



School's Out Washington & The Best Starts For Kids Out-of-School Time Initiative

Evaluation Report 2018-2022

Prepared by Public Profit | May 2022



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Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge our partners on the School's Out Washington (SOWA) and Best Starts for Kids (BSK) teams for their contributions to this report:

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Credit for photographs on pages 2, 10, 18, 26, the cover, and within the executive summary to Paul Israel. Credit for photographs on page 6 and the cover to Rita Alcantara.

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Executive Summary

School's Out Washington's Role in the BSK OST Grant Investment

King County identified School's Out Washington (SOWA) as the intermediary organization to support planning, implementation, and performance measurement of the Best Starts for Kids Out-of-School Time (BSK OST) grant investment. SOWA is a non-profit organization that works to ensure equitable access to high-quality expanded learning programs in all Washington communities, especially for low-income youth and youth of color. SOWA provides support and guidance to expanded learning programs across the state of Washington and helps to improve young people's access to high-quality out-of-school time opportunities.

SOWA provided a unique combination of funding and quality supports for organizations, maximizing organizations' impact.

With the BSK OST grant initiative, SOWA saw an opportunity to not only provide significant financial support, but to also embed a system of youth program quality support, capacity development, and continuous quality improvement. The BSK OST grant provided funding and support to grantees for three years, with the opportunity to extend another one and a half years. SOWA also provided grantees with quality supports aligned with the Youth Program Quality Initiative, including training, one-on-one coaching, program quality assessments using the Social-Emotional Learning Program Quality Assessment tool, and peer learning community meetings. This unique combination of financial and program quality supports allowed organizations to engage more deeply in program quality work, and ultimately strengthen their positive impact on their communities.



"When we were awarded the BSK grant [as a POC-led organization], that funding increased our organizational budget by 25 percent, yet the gains the Best Starts Out-of-School Time Initiative have reaped for our organization have been exponential. As a result of this investment, we have a strong understanding of our program strengths and weaknesses and how to grow. We are so grateful for this initiative, and it has completely transformed and affirmed our work, our capacity, and our communities."

- Grantee Representative

SOWA demonstrated a commitment to strong relationships and equity-based practices.

SOWA demonstrated numerous strengths and successes as the grant maker and intermediary, including developing strong relationships between grantees and the SOWA team, a commitment to equitable practice, and support for ongoing continuous quality improvement for grantees and SOWA's internal practices.

SOWA's built their commitment to equity into their work with grantees through the following practices:

Develop strong relationships with grantees: The BSK team at SOWA, a group of three staff members dedicated to supporting the BSK grantees, cultivated trusting relationships with grantees through personalized and responsive communication and individualized support.

Viewing grantees as experts: SOWA recognized that grantees serving these populations have intimate knowledge of their own communities and are experts in how to best serve their youth and families.

Responding to grantees' experiences and needs: SOWA intentionally hires staff with direct service or lived experience in the out-of-school time field, which helps staff understand the grantee experience and be responsive to grantees' level of experience and needs.

Offering equity-based trainings: SOWA provided structural racism training for grantees, which helped participants increase their understanding of structural racism and how this is crucial to achieving equitable outcomes for youth.

Adopting a culturally-responsive approach to program quality improvement: SOWA staff and coaches helped grantees understand the underlying intent behind program quality best practices, and then identified how those practices may show up in their specific program based on their cultural context.

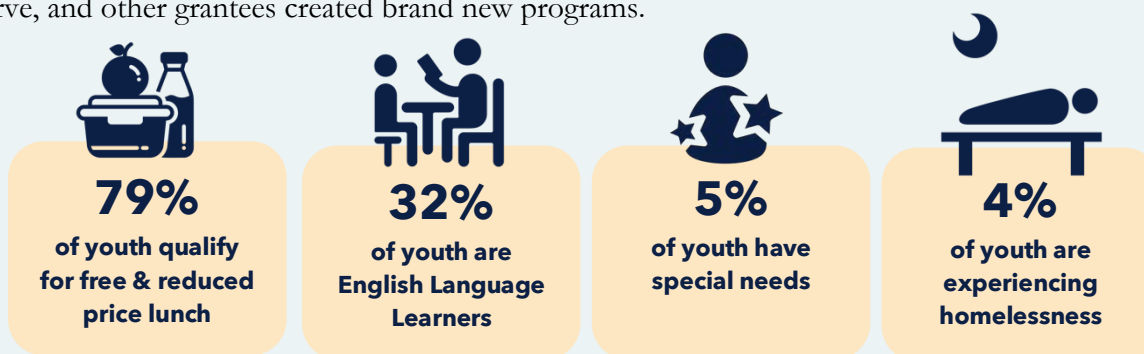
SOWA is committed to continuous improvement both for grantees and for their own work.

SOWA supported grantees in improving the quality of their OST youth programs and their organizations, through tools, trainings, and individualized coaching. SOWA also modeled a commitment to continuous improvement through shifting and bettering their own internal processes. Throughout the initiative, SOWA solicited feedback from grantees and subsequently made impactful shifts to better support grantees.

Youth Served and BSK OST Grantee Accomplishments

BSK OST grantees more than doubled the youth served from 2018 to 2021 and served youth most in need of supportive programming.

At the beginning of the initiative in Spring 2018, grantees served 1,030 youth. By Fall 2021, grantees served 2,102 youth! Some grantees dramatically expanded the number of youth they were able to serve, and other grantees created brand new programs.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees shifted programming to meet community needs.

When Stay Home, Stay Healthy was first ordered and organizations had to reimagine their services, program staff highly valued community and youth voice. Organizations turned to their communities to hear what they needed in these unusual and stressful circumstances. Organizations prioritized the needs of the communities they served, and SOWA's flexible funding model enabled them to do so effectively. Programs emphasized supporting youth and families with their social-emotional well-being. SOWA's training and support in integrating social-emotional learning into programming provided a crucial foundation for organizations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Program staff focused on connecting with youth and families and providing services that supported social and emotional well-being as well as basic needs.



Page sources: July 2021 youth demographics data reported by grantees and provided by SOWA; March 2020 -Dec 2021 COVID-19 enrollment and services provided data reported by grantees and provided by SOWA.

Recommendations for Institutions Funding and Supporting Grantees

Based on SOWA's approach, these recommendations will help institutions holistically invest in organizations, create strong relationships with grantees, and consider the role of funders in supporting organizations to positively impact their communities.

- 1 Consider a dual investment of funding and quality support:** If funding institutions aim for sustained engagement and maximum impact, consider providing organizations with both funding as well as program quality and capacity support.
- 2 Articulate which types of organizations are a good fit for the initiative:** When recruiting organizations for a grant opportunity, funders should fully detail the requirements of the engagement, as well as which types of organizations will be well-suited for the initiative. With this information, organizations can decide whether they have the staff capacity to devote to the engagement that this grant offers, or if they should expand their staff capacity.
- 3 Work with intermediaries for increased flexibility and focus on equity:** Especially with governmental funding, a non-governmental intermediary may be able to structure and implement an initiative differently or with more flexibility.
- 4 Hire the right people to lead the initiative:** When considering hiring someone to manage a grant or initiative, consider someone with lived experience working in the kinds of programs that you're supporting.
- 5 Focus on creating an authentic partnership with grantees:** Funder-grantee relationships can be saturated with power dynamics. Intentionally creating authentic partnerships between funders and grantees can alleviate these dynamics that are often steeped in white supremacy culture.
- 6 Commit to your own organization's continuous quality improvement:** Especially for funding institutions supporting grantees with their own continuous quality improvement cycle, it is imperative that organizations commit to receiving feedback and implementing changes to improve support for grantees.
- 7 Allow grantees to determine their own measures of success:** Funding institutions committed to equity should consider implementing grant practices such as allowing grantees to outline their own scope of work, evaluation plans, and measures of success.

Table of Contents

Overview of the Best Starts for Kids Out-of-School Time Initiative

page 2

School's Out Washington's Role in the BSK OST Grant Investment

page 4

Youth Served and BSK OST Grantee Accomplishments

page 18

Recommendations for Institutions Funding and Supporting Grantees

page 26



Overview of the Best Starts for Kids Out-of-School Time Initiative

About Best Starts for Kids

Best Starts for Kids (BSK) is an initiative that aims to improve the health and well-being of all residents in King County, Washington. Funded by a six-year levy that was first approved by King County voters in November 2015, BSK invests an average of \$65 million per year in services, programs, and initiatives. These initiatives build strong and resilient communities and help young people and their families thrive. In August 2021, King County voters renewed the levy for another six years, initiating Best Starts for Kids 2.0.¹

Investment in Out-of-School Time

One of the priority areas for the Best Starts for Kids initiative was supporting out-of-school time (OST). Given the extensive research base linking high-quality youth development programs to positive youth outcomes, investing in high-quality out-of-school time programs was seen as a promising way for King County to make progress on one of three key results areas outlined in the BSK Implementation Plan: **“King County is a place where everyone has equitable opportunities to be safe and healthy as they progress through childhood, building academic and life skills to be thriving members of their communities.”**² A total of \$14.5 million funded the BSK OST grant strategy for 2018-2022. The grant originally funded organizations from 2018-2021, and then was extended into 2022. For Best Starts for Kids 2.0, an estimated \$44 million will fund expanded learning programs.³

¹ For more information see: <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/community-human-services/initiatives/best-starts-for-kids/background.aspx>

² For more information see: <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/community-human-services/initiatives/best-starts-for-kids/dashboards.aspx>

³ For more information see: https://kingcounty.gov/~media/depts/community-human-services/best-starts-kids/documents/Best_Starts_for_Kids_Implementation_Plan_Approved_2021.ashx?la=en

About School's Out Washington

King County identified School's Out Washington (SOWA) as the intermediary organization to support planning, implementation, and performance measurement of the BSK OST grant investment. SOWA is a non-profit organization that works to ensure equitable access to high-quality expanded learning programs in all Washington communities, especially for low-income youth and youth of color. SOWA provides support and guidance to expanded learning programs across the state of Washington and helps to improve young people's access to high-quality out-of-school time opportunities.

About the Grantees

Grants were awarded to 31 unique organizations – 12 people of color-led organizations, and 22 organizations that formed seven place-based collaboratives.⁴ From the start of the BSK OST grant in 2018 to its end in 2022, grantees more than doubled the youth they served. Grantees engaged in intensive training and coaching with SOWA, which supported them to implement high-quality youth development practices. Grantees also integrated social-emotional practices into programming in diverse types of programming, including STEM, financial literacy, arts education, and reading.

“Prior to Best Starts for Kids, we didn't have an afterschool program. We were thinking about afterschool programming where we can have our own curriculum and a staff member that is designated as an afterschool coordinator. With BSK funds, we purchased our own curriculum and built relationships with the school district.” – Grantee Representative

“[The Best Starts for Kids funds enabled us to] expand the number of kids in this program, expand the number of partners, and to have a curriculum to give youth.” – Grantee Representative

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees quickly pivoted to offer innovative and safe ways to stay connected with their families, including virtual programming, learning hubs, and socially distanced events. Grantees offered nearly 20,000 meals and food boxes, almost 10,000 basic needs supplies, a variety of learning materials, and needed technology to youth and families.

About this Report

SOWA commissioned Public Profit to conduct a multi-year developmental evaluation of SOWA's role as the intermediary organization for the BSK OST grant investment. This report highlights SOWA's approach in managing this grant, celebrates how BSK OST grantees deepened and expanded their services to youth and families, and shares the lessons SOWA learned throughout this initiative to support other organizations interested in enacting similar funding strategies. Public Profit used data from 2018-2022, including documents from SOWA, interviews with SOWA staff and coaches, interviews and surveys with grantees, and grantees' submitted semi-annual performance reports.

⁴ Some of the organizations did not continue throughout the entire period of the initiative. Two organizations were part of two place-based collaboratives; one organization was part of a place-based collaborative and also has a POC-led organization grant.



School's Out Washington's Role in the BSK OST Grant Investment

In spring 2017, School's Out Washington was selected by King County to be the intermediary organization for the BSK OST grant investment, and was tasked with overseeing planning, implementation, and performance measurement for the investment.

Why School's Out Washington?

SOWA is dedicated to building community systems to support quality afterschool, youth development, and summer programs for Washington's children and youth aged five through young adulthood. SOWA was well-positioned to play an intermediary role because of their experience in the expanded learning field and strong alignment of their and King County's institutional values.

SOWA has deep leadership and experience in the out-of-school time field.

With over three decades of experience supporting expanded learning programs in the state of Washington, SOWA is widely regarded as a leader in the expanded learning field within King County and throughout the state. Between 2012-2013, SOWA led a process to develop the state's first quality standards for out-of-school time programs, "Washington State Quality Standards for Afterschool and Youth Development Programs"⁵, which defined program quality in a way that afterschool and youth development programs could use to guide their continuous improvement efforts. SOWA was also a key partner in the Washington Expanded Learning Opportunities Quality Initiative (ELOQI) which ran from 2016 to 2020.⁶ The initiative aimed to provide afterschool and youth development programs with a streamlined system of supports to enable them to deliver high-quality programming. These supports include assessments, coaching, and training. SOWA adopted many of these elements in the implementation of the BSK OST grant investment.

⁵ Washington State Quality Standards for Afterschool & Youth Development Programs, retrieved from: <https://www.schoolsoutwashington.org/pages/quality-standards>

⁶ The ELOQI was a joint effort by School's Out Washington (SOWA), Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Child Care Aware (CCA), and Cultivate Learning, University of Washington.

SOWA has demonstrated institutional commitment to racial equity.

SOWA has an explicit commitment to racial equity and addressing the impact of systemic racism on young people in the state of Washington.⁷ As an organization, SOWA has been deeply involved in training, advocacy, and leadership in the racial equity space, with the goal of providing equitable access and opportunity to high-quality youth programming for all young people in Washington State.

SOWA played many roles in the BSK OST Grant Investment.

SOWA conceptualized the grant strategies in collaboration with King County.

One of SOWA's earliest roles in the BSK OST grant investment was refining the program models for the BSK OST grant strategy. Building on earlier discussions led by the Youth Development Executives of King County (YDEKC), SOWA proposed two grant strategies:



People of Color-Led Organizations

The people of color-led model focuses on strengthening program capacity and reach for culturally-responsive out-of-school time programs for, in, and by underserved communities of color. These organizations have leadership, board, and staff that are largely Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) with a primary focus to engage BIPOC youth.

"Thank you for intentionally investing in communities and organizations led by people of color." - Grantee Representative from the People of Color-Led Organization Grant Strategy



Place-Based Collaboratives

Place-based collaboratives have three or more organizations that collectively serve the same group of youth throughout the school year and during summer. Programming takes place in neighborhoods and school communities that lack sufficient access to high-quality out-of-school time programs.

"The BSK OST initiative has led our staff to develop effective partnerships with several local organizations that we might not have otherwise teamed with to best serve youth and families in the community." - Grantee Representative from the Place-Based Collaborative Grant Strategy

⁷ For more on SOWA's racial equity commitment see: <https://schoolsoutwashington.org/about-us/our-commitment-to-racial-equity/>

SOWA's commitment to equity was reflected in the flexible funding model it employed for the BSK OST grant strategy. Based on the grant strategy type, grantees were contractually obligated to serve a certain number of youth and meet dosage requirements. Beyond this requirement, **grantees could propose to use the funds in a way that made the most sense for them, such as for staffing, professional development, transportation, and program supplies.** SOWA did not impose additional requirements for how grantees could use the funding, with the exception that they could not spend more than 15% on overhead. All grantees were provided an advance payment every six months, instead of asking for reimbursements. These upfront payments were particularly pivotal at the beginning of the initiative for organizations launching new programs.

SOWA also took steps to ensure that a range of organizations applied for the funding opportunity, such as newer organizations or organizations that did not yet have an afterschool program. SOWA allowed grant applicants to self-select into one of two phases depending on their level of familiarity with the Youth Program Quality Initiative (YPQI)⁸ and the amount of support and time they would need to prepare to offer programming. Additionally, SOWA held information sessions across King County to raise awareness about the funding opportunity and provided organizations with application support.

Finally, SOWA facilitated the proposal review panel process, which consisted of 22 external community member reviewers. Reviewers maintained their focus on equity throughout the proposal review process, including completing an anti-bias training which trained them to review proposals for substance rather than whether proposals followed dominant cultural norms in grant writing. The review committee delivered funding recommendations to King County, who then made final funding decisions.



⁸ For more information see: www.schoolsoutwashington.org/pages/quality-improvement-system

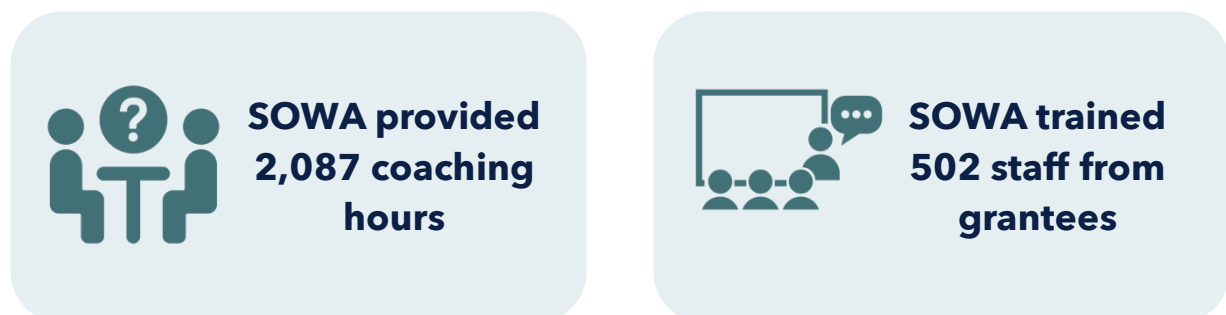
SOWA provided grantees with onboarding, quality supports, and technical assistance.

SOWA began supporting the implementation of the BSK OST grant investment in early 2018. SOWA's roles in the early stages of implementation included contracting with the organizations receiving grant funding and onboarding them to the initiative. Since the beginning of the contract period, **SOWA provided grantees with quality supports aligned with the Youth Program Quality Initiative (YPQI), including one-on-one coaching, training, program quality assessments using the Social-Emotional Learning Program Quality Assessment (SEL PQA) tool, and peer learning community meetings.** The figure below outlines how these quality improvement supports help organizations to increase youth engagement and participation and in turn, improve youth social-emotional and academic outcomes.



SOWA coaches supported each organization or collaborative with individualized coaching. Coaches supported grantees in implementing youth development practices associated with high-quality programs through individualized supports including tailored trainings, guidance in understanding the organization's SEL PQA scores, and support in action-planning.

SOWA trainings covered a range of quality, equity and capacity topics including the YPQI, SEL PQA, data-driven planning, evaluation planning, survey design, structural racism, cultural-responsiveness and transgender inclusiveness. As part of implementation, SOWA also provided on-demand technical assistance to grantees to address any issues that emerged.



Source: Total number of coaching hours provided to grantees and total number of grantee staff trained from 1/1/2018-12/31/2021 provided by SOWA. Number of staff trained the number of unduplicated individuals from grantee organizations who participated in BSK-specific trainings run by SOWA. Other trainings were offered to grantees through King County.

SOWA created and implemented performance measurement strategies for grantees.

SOWA also supported performance measurement and evaluation for the BSK OST grant investment. **SOWA collected quantitative and qualitative data from grantees on a semi-annual basis, including information about youth participation, program quality, program goals, and youth outcomes.** SOWA synthesized this information into quarterly narrative reports with qualitative data and annual reports with quantitative data which were shared with King County. An important part of performance measurement was ensuring that grantees uphold their contracted commitment to meet the minimum number of youth and dosage requirements, as well as any additional commitments that were made in each organization's individual contract and scope of work. If grantees did not meet the minimum contract deliverables, SOWA worked with them to understand why they were unable to meet the deliverables, what challenges they were facing, and how SOWA could support them. When necessary, SOWA worked with grantees to develop mitigation strategies and modify their contract scope of work.

SOWA adopted a non-punitive approach to quality improvement, recognizing that different organizations and collaboratives have different starting points and might see program quality improvement at different rates. For example, SOWA reassured grantees that SEL PQA scores would not impact funding; instead, SOWA focused on ensuring that grantees fully engaged with the YPQI process (e.g., attending trainings, engaging in coaching, completing assessments).



SOWA provided a unique combination of funding and program quality supports for organizations.

Most expanded learning grants provide financial support for organizations to expand or improve their programming. It is common for programs to receive a grant, and then report back to the funder about how the money impacted their program. Usually, there is no technical assistance or capacity support for these programs to make positive changes.

With the BSK OST grant initiative, SOWA saw an **opportunity to not only provide significant financial support, but also to embed a system of youth program quality support, capacity development, and continuous quality improvement into the support that grantees received.** This unique combination of financial support and program quality supports allowed organizations to engage more deeply in program quality work and ultimately have a stronger positive impact on their communities.

The combination of financial and quality support has also facilitated a deeper partnership between the grantee organizations and SOWA. The BSK OST grant required deep and sustained commitment from the grantees, and SOWA supported them along the way. This ongoing engagement between SOWA and grantees enabled true partnership. Within this partnership, both SOWA and the grantees gave and received feedback to each other and subsequently made aligned changes.

SOWA was very intentional with how they approached the power dynamics between a funder and a grantee. This was particularly important because SOWA was providing technical assistance and capacity support in addition to funding. SOWA staff wanted to create a container for honest communication – both so they could give grantees sincere and important feedback, and so grantees could provide SOWA feedback.



"To pair the two really accelerated the ability to have impact."

- Elizabeth Whitford, Chief Executive Officer, School's Out Washington



"When we were awarded the BSK grant [as a POC-led organization], that funding increased our organizational budget by 25 percent, yet the gains the Best Starts Out-of-School Time Initiative have reaped for our organization have been exponential. As a result of this investment, we have a strong understanding of our program strengths and weaknesses and how to grow. We are so grateful for this initiative, and it has completely transformed and affirmed our work, our capacity, and our communities."

- Grantee Representative

Sustained funding and investment were also key to supporting grantees to deeply engage in this work. **The BSK OST grant provided funding and support to grantees for three years, with the opportunity to extend another one and a half years. Thus, grantees felt secure that their program would operate and continue to be supported throughout those four and a half years.** This security enabled grantees to commit to improve program quality, engage in the technical assistance and training SOWA provided, and create effective reporting and business management systems. SOWA staff posited that the sustained funding also contributed to staff retention, as staff received the pay, training, and support they need to be motivated to stay in the field. Staff retention is an important contributor to positive youth impact, as strong and trusting relationships with adults is a major contributor to positive youth development outcomes.



SOWA demonstrated a commitment to strong relationships and equity-based practices.

SOWA demonstrated many strengths and successes as the grant maker and intermediary, including developing strong relationships between grantees and the SOWA team, committing to equitable practice, and supporting continuous quality improvement for grantees and SOWA's internal practices.

SOWA developed strong relationships with grantees, which enabled them to provide individualized support.

SOWA's practice of developing strong relationships with grantees was a key strength in its position as the intermediary for the BSK OST initiative. Both the SOWA BSK team and SOWA coaches intentionally nurtured these relationships. **The BSK team at SOWA, a group of three staff members dedicated to supporting the BSK grantees, cultivated trusting relationships with grantees through personalized and responsive communication and individualized support.** The BSK team had relationships with the grantees' staff members and was aware of the programs' unique strengths and needs, which enabled SOWA to provide individualized support.

SOWA maintained an "open-door policy" and deliberately made themselves available to grantees for support. A strong majority of grantees appreciated SOWA's availability and responsiveness, and felt comfortable approaching SOWA staff with questions, concerns, or requests for support. Because the BSK team considers itself to be a partner to grantees, not merely a funder, open communication was imperative.

In addition, all grantees reported that they developed strong relationships with their SOWA coaches, which was a fundamental component of expanding and improving grantees' programs.⁹ SOWA coaches also named their strong relationships with grantees as a core aspect of SOWA's coaching philosophy.



"Omana is somebody that has been holding my hand through this process. To me, she is someone that is there if I ever need something. She gives me the feeling that she is available and don't feel like what you're asking is too much. She gives me the sense that she's a professional but is still connected to how a grassroots organization still needs something."

- Grantee Representative



"We as an organization have tried to approach grantees in ways that are more relationship oriented, and less about strict funder-fundee models that are really rooted in whiteness and classism."

- Lex Gavin, BSK Program Quality Manager

⁹ Data from a survey administered to all grantees by Public Profit in August 2021 (n=31).

SOWA's commitment to equity was built into their work with grantees.

SOWA's organization-wide commitment to equity carried through to SOWA's involvement in the BSK OST initiative specifically. Below we highlight three equity practices SOWA enacted.

1 Viewing grantees as experts

As a part of their commitment to equity, SOWA viewed grantees as experts in their own communities and programs. Many grantees served culturally-specific populations; **SOWA recognized that grantees serving these populations have intimate knowledge of their own communities and are experts in how to best serve their youth and families.** Furthermore, SOWA understood that their grantees serve a wide range of communities within King County, and therefore a “one-size-fits-all” approach to programming would not account for the unique needs and strengths of each community. This commitment to viewing grantees as experts translated to grant practices such as allowing grantees to develop their own scope of work, programming practices, evaluation plans, and metrics of success. These practices allowed grantee organizations to use the funding and support in a way that felt aligned and valuable to their community.

“SOWA is very proactive to engage us and allow us to have the space to create the things that we believe the program services are effective and it's going to be helpful to the population that we are serving.” – Grantee Representative

SOWA coaches also perceived their role as helping grantees figure out what they want to do and how to do it, rather than acting as an authority. **They recognized that grantees are experts in their own programs and communities, and coaches are there to help the grantees make space for reflection and learning.**

“[As a coach], I am here to draw out your expertise. I see you as the expert on you, your program, and participants. My role is to help you see that in yourself. [As a coach I need to] acknowledge their strengths first.” – Youth Program Quality Coach

2

Responding to grantees' experiences and needs

One factor that contributed to SOWA's strong understanding of the OST field is its approach to hiring. **SOWA values field experience and intentionally hires staff with direct service or lived experience in out-of-school time. This experience helps SOWA staff understand the grantee experience and adjust their grant-making model accordingly.** For example, when negotiating the grant contract, SOWA leadership advocated for providing grantees with advanced payments instead of asking for reimbursements. The SOWA team knew based on their experience working in direct service that reimbursement-based strategies are huge administrative burdens to programs. Throughout the initiative, the SOWA team aimed to use their experience of working in the field to inform their grant-making strategies.

“The benefit of us working in the field and understanding the kinds of conditions and challenges that organizations face means that hopefully we come in with less judgment and more problem-solving.” - Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Systems Director

Coming into the grant period, the BSK OST grantees had different levels of experience with quality improvement, different organizational priorities, and different programmatic goals. Another way SOWA showed its commitment to equity was by being **responsive to grantees' level of experience and needs**. For example, as part of the evaluation and performance measurement plan, SOWA required all grantees to set and measure youth outcomes. To enable grantee-level customization, SOWA allowed grantees to set their own goals and determine how they measured success.

“I think the benefit [of setting our own youth outcomes] was knowing what was achievable and being in the unique situation that we were, we're not able to have some of the same goals as others. That was our biggest benefit of being able to make our own - we can tie them to our unique situation.” - Grantee Representative

Similarly, during one-on-one coaching sessions, **coaches had the ability to address grantee concerns in the moment**. While improving program quality was coaches' main focus, oftentimes grantees requested their coach's support with issues other than program quality (e.g., staff transition, administrative processes, or supporting specific youth.) Grantees appreciated SOWA's flexible coaching model, because they were able to be responsive to the topics that grantees brought to coaching meetings.

“SOWA's approach is very flexible and responsive to [grantees'] needs. We might have an idea of what we're going to do, but it is about what the needs are in the moment. Flexibility around SOWA's coaching approach is really huge.” - Youth Program Quality Coach

3

Offering equity-based trainings

As part of an ongoing commitment to equity, SOWA provided structural racism training for grantees. This training helped participants increase their understanding of structural racism and how it affects equitable outcomes for youth. SOWA also offered a transgender inclusiveness panel to provide resources and strategies for creating safe, affirming, and culturally-responsive spaces for all youth, including trans youth. The event included a panel of local trans leaders, mentors, and educators in the youth development field. Panel members shared their insights on creating organizational cultures that work against the isolation and stigmatization many trans youth face, with a particular focus on working in communities of color and religious communities.

4

Adopting a culturally-responsive approach to program quality improvement

Coaches also helped grantees interpret the Youth Program Quality Initiative (YPQI) framework and their SEL PQA assessment scores in a way that accounted for their unique cultural contexts. **SOWA coaches have both deep knowledge of the social-emotional learning (SEL) concepts that the SEL PQA measures, along with a nuanced understanding of each program's culture and context.** For example, one SOWA coach worked with a program that serves youth who are non-verbal. The SEL PQA tool is often centered around verbal communication (e.g., by assessing how the staff instruct youth to carry out activities, solve conflicts, reflect). The coach and grantee worked together to understand the underlying intent behind the items in the tool, and then identified how those practices may show up in their specific program. In this program, staff encouraged youth to use visual cues, movement, and other forms of communication to express their opinions and choices. Through coaching, the grantee redefined how PQA items and practices are implemented when working with youth who are non-verbal. This type of culturally-responsive support helps grantees continue the practices that are already working well and begin implementing new best practices to better support their youth.



I remember when we first started, we struggled with greeting the kids when they come in. We just didn't think about it as new program. I remember just sitting with our coach, and she gave us some ideas on how to greet the kids with a hug or a high five. It really made a huge difference for us and for our relationship with the students. And for the students, we just felt like it really opened the doors to the next activity, which was to share your emotions and feelings.” – Grantee Representative

SOWA is committed to continuous improvement both for grantees and for their own work.

SOWA demonstrated their commitment to continuous improvement both in the support they provide for grantees and in their own internal practices to improve their support for grantees.

SOWA supported grantees in their continuous quality improvement.

To support grantees in improving the quality of their OST youth programs and their organizations, SOWA provided tools, trainings, and individualized support through coaching.

All grantees participated in the Youth Program Quality Initiative (YPQI), including internal and external assessments using the SEL PQA tool. **The tool assists organizations in understanding the concrete practices for providing high-quality environments and program cultures that nurture social-emotional learning among youth.** Trainings introduced grantees to new ideas, practices, and frameworks that they can implement.

SOWA coaches also played an integral role in supporting grantees in their quality improvement journey. As previously mentioned, grantees set their own goals for youth outcomes and program quality, which encouraged grantees to practice setting goals and intentionally work towards them. If grantees didn't meet their goals, SOWA coaches engaged them in a discussion about setting achievable goals and possible strategies to meet them. For example, some grantees set unrealistically high goals that were hard to reach. Alternatively, some grantees underestimated their capacity and set goals that did not stretch them. In both situations, coaches were thought partners for grantees on setting and achieving goals.

While grantees were always striving for progress, there are times when measurable improvement doesn't occur. However, lack of measurable improvement on the PQA isn't always an indication of lack of progress. In these cases, coaches helped grantees reframe and contextualize their growth. For example, one coach noted that a grantee had a lot of programmatic changes and staffing transition. But through these changes, the program maintained their PQA scores in the areas of safe space and emotional support. The grantee intentionally set goals in these areas because they anticipated change.



"From the grantee perspective, the framework is continuous improvement. They identify goals, get training around aspects of those goals, and then go through a process of internal and external assessments to get an understanding of where they are in applying the learning. They work closely with coaches to analyze what the assessment data means and develop goals that build from where they are to where they want to be. It's cyclical - over and over again - with the understanding that deepening our practice and expertise takes time."

*- Omana Imani, King County
Expanded Learning Systems Director*

The coach helped the grantee to see this as a “win” – that the program staff maintained the scores amid substantial staff turnover. This mindset helped grantees maintain realistic expectations for what improvement looks like, especially in times of major programmatic shifts or transition.

Coaches also helped grantees solidify and implement their learnings from SOWA trainings. After grantees attended trainings, the coaches’ role was to help the grantees reflect on what they learned and how that information was relevant to their specific program. Coaches were also accountability partners for grantees.



I think coaching helps hold it all together. When a program goes to a training and we attend alongside them, we can deepen and accelerate the learning, asking questions like; How did go? What insights did it bring? What are you going to try? Then a few weeks later - How did what you try go? How does this impact your youth? I see them become more intentional and inspired to adapt, change, or expand what they are doing.” - Youth Program Quality Coach



Coaching provides an opportunity to revisit and think deeper about things that come up in trainings. As a coach, I check in as soon as possible after the training about main takeaways, applications, and how we are going to share that with the rest of the team, and what will be helpful for you to follow through. [I’m] there as a resource and accountability partner.” - Youth Program Quality Coach

SOWA modeled continuous improvement by improving their own processes.

While SOWA encouraged grantees to reflect and change their process, they also modeled a commitment to continuous improvement through shifting and bettering their own internal processes. **The BSK team was intentional about gathering grantees’ feedback and taking timely and responsive action accordingly. Internally, SOWA made time to reflect on what was and was not working.**

SOWA made important, impactful shifts because of their commitment to continuous quality improvement. Some grantees reported that they did not have a thorough understanding of what SOWA envisioned for their youth outcome goals and sought more guidance in setting youth outcome goals. Grantees said they would benefit from participating in group-based and one-on-one coaching on how to set and measure youth outcome goals (e.g., what tools to use for



“SOWA strives for excellence. I’m really lucky to have a team that is so dedicated and wants to see success both for the community and the grantees. We’re willing to go the extra mile and we’re also willing to fail forward. So much of this work has been about building new things, and the ability to reflect and redirect as needed. Our focus on internal CQI has been an important part of this work.”

- Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Systems Director

measurement, who participates, when to measure). Especially organizations with less staff capacity, the evaluation and reporting data requirements felt arduous. Based on feedback from grantees about the reporting process, the BSK team created a grantee reporting mechanism that was easier for grantees to navigate. The team also understood that the grantees needed additional support to collect more accurate data, so they created a reporting toolkit, updated templates, and a step-by-step video. SOWA also shifted the assessment strategy for place-based collaboratives such that collaboratives set goals and are measured collectively instead of separately.

Many grantees noted that attending the in-person trainings was challenging; they have limited staff capacity, the trainings were held at inconvenient or challenging times to travel, and attending in-person trainings minimized their time for direct service. Even before the pandemic, many grantees expressed the need for asynchronous and virtual ways to participate in training and support. In response to this feedback, SOWA revised some of the quality supports such as providing virtual trainings, altering how many coaching hours were available, and changing the location of some in-person trainings to South King County.

Throughout the grant period, SOWA aimed to be responsive to emerging needs and requests from grantees, stretching and strengthening SOWA's ability to support grantees holistically.

For example, contract monitoring visits and feedback from grantees surfaced some gaps in grantees' skills and capacity. To meet these emerging needs, SOWA provided additional capacity trainings on topics that grantees requested.

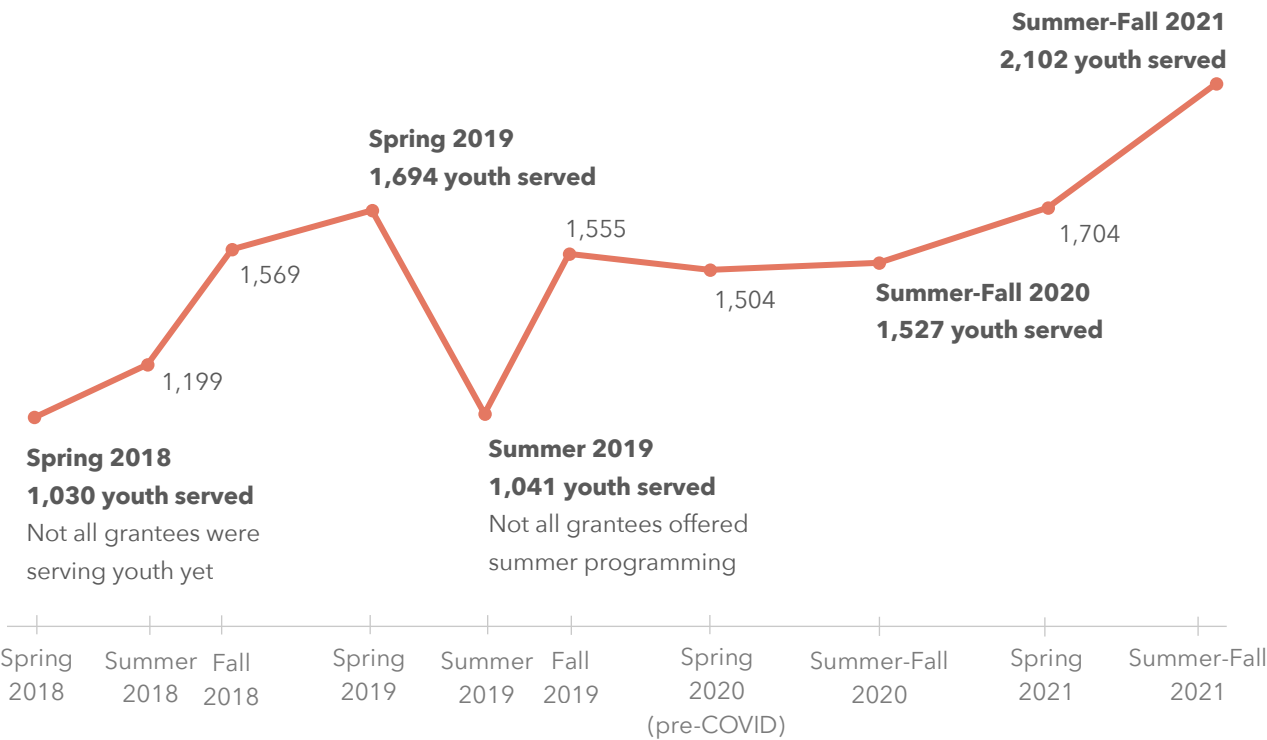
Not all of the challenges that surfaced were solved during the first iteration of the this grant. SOWA made meaningful changes to their structure and support, and SOWA plans to make additional improvements for the next cycle of the grant strategy. For example, the BSK team recognizes that the onboarding process should be more individualized. Understanding that grantees needed different types of support, the SOWA BSK team wants to create a rigorous, yet accessible, onboarding process from the very beginning of the grant engagement. For the next iteration of the grant cycle, SOWA will figure out when and how to refer grantees to other sources for capacity support that isn't within SOWA's purview.



Youth Served and BSK OST Grantee Accomplishments

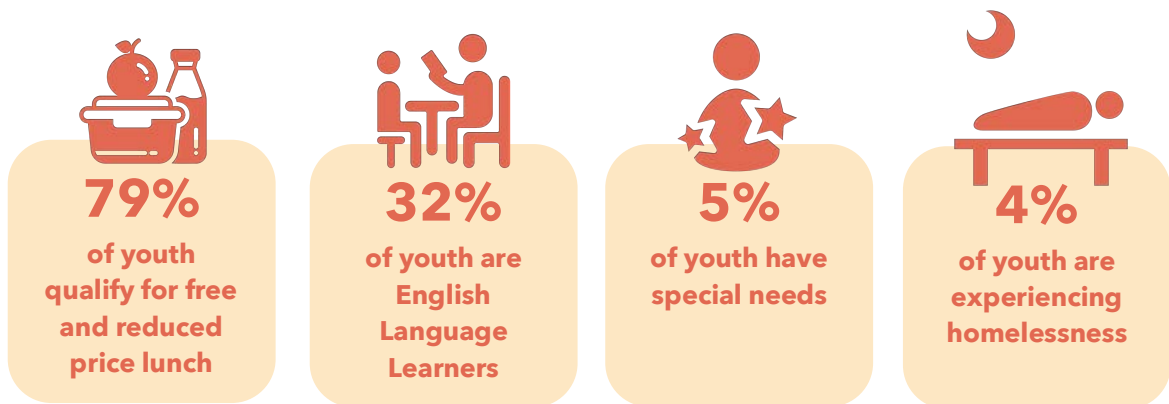
Grantees more than doubled the youth served from 2018 to 2021.

BSK OST grantees served more than 1,000 youth each fall and spring throughout the BSK initiative, integrated SEL practices into their programming, and shifted to meet community needs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. SOWA’s funding, staff, and supports were instrumental in these accomplishments.



Source: Spring 2018-Fall 2021 youth served data reported by grantees and provided by SOWA. Note: SOWA changed data collection periods over time, especially after the start of the pandemic.

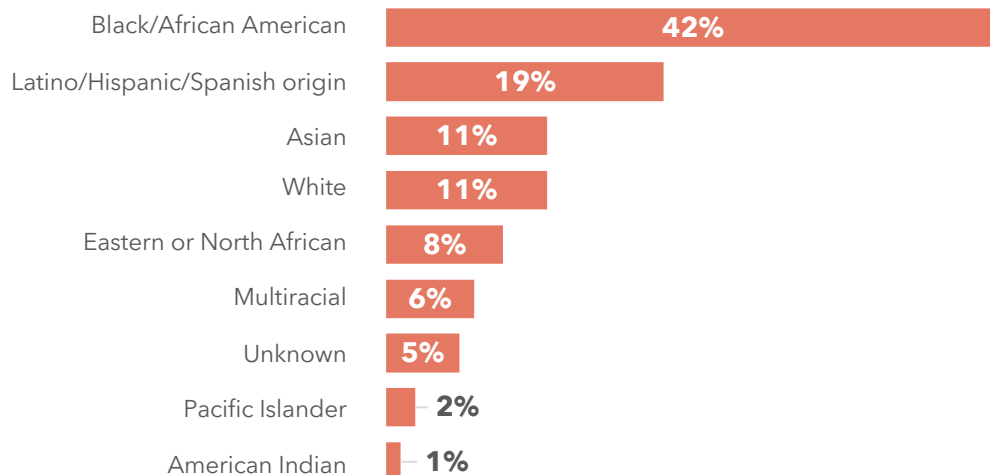
Grantees served youth most in need of supportive programming.



Grantees' programs were assessed for program quality using Social and Emotional Learning Program Quality Assessment (SEL PQA), a research-validated observational tool for assessing adult youth leader practices that support social-emotional learning. Across all grantees who received an external visit in Summer/Fall 2021, organizations' top three scales on the assessment were creating safe spaces (4.27/5.00), supporting youth interests (3.64/5.00), and fostering a growth mindset (3.63/5.00).

On the SEL PQA, grantees excelled at creating safe spaces, supporting youth interests, and fostering a growth mindset.

The majority of youth served by BSK OST grantees were youth of color.



Page sources: July 2021 youth demographics data reported by grantees and provided by SOWA; Summer/Fall external SEL PQA scores provided by SOWA.

Grantees applied social-emotional practices to their programming in diverse ways.

SOWA provided organizations with the tools and resources they need to support their participants' social-emotional learning (SEL). **Through trainings, coaching, and the Youth Program Quality Initiative (YPQI) process, SOWA helped grantees utilize SEL practices in ways most relevant to their own community and programming.** In turn, grantees integrated SEL in unique ways depending on their program. When incorporating SEL practices, some grantees shifted their programming in ways that complemented their culturally-specific programming, enriching it even further. Therefore, integrating social-emotional learning looked different for each grantee. Grantees integrated SEL into curriculum and programming focused on STEM, financial literacy, arts education and reading.

Additionally, grantees in place-based collaboratives partnered with other community-based organizations to better meet the needs of the youth and community they served. Through these partnerships, organizations collaboratively set goals around social-emotional learning. These partnerships enabled youth to access a variety of programming, exposing them to social-emotional supports in a variety of settings.



"Making time to check in and have the youth name what emotion they are feeling [has been important]. This helped remind the youth to give themselves time to reflect on how they are feeling and to sit with their emotions and name their emotions."

- Grantee Representative



"The YPQI fostered a shared vision for us and invited our team to creatively reflect on and implement strategies and best practices to ensure our youth had opportunities to lead, and that our program, staff, and facility were welcoming and continued to remain welcoming in how youth treated each other."

- Grantee Representative

SOWA supports for staff professional development created a ripple effect of support for youth and communities.

SOWA provides a range of professional development opportunities for grantee staff, including training, coaching, and the YPQI process. The combination of funding and supports enabled grantees to provide more and better programming. The BSK OST funding enabled grantees to serve more youth, enrich existing offerings, offer specialized programming, and partner with other organizations.



"A lot of our staff came to our organization with skillsets that gave them the keen ability to relate to the youth they serve, but one of the advantages of being trained in YPQI is it keeps the staff grounded and keeps the principle of 'environment' at the forefront of everyone's mind. Over the years, the YPQI has been insightful and a great resource to embed into the core of our program."

- Grantee Representative

Through a survey administered to SOWA BSK OST grantees in summer 2021, grantees described numerous ways that SOWA trainings positively impacted their program. All grantees agreed that trainings gave their staff more skills to work with youth, and directly contributed to their ability to provide a higher quality program.¹⁰ Numerous grantees also noted that trainings helped them incorporate SEL into their programming. Several grantees also noted that they benefited from connecting with the other organizations in the initiative.

“Because of our team’s participation in **SOWA trainings**, our site made a connection with other nonprofits and was able to engage and partner alongside them and learn more about their work.”
- Grantee Representative¹¹

“Because of our team’s participation in **SOWA trainings**, our site improved dramatically. Instead of running an OST program solely based on skill, we were also able to integrate SEL and provide a whole health, wellness approach.” - Grantee Representative¹¹

While trainings cover a wide set of topics, coaching has been an invaluable resource for organizations. Coaches provided support in whichever ways organizations needed. As grantees’ needs shifted over time due to staff growth, new community needs, and the COVID-19 pandemic, coaches shifted their support to meet those needs.

Over the BSK initiative, grantees continuously expressed deep appreciation for their coaches, noting that coaches were a critical piece in their ability to improve program quality and better serve their community. As part of the survey administered to SOWA BSK OST grantees in summer 2021, all grantees felt they built a strong relationship with their coach. Grantees reported that during coaching sessions, they most often discussed emotional well-being, high-quality program practices, the PQI process, equity-related topics, and sustainability.

“

“Because of our team’s participation in **coaching**, our site was able to see and handle situations through a SEL approach rather than how we’d normally handle things.”

- Grantee Representative¹¹

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“Because of our team’s participation in **coaching**, our site was able to change programming, so that it would benefit the youth that we were serving, by thinking reflectively on our practices.”

- Grantee Representative¹¹

¹⁰ Data from a survey administered to all grantees by Public Profit in August 2021 (n=31).

¹¹ Survey respondents were asked to complete the sentence “Because of our team’s participation in training, our site...”

As a result of the continued professional development SOWA provided to grantees, youth benefited as well. Staff saw their program quality improving and youth flourishing. Grantee staff reflected on their program practices, utilized data to set program quality goals, and implemented SEL practices they had never tried before. In turn, staff witnessed youth benefitting from those program improvements. Youth were more engaged in programming, expressed themselves, took opportunities to lead, and showed respect for other youth.

“Before getting involved with this collaborative through School’s Out Washington, we would just address the symptom of an issue. And if [a youth] did something, they would be removed from the program because we just looked at it as, ‘okay, you’re disruptive, we have to remove you.’ With the initiative, we really dug deeper into why this is happening. And, how can we help [the youth] cope? We can give them tools to overcome some of those things that are creating those behaviors.”
- Grantee Representative

“We paid more attention to giving students feedback and to teachable moments instead of hurrying back to continue the class content. As a result, our kids engaged more during the session, and they felt they learned more about how to respect others and how to be an effective listener.”
- Grantee Representative



During the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees shifted programming to meet community needs.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, SOWA made adjustments to the grant requirements and structure in order to best support grantees. This included offering flexible funding and reducing reporting requirements. These significant shifts enabled grantees to prioritize their community's immediate needs, which many grantees identified as basic needs and social-emotional needs. Due to SOWA's supports, grantees were able to focus on social-emotional needs of youth and provide basic needs supports to their community.

Flexible funding and adaptable reporting requirements were two of the most effective ways SOWA supported grantees during the COVID pandemic. Organizations prioritized the needs of the communities they served, and flexible funding enabled them to do so effectively. During interviews conducted with 11 BSK OST grantees during fall 2020, all interviewees said that SOWA's shift to flexible funding was critical to their programming. It allowed the program to reallocate money within their budget to where they needed it, which often included expenses they could not have predicted.

Program staff noted that SOWA's flexibility around deadlines for reporting requirements allowed them to prioritize community needs and be mindful of their own and their staff's capacity.

Grantees felt that SOWA staff consistently supported them, both as grantee organizations and as humans. They noted that SOWA staff were prompt in reaching out throughout the COVID-19 Stay Home, Stay Healthy orders. SOWA staff were also understanding of the challenges grantees faced and remained flexible when programming needed to change.

Grantees were nimble and innovative in shifting their programming. When Stay Home, Stay Healthy was first ordered and organizations had to reimagine their services, program staff highly valued community and youth voice. Organizations turned to their communities to hear what they needed in these unusual and stressful circumstances.



"The level of output that we have seen during the pandemic and how quickly organizations shifted, acting as first responders, I think is just remarkable. You look at our regular programming data, which is remarkable, the number of hours, the number of kids, and you also pair that with things like the number of basic needs supports, meals, laptops, and hotspots - things that we didn't think would need to be in a scope in this model. Also seeing the level of how deep the family engagement has been, is use another demonstration of how connected and rooted these providers are to community and family."

- Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Systems Director



"SOWA continued to be an ally and not an enemy. They continued to be lenient with us and understanding that we are doing the maximum of what we are allowed to do."

- Grantee Representative

Several grantees fielded a survey about what types of support families needed, and then used the responses to inform the development of new or modified services. Many program staff said that their program offerings have shifted throughout the pandemic, and they have frequently reassessed whether their services match current needs.

“We would just constantly try to stay flexible and roll with what's going on and just see what the community needs. And we do that through reaching out to the kids; the kids' voices are so important and their opinions matter. And what they say will kind of dictate your program. They'll tell you what they want. You'll have to create that space for them to communicate that to you.” - Grantee Representative

At the beginning of the pandemic, providing food and meal boxes was one of the main ways that grantees reached families and communities. Some organizations worked with their school district to distribute the meals that youth usually receive at school, with one organization serving over 45,000 meals by Fall 2020.

Programs emphasized supporting youth and families with their social-emotional well-being. **SOWA's training and support in integrating social-emotional learning into programming provided a crucial foundation for organizations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Program staff stated their focus during this time was to provide services and connections with youth and families focused on social and emotional support.** Whether that was creating intentional space during programming to talk with youth about their emotional status, calling caregivers to check in, or providing some much-needed fun and light-hearted activities. Some program staff noted that just being a stable presence was a top priority. Everything around youth changed due to the pandemic – their routine was disrupted, and they no longer saw their friends and supports in person. In response, many program staff from grantee organizations felt it was their role to keep showing up consistently in whatever ways they could.

“We're really just making sure that they're still receiving those social and emotional supports; that they know that they can come to a culturally relevant environment and feel safe because I think that's really important now because there's so many things out there that are unknown and scary for our kids...Especially in the beginning and now too, it was just really important to just like stabilize our young people emotionally because they're not blind or deaf to what's going on. They're watching their parents stress out. They're watching the news. They may not understand everything that's going on, but they feel the stress of it.” - Grantee Representative

During the COVID-19 pandemic, BSK OST grantees provided...

March 2020 - December 2021

In-Person Programming



16,954 hours



3,755 youth served



399 youth per day

Virtual Programming



12,728 sessions



5,366 youth served



592 youth per day

1:1 Engagement



15,830 hours



2,932 youth served



3,229 families served

Physical learning materials 10,203 youth reached



9,182
activity kits



2,523
books



1,472
laptops, tablets,
and hotspots

Food and basic needs supports 17,198 families reached



349,991
meals and food
boxes



73,501
basic needs
supplies/PPE



2,911
grocery cards



1,081
rent or utility
assistance



Recommendations for Institutions Funding and Supporting Grantees

Throughout the four and a half years of leading the BSK OST initiative, SOWA honed their approach and practice as an intermediary in supporting grantees in providing high-quality services and programming. This section outlines some recommendations for funding institutions seeking to holistically invest in organizations to maximize the impact on communities. Based on SOWA's approach, these recommendations will help institutions holistically invest in organizations, create strong relationships with grantees, and consider the role of the funder in supporting organizations to positive impact their communities.

1

Consider a dual investment of funding and quality support.

If funding institutions aim for sustained engagement and maximum impact, consider providing organizations with both funding as well as program quality and capacity support to use that funding.

SOWA found that the combination of financial support and program quality supports, like coaching and training, compounded the positive impact of the initiative. The goal was to provide the financial resources to create or support a program, backed with the necessary support to be impactful with those resources. It can be hard for programs to commit staffing resources to learning without having the financial or time capacity to do so.

In particular, the individualized coaching was consistently one of the highly valued supports. SOWA's experience with the BSK OST initiative confirmed that coaching should be a core part of the supports for grantees.

2

Articulate which types of organizations are a good fit for the initiative.

When recruiting organizations for a grant opportunity, funders should fully articulate the requirements of the engagement, as well as which types of organizations will be well-suited for the initiative. With this information, organizations can decide whether they have the staff capacity to devote to the engagement that this grant offers, or if they should expand their staff capacity.

The BSK OST initiative sought two very specific types of grantees: People of Color-Led Organizations and place-based collaboratives. In the RFP process, SOWA outlined the requirements for applying for this initiative, and the expectations and requirements that grantees can expect. SOWA learned through this first round of the initiative the importance of providing prospective organizations with as much detail as possible about what will be expected from them.

In particular, SOWA learned that the place-based partnership model introduces several challenges. Through this first iteration of the initiative, SOWA learned how to identify and articulate who this model is a good fit for, and who it is not. For example, SOWA learned that place-based partnerships work best when partners are in close proximity to one another, either in a neighborhood or a housing development. In the next iteration of the initiative, SOWA will even further articulate what types of organizations are a good fit for the place-based collaborative model.

3

Work with intermediaries for increased flexibility and focus on equity.

Especially with governmental funding, a non-governmental intermediary may be able to structure and implement an initiative differently or with more flexibility.

While the funding for the BSK OST initiative came from King County, SOWA was chosen as the intermediary to oversee planning, implementation, and performance measurement for the investment. SOWA's position as an independent entity from King County allowed for greater flexibility in how SOWA chose to implement the grant. For example, SOWA was able to provide upfront grants instead of reimbursement-based grants. Intermediaries may also provide opportunities for initiatives to be explicitly equity-focused. For example, SOWA explicitly focused on funding people of color-led organizations.

4 Hire the right people to lead the initiative.

When considering hiring someone to manage a grant or initiative, consider hiring someone with lived experience working in the kinds of programs that you're supporting.

As an intermediary and technical assistance provider, SOWA values and hires people with lived experience in the out-of-school time field. They also value people with an equity focus and people who can hold boundaries but also be adaptable. Especially for a grant initiative where the funders and grantees are in such close contact, there is a responsibility for the funder or intermediary staff to understand the power held in those roles and to not perpetuate these power dynamics steeped in white supremacy and classism. Staff with lived experience with the types of programs you're supporting will be better able to understand the challenges that grantees may be experiencing. The person in this role also must be able to hold people accountable and uphold expectations, without being authoritarian.

“[The BSK team's leader, Omana,] was a really key hire that helped make this successful as well. Anybody leading something like this has to have the ability to navigate across structures and systems and the realities of what it means to hold the power around funding. [They have to hold] a very respectful and understanding space about where programs are and what it is that they're navigating and what our goals are. I think that's a philosophy that I see in that team...You can kind of put the other components in place, but if you don't have [the right team], it might not play out the same way that it did for us.”
- Elizabeth Whitford, Chief Executive Officer, School's Out Washington

5 Focus on creating an authentic partnership with grantees.

Funder-grantee relationships can be saturated with power dynamics. Intentionally creating authentic partnerships between funders and grantees can alleviate these dynamics that are often steeped in white supremacy culture.

SOWA staff recommend that creating an authentic partnership should start with education and individual reflection around systemic oppression and understanding the way power dynamics can show up in a funder-grantee relationship. Then, when structuring and implementing the grant initiative, make time for relationship building with grantees. When building these relationships, consider how the funder and fundee align in their lived experience, professional experience, gender, race/ethnicity, and other factors that might impact trust.

6

Commit to your own organization's continuous quality improvement.

Especially for funding institutions supporting grantees with their own continuous quality improvement cycle, it is imperative that your organization commit to receiving feedback and implementing changes to improve your support for grantees.

SOWA's commitment to soliciting and implementing feedback was one critical way that SOWA was able to form such strong relationships with grantees. SOWA recommends asking grantees about their thoughts and experiences with certain procedures or processes. For example, SOWA frequently checked in with grantees about the reporting process; they asked about what challenges the grantees had and how they could make the process easier and more efficient. In response to grantee feedback, SOWA changed the report form and provided more support. Inevitably, there are times when grantees will have feedback about the grant that cannot be changed. When this happens, it's important that the funder communicate with the grantee why they cannot make certain changes.

“

We really have been geared towards learning and implementing those changes in real time.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Systems Director

7

Allow grantees to determine their own measures of success.

If your funding institution is committed to equity, consider implementing grant practices such as allowing grantees to outline their own scope of work, evaluation plans, and measures of success.

SOWA's commitment to equity was reflected in the flexible funding model it employed for the BSK OST grant strategy. Most grantees that were a part of the BSK OST initiative served very specific communities – either a culturally-specific or neighborhood-specific community. These organizations are embedded within these cultures or neighborhoods, and they know the youth and families they serve. SOWA values grantees' expertise within their communities, which was reflected in their grant practices.