Balsz Community Scan

Prologue: Executive Summary

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Background

In Fall of 2011, ASU's Partnership for Community Development (PCD) entered into a collaboration with Valley of the Sun United Way (VSUW) to conduct a community scan to inform the Balsz Promise Neighborhood initiative. The vision of the Balsz Promise Neighborhood initiative is to create “a comprehensive and seamless cradle-to-college-to-career continuum to improve educational and developmental outcomes for the children and youth of the community.”

A fundamental tenet of the emerging vision was that all elements of the Balsz community must be engaged if the educational and developmental outcomes of education are to be maximized. Thus, the responsibility for building a thriving learning environment rests not solely with the schools, but with the entire community. There are many players: individuals, families, businesses, faith communities, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, service clubs, and many other community-based organizations. As the old adage goes, “It takes a whole community to make a community whole.” The basic premise is that that all aspects of community life – and all the individuals and organizations within it – boldly shape the destiny of the children and youth of a community.

Many partners where assembled to provide leadership for this Balsz Promise Neighborhood initiative. These included but were not limited to Valley of the Sun United Way, Balsz Elementary School District (BESD), Communities in Schools AZ, Camelback High School, Gateway Early College High School, Gateway Community College, Educare Arizona, ASU – Partnership for Community Development, ASU - Educational Outreach and Student Services, KAET - Channel 8 Educational Outreach – ASSET, Chicanos Por La Causa, City of Phoenix Department of Human Services, City of Phoenix Department of Neighborhood Services, the Lindon Park and the Greater Orangedale Neighborhood Associations, Boys & Girls Club of Metropolitan Phoenix, Southwest Human Development, Literacy Volunteers of Maricopa County, and UMOM New Day center. The partnership structure continues to expand over time with an ever-increasing roster, and emerging support from entities such as Ellis Center for Educational Excellence, Apollo Group/University of Phoenix, Stardust Foundation, Desert Schools Federal Credit Union, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families and others.

The ASU Partnership for Community Development’s Balsz Community Scan was commissioned by VSUW to gain perspective on community assets and challenges, as well as what the Balsz community senses are barriers and opportunities for enhancing the educational and developmental outcomes for its children and youth. VSUW and the PCD elected to use an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model for conducting the scan, which is designed “to empower the community to establish its own vision.”

The ABCD model assumes that the answers for community challenges rest in the community, and not within institutions and traditional community service structures. While realistically identifying and addressing challenges within any given community, the focus is on identifying and organizing the many gifts and assets that abound within every community – challenged or not. This perspective is ultimately used to select and implement
effective community development strategies that both meet community needs and build on community strengths.

Community Scan Methodologies

Four distinct methodologies were utilized to build the Balsz Community Scan:

National Best Practice Review

The Balsz Community Scan was anchored in a comprehensive analysis of nationally recognized literature on and “best practices” in community development and school, family and community partnerships. The methods used in the comprehensive review ensured that

• core insights of asset-based community development methodology were reflected in the preparation of this report,
• nationally accepted approaches to community assessment were followed, and
• core insights about effective action plan development and asset-based intervention strategies were considered.

It was equally important that useful resources, toolkits and guidebooks were reviewed and offered to the community as forms of empowerment to create effective change. Such insights from the national literature and best practices are embedded throughout the entirety of the scan. There is particular emphasis on reviewing literature that is useful in helping community members build school, family and community partnerships that will create pathways to success for children and youth.

Community Conversations

Following ABCD protocol, an important element of the scanning process centered on gathering input from community members surrounding the intended outcomes of the Balsz Promise Neighborhood initiative. A series of 15 focus groups and 19 key informant interviews were established to gain perspective on the prevailing concerns, hopes and aspirations of community members – both in general and in the particular context of helping children and youth of the community succeed.

The focus groups included a diverse range of elementary, junior high and high school children, parents of these children, teachers, administrators, and adult residents with no direct connections to school activities. The key informant interviews were conducted with strategically chosen community members who have specialized forms of knowledge of the needs, aspirations, challenges, services and programs of the Balsz community. The focus group and key informant interviews were conducted between March and July 2012.
Community Vital Signs Assessment

The scanning process also included a comprehensive socio-demographic and economic profile analysis of the community. Examples of such data include: household composition, income indicators, health and public safety indicators, school performance measures, and other economic and life quality indicators. In essence, the profile analysis assembles what is known about variables having bearing on the vitality of the community.

Community Asset Mapping

Finally, again following ABCD protocol, the scan developed an inventory of the many assets within the Balsz community - including its people, facilities, institutions, programs and services.

Organization of the Scan

The scan is organized into three major components (Part A, Part B, and Part C) and an epilogue. It carries a unique format tailored to the goals of the Balsz Promise Neighborhood initiative. The format is designed to engage the community in framing specifics of the vision for youth success, and in creating effective pathways for youth to achieve that success.

Part A: The Story of Our Community

Part A is a community workbook. It introduces community members to the fundamentals of community organizing and visioning, and presents key themes from the community conversations. The workbook provides a mechanism for igniting further conversation about the issues that are important to community members, and for generating a platform for identifying important actions that will lead to youth success.

Written as a storybook complete with puzzles, lessons, and assignments, it contains twelve chapters – each reflecting an important theme emerging from the focus group conversations and key informant surveys. The chapters and themes are:

- Chapter 1: Our Kids: Our Hope
- Chapter 2: Believing in Children & Youth
- Chapter 3: Pathways to Success
- Chapter 4: The Nurturing Family
- Chapter 5: The Nurturing School
- Chapter 6: The Nurturing Neighborhood
- Chapter 7: It Really Does Take a Village
- Chapter 8: Enriching the Experiences
- Chapter 9: Hubs of Engagement
- Chapter 10: Linking Together
- Chapter 11: Growing Leaders
- Chapter 12: Involving our Children & Youth
Part B: Scan Methods, Findings, and Resources Toolbox

Part B provides greater focus on the results of the community conversations, and draws linkages to the results of the vital signs assessment and community asset mapping process. It also provides a condensed snapshot of the Balsz community, describing major landmarks within, and characteristics of, the Balsz community.

Part B also includes a comprehensive review of “best practices” literature that has bearing on the Balsz Promise Neighborhood initiative. Manuals, worksheets, and toolkits are reviewed that would help the community move through the five-step process of:

- Building relationships
- Formulating vision
- Tapping resources effectively
- Acting collaboratively, and
- Engaging in ongoing learning

It also contains a list of resources keyed to each of the twelve chapters of the community workbook (Part A) – offering community members specific insights on how to create community action around each of the twelve themes identified as important through the community conversations. Part B ends with an extensive list of particularly helpful articles, books and websites on how to build effective school, family, and community partnerships that foster student success.

Part C: Community Vital Signs and Assets Inventory

Part C contains the results of the Community Vital Signs Assessment and Community Asset Mapping methodologies. It serves as a repository of key statistical data that summarizes the socio-demographic structure of the Balsz community, as well as key institutional and organizational assets of the community – including but not limited to educational organizations, faith communities, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, businesses, service clubs and other community-based organizations. All data are derived from secondary data sources such as the U.S. Census, the American Community Survey, the Guidestar inventory of nonprofit organizations, and the MelissaDATA business index.

Epilogue: Bridging two Powerful Planning Approaches

The epilogue provides an overview of how the findings of the scan tie into the seven outcome solutions currently identified by the Balsz Promise Neighborhood initiative – through a process separate from the scan. These seven solutions are:

- Solution 1: Children enter kindergarten ready to succeed
- Solution 2: All K-12 students will become proficient in academic content
- Solution 3: All students will achieve success in post-secondary education and career
- Solution 4: Parents and community will support all children and youth in achieving
Solution 5: All children and youth will be healthy
Solution 6: All children and youth will live in stable environments
Solution 7: All children and youth will have access to 21st century technology

In interpreting potential linkages, an emphasis is placed on the work of the Balsz Promise Neighborhood Youth Advisory Council, which is an example of a program that well exemplifies both goals of the Promise Neighborhood solutions as well as the findings from the scan.

Conclusion

This community scan documents the many possibilities for Balsz and the potential role of community partners and members in affecting positive change within the community. Clearly established goals anchored in a community vision will create a profound and enduring impact. The scan highlights the importance of collaborative action and leadership among the community members and partners. An asset-based focus will help the Balsz community achieve self-sufficiency. Much work is still to be done, but the rewards have the potential to last for generations.

Gratitude is extended to Valley of the Sun United Way, the students, teachers, staff and administrators of the Balsz Elementary School District, and the many community residents and advocates who participated in the community conversations. Without their commitment and support, this scan would not have been possible.