

# Case Study I

## The John W. Gardner Center and Redwood City 2020

Supplement to the white paper:

Coburn, C.E., Penuel, W.R., & Geil, K.E. (January 2013). *Research-Practice Partnerships: A Strategy for Leveraging Research for Educational Improvement in School Districts*. William T. Grant Foundation, New York, NY.



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# THE JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER AND REDWOOD CITY 2020

The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University partners with classrooms, schools, school districts, city and county public agencies, and community-based organizations both locally and nationally. The center was founded by Stanford professor Milbrey McLaughlin in 2000 and is dedicated to the vision and values of its namesake, John W. Gardner, an activist in government whose work focused on social and economic justice. JGC's mission is to improve the lives of youth by conducting research, developing leadership, and effecting change in communities. Its work is rooted in the principles of community youth development— young people prosper when their community prospers, and vice versa. JGC's approach is to form partnerships with local communities, often across different sectors (e.g., schools as well as agencies that serve youth). In these partnerships, JGC's researchers and other staff—which includes former teachers, community organizers, and organizational consultants—identify and study opportunities to promote youth development.

One of JGC's longest-standing partnerships is with Redwood City, CA. This partnership has spanned more than a decade and has supported a major community-wide effort focused on youth development called Redwood City 2020 (RWC 2020). RWC 2020's mission is to help children and families in the city and county lead safe and healthy lives in a stable, caring environment; to help youth succeed in school and prepare for responsible adulthood; and to help public, private, and community partners consistently work together in pursuit of these goals.<sup>1</sup>

## History

In the early 1990s, Redwood City underwent a number of changes. There was an influx of immigrants into the city, and the schools were struggling to manage the needs of these new students. In addition, a cap on property taxes dramatically decreased a large source of public funding for schools and the city. As RWC 2020's executive director explained:

*It was disastrous. The school district felt the impact of this. The city felt the impact. And the county felt the impact. All three of the public agencies responsible for serving residents in our community were severely impacted by reduced resources and saw that their best chance of being able to maintain some level of service was to work together and leverage resources rather than continue to work separately.*

The city, county, and the school districts began to collaborate, moving from issue to issue as they arose. After about two years of working this way, the partners realized that they would be more effective if there was an “umbrella collaborative” that could keep everyone organized and focused on goals. The Redwood City collaborative formally began in 1991 as Redwood City 2000 with four partners—Redwood City, San Mateo County, Redwood City Elementary School District, and Sequoia Union High School District (it became Redwood City 2020 in 2001). According to the director of RWC 2020, at that time, there was an informal relationship between the schools and Stanford University:

*I've been historically involved with the partnership for 15 years, maybe longer. It started before there was a Gardner Center. We had a partnership with the Stanford School of Education and Milbrey McLaughlin. At that time, I was a member of the Board of Education in Redwood City, and she was on the faculty of the School of Education at Stanford. Milbrey and the District both recognized the benefits of working together since we were located close to the university and were a community facing a lot of challenges and trying to be innovative in addressing them. That preexisting relationship evolved into a more formalized relationship as the John W. Gardner Center was established.*

With Professor McLaughlin as the founding director, the John W. Gardner Center (JGC) opened its doors in 2000. The initial project of the newly opened center, in conjunction with the Redwood City Elementary School District, was the Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) program. YELL was an after-school youth development program run by staff from the JGC at a local middle school in which youth took on leadership roles, collected data, analyzed it, and presented their findings to stakeholders in the community. The director of RWC 2020 describes it as an effort to “explore how youth development principles and practices could enhance youth development and youth success at the middle-school level.”

The YELL program proved costly for the JGC to implement, and JGC leadership believed that a more focused effort on providing research support to the initiative would benefit the community more over the long haul. As its mission shifted away from direct service, the JGC began building an archive that assembled data from different societal sectors and institutions—data that had previously been siloed within schools, juvenile justice organizations, health and social service agencies, the parks and recreation department, and after-school programs. RWC 2020 and the JGC use this Youth Data Archive (YDA) to investigate questions related to the effects of initiatives, to groups of students who may be more or less protected from risk of educational failure, and the contributions of different kinds of experiences in various settings to youth development.

This YELL program collaboration eventually led to the JGC becoming a core partner in RWC 2020. Currently, RWC 2020 has seven core partners—Redwood City, Redwood City Elementary School District, Sequoia Union High School District, San Mateo County Human Services Agency and Health Services, Sequoia Health Care District, Kaiser Permanente, and the JGC.<sup>2</sup>

At present, the JGC is the main research partner for all five of the initiatives of RWC 2020:

1. Community Schools (founded in 2000),
2. Sequoia Teen Resource and Wellness Centers (2004),
3. Community Youth Development (2008),
4. Wellness (2009), and
5. Immigrant Integration/Community Building (2011).<sup>3</sup>

## Nature of the Partnership

RWC 2020 has two governing organizations: the Cabinet and the Coordinating Committee. The Cabinet consists of the heads (CEOs, directors, superintendents) of the core partner institutions along with the executive director. The Cabinet is responsible for the overall direction of the collaborative, including research and budget decisions. The Coordinating Committee consists of representatives of each of the core partner's elected bodies; it sets policy and acts on recommendations made by the Cabinet. The executive director of RWC 2020 reports to both the Cabinet and the Coordinating Committee and facilitates communication and collaboration between the core partners. These two governing bodies set directions for research, new initiatives, programs, and evaluations.

As is typical for a research alliance, a main goal of the JGC and RWC 2020 is to conduct research that impacts local policy and practice. Research questions typically focus on the relationship between different kinds of youth experiences (e.g., participation in school and community programs) and outcomes that the partnership targets. A good example is the role that the JGC plays in researching the Community Schools Initiative, which is an effort to create “full-service” schools as sites where youth and their families can get social and health services and benefit from programming outside normal school hours. The goal of the Community Schools Initiative is to increase student achievement and success in school by interacting with children and parents in a different way. In the last five years, JGC has completed a series of evaluations looking at the overall impact of the community school approach on students' outcomes. The JGC researchers have focused on understanding the relationship between family engagement and participation in community school programs and improved student outcomes, including academics and feelings of connectedness to the schools.

JGC's work with RWC 2020 in general and the Community Schools Initiative in particular is facilitated by the YDA. The archive links data from youth-service providers, government agencies, community-based organizations, and schools. While the YDA is not used exclusively for RWC 2020 (it is currently active in three communities and two counties), it is the most well-established in Redwood City.<sup>4</sup> The data

are used to document and analyze youth's experiences across a range of settings, with the rationale that each of these settings contributes to important developmental outcomes that the Community Schools Initiative and other RWC 2020 projects seek to influence. One JGC staff member explained:

*Youth don't just live in one institution. They go to school. And, then they go to after-school programs, they go to summer programs, and they also have a juvenile justice situation. They might be on public assistance. They and their families participate in more than one thing.*

Some of the data in the YDA come from the state, but local agencies also contribute by providing the data they collect to monitor and improve services.<sup>5</sup> In addition to linking administrative data on youth outcomes, JGC staff develop and collect data on the motivational climate of schools and after-school programs and other important things. These data can be linked to the administrative data and provide information that can be useful to organizations seeking to understand the relationship between program participation and youth outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

Collaboration is most intense at the beginning and end of each project when partners jointly negotiate the initial questions and interpret the results. Each year, the Coordinating Committee addresses the questions: On which questions will we focus? Do we have the data or not? JGC researchers then work with the appropriate partners and their colleagues internally to find data sources to answer the questions. In some cases, JGC staff and partners develop new measures and collect data to address a research question identified by the Committee.

Near the end of the process, partners work together with JGC researchers on drafts of findings before they are released more broadly. The director of the Community Schools Initiative describes the process:

*We have discussions about the draft, get to ask questions, and question the assumptions being made. And then we always have a presentation. We have data talks, where we bring together*

*a group of coordinators and extract what we believe would be the most interesting part for them, or something that we would like to get feedback on, and we have a conversation about that. "What do you see here? Do you think this is accurate? Do we need to work on improving the data collection? Do we have any strategies to do that?" Then, we have conversations about the meaning of the data.*

The JGC takes an unusual additional step to ensure that its partners, including those involved in RWC 2020, feel comfortable trusting it with potentially sensitive data. The JGC will not publish anything unless the partners have approved it.

## Challenges

The partnership has encountered several challenges in its history. It is difficult to find free time on everyone's calendars. The number of senior-level partners exacerbates the problem, though the expectation that "no one sends their assistants" does contribute to strong feelings of investment in the partnership.

At times, researchers present results and discuss issues using academic jargon, making it difficult for other partners to understand them. The need for careful vetting of reports and presentations arises in part from the recognition that practitioners and researchers speak in different languages, and that effort needs to be made to bridge the gap. One JGC researcher explained, "There were some bumpy experiences where we shared a presentation of data that was a little too academic. It was a little off-putting. But, we learned from that and altered our approach."

Deadlines and expectations between the two groups are also very different. The practitioners want results much more quickly than the researchers are able to provide. The director of the Community Schools Initiative said the slow pace of research was frustrating for them in the beginning, because they thought they would get data quickly and have multiple opportunities to reflect on it and implement findings into their programs. Now, they understand the time needed for research:

*We started looking at what was possible, and we focused on those things. We made better use of the one report a year that we were able to have, instead of focusing on the two we wanted to have.*

When JGC shifted its mission away from the direct provision of services (i.e., when they transitioned leadership and funding of the YELL program to school and community-based groups), its community partners were a little uncomfortable. One person associated with the community schools program explained:

*There was this conflict because they were funding programs and that were not their mission. We wanted them to continue, because we didn't want to lose the program, and we didn't want to lose the ability to learn from what's going on at the school. It was very hard to let that go. ... Now, at least at the capacity that I work with them, it's really focused on the evaluation. We made peace with that.*

Reaching the current level of collaboration did not happen overnight. Progress involved several steps to build the trust and relationships that are critical to the success of the partnership. A JGC staff member explained: "If it's a real partnership, the researchers have to be hanging out in the community. Then, there's a real opportunity for true partnership." A Community Schools Initiative staffer agreed:

*The Gardner Center, as a research organization, is really grounded in the community's desires and interests. That's probably the reason we didn't part ways when we had disagreements. The connection is really deep.*

## Benefits

The JGC's partnership with RWC 2020 has yielded a number of positive outcomes. The first is research that shows correlations between participation in community school programs and increased feelings of care and connection to the school and academic achievement. RWC 2020's director explained:

*The partnership with the Gardner Center and the Youth Data Archive is critical. We know now through longitudinal research that we are having an effect in community schools on how kids are doing in their educational and life development. We know that kids and their families who participate in community school programs are doing better. ... They're feeling more engaged and supported.*

Data collected by the partnership and analyzed by the JGC have led to changes in policy at the district level, such as a campaign to increase attendance in kindergarten. The partnership has also enabled the core partners to gain access to data analysis capabilities they don't have internally. One partner explained:

*They [the JGC] can look at the data in a way that would be very costly for us to do. ... They can help to answer questions that the Cabinet may have.*

Finally, the partnership allows all the organizations involved to leverage their resources so that they can provide more services to youth and the community and conduct better research. For example, the superintendent of one of the partner districts stated that what they receive in terms of in-kind support, placement of personnel from the county, or time at the JGC far surpasses the cost of the district's annual contribution to RWC 2020.

*For more information on Redwood City 2020, see: <http://www.rwc2020.org>. For more information on the John W. Gardner Center, see: <http://jgc.stanford.edu>.*

## Endnotes

1. "Mission and Vision," <http://www.rwc2020.org/about-us/mission-vision>.
2. "Core Partners," <http://www.rwc2020.org/about-us/structure/core-partners>.
3. Redwood City 2020, "Redwood City 2020 Organizational Chart," (Redwood City, CA: Redwood City 2020, May 2011).
4. Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Margaret O'Brien-Strain, "The Youth Data Archive: Integrating Data to Assess Social Settings in a Societal Sector Framework," in *Toward Positive Youth Development: Transforming Schools and Community Programs*, ed. Marybeth Shinn and Hirokazu Yoshikawa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
5. Rebecca A. London and Oded Gurantz, "Data Infrastructure and Secondary to Postsecondary Tracking," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 15, no. 1-2 (2010).
6. McLaughlin and O'Brien-Strain.

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## References

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