



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community Partners Strengthening Public Schools:

A Mixed Methods Evaluation of
Caring for Kids

Sagamore Institute
April 2021

I.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Throughout 2020-2021, researchers from the Sagamore Institute, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization, conducted a mixed methods evaluation of Caring for Kids' work in the Kansas City metro area. Dr. Amy Sherman, a Senior Fellow at Sagamore who has overseen numerous large-scale research studies documenting the value and impact of nonprofit programs, served as the principal investigator.

CFK in Brief

Founded in 2013, Caring for Kids (CFK) is an intermediary organization brokering partnerships between public school and community organizations (including businesses, civic associations, nonprofits, and religious congregations). CFK has developed a simple process for helping the community answer the question, "How can we help our schools?" It facilitates conversations and creates a partnering team of representatives from interested community partners and staff of a local school. CFK partnerships are active in a variety of schools (primarily but not exclusively elementary schools) across seven school districts: Center School District; Grandview; Hickman Mills; Kansas City Public Schools; Shawnee Mission; Raytown; and Kansas City, KS Schools.

Importantly, the CFK partnerships at each school are driven by the principal's agenda. He or she defines the key goals. A school liaison works alongside a staff member from CFK to facilitate the collaborative involvement of churches and community organizations. Liaisons are school staff members assigned by their principals; often they are social workers or guidance counselors. The partners hold regular meetings (the frequency varies, but once per month is typical). At individual schools, CFK assists with agenda-setting, notetaking, communications among partners, and helping to keep projects on track. Overall, CFK understands itself as a "backbone organization" within the Collective Impact paradigm.¹ Specifically, CFK seeks to help partners build a common agenda around the principal's objectives, to maintain strong, continuous communications, and to encourage partners to engage in mutually reinforcing activities.

At the beginning of the evaluation initiative, CFK was working with 83 schools (mostly serving elementary-age students) across seven school districts in the metro Kansas City region. Well over 300 community organizations were involved (at various degrees of intensity) in the school partnerships.

Evaluation Overview

Sagamore Institute's evaluation project sought to gather evidence regarding CFK's "value-add," documenting the value it brings both directly to its immediate constituents (public schools and

participating partner organizations) and indirectly to its ultimate beneficiaries (schoolchildren). The project involved two main activities:

1. Quantitative research: Sagamore fielded an online survey among the 72 principals in CFK’s database. Fifty-four principals completed the survey (75% response rate). In sixty of the schools where CFK is active, school officials have designated a staff person to serve as an official liaison for the CFK partnership. Thirty-four liaisons completed the survey (56% response rate).

2. Qualitative research: Sagamore researchers conducted a total of 48 structured telephone interviews with principals, liaisons, and community partners active at seven selected schools (six elementary schools, one middle school).

II.

RESEARCH THEMES AND KEY FINDINGS

The research project was organized around five main themes. Key findings under each are summarized below.

1. Effective Partnering. CFK was interested in a third-party assessment of their effectiveness as a broker of collaboration between community organizations and public schools. Our assessment focused primarily on whether CFK had increased the number and quality of community partners for schools. As shown in Table 1 below:

- CFK has increased the number and longevity of community partners working with local public schools. 67% of principals said the statement, *CFK has helped us to build more partnerships with community organizations than we could have alone*, was “very accurate.” Sixty-one percent said the statement, *CFK has enabled longer-lasting partnerships with community organizations*, was “very accurate.”
- Nearly 70% of principals reported that CFK has mobilized community partners with which they otherwise would not likely have connected.
- Over 70% of school liaisons report that CFK has helped community partners to develop a common agenda and engage in mutually reinforcing activities.

“As I look at the CFK model, I think it is the most successful way of partnering with a school that we’ve ever had.”

—Pastor of a mid-sized congregation

Table 1. Partnership Characteristics

PARTNERSHIP CHARACTERISTIC	Not Accurate		Slightly Accurate		Moderately Accurate		Very Accurate		Not Sure	
	P	L	P	L	P	L	P	L	P	L
QUANTITY “CFK has helped us to build more partnerships with community organizations than we could have alone.”	4%	3%	2%	3%	28%	29%	67%	65%	0%	0%
EFFECTIVENESS “CFK’s role in providing infrastructure has enabled a more effective partnership between the school and community organizations.”	2%	3%	6%	6%	35%	27%	56%	56%	0%	9%
UNIQUENESS “CFK has brought us into relationships with community organizations with which we otherwise would probably not have connected.”	4%	6%	7%	9%	20%	24%	69%	59%	0%	3%
DURATION “CFK has enabled longer-lasting partnerships with community organizations.”	2%	0%	4%	6%	31%	24%	61%	68%	2%	0%
ALIGNMENT “CFK has enabled us to build partnerships that genuinely align with the principal’s goals for the school.”	0%	0%	9%	6%	26%	18%	63%	71%	2%	6%

P = Principals’ responses L = Liaisons’ responses

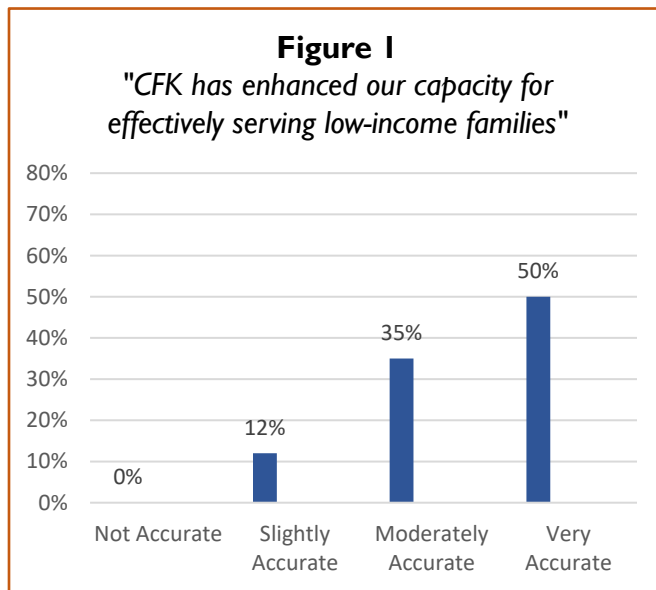
Source: Sagamore Institute Survey of Principals (n =54) and School Liaisons (n = 34), 2021.

2. Strengthening Schools. By mobilizing community support around local schools, CFK hopes to bolster staff morale and help schools create a positive culture. Our assessment examined the influence CFK partnerships are having on school culture, family engagement, and teacher/staff morale. Over half of the principals surveyed credit CFK partners as having a “very substantial influence” on promoting a positive school culture and a warm, welcoming climate at the school. Two-thirds of surveyed principals agreed or strongly agreed that partner activities have strengthened parent involvement in their schools and 85% reported that partners had provided practical resources to economically distressed families. Over 80% reported that CFK partner activities had had a moderate or very substantial influence on improving teacher morale.

Two-thirds of principals agreed or strongly agreed that partner activities had strengthen parent involvement and over 80% reported that partners’ work had had a moderate or very substantial influence on improving teacher morale.

3. Supporting Families. CFK partners are active in serving schools where many or most students live in poverty. School officials credit CFK partners with strengthening their ability to support these kids and their families:

- over 80 percent of principals reported that partners had provided resources to low-income families in their schools, and
- 85% of school liaisons said CFK had enhanced their capacity for effectively serving low-income families (see Figure 1).



4. Student Learning and Thriving.

The ultimate beneficiaries of CFK's work are schoolchildren. CFK seeks to increase hope and opportunity among children and teens, especially those facing socio-economic challenges. We examined the partnerships' influences on student academics, attendance, and extracurricular opportunities; kids' motivations and confidence in learning; students' social and emotional wellbeing; and the degree to which activities were enhancing student connections to positive adults and building Developmental Assets.^{®2}

We found that CFK partners' activities are having a greater influence on students' social and emotional wellbeing than on students' academics:

- 79% of liaisons report that the partners have had a very substantial or moderate influence on increasing the number of supportive adult relationships enjoyed by students;
- 64% say partners have had a very substantial or moderate influence on enhancing students' self-esteem;
- 25% to 40% of liaisons report CFK partners' activities as having a very significant influence on nurturing eight different Developmental Assets[®] among participating students (see Table 2);
- 55% say partner activities have had a very substantial or moderate influence on student academic gains;
- 61% of principals say CFK partners have had a very substantial or moderate influence on improving student attendance rates.

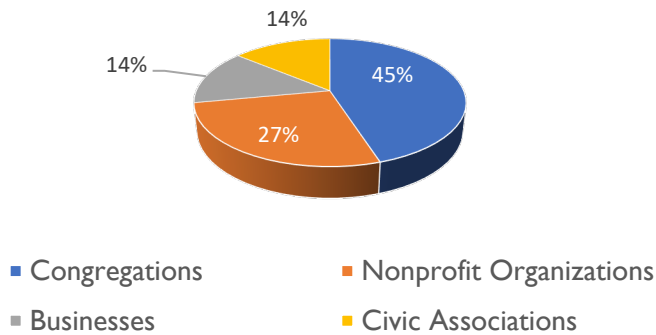
Table 2. CFK Partners and Building Developmental Assets®

To what degree have CFK partner activities...	Not At All	To a Slight Degree	To a Moderate Degree	To a Very Substantial Degree	Not Sure
ADULT ROLE MODELS (DA #14) <i>increased the number of positive role models in the lives of students?</i>	3%	24%	29%	44%	0%
POSITIVE ADULTS (DA #3) <i>increased the number of supportive adult relationships in the lives of students?</i>	0%	18%	38%	41%	3%
COMMUNITY VALUES KIDS (DA #7) <i>helped students feel valued by members of the broader community?</i>	0%	24%	29%	38%	6%
HOPEFULNESS (DA #40)³ <i>increased participating students' sense of hopefulness?</i>	0%	15%	29%	38%	18%
SELF-ESTEEM (DA #38) <i>increased participating students' self-esteem?</i>	6%	15%	29%	35%	9%
ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION (DA #21) <i>increased participating students' academic motivation?</i>	1%	12%	26%	35%	18%
SERVICE TO OTHERS (DA #9) <i>increased student opportunities for service in the community?</i>	18%	18%	29%	32%	3%
EXPECTATIONS (DA #16) <i>promoted a culture of high expectations?</i>	9%	26%	26%	29%	9%
CULTURAL COMPETENCE (DA #34) <i>increased student awareness of and appreciation for diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds?</i>	0%	26%	21%	26%	9%
PEACEFUL CONFLICT RESOLUTION (DA #36) <i>increased participating students' ability to resolve problems with peers without becoming aggressive?</i>	18%	24%	9%	26%	21%
ENGAGEMENT IN YOUTH PROGRAMS (DA #18) <i>increased student engagement in group programs such as clubs, organizations, and/or sports?</i>	15%	21%	15%	21%	24%

Source: Sagamore Institute survey of school liaisons, 2021. n=34.

5. Congregational Engagement. Given its roots in the faith community, CFK leaders were particularly interested in the ways that participating congregations are being influenced by their involvement in school partnerships. Of the 43 community partners working with these schools, 18 (or 42%) were religious congregations (see Figure 2). Faith and non-faith partners were engaged in a wide variety of activities benefiting the schools, for example: donating goods to benefit students and staff; supplying manpower to help supervise children at special school

Figure 2
Partner Types



events and festivals; operating before- and after-school programs; mentoring youth; enhancing school property; and providing resources and training for parents.

Interviews with pastors and lay leaders showed that CFK's greatest contributions to their congregational partners center around facilitating the school

partnership (opening the doors of the school and coordinating planning and communications) and giving congregations fresh ideas on how to effectively serve the school. Participating in the CFK partnerships had increased participating congregations' awareness of poverty in their communities, significantly expanded their investments in their local community, and grown volunteers' personal character.

“We would never have been able to organize ourselves or even known where to start [to serve the schools] without CFK providing these opportunities.”

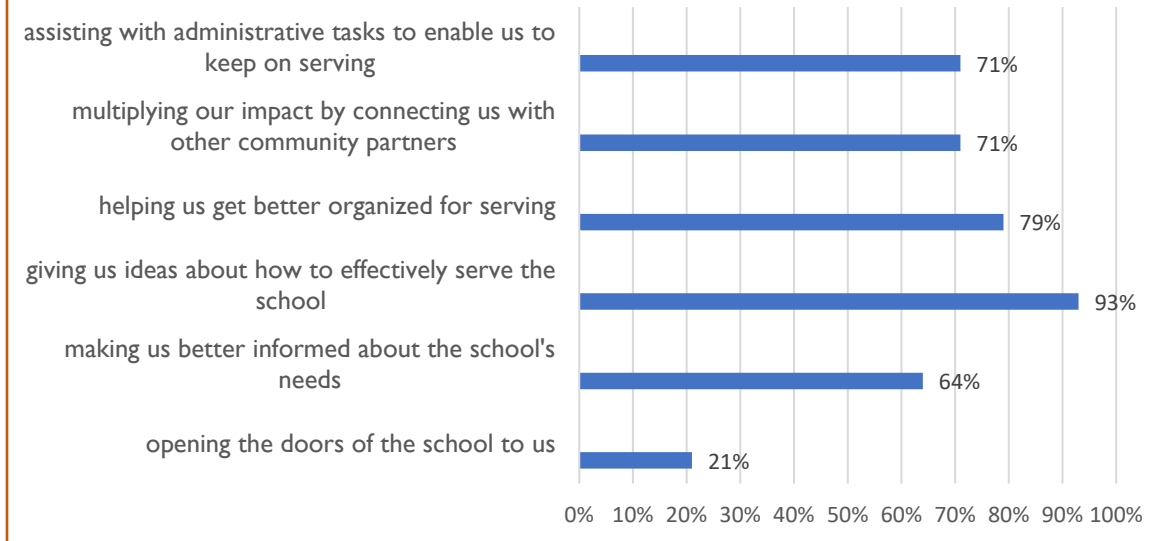
—A church lay leader

III. CONCLUSIONS

Motivations for Engagement. Interviews with community partners revealed a variety of motivations for joining the CFK partnerships at the schools such as the desire to collaborate with others in a common mission; gaining expanded resources; alignment with organizational mission/core values; and geographic proximity. Business partners said they wanted to give back to the community and wanted to help schools increase their ability to produce a quality workforce in the future.

CFK's “Value-Add” for Partners. As shown in Figure 3 below, partners reported that CFK had helped them in a variety of ways: giving them ideas for effective service, multiplying their impact, informing them about the school's needs, and opening the doors of the school to them.

Figure 3
How has CFK helped your organization?



Source: Sagamore Institute structured interviews with community partners, 2020-2021. $n=48$.

Increasing Collaboration Outside of the Schools. Roughly 61% of principals, 68% of school liaisons, and between one-third and one-half of community partners report that their involvement with CFK has increased their belief in the power of collaboration. Additionally, 71% of the partners indicated that as a result of their involvement with CFK, their organization was “more deeply involved in collaborating with *other* organizations outside the CFK partnership.”

Benefits for Congregations. CFK has helped busy pastors get connected—and stay connected—with their local schools. Over half of the congregational interviewees reported that CFK had opened the doors of the school, something most had been unable to do on their own. Those who had some past experience of involvement with schools credited CFK with creating a more rewarding kind of collaboration. Before they had served transactionally, in “one-off” events. Now they enjoyed a genuine, mutually beneficial, ongoing relationship. Smaller churches and congregations with mostly older members were having an especially satisfying experience with CFK. Small churches were feeling a greater sense of impact by being part of a larger, multi-partner initiatives. Older congregants were finding new purpose as they used their particular gifts, skills, and knowledge to serve kids as mentors or after-school club leaders.

Influence of CFK Involvement on Participating Congregations. The four most common influences of the CFK partnership on participating churches noted by interviewees were: (1) increasing the congregation’s awareness of poverty in their community; (2) increasing congregants’ sense of their church as “missional” or “outreach-oriented;” (3) increasing the

amount of money the church was spending on local outreach; and (4) enhancing the church's reputation in their community.

Overall, our research found that CFK's work in the Kansas City metro area has made the students, low-income families, and teachers and staff of the participating schools better off. Students are enjoying more positive, adult relationships and accessing new extra-curricular activities. Low-income families are receiving a greater level of practical support (e.g., emergency financial assistance, food, clothing, education). Teachers and principals feel less alone and more appreciated.

Work in Title 1 schools is stressful and difficult in light of how the numerous socio-economic challenges of students and their families can overwhelm schools' capacity to respond. As one principal told us, "Doing the work here can take a toll." She and other school officials indicated that CFK is providing not only practical services but *solidarity*. As one principal said, "CFK's most valuable contribution to school officials is that they no longer feel they are alone." Our CFK partners, she said, "believe in us and believe in our mission. And because they believe in us, you feel as if they're walking the walk with you."

"This would be a very hard and lonely job without CFK."

—Principal at a Title I Elementary School

Ironically, looking ahead, the greatest challenge that CFK may face is related to its own excellent performance in coordinating the school partnerships. School leaders and partners were vocal in praising CFK staff for saving them time and keeping the partnerships' labors on track. Most view their CFK staff liaison as the player who is responsible for keeping the collaborative moving forward together. CFK, though, desires to "work itself out of a job." Its hope is to help launch partnerships and facilitate them for the first few years, then gradually withdraw as the partners' deep trust and relationships allow them to coordinate and execute their work together without CFK's help. CFK refers to this as the partnerships moving into a "self-sustaining" phase. Based on what we heard, only one of the seven case study schools is close to achieving that phase. In the future, CFK will need to find ways not only to continue offering strong value to schools and community partners but also to nurture increased leadership and responsibility among the partners to continue the work without CFK's ongoing facilitation.

ENDNOTES

¹ For the leading overview of the Collective Impact paradigm, see John Kania and Mark Kramer, “Collective Impact,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2011).
https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact#:~:text=Our%20research%20shows%20that%20successful,communication%2C%20and%20backbone%20support%20organizations.

² Developmental Assets, as defined by the Search Institute, are a set of 40 positive supports, opportunities, and relationship qualities young people need across all aspects of their lives (called “external assets”) and personal skills, social emotional strengths, self-perceptions, and values they need to make good choices, take responsibility for their actions, and be independent (called “internal assets”) See <https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/development-assets/developmental-assets-framework/>.

³ Search Institute’s label for DA #40 is “Positive view of personal future.”