



Group Health Foundation Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

PROCESS: The ways you have invited, engaged, and created paths for community members to identify the issues that matter the most to them

REFLECTIVE presentation about challenges, successes, and key leanings related to the process of engaging and partnering with communities on health equity issues.

Mission Statement:

The mission of Salish School of Spokane (SSOS) is to create a vibrant community of fluent speakers of Interior Salish languages by providing Salish language instruction to children and by empowering parents and families to speak Salish in their daily lives. Our vision is that Salish School of Spokane will provide outstanding immersion education in the languages of the Columbian Plateau, creating fluent speakers. The school will serve children from birth to twelfth grade, delivering the highest quality academic and culturally relevant education. The services of the school shall be available for all children and families, regardless of race or economic status. Salish School of Spokane will serve as a beacon of light, guiding family and community efforts to reclaim our language.

Native people in Spokane face many challenges including worse school performance, higher unemployment, higher rates of disease, and more negative police interactions than the population at large. We believe that traditional language and culture are the keys to achieving a healthy and culturally grounded Native community. Our language and culture have a "specific gravity", such that, when we effectively revitalize our language and culture, we also make tangible improvements in health and resiliency factors. When we engage in inter-generational language and culture programs, we strengthen our Native identity, pride and inter-generational relationships. A strong identity, a sense of self-worth, and strong relationships empower us to make healthy choices and increase our resiliency when we face challenges or crises.

1. How have you engaged, Convened, and maintained relationships with your community/communities? Web of reciprocal relationships, community classes and input

Salish School of Spokane is a grass-roots organization that grew directly out of the post-colonial wreckage experienced by Native people that established inequity and undermined self-determination, while simultaneously creating new possibilities to engage in a globalized and informatized world. It is at this post-colonial intersection that we have created a pathway to address the critical need to revitalize our plateau languages and cultures. At Salish School, we strive to recover the multi-faceted and holistic network of care, that will resituate our community into our traditional web of mutual respect, accountability and strength. We are a continuum of the community, rather than a separate part or piece of it.

While, we have chosen a schooling model to create a new generation of Salish speakers, this is only part of the revitalization equation. Revitalization will not happen unless community members are directly involved, invested and responsible for their portion of language learning. To this end, our language programming includes multiple weekly convening's of community members, in which eight



hours of free language classes are provided each week. This way the entire community is engaged in the language revitalization movement; whether student or teacher, child or parent, grandparent or friend, we are all on a pathway of language acquisition. It is through these classes, and other community language events and performances, such as the Celebrating Salish Conference that our community has the opportunity to convene, engage and strengthen our relationships with each other; which in turn empowers and strengthens our community. The process of language revitalization is not simply a revitalization of words, phrases, or ideas; but a transformation of the community, a transformation that is driven from within the community and led by it.

2. How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your community/communities?

We are a grassroots and holistic community response to the genocidal policies, practices and institutions that have exploited, repressed and appropriated our people. We are Native driven and led, a continuum of the community, not a separate segment of it. Because we are firmly rooted within the community, every decision, creation, design is a community response to a community problem. Simply put there is no “co” because there is no separation of our organization from the community; our administrators, curriculum designers, elders, board members, teachers, staff, and students not only grew from within the surrounding Native community, but work from within it and for it. For example, many of our staff engage in multiple community roles, as both a community member and a parent of a student and a Salish school teacher, board member, or staff member. We have community members that are also grandparents, uncles, aunts, and a cousin of a student and are also a Salish school board member, curriculum developer, administrator, or dance teacher. Not only do all of our staff and board members sustain our organization with monetary donations, but they are also involved at the most authentic level as learners, teachers and leaders in our community effort to revitalize language and culture. Thus, in addition to the 360 hours of community language classes offered each year, each and every employee is part of a teacher training program that provides them with 560 hours of language instruction every year.

In this vein, our programming is planned and implemented by Native American people and families in response to the authentic needs of the Native American community. Our people want every door of opportunity open to their children, and do not want to have to choose between honoring and maintaining traditional culture and language and being economically self-sufficient and able to thrive in the globalized and informatized international economy. Our community has invested in language and culture revitalization because they are invested in the health, wellbeing and recovery of our community. They are invested in the forward thinking for and empowerment of our community. Moreover we are connected to a larger network of indigenous communities that are also in the processes of creating their own responses towards revitalization and decolonization.

Given that the majority of our work comes from within the community, most of our outreach has focused on engaging the dominant society in an effort to advocate and create positive avenues for reconciliation. We know that in order for our efforts to be successful, it is imperative that the institutions and leaders of the dominant society help empower Native communities through direct funding as well as engagement in critical partnerships with Native led and driven organizations that have demonstrated the development of effective solutions. With this in mind, we have established mutually constructive partnerships with hundreds of individual donors, as well as with non-Native local, state and private



organizations such as the United Way of Spokane County, Washington State's Department of Early Learning, and the Kalliopeia Foundation.

3. How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) as part of your community engagement work?

For more than 150 years, the education of Native American children in the City of Spokane has been controlled by non-Native people who at worst, wished to commit genocide against us, and at best pursued an assimilationist agenda that has undermined, devalued, and marginalized Native American culture, identity, and family stability. As a result, Native children in Spokane have the lowest test scores, highest drop/push out rate, highest number of negative disciplinary interactions, and most expulsions of any recognized ethnic or racial group.

Salish School of Spokane was founded, and is governed and led, by Native American people for the good of our children and community. We are striving to take control of and responsibility for the education and health of our children and families. We are working to end the cycles of poverty, discrimination, and cultural assimilation that have plagued our community. We believe that we can transform our community by building educational and social programming on a foundation of Salish cultural and linguistic revitalization and renewal.

Community transformation is not a segmented process but a holistic one. We have learned that to enact long-term, sustainable improvement for children and families in the Native American community, we must acknowledge, respect, and celebrate traditional Native American language and culture. A high quality language and cultural revitalization strategy turns out to be the best strategy for addressing other community challenges. Because our language and culture have a kind of specific gravity, when we bring our language and culture back, we can not help but to strengthen intergenerational relationships, build community networks, engage in healthy behavior, and invigorate self-identities and esteem. As our community members speak our traditional language, learn our traditional songs, gather our traditional foods and medicines, and maintain and building intergenerational relationships with our Elders and other Knowledge Keepers, they are also healing themselves and our community in the process.

4. What about your organization's way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships? Include examples of how your staff and your board (if relevant) contributed to the culture and values that enabled your success.

Salish School of Spokane was founded, and is governed and led, by Native American people for the good of our children and community. We are striving to take control of and responsibility for the education and health of our children and families. Both the success of our work, and the way we work has grown out of this innate desire to remain a grass-roots, community-driven, and Native-led organization. We are not solely a service provided to the community but part of a larger community effort. Our school dictum best encapsulates the reciprocal relationship we have with each other as community members: k^wu ha?nwix^w (we respect each other), k^wu K^wułnwix^w (we share with each other), k^wu txətnwix^w (we take care of each other). The way we work is not simply part of an organizational strategy, theory or climate, but is part of a larger extensional mission to revitalize and recover our very essential identity as Native people.



Our community has collectively found that language and cultural revitalization are not only a most pressing issue, but that movement for revitalization has proven to include the most transformational and far-reaching impacts for our community. Language revitalization is the antidote to ACES. Language revitalization heals intergenerational trauma. Language revitalization creates confidence. Language revitalization builds support networks. Language revitalization increases family stability. Language revitalization reintroduces healthy diets. Our organization is built from the collective work of the community.

5. What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, and missteps?

One of the most challenging aspects of our work is remaining focused on our mission. While we have chosen a schooling model to recreate a vibrant community of Salish speakers, it is a means to an end, not an end unto itself. In this sense, the school is able to support and build on certain aspects of language revitalization; most specifically the fluency and success of our next generation; but language revitalization is not the sole responsibility of the teachers and their students. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a network of communities to revitalize a language, and our programming must reflect that.

Because the vast majority of organizations and institutions do not reflect the exact work of our mission we must: 1) be conscious of whether a particular grant or partnership provides an opportunity, an applicable compromise or an ineffectual conciliation that deters our work; 2) provide comprehensive explanations to mainstream organizations/institutions about the historical and contemporary challenges faced by Native American people and communities; 3) provide comprehensive explanations and examples of how good language and cultural revitalization strategy turns out to be the best strategy for addressing other community challenges, such that when we bring our language and culture back, we can not help but to strengthen intergenerational relationships, build community networks, engage in healthy behavior, and invigorate self-identities and esteem; 4) effectively convey that the outcomes of our work are both transformational and preventative in nature. As the saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. We are not solely interested in treating the symptoms of colonialism; we want to prevent the further dissemination of them, by creating a culturally-bound community of support. We don't want to treat the symptoms of ACES, we want to prevent their further perpetuation. Lastly, finding resources for something that is so counter-cultural is one of our major challenges. In the United States, the dominant society does not typically encourage, reward or often, even tolerate, communities that speak other languages or that maintain strong cultural boundaries. Yet, for Native American people, our health, identity and possibilities are bound to our traditional languages and cultures, and our recovery from genocide and colonization. In this struggle for recovery, it is imperative that we very much need mainstream organizations and institutions to help empower effective community grassroots efforts by providing direct funding and viable and effectual partnerships.

6. What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?

In an attempt to finally dissipate indigenous communities, settler states across the globe began to pass anti-language laws in the late nineteenth Century. Native languages were not only banned in national institutions but were treated as shameful vestiges of a once glorious past, a past that it was said was vanishing, right along with the people. Since the late twentieth century we have witnessed a global



movement of language and cultural revitalization. This movement is part of the larger movement for decolonization. It represents a cultural shift that not only celebrates our heritage cultures and languages, but also a full effort to recover, reimagine, and build upon what was left. This is rewarding, transformational work, and the support it receives from both within and outside the community is growing. Everyday we are building up our community, learning more, supporting each other, and creating a new future for our children and community.

A model for Native health and wellness

Our work to improve the lives of Native American people is build around a model that has traditional language and culture at its core. The model seeks to support Native children, youth, adults and Elders by re-establishing intergeneration connections, promoting healthy lifestyles, and pursuing excellence as a community standard.

