



## Review of Partnerships

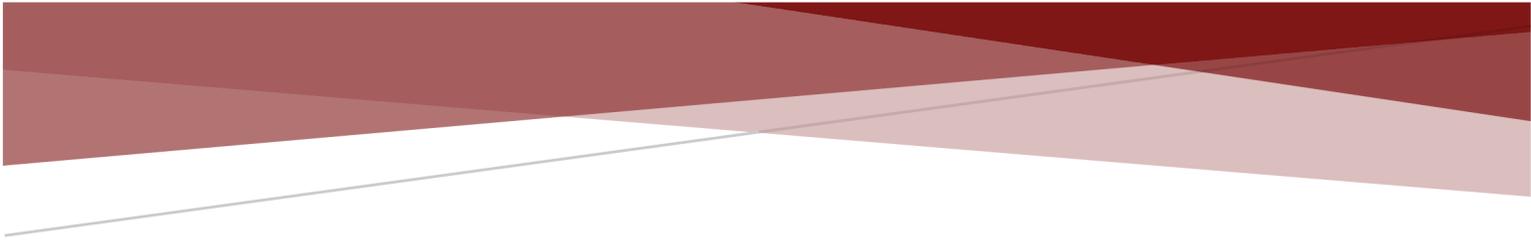
### The BERC Group

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**SPS School Board Office**  
[boardoffice@seattleschools.org](mailto:boardoffice@seattleschools.org)



# Review of Partnerships

Prepared for Seattle Public Schools

The BERC Group

## Introduction

Seattle Public Schools (SPS) engages many community-based organizations and nonprofits to provide services to students and families. These partners deliver academic tutoring, enrichment and arts programs, social–emotional supports, mentoring, college and career readiness activities, and family engagement services. In SPS, many of these relationships are governed through Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), coordinated primarily through the Partnerships Office. Over the past several years, the Partnerships Office has strengthened the MOU intake process by revising forms, clarifying required elements, and front-loading safety documentation. At the same time, district leaders and school staff have raised questions about what happens after intake: how consistently partners are monitored once they are working in schools, how outcomes are assessed, and how well the overall portfolio of partnerships aligns with SPS academic and equity priorities.

The purpose of this report is to describe the current state of partnership MOUs in SPS, focusing on system-level patterns in intake, safety practices, academic alignment, and follow-up. It aims to recognize existing strengths in relationship-building and onboarding, while identifying gaps in accountability, data, and equity that corrective actions must address. Our evaluation was through the lens of four anchors of quality: clarity (roles, approvals, and requirements), academic alignment (fit with school priorities such as the CSIP), safety (background checks, insurance, supervision, and liability), and consistency/equity (how similar expectations are understood and applied across sites).

Our priority throughout the evaluation was strengths-based and improvement-oriented. Many procedures adhere to policy and already work and many staff and volunteers go to great lengths to support students. The findings highlight where accountability and safety expectations are least visible or most variable, especially for student-facing work, so that school leaders and central teams share a common understanding of what “effective” looks like and can build on what’s working while providing the tools, knowledge, and procedural guidance to sunset partnerships or contracts that do not serve the best interests of SPS students.

## Methodology

BERC researchers use a theoretical framework that involves collecting multiple perspectives from stakeholders and employing rigorous data collection methods and analyses for mixed-methods evaluations (Creswell, 2022). In this study, the BERC research team employed a utilization-focused participatory evaluation model that centers intended users and practical use of findings (Patton, 2014). Researchers used a convergent mixed-methods design to examine three strands of student-facing work in Seattle Public Schools: Personal Services Contracts (PSC), community partnerships governed by MOUs, and PTA–school collaboration and facility use. The inquiry focused on how accountability and safety expectations are interpreted in practice and the consistency of those practices across schools.

We engaged 27 stakeholders through 60–90 minute semi-structured interviews, with several participants meeting multiple times as the project scope expanded. Stakeholders included district office staff spanning the organizational chart and PTSA leaders. This purposive approach ensured

representation of decision-makers, implementers, and community partners who interact with student-facing services from different vantage points.

Researchers also reviewed key artifacts and administrative materials relevant to each strand, including MOU intake forms and partnership guidance, insurance verification processes (MyCOI); volunteer/background-check and sexual-misconduct training guidance, and representative school CSIPs to understand alignment expectations. Consistent with a utilization-focused, participatory stance, we triangulated across interviews, documents, and administrative artifacts.

## Guiding Questions

- How are community partners recruited, vetted, and onboarded through the MOU process?
- How are scope, outcomes, and safety expectations documented at intake?
- What mechanisms exist to follow up on implementation and impact once partners are operating in schools
- How visible and equitable is the overall portfolio of partners across schools and student groups?

## Findings

### Intake Strengths and Relationship-Building

The MOU intake process itself was relatively robust by the time this project began. The Partnerships Office had invested in revising the MOU template, and central leaders described the document as on its way to better aligning with the academic needs of a building. One leader noted that “the MOU template was updated fairly recently, and I think it is accurate in terms of what the requirements are to do work in the district or at a school.” However, staffing cuts have reduced the intake capacity of the Partnerships office and follow up and evaluation of partners once they are in schools was not occurring.

The Partnerships team played a proactive, relationship-based role in the recruitment and support of partners. Staff described working closely with schools and partners to clarify scopes and expectations. District staff spoke of outreach efforts, matchmaking between schools and potential partners, and hands-on support that made the process feel accessible to community-based partners.

### Limited Implementation and Impact Evaluation

Once partnerships were in motion, however, the system had far fewer routines for checking implementation and outcomes. District staff consistently pointed to the absence of a routine rhythm to revisit scopes, SMARTIE goals, or other commitments once the MOU was signed. Capacity constraints in the Partnerships Office were a key factor; staff and leaders described having “hundreds of zero-dollar [MOUs]... that doesn’t mean it’s helpful. It’s still time, it’s still personnel resources,” making it difficult to add structured follow-up on top.

Several staff described aspirations for more robust monitoring that were not yet feasible. One central staff member reflected that “twice a year I lead partner meetings with school leaders and I

do site visits with certain partners... but we just don't have that space to do it right now," signaling individual attempts at quality assurance without a districtwide system. Another pointed specifically to the goal-setting section of the MOU: "The SMARTIE goal was hard; people had a hard time understanding how to write it, and that's the piece that hasn't been fleshed out," and concluded, "we don't have a system to, like, follow up and say" whether those goals were met.

Despite working towards improved intake documentation, schools and central staff had only partial visibility into whether partnerships were delivered as described, whether they were advancing outcomes, or how well they remained aligned to evolving school priorities after launch. Decisions to continue or end partnerships were often based on relationship history or perceived goodwill rather than on a shared set of implementation and impact data.

Curriculum leaders and central staff voiced a desire for stronger standards alignment and clearer expectations for tutors and enrichment providers. One leader noted, "we make sure that all of our programs are aligned—what happens in general education and then what happens with academic interventions," and argued that "our providers, our partners, should be aligned and should know about some of the basic fundamental belief systems we have about teaching reading and writing." They also offered concrete counterexamples: "I have a [literacy] partner coming, and I'm like, 'What?' That is not aligned to the curriculum. It's not aligned to the outcomes." Without a consistent mechanism to check delivery against scopes and goals, academic alignment remained more an aspiration at intake than a lived expectation over time.

### Uneven Safety Practices

Safety practices for partners entering through MOUs were stronger than other agreements or contracts across the district, but still presented gaps once programs were underway. Expectations around background checks and training were included in the template, but responsibility for carrying them out and storing verification often rested with the partner organization. One central leader recalled hearing only "bits and pieces" about "the accountability of background checks," and another, discussing sexual-misconduct training, explained that "there's language in the personal services contract that everybody that works with kids has to complete the sexual misconduct training. The scary part is I don't know if that's being verified—they could just email me that they did that and go on campus today. Who double checks to make sure you did that?"

Although MOUs emphasized safety more explicitly than other agreements and contracts, verification artifacts were not consistently housed within SPS systems, making it difficult to confirm compliance when partner staff changed midyear. In conversations about potential improvements, one idea was that "if someone's working with kids, they have to go through the Samaritan system, and then the background checks live with you [central office], rather than the partner just saying, 'We've done background checks on our four employees.'" At the same time, leaders emphasized that staffing for safety systems was minimal; one remarked that "we have one person that does the volunteer checks and all that for the whole district," calling this "a big issue as well." Overall, the partnership pathway devoted more initial attention to safety than PSCs did, but central visibility remained incomplete, especially as personnel turned over.

## The Underdeveloped Youth Program Services Roster

While a roster of vetted partners, called the Youth Program Services Roster, existed, it was not functioning as a widely used or trusted entry point. Staff described it as an older system whose purpose and status were not well understood due to the loss of institutional knowledge over time. One district staffer explained that “the youth programming roster is our system that we created, I don’t know, ten years ago... for partners who were receiving [contracts over a certain amount],” but added that “they haven’t told us a new process for it,” signaling that it was not actively maintained. Another reflected, “I don’t know whether we have implemented the direction to consolidate a list of partners that work with Seattle Public Schools, unless we’re defining that in a really limited way, like those who have an MOU.”

Even among central staff directly engaged in partnership work, the roster’s scope, vetting criteria, and update process were unclear. For principals, this meant that the roster was not a reliable tool for identifying vetted providers and no one interviewed knew how partners got onto the list or what being listed signified. As a result, schools continued to rely on informal networks and historical relationships, and the district lacked a simple, transparent mechanism to direct schools toward organizations that had met consistent standards.

## Recommendations

### Partnership and Personal Service Contract Alignment

The processes for entering into a partnership agreement or a student-facing Personal Service Contract are siloed, with distinct approval workflows and points of contact at the district level. In practice, many community-based organizations operate in both capacities, sometimes functioning as formal contractors paid through district funds, and at other times serving as in-kind or grant-funded partners delivering similar types of programs via an MOU. Organizations operating under a PSC or partnership often share common goals, such as academic support, social-emotional learning, enrichment, or college and career readiness. Despite these similarities in function and impact, the lack of alignment between the two systems result in a lack of accountability in monitoring quality and student outcomes and inconsistencies in vetting and compliance.

To ensure coherence and equity, Seattle Public Schools should work toward aligning recruitment, vetting procedures, data reporting requirements, and renewal standards across both PSCs and partnerships. Doing so would create a unified framework for all student-facing external providers, ensuring that every adult working with students meets the same safety, quality, and alignment criteria. This alignment would also allow for more accurate tracking of who is serving students, reduce duplicative efforts, and support better integration with CSIPs and school priorities.

Structurally, partnerships/MOUs and PSCs are handled by different areas of the SPS organizational chart. To dismantle the siloed nature of this structure, we recommend that the MOU intake process be moved from the Partnerships team to the Contracts team. The Contracts team is already well-versed in handling intake and compliance documentation at scale and is better positioned to ensure consistent application of legal, safety, and insurance protocols. Shifting intake responsibilities to Contracts would streamline initial onboarding processes and

reduce confusion among community organizations who often engage with the district in multiple capacities.

To truly align these processes, both the MOU and PSC workflows for student-facing providers should be revised or possibly merged into a single intake system, that mirrors the strengths of the current MOU process: clarity, accessibility, and alignment with school-based priorities. This consolidated system would apply a common intake form, shared vetting requirements (e.g., Samaritan clearance, MyCOI insurance verification), and a joint review mechanism regardless of whether the external provider is compensated or not. A unified intake model would help eliminate duplication, mitigate risk, and ensure that all student-facing services are reviewed through an equity-centered lens aligned to district and school goals.

Removing the intake function from the Partnerships team would allow that team to focus on the core work of accountability, alignment, and strategic support. Specifically, the Partnerships team could lead the RFQ process for partner approval, coordinate the use of Unified Insights as a centralized analytics hub for partner impact and home of KPI's for SPS employees, and ensure that all active partners, whether via MOU or PSC, are tracking meaningful SMARTIE goals. Partnerships staff would be positioned to provide coaching and tools to school leaders, supporting them in evaluating whether external programs are advancing their CSIP goals, improving student outcomes, and closing opportunity gaps.

This shift would also enhance transparency and trust among school leaders and families. When both compensated and uncompensated organizations are held to the same vetting, reporting, and impact standards, it signals a commitment to student safety, instructional alignment, and equitable access to high-quality supports. In the long term, this alignment could pave the way for a shared digital dashboard or partner portal where school leaders can view pre-approved programs, track service delivery, and request supports based on identified student needs backed by consistent backend infrastructure.

**Establish the process to update and maintain the Youth Program Services Roster**

To ensure transparency, equity, and quality in recruiting partnerships, Seattle Public Schools should make a renewed effort to update and maintain the existing Youth Program Services Roster. This roster should function as a pre-approved list of vetted community-based organizations, maintained through a formal Request for Qualifications (RFQ) process that is reviewed every quarter by a cross-departmental committee, including representatives from Contracts, Curriculum & Instruction, Accountability, and various principals. This structure would ensure district and school alignment to academic priorities and provide a reliable list of partners for school and district level stakeholders.

The first step in this process is to formalize an RFQ process that includes the development of equity and outcomes aligned vetting criteria. The BERCC Group can facilitate the design and documentation of the RFQ process by creating a workgroup with staff from across the SPS organizational chart, including Contracts, Accountability, Curriculum & Instruction and Legal. This committee will design the application, scoring rubric, and scoring process, as well as serve on the inaugural approval committee for the first year of partner and contractor review.

Once the RFQ process is in place, the existing Youth Program Services Roster should be modified to include embedded filters such as district goals and guardrails, student populations served, and program focus, which allows staff across the district to search for vetted partners and vendors that can meet the specific needs of their students. The BERC Group can support the Partnerships team in training district and school staff, as well as drafting and distributing communications about the rollout and use of the roster.

#### Require Impact Statements and CSIP Alignment for All Partners

All partnership agreements, whether funded, in-kind, or volunteer-based, should include a partner impact statement and a clear explanation of how the work aligns with each school's Continuous School Improvement Plan (CSIP). This requirement ensures that all student-facing activities are intentional, measurable, and tied to school goals. Embedding CSIP alignment into MOUs and program plans will help eliminate fragmented or duplicative services and focus school-community collaborations on advancing academic and whole-child outcomes identified by school teams.

There are current efforts to include academic accountability to the partnerships process when applying for an MOU, such as a more detailed Scope of Work statement and SMARTIE goals that must be filled out by the partner before the MOU is approved, whereas the PSC process does not include academic alignment or evaluation planning. The BERC Group can support the revision and alignment of these forms to include a CSIP alignment summary and evaluation plan that includes specific qualitative and quantitative measures of impact and a timeline of measurement. This puts the responsibility of supporting the validity and reliability of the proposed program on the partner or contractor.

Such a drastic change to procedure in multiple departments will require professional development to instruct school district staff and current partners on how to follow new procedures and toolkits to ensure that knowledge is readily available for reference. The BERC Group can convene staff that currently work on partnership and personal service contracts and assist that team in the creation of professional development tools and toolkit creation and assist in identifying the proper channels and strategies for implementation.

#### Perform a District-wide Audit of all Partnerships

The district should conduct a comprehensive audit of all partnerships. At the building level, this audit can be conducted by principals and their leadership teams, while at the district level, this can be conducted by Curriculum and Instruction or Accountability teams. Teams can collect and review documentation related to project scope, CSIP alignment, safety compliance (e.g., background checks, insurance), and deliverables. The goal is to identify gaps or inconsistencies in CSIP alignment, and inform future approval, renewal, or sunseting decisions. This process will increase transparency, mitigate risk, and ensure equitable access to high-quality supports across all schools.

The BERC Group, with assistance from staff in the Accountability and Curriculum and Instruction divisions, can create an audit tool and rubric and train district and building leaders on using the tool to audit their existing partnerships and student-facing contracts. Once the audit

process has been completed at each building, the data should be collected and analyzed into a yearly partnership report that summarizes the implementation and impact of partnerships across the district.

### Develop Targeted Principal Training on Evaluation and Renewal of Partnerships

To strengthen oversight and ensure quality control, the district should design and deliver principal-facing professional development modules focused on evaluating partnerships, aligning services to school priorities, and making informed renewal decisions. These modules should include real-world case studies, partner evaluation rubrics, templates for CSIP-alignment conversations, and guidance on how to collect and analyze both qualitative and quantitative impact data. Making this training a regular part of the Summer Leadership Institute and onboarding for new administrators will build coherence and shared expectations districtwide.

The BEREC Group can design professional development for principals that train them to evaluate the impact of their partners and contractors. These sessions will go beyond theory and offer hands-on guidance in identifying high-quality data sources already available in SPS and show principals how to connect these metrics directly to the SMARTIE goals or CSIP outcomes stated in partnership agreements. Recognizing the overwhelming demands on new leaders, BEREC can also develop an easy-to-use evaluation toolkit that includes decision trees, flowcharts, sample rubrics, and scripted questions for partnership conversations, ensuring that principals have clear, step-by-step guidance to fall back on when navigating complex or politically sensitive decisions. This toolkit should be embedded in onboarding, made accessible through the principal portal, and reinforced through follow-up coaching and peer learning communities.

### Use Unified Insights to Track Partnership Impact on Student Outcomes

To improve accountability and decision-making, all partners and schools should track the outcomes of their key partnerships using Unified Insights. This would allow school leaders to monitor student progress in areas such as attendance, course grades, assessment growth, or SEL metrics for students served by partners. Embedding these metrics in partnership agreements and MOUs will help ensure programs are continuously improving and genuinely advancing district goals. Centralizing data at the district level also supports equity by identifying which programs are closing opportunity gaps and which are not.

To operationalize this vision the district should retool the Unified Insights platform to accommodate both implementation data submitted by partners and outcome data analyzed by district staff. This will require developing a standardized data submission protocol for partners, integrated into the existing MOU or PSC process, along with clear guidance on metrics aligned to CSIP goals. Once the platform infrastructure is in place, a member of the Partnerships team, which currently owns Unified Insights, should plan and implement targeted professional development for principals starting with those in their first five years on using Unified Insights not just for compliance but as a decision-making tool. To reduce cognitive load and ensure sustainability, Partnerships would also create user-friendly templates, reflection tools, and data review protocols that principals can use during BLT or CSIP meetings. The BEREC Group can assist Partnerships in planning and implementation to ensure alignment with partnership evaluation process and procedures.

## Revamp Required Safety and Liability Structures

For safety, consistency, and legal compliance, all partners and contractors working directly with students must complete the district's Samaritan system application process. This important tool that is already in use for volunteers brings the background check process into district control and ensures that records are up to date and people that should not be doing work in the district are flagged before they enter a building. The Samaritan registration should be non-negotiable and monitored regularly to ensure that only fully vetted individuals and organizations are engaging with students in any capacity. Standardizing this requirement will also build trust with families and ensure that school-based programming adheres to the highest standards of student safety and legal accountability. In addition, the district should standardize the insurance verification process to ensure that all partners are providing and updated their insurance requirements via MyCOI. A clearly documented process will help prevent liability gaps, reduce delays in contract processing, and ensure that all partners meet consistent districtwide safety and risk standards.

To carry this work forward, The BERC Group can support the district by convening a cross-functional safety and compliance committee consisting of representatives from HR, Risk Management, Contracts, and school leadership to co-develop a unified safety checklist for all student-facing external providers, regardless of whether they are engaged through an MOU or PSC. BERC can facilitate the committee's work in identifying critical non-negotiables, such as background check verification, emergency protocols, sexual misconduct training, and insurance coverage, similar to what is already required for partners, and develop a streamlined guidance document and intake process aligned to those requirements for all student-facing contractors as well. To ensure these guardrails are enforced systemwide, The HR department should lead the expansion of the Samaritan vetting system to cover all MOUs and PSCs and help formalize the MyCOI insurance verification process by clearly defining roles, responsibilities, and escalation protocols across departments. HR staff should also work with technology staff to create integration between Samaritan and Verkada, enabling school leaders to view real-time compliance status at the building level.