



In the summer of 2004, Youth Professionals and Regional Extension Educators in Community Youth Development were asked to write case studies about community efforts to coordinate out-of-school time programs. They examined how the coordination occurred and how it impacted availability of programs for young people. They also captured the lessons from the coordination efforts that could help other Minnesota communities work together to increase programs and opportunities for youth.

This is one in a series of ten reports.

About The Community

The Thomas/Dale Neighborhood, known locally as "Frog town," is located just west of the Minnesota State Capitol, along Interstate 94. It covers roughly 7.2 square miles. The community is a combination of residential, rental, and business property, and includes some major retail outlets. Frog town residents are some of St. Paul's most economically stressed. A few demographic factors from the 2000 census point out some of the issues most critical to children and youth living in Frog town.

To those outside Frog town, it is a place with high crime, transient families, low economic stability, and minimal political power. For those living and working there, it is a community that works in collaboration and partnership, has strong organizational stakeholders, places a high value on cultural diversity, and has accomplished significant goals such as reducing crime, increasing affordable housing, and increasing opportunities for children to participate in after-school activities. A significant factor in addressing the current challenges is the ability to continue Frog town's strong tradition of collaboration and community-wide investment around important issues.

DATA FROM THE CENSUS

Total population: 17,248 people

Population under age 18: 42%

Population over age 65: 7%

Growth in number of school-age children between 1992 and 2000 census: 52%

Percentage of children living in single-parent homes or other arrangements: 46%

Percentage of children at the neighborhood school testing below average on the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT7): 40.1%

Right now, after-school summer programs serve 1,200 children, yet there are more than 5,500 school-age children in the neighborhood.

What's Happening in Out-of-School Programming?

One of the driving forces in local collaboration is Frog town's Leap Forward for Youth. Leap Forward is an out-of-school time collaboration for providers serving children ages 5-18. Members meet monthly, work on committees, and create shared programming in order to increase the depth and breadth of services to youth in Frog town.

About The Coordination Effort

Currently, the collaboration includes 31 youth-serving agencies and other organizations interested in supporting youth development in the community. Leap program providers (or collaborative members) offer programming at sites throughout the neighborhood. Some program sites are open to all children, some are targeted to particular ethnic groups, and some have other restrictions. Programming includes tutoring and academic instruction, science, arts, computers, cultural learning, problem solving, recreation and athletics, community service, field trips, social skills learning, and leadership development. Collaborative members also represent a range of organization types:

- Youth-serving organizations: nonprofits and culturally specific organizations.
- Grassroots organizations: block clubs and neighborhood resident groups.
- Schools: public and charter schools.
- Local government: recreation centers and public library.
- Faith-based groups: churches, faith based nonprofits.
- Housing communities: apartment buildings and complexes.

Mission/Goals:

Leap Forward for Youth's mission is to "mobilize the community in support of high quality, community-based after-school and summer programming for children in Frogtown."

To fulfill the mission, Leap Forward is actively working towards three long-term goals:

1. To improve the quality and quantity of programs in Frogtown.
2. To reduce the service gaps that exist in the neighborhood.
3. To increase coordination of after-school services in the community

Leadership:

Community Youth Development at the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation leads the collaborative. The roles of both the Wilder Foundation and the collaborative members are clearly defined in a membership agreement. In addition to this, specific work plan duties are developed each year, and are member driven.

Amherst H. Wilder Foundation's role:

- Lead coordination of collaborative.
- Support shared projects, events, and other community work.
- Offer training, technical assistance, and other resources.
- Provide connections to other Wilder work and resources.

Member's role:

- Attend Leap Forward's monthly meetings.
- Serve on a committee or contribute to a committee project.
- Participate in Leap-sponsored youth- and community-service activities when possible.
- Contribute to the development and implementation of annual collaborative work plans.

Membership:

The member organizations provide direct programming and the collaborative enhances their efforts. The collaborative is unique in its offering of a wide range of services and supports that create a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts. Each year, the Leap collaborative develops a work plan and sets goals to decide how they will work together. Examples of the Leap Collaborative activities include:

- Creating visiting art and science teams and related curriculum to member program sites.
- Delivering shared training to build the tutoring skills of staff and volunteers.

- Writing articles for the local newspaper to promote events and the importance of after-school programs.
- Developing a volunteer-management training cooperative to support the design of a volunteer program at each member site.

Structure:

The structure has evolved over time from very informal networking, to very formal policies, structure, and member requirements. Currently, that includes monthly meetings, shared programming efforts and events, the work plan, shared communication tools, cooperative training efforts, and ad hoc issue or planning committees. What seems to affect the structure most are member interests and the economics of the time.

It is also important to note that Leap Forward comes together to locally solve community problems. One issue that was addressed very early in planning is the transportation barrier. Through community assessing and planning, the local collaboration took an intentional approach to encouraging many options for programming scattered throughout the neighborhood. This allows children to walk to program sites. This concept led to more planned expansion of programming based on what the collaboration knew about geographic needs. In significant ways, this has reduced the issue of transportation for Frogtown families.

Cost:

Wilder has provided base support since the inception of the collaborative in 1995. Currently, Wilder invests around \$60,000 annually in the collaborative and its activities. Outside grant sources enhance and expand the activities (such as summer transportation money to offer shared field trips across program sites). Funding is cultivated on behalf of the collaborative each year by Wilder, although the total amount has decreased in the past two

years. The biggest financial source was the After-School Enrichment funding from the State of Minnesota, subsequently cut in the 2003 budget. Since the funding loss, Leap Forward is one of the few surviving collaboration efforts in St. Paul that accessed the state funding. One of the biggest factors in the continuation of the collaborative is Wilder's leadership and the vision and commitment of members to improve the lives of young people.

The impetus for coordination:

"What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children."

-John Dewey

John Dewey's words give voice to the spirit of the Frogtown's Leap Forward for Youth and describe the underlying values that motivate members to stay involved. Leap Forward was created in 1995 after a community forum sparked discussion of the need for coordination of out-of-school time programming in the neighborhood. The collaboration quickly bubbled up with the support of agencies serving youth in Frogtown, and a few key leaders. A cornerstone of the group is and remains that "what is good for our own children is good for all the children of Frogtown." Indeed, it is the rallying cry when times are tough, problems seem insurmountable, or turf issues block the way. The collaborative had very little funding in the early years, and instead built a foundation based on its values and commitment to enhancing the quality and quantity of programs for children. This tradition of listening to community needs continues.

For example, two years ago local families voiced concern over a green space in the neighborhood known for drugs, prostitution, and violence. Taking heed, key stakeholders created a summer activity to take back the local park. The simple idea of holding a few activities in the area park has evolved into a formal summer

program that includes free field trips for area youth, movies in the park on Friday nights, and regular community celebration events. More than 2,000 residents now connect to the park activities each summer and families feel a new sense of safety playing there year round.

What could stimulate more local action?

The Leap Forward Collaboration exhibits key ingredients noted in research on collaboration. This builds many opportunities for those involved to observe and learn about how good collaborations work. Leap Forward is more than a network; it is more than a fiscal sponsor. It is a group of individuals who work on behalf of the programs they represent to do more for the children in Frogtown. They negotiate that line between self interest and interest of the youth and the collaboration itself. This is a key indicator of best practices in out-of-school time collaborations as noted in research from the National Institute of Out-of-School Time (NIOST), Indiana University, and John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities. Other ways Leap Forward exhibits noted best practice in out-of-school time collaborations include:

- **Focus is on ensuring the highest quality of service and continuous improvement.** Leap staff developed a new line of services that implemented program improvement plans for each member organization. Staff leads and supports the improvements by providing an initial training in youth development and organizational practice and on-going coaching support through monthly cluster groups.
- **Youth workers have access to training and professional development.** Leap has offered scholarships to members to attend professional development and training workshops. Leap staff also added regular training workshops to the monthly Collaborative agenda. Trainings include topics such as working

with volunteers and developing community service projects.

- **A variety of stakeholders linked in committees and work plans for joint planning and shared decision-making.** When Leap Forward received the news that they lost the state funding, the group could have been devastated. Instead, with help from the Wilder staff member facilitating, they created a new vision of what they could be within the changed parameters. All members at the meetings have equal votes in decisions and the spirit of how decisions are made remains collective.

Implications for other communities:

In addition to what research tells us, other lessons have unfolded about collaborations that may be useful for replication in other communities. These include four key ideas:

- Leadership is critical and must be defined.
- A little money helps, but too much can create dependence.
- Vision and values must be the coalescing purposes of the members.
- Structure and goals have to be clear but can and should adapt to the times.

Leadership and Structure is Understood

Much has changed around and within the Leap Forward Collaborative. Organization members have come and gone. Youth programs have closed. Money has dried up and other resources have been uncovered. What has not changed is the solid commitment of the Wilder Foundation to provide consistent leadership. What has been learned is not only that leadership is critical to sustaining the effort over time and providing the stability that entails, but that a local collaboration requires a distinctive kind of leadership that is based on the values of community. These values include a firm belief in equal partnership between leaders and partners in most areas, and clarity about what is solely the decision of the leaders or others. It also

means that the work is driven by the needs the community itself defines. In essence, leaders walk a line, ideally finding the common ground between the needs of the lead organization and of the community members themselves. In practice, this means that leadership facilitates the annual planning process, but the members decide what they want to accomplish. Additionally, it could mean that leaders hire the staff, but members serve on the selection committee. The key is to always be clear and transparent about the roles in each situation the collaboration faces.

Vision and Values Get Real

This lesson unfolded as Leap Forward made the decision about how to distribute state grant money to program members. Early Leap program members were a part of another broader local collaborative that disbursed money to local youth programs. Much infighting and turf warring occurred as members tried to gain the most resources for their programs. When designing their own method of fund distribution, Leap Forward members decided to set basic program requirements to access funding (such as a total number of service hours per year, number of youth served, and so on). If members met those requirements, they received an equal share of the funding. Yes, an equal share of funding; how simple. While this caused much consternation for the state funder, it was a solution that encouraged the vision of equal partnership and kept the focus on what is best for the community. It also discouraged members from relying too

heavily on one source for full support. Too often, Wilder has seen good youth programs close because the organization relied on one source of funding. By “walking their talk” on equal partnership, Leap Forward uncovered a valuable lesson in resource allocation. Today, the focus for funding is on finding money to support shared projects across the collaboration, with some small support of individual programming.

Conclusion:

All of these ideas were gained through both direct experience within this Collaboration and also reflection and participation in other less successful efforts. While much can be said specifically about how and why these ideas hold true, it is beyond the scope of this briefing to do so. In part, we must remember that to truly build a strong, effective collaboration you must be as adaptive and sensitive to its nuances as when parenting a child. In that vein, you can never forget the context in which it lives, the vision it has for itself, and the clarity of what to do next. As each grouping of people begin their journey, they must define for themselves how they want to address these lessons learned from Frogtown and other community efforts.

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Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; Wilder Research Center’s Community DataWorks