

Prioritizing Partnerships and Embracing Change: The Growth and Development of the Denver Afterschool Alliance

Welcome to DAA

The Denver Afterschool Alliance is a community collaborative whose mission is to increase access to and participation in quality afterschool programs to keep Denver's youth safe, inspire them to learn and prepare them for the future. It represents a collaboration of many stakeholders, including the City and County of Denver, many community-based and funder organizations, and the Denver Public Schools. With its collaborative roots dating back to the early 1990's, the Alliance formally launched in 2012 and is now recognized as a national model for multi-sector partnerships, proponents of quality in action, and robust evaluation efforts of targeted programs. How did that happen? What was its journey from a loosely knit collaborative to a robust out-of-school time system and what were key successes and lessons learned along the way?

To answer these questions DAA engaged The Forum for Youth Investment to develop this case study of the roots and iterations of DAA and offer a set of lessons learned for other communities embarking on a similar journey of developing a coordinated approach to improving access to quality afterschool and summer learning programs.

The Roots of Collaboration

The Denver Afterschool Alliance emerged from a rich history of collaboration among key public and non-profit organizations. In fact, efforts of community-based afterschool programming partnering with Denver Public Schools and the City and County of Denver predate the formal creation of DAA by at least fifteen years. Receiving what would become one of at least three grants from The Wallace Foundation, Denver was early-on recognized as a community that knows how to form cross sector collaborations and values those partnerships in service of supporting quality learning and developmental experiences for Denver's children and youth. From 1997–2011 community partners— including the City and County of Denver, Denver Public Schools, Mile High United Way, Denver Public Schools Foundation, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Denver—worked locally as well as with national partners such as The National League of Cities, The David. P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, The Forum for Youth Investment Ready by 21, and The Wallace Foundation, to lay the foundation for the launch of the Denver Afterschool Alliance in 2012. Several key events happened during this time to pave the way for the creation of DAA, offering numerous examples of people in Denver being “all-in” to serve children and youth and do it well.

Denver Afterschool Alliance At-A-Glance

Vision: All Denver youth will achieve success now and in the future through active participation in diverse quality afterschool programs.

Mission: To develop a sustainable, citywide afterschool system to increase access to and participation in quality afterschool programs to keep Denver's youth safe, inspire them to learn and prepare them for the future.

Reach in 2018-2019:

- 400+ afterschool partners
- 250+ partners with data sharing agreements
- 125 sites engaged in deep program quality
- 20,000+ K-12 students served
- 50+ professional development opportunities

Creating a City Agency Dedicated to Children and Youth Signals City Commitment to Afterschool and Summer Learning

In 1995 Mayor Wellington E. Webb created the Mayor's Office for Education and Children (renamed the Office for Children's Affairs, OCA, in 2012) to strengthen and enhance the education and development of Denver's children from birth to young adulthood. Since its inception, OCA has focused on advancing afterschool and summer learning programs, signaling an unwavering city and county-level commitment to youth development, a commitment that remains strong under Mayor Michael B. Hancock's leadership. Also, in the early 1990's, DPS created the Department of Expanded Learning and Community Schools (DELCS), which, like the formation of MOEC, signaled strong District-level commitment to and leadership for afterschool and summer learning. Thus, by the mid-1990's two key city institutions had made a public commitment to afterschool and summer learning—and this was not typical of many other cities at that time.

The Extended Service Schools Initiative Brought Together Key Partners

With these two efforts underway, in 1997 Denver was one of 20 communities selected to participate in The Wallace Foundation's Extended Service Schools Initiative. The initiative required communities to select a program model operating in school buildings and involving partnerships between schools and community-based partners. Requisite to the grant was a collaboration among foundations, the City, Denver Public Schools (DPS/DELCS) and community-based organizations. Representatives from these groups came together and selected three DPS middle schools and Community Based Organizations (CBO) to work collaboratively to provide integrated developmental supports after school. As part of this effort, the CBO's started to come together regularly for networking and peer sharing. Important to note in the history of system-building in Denver is that it was at this time that other foundations—Rose, Piton and Donnell-Kay—stepped up and convened the key organizations for technical assistance, coaching and mentoring, and sharing best practices. This had two-fold results: it was the first time that organizations started to look outside themselves and think and act collectively; it also signaled that the local philanthropic community had “skin in the game” beyond their own dollars, with shared accountability for success. The relationships formed during this period lasted for decades and set the tone for partnership moving forward.

Out of the Extended Service Schools Initiative grew the Community Schools Planning Group, an offshoot of the original Wallace CBO group, comprised of Catholic Charities, Mi Casa Resource Center, DELCS and then, later also YMCA. These groups were the first large-scale collaboration among the “comprehensive” providers that now make-up one of three classifications of DAA provider types.

The Denver Quality Afterschool Connection Lays the Roots for a Provider Network

A few years later (2000) Denver Public Schools (DPS/DELCS) with support from MOEC received a small, one-year grant to begin to look at how to assess quality programming for youth and this is where the collaboration really began to gel. Through this grant, DPS/DELCS began to convene an informal collaborative network of youth serving organizations on a regular basis to discuss quality and in 2002 the group formally established themselves as The Denver Quality Afterschool Connection (DQUAC) with a joint goal of promoting quality programming. DQUAC formed a steering committee and subcommittees of volunteers to dive into topics such as professional development and assessing program quality. DQUAC continued to grow and become more sophisticated over time, offering large scale trainings to meet organizations' needs around staff professional development, prioritizing partnerships among providers. The collaborative nature of DQUAC—an organization with diverse representation from many organizations, with a strong, central provider voice—made sure the work was always in line with what the field needed. Information was gathered from the field as a

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whole and shared with funders, policy makers, and other stakeholders. DQUAC was so successful, that DAA founders, who were on the DQUAC steering committee, made sure to not take it over or merge with it when in 2012 MOEC was awarded the afterschool systems building grant and planning for citywide coordination began. Rather, the leaders wanted to maintain and protect the work and focus of DQUAC, the collaborative structure and the “not being driven by the agendas of others” reality of the group—all of the things that had made it so successful. *(For more information on DQUAC see the Spotlight on Program Quality Improvement.)*

Key Funders Collaborate to Form the Lights on Afterschool Partnership

While the provider community was coming together around quality, a cross-agency effort emerged to coordinate the funding of programming and in 2003 the Lights on After School Partnership (LOAS) was created during Mayor John Hickenlooper’s administration. This funding partnership among the City and County of Denver, the Denver Public Schools Foundation and Mile High United Way (MHUW), with staffing support provided by MOEC and DELCS, offered funding and program support, including professional development and evaluation support, to all DPS elementary and middle schools. This effort was another precursor to DAA, where the City and County of Denver and DPS were working collaboratively to promote and scale afterschool and summer learning.

Maxine Quintana, Director of Out-of-School Time Initiatives in OCA, and founding partner of DAA reflects that the LOAS Partnership was the true start of the system-building effort. Informal as it was, the partners met regularly, made joint decisions, developed trust, and took ownership and action to move the work forward. Each partner contributed funding and then jointly ran a competitive RFP process to support direct programming in schools either through teacher led clubs or through partnerships. The key partners created the RFP, jointly reviewed applications, made funding decisions, monitored programs, and celebrated their successes. However, each partner also made unique contributions. For example, MHUW and DPS Foundation funded programs directly, since they were using child care tax dollars, whereas MOEC’s funding was more flexible and was used to fund evaluation and quality work.

This partnership also provided support for the Community Schools Planning Group by funding joint evaluation and exploration through the use of quality tools like the Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes and the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality Assessment. This combination of direct service, professional development, joint evaluation, and exploration is what launched Denver’s system-building effort.

Among the partners, they had approximately \$250,000-\$500,000 to support afterschool programs across the city. This came from a number of sources. When Mayor Hickenlooper ran for office, he set aside all of the funds raised through his inauguration to form the DPS Foundation to be used for afterschool. MOEC already had some funding available for afterschool, as it was leading a program started in Mayor Webb’s administration called Club Denver, which was connected to City services such as Health, Firefighters, Business, etc. MOEC redirected its Club Denver funds to support the LOAS Partnership. Finally, MHUW also contributed funds for direct service programming.

Denver Gets the Attention of National Partners

From 2005-2011 efforts to develop a more coordinated approach to improving access to quality programming continued. In 2005, the City and County of Denver, under the leadership of Mayor Hickenlooper, was selected to participate in the “City Leaders Engaged in Afterschool Reform” or CLEAR initiative, directed by National League of Cities’ (NLC) Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. Phase I of CLEAR was a six-month effort that engaged the 12 selected cities in an “opportunity scan city assessment” to assess the city’s readiness to develop a citywide system that

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supports after school programs. Based on the results of the NLC scan, which showed strong partnerships and leadership for taking a systems approach to afterschool and summer learning, NLC moved forward with Denver as one of only six communities to participate in Phase 2 during which time NLC provided technical assistance to build out some key systems components. This marked Denver's first real effort to name and try to design an afterschool and summer learning system. Bela Shah Spooner, Manager, Expanded Learning, at NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, who led the CLEAR initiative in 2005, recalls *"their mapping effort to create a program locator stands out as a major success and turning point for the City due to how strategically they leveraged the City's GIS and IT department to do a very thorough mapping...they mapped poverty data from the school district, crime data from the police department, city recreation centers, and they mapped teen pregnancy rates, which back then was pretty cutting edge...they were the only city in the cohort that tapped environmental health data"* Thus, a full five years before DAA was launched, Denver was already viewed as an exemplar in terms of its approach to system-building.

Based on its knowledge of Denver's promising approach to building a system, NLC profiled Denver as one of 27 cities that were making strides in building systems in its report, [Municipal Leadership for Afterschool: Citywide Systems Spreading Across the Country](#). Released in the Fall of 2011, this report helped inform The Wallace Foundation's thinking and approach to afterschool system-building.

In addition to the National League of Cities, two other national organizations primed the pump for Denver to receive an award that would formally launch DAA. In 2010 core partners from the City, DPS/DELCS, and leading providers, including Boys and Girls Clubs attended a Ready by 21 meeting hosted by the Forum for Youth Investment. Maxine Quintana remembers: *"We saw their insulated pipeline and I was like, 'oh my gracious, we should be doing this, too'...we started thinking 'hey we have a lot of parts of the system and maybe we should think bigger.'"* Finally, after piloting the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality's Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) in the 2010-11 school year at 12 sites with multiple comprehensive organizations (Boys & Girls Clubs, MiCas, Summer Scholars, and DPS/DELCS) the Community Schools Planning Group with the support of the Lights on Afterschool Partnership decided to officially continue and expand their use of the YPQI in the 2012 school year.

Denver Secures the Funding to Build an Afterschool and Summer Learning System

In sum, when The Wallace Foundation invited Denver as one of 17 communities to respond to a Request for Proposal to build a sustainable afterschool system, Denver was poised for success. Sharon Deich, vice president of FourPoint Education partners was one of the consultants engaged to help the Foundation with the selection process for the initiative. She noted that Denver had three selling points: *"(1) DQUAC was a strong provider group; it was well organized and cost-effective; (2) there was dedicated city funding that could help with sustainability when the Wallace grant ended; (3) there was a strong history of partnership and the mayor was clearly committed to the work."*

In 2012 the City and County of Denver, through Office for Children's Affairs, was selected as one of nine cities across the United States to receive the three-year Wallace grant to build out key components of an afterschool system. Keeping *improved access to quality afterschool and summer learning programming* as its north star to guide the work, the City and County of Denver had two main goals for its three-year system-building strategy: (1) formalize existing relationships between stakeholders and create a unified vision, strategy, and core staff to advance quality programs; and (2) develop and launch a community-based data platform called the Community Partnership System

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(CPS) that would enable stakeholders to map program locations and access reliable information for program improvement and accountability. Building on its long-standing commitment to program quality, Denver also requested support to continue to expand efforts to improve provider capacity to increase access to quality afterschool and summer learning experiences for more children and youth.

The Formative Years: 2012-2013

The Denver Afterschool Alliance formally launched in 2012 with a Board, working committees and staff adopting what it termed as a “hub and spoke” model where the Board was the hub to determine the “what” and the spokes, consisting of the provider community, including DQUAC, to determine “how” the work would be carried out. The inaugural board consisted of key leaders from providers, businesses, and foundations as well as the City and DPS. The board was seated simultaneously with the recruitment and hiring of DAA’s first Director, who started the position in Fall 2012. While numerous scenarios were considered regarding the best “home” for DAA, a decision was made that for the duration of the three-year Wallace grant, DAA would be housed in OCA and the Director of the OCA would chair DAA. These decisions—to have a single director and a single chair—mirrored many of the other afterschool and summer learning systems that were emerging at the time however, about six months into the launch of DAA, the work seemed stalled and the board and core staff began to question how to best move the work forward.

A key challenge identified by one of the inaugural board members, Erin Brown who at the time was Deputy Director of Parks and Recreation, was lack of clarity about the work: *“When I was asked to join the board I was totally in because it was important to me and I absolutely believe in quality for kids and especially in the neighborhoods that need it most. I understood very clearly in concept what the Alliance was designed to do. But as I sat in on Board meetings and we talked about the work it all of a sudden became really unclear.”* She further reflected that their struggle the first year was to move from broad guidelines to clear actions on how to do the work—and a critical part of that conversation was *“getting clarity on the role that everyone was playing around the table.”* Other board members were feeling frustration as well and a turning point came when the Wallace program officer acknowledged the struggle and encouraged DAA to hit a reset button, sharpen its vision and mission and clearly articulate the core work it needed to implement to be true to its mission.

With technical assistance support from The Wallace Foundation, the Board took several months to develop a multi-year strategic plan for moving forward with targeted work that would enable DAA to achieve its ultimate goal of *developing a system of supports for Denver afterschool providers so that youth in need have access to high quality programs that promote their academic and social and emotional success.* The principles of the new strategic plan remained consistent with the original goals—keeping an intentional focus on: data-driven decision-making in the areas of quality, access and outcomes; fundraising; and advocacy for the Denver afterschool field—but with a sharpened focus on the social and emotional learning outcomes critical to academic success.

Given the new strategic direction of DAA the Board then stepped back and asked *“how do we organize ourselves for success?”* To answer that question the Board examined its current membership, by-laws, and the role and job descriptions for board members and staff alike. In doing so, it realized that its current Board composition and staffing structure did not meet its strategic goals. Specifically, the inaugural board had a heavy emphasis on providers but given DAA’s priorities around fundraising and advocacy, as well as its commitment to the broader afterschool field in Denver, a shift was made to recruit for and seat a Board that would have better cross-sector representation including a heavier emphasis on fundraising and policy, as well as those who had

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influence in their organizations and the community. As then Board member John Albright, former Deputy Chief of Staff for DPS reflected: *“We really moved from a ground level, practitioner-type Board with a couple of funders to much more of a city-wide blue-ribbon Board of policy leaders, elected influencers, people who had experience with program and strategy, and then also funders—this mix helped us deepen our work on impact and strategy and how to communicate our vision to funders.”*

In addition to re-seating the Board, DAA also transitioned to a shared staffing structure and a co-chair model. Reflecting on the original staffing structure of DAA Regan Suhay, Afterschool Provider Liaison for DAA and one of its founding partners, made the following analogy: *“Getting the Wallace grant was like going from being a high school senior where you know everyone, you know how to work relationships, to being a freshman in college out of state and you are in shell-shock. All of a sudden, we had almost a million dollars and everyone wanted to know what we would do with the money. We were all stressed, we all wanted someone to lead the work, so we hired a Director.”* But by the time DAA was revising its strategy, the Director of OCA had left the position and Erin Brown stepped into the role as Executive Director. Rather than her office alone staffing DAA there was a decision to *“go back to our roots, to go back to doing what we do well”*—in other words deep collaboration and shared decision-making. Three core staff members from key partner agencies—DPS, OCA and Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Denver—established a shared staffing structure representing the main stakeholder groups involved in DAA.

Given where the core work of DAA was—heavily engaged working with DPS to get the Community Partnership System up and running, data sharing agreements in place, and funding a dedicated person at DPS to support provider capacity to get and use data—it made sense to shift to a co-chair model with representation from senior leadership at the City and the District, and Erin Brown, ED of OCA and John Albright, Deputy Chief of Staff for DPS became DAA’s first two co-chairs in early 2014. As John Albright reflected: *“Primarily the decision was that the city needed to be front and center in terms of elevating afterschool...but that DPS was such a critical partner in the data backbone, the information about how we were serving students, and that we needed to have a unified front to pursue more philanthropic dollars to sustain the DAA. “*

With a sound, actionable strategic plan and a high-functioning Board and staff team, DAA was poised to implement its two core strands of work: scaling program quality and improving access to reliable information. One key realization in the strategic planning process was that DAA could not be “all things to all providers” and a more nuanced approach to capacity-building was needed. DAA therefore decided, and still continues, to implement targeted support to improve the capacity for data driven decision-making within selected afterschool organizations while simultaneously creating an onramp for additional organizations to become engaged in the future. In addition, DAA began offering universal supports for the broader afterschool field, in partnership with DQUAC.

Hitting Stride: 2014-2016

For two full years DAA had stable staff, a stable Board, and stable co-chair leadership. Erin Brown remembers that: “we were cooking; we were bringing funders in to tell our story; we were talking to providers; we were sharing the work; we were rolling out reports.” And it was during this phase that the work of DAA as it stands now really took shape. (SEE SIDEBARS ON DATA AND QUALITY FOR WHAT DAA LOOKS LIKE TODAY)

2014 saw full implementation of DAA’s more nuanced and strategic approach to supporting programs’ data and quality efforts. Using a data-driven process DAA used information in the CPS to identify organizations with robust, comprehensive programming for K-8 students located in high-need neighborhoods. The organizations were then surveyed and interviewed about their current data and quality processes. Organizations selected had strong support from their leadership and a high capacity of readiness to fully engage in all aspects of the data and quality work. DAA then asked each organization to sign a memorandum of understanding that outlined the roles and responsibilities of DAA to provide supports as well as the organization’s to commit fully to participate in the work, including allocating sufficient staff time to work intentionally and collaboratively as part of a cohort. The primary goal of the demonstration project was to show that engagement in continuous quality improvement and data-driven decision-making leads to positive student outcomes.

A similar data-driven process was used to identify and select capacity building partners, with an intentional focus on organizations that were already part of the demonstration project so as to create a “ripple effect” throughout an entire organization.

Developing Common Outcomes

A second critical and defining undertaking during this time period was the development of a set of youth outcomes statements to guide the work. DAA and its partners came to consensus on the following shared goals for programs:

- Growth in academic success
- Increased engagement in school
- Growth in social-emotional learning
- Increased positive youth experiences in programming

Further, as former providers themselves, DAA staff understood and made it clear that for its universal and capacity building partners, the tracking of outcomes would be low stakes and used for improvement purposes. It also designed trainings to help providers makes sense of all the data they were collecting and receiving (YPQI quality data, Survey of Afterschool Youth Outcomes youth data, CPS data) so they could make robust improvement plans. To incentivize participation in data collection, DAA covered the costs of data collection, a practice it still continues.

Securing Funding

When The Wallace Foundation invited the City and County of Denver to apply for a grant it required a 25% match. The original LOAS Partners (The City, Mile High United Way, and DPS Foundation) each stepped up to contribute by providing a portion of matching dollars for the three years of the initiative. The partnership leveraged this funding to bring in another major contributor, The Piton Foundation. The partnership also secured on-going commitments for in-kind staff support from the City and from Denver Public Schools. The funding and clout from The Wallace Foundation was leveraged to create a diversified funding model and get additional funders onboard, including the

Anschutz Foundation, the Denver Foundation, and more. As the initial funding from The Wallace Foundation came to an end, DAA received another grant focused solely on sustainability of the system. DAA brought on a part-time fund relations consultant to work specifically on this task.

Managing Transitions While Embracing a New Opportunity: 2017-2018

After two years of stability, DAA again underwent leadership, staff and Board changes which posed potential threats to the work of DAA. Specifically, two key district partners, the Director of DELCS who had been staff to DAA, and the Deputy Chief of Staff, who had co-chaired DAA, transitioned to other roles, leaving critical positions vacant. For over a year DAA had an inactive co-chair, leaving the City as the lead decision-maker. Kim Schulz, vice president of the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver and former board member recalled: *“There was definitely a gap for a long time...it was a bit of a struggle to find who was the best person in DPS who could be a voice for afterschool and summer learning in the District.”* John Albright asserted the need for a strong district champion: *“There is a diversity of perspectives in DPS about the value of afterschool and summer learning programs and how much a K-12 system should be involved in that space. We need someone who is willing to be a champion and work hard to convince people that there is a role for the public-school system in this space.”* For about six months DAA had a single chair, and DAA continued to support providers on data and quality. Of that period, Erin Brown proudly reflected: *“The city just got in the driver’s seat with our program partners and said ‘we are going to do this.’ We felt very strongly that we should not slow down and risk losing momentum.”* As of the writing of this case, DAA once again has a co-chair model, shared across DPS and OCA leadership.

In maintaining its momentum and building on its successes despite leadership challenges, DAA demonstrated its durability as a collaborative and learned that transitions can set the stage for examining what is working, what is not, and how best to move ahead with new personnel, new relationships, and new opportunities. For example, while DAA was adroitly managing transitions and keeping its systems work moving forward despite leadership challenges, The Wallace Foundation invited DPS and DAA to submit a proposal to participate in a new national initiative focused on supporting social and emotional learning, specifically requiring afterschool systems and districts to work in partnership to support SEL across learning environments, in- and out- of school. Building on its rich and robust history of working together, DPS and DAA jointly submitted a successful proposal and Denver launched the Denver Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning (SEAL) initiative.

Coming together to apply for the grant was viewed by some stakeholders as helpful in maintaining and stabilizing the partnership with DPS. During the 2016-2017 school year, leaders from DPS and DAA came together to form the Denver SEAL Initiative Core Team and created a shared vision for youth in Denver where adults model and infuse social, emotional, and academic learning to ensure that all youth in the city of Denver are successful in school, out of school and in life. While both DPS and DAA had embraced and supported social, emotional, and academic learning (SEAL), each group had focused on SEAL through different foci and strengths. Denver’s afterschool programs had traditionally focused on creation of a culture and climate that facilitates social emotional development, zooming in on developing quality practices. School day teams had traditionally focused on delivery of explicit SEAL instruction, primarily in small groups. Now, through this unified strategic plan, the strengths of both DAA and DPS are being leveraged to provide an integrated approach to SEAL instruction, practices, and climate and culture, providing youth with the tools they need to thrive. (SEE PULL OUT ON PSELI)

Lessons Learned Along the Way

Now in its seventh year, DAA entered 2019 supporting more afterschool and summer learning programs than ever before. Its core work continues to be to develop the capacity of providers to participate in a continuous quality improvement process and increase access to quality programming for more young people across the City. Its main provider network continues to be DQUAC and it continues to have strong support from Mayor Hancock, recently elected to his third term in

Denver 2020 Goals	How DAA Supports Them
Great schools in every neighborhood	Quality afterschool and summer learning programs in every neighborhood
A foundation for success in school	Extra literacy supports in programs
Ready for college and career	Higher academic growth and better attendance
Support for the whole child	Healthy, engaged, challenged, socially and emotionally intelligent
Close the opportunity gap	Access to afterschool and summer learning programs for all DPS students

office. It is recognized by Every Hour Counts, a national coalition of expanded learning intermediaries, as being an exemplar for the field. And, in an effort to promote stronger alignment between the school day and afterschool programs, DAA created a crosswalk between DPS’s Denver 2020 plan and DAA.

This report ends with reflections on getting from fledging collaborative to national exemplar, offering advice to other communities who are engaged in afterschool and summer learning system-building efforts.

1. Start small, get it right, grow incrementally...and learn to say “no.”

Establishing a clear mission and vision is empowering for any organization. It provides the fundamental guidance and reference point to inform decision-making and approaches to improvement and growth. When DAA realized it couldn’t be all things to all providers, it took the stance that it needed to start small, get it right, and grow incrementally. Regan Suhay describes DAA’s overall approach is to “*embrace innovation, get a quick win, be good at documentation, and share success with others.*” But not all innovations are worth embracing. A key point made by several stakeholders was that an initiative needs to learn to say “no.” Don’t go after every funding stream, stay true to your mission, and build a core network of supporters before you do anything else.

2. Form follows function—when function changes its time to reexamine form.

Central to DAA’s approach is the belief that partnerships and governance structures can and should evolve over time in order to best meet the needs of the work and its specific context. DAA took advantage of the departure of its director to reevaluate its organizational structure and shift away from the single director and single chair model that was not working well enough at that time. The change to a shared staffing model and co-chairs exemplifies a core lesson about the need to continually assess whether an afterschool and summer learning system is setting itself up for success in the current context of the work.

This kind of flexibility and openness to considering new ways of doing things also enables intermediaries and afterschool and summer learning systems to leverage periods of change as opportunities to take stock, reevaluate partnerships and priorities, and make refinements that will strengthen the work. A sign of a healthy initiative is to continually assess form and function and ensure it is setting itself up for success in the current context of the work and

the leaders in the community. Partnerships and governance structures can, will and should evolve over time in order to best meet the needs of the work.

3. Embrace change as an opportunity.

Over the course of its 7-year history, DAA has experienced multiple leadership transitions and leadership changes among its other partners. These transitions could have derailed the work, but they didn't because DAA partners viewed these transitions as opportunities, not derailments. With each leadership change, there is the opportunity to take stock of the work, assess partnerships and priorities, and embrace changes that will keep the work strong. As Regan Suhay reflected, DAA has always recognized that change is inevitable but it *"doesn't matter who is in the driver's seat"* if you have a clear vision and mission that guides the work. And it helped that DAA benefited from a group of funders who tolerated "messiness." Sharon Deich, who worked closely as a consultant to DAA, feels that The Wallace Foundation *"set the tone for flexibility, false starts, and course corrections"* that enabled DAA to try different approaches to building a system to see what would work in the context of Denver.

Readiness to embrace new opportunities and openness to innovation is a key contributor to DAA's sustainability, enabling expansion of efforts to include the Social, Emotional and Academic Learning (SEAL) initiative, supported by The Wallace Foundation, and tapping into targeted funding streams, such as city tax revenue from the legal sale of marijuana—thereby bringing valuable resources to both the organization and the field

4. Partners are the ticket to success and sustainability.

It sounds so simple, but in the afterschool system-building field, partnerships are a key ingredient to success. DAA has been intentional about who is on its board and how to represent the very diverse provider community, including comprehensive providers as well as content specific providers, so that it has the right set of partners able to engage in the work. It also offers multiple entry points for partnership, from being on the mailing list, to attending meetings, to being on the board itself. It strives for transparency in partnerships so everyone is clear about role, responsibilities, and contributions. Two key pieces of advice emerged about partnerships: (1) there is a difference between getting the right organizational partner and the right human partner—think carefully about who from an organization will be the best fit for the partnership and (2) don't ask partners to do anything you wouldn't do. Reflecting on the early days of partnership building Regan Suhay advises: *"the way you build partnerships is by schlepping tables."*

Katherine Plog Martinez, Co-founder of DAA, remembers that a key to their early partnership success was that *"Everybody was just willing to be in it...it was the mid-level managers and not higher-level managers. We (the mid-level managers) were the ones that set the tables and set up events and did things to help each other. There wasn't ego in it and we talked a lot early on about collaboration versus competition and we got to collaboration because there weren't egos."* Cultivating mid-level manager buy-in is also a key ingredient to sustainability because when high-level managers inevitably change positions, the mid-level managers can keep the work going.

5. Clearly define what it means to be a partner.

DAA has learned that each partner enters the room with a different definition of "partnership." Therefore, it is important early on to come to consensus on what it means to be a partner in whatever the initiative might be. Key questions to ask are: What is mutually

beneficial to all partners? What are the checks and balances that need to be in place in a partnership so that everyone's needs are being met or at least surfaced? What does it mean to collaborate? Does it mean shared decision-making and if so, decision-making about what? How are these decisions made and by which partners? Partnership agreements or memorandum of understanding are useful ways to formalize expectations and ensure that as leadership changes and new people enter into the collaborative, they understand the commitments of their organizations have made with regard to being a "partner."

6. A good legal expert can't be undervalued.

Afterschool and summer learning systems generally have a component of the work focused on getting and using reliable information, and DAA is no exception. This work often entails developing memorandum of understanding and data sharing agreements across agencies such as the City and the District, as well as between agencies and providers. The right lawyer can make all the difference in how smoothly these agreements are developed. Heather Intres, former manager of DAA's data system and current Associate Director, DELCS, and Chair of DQUAC affirms the value of a good lawyer: *"Finding that ally who understands the power of data and who has the legal acumen to develop contracts and MOUs around data cannot be undervalued."*

7. Put your data to work to tell your story.

In 2014 DAA had just collected its first year of data and wanted to use the data for a public-facing report to garner support for DAA. But it recognized that to get attention, it couldn't just offer up a few numbers. It engaged Collaborative Communications, a Wallace technical assistance partner, to help develop a report that would use numbers to tell a compelling story about why DAA made a difference in the lives of Denver's youth. As Daniel Read, Senior Research Analyst for DELCS supporting DAA data efforts reflected: *"I just presented the data and then they [staff team] took it and asked 'what is the compelling story?' And it was access—in our first year we opened up opportunities to youth in high need and limited opportunity neighborhoods....and a second story is 'we help kids go to school.'" This is an approach that DAA continues to use each year with its evaluation reports, placing it in the national spotlight for how it presents data to stakeholders.*

8. Don't go it alone.

A very practical piece of advice that emerged from Denver's story is: "don't go it alone." Maxine Quintana reflected: *"Turning to national organizations for support really helped us... getting somebody in who doesn't have skin in the game to help you take a step back and to look at what other people are doing to see how you could do better is always a very valuable thing to do."* And as Sharon Deich, consultant to DAA noted: *"It doesn't cost a lot of money to get somebody to come in and look...when you bring in an outside consultant people are focused. They want to get as much value as they can from the consultant. It also helps to get the process moving...of course they can do it themselves but an outside voice can provide a boost and renewed excitement for the process. As valuable as deep technical assistance can be, Maxine also commented that "'phone a friend' is even better" so that you are not reinventing what someone else has already done.*

Conclusion

DAA now supports more afterschool and summer programs than ever before, developing the capacity of providers to continuously improve the quality of the programs they offer and increase access to quality programming for more young people across the Denver.

Additionally, DAA has extended its commitment to ensuring that its work responds to the needs of parents and providers and incorporates their input into the design of its tools, resources, and supports. Heeding the call for a more robust data management system, DAA launched DAAconnect, a new and improved, multi-functional management information system. DAAconnect provides a user-friendly search engine and gives partner organizations an efficient way to register and track youth participants; it also features an updated program locator and directory search interface to make it more accessible to parents, caregivers and professionals.

This latest innovation in its approach to data exemplifies two core principles that have guided DAA's efforts from the very beginning. First, DAA embraces change and uses it as a springboard for finding opportunities to think and act differently for the benefit of children, youth, and families. Secondly, DAA keeps providers at the center of everything it does and every decision it makes. Embracing change and keeping providers at the center requires DAA to “walk the talk” of continuous improvement— seeking input on what’s working, what’s not working and why—so it can continue to be responsive to its partners, stakeholders, and the dynamic environment in which it operates.

Spotlight on Program Quality Improvement

“Being clear about our quality work and investing in the YPQI probably shaped our initiative more than any other decision. It is the strength of our network” John Lewis, Network Lead, DELCS

DAA’s approach to program quality improvement started small so it could “get it right” before expanding. With support from the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, DAA has steadily scaled the Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) since 2012 so that more youth are experiencing quality afterschool and summer learning opportunities. Currently, DAA offers the YPQI to over 125 program sites across 23 different organizations. The tool equips providers with a common language and an associated staff training process. Critical to successful implementation of the YPQI is that DAA has been able to raise enough funds to have dedicated staff members who support participating providers in getting and using data. Dedicated staff have been able to devote time to overcome the challenge of ensuring buy-in across different levels of leadership in provider organizations. Gaining buy-in allows for intentionality of data collection, and full participation in the low stakes planning to improve process based on assessment data.

But DAA’s approach to quality is more than implementing a framework and some training. Its deep coaching supports meet organizations where they are, offering customized coaching and support to each site. DAA quality supports are responsive to the changing needs of the provider network and it adjusts supports on a regular basis to best meet those needs. Since 2012, there have been two iterations of DAA quality supports, with a third being designed right now. With each iteration, DAA utilized the expertise of staff, benefitting from current provider relationships and interactions to create an initial plan of services to the field. With a rough plan in hand, DAA meets with key providers to talk it through and get specific feedback to make sure the benefits being provided are on point and the asks of the participants are also within their ability. With this critical information, DAA staff then work to finalize the support plan, create clean communications around it and begin meeting with providers to mutually agree upon participation in the various cohorts.

As organizations increase their level of participation with DAA, they gain more access to outstanding professional development, networking opportunities, data collection tools, and technical assistance from national leaders—all at no cost to the provider. Its current cohort approach offers three tiers of engagement:

- **Explore:** for organizations just beginning their journey with the CQI system of supports
- **Venture:** in which organizations are accessing valuable tools and supports to drive program quality and have integrated the CQI system into their organization.
- **Trailblaze:** where providers are deeply engaged with DAA and the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) system. They receive the greatest benefits, with opportunities to showcase leadership in the field.

Going forward, related to its quality strategy, DAA will tackle questions of both scalability—how to ensure that quality support opportunities are accessible to and being accessed by more comprehensive and content providers—and sustainability—as more sites participate in quality initiatives, how can DAA continue to offer free quality supports without having to add more dedicated staff. Thus far, DAA has been successful in scaling—from 12 to 125+ sites in 6 years—and much of this success can be attributed to dedicated funding for key staff positions in this area of work. As DAA has scaled up YPQI participation, it has introduced sustainability mechanisms by asking the participating organizations to adopt capacity building supports, such as utilizing volunteer external assessors and methods trainers.

Prioritizing Partnerships and Embracing Change

Central to the efforts to scale and sustain program quality has been and is DQUAC, the provider network for DAA. DQUAC is a coalition of youth service providers working together to promote the importance of quality in out-of-school-time programming, both after school and during summer. In the early days of DQUAC it focused on program quality assessments, reviewed existing tools and best practices from around the country and assembled a local set of rubrics for providers in the Denver community to begin to use. In 2009, members of the DQUAC steering committee began to explore using a new assessment process, the David P Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality's Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI), after the local Boys & Girls Club (BGC) heard about it through their national network. This was important because it provided the network with a common language to talk about program quality.

At the time DAA was being conceptualized some stakeholders asked: *“Why are you adding something else? Why don't you just turn DQUAC into this? Why don't you just change DQUAC?”* On reflection, Regan Suhay says: *“I am super glad that in that moment we all were able to see that DQUAC needed to stay as it was, that it had extreme value and it was a right entity for a lot of the universal supports. It was the up and coming area for people to contribute to. It was a come one, come all—there's no kind of requirements. So, I'm so glad that we did not just like cannibalize DQUAC and make it into the DAA of today.”*

DAA continues its partnership with DQUAC and supports its sustainability through a small amount of funding. As Kim Schulz noted, *“Although the support is modest, it helps to legitimize, market, and bring in more high-profile experts in the field to work with our providers.”* Together, DQUAC and DAA collaborate and align strategic plans to ensure a breadth of offerings made accessible to all organizations who are interested in learning how to deepen quality, increase impact and improve services. DQUAC continues to provide open access professional development opportunities on a wide variety of topics. DAA provides trainings that are specific to continuous quality improvement. DQUAC participation reaches a much larger number of program sites than DAA alone; in 2016 over 900 sites participated in training and networking.

Spotlight on Data and Evaluation

“A major factor that has continued to propel the DAA forward is its ability to articulate its value using data.” Daniel Read, Senior Research Analyst, DELCS

When DAA applied for its afterschool system-building grant in 2011, its main request for support was to fund the Community Partnership System (CPS), a management information system that would enable regular inventory of all afterschool and summer learning programs, overlaid with DPS student outcome data and community and student demographic data. CPS is a dynamic online platform to support organizations that serve youth and DPS school leaders and staff who are seeking external partners. The creation of this management information system (MIS) was a collaborative effort among several groups including The Civic Canopy, DPS Department of Technology Services, DPS Extended Learning and Community Schools and OCA.

The system provides Denver with two vital services relevant to high quality programs and services for young people in the City and County of Denver. First, it offers a comprehensive inventory of available school day and afterschool and summer learning programs in Denver and a searchable database containing information about programs citywide. The program locator is used by educators, school counselors, administrators, parents/guardians and community organizations. Second, it is a reporting platform to link providers to DPS student outcome data. By allowing partners to access data about the students they serve, it helps users measure the impact of their programs and services on youth participants and report results. Different users of CPS have different levels of access to information based on their DPS Partnership and Data Sharing Agreement. The development of the CPS was coupled with training on how to use the system as well as the creation of data-sharing agreements between providers and DPS so that they could access student performance data. Currently there 508 community partners who have set up profiles in CPS; 244 access data regularly.

Heather Intres says that prior to having the CPS *“we would ask basic questions like ‘Who is doing what, where? Where are the community partners operating?’ And it was just crickets.”* Now, Tina Martinez, Director of Partnerships and Programs for the Denver Museum of Nature & Science (an informal science education organization/content provider) and formerly Chief Program Officer for Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver (a large, comprehensive afterschool program) reported, *“[access to the DPS data] helped us improve our services, figure out where our gaps were, and report out what we were doing and it just helped us in so many ways. The school data through the CPS system was really helpful.”* But the CPS wasn’t just for the large providers; it also greatly expanded the ability to track and share data to include providers with smaller infrastructure and capacity. As Heather Intres noted: *I think the other interesting thing about CPS is that it includes all sizes and shapes of partners from the tiny mom and pop shop who have three employees to very large organizations like the Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Denver. It’s a system that serves many different sizes of organizations as well as help school users.”*

Much like DAA’s quality improvement efforts, its data supports are driven by provider needs. Therefore, in 2017, DAA set out to learn more about the data needs of programs and organizations that provide youth services. To gather information from CPS users, DAA conducted four focus groups with 22 individuals representing 15 afterschool providers across Denver. Results indicated organizations rely heavily on the current services provided by CPS and many reported positive experiences. However, results also indicated that a number of provider’s needs were not being met by the current CPS including inability to—capture student information—including program

Prioritizing Partnerships and Embracing Change

attendance; house non-DPS data sets; and generate customized reports—as well as lack of technical support from the owner of the system and user friendliness to upload student rosters and download DPS data reports. These results corresponded with feedback collected regularly by the CPS Manager, which indicated that while many users have positive experiences with the system, there are several “areas of growth” identified for the system.

In response to this feedback, and after careful and thoughtful deliberation, DAA has chosen CitySpan, a nationally recognized cloud-based provider of data management systems for tracking services, funding, and outcomes used by some of the leading systems in the country including the Providence After School Alliance and Boston After School and Beyond.

In addition to the deep work DAA continues to do to develop and refine a comprehensive, city-wide MIS, it has been strategic and deliberate about establishing shared outcomes among stakeholders, tracking those outcomes, and using the information for continuous improvement and communications. At the outset of DAA, it was tracking outcomes related to academic attainment and academic growth but as it began collecting and analyzing its data, there was a recognition that the “sweet spot” for DAA-supported programs was in supporting engagement and the whole child and so, over time, in addition to examining CPS data, it began to use YPQI results as part of its evaluation efforts and introduced the Survey of Afterschool Youth Outcomes (SAYO) to better understand youth experiences. Most recently, DAA’s yearly evaluations also include information from DPS’s Whole Child Student Survey which is a social and emotional assessment. DAA also supports providers who have additional data sets that they want to analyze in conjunction with what DAA collects. Cognizant that not every organization has the ability to be “data superstars” (they might not have dedicated evaluation staff, or they don’t have analytic software) DAA developed bilingual easy-to-use, reliable and valid survey tools that can be administered at smaller dosage programs, making data available to all. Through its partnership with DPS on the SEAL initiative, DAA is piloting new tools specific to SEL, including the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality SEL-PQA, the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), and SELWeb, a web-based system designed to assess key social-emotional skills that are the targets of evidence-based social-emotional learning programs, and is a requirement of participation in The Wallace Foundation’s Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative.

The Denver Social, Emotional and Academic Learning (SEAL) Initiative

In 2017, Denver was one of six cities in the United States chosen by The Wallace Foundation to align and improve Social, Emotional and Academic Learning (SEAL) practices for in- and out-of-school time. The Denver Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with Denver Public Schools, is in the first phase of a pilot program ultimately designed to enrich the lives of students and improve their academic outcomes. Other communities in the Wallace Initiative are: Boston, Dallas, Palm Beach County, Tacoma and Tulsa.

Social and emotional learning includes three core competencies that, when engaged, lead to better opportunities for success in school, career and life—they are self-awareness and self-management, social awareness and relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

The Wallace initiative aims to bring direct benefits to Denver, as well as develop credible lessons for the field that can improve practice nationally. Anticipated local benefits include increased opportunities for social and emotional learning, improvements in adult practices, SEAL-rich learning environments and instruction, and stronger partnerships between in- and out-of-school time staff that engage *all* adults.

At the same time, RAND Corporation is conducting independent research on whether, and if so how, students benefited and will develop guidance on how such collaborations can be implemented across the field.

Like all Wallace initiatives, the effort is aimed at creating direct benefits for participating communities, as well as developing credible lessons for the field that can improve practice. Anticipated local benefits include:

- increased opportunities for social and emotional learning;
- improvements in adult practices, learning environments, and instruction; and
- stronger partnerships between the school districts and afterschool providers.

To learn more about The Wallace Foundation and its ongoing efforts to improve student's SEL, visit the Foundation's website: <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/how-we-work/our-work/pages/social-emotional-learning.aspx>

About This Report

This report is the result of a nine-month inquiry process that included extensive secondary source data review and telephone interviews with the following key DAA stakeholders:

- **Jon Albright**, former Deputy Chief of Staff for DPS, currently Student Engagement Director in the DPS Office of College and Career Readiness
- **Rob Beam**, Principal, Newlon Elementary School, Denver
- **Erin Brown**, former Executive Director of Office of Children's Affairs (OCA), former co-chair of DAA Board, currently Mayor Hancock's Chief of Staff
- **Miranda Cook**, former afterschool provider, currently SEAL Initiative Manager, City and County of Denver, OCA
- **Sharon Deich**, Vice President of FourPoint Education partners, consultant to DAA
- **Jennifer Harris**, former DAA Director, currently Portfolio Manager, Field Services, The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality
- **Heather Intres**, former Community Partnerships System Manager, currently Associate Director, Department of Expanded Learning and Community Schools (DELCS)
- **John Lewis**, Network Lead, DELCS, DAA Leadership Staff
- **Katherine Plog-Martinez**, former Executive Director of DELCS and former member of DAA staff team, co-Founder of DAA
- **Tina Martinez**, Director of Partnerships and Programs, Denver Museum of Nature and Science (current board member)
- **Lisa Montagu**, Investment Director, Health and Education, The Piton Foundation (former DAA board member)
- **Jami Powell**, former afterschool site supervisor, led the planning process for The Wallace Foundation system building RFP
- **Kristin Pozzoboni**, Senior Manager, DELCS, DAA Leadership Staff
- **Maxine Quintana**, Director, Out-of-School-Time Initiatives, City and County of Denver, OCA, Co-founder of DAA
- **Daniel Read**, Senior Research Analyst, DELCS
- **Kim Schulz**, Associate Vice President, YMCA of Metropolitan Denver, current board member
- **Polly Singh**, Program Officer, The Wallace Foundation
- **Bela Spooner**, Manager, Expanded Learning. Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, National League of Cities
- **Regan Suhay**, Director of Strategy for Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Denver, currently Afterschool Provider Liaison, City and County of Denver, OCA, Co-founder of DAA
- **Laenne Thompson**, Director, Field Services, The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality

About The Authors

Priscilla M. Little is a senior consultant with The Forum for Youth Investment. Prior to joining the Forum, she was Initiative Manager for The Wallace Foundation's Next Generation Afterschool System Building Initiative, where she worked closely with nine cities that were working to build and sustain robust afterschool and summer learning systems. Central to that work were regular community of practice meetings among the cities as well as a centralized technical assistance effort to help grantees with core aspects of their system building work. She is a national expert on afterschool and summer learning systems and has helped incubate dozens of systems across the country. Laura Jahromi, Senior Program Associate at the Forum, assisted with data collection, analysis and report writing. Ian Hickox, Collaborative Communications, provided editorial and design support.



The Forum for Youth Investment is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan “action tank” committed to changing the odds that all children and youth are ready for college, work and life. It provides ideas, services, and networks that leaders need in order to make more intentional decisions that are good for young people. The Forum helps leaders increase their capacity to more effectively make the case for and manage the collaborative efforts that are needed to change the odds for youth; improve the alignment and appropriateness of child and youth policy agendas and investments; and strengthen programs’ and practitioners’ capacity to create environments in which youth thrive, across all the systems and settings where young people spend time.



Collaborative Communications is a strategic communications and consulting firm specializing in education and learning issues. For more than 18 years, Collaborative has worked with educators, policymakers, advocates, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, philanthropies, and community leaders to improve public education and drive changes needed to ensure that all children have access to high-performing public schools and learning opportunities. Collaborative is a recognized leader in working with networks and intermediaries across the country to build partnerships and support the growth of effective afterschool and summer learning programs.