Poconos Services for Families and Children (PSFC)
“A One Stop Shop” to Cultivate Community Networks

Making Connections Strategy 1
Leveraging a Wraparound Model

Maggie Dahn and Kylie Peppler
Connected Learning Lab, University of California, Irvine

Effective coordination across settings enables young people to locate and use resources and opportunities offered by different yet connected programs within and beyond their communities (Ito et al., 2020). These coordination efforts require time, energy, and brokering relationships on the organizational level to support effective communication and coordination across different entities. For Pocono Services for Families and Children (PSFC), a program affiliated with Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool Youth Development Network (PSAYDN), a key driver of their approach is to support the youth and families they work with to access resources they need to “succeed and thrive” and by extension, improve their communities and quality of life through a wraparound approach (PSFC, 2020). To address the problem of practice this portrait surfaces — namely, that accessing the many resources families might need at once requires movement between spaces, settings, and people — PSFC aims to be “a single resource for family assistance that connects people they serve with multiple services and helps reduce the hassles associated with them” (PSFC, 2020). In pursuit of this aim, which Justin, the School Age Lead at PSFC, described as part of a goal to “create larger networks and ecosystems,” PSFC opened The Mountain Center, which physically unites several nonprofit and social services under one roof. Justin referred to their center as a “one stop shop” for families in need and offered his account of the history of PSFC as a coordinating center for their community: “We were Monroe County Head Start, and we still are, but we were based out of East Stroudsburg, and a lot of our services were only in East Stroudsburg. And the Tobyhanna area was a target area, and it was the area that had the most need in our county. So our old executive director wanted to expand services into this part of the county to support the population here and also to bring more resources. So what he had in mind was to purchase the school and to bring in community partners and offer an office space so people could use this as a one stop shop and they wouldn’t have to do the runaround for resources. So long story short, we were able to bring in a food pantry, state representatives offices. We have Habitat for Humanity, we have a WIC office, we have women’s resources, an agency on aging, and we also have a clinic coming in… we wanted to bring in a bunch of resources together within this part of our county. At the same time, we have this huge school now and we wanted to keep on growing so we looked to expand to older youth because we were partnering with the YES program already and providing summer work experience so [we merged] with the YES program so we could just serve cradle through career.”

The often invisible work of coordinating between settings was no easy task, and there were key factors that contributed to the physical co-location of several nonprofits and community services such as the WIC office, a clinic, and food pantry under the PSFC umbrella. In explaining the practices behind how this coordination work of several organizations with aligned missions came together to serve their community, Justin elaborated:
“[PCFS was] seen as the foremost educational leader in our community and [some of the other agencies] were already serving the populations we served, and we would make these resources more accessible if we had it all underneath one roof. Granted, we also provided an incentive by providing low-cost rent each month so that’s another benefit for them…so they’re getting a discount and they’re also partnering, and the people that they serve also have more accessibility to their resources.”

Providing incentives for the individual organizations in terms of alignment of missions and organizational goals, visibility within the community they aimed to serve, and a financial break, supported the physical co-location of their offices. Additionally, PSFC’s relentless focus on long-term outcomes for children and families (as Justin explained, “A good outcome would be the next generations are not eligible for Head Start, we want to work ourselves out of a job”) motivated the merging of groups since their work together could effectively lead to greater change than any one organization could enact alone.

Fundamentally focusing on long-term outcomes for youth and families provides a bedrock for motivations of individuals and organizations to work together to support the whole child and whole family, rather than serve them in isolation solely within their programming. Finally, though physically and structurally co-located under one umbrella organization (PSFC), each nonprofit maintained their own individual identities and ways of operating.

**Background on Brokers from PSFC and YES**

![Image](image.jpg)

In explaining how he came to this work, Justin (School Age Lead at PSFC) explained that he hoped to be “part of a proactive approach rather than reactive.” Aligned with this goal, he explained that though he went to school for criminal justice to pursue a career as a police officer, he instead got a job as a family advocate in 2015, working his way up to help develop a school age program for PSFC that eventually merged with the YES (Youth Empowerment Services) program. His motivations for engaging in the work that he does came from his experience growing up “struggling” in which “extracurriculars were [his] safe havens.” He hopes to create that same feeling and experience for the youth and families he serves in his current position. In terms of STEM, he helped develop the apprenticeship room at PSFC but has no formal training in STEM disciplines. Damarys (Youth Empowerment Services Lead and Program/Recruitment Coordinator) is “a jack of all trades” who simultaneously acts as a program coordinator, recruiter, and teacher. Her educational background is in psychology and she previously worked with students with anger management and autism. When asked to create a STEM curriculum, she first said, “oh no, no, no, I can’t.” However, though she had limited STEM experience, she explained that the network lead, Winnie, “hooked us up with some existing curriculum,” which they “gave [their] own twist.” Damarys tailors the program to the needs of PSFC clients and aims to keep their STEM programming “fun and interesting.”

Though neither Justin nor Damarys have a formal background in STEM, each expressed a belief that STEM skills
and knowledge are valuable for the youth they served in terms of preparing them for future careers and inspiring/developing their interests. Despite not having STEM experience, both Justin and Damarys modeled their work as STEM learners in their practice — Justin in terms of bringing back learning from conferences and workshops to their apprenticeship room at PSFC (e.g., NASA STEM challenges), and Damarys in modifying the network-provided STEM curriculum to fit the needs of their participants.

### Supporting Transition to STEM Career and Community Networks

STEM learning opportunities are part of the PSFC/YES approach to providing a one stop shop for services and experiences for youth and families. In coordination with Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool Youth Development Network (PSAYDN), they work to provide STEM programming with a focus on connecting to the STEM workforce. For the YES Program, teaching young people about job opportunities is a major goal, including the financial specifics of different careers, along with the training and background needed to succeed in different tracks. With funding from the STEM Next/MGM grant, PCFS/YES are building a community garden with youth at their East Stroudsburg location through their Saturday STEM programming. (This extends existing work done at The Mountain Center, which houses 21 garden beds, 14 fruit trees, and a greenhouse all generated and used by the community at large with the goal of teaching sustainable skills and bringing fresh produce directly to the community.) Broadly, the PSFC/YES Saturday STEM program in East Stroudsburg was designed to get youth to think critically and invent solutions around STEM-related problems. For example, during their first sessions they experimented to design their own water filters for the garden and are collaboratively working on its design.

Part of the PSFC/YES approach to supporting youth, and particularly girls, in STEM is through assessing their interests (STEM-related or not), or what Damarys called a “STEM personality” and matching that to potential careers and necessary training needed to succeed in those careers. To Damarys, it’s about being honest about how much they might make in different career paths, but also “not just make money to make money, but to have a goal in life, to have a career, something you enjoy.”

### Supporting Career Opportunities in the “Cradle through Career” through Partnership with PA CareerLink Monroe County

In addition to the STEM program described above, as an explicit example of supporting transitions to opportunities from PSFC/YES, Damarys explains that both she and a colleague (Melinda, a social worker with PSFC) support making connections to career opportunities through their partnership with PA CareerLink Monroe County to support the career-oriented goals of PSFC. Through their partnership with CareerLink, Damarys and
Melinda act as brokers to help youth and young adults (ages 18-24) find training for jobs that are in high demand in Monroe County. They help these young people from start to finish throughout the entire process, including completing applications and contracts, as well as monitoring progress and ensuring they are attending the classes and trainings they need to. As Career Counselors, Damarys and Melinda attend CareerLink seminars and workshops to support job searches and interview prep for their clients and help them to develop curriculum. As part of this partnership, they also are designing a tutoring class and study guide for the CASAS (Comprehensive Adults Student Assessment Systems) test (a requirement for participation in CareerLink services) and thinking strategically about how to best support individuals struggling with scoring sufficiently well. Currently, PSFC/YES’s main partnership with CareerLink is through the Summer Youth Employment Program, which supports youth ages 14-24 find summer job experiences. Through this program, youth are paid $8/hour for six weeks of work and a mentorship program through local businesses in Monroe County.

The program includes a recruitment period for both local businesses and youth for whom the partnership could be a match, participant support for the job application process, a matching and orientation process, and end of program evaluation.

**Room to Grow**

In terms of reflecting on areas in which they could improve in terms of creating sustainable outcomes for youth, Justin and Damarys both acknowledge that better systematic tracking of the families they serve would improve the ways they work, and as Justin explained, “help bridge the gaps” they see. Justin explained that they do have anecdotal success stories, but they do not have a formalized way of tracking outcomes of interest aligned with their goals. Damarys added that since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been a lot of “new faces” and they haven’t really prioritized “collecting data” but once things get “back to normal” they hope to be able to do so more purposefully.

*Figure 3. Organization of PSAYDN and PA Programs participating in the “making connections” project*

**How Pocono Services for Families and Children (PSFC) Prepared for Leveraging a Wraparound Model to Address Holistic Needs to Support STEM Learning and Development**

- Multigenerational trust-building and establishing a mission-aligned reputation in the community
- Providing space for other coordinated organizations to maintain individual identities, while offering incentives for physical co-location (e.g., lower rent, better access to individual organizations serve)
- Brokers in leadership positions committed to creating “safe haven” for youth and families
Figure 4. Draft mapping of strategies/approach

About the Making Connections Project:  
Fostering Connections and Pathways for Youth across STEM Learning Ecosystems

STEM Next and the Connected Learning Lab at UCI have partnered to support state and regional out of school networks as they develop and strengthen an ecological and connected approach to STEM learning. The case studies series represent real world examples that are part of a larger effort to develop and improve connection strategies that strengthen STEM learning ecosystems, centering the experiences, mobility, and futures of individual learners and their families across state and regional networks.

Each case study in this series takes a close look at a partner organization’s approach to one of the eight strategies for connecting: 1) A wraparound approach; 2) Coordinating between in school and out of school; 3) Giving back to one’s community; 4) Near peer or industry mentorship; 5) Translating youth interests into STEM career opportunities; 6) Building relationships with families; 7) Curating online tools; or 8) Creating open portfolios. These case studies are not exhaustive; they are examples of coordinating and brokering that can be used to spark ideas and inspire growth.

For more information on the project and the strategies, visit https://stemnext.org/stem-pathways and connectedlearning.uci.edu/projects/making-connections/

References


PCFS. 2020. Pocono Services for Families and Children.