The Seattle Housing Authority
Education Engagement Specialist:
Building Bridges that Advance
Student Outcomes

BACKGROUND

The Choice Neighborhood (CN) program is designed to transform selected HUD-assisted housing projects and their surrounding neighborhoods.1 In 2011, the Seattle Housing Authority was awarded a CN grant to support the redevelopment of Seattle’s Yesler Terrace (YT) community. The redevelopment is guided by a locally driven collective impact approach, with Seattle University’s Center for Community Engagement (CCE) serving as the backbone education partner. In 2012, the Education Engagement Specialist (EES) position was created to support students living in YT in developing and fulfilling academic plans. As many of the YT students are from immigrant families who are unfamiliar with the local school system, one of the key roles of this position is to provide navigation support.2 Current research on effective practices for student success promotes the “dual-capacity” framework, strengthening both families and school systems in order to create a comprehensive and supportive academic environment for students.3

In the fall of 2015, CCE and Cohen Consulting & Evaluation collaboratively conducted interviews and data analysis in order to surface understandings of the evolution of the EES role, as well as outcomes for students and their families. We conducted interviews with several CN community partners, in particular those involved in school and academic support; interviews were also conducted with several parents. Academic data were pulled from the Seattle Public School’s Automated Data Report.

FINDINGS

Our query investigated the underlying assumptions of how the EES role potentially contributes to improved student outcomes. Based on the interviews, we found that the key, research-based, underlying assumption

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3. Mapp, K. & Kuttner, P. (2014). Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships. Austin, TX: Southwest Education Development Laboratory. This report contains a further discussion of this concept. We use the same definition for family as this report, i.e., “... any adult caretaker who has responsibility for the well-being of a child or children.” (p. 27).
is that relationship building is critical to a dual-capacity model of education. When relationships are grounded in trust, they can transform the ways that students and families work with schools to foster student success. When asked about the role of the EES, our interviewees, whether representing parents, school personnel, or community organizations, used a variety of trust-related terms: bridge, navigator, connector, translator, and peacemaker.

Our investigation found that the EES parleys these relationships into a set of intertwined strategies designed to effect improvements in parenting skills, community partner and school capacity, and student academic outcomes. These strategies are:

1. **Relationship building.** The EES builds bridges between parents, schools, and community partners in order to develop cultural understanding and trust between groups.
2. **Individualized support.** The EES works closely with community partners and school personnel to provide individual-level support to both youth and their families, and provides follow-up that extends beyond the capability of the schools and partners alone.
3. **Community programming.** The EES listens to the needs of the community and works with local partners to create culturally responsive programs to meet these needs. These programs are intended to give families social and emotional support as well as to provide tools for engaging in their children’s education.

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**THE FOUNDATION: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS**

The foundation of the EES’s work is to build two-way relationships between families and both schools and community organizations. We find the concept of confianza, which translates as “trust” but also encompasses ideas of confidence and familiarity, a useful construct. Confianza requires the ability of partners to trust each other not only professionally but personally as well. Relationships are indeed the key to gaining trust in the Yesler Terrace community and to collaboration between parents, schools, and community partners who provide academic resources. Our interviews indicate that the current EES is able to foster relationships because she is trusted in the community and speaks the language of many of the residents.

**School-family relationships.** The EES fosters both formal and informal connections between the school and families. Parents and community partners referred to the EES as the “home-to-school connection.” Parents at Yesler Terrace commented that they want to be a part of their children’s education, but they are often confused by the system. These interviewees reported

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5. Mapp & Kuttner. Partners in Education.
7. The current EES speaks Tigrayit, Tigrinya, Amharic, Arabic, and English.
that they ask the school to communicate directly with the EES, who then communicates with them. She often serves as a
translator for parents in meetings, as well as when parents receive written information from the school.

**Connecting families and community organizations.** The EES advocates with partners such as the local community center
and public library to meet community needs. These organizations noted that she has guided them in developing culturally
responsive programming and provides credibility with community members. One interviewee reported that her organization
tried to pilot its program in other housing communities but couldn’t get a foothold without the support of an EES in the
community.

**INDIVIDUALIZED FAMILY AND STUDENT SUPPORT**

**FAMILY OUTCOMES**

Immigrant students, especially those with parents who have little or no formal education, can easily fall off track in
school. Research-based evidence, and CCE’s own experience working with immigrant families, indicates that a focused
household-level effort pays off.

- The EES works with a caseload of around 50 students, creating academic plans and providing individualized guidance to help
  them achieve their goals. This assistance includes accessing external resources such as tutoring, placement in alternative
  academic settings, and organizations that offer college application and financial aid support.
- The intervention is based on a family systems approach. EES-family connections are cemented through personal connections
  such as convening informal family meetings. High school counseling staff and school-based community partners noted
  that she can conduct home visits by simply knocking on families’ doors to check in with them, something they cannot do.
- Several community partners stated that the EES helps parents understand the education system and what roles they can
  play. She initiates meetings with school counselors when “something comes up” with the family or student, and then works
  with all parties to figure out what the student needs to do to be successful. One high school counselor related how the EES
  worked with an immigrant mother over time, helping her to forge a pattern of regular communications with the school
  and develop the skills to electronically track her child’s grades and attendance.
- Finally, the EES recognizes that holistic family well-being is integral to academic success. Since she is trusted by the families,
  she is called on to provide a broad range of support. According to one community partner, “Everyone has education
  problems, but that’s not the priority. She works to help families with their priorities so that they can then address education.”
  For example, the EES has helped families with translating official documents. While this is not an educational intervention,
  the feeling is that families can only address education when their basic needs are met.

**STUDENT OUTCOMES**

As noted above there are about 50 students on the EES caseload. Collecting comparison data poses challenges, as there is no
randomized control group to validate a causal inference. However, we can look at the performance of students on the EES’s
caseload compared to the performance of all of the students living at Yesler Terrace to gain an understanding of academic
trends without claiming causality. Additionally, we can observe these quantitative trends in light of the qualitative data that
we’ve received. A review of student record data found indicators of positive results in areas of attendance, disciplinary actions,
test scores, and high school completion. For example:

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Parents and community partners alike reiterated the EES’s role in their children graduating from high school. As recounted by the EES, all 14 of the students who chose to remain on the EES’ caseload through high school have graduated. This number is relatively high, as only 56% of the 27 twelfth graders living at YT graduated high school in the 2014–15 school year.

Of the 14 EES students to graduate from high school, 10 have enrolled in postsecondary education and/or military service after graduation.

EES students in grades K–8 had a 98% attendance rate during the 2014–15 school year, and only one K–8 EES student had over 10 days absent in the 2014–15 school year. In comparison, K–8 YT students have a 95% attendance rate, with 46 out of the 155 students missing 10 or more days during the 2014–15 school year.

Only one K–8 EES student had any disciplinary action over the 2014–15 school year. This is compared to 12 out of 155 K–8 students living in Yesler Terrace who received disciplinary action in the 2014–15 school year.

94% of the EES K–8 students met the growth standard in math in the spring of 2015, with an average increase of 20 raw points and 17 percentile points. For all of the students living at Yesler Terrace, 68% met the growth standard for math, with an average increase of 16 raw points and 10 percentile points.

Our interviews focused primarily on high school student impacts. For a variety of reasons, the high school years offer a strong potential for EES engagement and impact. The local high school counselors each have approximately 400 students in their caseloads and are not assigned to work with the same student throughout high school, making it hard to develop deep relationships. Working within a dual-capacity framework, the EES has the potential to be the consistent advocate for the student and family throughout their high school years.

Time and again, the interviewees expressed that once students see a unified family, school, and community effort to ensure their success, their behaviors change. One high school counselor related the story of a mother who approached the EES to see how to get her 11th grader on track to graduate. Initially, the EES, mother, and student met with the counselor as often as twice a week. While he did not follow a straight path, the student did graduate. The counselor stated that once the student experienced the “wraparound services” of the school, EES, and family, “he had no choice but to do well.”

Another story, related by the EES and the matriarch of an immigrant family, illustrates the levels of interventions throughout the educational pipeline. Prior to their relationship with the EES, the family had invested over $2,000 for an outside service—which proved to be a scam—to tutor their eldest son. When they connected with the EES, she helped this student enroll in and complete his GED course. The family then called on her to support the middle son by identifying what he needed to do to graduate, monitoring that his homework was submitted on time, and documenting how he met his community service requirement. At the time of this report, the EES was working with him to complete his paperwork to enroll in and receive financial aid from Skagit Valley College. The family has now asked her help with the youngest son to ensure that he is enrolled in a middle school that meets his specific needs.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING

Yesler Terrace community members, with varying levels of literacy, English language skills, and employment rates, benefit from access to resources previously unknown to them. Culturally responsive programming that builds strong families and community is vital in creating a healthy community can be so invisible, so it’s about how to reach out to them and bring out their strengths.

–COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION
environment for academic success. The EES has initiated programs designed to support academic learning, and also to address social isolation, build healthy families, and contribute to the overall development of the community.

The EES is uniquely situated to hear the needs of the community and to be heard by community partners who can provide or leverage resources to create culturally responsive programming. As an illustration, we note three EES-initiated programs. Yesler Terrace Community Center offers two of these programs: “Adult Story Time,” giving Yesler Terrace residents the opportunity to talk about where they came from and to share their cultural practices with each other; and “Preschool Story Time,” a program for parents and preschool-aged children, in collaboration with Seattle Public Library, that provides a linguistically and culturally appropriate reading time for families. The EES also initiated the “Adult Digital Literacy Class” by coordinating with the Seattle Public Schools, the Seattle Public Library, Yesler Community Center, Seattle University, and Friendly Earth. This 12-week program provides parents with basic computer skills, including how to check their email and access the Seattle Public School system for checking on student records. This course has been offered three times, serving about 50 participants to date. It has attracted significant attention, and public libraries across the state have indicated interest in replicating this course as an example of cultural competency and how to collaborate across organizations to provide effective programming.

Beyond community-level programming, interviewees commented that the EES plays the role of community builder and hub for organizations serving YT residents. One referred to her as the “glue” that brings the various organizations together and enables them to work in the interest of the community overall.

EES ROLE: EVOLVING UNDERSTANDINGS

This initial investigation uncovered important understandings about the unique niche the EES fills in contributing to improved student outcomes, in particular, through the three-pronged strategy of relationship building, individualized support, and community programming. There are clearly many existing success elements of this work that can be further identified and used to build the program. Our inquiry also raises a series of next-step questions. First, given the emerging understandings of the EES role, it may be useful to revisit the underlying assumptions, current EES strategies, and the types of outcomes that can realistically be expected from this work. The EES fills a unique niche but is one of one of many types of student supports and interventions; she contributes to, but is not solely responsible for, academic outcomes. As part of this effort, data collection protocols and the program’s capacity to collect data should be reviewed.

One complication in both data collection and staffing is that many families have relocated during the YT redevelopment. These families can’t technically be considered part of the EES caseload, but they still trust and rely on the EES for support. Thus, the EES supports far more families than appear in the record data. Second, it will be useful to consider how to best

10. The concept of “two-way trusted communicators of information” has been identified by Cohen Consulting & Evaluation as part of a developmental evaluation of the role of community health workers.
support the EES position, for example, through additional staffing and professional development opportunities. Finally, it may be useful to direct targeted efforts to raise awareness of the best ways for schools to work with the EES, particularly at the high school level.

METHODOLOGY NOTES
Structured Interviews were conducted with a total of nine school and community partners representing the following: the Seattle Housing Authority, Garfield High School counseling staff, the College Success Foundation, Yesler Community Center, the Seattle Public Library, the Youth Tutoring Program at the Catholic Community Services; as well as with the current EES. In addition, ten parents participated in individual interviews, which were conducted jointly by the EES and the CCE associate director, and transcribed by CCE staff. Students were not interviewed as part of this query. However, student record data from the Seattle Public Schools Automated Data Report were examined under a data-sharing agreement between CCE and the Seattle Public Schools, which provides access to data for students living in the Yesler Terrace community.

This report was prepared by Carolyn Cohen, Owner, Cohen Consulting & Evaluation, LLC and Ann Dunn, Senior Data and Evaluation Analyst, Center for Community Engagement, Seattle University.

Seattle University’s Center for Community Engagement connects classroom, campus, and community to promote a more just and humane world. It serves as the backbone entity for a collective impact effort dedicated to improving education outcomes for youth in the Yesler Terrace neighborhood. For more information please contact Kent Koth, Executive Director, at kothk@seattleu.edu.

Cohen Consulting & Evaluation, LLC, based in Seattle, Washington, works collaboratively with clients using approaches such as Evaluation and Strategy Learning Circles and Appreciative Inquiry to build evaluation capacity, facilitate the use of results for strategic learning, and inform social change. For more information see http://www.linkedin.com/in/cohenevaluation or www.cohenevaluation.org.

When students of color, especially immigrant kids, have a relationship with her, and she has a relationship with the parents, and she has a relationship with us, it makes a difference to those students.

–COMMUNITY PARTNER