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Rebecca Tilhou, Brittney Rose, Angela Eckhoff & Jane Glasgow

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Building Partnerships

The role of nonprofit organizations in supporting education diplomacy in early childhood

Rebecca Tilhou, Brittney Rose, Angela Eckhoff, and Jane Glasgow
Old Dominion University
Nonprofit organizations providing early childhood services that support the healthy growth, development, and education of young children and their families have a unique relationship with communities. In order to have significant impact on quality of life, these programs must be sustainable and committed to meeting local needs. This article illustrates how commitment to skills and principles supported by Education Diplomacy—namely implementing strategies for developing partnerships, developing strategies for supporting stakeholders, and planning for collaboration—can result in positive outcomes for young children and their families, ultimately improving the quality of life of their community.

For nearly a century, nonprofit organizations have worked to fulfill a variety of functions that help to build and maintain communities and greater society. From providing places for healthy living and work to training and educating the workforce and sustaining culture and the arts, nonprofits are an essential component of a community. Nonprofits work for the common good of people, often filling gaps between government services and vital community needs. Because of this sector’s deep understanding of a community’s social issues, nonprofits can create innovative solutions that advance the quality of life for all.

Additionally, nonprofit organizations are increasingly forming alliances, partnerships, and collaborations both within and across sectors. Nonprofits work together to address problems by sharing effort, resources, decision-making, and ownership of the final product or service. A survey of 95 urban charitable organizations found that collaborations are common among older organizations that have a larger budget size, receive government funding, rely on fewer government funding streams, have more board linkages with other nonprofits, and are not within the education, research, or social service industry.

Community nonprofits play an important role in urban environments, contributing to networks that are essential to generating social cohesion and positive growth. Studies have shown that major cities with historically high crime rates in the 1990s and 2000s experienced a decrease in violent crime as the prevalence of nonprofit organizations, in conjunction with other sectors, increased. These data suggest that local nonprofit organizations have tremendous capacity to impact those in the community who may need it most, by providing support and resources that ensure a better quality of life.

A New Nonprofit for an Urban Community
This article describes the initial steps taken by a new early childhood (EC) nonprofit organization in urban southeastern Virginia in an effort to show how attention to diplomatic principles can work to build a sustainable, representative organization. The organizational vision was to provide a coordinated early care and education system to ensure availability of and equal access to high-quality programs and services for children and families that will support children and their families from conception
and ensure the children are ready to learn once they enter kindergarten.

School readiness is a multifaceted concept, where each component cannot stand on its own and each is essential to children’s development. The EC nonprofit identified the components as: 1) ready children, 2) ready families, 3) ready schools, and 4) ready communities (see Figure 1). To meet this challenge, the organization gathered stakeholders from across all sectors in five neighboring cities to support children from the moment they are conceived and prepare them not only for kindergarten, but also for a brighter future for themselves, their families, and the community.

The urban community served by the EC nonprofit has a variety of existing services and programs that assist nearly 75,000 children and families annually, from the time of conception through a child’s fifth birthday. Unfortunately, access to these services and information is not uniform across all demographics. In 2015, when the EC nonprofit was initiated, uniform access to services was identified as a community need because of the strong connection to kindergarten readiness. With the belief that a child’s growth, development, and readiness for school holds promise for a child’s future and a community’s future, the EC nonprofit was established and began acting as a resource hub that families could access from the time a woman discovers she is pregnant to a child’s entrance into formal schooling.

From the establishment of the EC nonprofit, initial stakeholders worked to develop and strengthen the organization’s connections and bonds to the community, each bond a brick crafted through acts of diplomacy used to build a single structure for the community. Diverse stakeholders from all different sectors in the region, including health, business, public and higher education, parents, and other nonprofits, were called upon to provide insight and guidance for the EC nonprofit’s initial work. The response and desire stakeholders showed as they came together to bridge the current system’s gaps and create greater access for families proved to be astounding. In 2016, the new organization stood as its own entity and began serving the community under guiding principles that highlight Education Diplomacy (see Figure 2).

Nonprofit Built on Diplomacy and Guiding Principles
To develop the descriptive account of the
community nonprofit, we employed a revelatory, embedded, single-case design\(^3\) that included interviews and artifacts from the initial stakeholders in the organization. Specifically, we conducted and analyzed semi-structured interviews using constant comparative analysis and conducted a content analysis of organization artifacts (e.g., website and handouts). Data analysis revealed three guiding principles valued by founding board members: 1) implementing strategies for developing partnerships, 2) planning for collaboration, and 3) developing strategies for supporting stakeholders.

First, all key players discussed implementing strategies for developing partnerships. The Vice President of Grantmaking of the local community foundation, who also led the start-up of this EC nonprofit, shared the vision of bringing people together to make an impact. “Our Foundation determined that collective impact was an important structure for us. It was new on the horizon. It was a new and innovative way of bringing people together to align them around issues and solutions.” She went on to describe how the main goal stemmed from knowing that many efforts in the community were already addressing and strengthening early care and education, but “we also knew that they weren’t under one umbrella working together.” The goal? Create the umbrella and gather many under it. Thus, they began with an underlying value that still exists today: “We need to talk more. We need to be on the same page. We need to work together.” And while no gathering of actors from different sectors of the community can be in perfect harmony at all times, this value leads every discussion that drives the EC nonprofit’s vision of serving the community.

Once key players are in place, a steering committee can be formed and function as a cohesive group of individuals who work for a collective cause. Planning for collaboration can begin. The process of this EC nonprofit’s planning is described as “coordination alignment.” The director explained, “It’s about how we build those puzzle pieces and how are those programs working (that serve the community’s people) and how are we ensuring that those programs are really serving those people. But it’s not just about looking at programs and how those programs serve the community’s people, it about looking at families and children in the context of communities.” The director went on to say, “We have to look at children in the context of families and families in the context of communities, and really I think that this initiative does.”

The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction of a local school system, who also serves as a member of a working group for the EC nonprofit, further described the strategic planning and collaboration that happens in the steering committee in regard to the public education sector. “It’s definitely a two-way flow of information. I share with them what the expectations are, they share with me the realities, and together we can look at what’s happening in our division. And there are other school divisions represented there as well.” She went on to state, “We’re looking at what the needs are in the community, but we’re thinking about how we address those needs. How do we prepare people to address those needs? What should our teachers learn, our pre-service teachers? What should they learn when they’re in school so they can come out ready to support the students who need them so much?” When stakeholders come to the table with important questions, they can work as a group to find and plan solutions or make suggestions as how to find solutions. The effort is powerful, because it includes a diverse assembly of individuals.

It takes effort and time to continue in a voluntary role as a stakeholder or in a working group of a nonprofit. The EC nonprofit focused on its ability to continuously develop strategies for supporting stakeholders, to ensure sustainability of their efforts. The Program Coordinator explained about the importance of supporting stakeholders with consistent communication and understanding their needs for success. “I think us listening and letting the workgroup drive the decisions based on what
is happening in their own organizations (is important). Then, they have an opportunity to see this is a challenge or an obstacle with my everyday work and we need to find a resolution or a solution to this. They recognize that we’re here to do that and to help make that happen.”

The Program Coordinator went on describe that her organization demonstrates not just Education Diplomacy, but also Life Diplomacy. “I think in every aspect of life diplomacy, it’s how you deliver the message, and it’s how you bring people together. And because this is a collective impact, which means it’s community led and it’s more organic, you know, bottom up; it’s the people on the ground making the decisions about ‘This works’ or ‘This doesn’t,’ and how can we find a better way to change the system.” Diplomacy determines how you deliver your message and the EC nonprofit’s Program Coordinator is an expert at this. She also models the diplomatic ideal of group members listening and acknowledging other’s ideas. She shared, “I think the key is, when we bring these stakeholders together, making sure that we’re hearing what they say; and it’s not our idea, you know, it’s the people on the ground. It’s your idea. It’s what would make the system stronger, and then how can we go about making that happen?”

Intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm is reflected in one’s own willingness to participate in events and organizations. When committee members question the value of their role and contribution, the EC nonprofit’s Director and Program Coordinator are quick to acknowledge individuals’ strengths to pull them back in as active participants. A Workforce Development Coordinator for a local city shared, “I was initially involved in one of the committees and I was kind of clearing my role, and I quite

Figure 2. Guiding Principles in Initial Program Development to Create Educational Diplomacy
frankly stopped going because I didn’t see what I contributed. But then the director brought me back and she made me the chair of this subcommittee so I’m just now getting actively engaged again.” This working group member understands that even if an individual’s career “is not in any way [involved with] young children,” it’s still vital to “understand the importance of our next generation.” The EC nonprofit understands this as well and not only works to serve families in the community, but also puts forth great effort in serving the needs of its stakeholders who make great things happen for the community. As the Vice President of Grant Making stated, “When you improve the lives of children in families, you improve many of the systems in our community, and the community benefits.”

Collaborative Sustainable Model
With any new nonprofit organization, sustainability is a key focus. A leading institute for community and global health housed in the community’s medical school has recently come to be the EC nonprofit’s new home. While this may emphasize health aspects of the organization’s goal, it is a move that will ensure the organization’s sustainability and ability to network on an even larger scale. The director of the health institute described this new nonprofit as “growing to . . . rates that we can’t even imagine. [We can] engage additional nonprofits that are involved along the spectrum of care, from prenatal care all the way to early childhood, to involve anyone who is involved in not just healthcare, but workforce development, and looking at policies for business and for cities and for organizations. I see this growing and touching everyone who needs to be involved.” The excitement is palpable as she described her belief in sustainability and growth as this message reaches more and more people. “That’s where it becomes sustainable. When other organizations and individuals and entities realize . . . this is so innovative, but yet common sense and [they will say] ‘We want to be a part of that, we want to be associated with this activity, because it’s simply the right thing to do.’” The key for growth is the proliferation of the important message that our community depends on organizations like this, who support the next generation through acts of Education Diplomacy.

Guiding Diplomatic Principles
The initial phase of this organization’s development and the guiding principles that emerged were central to creating an organization that has successful engagement across many sectors of the community today. This organization is not only showing sustainability, but also showing growth as it builds new connections in the community. As we have seen, nonprofits do make a difference in the lives of people in their communities. It is important to remember that the most successful organizations, such as the one highlighted here, are successful because they have built upon important diplomatic principles during initial program development, such as implementing strategies for developing partnerships, planning for collaboration, and developing strategies for supporting stakeholders. Focusing on these guiding principles in the initial phase of program development is central to creating engagement across all systems. Organizations seeking to build sustainable community-centered nonprofits should carefully consider their initial attention to these diplomatic principles during the early stages of the program in an effort to build and strengthen their bonds within the communities they serve.

Notes: