

## SOUTH KING COUNTY, WASHINGTON

### **SOUTH KING COUNTY, WASHINGTON: Doing the Work Better and Faster; Expanding in King County, Washington**

For Deborah Salas, executive director of the [Community Schools Collaboration \(CSC\)](#) in South King County, Washington, scale-up has meant "learning to do the work better, faster and more efficiently."

Unbeknownst to Salas, what would become her community schools journey began in 1998. At that time, representatives from Casey Family Programs met with representatives from the Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD) to discuss ways to remedy an unacceptable drop-out rate and the high number of out-of-home placements. The participants decided to focus on the city of Tukwila—just outside Seattle—because of its small size (five schools), history of collaboration, rapid urbanization, and King County's highest rate of children living out-of-home (one in nine). Casey hoped to learn from Tukwila and then expand its work in new communities. Tukwila is one of the nation's most diverse school districts; among its 2,800 students, 1,500 refugee and immigrant youth speak over 70 languages.

Casey Family Programs and PSESD added the Tukwila School District, the city of Tukwila, and the Washington State Department of Children and Families to the CSC as founding partners. Together, they established the Tukwila Community Schools Collaboration (TCSC) as a public/private partnership. Leaders from the respective organizations devoted two years to conducting internal conversations to ensure that each partner had an equal voice, a share of funding responsibility, and no staffing issues. As part of the process, the partnership conducted 19 focus groups with families, students, educators, public agencies, and local government and secured additional funding from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. The partnership developed a strategic plan built on the following vision: "To establish Tukwila as a model community that maximizes resources to improve its schools, neighborhoods, and economic environment through a coordinated collaboration of local schools, government, businesses, citizens, and foundations."

In 2001, the TCSC was formally introduced; a Collaborative Executive Leadership Team comprised of representatives from the founding partners governed the enterprise, with PSESD's children's foundation serving as the fiscal agent. That same year, site-level operations began in all five Tukwila schools: three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.

The TCSC funded eight staff in each school (a full-time site manager, three part-time group leaders, and four part-time youth leaders). Deborah Salas was among the initial site managers, and she recalls that two of the youth leaders were high school students who themselves needed support and enrichment. Site managers at each school forged partnerships with groups such as Tukwila Parks and Recreation, the Tukwila Public Health Department, Washington Reading Corps/AmeriCorps, Smile Mobile dental services, and 4-H. Initial programming focused on after-school and summer academic and enrichment activities. Quarterly literacy events offered families opportunities to learn with their children, and an annual health fair with immunizations addressed student health concerns.

In short time, TCSC leaders and staff saw the need for more expertise and began looking for partners that could provide greater capacity in the schools. In an area with few community-based providers, the TCSC took a broad approach and looked for partners in arts, cultural, and faith-based organizations as well as through contracts with skilled individuals. It also recognized the need for ongoing training of both TCSC and school staff. As a result, the TCSC launched a Continual Quality Improvement (CQI) process and identified areas for professional development.

As its work grew, the TCSC expanded its vision and developed a multipronged strategy not just to support students but also to strengthen families and enhance school effectiveness. The TCSC realized that high school as well as elementary school students needed enrichment opportunities and social supports and that all students would benefit from special assistance at academic transition points.

Typical of growing systems, the TCSC recognized—after three years—that it needed to perform its work more effectively and efficiently. One challenge in particular underscored the need for improvement: the TCSC was experiencing difficulty in communicating to funders the collaborative's unique partnership and leadership structure. The TCSC project coordinator worked for Casey, the school-site managers worked for PSESD, and other staff were on the city of Tukwila's payroll. The arrangement was workable but did not lend itself to easy explanation. So, the Collaborative Executive Leadership Team decided to restructure the initiative by forming an independent not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization. A community board of directors oversaw the work of the reconstituted organization, which was now positioned to receive additional funding from local funders, such as the Stuart Foundation, the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, and others. The five founding partners served on the new governing board as the TCSC recruited additional members. In 2004, the new community board added to the original partners a parent from the community, a local business consultant, and the leaders of community-based organizations. It formulated a cohesive management vision, naming Salas the first TCSC executive director and developing a fund-raising strategy. Since then, the TCSC has expanded its partnerships, deepened its work, and continued to see success.

By 2007, the TCSC had improved graduation and attendance rates and saw a decrease in drop-out and mobility rates. It received the Coalition for Community Schools National Award for Excellence and was gaining visibility in the region among funders and community leaders. At the same time, it drew the attention of John Welch, superintendent of the nearby Highline School District, and of the city of SeaTac. With the Stuart Foundation's and Seattle Foundation's support of community schools in the region, the Tukwila Community Schools Collaboration became the Community Schools Collaboration, reflecting its new regional focus. The TCSC's first effort at expansion began with the Highline School District. Believing that community-based organizations command the strength to support efforts to improve student achievement, Highline's leaders identified SeaTac and White Center as the communities with the greatest need for support. According to Superintendent John Welch, "We really need our communities to rally around our kids' education and just support kids overall so they can be successful in school and life and that is what community schools are all about."

Regional scale-up has been intentional in all three communities, with clusters of schools organized around elementary, middle school, and high school feeder patterns. Within the clusters, schools work with and learn from each other, and students and families may progress through schools that employ a community schools approach. From 2008 to 2010, the CSC expanded into 16 campuses and 20 schools and began to address transitions across grade levels and the alignment of extended-day activities with student supports. Extended-day activities are organized around youth development assets and grade-level standards. In addition, teachers or CSC staff who have worked with an education coach coordinate many of the activities.

Salas notes that the CSC has expanded its family engagement "by developing partnerships with culturally based community agencies [e.g., Somali Community Services Coalition, Para Los Niños, and PACIFIKA], partnering with the parent-teacher organizations and reaching out to families in their own language." The CSC has expanded health services to include physicals, immunization services, dental screenings, and vision care through partnerships with individual doctors, dentists, the Swedish Hospital, King County Public Health, HealthPoint Community Health Centers, Washington Smile Partners and the Smile Mobile, and LensCrafters.

The CSC has re-branded itself with a new logo and web site and is now developing a new strategic plan that makes community schools the centerpiece of education reform, building deeper alliances and sustainability strategies. It is working with a cradle-to-career network on benchmarks and transitions in a child's developmental path and putting the community schools strategy out front.

The pace of change has been exhilarating as the initiative's budget has grown from \$600,000 to over \$2 million in just a few years, and that figure does not count the more than \$1 million in leveraged programs and services delivered in CSC community schools. The CSC is reaching out to nascent initiatives in Seattle, Tacoma, and Vancouver, Washington, to help them build and strengthen their own community school initiatives. Still, the challenges facing the CSC remain daunting, particularly as difficult economic times challenge families. With scale-up continuing into new communities with different demographic and political dynamics, leaders have learned about the importance of patience and flexibility. But, for Deborah Salas, the payoff lies in watching community schools become "not just a program but the life and breath of our schools."

In 2010, after more than 10 years of hard work, the CSC reflected on its system-wide operations and took even greater steps in scaling up and improving its work. It co-founded the West Coast Collaborative of community schools initiatives, a group funded by the Stuart Foundation to share best practices with one another.