Best Starts for Kids: Exploring Equitable School Partnerships

Year 1 Final Report | January 15, 2020

Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

King County's Best Starts for Kids (BSK) has invested in School Partnership (SP) strategies so that "School environments are safe, supportive, respectful and engaging environments for young people, staff and families. Race, ethnicity or cultural identity does not impact access to these environments."

Equitable partnerships are critical to the success of these strategies. This report is a snapshot **of how partnerships are forming, the changes partnerships seek to make, and what schools, districts, community-based organizations (CBOs), and King County staff can do to support their continued growth**. The report is based on evaluation activities conducted during the 2018-19 academic year. This is Year 1 of a three-year evaluation period from August 2018 to December 2021. We are grateful to the organizations and schools engaged in partnerships, including BSK SP Evaluation Advisors, Participants, King County and Best Starts for Kids staff, and other BSK School Partnerships evaluators that have shaped all parts of the Year 1 evaluation.

Thanks to the work of those who came before us, like the Youth Development Executives of King County[1] and other partners, we have some understanding of what equitable partnerships look like, and how they support greater change than would be possible with one organization.

We know that Leadership and Coordination support partnerships to have a Shared Vision; Aligned, Responsive Implementation; and Mutual or Shared Accountability for Success. We believe that partnerships across multiple BSK strategy areas (i.e., HSE, OST, SBHC, SBIRT, TIRP, YD) in a school achieve synergy (the idea that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts"). In equitable partnerships, synergy contributes to changes in practices, policies, systems, environments, and student well-being and outcomes. Exhibit A on the next page shows how these partnership pieces fit together in support of improved academic and health outcomes for students.

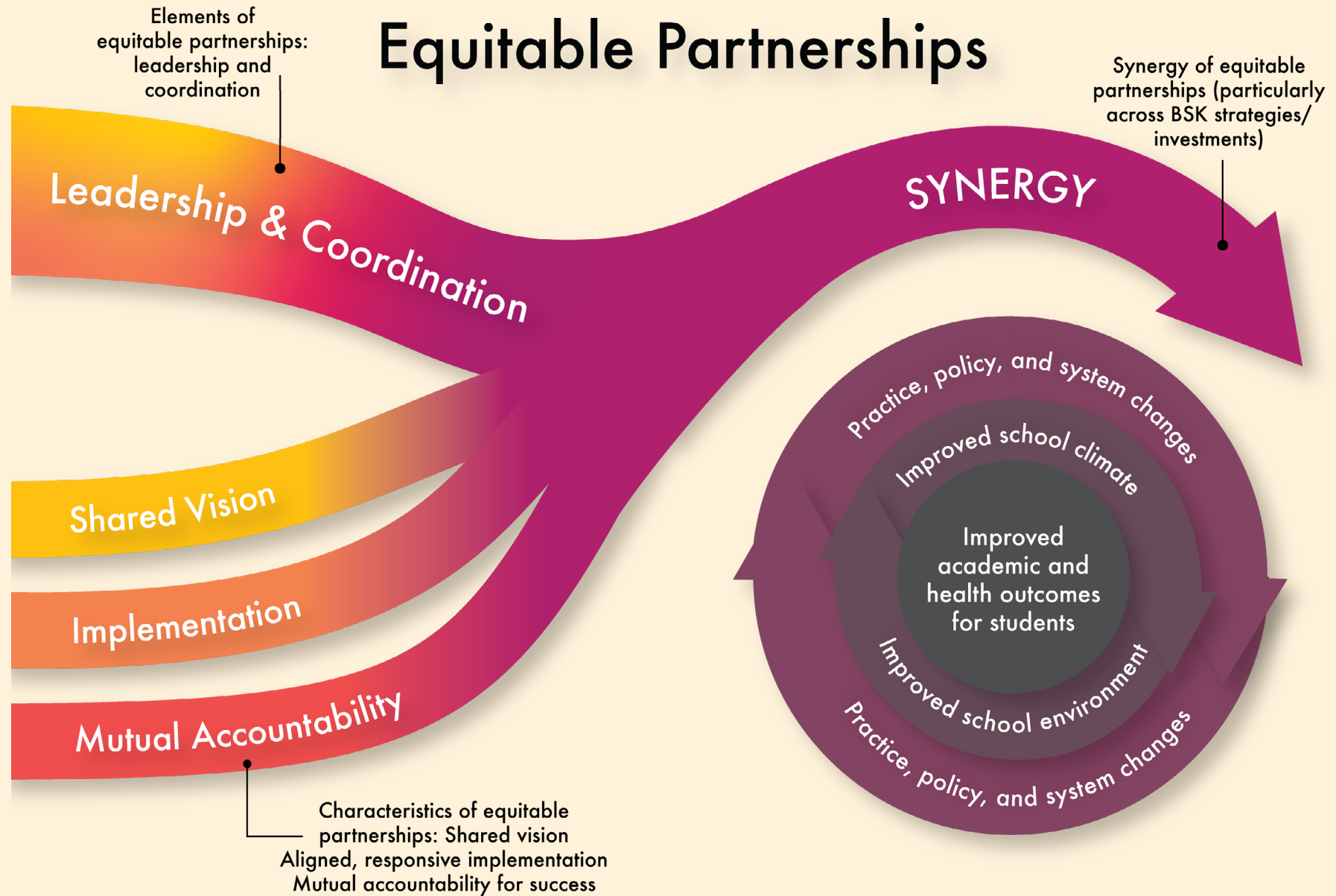**BSK School Partnerships strategy areas:**

1. Out-of-School Time (OST)
2. School-Based Health Centers (SBHC)
3. Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral To Services (SBIRT)
4. Trauma-Informed and Restorative Practices (TIRP)

This study also includes investments from the following two strategy areas:

1. Healthy and Safe Environments (HSE)
2. Youth Development (YD)

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1 Youth Development Executives of King County (n.d.). School and Community Partnership Toolkit. Retrieved November 2018, from https://ydekc.org/resource-center/school-community-partnership-toolkit

EXHIBIT A. EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS, SYNERGY, AND PPSE CHANGES AND STUDENT WELL-BEING AND OUTCOMES

Equitable Partnerships

Elements of equitable partnerships: leadership and coordination

Synergy of equitable partnerships (particularly across BSK strategies/ investments)

Leadership & Coordination

SYNERGY

Shared Vision

Implementation

Mutual Accountability

Characteristics of equitable partnerships: Shared vision
Aligned, responsive implementation
Mutual accountability for success

Practice, policy, and system changes

Improved school climate

Improved academic and health outcomes for students

Improved school environment

Practice, policy, and system changes

EVALUATION RESULTS

There are different types of partnerships developing within and across BSK strategies.

This evaluation looked at partnerships in nine schools with multiple BSK strategy investments. These schools are in five districts (Auburn, Bellevue, Kent, Seattle and Tukwila). Through interviews and other methods[2] we learned that partnerships are in different stages of development.

A number of awardees and partners were just beginning program implementation and partnership development when the Year 1 evaluation data collection took place.
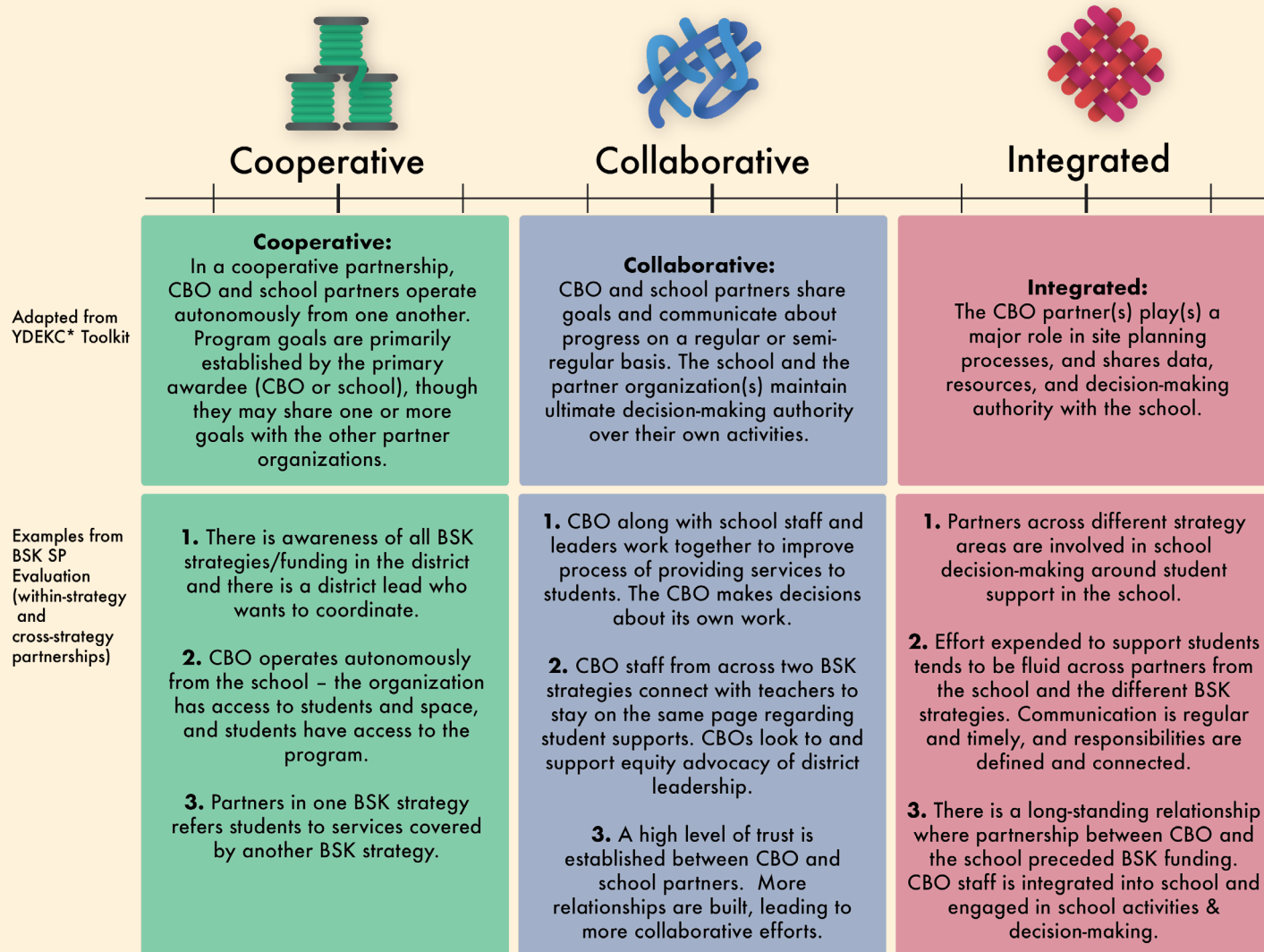
While we believe that synergy is achieved when organizations from multiple strategies work together, we also wanted to understand how partnership was developing within strategies. For example, this could be a TIRP awardee building a partnership with school administration, or two Youth Development awardees in one school developing a partnership with each other.

To help with this, we adapted the partnership model from Youth Development Executives of King County (YDEKC) School and Community Partnership Toolkit. YDEKC uses the categories Cooperative, Collaborative, and Integrated. Exhibit B shows BSK School Partnership examples in each category along the continuum.

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2   (1) Awardee and partner interviews (n=29); (2) Secondary data from awardees including awardee narrative reports and logic models; strategy-level logic models; Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral To Services (SBIRT) Interventionist Survey responses; and Healthy and Safe Environments (HSE) quarterly reports; (3) Secondary data from BSK/King County including Requests for Proposals (RFPs), Scope of Work templates, contract monitoring processes, convening agendas, and narrative report guidance (4) BSK and King County Staff Interviews (n=12)

EXHIBIT B: PARTNERSHIP TYPE DEFINITIONS AND PARTNERSHIP EXAMPLES VISUAL

Cooperative   Collaborative   Integrated

Adapted from YDEKC* Toolkit	**Cooperative:** In a cooperative partnership, CBO and school partners operate autonomously from one another. Program goals are primarily established by the primary awardee (CBO or school), though they may share one or more goals with the other partner organizations.	**Collaborative:** CBO and school partners share goals and communicate about progress on a regular or semi-regular basis. The school and the partner organization(s) maintain ultimate decision-making authority over their own activities.	**Integrated:** The CBO partner(s) play(s) a major role in site planning processes, and shares data, resources, and decision-making authority with the school.
Examples from BSK SP Evaluation (within-strategy and cross-strategy partnerships)	**1.** There is awareness of all BSK strategies/funding in the district and there is a district lead who wants to coordinate. **2.** CBO operates autonomously from the school – the organization has access to students and space, and students have access to the program. **3.** Partners in one BSK strategy refers students to services covered by another BSK strategy.	**1.** CBO along with school staff and leaders work together to improve process of providing services to students. The CBO makes decisions about its own work. **2.** CBO staff from across two BSK strategies connect with teachers to stay on the same page regarding student supports. CBOs look to and support equity advocacy of district leadership. **3.** A high level of trust is established between CBO and school partners. More relationships are built, leading to more collaborative efforts.	**1.** Partners across different strategy areas are involved in school decision-making around student support in the school. **2.** Effort expended to support students tends to be fluid across partners from the school and the different BSK strategies. Communication is regular and timely, and responsibilities are defined and connected. **3.** There is a long-standing relationship where partnership between CBO and the school preceded BSK funding. CBO staff is integrated into school and engaged in school activities & decision-making.

* Youth Development Executives of King County School and Community Partnership Toolkit. https://ydekc.org/resource-center/school-community-partnership-toolkit/ Accessed October 1, 2019
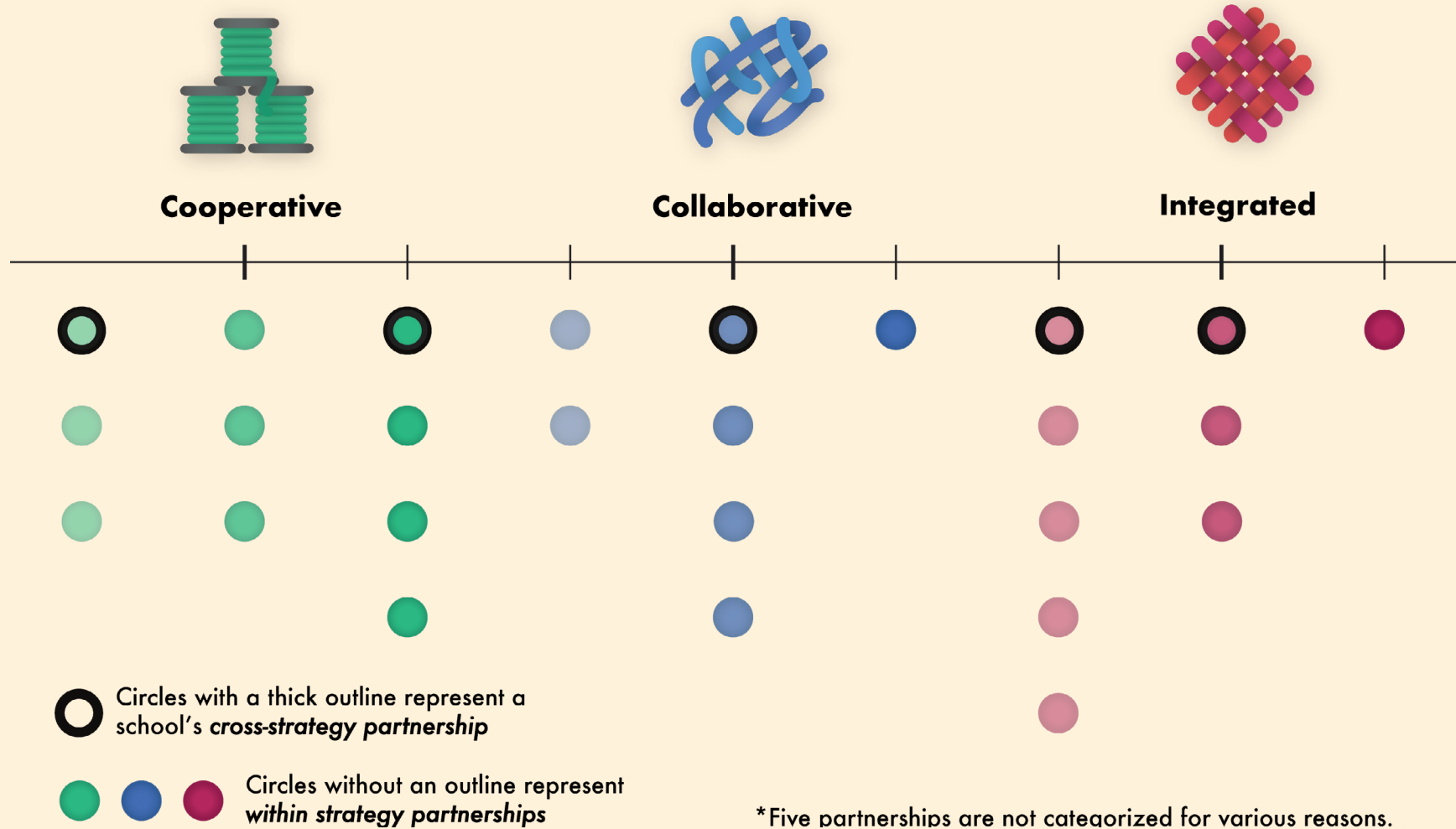
Using the adapted YDEKC model, we assessed 31 total partnerships, of which we could categorize 26. The 31 partnerships include existing and potential within- and cross-strategy partnerships in a school. For example, a school with a TIRP and SBIRT award from BSK would have three total partnerships that are assessed: 1) a TIRP partnership, 2) an SBIRT partnership, and 3) a TIRP-SBIRT partnership. The diagram below shows the categorizations. We found these partnerships to be fairly well distributed across each distinct partnership category. **There are 10 Cooperative partnerships, seven Collaborative partnerships, and nine Integrated partnerships.**

Overall, there are numerous Collaborative and Integrated partnerships within individual strategies (no outline). Exhibit C also shows that there are two Integrated cross-strategy partnerships (thick outline) of the five cross-strategy partnerships that could be assessed. Though there is limited evidence of the cross-strategy Integrated (or synergistic) partnerships – two of nine cross-strategy partnerships – there is expressed interest in engaging and collaborating across strategies in schools where this is not yet happening. In Years 2 and 3 of the evaluation, we will continue to examine how within and cross- strategy partnerships are developing over time.

EXHIBIT C: PARTNERSHIP TYPE CONTINUUM AND PARTNERSHIP DISTRIBUTION VISUAL

Cooperative

Collaborative

Integrated

Circles with a thick outline represent a school's *cross-strategy partnership*

Circles without an outline represent *within strategy partnerships*

*Five partnerships are not categorized for various reasons.

A number of factors support equitable partnerships in schools.

In equitable partnerships, people that do not hold institutional power feel included and valued, have buy-in, and see themselves in the communication and decision-making processes. Those who are affected by decisions are included in and influence decision-making. Attention to **building relationships and trust** is a critical component of equitable partnerships and lays a foundation from which partnerships can build and deepen. BSK SP Evaluation Advisors emphasized that equitable partnerships are inclusive partnerships. Equitable partnerships are those that attend to issues of equity in:

1. How they function (e.g., power, decision-making, and relationship- and trust-building) as well as in
2. The changes in practices, policies, systems, school environments, and student well-being that are occurring, and to whose benefit.

In our interviews and other data collection efforts we saw manifestations of equitable partnerships in some schools. To understand how equitable school partnerships forged in service of students work, we relied on both the YDEKC Toolkit and the Authentic Community School Partnerships Framework.[3] In many cases, there is overlap in the attributes of Integrated partnerships (from the Cooperative, Collaborative, and Integrated continuum) and equitable partnerships, as described below.

We looked for evidence of **equitable leadership**, including the following factors:

- Those who are part of a partnership named and described leaders beyond large institutional stakeholders (e.g., schools, districts, King County) to include CBOs, students, and/or families

- Similarly, those partners and individuals who did not hold institutional power felt included and valued in the partnership, had buy-in, and saw themselves in the communication and decision-making processes
- People who were affected by decisions were included in partnerships and influenced decision-making

We also looked for evidence of **equity-focused coordination** within partnerships, including:

- The school and partners were working toward shared goals and people understood how working together would improve performance
- Partners engaged in creating norms, protocols, and structures in inclusive ways that defined and drove decisions and communication
- Roles and responsibilities were clearly defined and agreed upon among partner organizations and within the context of the partnership's work

The Leadership and Coordination of equitable partnerships also contributed to partnerships' **Shared Vision; Aligned, Responsive Implementation; and Mutual/Shared Accountability for Success**. **In Integrated partnerships**, we observed the connection between equity-focused Leadership and Coordination and partnership characteristics in the following ways:

- Shared Vision: There was a clear sense of what the partnership's common purpose is, what and how contributions from partners within or across strategies would be needed or used, and how input was gathered from students, families, and staff.

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3   Gulbranson, M. (2017). Authentic Community-School Partnership Framework. In preparation.

- Aligned, Responsive Implementation: Partners reported being very much part of, on the same page with, embedded, integrated into, or supported by the work of other partners within or across strategies.

- Mutual/Shared Accountability for Success: While still a mostly within-strategy endeavor, we saw varying degrees of effort for collecting, using, and sharing information with partners; and to a more limited extent, with groups such as staff, students, and parents. Partners noted constraints on sharing student data and information given confidentiality policies.

While organizations and individuals can do a lot to nurture their partnership, there are contextual factors that affect equitable partnerships in schools. Common factors that we heard from BSK awardees and partners included:

- **Leadership and staff changes in schools, districts, CBOs, and BSK:** Turnover is a challenge given the importance of relationships and trust to equitable partnerships. For the most part, interview respondents referenced changes that have required either a pause or a start-over. In some cases, such as when a position is newly created, changes in personnel can be helpful.

- **Power dynamics:** Current and longstanding power dynamics also affect partnerships. This includes dynamics within schools, between administration and teachers, as well as mistrust of schools in the broader community. School-wide shifts in leadership and decision-making, including expanding efforts to increase parent engagement and including students in leadership roles, can create supportive conditions for equitable partnerships.

- **Student support capacity:** Existing capacity to provide services to students is another important contextual factor. This includes the reality of identifying more students in need of services than existing providers/partners can support. On the other hand, the growing need is also prompting some partnerships to expand to include additional providers (e.g., for mental health services).

- **Resources:** Resources, including the people, space and funding to support partnerships, affects how partnerships develop. Shared spaces, resources, existing meetings, and staff were considered helpful to coordination and communication among partnerships. There are situations where there is not sufficient space to house partners in schools.

The Year 1 evaluation lays a foundation to understand partnership development and changes in schools over time.

In Year 1 we built a foundation for Years 2 and 3 of the evaluation. We developed our conceptual model (the Equitable Partnerships model) and learned from awardees and partners about how equitable partnerships are developing.

BSK School Partnerships are developing in service of changes to practice, policies, systems, environments, and student well-being in schools. We conducted an initial assessment of the changes partnerships want to make. This will allow us to understand changes over time in Years 2 and 3 of the evaluation.

Common **practice, policy, and system changes** that partnerships seek to affect include:

- **Improving coordination of supports**, including connecting partnerships' services and supports to existing school and district structures like multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), and screening students to connect them to relevant supports
- **Expanding access to services and activities**, which includes demonstrating the needs of priority groups of students (e.g., homeless, English language learners, Brown and Black students), improving access to services for underserved students, and shifting policies for mental health support
- **Supporting student leadership and engagement in partnerships**, focusing on interrupting individual, institutional, and structural racism in the education system. This includes supporting students as "credible messengers" with their peers, engaging students to serve in leadership and decision-making roles, and providing student-led professional development for staff

- **Engaging families**, which includes involving families as members and leaders of partnerships, engaging them in the rollout and implementation of programs, and conducting home visits. This focus is more common within Collaborative and Integrated partnerships than Cooperative partnerships
- **Shifting staff practices**, including via professional development on topics of racial equity and racial trauma
- **Transforming discipline practices**, including addressing disproportionate impacts of discipline on students of color, shifting to restorative approaches to discipline, and providing alternatives to in-school suspension, is also a focus of almost half of the partnerships

In terms of improving **school environments**, partnerships are working to 1) improve school climate including students feeling connected and feeling safe at school, 2) support positive relationships and interactions, 3) reduce suspensions and expulsions, 4) improve attendance.

Finally, partnerships are focused on improving **student well-being outcomes**, including students' engagement in school (including school connectedness, regular attendance, decreased disciplinary issues); mental, socio-emotional, and physical health; academic and career success; healthy relationships; healthy sense of self; improving support systems for youth; and decreasing substance use.

From this initial assessment, we will seek to understand changes over time in Years 2 and 3 and how equitable partnerships relate to these changes. In particular, we expect to explore how integrated, cross-strategy partnerships (i.e., synergy) contribute to lasting change in schools.

> ## BSK, schools, districts, and CBOs have important roles to play in supporting equitable school partnerships.

Best Starts for Kids (BSK) and King County

Interviewees consistently noted that equitable school partnership work can be challenging. BSK awardees and their partners look to the BSK initiative and King County staff for technical assistance on a range of topics, particularly for partnership development and implementation.

Throughout the Year 1 evaluation, we heard an overwhelming appreciation for BSK's equitable school partnership strategies. This extended to BSK granting practices that increase access to resources for student-centered work for organizations both traditionally and not traditionally engaged with local government, support for whole child approaches, and help to nurture partnership between schools and CBOs. In addition, BSK awardees overwhelmingly report positive relationships with BSK staff and appreciation for the responsive and comprehensive support they receive from the people connected to King County's BSK initiative.

Each strategy's requirements for awardee applications as well as strategy supports for awardees and partners were responsive to the type of programming in the strategy, as well as the size and experience of a prototypical awardee. For example, the TIRP strategy required CBOs to attend regularly scheduled school meetings, in order to encourage partnership development between those awardees and the schools in which they were working. For SBHC applicants, proposals were required to include a description of the organizations experience working collaboratively with community.

There are several steps BSK can take to support equitable partnerships:

BSK can **account for the time it takes** to develop partnerships and to create lasting change, in the following ways:

- As BSK seeks to affect changes in practice, policy, systems, environments, and ultimately student outcomes, **consider the time this work requires** in how they structure their support for school partnerships.
- Continue to provide **flexible, long-term and multi-year funding** to support ongoing relationships.
- Offer some **orientation for new school leaders** (first provided for OST awardees and partners during Spring 2019) which can mitigate the impact of staff turnover among partnership leaders.
- Continue to **devote time** to building relationships and connection within the BSK School Partnership team and to support each other working across Departments and Divisions in King County government.

BSK can also support **cross-strategy partnerships** by increasing alignment across strategies internally, in the following ways:

- Increase strategy alignment for **grant materials**, from strategy descriptions to logic models to program evaluation processes.
- Standardize **partnership criteria** and contract language across strategies.
- Align **BSK processes** as well as key messages, for example, continue to support shared site visits.
- Increase and improve **communication** about BSK grants, partners, and staff; consider how to support knowledge of resources and referrals across strategies and within regions.

Schools, districts, and CBOs

Implications for schools, districts, and CBOs will depend on the context and partnerships of each organization, its leadership and staff. As described above, the inclusion and deep, authentic engagement of CBOs, students, and families are central to equitable and integrated partnerships. Partnerships are ultimately about making a difference in the lives of students. There are several ways that schools, districts, and CBOs can increase or deepen student engagement, including:

- Include students in school-based partnerships. **Student voices** help shift beliefs and ensure that the experiences of students are considered. Continuous efforts to invite students to the table are critical.

- Set up **structures to enable shared responsibility, including among students**, to keep the partnership going.

Schools, districts, and CBOs can also develop or strengthen structures to support equitable partnerships, including:

- **Adopt approaches to manage change**, including 1) building redundancy as one way to help ameliorate the impact of turnover; and 2) capturing information that can be archived in places with high turnover. This will help institutionalize knowledge which can help prevent burdening organizations with less resources.

- **Develop coordination structures**, including those that 1) alleviate burden on the people doing the work and sustain the partnership over time; and 2) support data access and data use, such as meetings where partners can review data, understand progress, and plan next steps.

- **Connect partnership work to lasting changes in practices, policies, systems, and environments**. This includes how different partnerships can align with or intentionally complement one another in the changes they seek, strengthen family engagement, support staff growth, and connect with state- and regional-efforts for change.

Limitations & Strengths

We are confident in the results of our evaluation because we built on a strong existing evidence base; used high-quality methods; gathered extensive information from all awardees in the sample; and compared results across multiple sources of data to get a full picture of partnerships. There are some factors to consider in reviewing the report:

- Our sample included nine of 19 schools with multiple investments. With this sample, we were able to go deeper through interviews in fewer schools rather than broadly across all 19 schools through a survey or other methods. We were able to assess 31 partnerships.

- The perspectives of multiple stakeholders were included in this evaluation, through data collection and through the leadership of the BSK SP Evaluation Advisors. The Year 1 evaluation does not include the perspectives of students and families who are impacted by BSK investments. Seattle Public Schools staff, and secondary data from BSK investments made to Seattle Public Schools are not included but will be included in Year 2, as a partnership agreement has been established between BSK and the district.

- Evaluation findings may be limited by the timing of interviews in mid- to late spring, which coincides with the busiest period of the school year. Data collection at this time of year also allowed the partnerships to have the fall and winter to develop. In certain cases, we were not able to interview key informants who could give us a holistic picture of school partnerships. We plan to include these individuals in Year 2 and 3 data collection.

- The evaluation provides an assessment of partnerships at a specific moment in time during their implementation. Partnerships would likely look different if done before or after our study period due to their dynamic nature, and to the early stage of implementation of a number of BSK strategies in the 2018-19 academic year.

> **In Years 2 and 3, this evaluation will follow how partnerships continue to develop and how they are making a difference in schools for kids.**

In Years 2 and 3 of the evaluation, we will continue the focus on our three evaluation questions:

1. What do **equitable school partnerships look like**, and what are the **factors that support** them?

2. What is the **relationship between equitable partnerships and school-wide changes** in practices, policies, systems, environments, and student well-being?

3. How do **King County processes and systems** support equitable partnerships?

We will:

- Continue to go deeper into a sample of schools with multiple investments

- Build our collective understanding about the nature of stability and change in partnerships that remain in the same category (e.g., Cooperative, Collaborative) and those that deepen, and what factors contribute to stability or change. Following partnerships over time will help us address the limitations of a point-in-time "snapshot" of dynamic partnerships taken during the busy spring from the Year 1 evaluation.

- Explore where and how changes in practice, policy, system, environment, and student outcomes are happening and how the changes at these different levels fit together and affect one another.

- Broaden the perspectives included in this evaluation (students, building leaders, and school/district staff, particularly in Seattle schools). Where relevant, we will also seek to include families in Year 3.

- Continue to explore the relationship between the number and types of BSK strategy investments and alignment across practice, policy, and system changes that awardees seek to impact.

This Executive Summary is a shortened version of the full Year 1 Evaluation Report, which includes a case study of partnerships at Mill Creek Middle School in Kent School District. The Mill Creek Case Study is available at: https://strategy.psesd.org/current-evaluation-projects/best-starts-for-kids. For information about the evaluation, please contact Sarita Siqueiros Thornburg (sthornburg@psesd.org). You can find more information about PSESD's Strategy, Evaluation and Learning team at: https://strategy.psesd.org/. For more information about Best Starts for Kids visit https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/community-human-services/initiatives/best-starts-for-kids.aspx

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