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PUC SCHOOLS

Building and Maintaining Successful Community Partnerships

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INFORMATION ABOUT THIS TOOL

This case provides insight into the community outreach efforts in place at Partnerships to Uplift Communities (PUC Schools). PUC Schools invests heavily in community outreach and has built a wide range of community partnerships to support the start-up and ongoing operations of their schools.

This case study was prepared by FSG Social Impact Advisors. FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm that provides guidance to foundations, corporations, nonprofits, and other public sector entities on issues of strategy, evaluation, and operations. FSG was commissioned by NewSchools Venture Fund to document “best practices” of portfolio ventures in a format that could be shared across the NewSchools portfolio. To complete this case study, FSG conducted background research on PUC Schools and interviewed Jackie Elliot, PUC’s Co-CEO and Co-Founder; Leslie Chang, Assistant Principal of CALS Middle School, a PUC School; and Maureen Rubin, Director of Undergraduate Studies at California State University—Northridge. Misha Simmonds of NewSchools Venture Fund provided additional context on PUC Schools.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

We hope that reading this case study sparks conversations about how the practices highlighted here relate to your own organization. To help facilitate that process, we have developed the questions below to help guide these discussions. We encourage you to keep them in mind as you read through the case study and to refer back to them as your organization reflects on the case study’s implications for your own organization.

1. Is working with groups and organizations throughout your community an explicit part of your organization’s model?
2. What are your primary organizational needs? How can your community outreach efforts help address these needs?
3. Who are the most important stakeholders in your community? Who are your key allies?
4. Who within your organization is responsible for community outreach efforts? Are these responsibilities included in his/her performance reviews?
5. Do you have systems and metrics that you use to track and maintain the progress and status of these relationships?

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Schools are an integral part of the communities in which they operate, and as such, they are heavily impacted by the people and organizations that surround them. When opening and operating schools, charter school management organizations (CMOs) inevitably have a high degree of interaction with community stakeholders, and the success or failure of a school is often directly related to the ways in which charter schools and their parent organizations engage with these stakeholders. Building positive community relations can have many benefits for a CMO, such as identifying facilities, boosting student enrollment, and creating access to valuable resources such as volunteers or recreational spaces.

While most CMOs and charter schools recognize the importance of strong community ties, they don't always know how best to go about the process of building these relationships. Efforts are often haphazard and reactive, rather than strategic and proactive. As a result, most CMOs could utilize staff and financial resources more efficiently and effectively to build stronger, more sustainable partnerships. The following case study profiles the successful community outreach efforts of Partnerships to Uplift Communities Schools (PUC Schools), a Los Angeles-based CMO that invests heavily in community outreach and has built a wide range of community partnerships to support the start-up and ongoing operation of their schools. The community outreach efforts profiled in this case include informal efforts to build community goodwill through relationships with local residents and neighborhood councils, as well as more formal alliances with organizations geared toward meeting specific needs, such as facilities or instructional support.

PUC Background

PUC Schools was formed in 2003 as a partnership between Jackie Elliot and Ref Rodriguez, two longtime educators and charter school principals who shared a vision for providing high-quality educational opportunities for low-income youth in the Los Angeles area. PUC's mission reads "*We aim to develop and manage high-quality charter schools in densely populated urban communities with overcrowded and low-achieving schools. We create school programs and cultures that result in college graduation for all students. We focus on developing secondary schools partnered with strong feeder elementary programs. We uplift and revitalize communities through the development of educational and other supportive partnerships.*"¹

PUC currently operates seven charter schools in Northeast Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley, including one elementary school, four middle schools, and two high schools, serving more than 1,300 students. About 96 percent of PUC's students are Latino and 83 percent qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch.

¹ PUC Schools' Web site <http://www.pucschools.org>

Community Outreach Efforts at PUC

Working from within the community is an explicit focus of PUC's model, and is grounded in the vision and background of the organization's leaders. Co-founder/Co-CEO Ref Rodriguez grew up in Northeast Los Angeles, where several PUC schools are located, and PUC's other Co-Founder/Co-CEO Jackie Elliot spent more than 20 years working as a teacher and administrator in Los Angeles' public schools. Rodriguez and Elliott not only have deep ties to the community – they also have a firm belief in the importance of relationships and the power of community-building. PUC partners with a wide range of organizations and individuals, including colleges, local parks, neighborhood councils, schools, parents, and community members. These relationships fulfill needs such as facilities, transportation, student recruitment, academic program, and parent involvement (see Toolkit for *Summary of PUC's Community Partnerships*.)

IMPLEMENTATION OF PUC'S COMMUNITY OUTREACH EFFORTS

Laying the Groundwork: Grassroots Efforts to Build Community Goodwill

An integral part of PUC's community outreach work involves getting to know the communities in which their schools operate, and forming strong ties with stakeholders in those communities. Before opening each new school, PUC staff spend time walking through the neighborhood, organizing community meetings, knocking on doors, and handing out flyers about the school they plan to open. The goal is to not only raise awareness about the school, but also to gain insight into the kinds of issues and concerns that neighbors may have. They do this in order to proactively address any potential roadblocks, and to ensure that they have the buy-in and support they need to successfully move forward with opening the school.

One of the things that makes this work well is PUC's community-centered approach. PUC enlists parents, students, principals, and residents with whom they already have a relationship to do this door-to-door work and to help organize community meetings. This helps build buy-in with local community members because it sends the message that PUC already has a positive track record in the neighborhood. These grassroots efforts to build community goodwill are instrumental to the success of PUC's overall community outreach strategy and help lay the groundwork for many of their more formal partnerships.

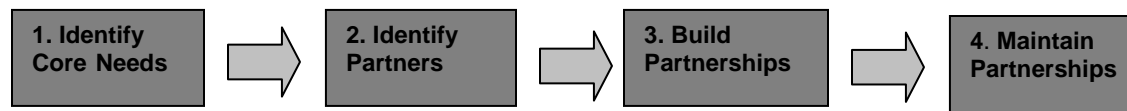
First and foremost, you have to be a good neighbor. You want to be respected by and familiar with members of the community. In the neighborhoods in which we open schools, we make sure we meet the people who live near the school and that our staff understands that certain things like parking that blocks them could be an issue — be respectful of the neighborhood folks.

- Jackie Elliot, Co-CEO, PUC Schools

Building Formal Partnerships

While the grassroots efforts described above are fairly organic, PUC's approach to building and maintaining more formal partnerships is well-structured. There are four basic steps that are integral to the establishment and management of each such relationship:

Key Steps for Partnership Development and Sustainability



Step 1: Identify Core Needs

PUC's partnerships are designed to address a very specific set of core needs related to the start-up and ongoing operation of their schools. While not all of PUC's partnerships fall into these specific categories, having a clear focus on their primary needs helps guide how they invest their time and resources.

PUC has identified the following two areas as core needs and has targeted their relationship-building efforts accordingly.

- **Facilities.** Getting buildings approved and opened
- **Academic Program.** Identifying resources to enhance teaching and learning

Facilities

Many of PUC's partnerships revolve around the acquisition and development of facilities. They think about the need for facilities in a broad way, not just in terms of classroom space. When Elliot – who heads up new site development and community relations efforts – thinks about what will be required to open a new school in terms of space, she looks at a number of factors, such as what support will be needed to address zoning issues or where to find space for graduation. PUC then seeks out partners to address each of these needs. For example, PUC is currently developing a new facility for 1,000 students in Lakeview Terrace, a quiet residential neighborhood. The building that will house the school is a former medical building, which means they need to apply for a conditional-use permit in order to convert it to a school. In order to acquire the permit they must build good relationships with neighbors, who may otherwise voice complaints at planning meetings and derail PUC's efforts.

I look to see if the facility will accommodate all of our programmatic needs. For example, is there space for lunch? Is there space for PE? Is there space for meetings? Is there temporary space to use for classes while the permanent facility is getting ready? Is there space for computer labs? If not, we seek partners to fulfill those needs.

- Jackie Elliot, Co-CEO, PUC

Other facilities-related partnerships have been built around finding temporary space to house students while a permanent facility is being completed. One of PUC's strongest relationships is with California State University—Northridge (CSUN), which began when one of PUC's first schools, Community Charter Middle School, needed to find temporary space. Elliott persuaded the Dean of CSUN's College of Education to accommodate the PUC students on campus for a few weeks and subsequently turned that relationship into a valuable ongoing partnership (see below).

Academic Program

PUC also has a number of partnerships that support and enhance its academic program. The CSUN relationship is one example of this. What began as a solution to a short-term facilities problem has since evolved into a multi-faceted partnership that enriches the teaching and learning environment at PUC schools. CSUN now hosts incoming PUC 6th graders on campus each summer to expose them to college, has been a source of mentors and tutors, and has also provided physical education, computer training, journalism, photography, and arts courses for PUC middle school students.

Another important way in which CSUN supports PUC's academic program is by offering concurrent enrollment courses for PUC high school students. As part of PUC's Early College High School (ECHS) program, students can enroll in college courses beginning in their junior year, which allows them to earn college credits and gain firsthand exposure to the college experience while still in high school. Some of these courses are taught by CSUN faculty. PUC has formed similar partnerships with other community colleges, including the Los Angeles Trade Technical College (LATTC), Los Angeles Mission College, LA City College, and Pasadena City College.

Step 2: Identify Partners

In addition to ensuring that partners fulfill a core organizational need, PUC staff is careful to identify partnerships in which there is a clear mutual benefit. The PUC team feels this is important in terms of building relationships that will be sustainable over time. An example of this is their relationship with Los Angeles Mission College. PUC approached the college about participating in the Early College High School program and learned that the college faced space constraints. As Elliott describes, *"We immediately told them that we had several middle schools and that they could hold classes at the middle schools in the evenings. They now hold classes in one of our middle schools several nights a week. In exchange, they offer lots of slots for our kids to take classes, send instructors to our sites to enroll our students, and they even teach some of the courses on our site. This has turned into a very good mutual relationship."*

PUC also thinks creatively and broadly about what kinds of partners to pursue in terms of the potential for sustainability and access to resources. In this way, higher education institutions make excellent partners for CMOs like PUC, because they can provide support in many different ways. They also typically have the infrastructure in place to maintain such a partnership over time, such as CSUN does with its Department of Service Learning, which has dedicated staff that can coordinate volunteers or fulfill requests for classroom space (see Toolkit for *CSUN Community Partner Guide*). In addition, service learning coordinators on college campuses often spend a lot of time seeking out nonprofits and other groups, so they are typically highly receptive to organizations who proactively reach out to them.

Colleges and universities are so valuable on so many levels, such as college visits, use of facilities, attending exhibits and shows, service learning opportunities and participating in science programs. I'm always amazed that every school doesn't take advantage of the resources that colleges offer. They are not as widely used partners as they should be.

- Jackie Elliott, Co-CEO, PUC Schools

Step 3: Build Partnerships

Building successful partnerships requires a clear, shared vision for the partnership and the capacity to work closely with partners on an ongoing basis.

Building Internal Capacity

Since community outreach is a high priority for PUC, the organization has dedicated significant staff resources to this function. Elliott and Rodriguez recently restructured their roles to enable Elliott to devote more of her time to this arena, and she now spends approximately 40 percent of her time on community outreach efforts. There are also three full-time staff members in PUC's headquarters who are dedicated to new site development, an activity that is primarily centered on building and maintaining community ties. PUC principals are also actively involved in these community-building efforts. For example, the Principal and Assistant Principal at California Academy for Liberal Studies (CALs) Middle School participate in monthly meetings hosted by Occidental College's Center for Community Based Learning in order to network with other schools and community groups, and to strategize about how to effectively engage community stakeholders. In addition,

When we attend neighborhood council meetings, the people who will be allies will introduce themselves to us and ask how they can help. The ones who are going to object usually surface too. Build a relationship with the allies and then use their advice to help deal with the issues that arise and the opponents. We get input into strategy and relationship building from these allies — they know the players, they can speak to them, and they can help get votes. Find your allies early on.

- Jackie Elliot, Co-CEO, PUC Schools

Principals are central to our community building work. They walk the streets with me and go to meetings with me. Once a Principal is hired, we engage him or her right away in reaching out to the community.

- Jackie Elliot, Co-CEO, PUC

these school leaders work closely with parents to involve them in community outreach efforts, such as speaking on behalf of CALs at local events and sharing their experiences with other parents in the community. PUC principals also attend neighborhood meetings, participate in weekly discussions about PUC's current and future community engagement activities, and hand out flyers to families to promote PUC's efforts. Elliott is in regular touch with PUC's principals to discuss partnership needs, and principals have an informal network through which they share community resources and opportunities.

Building External Capacity

In addition to dedicating staff resources to community outreach, PUC also strives to enlist the support of key allies in the neighborhoods in which the organization works. When they are in the process of opening a new school, PUC staff will attend neighborhood community council or improvement meetings to identify supporters and cultivate relationships with individuals who can help them navigate issues, such as getting zoning permits for a facility.

Recently, when we were trying to get approval on a building for a new school site, one supporter came to a planning committee and said, "I have lived across the street from that building for 47 years and this will be the best use that this building has ever had. This is the best thing that has ever happened to this neighborhood." We enlisted that person right away to attend meetings and speak on our behalf.

- Jackie Elliot, Co-Founder, PUC

Garnering the support of neighbors can make a big difference. PUC learned this lesson the hard way when it pushed through a zoning requirement that neighbors opposed – without engaging community members in the decision. While they could legally do this without neighborhood approval, the response was immediate and highly negative. Neighbors called City Hall to complain, which raised many issues for the school. PUC staff is now much more proactive about cultivating allies from the outset.

Making a Specific Pitch

Another important factor in building successful partnerships is the ability to make a specific, targeted request of prospective partners, and one that is mutually beneficial to both parties. Individuals and organizations will be much more likely to want to engage if they have a clear understanding of what is being asked of them, particularly if the request is aligned with their needs and the resources they can offer. For example, when PUC approached CSUN about participating in the Early College High School program, they had a unique and very specific role for the university to play, which was much more compelling than a generic request for academic support. Maureen Rubin, CSUN's Director of Undergraduate Studies and a key ally in forming the relationship with PUC, emphasizes the importance of making a directed request when approaching prospective partners: *"Don't ever just say 'send us students.' Be specific and be creative and think about what the university will get out of it."* She also recommends going in with a contingency plan in case the initial request is not a match.

Step 4: Maintain Partnerships

Successful community outreach is not just about building support, but also ensuring that such support is sustainable over time. One of PUC's core strengths is the way in which it reinforces partnerships by recognizing and supporting its allies in meaningful ways. For example, PUC formed a relationship with a local park near one of its middle schools. The school is highly space constrained, so it serves students lunch in the park and holds meetings in the park's gymnasium. In an effort to express the middle school's appreciation and cultivate goodwill, the principal arranged for students to sand and refinish all of the play equipment in the park and paint trash cans as a community service project. On another occasion, the principal presented the Director of Parks and Recreation with a framed poster of art by his favorite artist. These gestures went a long way towards solidifying the relationship and even resulted in a fee waiver for use of the park.

*Whatever you can do to show respect helps.
Little things can mean a lot in maintaining
these relationships.*

- Jackie Elliot, Co-CEO, PUC Schools

Building community partnerships comes naturally to the PUC's leaders and is done as a matter of course. However, they have not yet put in place a good system for tracking and cultivating these partnerships. They recognize the value in this and plan to do so, particularly as the number and complexity of relationships expand.

ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNED

- ***Build partnerships around core organizational needs.*** Determine up front what your primary organizational needs are and use these to drive your selection of potential partners.
- ***Build partnerships with clear mutual benefits.*** Take the time to understand how you can help your partner meet their own goals, in addition to your own organization's objectives.
- ***Think creatively and broadly about whom to partner with.*** Focus on partners that can offer a variety of resources and those with the infrastructure to support an ongoing commitment.
- ***Identify dedicated staff resources to build and maintain relationships.*** Be explicit about who within your organization will be responsible for community outreach efforts and build this into job descriptions and performance reviews.
- ***Enlist the support of key allies.*** Look outside of your organization to identify well-connected supporters who can help build goodwill in the community.
- ***Make a specific pitch to prospective partners, but have a contingency plan in mind.*** Do not make a generic "ask," but be targeted in your request.
- ***Reinforce partnerships on an ongoing basis.*** Find creative ways to acknowledge partners that reinforce the sense of reciprocity.
- ***Develop systems to track and maintain relationships.*** PUC is highly relationship-based and operates organically in its approach to community outreach, but having some systems in place to keep track of and manage relationships can prove extremely helpful.

PUC COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TOOLKIT

Toolkit Contents

- **PUC Partnerships Chart (FSG-Synthesized Document)**

Additional Document (Available Separately)

- **California State University-Northridge (CSUN) Community Partner Guide (CSUN Document)**
<http://www.newschools.org/files/PUCComm-A.pdf>

SUMMARY OF PUC'S COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Partner	Need Met	Description
California State University–Northridge	Academic Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participates in Early College High School Program • Hosts 6th graders for “college experience” summer program • Past courses taught to middle school students in computer training and arts
Fenton Charter Elementary School	Student Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages students to apply to PUC middle school and hands out applications
Laidlaw	Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided buses for first few weeks of school to one PUC campus
Las Palmas Park	Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides lunch and recreation space • Makes meeting space available in gymnasium
Los Angeles Mission College	Academic Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participates in Early College High School Program
Los Angeles Trade Technical College	Academic Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participates in Early College High School Program
Masonic Lodge	Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides meeting space
Neighborhood Community Councils	Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide support for getting zoning and permitting issues approved
Occidental College	Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinates and facilitates community engagement initiative
Pasadena City College	Academic Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participates in Early College High School Program