GrantSpace - Collaboration Hub

Alabama School Readiness Alliance

Participating Organizations

- VOICES for Alabama's Children, Montgomery, AL
- A+ Education Partnership, Montgomery, AL
- Alabama Partnership for Children, Montgomery, AL

Please note that all data below was derived from the collaboration's nomination for the Collaboration Prize. None of the submitted data were independently verified for accuracy.

Formation

Type of Collaboration: Joint Programming to launch and manage one or more programs
Geographic Scope: State
Collaboration Focus Area: Education
Population Served: Children and Youth
Year Collaboration was Established: 2006
Goals Sought Through Collaboration:

- Develop a stronger / more effective "voice"
- Expand reach and/or range of services / programs
- Leverage complementary strengths and/or assets

Reasons Prompting Collaboration:

- Advancement of a shared goal
- Response to a community need
- Response to a funding opportunity

Who Initiated Collaboration: Executive Director(s) / CEO(s) / President(s)
Number of Participating Organizations: 3-4
Nature of Funder Involvement:

- Suggested / encouraged the collaboration
- Funded implementation

Were Partners Added or Dropped?: No
The Alabama School Readiness Alliance (ASRA) was founded in 2006 by four statewide nonprofit organizations to promote the expansion of high-quality, voluntary pre-K programs for Alabama’s children and support the work of the state Office of School Readiness. Although there were 60 state funded pre-K sites at the time, less than 2% of Alabama children were being served by those programs. This unmet need, combined with a supportive political and policy landscape, indicated an opportunity to expand Alabama’s investment in quality pre-K programs that result in school success and close achievement gaps. ASRA represents a unique partnership of education and advocacy organizations and Alabama’s philanthropic sector; ASRA partners are VOICES for Alabama’s Children, A+ Education Partnership, and Alabama Partnership for Children, three statewide organizations dedicated to advocacy of education and children’s issues and Alabama Giving, a grantmaker network representing Alabama’s largest and most active funders.

Seeking an opportunity for collaboration, Alabama Giving (AG) members met in 2005 to identify the greatest need facing Alabama residents that could benefit from a collaborative focus by foundations. After meeting with various organizations and much discussion and research, AG identified school readiness as an area of primary interest and pursued a partnership with A+, VOICES, and APC. Concurrent with the founding of ASRA was a push from Pre-K Now, an organization funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, to provide support for state level advocacy of pre-K.

Key to the success of ASRA was allowing ample time for planning and the formation of trust among partners early on. Partners spent almost a year in discussion and development of key organizational documents before officially forming ASRA, ensuring that partners had well-defined roles and fostering an inclusive participation structure that respected all partners’ individual needs.

Management

Management Structure: One Executive Director / CEO / President

Through several meetings, ASRA partners collectively decided that they would direct the primary work of ASRA, with VOICES acting as the fiduciary agent and initially housing the collaboration. Originally, ASRA was jointly managed by the executive directors of each partner organization, and a coordinator handled routine operations. After this initial period, the partners decided that ASRA required an executive director to provide needed leadership and manage ASRA more independently from the other workings of partner organizations.

Under the leadership of a strong executive director, ASRA became more independent and less reliant on assistance from partners for day to day management. This strengthened ASRA and also reduced expenses as compensation to the partners for extra assistance was no longer required. By hiring a tenured professional, the founding partners and board members are now a source of guidance on governance and policy issues, rather than assisting with routine operations.

As with all decisions, changes in management occurred through a methodical, yet spirited, decision making process involving the partners. As explained in the organizational documents, all decisions are made in an atmosphere of mutual benefit through open communication and consensus building. Only when unanimous agreement can not be achieved is majority rule relied upon. Partners meet quarterly for board meetings, hold monthly conference calls, and attend a yearly planning retreat to develop work plans and review goals and grant opportunities.

Challenges

Challenges to Making the Collaboration Work:

- Clarifying partner roles
- Leading and / or managing the collaboration
- Internal and external communication
- Accepting change

Since its inception, ASRA has expected and applauded open, direct communication and differences of opinion. This willingness to be forthright, especially during conflict, has proven to be an important asset to the collaboration, as it ensures issues are addressed immediately. Requiring honest communication, as well as consensus building when making decisions, has been essential to addressing ASRA’s challenges.

 Differences of opinion can sometimes be detrimental to collaboration; however, ASRA has chosen to capitalize on the diverse strengths of each partner, a technique which has helped to quell conflicts over leadership and perceptions of power within the collaboration. By partnering as equals, ASRA is better able to utilize the diverse strengths of each organization to reach its goals.

Impact
Internal Efficiencies and Effectiveness:

- Fund development - Access to new / more sources of funding
- Improved marketing and communications, public relations and outreach - Improved marketing and communications, public relations and outreach

Community Impact:

- Increase in number of clients / individuals / organizations served
- Stronger / more effective "voice"

Since its inception in 2006, ASRA has worked to support high-quality, voluntary pre-K programs and close gaps in student achievement by helping children enter school ready to succeed. One of the greatest impacts of ASRA’s efforts has been a four-fold increase in the amount of public funding, from $4,326,050 in 2005 to $18,376,806 in 2010, for the state funded pre-K program. In addition, ASRA has worked to grow public awareness and support for pre-k, a necessity if public funding is to increase. Over four years, ASRA has built a network of organizations, businesses, and individuals that publicly support the expansion of quality pre-K programs. ASRA has celebrated the growth of pre-k funding through public forums and press releases, and this issue has received extensive media attention. Results from a 2010 ASRA voter poll indicate strong belief among residents in the importance of pre-k for children and broad support for its expansion.

ASRA not only provides a public benefit by helping to grow pre-K but the collaborative experience has proved to be advantageous for partners in their individual efforts. The ASRA partnership has prompted a more efficient use of resources as organizations now conduct some joint operations, such as periodically holding joint meetings and partnering to apply for grants with a shared application. ASRA has also learned that collaboration on one issue breeds further cooperative efforts; through working together for pre-k, ASRA partners have strengthened their ties and now collaborate on other mutual concerns. The visibility of ASRA has also helped individual partners develop working relationships with other organizations, like the Business Council of Alabama and community foundations in particular, that prove beneficial in other efforts.

Model

ASRA partners learned an important lesson that applies to much of the collaborative work done by nonprofits today. In order for ASRA to be effective, each organization realized that individually they could not all be advocates for pre-k. In order to achieve substantial change, pre-k expansion needed one message, one voice which could be achieved most effectively by channeling the efforts of individual organizations through ASRA. Similarly, ASRA is proof that giving up of some organizational independence can yield big results for our goals, although not necessarily big recognition for individual organizations. By presenting a powerful united front on the issue of pre-K, ASRA partners were able to leverage resources, both public and philanthropic funding, to achieve impact beyond what they might expect through isolated grants or individual nonprofit efforts.

Efficiencies Achieved
While the Alabama School Readiness Alliance was not developed primarily as a means to promote economic and operating efficiencies between the partner organizations, the relationships formed through this effort have allowed ASRA to grow its capacity and influence in a cost-effective way. In addition to sharing some overhead costs, ASRA works with collaboration partners to split other expenses that help ASRA achieve its mission to support high-quality pre-K programs and close gaps in student achievement.

Cost prohibitive for a single organization of its size, ASRA works with partner organization VOICES to share the cost of governmental relations consultant who spearheaded ASRA’s efforts to develop relationships with state agencies and members of the Alabama Legislature. ASRA could not afford this expense on its own, yet having a professional governmental relations consultant has been an essential part of ASRA’s strategy and extremely helpful in developing its partnership with the State Department of Education and a continuing and growing relationship with the Alabama Department of Children's Affairs. Furthermore, the consultant will be essential in building relationships with the new governor’s administration to ensure previous gains in the area of pre-K are not lost.

ASRA partner organizations also assist in the development of additional relationships that further the work of the organization. Through its work with A+ Education Partnership, ASRA has forged a partnership with the Alabama Association of School Boards. Although traditionally focused on K-12 education, the Alabama Association of School Boards has recognized the importance of pre-K to improving overall educational outcomes for children. In conjunction with ASRA, the Association of School Boards hosted conference sessions and nine regional training meetings on pre-K, reaching 750 school board members and superintendents across Alabama. Additionally, ASRA has worked with partner organization APC to reach out to the business community, creating important relationships which benefit both APC and ASRA. Working with the Business Council of Alabama, the Partnership for America’s Economic Success, and partner organization APC, ASRA hosted four regional and two statewide Business Leader Summits. These events help to build awareness and support for pre-K with business leaders and in local communities throughout the state.

Three of the ASRA partner organizations have similar missions which could put them in competition for funding; however, these organizations are committed to the work of ASRA and have found ways to collaborate that increase revenue in support of the pre-K effort. In a recent example, rather than forcing ASRA and partner organization APC to compete against each other for funding from a corporate funder interested in early childhood issues, the two organizations worked together on a joint request in which a portion of the grant award was earmarked to support the work of ASRA. Moreover, by working together and developing one effort to provide high-quality pre-K in Alabama, ASRA was able to garner support from foundations from across the state of Alabama and leverage the financial resources of Alabama grantmakers to bring in national funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts and Pre-K Now.

The Alabama School Readiness Alliance was started to promote the expansion of high-quality, voluntary pre-K programs for Alabama’s children, and the collaborative work of VOICES for Alabama’s Children, A+ Education Partnership, Alabama Partnership for Children, and Alabama Giving through ASRA has yielded significant benefits for children in Alabama. One of the tangible benefits of ASRA’s work has been a four-fold increase in state funding for pre-K programs. Furthermore, the number of classrooms for Alabama’s state funded pre-K program, First Class, has increased from 57 in 2005 to 215 in 2010, meaning that more of Alabama’s four-year olds now have access to high-quality pre-K. This increase in public funding and the growing number of pre-K classrooms, even during the economic downturn, is evidence that ASRA’s efforts have yielded a real commitment from Alabama to provide opportunities for high-quality pre-K for children in this state.

**Evolution**
An equal relationship and continuing involvement of all collaboration partners in the management of ASRA is key to the success of the organization. Each partner organization has representation on the board of directors, and they hold monthly conference calls to keep all partners up-to-date on the work of ASRA. Regular communications among all partners helps to ensure that any issues are addressed immediately and also makes partners more sensitive to the agendas of other partner organizations. Most importantly, partnering as equals has helped ASRA to utilize the unique expertise, strengths, and outside connections that each organization brings to the effort.

Unique to this collaboration and its management is the inclusion of foundation partners as more than just funders. Alabama Giving member foundations support the collaboration financially, but they are involved in the operational and program aspects of ASRA as well. ASRA’s eight-person board includes three representatives from Alabama Giving, and the entire Alabama Giving membership receives periodic updates on the status of ASRA’s work along with information about opportunities to get involved.

Recently, ASRA has made some changes to the composition of its board of directors that will help to ensure the future success of its work. Previously, the board of directors consisted of representatives from the partner organizations only – the children’s and education organizations and Alabama Giving foundation members. ASRA partner organizations decided that ASRA could further expand its reach by growing its board to include outside members with different backgrounds and skills. The eight-person board now includes two representatives from the business community, in addition to the original grantmaker and nonprofit partners.

ASRA has made tremendous achievements in terms of raising awareness about pre-K and increasing state funding for pre-K in Alabama. However, with three partner organizations working in the areas of early childhood issues and education, ASRA is constantly faced with the question – why should our organization exist? Why start a new effort when each partner organization could run its own pre-K awareness campaign? This challenge has been overcome by capitalizing on the variety of skills, connections, and areas of expertise that each organization brings to the table. Furthermore, by working together to develop one message, rather than each organization constructing its own pre-K campaign, ASRA has successfully leveraged resources, including both public and philanthropic funding, beyond what one organization could do on its own or what several organizations could achieve when competing for resources. Alabama now invests over $18 million in pre-K, and there are 158 more pre-K classrooms available to 4-year olds in Alabama than when the partners began to examine this issue four years ago.

The success of the ASRA collaboration is not determined by its ongoing existence. In fact, in an effort to be good stewards of resources, ASRA evaluates the need for its existence each year. The real measure of ASRA’s success is the extent to which it lives up to its mission and helps to provide high-quality pre-K for children in Alabama and closes achievement gaps.

The Alabama School Readiness Alliance is a good candidate for The Collaboration Prize because it brings together a unique set of partners and continues to grow its network of pre-K supporters. Including a grantmaker network in a collaborative effort of this type is rare, especially when the foundations take such active roles as that assumed by the Alabama Giving representatives. Additionally, the ASRA partnership includes three other organizations with similar missions and interests. While these groups seem to be a natural fit for collaborative work, successful partnerships rarely include such similar organizations. Most partnerships bring together organizations working on different issues or to help fill needs within an existing agency or program; however, the partners have managed to balance their interests in a way that strengthens ASRA. Moreover, ASRA continues to seek out opportunities to build relationships with others in different sectors, including the business community and public school officials, creating a diverse network of supporters for providing high-quality pre-K for children in Alabama.