in the SPSW pilot were visible minorities, so the findings of the York University report heavily influenced some of the pilot program delivery. To ensure the pilot was addressing the issue of academic versus applied courses, an issue that could have a huge impact on the postsecondary options for participating students, the SPSW ran workshops for youth and parents in both communities in May of 2017. These workshops outlined the difference between academic and applied courses in terms of postsecondary and career options. The SPSW also explained the rights of parents and students in the decision-making process as well as supports and resources available to support whatever decision they made. The SPSW also met with all of the students on his caseload that were transitioning to high school to discuss course selection options.

SPSW Background

This project had a one-year time frame so it was imperative to find a staff member that had an in-depth knowledge of the communities involved, a strong understanding of the social services available in Ottawa as well as experience facilitating youth programming. The individual that was hired met all of the criteria. The SPSW's degree in mathematics and background as a front-line youth worker were also advantageous. As a former resident of one of the pilot neighbourhoods, the SPSW's cultural/socioeconomic background was also reflective of the youth being targeted by the program.

Target Demographic, Outreach and Registration of Students

The pilot ran from January to December of 2017. Through consultation with stakeholders it was decided that priority would be given to students who were enrolled in their second semester of Grade 8 at the time the pilot began. Stakeholders identified this transition year as a critical time for youth in their communities. This would allow the SPSW to support these students as they transitioned to high school (through their second semester of Grade 8, throughout the summer and through their first semester of Grade 9.) The program was open to all Grade 8 students that lived in the identified low-income social housing communities. It was decided that all residents of these communities should be eligible as they may all face barriers to achieving success based on their socioeconomic status as childhood socioeconomic status has been shown to be the single strongest “predictor of long-term income and educational achievement” (Levin & Riffel, 2000).

Outreach and registration for the pilots proved to be a challenge. As the program did not yet have community buy-in and trust, a lot of effort was required to register the requisite amount of students. Outreach to eligible students initially took the form of:

- Targeting youth currently connected to after-school programming
- Information sessions hosted in the community
- Door-to-door outreach
- Canvassing in neighbourhoods through flyers
- Enlisting community members to reach out to their neighbours

Once these methods were exhausted, potential participants were identified by comparing lists of eligible postal codes with school enrolment records. Eligible students were invited to lunch meetings with Equity in Education staff to find out about the pilot project, and provided with parental consent forms by school administration so Equity in Education staff could contact families directly.

Since the capacity of 30 students was not reached by May 2017, registration was then opened up to Grade 9 students in the catchment area.² This would allow the SPSW to support these students over their last month of Grade 9 through the summer and into the first semester of Grade 10.

It should be noted that there is an inherent selection bias in the enrolment of students as those that were already connected to existing programming were more likely to register in the SPSW program. The project did attempt to mitigate this by reaching out to students through other means (school lists, parents and targeting youth known to community staff members as requiring additional support).

Program Guidelines and Expectations

- Students were expected to meet with the SPSW at least once every two weeks, at school or at the community house. One school provided meeting space specifically for the SPSW to meet with students.
- Students were encouraged to call the SPSW if they had any difficulties or questions regarding their success at school, safety or choices. They were also instructed to call the SPSW if they were to be absent from school for long periods so that the staff could assist in developing a continued work plan.
- Students were expected to attend tutoring at an assigned site at least once a week.
- Students made a commitment with the SPSW to hand in homework assignments and write all school exams.
- Students set goals with the SPSW, and were encouraged to make one of these goals academic in nature.
- Students agreed to provide a copy of progress reports and report cards to the SPSW.
- Students committed to participating in an activity that was not related to their school work (e.g., club, sports team, art class, music, volunteer opportunity). Students were highly encouraged to complete volunteer hours over the summer or early in the fall as completing 40 hours of community service is a requirement for graduation.
- Immediate financial supports in the form of monthly \$50 grocery store gift cards were provided to students. These supports were distributed to students but could be suspended or modified based on lack of attendance at school or in programming and therefore acted as an incentive to participation.

² The caseload of 30 students was a reflection of the traditional caseload distribution numbers in the Pathways to Education Program (which are approximately 50 students per full-time SPSW). Since the SPSW in this project would have the additional responsibilities of program facilitation, additional outreach and partnership development as well as the additional constraint of condensed hours it was decided to lower the cap from 50 to 30 students for this project.

Participant Profile

The SPSW pilot began with 23 registered participants; two students moved out of the country after three months and withdrew from the program. This report will only report on the results of the 21 students that were registered at the conclusion of the pilot. These students all contributed to survey results and/or focus groups and provided copies of their academic progress reports.

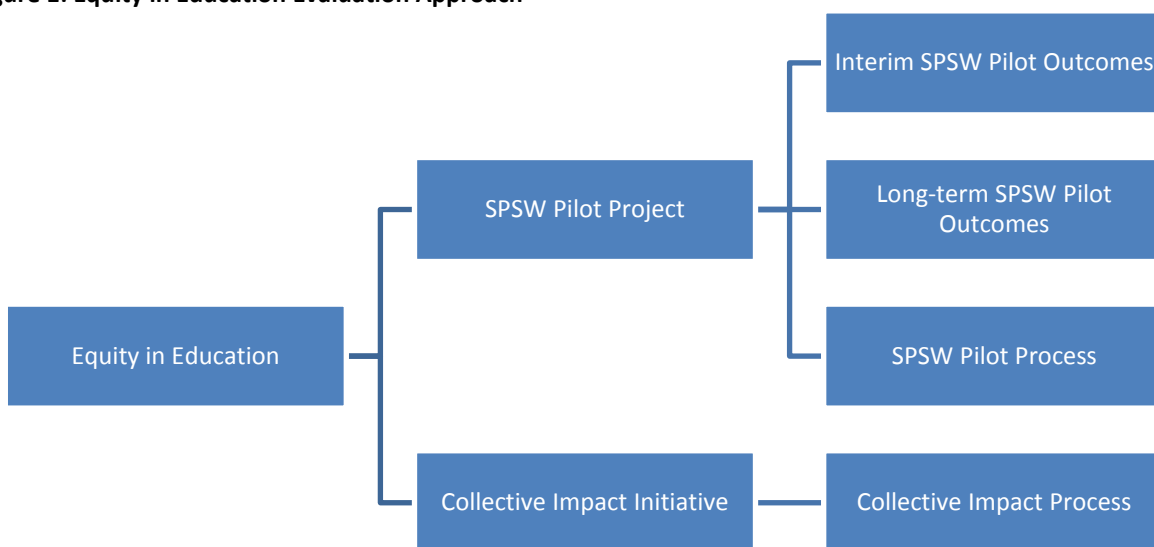
Of the 21 students, 12 were male and nine were female. At the conclusion of the pilot, 12 were Grade 9 students, six were in Grade 10 and three were in Grade 8. Twelve participants attended schools in one of the two English school boards and the other nine attended schools in one of two French school boards. Thirteen reported coming from homes with a single parent. It should be noted that students' cultural backgrounds and immigration statuses were not collected and thus cannot be reported on. This data will be tracked moving forward.

Evaluation Questions and Methodology

Research Approach

A two-pronged mixed methods developmental evaluation plan was established to evaluate the Equity in Education program. The evaluation plan was divided between the SPSW pilot program and the Equity in Education collective impact initiative. The SPSW pilot evaluation was further divided by outcomes and process elements and the Equity in Education collective impact section was specified more clearly as a process evaluation (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Equity in Education Evaluation Approach



Evaluation Questions

Information was gathered in order to evaluate interim and long-term outcomes of the SPSW pilot project including awareness of and access to supports, service coordination and academic outcomes. Further investigation into the implementation of the SPSW pilot and the collective impact initiative were also included. Table 1 outlines the Evaluation Questions specific to each of the sections outlined in Figure 1.

Table 1: Evaluation Questions

Category	Section	Evaluation Question
SPSW Pilot	SPSW pilot process	1. Who was reached by the project? 2. What was the nature of the interactions within the project? 3. What was learned from the process of implementing the SPSW pilot?
	Interim participant outcomes	4. How can having an SPSW improve the interim outcomes for youth in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved awareness and increased knowledge of existing supports? • Increased access to needed supports? • Improved coordination between students and their parents, schools and communities?
	Long-term participant outcomes	5. Did these interventions contribute to improved academic outcomes for participants?
Equity in Education Collective Impact Initiative	Collective impact process	6. What was the most effective way to engage and inspire action among stakeholders to work collaboratively to improve outcomes? 7. Were there any benefits or positive outcomes for stakeholders that participated in the Equity in Education Initiative?

Data Collection Methods

Participant Surveys

Three participant surveys were conducted over the course of this one-year evaluation. The first, a seven-question Likert-style survey, was used as a pre-test for student awareness of and access to services in the community. This survey was conducted in September 2017 and 20 of the 21 registered participants responded.

The second survey was a four-question open-ended survey conducted in October 2017. Discussions around decision-making and civic engagement had been taking place so the survey attempted to garner feedback on those issues while also including questions on access and support. Eleven participants completed surveys, which was just over half that of the first survey.

A third and final survey was conducted in January 2018 which acted as a post-test and investigated any changes in the awareness and access of participants. The format was changed for the third survey in response to feedback that stated the five-point scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree was not providing optimal clarity. The revised answer structure was a multiple-choice scale with the options: definitely, somewhat, not at all, and unsure. Responses for the pre-test were recoded to match the post-test surveys, which allowed for analysis of the results. It is important to keep the potential threat to validity of the mismatched pre- and post-test response options in mind when interpreting the survey results. Over the course of the current evaluation, there was a consistent effort to balance the needs of the participants with the rigor of the evaluative measures. In future iterations all tests should match the format of the post-test to maintain data integrity. At that point the measures could be validated, shining a light on the current evaluation retrospectively. Additionally, in response to feedback from the SPSW and project manager, several questions on the topic of goal setting were added to this post-test evaluation. Seventeen participants responded to the third participant survey.

Parent Survey

The parent survey was both a retrospective pre- and a post-test. Parents were asked to consider their experiences before the SPSW program in order to respond to the pre-test section of questions. The survey focused on participant and parent access to and awareness of community supports and services.

Pre-tests were not conducted earlier because it took time to establish trust and relationships between parents and project staff. Although there are limitations to this approach, surveys were conducted when it was felt that parents had been sufficiently engaged to a point where they would be receptive to responding to such questions. The researcher, project manager and SPSW discussed the sensitivity of data collection techniques and decided that the most effective approach to implementing parent surveys, without compromising their engagement in the community program, was to have the SPSW reach out to parents in the community. A total of 13 parents completed the survey. (Two of the participating parents had two children participating in the program.)

Delivering Agency Survey (Community Houses)

Four open-ended questions were asked to both community houses that participated in the SPSW pilot. These questions were designed to investigate the process of implementing the SPSW program within the community houses from the perspective of the community house executive directors.

SPSW Survey

The SPSW survey consisted of nine open-ended questions exploring the obstacles and accomplishments of the role within the community houses. Specifically, the survey inquired about youth engagement in the project, the impact of the SPSW on the communities and schools, the challenges faced and the unexpected outcomes of the project.

Participant Focus Group

The purpose of the participant focus group was to find out how the introduction of the SPSW helped build a support system for students transitioning into high school. Questions revolved around existing support systems and how access to supports had changed since the introduction of the SPSW. A total of 13 students in four groups across the two sites participated: five participants in one group at the Banff Community House and eight participants across three groups at the Confederation Community House. Focus groups were facilitated by the evaluation staff. It is important to note that a couple of participants appeared apprehensive to say, or allow other members to say, anything negative about the SPSW project. Facilitators were clear that the project would not be compromised by negative responses, that focus group comments would remain confidential and that anything discussed would be used for the sole purpose of improving the existing project. One explanation for these reservations could be that there was not a pre-existing relationship between facilitators and participants, therefore participants did not have the level of trust that would be necessary to candidly share any issues that they were experiencing. There were also groups that were quite outspoken regarding the project, indicating that if a lack of trust was the reason for the reluctance of some to share, it was dependent on the individual participants.

Stakeholder Surveys

The first stakeholder survey was conducted in June 2017 with the purpose of assessing partners' readiness for and awareness of collective impact in the context of increasing graduation rates in low-income neighbourhoods in Ottawa. Fourteen stakeholders were surveyed with a six-item questionnaire before the June 2017 stakeholders committee meeting.

The second stakeholder survey, another six-item questionnaire, was conducted in February 2018 to investigate stakeholder knowledge and engagement. This survey implementation elicited the same response rate as the June survey.

Grade 9 Credit Accumulation (Comparative Baseline Data)

Grade 9 credit accumulation rates were provided by all four local school boards for the 2016–17 school year for students in the catchment area of the two pilot communities. Both neighbourhoods have distinct postal codes that were used to identify students. This data was used as a baseline as this comparison cohort started high school the year before the pilot project. These numbers were then amalgamated to produce an aggregate rate for all four school boards for both communities.

Five students captured in the Grade 9 credit accumulation baseline data would have been supported in some capacity when the project opened registration to Grade 9 students in May 2017. These students were only directly connected to the SPSW for approximately one month prior to receiving their final marks and made up a relatively small percentage of the sample size (17%). Because of this, it was decided that this comparative baseline data would still be used as the SPSW's impact on students represented by this data would have been minimal.

Participant Academic Data (Semester 1 report cards, 2017–18 School Year)

All 21 participants in the program provided their report cards.

Stakeholder Engagement (Stakeholder Attendance at Convening Stakeholder Meetings)

Unique stakeholder attendance at each of the six stakeholder meetings was tracked. Stakeholders sending more than one attendee to a meeting were tracked as a single participant.

Limitations

As mentioned before, there is an inherent selection bias in the enrolment of students as those that were already connected to existing programming were more likely to register in the SPSW program. The project did attempt to mitigate this by reaching out to students through other means, but this bias still remained. In addition, program participants who opted to complete the evaluation requirements self-selected, further amplifying the selection bias in the current study. In future evaluations of this sort, this selection bias could be reduced by adding selection criteria such as the formal assessment of risk factors prior to program registration. Variations in outcomes could also be theoretically tested in evaluations of similar programs in order to predict what the likely effect of a selection bias would be in this setting.

Due to the timing and duration of the funding for the SPSW pilot project, the timeline of this evaluation was very short. Consequently, pre- and post-test surveys implemented with program participants were conducted over the course of only four months, which is likely too short a timeline to expect to see outcomes resulting from the current program.

A further limitation is a result of the very nature of developmental evaluation. It was a priority of the evaluator to promote participant, parent and SPSW engagement in the program rather than alienation due to complicated questions and tools. Feedback from all those participating in the evaluation tools was considered and modifications were made, leading to discrepancies in scales and question wording so that items had to be recoded to conduct analyses.

Retrospective pre-tests were used to survey parents due to the challenging nature of engaging parents in community programs. While retrospective pre-tests can be vulnerable to the social desirability bias, hindsight effect and effort justification, they have been shown to be at least as valid as traditional pre-tests due to the response shift bias and pre-program assumptions gained by pre-test content (Klatt & Taylor-Powell, 2005). There is also limited evidence to support retrospective pre-tests providing a more accurate measure of change (Pohl, 1982).

Limited resources and timelines prohibited a deeper investigation of the intensity of the interactions between the SPSW and program participants. Future evaluations of the SPSW program could build on the current findings and investigate the nature and origins of these interactions in more detail.

Data Report

SPSW Pilot Process Evaluation

Host Agency Feedback

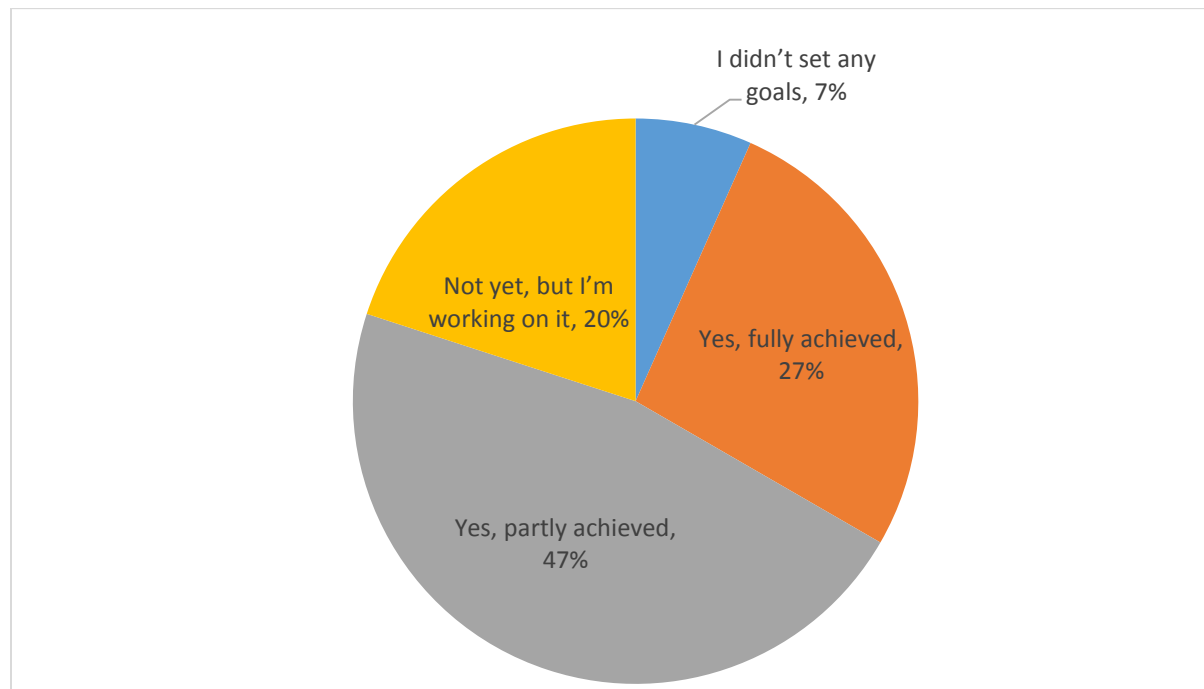
The biggest obstacle identified by the community houses was ensuring that the SPSW had predictable and regular hours in the community house. Extenuating circumstances and conflicting demands often required the SPSW to modify his schedule. This proved to be a challenge for the youth and the community house as youth depend on knowing when they could connect with the SPSW. Other than this logistical issue, the community houses reported that there were no obstacles in having the SPSW on site. In fact, according to the community houses, having the SPSW on-site built continuity in the services and supports that were available to youth, which enhanced their programming. The enhancements described by the community houses include; relevant programming for older youth (13 and 14 year olds), enhanced academic supports for youth and increased relationship building capacity. The SPSW also provided a capacity to link directly to schools. Community houses reported that the SPSW was the critical link in their neighbourhood, through which youth could be directly connected to the community at large and supported in a holistic way, rather than in a fragmented way as it had previously been. The biggest achievement listed by the community houses was the SPSW's ability to build relationships with traditionally hard to reach youth which allowed parents to feel more comfortable sending their children to meet with the SPSW. The community houses also reported receiving a lot of inquiries from local families about their children attending and getting support from the SPSW program. Community houses reported that they did not anticipate the level of interest that the project garnered.

Nature of Project Interactions

The provision of academic and goal-setting support by the SPSW seems to be an effective method of building trusting relationships with participants. Research on increasing trust between students and teachers shows authenticity and credibility are the two key determining factors (Brookfield, 1990). Developing, building, and strategically investing in relationships with youth consistently demonstrate a return on investment in their increased physical, emotional, intellectual and social growth. Social trust can have an influence on student attendance and commitment to learning, particularly in disadvantaged urban schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Research also shows that the process of goal setting improves students' learning and motivation, empowers the goal-setter and, particularly in low achievement groups, enhances student performance (Zimmerman, 1990; Elliot & Fryer, 2008; Mirsano et al., 2010). In addition, by providing academic support, the SPSW was helping participants to develop important skills that influence academic success, such as sustained attention, persistence and focus (Locke, Shaw, Saari & Latham, 1981; Dewett, 2007; Page-Voth & Graham, 1999). Thus, in addition to building trust, these supports can lead to improved academic outcomes.

The SPSW pilot appears to have successfully engaged youth. Seventy-six percent of youth set goals with the SPSW over the course of the year and 6% reported that they planned to do so at some point in the future. Goals generally fit into the following categories: vocation-related goals (42%), goals pertaining to volunteer hours (25%), academic goals (17%) and recreation-related goals (17%) (See Appendix 2). Of those who set goals, 27% reported that they had fully achieved the goals they had set and 47% reported that they had partly achieved the goals (Figure 2). Sixty-four percent of youth reported that the supports the SPSW provided were academic in nature and parents reported an increase in their child's access to academic supports over the course of the SPSW pilot.

Figure 2: Youth Achievement of Goals Set with SPSW



All participating students reported that support was more accessible in the community since the SPSW was introduced. As noted previously, the support provided to them by the SPSW was primarily academic (64%), however, vocational support (18%), support with recreation (9%) and access to resources (9%) were also increased by the presence of an SPSW in the community house. Despite most participants having a solid, existing support system, the SPSW was able to successfully address unresolved challenges such as access to recreational programs, support in finding part-time jobs, and connecting to volunteer positions. In addition, the SPSW successfully coordinated a summer basketball league for female participants in the community over the summer. The SPSW was able to register the team in a league and was able to get partner support to provide free transportation to and from practices, games and tournaments. Many students on the SPSW's caseload participated on this team and the opportunity proved to be a great relationship building activity.

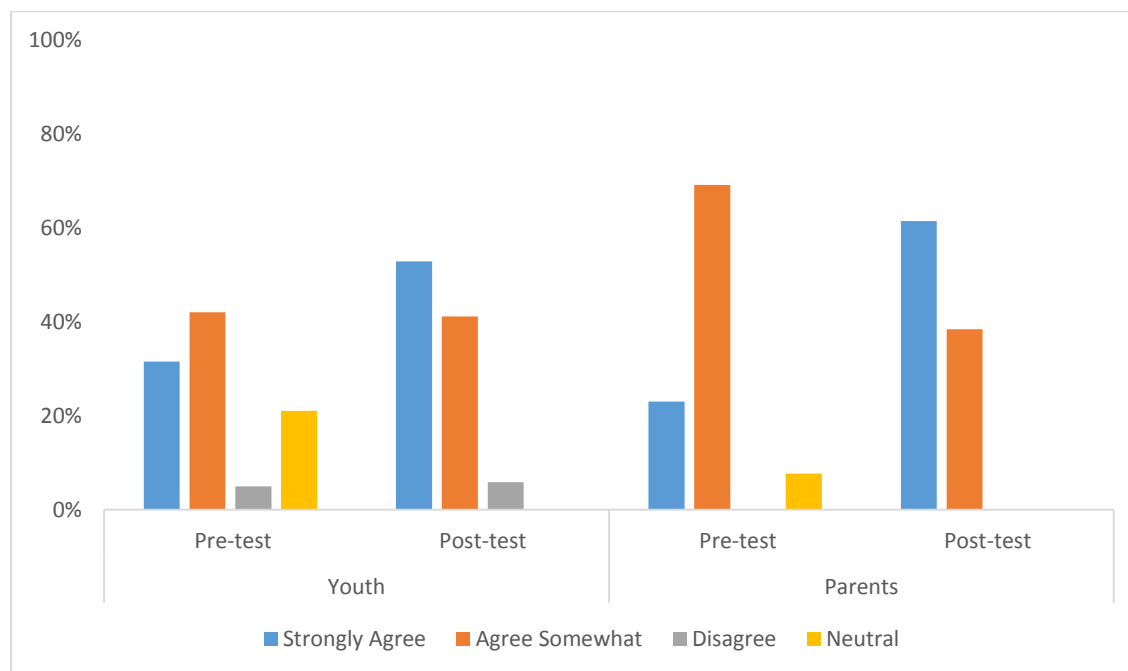
The SPSW was able to assist students with job search support by working with youth on resume development, job search strategies and mock interviews. The SPSW reported that this proved to be a great way to engage with youth as it involved providing a resource beyond academic support. For youth that were too young to apply for employment, the SPSW encouraged volunteering.

With the introduction of the additional staff member at the Confederation Court Community House, the project was able to split by age group so that the older youth had a space specifically for them, rather than a mixed group of all ages as had previously been set up. It was acknowledged enthusiastically in each focus group as having made a positive impact. From the perspective of participating youth, the SPSW was someone who knows what supports are available in the community and how to access them, someone youth feel comfortable turning to if they have a difficult question or are faced with a challenging situation, and someone who was interested and engaged in their academic progress. According to youth, the presence of this individual in their communities made a positive difference. They reported that they were more likely to go to the program when the SPSW was there, and to stay for longer periods of time because, as one youth noted, they “have something to stay for.” The SPSW reported that in his view, his primary role was to help students be able to succeed academically. To flourish in this role, the SPSW made sure to be available to participants regularly enough that they gained a sense of familiarity with him to the point where they felt comfortable confiding not just their big goals and challenges, but also their day-to-day concerns.

Coordination Between Services

Youth reported higher incidences of local community resources directing them to appropriate supports and services after the SPSW pilot, increasing from 32% strongly agreeing that this was occurring to 53% in post-tests (Figure 3). Parents of participating youth also reported an increase in agreeing that community resources were directing them appropriately (Figure 3). More than half of youth agreed that there was service duplication in their community to some degree (pre-test, 67%; post-test, 53%) and less than half of parents were aware of whether or not there was duplication (pre-test and post-test 38%) (See Appendix 3). Less than one-quarter of youth reported that there was not duplication in both pre- and post-tests (pre-test, 17%; post-test, 24%) and 15% of parents reported that there was no duplication before or after the implementation of the SPSW program (See Appendix 3).

Figure 3: Community Programs Direct Youth Where to Access Supports and Services



Interim Participant Outcomes

Awareness of Existing Supports

The percentage of participants who reported that they knew where to go to access services increased over the course of the program (Figure 4). Parents also reported an improvement in their child’s knowledge of where to access services over the course of the program; 62% indicated that their child somewhat knew how to access necessary services before beginning with the SPSW project and 69% indicating that their child consistently knew how to access what they needed after participating in the program (Figure 4).

Participants’ perceptions of their choice of services and supports in the community improved from 25% to 88% after the SPSW pilot (Figure 5). It is possible that the presence of the SPSW in the community had an effect on youth awareness of the choices of supports available to them for their particular needs. Parents did not report a noteworthy increase in their child’s choice (Figure 5). When participants were asked about their parents’ knowledge of where to access supports after the project implementation, their responses indicated that there is work to be done in building parent awareness. Only 29% of youth were confident that their parents knew where to access supports or services for their child, while 24% of youth indicated that their parent was somewhat aware, not at all aware or that they were unsure of whether or not their parent was aware.

There is not much evidence to suggest that parents’ knowledge of where to access services increased during the SPSW pilot (Figure 7). Lack of parent awareness was not unexpected, however it is important to further explore this as students with involved parents are “more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, enrol in higher-level programs, be promoted, pass their classes, earn credits, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school, graduate and go on to postsecondary education.” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). This is possibly due to the short timeframe of the current evaluation but the positive trust built with participants suggests that trust building with parents is likely the longer the SPSW is in the community.

Although there was a group of engaged parents, the SPSW did find it challenging to connect with every parent. He pointed out that over the course of the project he became a resource for all neighbourhood parents, including those without children in the study as many parents would be referred to him with questions regarding their child’s education. Over time, it is possible that the levels of social capital built up through such exchanges would result in a deeper level of engagement for the disengaged parents. This may require further attention moving forward.

Figure 4: Responses to the Survey Question “I know where to go in my community to get help.”

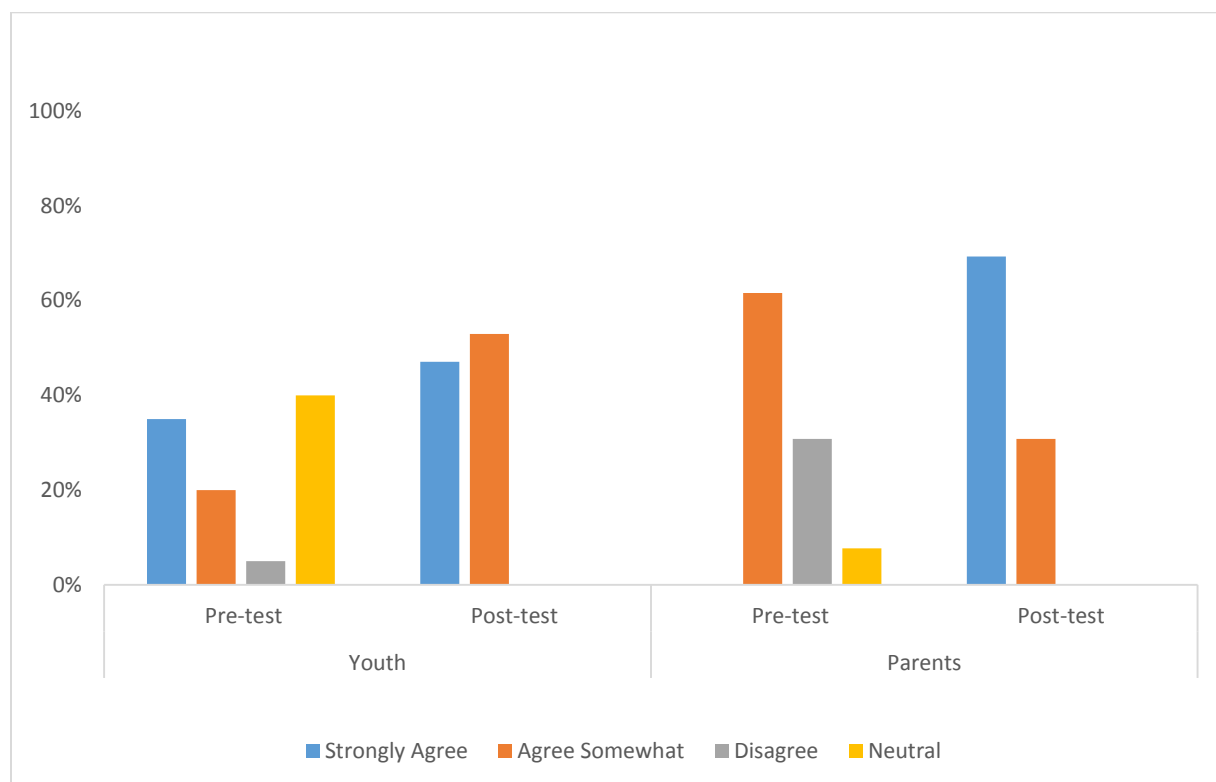
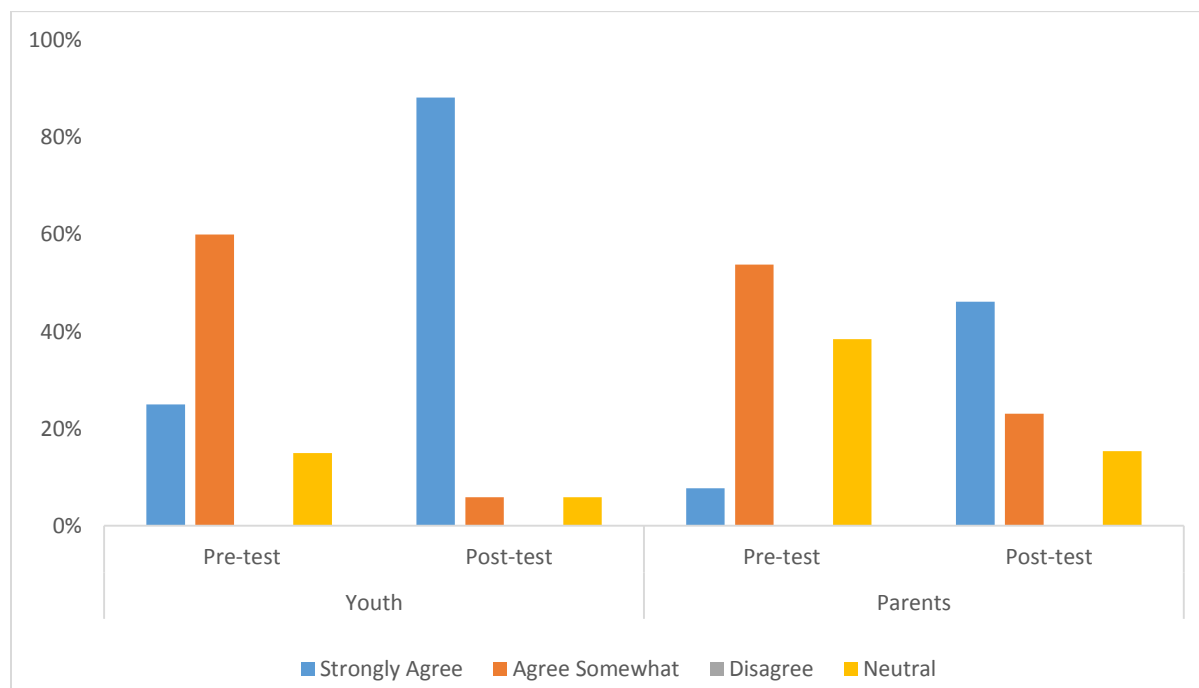


Figure 5: Responses to the Survey Question “I have a choice about the services/supports that I go to.”



Access to Supports and Services

Student Support System

Participating students indicated that they had a broad support system to turn to for help or to direct them to necessary supports, even in the early stages of the SPSW project, presumably in existence before the project began. This system included school staff such as teachers and counsellors, community house staff including the SPSW, and parents and peers. When faced with a big decision, 82% of youth said they turned to parents or family members for support. Roughly one-third of participating youth said they would turn to community house staff, including the SPSW, peers or the Internet for support, while 9% of youth reported that they do not have anyone to turn to in this type of situation. Participants reported that simply knowing supports were there was helpful, even if they did not need help with a specific issue.

Peer support

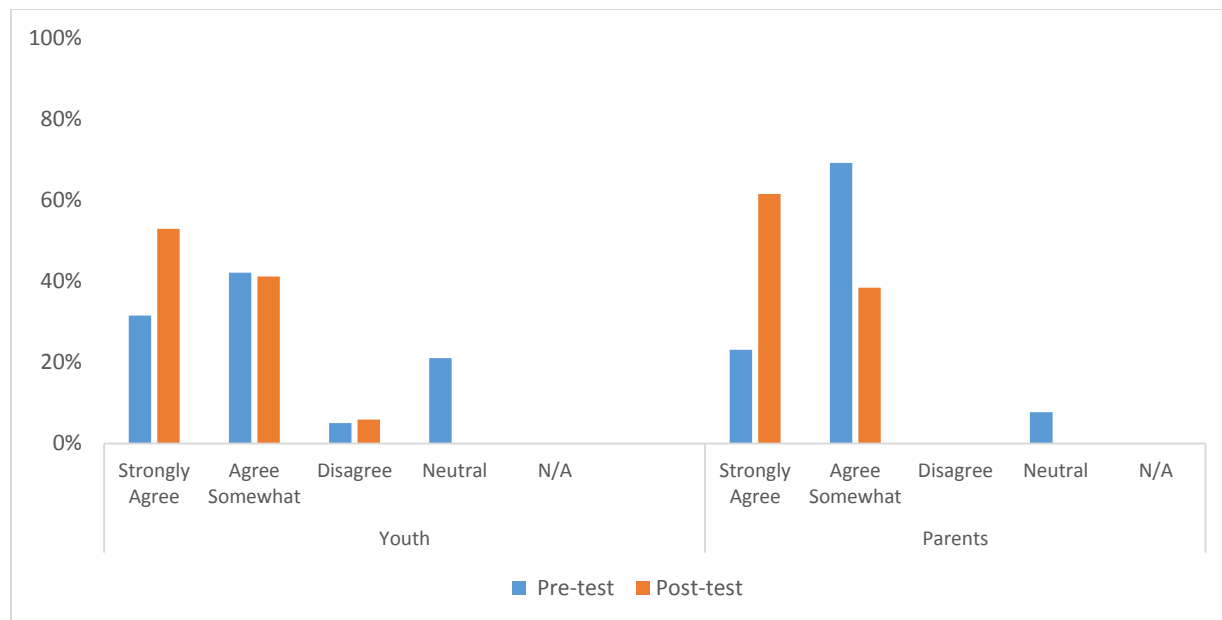
There were several students who indicated that peers were not a part of their support system and that they would rather wait to discuss problems with a supportive adult. Only 36% of survey participants indicated peers as a support. Some noted that peer support was not as easy to access as support from other resources. That being said, youth support networks appeared to be forming between students who met at community programs and attended the same school. Some of these students reported that they were getting to know each other well and offering support to one another in both their community and at school.

This type of youth support system may be an unexpected positive outcome of the SPSW project worthy of further investigation.

Access to Supports

The SPSW pilot had a positive impact on students’ opinions that their community programs provided what they needed (Figure 6). There was also an increase in the number of parents who said their child received the services they need from local community programs over the course of the pilot. Youth reported higher access to academic supports than their parents before the pilot but this difference was reduced over the course of the pilot. This may indicate that parents were unaware of the access that their children had to services before the SPSW project, and that the project succeeded in providing parents with insight into their child’s access to programming.

Figure 6: Community Program Provides Supports Youth Need



When asked about the specific reasons they were not able to access supports or services before the introduction of the SPSW, 69% of parents reported that services were not available and 15% of youth indicated that the services available were not helpful. Post-tests showed that there were no such barriers to accessing supports. It was observed in focus groups that there was a reluctance on the part of some participants to express critical feedback related to improving the SPSW project. Further investigation into the degree to which students access services and the barriers they experience will be necessary to explore these improvements in access and reduction in barriers beyond just the perceptions of the participating youth.

Long-term Participant Outcomes

Academic Engagement

According to participants, their grades and test scores have improved since the SPSW has been present in their community. According to participants, the reasons for this improvement include: improved understanding of course material, improved confidence, increased homework completion, ongoing feedback from the SPSW regarding academic progress and improved access to supplies and support. This also appears to be further corroborated by the credit accumulation data outlined below.

The SPSW outlined the process he used when he began working with each student. Students were expected to create their own schedule based on their expectations, and both he and the youth would sign it, like a contract. They would regularly go over goals and possible struggles to come up with a plan for the participants' success. The SPSW maintains that the youth have a considerable amount of influence over what happens in the SPSW project. This is a unique aspect of the project. Supports and resources were accessed to build on the unique strengths of the students and to address their individual barriers to experiencing success. The project had the capacity to be fluid and not be confined to a one-size-fits-all approach that was static in its delivery.

In addition to feeling engaged academically, all participating students contributed to their community by either volunteering or fundraising. However, despite this high rate of civic engagement, only 36% felt that young people were valued in their community. This was a theme that came up over the course of the evaluation and may be an area for further investigation in future evaluations.

Academic Improvement

Having the SPSW on site appears to have encouraged accountability among youth regarding their academic outcomes. Youth in the project may have a vested interest in succeeding because they have a caring adult who is continuously connected to their school, provides or arranges supports targeted to their needs and has an expectation that they will succeed. The SPSW creates a system within which youth develop an increased knowledge and ability to perform well, which can improve their confidence in their own abilities, and help them become more capable of and committed to completing the schoolwork required of them. The presence of an SPSW appears to have promoted the formation of trusting relationships with a positive adult role model and engagement of students in their community. In addition, the SPSW reported that the biggest impact of his position on local schools was that the teachers and principals had a contact they could reach out to when they had a difficult time reaching a particular student.

Collective Impact Process Evaluation

Stakeholder Attendance

Over the past two years the Equity in Education collective impact initiative has hosted six convening stakeholder meetings. The stakeholders at these meetings included representatives from local school boards, community health and resource centres, youth serving agencies, funders and youth with lived experience. For tracking purposes youth with lived experience were recorded as one stakeholder.

Stakeholder participation at the meetings has remained consistent (an average of 21.5 stakeholders were represented with a high of 24 and a low of 19). Over the course of the two years, 35 stakeholders have attended at least one meeting. It should be noted that these numbers reflect unique stakeholders represented (i.e., if one organization sent two representatives they were only counted as one stakeholder in attendance) and not attendance numbers.

Stakeholder Readiness

Readiness for Collective Impact

All surveyed stakeholders agreed (67% strongly agreed, 33% agreed) that collective impact was the right approach to increase graduation rates in low-income neighbourhoods in Ottawa. The expectation was that the collective impact initiative would allow the community to focus on vulnerable populations to address inequities and prevent further marginalization. Stakeholders commented that the complex system currently in place was one of the biggest barriers to increasing graduation rates and suggested that a collective impact approach would have the potential to change the rules and introduce mutually reinforcing activities to benefit all stakeholders. The importance of the initiative being long term in order to be effective was also noted. In addition, the importance of a dedicated staff member to lead the initiative was also noted by several stakeholders.

Stakeholder comments represented a hopeful sense that the Equity in Education collective impact initiative was a step in the right direction toward successfully increasing graduation rates. Stakeholders noted funding and capacity as barriers to the ability to collaborate as well as to keeping graduation rates a priority when pressing issues such as risk of homelessness and food insecurity take precedence. Partners pointed to a need for a common goal and a review of the evidence as next steps in moving forward as a community, mirroring two important conditions of a successful collective impact initiative (Kania & Kramer 2011).

Discussion

SPSW Project Process Evaluation Summary

Academic support and goal setting appeared to engage students in this project. Most of the participants set goals during the pilot and many achieved them, at least in part. The SPSW's role in the community and in working with the youth was fluid and varied depending on the individual as well as emerging needs in the community.

In addition to providing academic support to the participating students, the SPSW was also tasked with researching and facilitating social recreation opportunities, career and job search programming as well as gender specific programming (e.g., boys' group), which was made available to all youth in the communities. This flexibility in program delivery was really appreciated by the host agencies as it allowed them to meet the needs of more students. It also allowed the SPSW to develop trusting relationships with students through the delivery of programming that met their individual needs.

According to students, overall access to support was easier after the SPSW was introduced. Youth stated that it was particularly beneficial to be able to access the SPSW's knowledge of what services are out there and how to access them. Youth reported that they are more likely to participate in the programming at the community house when the SPSW is there, and that they are likely to stay for longer periods of time. In addition, the introduction of the additional staff member did allow the delivering agencies to provide more programming and space specifically for the older youth, rather than a mixed group of all ages.

Parents acknowledged that they had a deeper understanding of what supports were available at the community house. They were also more confident in sending their children to the community house as they knew it could support them in achieving greater success at school.

SPSW Pilot Outcomes Summary

The academic outcomes of participating youth appears to indicate that the SPSW project had a positive impact. While the limited timeline, small number of participants and availability of data prevents this report from making any definitive statements regarding the efficacy of the project, the credit accumulation rates of the participating youth coupled with survey responses and focus group feedback indicate the SPSW project had positive effects.

The SPSW's support of students in switching from Applied to Academic courses when starting high school warrants further investigation. This choice has a long lasting impact on student's future postsecondary and career options. Further research into this topic should be facilitated by the recent mandate issued by the Ontario Ministry of Education to disaggregate data to better understand student outcomes as they relate to marginalized youth (Ministry of Education, 2017b.)

The presence of an adult role model who was interested in their academic progress and to whom students wanted to demonstrate positive academic results was reported to have motivated participating youth to make an extra effort to succeed at school. This fact warrants further exploration. Understanding what unique characteristics of the SPSW increased engagement and motivation in this area would help support developing best practices in similar type of roles. For example: Was the SPSW effective in inspiring motivation and engagement in these youth specifically because the SPSW is not the student's parent or teachers? What is different about this role versus other caring adults in their lives? Did the cultural background/lived experience/age of the SPSW play a role in their effectiveness in this position?

It appears that the SPSW succeeded in letting parents know more about the community supports and services available to their child. Parents showed increased perception of access over the course of the SPSW program, in particular the access to academic supports.

Youth perceived an increase in the choices of supports available to them after the introduction of the SPSW. Participating youth began the year with a broad support system, even prior to the introduction of the SPSW, wherein most of them expressed feeling comfortable turning to their parents for support in a time of need. This was not an unexpected result as adequate resources, capacity of after-school programming as well as a history of partnerships were part of the criteria in choosing pilot communities. Peer support seems to be a complex notion that requires further investigation to determine how it best fits into a youth's system of support. Participants saw an increase in the appropriateness of the various supports and services they received over the course of the project and both parents and youth felt that service coordination among community agencies had improved during this time.

Youth reported feeling a sense of accountability to the SPSW, which increased their motivation to succeed academically. The SPSW communicated with participants' schools on an ongoing basis, in the hopes of providing a better understanding of the supports they need, which in turn could improve confidence and lead to improved work habits. Participants reported already seeing improvements in their test scores over the course of the first term of the current school year.

Collective Impact Process Evaluation Summary

Stakeholders originally engaged in the Equity in Education collective impact initiative to connect and learn from one another. Learning and sharing continue to be the primary reasons for partner engagement.

Stakeholders have indicated an interest and willingness to use a collective impact approach to address the issue of low graduation rates in low-income neighbourhoods in Ottawa. A common agenda and a common language seem to be the expected next steps in moving forward in our effort to increase graduation rates. Respondents seem open to contributing their resources and expertise to the initiative and several have expressed an openness to adapting their current practice to align with the common goal of Equity in

Education. The most obvious barrier to moving forward seems to be funding; more specifically, the lack of human resource capacity to fully participate, as well as the tendency to shift funding and human resources to more urgent issues when they arise. It is especially important that those partners with capacity are willing to use their resources to move the common agenda forward, for example, facilitating shared learning, opportunities for shared training and syntheses of shared learnings. An evaluation of the collective impact process itself was also noted as a priority.

Next Steps

The one-year timeframe of the initial SPSW pilot project produced results that appear to demonstrate a positive impact on the youth and families in the program. It would be difficult to definitively draw direct links between the SPSW role and student success outcomes due to the sample size of the youth involved and the data that the researchers had access to. Much of the first year of the pilot was spent creating relationships with youth and their families and getting community buy-in for the program. A lot of time was also spent researching and establishing partnerships to better serve the youth. Therefore, it was a priority of this initiative to find continued funding to build upon this work and more thoroughly evaluate this project and its impact.

At the outset of this pilot there was a plan to establish a community of practice related to evaluation. When this idea was presented to stakeholders it was met with mixed reactions. Some stakeholders acknowledged that this was necessary but many expressed concern that there were already opportunities to get basic support in program evaluation. Stakeholders felt that the proposed evaluation community of practice may prove to be a duplication of resources. Also, the stakeholders thought that promoting the use of evaluation and shared measurement tools would be better received if it was combined with work on concrete issues at a neighbourhood or systems level that were tied to pilot projects or existing programming, so that these topics could be explored in real time and work could be completed in practice.

In an effort to continue the work and research that has been taking place over the last year, and to provide more opportunity to learn from tangible interventions, Equity in Education applied for and was successful in receiving three additional years of funding to continue the current pilot project as well as scale this intervention to two additional communities across the city. Each of the three pilots will explore different ages and stages of intervention and will give a clearer picture of the impact of the role of the SPSW. In addition to further evaluating the role of the SPSW and the impact this role has on the educational outcomes of youth, these three pilots will also explore how systemic barriers manifest differently depending on cultural background, immigration history, family composition and homelessness risk. This will enable the Equity in Education initiative to increase the communities' understanding of how to best serve youth from different demographics.

Stakeholders have also indicated that they are ready to begin identifying and working in the specific action areas outlined above. Stakeholders are very excited to see the initiative playing a role in piloting prototypes. This allows them to see their feedback and work being translated into tangible interventions on the ground. The stakeholders are excited to move from the convening stages of collective impact. As one stakeholder commented, “It seems that many collective impact initiatives have trouble moving from evaluating whether or not they are a collective impact initiative.” The Equity in Education initiative wants to leverage the funding received for the expansion of the SPSW project to further engage stakeholders in developing Equity in Education. These three separate pilot projects will be used as a catalyst to engage stakeholders in neighbourhood-based and city-wide action groups. Work over the next three years will evaluate the best engagement strategies to build appropriate membership around these tables. In addition, evaluation plans will be developed with these groups to capture and share best practices to ensure learnings from the groups and the pilot projects are effectively shared amongst the different stakeholder groups.

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