

PROMOTING HIGH-QUALITY OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME IN KING COUNTY

School's Out Washington's journey as the intermediary organization
for the Best Starts for Kids Out-of-School Time grant investment



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Introduction

About Best Starts for Kids

Best Starts for Kids (BSK) is an initiative that aims to improve the health and well-being of all residents in King County, Washington. Funded by a six-year levy that was approved by King County voters in November 2015, BSK invests an average of \$65 million per year in services, programs, and initiatives that build strong and resilient families and communities and that help young people thrive. Following voter approval, priority areas for BSK investment were determined through extensive consultation and engagement with stakeholders throughout King County. The decisions about priority areas were made with the understanding that the implementation would remain flexible and responsive to changes in the overall environment.

Investment in Out-of-School Time

One of the priority areas that emerged from the engagement process was out-of-school time (OST). Given the extensive research base linking high-quality youth development programs to positive youth outcomes, investing in high-quality out-of-school time programs was seen as a promising way for King County to make progress on one of three key results areas outlined in the BSK Implementation Plan: “King County is a place where everyone has equitable opportunities to be safe and healthy as they progress through childhood, building academic and life skills to be thriving members of their communities.”¹ A total of \$8.3 million has been set aside to fund the BSK OST grant strategy for 2018-2021. BSK OST grants have been awarded to 31 unique organizations – 12 people of color-led organizations, and 22 organizations in seven place-based collaboratives.²

About School’s Out Washington

King County identified School’s Out Washington (SOWA) as the intermediary organization that would support planning, implementation, and performance measurement for the BSK OST grant investment. Based in Seattle, SOWA is a non-profit organization that provides support and guidance to expanded learning programs across the state of Washington and helps to improve young people’s access to high-quality out-of-school time opportunities.

About this Case Study

As part of a multi-year developmental evaluation, SOWA commissioned Public Profit to develop this case study to tell the story of its journey as the intermediary organization for the BSK OST grant investment. This case study will highlight the success and challenges SOWA has faced and lift up the lessons SOWA has learned from its experience to help

¹ For more information see: <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/community-human-services/initiatives/best-starts-for-kids/dashboards.aspx>

² Two organizations are part of two place-based collaboratives and one organization is part of a place-based collaborative and also has a POC-led grant.

other organizations interested in this work understand what it takes to support an initiative of this scale.

Public Profit applied a mixed methods approach to this case study. Data collection and reporting was guided by these questions:

- What role has SOWA played as the intermediary organization for the BSK OST grant strategy? Why was SOWA well-positioned to play this role?
- How has SOWA demonstrated its commitment to equity in the implementation of the BSK OST grant strategy?
- How has SOWA demonstrated its commitment to continuous improvement in the implementation of the BSK OST grant strategy?
- How has SOWA navigated its partnership with King County?

Public Profit used documents from SOWA and interviews with SOWA leadership, SOWA staff, SOWA coaches, and King County staff as key data sources.

SOWA's Roles in the BSK OST Grant Investment

In spring 2017, SOWA was selected by King County to be the intermediary organization for the BSK OST grant investment, and was tasked with overseeing planning, implementation, and performance measurement for the investment.

Why School's Out Washington?

School's Out Washington was well-positioned to play the intermediary role because of its leadership and experience in the OST field and the strong alignment of its institutional values with those of King County.

Leadership and experience in the OST field

With over three decades of experience supporting OST programs in the state of Washington, SOWA is widely regarded as a leader in the OST field within King County and throughout the state. Between 2012-2013, SOWA led a process to develop the state's first quality standards for out-of-school time programs ("Washington State Quality Standards for Afterschool and Youth Development Programs"³), which set out a definition of program quality that afterschool and youth development programs could use to guide continual improvement. SOWA is also a key partner in the Washington Expanded Learning Opportunities Quality Initiative (ELOQI) that was launched in

³ Washington State Quality Standards for Afterschool & Youth Development Programs, retrieved from: <https://www.schoolsoutwashington.org/pages/quality-standards>

2016.⁴ The initiative aims to provide afterschool and youth development programs with a streamlined system of supports, including assessments, coaching, and training, to enable them to deliver high-quality programming. SOWA has adopted many of these elements in the implementation of the BSK OST grant investment.

“[SOWA] has a great reputation in the community – they’re a known entity in the OST world, throughout the state but especially King County...They’ve been doing work around quality programs and quality support for a really long time. They already had the systems and structure in place to do that work. We selected them because it made sense to be able to deal with programing and quality supports in one.”
– Megan McJennett, Best Starts for Kids Implementation Manager at King County

“We had demonstrated evidence that we had the mechanisms to help programs improve their quality.” – Jackie Jainga-Hyllseth, Chief Program Quality Officer

“We’ve been doing this quality improvement work for a long time and there are things that are new and experimental about this initiative, but we also have experience and expertise to fall back on.” – Lex Gavin, BSK Program Quality Coordinator

Another factor that has contributed to SOWA’s deep experience and strong understanding of the OST field is its approach to hiring. SOWA values field experience and intentionally hires staff with direct service experience.

“One area that is important in an intermediary is that our staff have worked in direct service before they come here...People with on the ground experience means that they can relate and programs see that in us and feel like we’re connected in community.” – Elizabeth Whitford, Chief Executive Officer

“SOWA’s role is unique because we’re very close to the sector – we have an intimate understanding of what the conditions are, what youth and family need, so we’re able to create our system and culture around that.”
– Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

“We come from the field... everyone that the BSK grantees work with have been in youth programs. While we might not be peers now, it is more relatable. We get it, we are also in this field and we are advocates for you.” – Lex Gavin, BSK Program Quality Coordinator

⁴The ELOQI is a joint effort by School’s Out Washington (SOWA), Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Child Care Aware (CCA), and Cultivate Learning, University of Washington.

“[SOWA] really understands the challenges. It means a lot to us as a small agency to know that our funders understand where we’re coming from.” – Representative from a BSK OST Grantee

Institutional alignment with King County’s values: A commitment to racial equity

SOWA has an explicit commitment to racial equity and addressing the impact of systemic racism on young people in the state of Washington.⁵ As an organization, SOWA has been deeply involved in training, advocacy, and leadership in the racial equity space, with the goal of providing equal access and opportunity for all young people in Washington State.

“At SOWA, we are committed to addressing how these disparities impact young people in our communities. We believe that access to high-quality expanded learning opportunities is essential for closing the opportunity gap and challenging inequity. We know first-hand from three decades of work in diverse communities how expanded learning opportunities can level the playing field. That is why we strive to increase access to quality programs for youth of color so that they have the opportunity to reach their full potential.” – SOWA Website

Similarly, King County is committed to advancing equity and social justice in all of its work, including in the BSK initiative. In its recent Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan, the county set out a number of strategies to guide its approach to reducing inequities and removing barriers to opportunity. These include investing where needs are greatest, and investing in community partnerships, both of which are key features of the BSK OST grant investment.

“The values of the BSK initiative align nicely to SOWA’s values. We knew that if SOWA became the grant maker for the initiative that we would be able to serve the young people in King County differently... We had made an organizational commitment around providing access to the highest need programs and children and youth.” – Jackie Jainga-Hyllseth, Chief Program Quality Officer

“There’s a real commitment to racial equity work, [and] culturally-responsive youth work in general.” – Lex Gavin, BSK Program Quality Coordinator

“[SOWA has] really taken what BSK has laid out [in terms] of leading with equity and social justice and taken it to another level.” – Megan McJennett, BSK Implementation Manager at King County

⁵ For more on SOWA’s racial equity commitment see: <https://www.schoolsoutwashington.org/pages/our-racial-equity-commitment>

SOWA's Roles in the BSK OST Grant Investment

Planning

One of SOWA's earliest roles in the BSK OST grant investment was refining the program models for the BSK OST grant strategy. Building on earlier discussions led by the Youth Development Executives of King County (YDEKC), SOWA proposed two grant strategies: place-based collaboratives and people of color (POC)-led organizations. SOWA's commitment to equity was clear in its approach to both program models. For the place-based model, programs that served youth from low-income families, youth of color, or other disadvantaged populations in geographies that lack adequate access to high quality expanded learning programs were prioritized for funding. The place-based model was also designed to encourage organizations working in the same geographical area to collaborate and build on each other's strengths in order to best meet the needs of underserved neighborhoods and school communities. For the POC-led model, organizations led by people of color and which serve children and youth of color within communities of color were prioritized.

"In BSK, from the gate we had a very clear stance around racial equity and really institutionalized that commitment through our POC-led funding strategy. The goal of this strategy is to provide access and high-quality programming to underinvested communities – youth of color and low-income youth. Those goals alone address issues of equity."
– Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

"[Equity has] been built in from the beginning – when thinking about who we funded. Having a POC-led strategy is a commitment to equity in and of itself, and that was a priority in the grant process." – Lisle Bertsche Kehr, King County Grants Manager

SOWA's commitment to equity was also reflected in the flexible funding model it employed for the BSK OST grant strategy. Based on the grant strategy type, grantees were contractually obligated to serve a certain number of youth and meet dosage requirements.⁶ Beyond this requirement, grantees could propose to use the funds in a way that made the most sense for them, such as for staffing, professional development, transportation, and program supplies. SOWA did not impose additional requirements for how grantees could use the funding, with the exception that they could not spend more than 15% on overhead.

⁶ Dosage requirements are different for POC-led and place-based collaboratives. POC-led organizations were contracted to serve 20 or more youth, 2 days a week for 32 weeks during the school year, with optional summer programming. Place-based collaboratives were contracted to serve 50 or more youth, 5 days a week for 32 weeks of the year in addition to 6 weeks of summer programming. The dosage requirements for place-based collaboratives were shared across the multiple organizations within the partnership, whereas the requirements for POC-led organizations were for a single organization.

SOWA also took steps to ensure that a range of organizations applied for the funding opportunity, not just well-established programs. SOWA allowed grant applicants to self-select into one of two phases depending on their level of familiarity with the Youth Program Quality Initiative (YPQI)⁷ and the amount of support and time they would need to prepare to offer programming. Organizations in Phase One were new to the Youth Program Quality Standards or were creating new or greatly expanded programming or partnerships. These organizations received funding in February 2018 and worked with SOWA for six months to prepare for program implementation to begin in September 2018. Organizations in Phase Two were more familiar with the Youth Program Quality Standards and did not require as much preparation or planning time. Because these organizations were more prepared to begin program implementation, they also received funding in February 2018, but began program implementation in April 2018. SOWA's two-phase approach ensured that organizations that needed additional time and support in order to implement a high-quality OST program were still able to apply for the grant, and in fact, were encouraged to do so. Additionally, SOWA conducted information sessions across King County to raise awareness about the funding opportunity and ran technical assistance sessions to support applicants as they were preparing their proposals.

Finally, SOWA facilitated the proposal review panel process, which consisted of 22 external community member reviewers. Reviewers maintained their focus on equity throughout the proposal review process, including completing an anti-bias training which trained them to review proposals for substance rather than whether proposals followed dominant cultural norms in grant writing. The review committee delivered funding recommendations to King County, who then made final funding decisions. In total, 12 POC-led organizations and seven place-based collaboratives received funding.

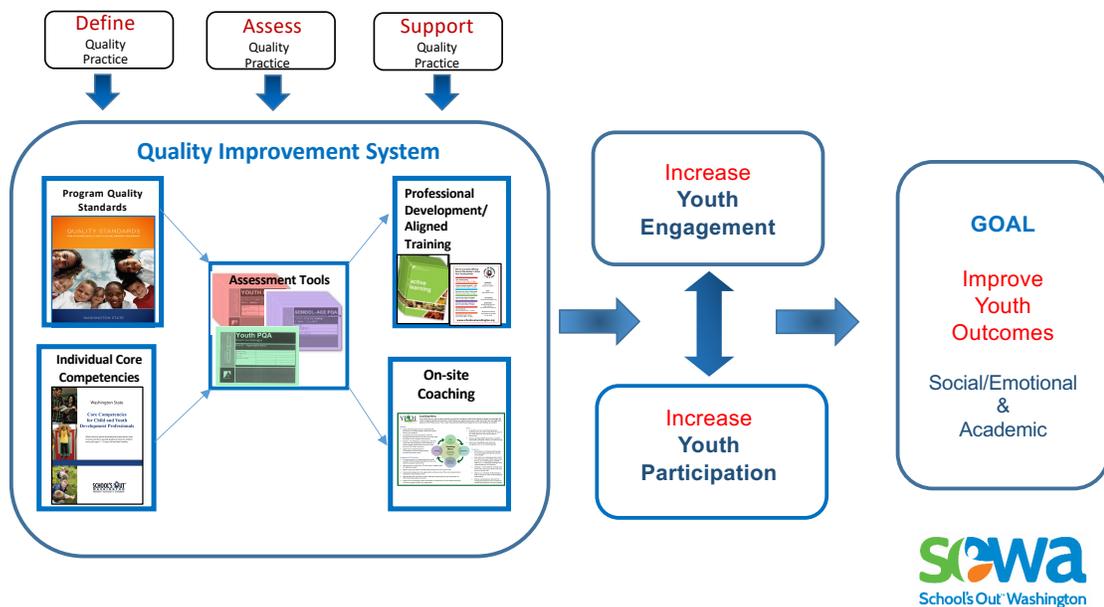
“Early on, I wanted to be really intentional about the way we disseminated the information. For example, we held informational sessions around the county to walk through the RFP and answer questions. We put together an FAQ process and committed to answering questions within 48 hours. By the end of that process, we had a 30 page FAQ document. Throughout the process, we wanted to make sure we gave opportunity for technical assistance with the understanding that the people we wanted to reach may not have the infrastructure or technical expertise that some funders may [want]. So we flooded the sector with as much support as possible.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

⁷ For more information see: www.schoolsoutwashington.org/pages/quality-improvement-system

Implementation

SOWA began supporting the implementation of the BSK OST grant investment in early 2018. SOWA's roles in the early stages of implementation included contracting with the 35 organizations receiving grant funding and onboarding them to the initiative. Since the beginning of the contract period, SOWA has been providing grantees with quality supports aligned with the Youth Program Quality Initiative (YPQI), including one-on-one coaching, training, program quality assessments using the Social-Emotional Learning Program Quality Assessment (SEL PQA) tool, and peer learning community meetings. Figure 1 outlines how these quality improvement supports support increasing youth engagement and participation with the goal of improving youth social/emotional and academic outcomes.

Figure 1. Washington's Quality Improvement System



Source: School's Out Washington, 2019.

SOWA coaches provide each POC-led organization with up to 30 hours of individual coaching annually, and each place-based collaborative receives 30 hours of coaching annually to share among collaborative partners. Coaches support grantees in implementing youth development practices associated with high-quality programs by providing a myriad of individualized supports, including tailored trainings, guidance in understanding the organization's SEL PQA scores, and support in action-planning.

SOWA trainings cover a range of quality and capacity topics that are relevant to grantees, including the YPQI, SEL PQA, data-driven planning, evaluation planning, survey design, structural racism, cultural responsiveness and trans inclusiveness. As part of implementation, SOWA also provides on-demand technical assistance to grantees to address any issues that may arise.

“[Early on, our role in the initiative was...] making sure grantees understood the expectations of our contractual relationship, through an intentional onboarding process and ensuring that their needs were and continue to be met – it’s very much a partnership. We value communication and we are continuously doing our best to communicate with grantees effectively. So much of this work has been the building of intentional systems of engagement.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

Performance Measurement

SOWA also supports performance measurement and evaluation for the BSK OST grant investment. SOWA collects quantitative and qualitative data from grantees on a semi-annual basis, including information about youth participation, program quality, program goals and youth outcomes. SOWA synthesizes this information into semi-annual reports to King County. An important part of performance measurement is ensuring that grantees uphold their contracted commitment to meet the minimum number of youth and dosage requirements, as well as any additional commitments that were made in each organization’s individual contract and scope of work. If grantees do not meet the minimum contract deliverables, SOWA works with them to understand why they have not been able to meet the deliverables, the challenges they are facing, and how SOWA can support them. When necessary, SOWA has worked with grantees to develop mitigation strategies and implement a corrective action plan.

SOWA has adopted a non-punitive approach to quality improvement, recognizing that different organizations and collaboratives have different starting points and might see improvement at different rates. For example, SOWA has reassured grantees that SEL PQA scores will not impact funding; SOWA is more interested in ensuring that grantees engage fully with the YPQI process (e.g., attending trainings, engaging in coaching, completing assessments).

“None of the oversight and monitoring and evaluation is punitive. We’re not threatening to take funding away. That’s quite special and unique in the role of a funder.” – Lex Gavin, BSK Program Quality Coordinator

SOWA's Strengths and Successes

SOWA has demonstrated numerous strengths and successes as the grant maker and intermediary, including developing strong relationships between grantees and the SOWA team, a commitment to equitable practice, and support for ongoing continuous quality improvement for grantees and SOWA's internal practices.

Strong Relationships with Grantees

SOWA's practice of developing strong relationships with grantees is a key strength in its position as the intermediary for the BSK OST initiative. Both the SOWA BSK team and the SOWA coaches have intentionally nurtured these relationships.

The BSK team at SOWA has cultivated trusting, personal relationships with each of the BSK grantees through personalized and responsive communication and individualized support. The BSK team knows the grantees' staff members and their programs' unique strengths and needs, which has enabled SOWA to provide individualized support to grantees.

"We're deeply connected to our grantees and we're in close relationships with them. Because of the quality investments and coaching and training, it's a deeper more relational grant making relationship than you would typically have." – Elizabeth Whitford, Chief Executive Officer

"I'm a very relational person. I think this has really set the tone for our work with grantees. Given my commitment to partnership and to the community, I welcome feedback and hard conversations. I'd rather know and have a sense of what the real challenges are and to create an environment where grantees feel like they can come to me or the team and voice those things. This work, first and foremost, is about relationship and community building. I believe it is this approach that has led to grantees feeling safe enough to share about very specific challenges inside their organizations and that without a strong relationship in place, this likely wouldn't be the case." – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director



“We as an organization have tried to approach grantees in ways that are more relationship oriented, and less about strict funder-fundee models that are really rooted in whiteness and classism.”– Lex Gavin, BSK Program Quality Coordinator

“I think SOWA has been really responsive to their grantees. They have systems in place to support the organizations and celebrate the organizations. It’s been really impressive and fun to watch.” – Megan McJennett, BSK Implementation Manager at King County

SOWA has an “open-door policy” and have deliberately made themselves available to grantees for support. Grantees appreciate SOWA’s availability and responsiveness, and feel comfortable approaching SOWA staff with questions, concerns, or requests for support. The BSK team considers itself to be a relationship partner to grantees, not merely a funder.

“We really continuously make ourselves available with an open-door policy and transparency with and to grantees. We’re not just expecting them to come to us and trust us, but we trust them and we’re sharing information with them that feels real. We are growth mindset- and strengths-based... The feedback from grantees about why they appreciate SOWA is that they have someone to talk to. Giving a human face to it is huge. And tailored supports - tailored coaches, trainings specifically for the people in the cohort. Being an intermediary affords us the ability to focus on that relationship piece, which has proven really important in the initiative.”– Lex Gavin, BSK Program Quality Coordinator

*“Omana is somebody that has been holding my hand through this process. To me, she is someone that is there if I ever need something. She gives me the feeling that she is available and don’t feel like what you’re asking is too much. She gives me the sense that she’s a professional but is still connected to how a grassroots organization still needs something. They always say if I need anything to ask them. I have asked some things over the phone like clarifying questions and she was always able to do that. I think it’s an untapped resource that I have.”
– Representative from a BSK OST Grantee*

In addition to strong relationships with the SOWA BSK team, deep relationships with their SOWA coaches have also been a fundamental component of supporting grantees in expanding and improving their youth programs. SOWA coaches named strong relationships with grantees as a core aspect of SOWA’s coaching philosophy.

*“Relationships first. That is definitely the philosophy of all coaches in SOWA. [A relationship] in which they can trust you and value you.”
– Sebastian Wilson, Youth Development Program Quality Coach*

Commitment to Equity

SOWA's organization-wide commitment to equity has carried through to SOWA's involvement in the BSK OST initiative specifically.

Viewing grantees as experts

One practice SOWA implements as part of its equity commitment is viewing grantees as experts in their own communities and programs. Many grantees are serving culturally-specific populations; SOWA recognizes that grantees serving these populations have intimate knowledge of their own communities and that they are the experts in how best to serve their youth and families. Furthermore, SOWA understands that their grantees serve a wide range of communities within King County, and therefore a "one-size-fits-all" approach to programming does not account for the unique needs and strengths of each community.

"We're trying to be super responsive to the things that matter for them. That is closely aligned with King County's design but also SOWA's investment in culturally relevant and responsive support and programming. [Our approach is], 'You are experts in the East African community, so tell us what do you want to do to better serve your community.'" – Lex Gavin, BSK Program Quality Coordinator

As mentioned previously, the design of the BSK OST grant strategy includes a flexible funding model. This model allows grantees to use funding how they best see fit in order to best serve their community.

*"SOWA is very proactive to engage us and allow us to have the space to create the things that we believe the program services are effective and it's going to be helpful to the population that we are serving."
– Representative from a BSK OST Grantee*

SOWA coaches also hold viewing grantees as experts as central to their work. The coaches we interviewed perceived their role as guiding grantees in figuring out what they want to do and how to do it, rather than delivering expert opinions. They recognized that the grantees are the experts in their own programs and communities, and that coaches are there to help the grantees make space for reflection and learning.

*"I am here to draw out your expertise. I see you as the expert on you, your program, and participants. My role is to help you see that in yourself. [As a coach I need to] acknowledge their strengths first."
– Sebastian Wilson, Youth Development Program Quality Coach*

Responding to grantees' experiences and needs

The BSK OST grantees have different levels of experience with quality improvement, different organizational priorities, and different programmatic goals. Another way that SOWA is committed to equity is by being responsive to grantees' level of experience and

needs. For example, as part of the evaluation and performance measurement plan, SOWA requires all grantees to set and measure youth outcomes. To enable grantee-level customization, SOWA allows grantees to set their own goals and determine how they will measure success.

Similarly, during one-on-one coaching sessions, coaches have the flexibility to address issues and concerns of interest to the grantee in the moment. While improving program quality is coaches' main focus, the coaches we interviewed noted that oftentimes grantees request their support with issues other than program quality. They said they appreciated SOWA's flexible coaching model, because they are able to be responsive to the topics that grantees bring to coaching meetings instead of being prescriptive and rigid.

“SOWA’s approach is very flexible and responsive to [grantees’] needs. We might have an idea of what we’re going to do, but it is about what the needs are in the moment. So, if they want you to strategize with them instead of running a consensus meeting [to score the PQA], then that’s what we do. Program quality is important, but so [is] strategizing about issues that you’re facing in the moment. Flexibility around SOWA’s coaching approach is really huge. SOWA has said that they value flexibility. Going back to it, I realize why there wasn’t formal training [for coaches], they didn’t want me to feel regimented. That doesn’t help build relationships.” – Sebastian Wilson, Youth Development Program Quality Coach

“The cool thing about coaching is that wherever the coachee wants to go with the coaching, they really can...No matter what realm, they have the opportunity to talk and reflect. This helps them refocus and be more successful in their work.” – April Miller, Youth Development Program Quality Coach



Offering equity-based trainings

As part of an ongoing commitment to equity, SOWA provided a structural racism training for grantees. This training helped participants increase their understanding of structural racism and how this understanding is crucial to achieving cultural competence. SOWA also offered a trans inclusiveness panel to provide resources and strategies for creating safe, affirming, and culturally responsive spaces for all youth, including trans youth. The event included a panel of local trans leaders, mentors, and educators in the youth development field. The panel members shared their insights on creating organizational cultures that work against the isolation and stigmatization many trans youth face, with a particular focus on working in communities of color and religious communities.

Adopting a culturally-responsive approach to program quality improvement

Coaches also help grantees interpret the YPQI framework and their SEL PQA assessment scores in a way that takes into account their unique cultural contexts. SOWA coaches have both deep knowledge of the social and emotional learning (SEL) concepts that the SEL PQA is measuring, along with a nuanced understanding of the program's culture and context. For example, one SOWA coach is working with a program that serves youth who are non-verbal. The PQA tool is often centered around verbal communication (e.g. by assessing how the staff instruct youth to carry out activities, solve conflicts, reflect). The coach and grantee worked together to understand the underlying intent behind the items in the tool, and then identified how those practices may show up in their specific program. In this particular program, staff encourage youth to use visual cues, movement, and other forms of communication to express their opinions and choices. Through coaching, the grantee was able to redefine how the PQA items and practices are implemented when working with their specific population of youth. This type of culturally-responsive support helps grantees continue the practices that are already working well and begin implementing new best practices to better support their youth.

“My understanding of SEL has been defined in large part by SOWA and the PQA tool. Now, when I’m working with grantees, I’m recognizing how other programs have been talking about these same concepts in different ways—‘What does social emotional learning look like in different cultures?’ It has been valuable to work with so many different programs that represent different communities and have a conversation about what each practice looks like in the setting of their particular program... The [PQA] tool may offer some suggestions and what has been valuable for their understanding is to look for the underlying intent of those examples—take that as the starting point and then think about how that shows up in their program.” – Jeff Chandler, Youth Development Program Quality Coach

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

SOWA's commitment to continuous improvement is demonstrated both in the support it provides for grantees in their quality improvement processes and in SOWA's internal practices and actions to continuously improve its own support for grantees.

Supporting grantees in their continuous quality improvement

To support grantees in improving the quality of their OST youth programs and their organizations as a whole, SOWA provides tools, trainings, and individualized support through coaching.

All grantees participate in the Youth Program Quality Initiative (YPQI), including assessment using the SEL PQA tool. The tool assists organizations in understanding the concrete practices for providing high-quality environments and program cultures that nurture social and emotional learning among youth. Trainings introduce grantees to new ideas, practices, and frameworks that they can implement.

Coaches also play an integral role in supporting grantees in their quality improvement journey. As previously mentioned, grantees set their own goals for youth outcomes and program quality, which encourages grantees to practice setting goals and intentionally work towards them. If grantees don't meet their goals, SOWA coaches engage them in a discussion about appropriate goal setting and possible strategies to meet them. For example, some grantees set unrealistically high goals that are hard to reach.

Alternatively, some grantees may underestimate their capacity and set goals that do not stretch them. In both of these situations, coaches are thought-partners for grantees on what appropriate goals could be and ways to meet those goals.

“From the grantee perspective, the framework is continuous improvement. They identify goals together in their individual organizations and collaboratives, get training around aspects of those goals, and then go through process of internal and external assessments to get an understanding of where they are in applying the learning. They work closely with coaches to analyze what the assessment data means and develop goals that build from where they are to where they want to be. It's cyclical – over and over again – with the understanding that deepening our practice and expertise takes time. Our emphasis is about having it infuse as far as it can into those organizations and that takes time.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

While grantees are always striving for progress, there are times when measurable improvement doesn't occur. However, lack of measurable improvement on the PQA isn't always an indication of lack of progress. In these cases, coaches can help grantees reframe and contextualize their growth. For example, one coach noted that a grantee had a lot of program change and staffing transition. But through these changes, the program

maintained their PQA scores in the areas of safe space and emotional support. The grantee intentionally set goals in these areas because they anticipated the changes. The coach helped the grantee to see this as a “win” – that the program staff maintained the scores in the midst of substantial staff turnover instead of declining. This mindset can help grantees maintain realistic expectations for what improvement looks like, especially in times of major programmatic shifts or transition.

“I think coaching helps hold it all together. When a program goes to a training and we attend alongside them, we can deepen and accelerate the learning asking questions like; How did go? What insights did it bring? What are you going to try? Then a few weeks later – How did what you try go? How does this impact your youth? I see them become more intentional and inspired to adapt, change or expand what they are doing.” – April Miller, Youth Development Program Quality Coach

Coaches also help grantees solidify and implement their learnings from SOWA trainings. After grantees attend trainings, the coaches’ role is to help the grantees reflect on what information was provided and what they learned, and then reflect on how that information can be relevant to their specific program context. Coaches also can be an accountability partner for grantees.

“They may have this great training, but how’s that going to be translated into practice? Who’s going to help me make sense of this? To hold us accountable? The coach can!” – Sebastian Wilson, Youth Development Program Quality Coach

“Coaching provides an opportunity to revisit and think deeper about things that come up in trainings. As a coach, I check in as soon as possible after the training about main takeaways, applications, and how we are going to share that with the rest of the team and what will be helpful for you to follow through. [I’m] there as a resource and accountability partner.” – Jeff Chandler, Youth Development Program Quality Coach

Modeling continuous improvement by improving its own processes

While SOWA is encouraging grantees to reflect and change their process based on their learnings from coaching, training, and experience, SOWA is also modeling a commitment to continuous improvement through shifting and bettering its own internal processes. The BSK team has been intentional about gathering grantees’ feedback and taking timely and responsive action accordingly. Internally, SOWA makes time to reflect on what is working and what is not working.

“SOWA strives for excellence. I’m really lucky to have a team that is so dedicated and wants to see success both for the community and the grantees. We’re willing to go the extra mile and we’re also willing to fail forward. So much of this work has been about building new things—

systems and practices, and the ability to reflect and redirect as needed. SOWA allows for that possibility. The internal CQI process has been an important part of this work.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

“The BSK team does internal reflection at the end of each season. Scheduling intentional time to really think about what’s working, what do we need to change. And then we also do that in more informal ways – ‘This is what I’m hearing...what if we change our approach?’” – Lex Gavin, BSK Program Quality Coordinator

As part of the commitment to continuous improvement, SOWA commissioned Public Profit, an external evaluation and strategic consulting firm, to conduct a formative evaluation. The evaluation provides feedback to SOWA about what is working best about their work and what opportunities for improvement exist. As part of this evaluation, Public Profit has conducted interviews and focus groups with grantees to provide SOWA with feedback about the onboarding, supports (e.g. training, coaching), and communication. Public Profit shared the input from stakeholders with leaders from SOWA and King County in interactive meaning-making sessions, which encouraged SOWA to look critically at the data from grantees, and make shifts to their approach or practices based on this data.

“We are able to reflect back to grantees that we are in that same process through changing or sharpening our reporting tools or shifting the way we are doing training or redesigning our coaching plan to better meet their needs. Through this process, we learn about what is successful and impactful.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

SOWA has made important, impactful shifts as a result of their commitment to continuous quality improvement. For example, the BSK team has transferred the grantee reporting mechanism from Excel to SurveyMonkey to be easier for grantees to navigate and to collect more accurate data. SOWA has also shifted the assessment strategy for place-based collaboratives such that collaboratives set goals and are measured collectively instead of separately. In response to grantees’ request, SOWA has changed location of some trainings to South King County. In the future, SOWA will incorporate more capacity-building topics into the next round of grantee trainings based on grantees’ request for organizational strengthening support.

“[SOWA has demonstrated a commitment to continuous improvement through] their willingness to take a critical look at the work that they’ve done, to ask for feedback from grantees, to open themselves up to feedback from awardees. They’ve taken that feedback and changed practices and internal policies to better serve the orgs that they fund.” – Megan McJennett, BSK Implementation Manager at King County

Strong Partnership with King County

The strong, collaborative relationship between SOWA and King County is a marked strength of this initiative. As mentioned previously, SOWA's values closely align with those of King County, which has laid the groundwork for a positive working relationship. Representatives from both King County and SOWA feel that each party is responsive to requests and feedback, is working hard to carry out this initiative to their best of their ability, and is trustworthy.

“Open communication and dialogue are essential and I’ve done my best to model that. Being a consistent and accountable partner is something that I try to be intentional about – meeting all the deadlines, being responsive to requests even when it’s something that I can’t meet, and communicating directly. So much of this work is about building trusting relationships and demonstrating that we are accountable and responsive.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

“The alignment of values between SOWA and King County has set us off on the right foundation. That is a good fit – the values around equity and social justice. And really trusting communities to know what they need and want for their young people. That set us off on the right foot...I think we’ve built a really good working relationship that has trust as the foundation. I personally have enjoyed working with the staff at SOWA – they’re really responsive and willing to go the extra mile when we have requests, like when the [county] executive wants to come visit the program, or last minute requests that come up from councilmembers. They’ve been great to respond to those and willing to help out and participate.” – Megan McJennett, BSK Implementation Manager at King County

King County has given SOWA the room to be the expert on the implementation of this initiative, which has enabled SOWA to carry out this initiative in the way that they envisioned.

“Our county partners have been supportive, flexible and anytime I have had a need or question, they have been receptive and responsive. The success of this work has so much to do with the trust and relationships we have been building together.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

“They’ve hired us as the experts to run this – that is how they treat us and that makes us rise to the occasion.” – Elizabeth Whitford, Chief Executive Officer

As with any collaboration, minor challenges have come up from time to time. SOWA and King County have been able to navigate these challenges productively by relying on trust

and transparency as key components of the relationship. Each party recognizes the value the other brings to the initiative, and are willing to work together to navigate how best to implement the different components of the initiative.

“It feels like a trusting relationship – on the finance side we’ve had little bumps and they are super understanding. They’ve also made mistakes and we’ve been able to talk through them and roll through it. There is a commitment to dialogue and to trusting our expertise. They don’t micromanage what we do at all. They trust us to be able to deliver. We’re also committed to being transparent with them. We let them know if something is going wrong. We want them to know that we’re putting everything on the table.” – Elizabeth Whitford, Chief Executive Officer

“There is a lot of trust given to us on how to best implement this project. SOWA has pushed back in some ways and the County has been willing to work with us. They have also been very helpful with troubleshooting as issues arose. We were revising how we collected demographics and they shared their strategies and helped us align our data collection. It’s helpful to have their support with communications as well – they’re putting a lot of energy into storytelling about the initiative.” – Lisle Bertsche Kehr, King County Grants Manager



Ongoing Challenges

As the intermediary organization for the BSK OST grant investment, SOWA has had to navigate numerous internal and external challenges.

Internal Challenges

Internal capacity and alignment

Many of the SOWA staff we spoke with cited challenges with internal capacity after taking on multiple high-profile and high-budget investments in recent years, including the BSK OST investment, the Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Quality Initiative, and the Housing and Expanded Learning Opportunities (HELO) initiative. The challenges in internal capacity have been exacerbated by turnover in core roles within SOWA, such as finance.

“This [BSK OST] investment alone was a huge growth in budget for us and had lots of implications on our capacity, so I’ve been working on that. With our new finance director, we are trying to get our own internal capacity to match the scale that we are at and the level of tracking and reporting that we’re doing.” – Elizabeth Whitford, Chief Executive Officer

“[SOWA has] had turnover [in finances] so sometimes invoices have been slow or getting clear ledgers and things like that has been a challenge. That hasn’t negatively impacted our relationship at all. That’s a place Elizabeth (the SOWA Chief Executive Officer) has been focusing on.” – Megan McJennett, BSK Implementation Manager at King County

“We’re really ambitious and that means that staff is stretched really thin which has led to an inefficiency around our systems. Not many opportunities to pause and assess where we are.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

SOWA staff also discussed the need for more alignment across the multiple initiatives the organization is involved in, and the need for more cross-initiative learning and sharing across SOWA’s internal teams.

“I want to ensure that SOWA’s quality services are not duplicated. [SOWA’s BSK team] should think about being very cognizant of overtaxing organizations. I think about providers and the impact on youth – when providers are stretched, they’re not giving their best to the youth they’re serving. I would like more [internal] organizational buy-in to lessons learned. For [SOWA’s BSK team], the lessons from an organizational point of view is how to get clear on all of our service offerings – how do we support coaching so that it’s not coaching a certain way in [our BSK work] – it’s coaching the same way across

initiatives. How do we educate everyone so they know what services we have?” – Jackie Jainga-Hyllseth, Chief Program Quality Officer

“We need some support in refining or building out organizational systems that are efficient and lean. There are a lot of ways that our internal teams work in silos and are redundantly doing the same activities (pulling the same reports, capturing the same data and holding it in their silos) versus sharing information.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

Role clarity

Many of the grantee organizations that SOWA has worked with have expressed a need for more capacity-building support and tools, especially around human resources, finance, and IT systems. SOWA’s supports are primarily focused on program quality, and SOWA is now grappling with the question of whether its role extends to providing capacity supports, or whether it should link grantees needing such supports with other capacity builders, such as the BSK team within King County, that might be better suited to providing those supports than SOWA.

“While I feel that the resources we’re able to provide are substantial awards, I worry about how are we and other BSK strategies are preparing [grantees] to receive those funds and manage them well. Getting funding is really helpful and impactful, but if you don’t have the ability to receive and manage them well, it can be incredibly challenging to meet deliverables. Because of this, [we’re] thinking about ways we can help organizations build the capacity to manage their systems (data collection, HR, and finance). Through our work with organizations, we’re uncovering that folks, in many cases, are trying their best to manage but need more capacity building and support.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

“SOWA does need to think through how to provide capacity supports, and maybe partner with other organizations to get those supports or partner with the county.” – Lisle Bertsche Kehr, King County Grants Manager

Coaching staff diversity

An additional internal challenge that emerged during interviews with SOWA staff is the lack of diversity among SOWA coaches, which was particularly concerning for them because one of SOWA’s organizational priorities is serving children and youth of color.

“I would like more diversity – we’re serving large POC populations and our coaching [staff] is not diverse. Not to diminish the skills or value that they currently bring, but we have to walk the talk. We can’t focus on these populations and not deploy diverse coaches. That was always a

value when I ran the early initiatives – majority coaches of color. That’s a value that I want to see more embedded in our service pool. It sits with me heavy because it’s something we can do better on. I hope we can move forward and [increase] diversity in the coaching corps.” – Jackie Jainga-Hyllseth, Chief Program Quality Officer

Cultural responsiveness of the YPQI framework and the SEL PQA tool

Finally, many of the BSK OST grantees are serving communities of color, and there has been some discussion about the extent to which the YPQI framework and SEL PQA tool used by SOWA reflect dominant culture values and practices, and what additional work SOWA might have to do in order to make the framework and tool more culturally responsive.

“There is also a tension around specifically the SEL tool that we’re using. We’ve heard...not complaints necessarily, but generous challenging of whose values are these or whose cultural norms are these that we’re trying to promote. Valid criticism that [the tool] promotes a white cultural way of supporting young people... We’re in deep partnership with Weikart⁸ so we say, ‘Yes, keep asking these questions, we’re asking them alongside you. You are being innovators by being this pilot initiative so your feedback and struggle is not unappreciated, unseen. It’s not going to go unused in the future.’ That’s the commitment we’re making.” – Lex Gavin, BSK Program Quality Coordinator

External Challenges

Partnership with King County

While SOWA’s partnership with King County has generally been strong, both organizations have identified ways in which their partnership could grow. With SOWA as the intermediary for the BSK OST grant investment, SOWA and King County have navigated a unique relationship in which King County currently has less direct contact with grantees, and SOWA is less involved in overall BSK work than they or King County would like.

“I think we can do more work on getting [SOWA] more involved with BSK as a whole rather than just the school partnerships work. It’s a little challenging because they are our one intermediary so it’s not a usual relationship for BSK. We don’t forget about them but they’re at a different site and different organization altogether. I would love to see that improve over time.” – Megan McJennett, BSK Implementation Manager at King County

⁸ Refers to the David P. Weikert Center for Youth Program Quality. For more information, see: www.cypq.org

“Because King County has been so focused on building, refining and growing the work overall, sometimes conversations happen where, because we are not physically present, we’re not at the table, and could potentially not be getting all the information or impacting the conversation with our own experience.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

Grantee-specific issues

As an intermediary, SOWA tries to help grantees address pressing challenges that affect their ability to deliver high-quality programming. One such challenge is partnership and collaboration, which some grantees struggled with relatively early on in the BSK OST implementation and which is still an area of concern. The issue has been especially acute for grantees in place-based collaboratives who are navigating new partnerships for the first time. SOWA has implemented innovative practices such as joint goal-setting and joint assessment to help collaborative members see themselves as a team, and continues to explore ways to promote partnership and collaboration among collaborative members.

However, there are some issues that grantees are facing that are beyond SOWA’s control. Many grantees struggle with program sustainability, given the high rates of staff turnover, funding instability, and limited capacity to build out strong internal systems even as they try to meet young people’s varied needs. Many grantees are also receiving funding from multiple sources that each have their own participation and reporting requirements. Having to keep track of the specific requirements for each grant and work to fulfil them can add to already heavy staff workloads.

“A challenge that we see is staff turnover – the sector doesn’t pay enough, the work is challenging, and organizations are at capacity so often it is hard in this economy to find a good fit especially when you’re considering the demographics of the community. Organizations want and need staff that reflect the community they serve. But in the Seattle area we’re so deeply impacted by gentrification and by poverty that so many of the communities here are changing and people are being forced to leave. Hiring, retaining, and paying staff a living wage in the sector overall are challenging. Organizations are just having to deal with so many things – multiple funders who have different expectations around reporting and outcomes, families, who they work with, not having their basic needs met, the reality that many of the youth they serve transition out of programming early due to moving out of the region because of gentrification so there is flux in youth and family engagement, which makes it even harder to make the impact they intend to.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

Looking Ahead

SOWA has spent the past year and a half building up its system of quality supports for BSK OST grantees. As SOWA navigates the next phase of the BSK OST investment, it should continue to maintain strong relationships with grantees and with King County, and continue to demonstrate a commitment to equity and continuous improvement in all of its work with grantees.

SOWA should also consider making adjustments in the areas it still has room to grow, including strengthening its internal systems and structures to deepen alignment across the many initiatives it is involved in, increasing the diversity of the coaching pool, and supporting grantees in capacity-building and maintaining strong partnerships with each other. By building on its strengths and learning from the challenges it has faced supporting the BSK OST investment, SOWA is poised to serve grantees even more effectively in future investments.

“I’m looking forward to diving deeper into the youth outcomes that grantees are trying to see. It’s also exciting to see them focusing improvement efforts on the interaction and engagement pieces of the PQA pyramid. On the SOWA side, I’m interested in learning which supports (training, coaching, etc.) have the most impact in shifting youth program quality. A big priority is storytelling and communication. As we plan for renewal, a key role for SOWA is to elevate the good work that grantees are doing and share the data and impact from our initiative to help make the case for renewed funding.” – Lisle Bertsche Kehr, King County Grants Manager

“We’ve spent the last one and a half years building and refining systems, and we’re in a place where those things feel pretty solid, I anticipate we’re going to spend the next 1.5 years really guiding and supporting organizations to deepen their practice and programs.” – Omana Imani, King County Expanded Learning Opportunities Systems Director

“In the next year we want to see more and better OST programming coming out of the investment. We’re interested in looking at high level evaluation questions and whether we’re making those marks of attendance and quality improvement and things like that. We need to start thinking about when the contract comes to a close – What’s the next step? What makes sense to the community? What do we have the power to control? Those are all questions.” – Megan McJennett, BSK Implementation Manager at King County

“For me, my mind is already on the next investment – what can we learn from this that we can replicate across our quality work? And then the next phase of this... how can we make sure that we learn as much as we can now so that we can be thoughtful about the next investment? And

then telling stories and making sure that voters know why this matters, and the county knows why this particular thing is working. How can we leverage this to impact the next round?” – Elizabeth Whitford, Chief Executive Officer

The Best Starts for Kids Out-of-School Time Initiative has built a very strong foundation in the last year and a half. Input from BSK grantees, King County staff, and SOWA’s own team show that the initiative reflects an equity-centered design, is deeply rooted in the assets and interests of out-of-school time programs, and provides responsive supports to youth-serving organizations across King County. Both the design of the initiative and the ways in which the SOWA team has implemented Best Starts for Kids serve as an exemplar for similar initiatives nationally.

