The Seattle University and Bailey Gatzert Elementary School Partnership: Lessons for Sustainability and Scaling

CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

Bailey Gatzert Elementary School, located in Seattle's Central District, serves one of the most economically disadvantaged populations in Seattle, with 92% of its 390 students eligible for the free or reduced price lunch program. At the time of this report, between 60 and 70 of the students were homeless, with others living in transitional housing. Over 20 languages are spoken by the students' families, many of whom are English Language Learners or new Americans. Seattle University, a Jesuit Catholic institution just several blocks away, has had a relationship with the school dating back to the 1990s. The two institutions launched a formal and more comprehensive partnership in 2009, when the current principal, Greg Imel, came on board. The partnership, initiated through a series of conversations between Seattle University's Center for Community Engagement (CCE) and principal Imel, resulted in an initial set of defined activities and has evolved into what is termed a "university-assisted community school."[1]

A brief history sets the context for understanding the partnership's evolution. Seattle University launched its CCE in 2004. As noted above, Seattle University had an existing long-term relationship with Gatzert, spearheaded by the current CCE Director of Education Partnerships. In 2009, the CCE Executive Director and Director of Education Partnerships engaged the school's principal in a series of brainstorming discussions that served as an informal "gap analysis" of school needs. As a result of these conversations, they jointly decided to engage with Seattle University through targeted entry points, beginning with an afterschool program. After considerable discussion, the afterschool program was launched, with Seattle U supporting the program for kindergarten and first graders. The principal, who had existing close relationships with community-based afterschool providers, invited selected organizations to offer additional programs. Since that time, the Seattle University-Gatzert partnership has evolved considerably. In 2011, Seattle U launched the Seattle University Youth Initiative (SUYI), committing to serve as the anchor institution for a P-12 pipeline for all youth in the Bailey Gatzert attendance zone.[2]

This paper investigates the lessons learned to date from the Seattle University-Bailey Gatzert partnership. In particular, our investigation is designed to inform program growth and improvements, identify elements that support sustainability, and uncover considerations for scaling the partnership to the middle and high school levels.

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1. For more information on university-assisted community schools, see https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/programs/university-assisted-community-schools.

2. For a description of the evolution, current status, and future plans of SUYI, see Lessons Learned from Seattle University's Journey of Community Engagement, University of Pennsylvania (University and Community Schools Journal, Fall 2015).

PARTNERSHIP COMPONENTS

The CCE serves as the link between Seattle University and Bailey Gatzert faculty and staff. It is also operates as a connector between Gatzert and many of its community partners and funders. CCE staff members who serve Gatzert include a full-time School Success Coordinator (SSC), a Family Engagement Manager, and 30 paid student tutors. The Center also oversees 100 university student volunteers per quarter.

Seattle University's role in the partnership embodies four intertwined approaches:

1. **Programming.** Seattle U provides funding, staffing, and student employees and volunteers to support a host of activities. These include the afterschool Extended Learning Program (ELP), which serves K-5 students and is considered a cornerstone of the partnership; and family programs, such as parenting courses and a "talk time" program where parents practice English language skills.
2. **Connecting organizations and systems.** CCE staff actively engage, partner with, and connect numerous nonprofit organizations and public entities, such as the Seattle Public Schools (SPS) and the Seattle Housing Authority (SHA).
3. **Investment.** Seattle University has leveraged considerable financial support from private funders and philanthropies to fund both tangible needs (e.g., state-of-the-art computer equipment and field trips) and personnel (e.g., .5 FTE funding so that the school has a full-time counselor). In addition, the CCE Director of Education Partnerships supports Gatzert in drafting its own grant applications, for example, in applying for Seattle's Family and Education Levy dollars.
4. **Advocacy.** CCE has worked with the school to mobilize Gatzert parents to advocate before the Seattle School board for program and policy changes. Seattle University's president has also communicated directly with public entities on policies affecting Gatzert families.

> *One of the great successes was finding funding for the full-time counselor. Having a full-time counselor has made a huge impact on the school. The students are happy, and staff feel supported in the area of social, emotional and behavior needs being met.*
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> **−GATZERT ADMINISTRATOR**

FINDINGS

This section summarizes findings from structured interviews conducted with Gatzert faculty and administrators, community-based and public partners, and CCE staff. We first summarize the expressed underlying assumptions and visions for the partnership, as well as the reflections on the critical role that ongoing communication and trust-building plays in building this endeavor. In analyzing the findings, we pay significant attention to lessons relating to sustainability and growth at the elementary school and scaling to middle and high school. We also captured interviewees' concrete examples of proposed strategies to deepen the partnership.

> *I was shocked the first time we went on a field trip provided by Seattle U. I mean, here we are at Yesler—we just go over the hill and there are the stadiums—but some of the children had never seen the stadiums before. They'd never seen the Space Needle. It's like their horizons expand going to a play; it helps them learn appropriate behavior for activities outside of school settings. And the parents, too, get to go along as chaperones.*
>
> **−GATZERT FACULTY MEMBER**

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1. SHARED VISION

Our interviewees were asked how they would articulate the partnership's vision and goals. Their responses reflected a striking commonality in the set of underlying assumptions about the partnership:

- The two institutions share a strong commitment to social justice.
- The partnership is grounded in mutual trust and respect.
- Each partner cares deeply about the success of Gatzert children and is committed to bettering their long-term outcomes both in school and in life.
- Potential school needs are discussed collectively, but the ultimate decisions about what Seattle University brings to the school are appropriately made by the principal and building staff.

In terms of the vision and goals, respondents noted four broad factors:

- The partnership's goal is to support Bailey Gatzert children, not only while enrolled in elementary school but through high school completion and to successfully enter college and careers.
- The partnership's approach is comprehensive and aimed at addressing student needs from multiple angles: academic growth, social-emotional needs, physical health, and family support. As one administrator said, "If basic needs are met, those are not a distraction to students—they can focus on academics. Schools and students win."
- Enrichment activities, whether incorporated into the afterschool program or as school time field trips, are as valuable as the academic support.
- Gatzert can serve as the "hub" of its community.[3] Seattle University's role in developing this hub includes connecting families to resources and creating new community partnerships.

> *My thinking is that Seattle U supports the vision of our school. . . . They just stepped in and supported the vision we have . . . to help the kids be successful.*
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> **−GATZERT FACULTY MEMBER**

2. BUILDING TRUST: COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION

Interviewees were asked to describe how trust was built between the two organizations, the challenges of trust-building, and whether there are still issues to be resolved. Clearly, the existing long-term relationship between the two organizations provided a basis for building trust. Overall, staff on both sides characterized themselves and the others as "great at listening." The principal, in reflecting on the initial conversations with the CCE Executive Director said, "He kept coming back, asking me similar kinds of questions . . . his level of hearing is exemplary. And then feeding back to me, 'okay do you think this would be helpful to the school,' until we really landed on those areas." In our conversations the theme of listening deeply—and then responding—to school needs arose time and again. Interviewees gave specific examples of the responses they felt have profoundly impacted students, such as securing funding for the counselor and for field trips.

> *Seattle U has kept themselves open to hearing the positives and the negatives. They are always willing to come to the table.*
>
> **−GATZERT ADMINISTRATOR**

> *I feel like Seattle U really walks their talk. They have certain philosophies... and I think by what they do with us they are showing us that those guiding principles are true to their actions. And I think they've also been willing to change as the program has grown and as we've matured.*
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> **−GATZERT FACULTY MEMBER**

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3. Often referred to as a community school model. For more information, see http://www.communityschools.org/

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Communication and trust-building have faced challenges. While the administrators at each end are able to schedule regular meetings, it is more difficult to engage teachers in the conversation. One example that surfaced was around the evolution of the afterschool program (ELP). In general, there were comments that the initial plan overemphasized Seattle University students' roles in planning the curriculum and insufficiently looped in teachers' views on the best approach to supplement academic support for their students. However, the interviewees also noted productive changes over time, such as including teachers in conversations about the extent to which homework should be part of the ELP curriculum, and stipending teachers to serve as coaches for the Seattle U student tutors. The new SSC previously served as a long-time Gatzert staff member and was repeatedly acknowledged for being in tune with faculty. One faculty member said:

> *Over the past year and a half, two years, it's become a much more responsive system. When Seattle U came in, it was just kind of like, boom, here it is, this is what is happening. And we were like, thank you, but we didn't really have a lot of interaction with what was happening and what we saw as a need—we weren't asked a lot of questions. But I feel like this year . . . he [the new SSC] is very aware of our school's community and needs. He's constantly checking in to see how things are going, to see if there are any classroom concerns or classroom requests. So I feel like there is a lot more back-and-forth dialogue now.*

Other lessons include the following:
- **Trust is built incrementally**. The interviewees' recollections indicate that the relationship began with several months of conversation between CCE and the Gatzert principal. Activities were then piloted incrementally, allowing trust to build over time.
- **Partnership does not mean a lack of boundaries.** The principal and CCE staff each play important gatekeeper roles, setting boundaries with each other and with their respective institutions. For example, Seattle U has worked to ensure that their own faculty members who want to support Gatzert first vet their ideas through CCE before approaching the school directly. At Gatzert, the administration conveys to his staff that Seattle U is "not an ATM."
- **Ongoing communication is key.** Interviewees at both institutions noted informal conversations between school and CCE staff take place effortlessly as the Director of Education Partnerships is frequently in the building. Respondents also said that the SSC, a Seattle U employee housed full-time at Gatzert, serves as an easily accessible communication link. However, there were calls from interviewees at both institutions for carving out dedicated joint reflection time with teachers.
- **Communicating with other service providers is important.** As one informant pointed out, it is likely that the school will have existing relationships with community-based service providers prior to forging a university-based partnership. These providers may be affected by the new partnership. For example, at least one of the service providers had to make structural changes in its service delivery protocols in order to accommodate the ELP. The issue of communicating and coordinating with multiple school-based providers may be even more salient at the middle and high school levels, where numerous organizations offer on-site programs.

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3. SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALING

Being able to listen to the teachers I think is a huge thing, as is listening to their suggestions and responding positively to them. —GATZERT FACULTY MEMBER

A. FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IS ESSENTIAL

For schools and districts across the U.S., family engagement is rapidly shifting from a low-priority recommendation to an integral part of education reform efforts.[4]

Respondents highlighted family engagement as a critical and fertile area for partnership activities. Time and again, interviewees spoke of the need for—and challenges of—engaging Gatzert families. The partnership relies on a "dual capacity-building" approach, strengthening the skills of both families and school personnel to work with each other. As noted below under Family Engagement and Transition Points, our informants suggested that family engagement strategies will be one of the most significant areas needing attention as the CCE partnership scales to the middle and high school levels. This perspective is backed up by research; the importance of family engagement cannot be overemphasized.

Respondents appreciated that Seattle University's support for Gatzert families is guided by school staff insights regarding student and family needs. To date, this has resulted in Seattle U securing funding for a range of family support, including the following: a new CCE staff position, Family Engagement Manager; supplementary funding that increase the school counselor to a full-time position; and field trips where parents are invited to attend as chaperones. The partners have also collaborated to support neighborhood families in advocating for policy changes before the Seattle School Board.

B. INSIGHTS FOR MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL EXPANSION

Our investigation was tasked with seeking suggestions for scaling partnership efforts to the middle and high school levels. Interviewee comments identified both challenges and considerations for moving forward; several of these lessons apply to sustaining the work at the elementary level as well.

> *I think that the mental health piece as the kids get into middle school is number one.*
> —GATZERT ADMINISTRATOR

Family engagement and transition points. While elementary schools often have natural portals for inviting family engagement, middle and high schools are not known for laying out the welcome mat to their students' families. Interviewees advised that, as Seattle U expands efforts to the upper grades, it consider its unique role in contributing to family engagement, particularly by leveraging its partnerships with organizations involved in the SUYI.

School district support. The current Seattle Public Schools (SPS) structure divides the district into five clusters, with a director overseeing the principals in each one. Thus, one regional director is positioned to champion CCE's partnership at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. As an example of playing a champion role, the SPS regional director encouraged the district to invite the dean of Seattle U's College of Education to serve on the search committee for the new middle school principal—thus sending a strong signal to candidates about the value of the partnership. Interviewees noted that CCE proactively engages the director in its work; for example, it has wisely invited the current regional director to serve as a member of the SUYI board. There were also comments indicating that there may be differences in perspectives on issues such as whether partnerships with philanthropies should be forged at the district rather than the school level.

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4. Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships, p.5

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School leadership and faculty engagement. Interviewees voiced insights on school leadership and teacher engagement throughout our conversations. Comments on the role of school leadership and the imperative of teacher engagement provide grist for scaling considerations.

- **The principal's role:** Time and again, interviewees volunteered insights on the critical role the principal plays at every stage of the partnership. Faculty interviewees identified a skill set modeled by the principal, including a grounded and deep understanding of community needs, an ability to attract and work with community partners, skilled communications with school staff, and an unshakable commitment to the school's students and their families. Commenting on communicating and building trust, the principal said, "Another part of my job as an administrator is running interference . . . when it's [a new program idea] at the tipping point in the conversation, then I talk to the staff: 'This is what Seattle U is proposing, what do you guys think?' I think if you're a good manager of the school culture then that's the work you do anyway. You know what your folks are thinking and you know how they are going to react."
- **Teacher engagement:** Teacher engagement was viewed as fundamental to both sustainability and scaling. Several Gatzert respondents said they didn't feel that there was a deep understanding of the partnership among all of their peers. Comments included, "I don't think we know everything that Seattle U does for us," and "The school is a giant organism; support that we don't necessarily see is being brought into our building." They identified actionable steps, which could be implemented in the upper schools as well. These included dedicating part of two regular staff meetings to the partnership each year (for example, one at the beginning of the year and the other at the end) and using these meetings as opportunities to foster an honest conversation about what is working well and areas for improvement. There were also several comments about the value of stipending teachers to oversee the afterschool programs.

Social and emotional support. In meetings with CCE staff, Gatzert's principal prioritized the need for counseling services; CCE responded by securing funding to increase the counselor position from half to full-time. Our interviewees consistently called out the value of this additional counseling support. Some also noted that counseling is both more important—and more challenging—in middle and high school. One noted that the counseling role in those institutions is geared toward course selection and scheduling, not social and emotional support, but that both are needed. She continued, "We have so much work to do with identity and self-esteem, and that really peaks at middle school. You know, we start looking at building academic confidence and self-confidence, and those are key at middle school."

Place-based challenges. The unifying model at Gatzert is to serve all students, an approach that resonates with faculty and staff. However the middle and high schools encompass a broader geographic area than the Gatzert neighborhood and are attended by a wider range of students in terms of income, academic achievement levels, and need for support services. CCE staff noted that they plan to continue their focus on neighborhood students, while being inclusive of others needing support services. The change to potentially serving segments of, rather than the entire, school population and to engaging with families who reside outside of the Yesler Terrace boundaries will require some consideration.

C. MAXIMIZE CONNECTIONS WITH THE SEATTLE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

When asked where they would like to see the partnership expand its efforts in the coming years, several interviewees suggested deepening connections with the Seattle U campus, as summarized below.

> *Our kids live here and they see the college and they don't know what goes on there.*
>
> **–GATZERT FACULTY MEMBER**

Strengthen connections with Seattle University's academic departments. The partnership has piloted innovative connections between the school and the university. For example, the CCE Director of Education Partnerships and the Gatzert

principal co-taught a course for students in Seattle University's Liberal Studies program, held onsite at Gatzert. Our teacher interviewees suggested several areas where additional ties could be forged with Seattle University's College of Education: financial support in receiving advanced degrees or taking credit courses, and also onsite professional development offerings. They also felt that the College of Education could take advantage of Gatzert and its excellent teaching staff, for example, by serving as an internship site for Teacher Education students or by becoming a laboratory school.

Expand Campus Opportunities. Our respondents noted that Seattle University's presence in the school offers an intrinsic opportunity for Gatzert youth to personally connect with college students. They suggested that Seattle U take additional steps to invite students into campus life, and they strongly recommended having the students physically experience the campus as much as possible, whether through regular visits or special programs. Their proposals included sponsoring a summer program on campus; organizing a "take a kid to campus day" where Gatzert youth shadow Seattle U students, sit in on classes, and visit dorms; and facilitating career awareness by having Seattle U students share information about their fields. One suggested investigating the body of research on exactly which types of campus experiences have proven effective.

D. TRACKING STUDENT OUTCOMES

CCE funds a full-time data and evaluation analyst to measure the overall impact of SUYI activities. This work will include long-term follow-up of students looking at factors such as academic performance, attendance, and graduation rates. Implementing the data collection plan has encountered hurdles, including in accessing student records. Interviewees felt that there is a significant, but as of yet unrealized, potential for the value of these data. Questions were raised about how the findings will be used at the school level and whether they will be accessed and used by teachers. A few of the interviewees also recommended that, as the effort expands to middle and high school, CCE work with entities such as the Seattle Housing Authority to establish a common set of metrics around early warning indicators and social-emotional learning measures.

E. BUILDING ON SUCCESS FACTORS

Interviewees were asked to reflect on where the partnership has been most successful. Their thoughts provide potential lessons for scaling and sustainability. Identified successful practices included the following:
Cultivating champions at multiple levels, e.g., from school faculty, the Seattle school district, the Seattle Housing Authority, and local funders.

- **Conducting high-profile advocacy.** As an example, Seattle University's president has been a visible advocate and supporter, engaging with elected and appointed public and private sector leaders at the local and national levels.
- **Ensuring reciprocity.** Seattle U student experiences were not a focus of this investigation. However, respondents noted that in order for the partnership to be sustainable, its work must meet the needs of Gatzert families while at the same time providing meaningful learning outcomes for those college students engaged at the school. As one example, Seattle University's agreement to support the Gatzert counselor position includes the opportunity for its students to serve as onsite interns and to conduct research.
- **Utilizing joint hiring committees.** One decision that has solidified the collaboration is including representatives from both institutions on selected hiring committees for positions such as the School Success Coordinator. As an example, the Seattle Public Schools leadership invited a CCE representative to sit on the hiring committee for the new principal at Washington Middle School, sending a message to candidates about the importance of the collaborative effort.

FINAL NOTES

Once Yesler Terrace is redeveloped into a mix of low-income and market-rate housing, the demographics of Gatzert will change and include youth from middle-income families as well. One of our interviewees stated that the success of the redevelopment is in part related to Gatzert's ability to attract enrollment from all Yesler Terrace families. Interviewees raised related considerations for the partnership going forward. For example, a couple of interviewees commented on how CCE currently fills the traditional PTSA role by providing classroom volunteers, fundraising, sponsoring field trips, and bringing in professional expertise for student enrichment. A new mix of Gatzert families may mean that school families will take on some of those roles.

Finally, some voiced thoughts on the extent to which the partnership's sustainability will depend on positive documentation of student outcomes. The teachers in particular emphasized that they hoped for recognition of the wide range of the partnership's impacts on students' aspirations and social and emotional growth, and not solely on the metrics of test scores.

> *I know of course that we have to raise test scores...but they're getting so much more than that. They get the academic piece, but there are other things that are more important, like the field trips and the books in their hands, and being able to interact with college-age students who show them respect and speak to them appropriately and can become role models to them.*

METHODOLOGY AND NEXT STEPS

Our findings are drawn primarily from a set of structured interviews with 17 informants representing Gatzert faculty members and administrators, external community partners (including the Seattle Housing Authority and Seattle Public Schools), and CCE staff. The interviews were informed and supplemented by an extensive review of program documentation. There are clearly additional dimensions of this work and other informants' views left to be explored. Our study does not investigate the experiences of—and impacts on—Seattle University students who provide extensive program support. We suggest as a next step a deep investigation into family engagement strategies and outcomes, providing an opportunity to surface community voices and experiences and further inform scaling this work to the middle and high school levels.

Seattle University (SU) is committed to the formation of leaders for a just and humane world. The Seattle University Youth Initiative provides the vehicle to ensure that SU's mission extends beyond campus through its commitment to increasing the academic outcomes of low-income children living in the neighborhood adjacent to campus. Through a strategy of collective impact, SU and its partners are developing a pipeline of academic support for children and their families from birth through high school graduation. For more information please contact Kent Koth, Executive Director, Center for Community Engagement at kothk@seattleu.edu.

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