



## Community Innovation Grant INTERIM Report

**Organization:** PACT for Families Collaborative

**Amount:** \$130,000

**Grant Term:** 11/1/2013 - 12/31/2015

**What specific aspects, components or activities of your work this year were instrumental to making progress? Why was each important?**

1. **Data Digging-** we collected data from community professionals, student surveys, and youth and parent interviews all related to issues impacting chronic absenteeism. The data shared similar themes, but also showed different priorities from each of the three groups – professionals, students and parents. As we shared data from each of the perspectives with the community professionals, it generated very good discussion that led to new insights for some, and reinforced the complexity of the issue for others. The data has also helped to keep the conversation grounded on the issues that are real contributing concerns—not just personal opinions or more limited perspectives on the issue. The data also has helped keep the primary issues contributing to absenteeism in the forefront as we moved into new solutions.
2. **Collaborative Communication—**Our original plan to use a Collective Impact approach for focused conversations on chronic absenteeism was powerful. We were able to utilize a more structured process to work through a set of questions that helped participants move towards a deeper understanding of the problems, the barriers that people are experiencing, and important issues to keep track of as changes are being considered. Having the history and relationships with the parents and professionals from all five counties helped the process get rolling quickly and “buying in to” the process much easier. In addition we had great communication between our PACT team members (our three managerial staff). As the process unfolded it was so crucial to talk through each meeting and plan the steps necessary for the following meetings in each county. Finally, we had a good working relationship with our Bush Consultant, Maggie Arzdorf-Schubbe. She communicated her trust in us and our ability to pull off this very industrious project. Her support was the added fuel to keep the project moving forward.
3. **Back bones—** Those involved in our discussion and planning have been willing participants, sharing the desire to find a ‘better way’ --but even with their willingness, working across agency and school practices is difficult. Leading in a direction that was thorough, consistent, and solution-focused took hours of planning, organizing and strategizing. This was time that education and government staff simply did not have available with their busy schedules, but time the Bush grant afforded

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PACT to invest. We know that PACT for Families' role as a backbone organization to this project meant that we have needed to play a skillfully guiding role behind the scenes, so that when the other players were assembled their time was well spent. It has become clear that to address chronic absenteeism we need all the players actively involved-- schools, the county and community professionals working together to find solutions; but our role as the organizing, steering, probing and analyzing partner is an important part of the equation.

### **What key lessons did you learn about doing your work during this year? Were any the result of something you might characterize as failure?**

1. A key lesson learned was the amount of time it does take to truly work through the complicated issues impacting attendance with a diverse audience of school, county and community providers. The process we were utilizing was able to generate very meaningful discussion, insight into key contributing factors and led to ideas that have great potential to have a positive impact. We had the benefit of doing each county meeting five times. If we identified a weakness as we began a new round of meetings, it could generally be fixed for the following meetings. It got complicated when there were five counties involved at one time, but we would not have done it differently. These county meetings have kept the topic in the forefront within our larger collaborative and in turn, individual county groups were energized knowing there was comparable work happening in the partner counties.
2. Knowing that the Bush Foundation was invested in the process, not just hard deliverables was liberating. The process we have gone through has evolved as necessary to meet the needs of each specific county. Yet, in each county we see one or more great products coming out of a process that we anticipated would be much shorter than it was. Knowing that we are not "under the gun" to produce products immediately was very freeing in this process. It has taken more time to get to the solutions stage of this process, yet it really seems the time was needed at each step of the way. In hind sight we perhaps could have combined two of the meetings that we had, where we were attempting to assess the services, interventions etc., that are currently in place at the county level. But ultimately, having to "work the process" has led us to some amazing discoveries that would perhaps have been missed if we tried to speed things up.

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Our project work has focused on...	We did this prior to this grant reporting period	We did this during this grant reporting period	We plan to do this in the future, during this grant	We plan to do this in the future, after this grant	We do not plan on doing this
Identifying a community need	X	x		x	
Engaging stakeholders to increase collective understanding of the issue	???	x	x	x	
Generating possible solutions to the issue or problem		x	x	x	
Testing or beginning to implement possible solutions to the issue or problem		x	x	x	

**Which of the three elements of the community innovation process—inclusive, collaborative or resourceful—if any, has been most important, relevant or valuable to making progress in your work? Why?**

Collaborative. From the beginning it was vital to our success that we have pre-established relationships with a variety of stakeholders in each county. Because we were vested in a collaborative approach we decided it was crucial to seek the voices/stories of students and parents who might not otherwise decide to join in a forum with our professional participants. It was also important for our stakeholders to have relationships with parents and students from whom we could use to gather this qualitative data from.

**Are there key elements in your community process other than inclusivity, collaboration or resourcefulness that have contributed to your progress toward innovation? If so, please describe.**

Persistence – patience –leadership  
 These three words summarize the process needed in moving the project forward. We needed to stay with the venture in a very determined way to assure that momentum was sustained and that partners were able to be a part of the solution as it was unfolding. It required patience, because sometimes people just wanted to see something (anything) done, without remembering the steps that had already been taken. It was easier at some junctures to just jump on what seemed like a good idea, without constantly revisiting what the core issues were, or what families or others had tried and found wanting. Leadership was important and came from different directions at different times—public health staff were the experts on prevention, a school social worker often informed the larger group that parents may have their own needs apart from those of the students, and we all learned a lot from the leadership of county attorneys and judges about the legal processes.

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**How has your process led to more clarity about the need that you defined in your grant application or about potential innovations to address that need?**

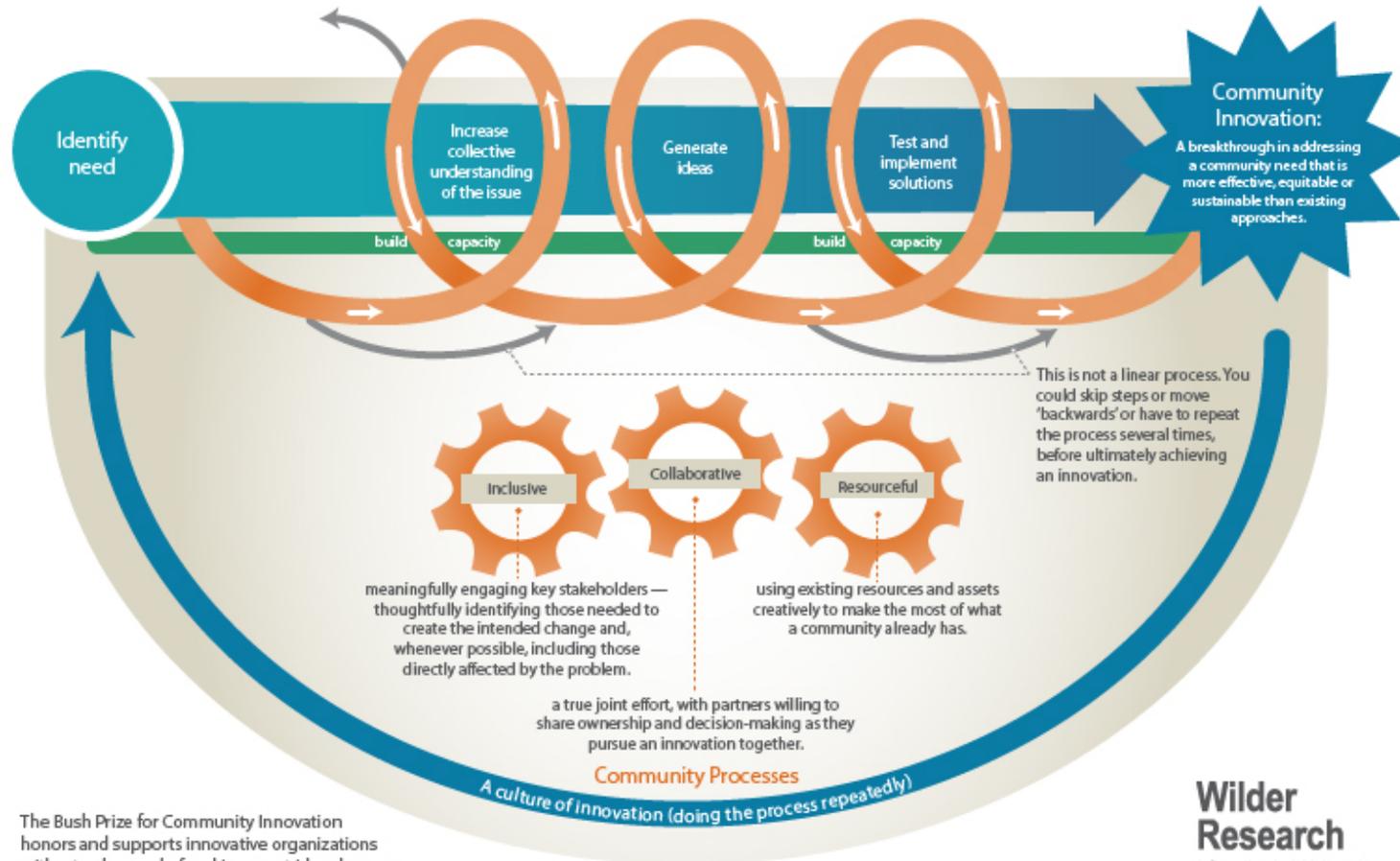
The beautiful thing about our process is that we all started with assumptions about the causes of chronic absenteeism and thus the needs that would have to be addressed in our solution. By gathering input from professionals, parents, and students we were able to see the COMMON themes that ran through each set. We are confident in the findings that have led to the decisions to implement change in a variety of areas. The reason? Because the data was validated over and over again, through multiple sources. Key points have surfaced that need to be addressed including attendance policies, consistency, having a defined process, early prevention, lack of resources across systems and communicating across typical silos. Ultimately, the sublime resource that was defined at every level was the importance of positive, supportive relationships.

**If you could go back to the start of your grant period and give yourself one piece of advice or learning, what would it be? Why would this have been important to know?**

It would have been helpful to know that it would take many more meetings than what we originally anticipated. It would have also been helpful to know that most participants wouldn't be able or willing to meet for more than about two40070 hours each time. We had originally thought that we might be able to have ½ day or day long meetings. It would have helped a bit in the planning process.

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## The Community Innovation Process



The Bush Prize for Community Innovation honors and supports innovative organizations with a track record of making great ideas happen.

Community Innovation Grants support communities to use problem-solving processes that lead to more effective, equitable and sustainable solutions.

**Wilder Research**

Information. Insight. Impact.

This theory of change was co-developed by Bush Foundation and Wilder Research.