



Raising the Bar on Behalf of Boys & Young Men of Color

How ACS Helped Grantees Leverage Collective Impact to Strategically Communicate and Organize For Action

Strategy development, communication, and capacity building for community initiatives affecting boys and young men of color

Who:

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Forward Promise grantees

What:

Community initiatives affecting boys and young men of color

Where:

Chicago, IL; New Orleans, LA; Phoenix, AZ; Little Rock, AK; Minneapolis, MN

When:

2014–2015

How:

ACS provided grantees with customized support in strategy development, communication, and capacity building to develop and implement their community initiatives.

Result:

Forward Promise grantees enhanced their collaborative efforts to reach new heights, improve outcomes for boys and young men of color and enrich their role in and impact on their communities.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, more than 3 million students in grades K–12 were suspended in 2009–10, more than double the rate in the 1970s. African-American students are suspended or expelled at least 3.5 times more often than their white peers. Suspended or expelled students are more likely to fall behind in their studies, drop out of school, interact with the juvenile justice system, and ultimately, may end up committing crimes in their communities that result in some type of incarceration. This phenomenon has been dubbed the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) launched Forward Promise in 2012 to expand the potential for boys and young men of color to grow up healthy, obtain a good education, and find meaningful employment. These grants address the fact that boys and young men of color are more likely to grow up in poverty, live in unsafe neighborhoods, and attend schools that lack the basic resources and supports that kids need in order to thrive. When Forward Promise was created, it cast a very wide net in terms of assembling grantees, and RWJF granted awards in three waves of cohorts: Innovation grantees in 2013, Community Partnership grantees in 2014, and Catalyst grantees in the second half of 2014.

In April 2014, after one of its largest Request For Proposal (RFP) responses ever, RWJF selected six collaborative partnerships located across the country as Community Partnership grantees. These organizations were located in Chicago, IL; New Orleans, LA; Phoenix, AZ; Little Rock, AK; Minneapolis, MN; and Oahu, HI. Each grantee brought together diverse partners to drive progress for boys and young men of color on critical issues such as reducing homicide rates; increasing graduation rates; and expanding the reach of restorative justice practices. All grantees needed assistance in building their capacity within a collective impact¹ framework to raise

¹Collective Impact is an approach to tackle complex problems where there is not an easy or replicable solution and no one organization can solve it on their own. It requires a collective approach from multiple sectors and stakeholders.

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awareness, reach new partners, educate their communities, build internal and external communication strategies, facilitate critical conversations, and expand their evidence-based programs.

Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) began work in early 2014 to assess Innovation and Community Partnership grantee need, build customized strategies to support those needs and build trust among each collaborative to ensure maximum effect and sustainability.

Assessing Grantee Needs

Helping grantees increase their effectiveness was certainly a key outcome of ACS’s engagement, but ACS also helped RWJF, and its intermediary organization for Forward Promise, BCT Partners, increase their own effectiveness, too.

“At the beginning of our process, ACS really provided significant thought leadership in terms of the approach to assessing grantees,” says Allen Frimpong of BCT Partners, RWJF’s intermediary organization for Forward Promise. “Together, we were able to put together a day-long convening and plan how we would support RWJF’s grantees to help reach their goals.”

In addition to programmatic changes, ACS helped BCT plan its approach for policy and systems change. “ACS suggested processes used in the past around storytelling and questions to get to the heart of what was really happening with RWJF grantees,” Frimpong says. “They helped us build team cohesion and a clearer understanding about the vision our technical assistance team was trying to accomplish. They made sure we pinpointed not only the needs of grantees, but also their assets as we identified areas for growth. They did a phenomenal job of being thought leaders and bringing their significant experience to bear.”

Based on a thoughtful initial assessment process, most grantees needed technical assistance within the context of a collective impact effort in the areas of strategy development; internal and external communication; facilitation; community engagement; as well as digging into promising practice research to inform evidence-based approaches within each grantee’s effort.

Providing Customized Support

ACS began to provide on the ground technical assistance to five of the six RWJF Community Partnership grantees, in engagements that went far beyond the typical boundaries of traditional “technical assistance.”

“Engagements like this one are complex, because although the overarching goal and vision may be the same for each, they are all coming from a very different starting point,” says ACS President Lori McClung. “We knew that a one-size-fits-all approach would never achieve RWJF’s vision for Forward Promise, so we developed a tailored approach with each grantee to meet their specific needs and goals.”



“ACS brings a breadth of experience, deep knowledge of work in community, and a passion for the issues that shines through in their work,” says Mark Perry, of the BMOST initiative in Little Rock, Arkansas. “They understood our role in the community, and were able to help us think through our strategies and nail down a specific plan to help bring our initiative to the next level.”

Because each grantee was so different, ACS provided customized services to each coalition or collaborative, meeting one-on-one with grantee staff and stakeholders to identify strengths, needs, and opportunities. ACS then designed a plan of action for each grantee, and monitored and reinforced their progress every step of the way. ACS staff also provided group workshops and one-on-one strategy sessions with the grantees in conjunction with RWJF national conferences.

For example, in Minneapolis, ACS provided professional development training for effective spokespersons. Using ACS’ promising practice communication research, ACS helped staff find their organization’s unique voice and craft universally supported messages to use with scholars, parents, partners and funders.

“ACS was able to help these grantees make clear what had been really unclear,” says Frimpong. “They helped grantees identify promising policies and practices that worked in other places across the country, and assist with working across different systems in their own communities. ACS provided the framework for grantees to develop tangible goals for each area of technical assistance to ensure forward movement of each grantee’s effort.”

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Several grantees wanted to better understand promising practices to inform their approaches. ACS provided extensive research on a variety of practices and initiatives, such as mentorship programs, collaborative structures, and youth engagement, so grantees could borrow promising ideas, practices and approaches. “In many cases, our research showed that what the Forward Promise grantees were doing was cutting edge,” says McClung. “They were surprised to find that while they could borrow some ideas or approaches, no one had applied many of these practices to settings like theirs in a collaborative way.”

In New Orleans, ACS helped translate evidence-based practices into standards for organizations in a city-wide collaborative partnership. All partner organizations now are able to follow evidence-based practices that will ensure boys and young men of color in that city are prepared for school and life.

In several locations, ACS focused on creating customized communication strategies to help each collaborative partnership accomplish its goals. For some, this meant improved management of collaborative partners. For others, the communication strategies not only helped give voice to the work they had already been doing but also increased their ability to attract unlikely partners to support issues around boys and young men of color. “There were many different pieces that ACS pulled together to



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“Every individual grantee presented a different challenge, but we were also able to find intersections of need that we could address collectively,” said McClung. “We were able to help grantees learn as peers from one another, and share ideas that could feed into each others’ plans. Because we worked with all of them individually, we had a special vantage point to spot the potential for cross-pollination. That’s not something that generally happens if there are different consultants working with each grantee, but it helps funders get more mileage from their investments.”

Building Trust to Create Impact

When the inevitable hiccups arose, ACS was there to help resolve problems quickly. “ACS was valuable in providing troubleshooting for one grantee that was facing a crisis. Their ability to quickly assess the situation and provide options as to how to support the local grantee meant we were quickly able to come to a decision that would best support the grantee and mitigate risk at the same time,” says Frimpong. “That helped us maintain trust in the partnership.”

“Trust is at the heart of any engagement between funder and grantee, and we take that very seriously,” says McClung. “Because of our commitment to the issue, the effort and the work of the grantees, we always felt we have just as much at stake in the success of these Forward Promise grantees as do the grantees themselves, as well as RWJF. Work like this inspires us, so we always strive to deliver nothing but the best so grantees can best help those they serve.”

In 2014 and 2015, ACS helped grantees lay the foundation and accomplish their goals by developing strategy and communicating with allies, unlikely allies, potential champions, challengers and potential funders on a local and national level. For partners in Little Rock, work through Forward Promise allowed the initiative to publicly launch, attract unlikely partners as champions, and track success to ensure continued sustainability. Partners in Chicago accomplished much during the same time period, including expansions of restorative justice in schools, a new curriculum guide for teachers to implement restorative justice in classrooms, and ongoing advocacy with key local and state policymakers.

ACS’ work with Forward Promise was a catalyst for grantees. These grantees enhanced their collaborative efforts to reach new heights, improve outcomes for boys and young men of color and enrich their role in and impact on the community for the long term.

