Merging Partnerships: A Case Study of the
Coalition for New Britain's Children and the Youth Network

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Like all nonprofits and coalitions, Discovery Collaboratives operate alongside other local organizations addressing both related and competing issues. Few studies have examined the coordination of interorganizational networks with overlapping, though distinct, functions within a given nonprofit landscape[1]. Yet networks face similar pressures to articulate their value, convince funders to invest in them[2], and engage a variety of stakeholders as has been widely documented at the organization level of the nonprofit and public sectors[3].

This case study describes the efforts of the Coalition for New Britain's Children to better understand how its aims and efforts overlap with another local coalition, the New Britain Youth Network. Across 2013 and 2014, the two networks explored whether it would be beneficial to working together and the way that might best occur and be supported. As part of this exploration, partners considered questions such as, Would a single network supporting a cradle to career continuum of strategies, services, and advocacy be more compelling than two separate sets of organizations and community work? How might merging create more efficient uses of scarce resources, such as partners' time and buy-in from school district and government partners? Would merging shift the balance of power in ways that

subsumed one or the other networks' priorities, due to an imbalance in existing funding and network staff?

The process through which these two groups considered combining efforts offers a rare glimpse into the interactions between networks focused on community change. This case study presents four stages of events: the initial conditions for exploring a cradle to career continuum, the ways in which network partners learned about the possibilities for working together, the formal process the networks used to consider merging, and the decision-making that resulted from these considerations. Throughout the case study, the implications of merging (such as the sustainability of partner relationships, the increased ability to track outcomes, and the redistribution of community representation) are highlighted. Together, these thick descriptions and implications provide valuable insights for other nonprofits and coalitions considering how they function within broader partnership landscapes.

The Case Site

Like many small, post-industrial cities, New Britain is challenged with substantial human and community development needs and inadequate infrastructure to address them. New Britain is a small city of about 73,000 people[4]. The city lies in an industrial corridor southwest of the state capitol and has a long history as a destination for immigrants, particularly from Poland and other Eastern European countries. There is also a sizeable (35%) Latino population and a growing Arabic-speaking community. Over the past decade, between 40% and 45% of the school district's students have spoken a language other than English at home. A

large number of residents live in poverty (21% in 2011) and three out of every four

students qualifies for free or reduced price lunch. The median household income of

$39,838 is approximately half the state average. Within this context, the

Consolidated School District of New Britain has struggled to meet the educational

needs of all students.

Multiple nonprofit agencies and alliances have been founded with

overlapping goals of helping New Britain's children and families. The Coalition for

New Britain's Children (the Coalition), formerly New Britain's Early Childhood

Collaborative and New Britain Reads!, formed in 2001 as part of the Graustein

Memorial Fund's Discovery Initiative. To prevent negative adult experiences, the

Coalition brought together key local partners (such as the public school district,

preschool providers, and family literacy organizations) to focus on improving early

childhood opportunities and supports. The community plan developed by the

Coalition organizes the work into three focal areas: early learning, family literacy,

and health and wellness. Each of these areas has co-chairs, a program management

team, and work groups for specific projects. The Coalition is governed by a

Blueprint Management Team, which includes the co-chairs of each focal area. An

executive council ensures financial stability and accountability for achieving goals,

functioning similarly to a board of directors.

A similar group, the New Britain Youth Network (the Youth Network),

formed in 2005 when the American Savings Foundation convened a group of service

providers working with older youth. The Youth Network is currently focused on

access to highly quality afterschool and is affiliated with the Connecticut After

School Network. The Youth Network organizes around three task forces –

Evaluation and Quality Control, Connecting Families, and Youth Development – and

is governed through a steering committee of six partners. The group is smaller than

the Coalition and also has a much simpler organizational structure, with only two

levels of partner engagement. Several local agencies and organizations, such as the

YWCA and the public school district, are involved in both the Youth Network and the

Coalition.

Methods

This qualitative, comparative case study describes the circumstances and

practices of the partners in two separate networks as they consider merging into

one new entity. These analyses describe a series of decisions and the practices that

supported making those decisions, which Schramm[5] describes as central to case

study research. A case study approach is appropriate due to its attention to real-life,

holistic data from multiple perspectives[6].

Sample and Data Collection

Data for this case study was collected from one primary source, two focus

groups with Coalition and Youth Network partners, and two secondary sources:

documents describing the Youth Network and the Coalition (e.g., website materials,

grant applications, strategic plans), and the findings from an external consultant's

assessment of member and stakeholder perspectives about merging. The first focus

group was held in March 2014 with three members of both networks (including the

current chairperson, the former chairperson, and a local funder), as well as a

technical assistant. This focus group was designed to discuss the emergence of the

possibility of merging, the process for making that decision, and the extent to which

various members and stakeholders were engaged in those processes. The second

focus group was held a few weeks later with thirteen members of the Coalition's

leadership team to discuss the local levers and mechanisms that were instrumental

in effecting successful community change in New Britain; the collaboration across

networks emerged in this discussion as Coalition members gave examples of

productive strategies.

Analysis

Focus group audiorecordings were transcribed and analyzed, along with

documents, in iterative rounds of coding using the constant-comparative method[7].

In the first round, I used open coding to identify the phases of working across

networks that participants described in the two focus groups. I then applied these

closed codes to the data in a second round of coding and organized the results into

four sets of data: initial conditions, learning about Cradle to Career Continuums,

considering options for working across networks, and making decisions. In the

third and final round, I used open and axial coding to identify emergent themes

within each phase of the case.

Initial Conditions for Exploring a Career to Cradle Continuum

Both groups function as networks in and of themselves, with partnering

organizations coming together regularly to discuss ways of collaborating on

common issues. Some local partners, however, have been involved in both

networks, allowing them to see areas of overlapping efforts. This led some partners

to see the possibility for a continuum that worked to provide holistic service

delivery with families as the primary unit, rather than individuals. The two networks often work with the same families who could potentially be serviced together, providing a more organic and less confusing experience for those the networks seek to assist. Both networks have a subcommittee organized around family strategies and both are engaged in similar outreach to parents and families.

A former co-chair of the Coalition, who also participates in the Youth Network, credited a community self-assessment planning process with helping members of both groups see the advantages of working together. The self-assessment process shifted the focus of conversations away from clientele to intervention strategies. Instead of identifying as organizations that work with young children versus organizations that work with older youth, each network of partners started thinking about New Britain's strengths and resources for addressing similar strategies, such as chronic absenteeism and summer learning loss. As Coalition members considered prevention of summer learning loss as a new target area of work, some members pointed out that the Youth Network was in the second year of a pilot program and could assist the Coalition in this work. The process of self-assessment motivated members of the Coalition to seek out these sorts of advantages for working together.

There was also pressure to reduce the redundancies of logistics for people who were attending multiple meetings about similar issues. The School District experienced a high degree of turnover as a new superintendent was hired and began sending central office administrators to both sets of meetings. These administrators

started questioning the economies of scale involved in maintaining the division between early childhood and youth.

A former co-chair of the Coalition, along with the current co-chair, said conversations about redundancies also included data collection and data sharing. The Coalition was planning to begin a new area of work, summer learning loss, which would require obtaining a new set of baseline population data, collecting data about efforts, and examining changes in trends. Because the Youth Network was already working on preventing summer learning loss, the former co-chair of the Coalition pointed out they could avoid recreating the wheel by asking the Network about sharing data.

As each network began to explore the possibilities for working together, the issue of resource stability was also considered. The Youth Network has a small budget, no staff, and has been unsuccessful in securing grant funding. The Coalition's dedicated staff, influx of funding, and organizational structure for project implementation was appealing to Youth Network members looking for ways to continue to support their work. Both networks were also assured early on that if they decided to merge, local funders who have long supported their work would continue to work with them to support both agendas.

Learning About Cradle to Career Continuums

During the fall of 2012, there were several informal conversations at Youth Network and Coalition meetings about the other group, introducing projects they were implementing and discussing respective priorities. The two groups decided to hold a joint meeting to introduce members who do not participate in both to the

work of each network. In December 2013, the Coalition's governance team and the Youth Network met to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of each group. The two networks then decided that they wanted to learn more about what a cradle to career continuum could look like.

The networks assembled a panel of communities from across Connecticut that had created cradle to career continuums, including groups from Waterbury, Norwalk, and Vernon. Each cradle to career group talked about their particular community's particular needs and assets and described the work of their continuum. Members from the Youth Network and the Coalition had an opportunity to ask questions and explore ways they might engage in similar work in New Britain.

The mayor, business leaders, and the Chamber of Commerce also attended and had an opportunity to learn more about what moving towards a cradle to career continuum might involve. In a sense, the panel was as much about building relationships and support for a cradle to career continuum as it was about exploring what other communities have done. Altogether, approximately 65 people attended the event.

Considering Options for Working across Networks

The entire time that partners spent pointing out redundancies, presenting and listening to the projects of the other network, and learning about other cradle to career continuums, partners were engaged in considering whether the two networks should work more closely together. After the panel, members of the Youth Network and the Coalition discussed in their own groups whether they were interested in moving forward with their exploration of forming a continuum.

Together, the groups decided to hire a consultant to guide them in a formal process for considering whether and how to do so. The Coalition put forth a request for proposals in February 2013 and formed a subcommittee to review applications and conduct initial interviews. The networks hired a consultant in April 2013 to assist them in exploring members' perspectives about merging in a manner that allowed all partner voices to be considered.

Youth Network and Coalition members used the consultant to dig deeply into the benefits and drawbacks of forming a cradle to career continuum. During the summer of 2014, the consultant distributed an online survey to members of the Coalition and the Youth Network and conducted interviews with several stakeholders, including funders, members of the Coalition's Executive Council, and technical assistants. Findings were included in two reports, describing members and stakeholder perspectives, respectively, which were distributed to the Youth Network and the Coalition in September. A joint meeting of the two networks was held in October to discuss the benefits, drawbacks, and next steps.

Although the consultant found broad support for merging, some members of each network remained skeptical about combining the two groups – especially those on the Youth Network who saw the Coalition as being larger, more tightly organized, and better funded. In a focus group for this case study, the former co-chair of the Coalition described needing to both slow down those who want to just make a merger happen, and happen quickly, while also helping those who were reluctant to support merging to at least consider the benefits of a single entity supporting a continuum of care. She described working together on projects as a critical

mechanism for building trust among members not working with both groups. In one notable example, the two groups approached the new mayor together to make one common set of asks for her support. Working together to garner political support and advocate for their issues lent their requests additional strength in numbers and coordinated one voice about community demands in place of two competing demands for attention. An additional benefit was getting members of the Youth Network and those on the Coalition to build trust in each other as partners.
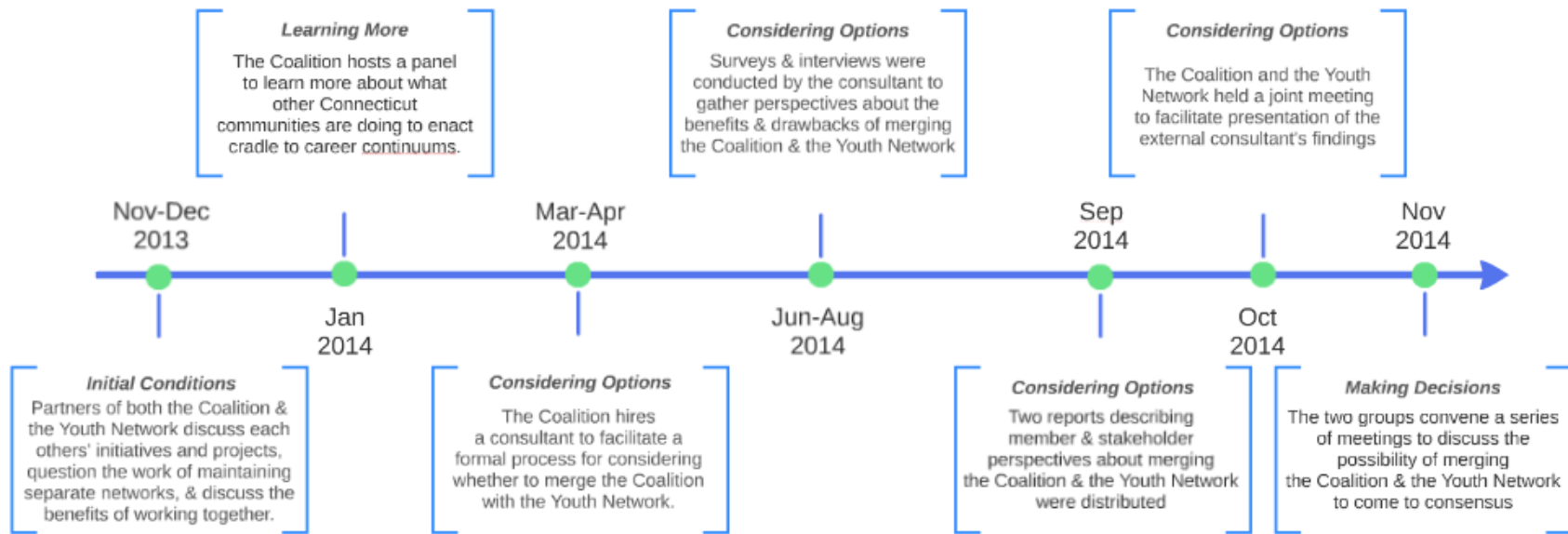
Making Decisions about Moving Forward

After learning about other Cradle to Career initiatives across the state and exploring the benefits and drawbacks of merging, partners with the Coalition and the Youth Network decided to convene a series of meetings to try to build consensus about either merging the two networks or not. In November 2014, members of the Coalition and members of the Youth Network met to review the possibilities of merging and make a series of decisions. The meeting was run by the consultant hired to assist the two networks in exploring their options.

Participants were invited to walk along the perimeter of the meeting room where posters describing various aspects of the potential merger were hung. Posters reviewed the work to date exploring the possibilities and described the proposed timeline for merging, a process for establishing the leadership of the merged network, and a structure to integrate existing workgroups and projects. Members of the exploration committee were posted at certain stops to facilitate dialogue, document questions, and engage participants in requests for their opinions.

A formal vote was held at the end of the meeting, after some dialogue about whether participants were ready to make a decision. The group in attendance voted to move forward with merging the Coalition and the Youth Network.

Timeline of Events for the Coalition and Youth Network Merger

Learning More

The Coalition hosts a panel to learn more about what other Connecticut communities are doing to enact cradle to career continuums.

Considering Options

Surveys & interviews were conducted by the consultant to gather perspectives about the benefits & drawbacks of merging the Coalition & the Youth Network

Considering Options

The Coalition and the Youth Network held a joint meeting to facilitate presentation of the external consultant's findings

Nov-Dec
2013

Mar-Apr
2014

Sep
2014

Nov
2014

Jan
2014

Jun-Aug
2014

Oct
2014

Initial Conditions

Partners of both the Coalition & the Youth Network discuss each others' initiatives and projects, question the work of maintaining separate networks, & discuss the benefits of working together.

Considering Options

The Coalition hires a consultant to facilitate a formal process for considering whether to merge the Coalition with the Youth Network.

Considering Options

Two reports describing member & stakeholder perspectives about merging the Coalition & the Youth Network were distributed

Making Decisions

The two groups convene a series of meetings to discuss the possibility of merging the Coalition & the Youth Network to come to consensus

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