

Growing Smart, Keeping Its Identity



A chance encounter led Dorinda Salazar and her two young children to a more hopeful future. The single mother of two girls from Guatemala struck up a conversation with someone on a bus who told her about a wonderful place for child care and other support: CentroNía. ¶ Until she found CentroNía, good quality child care had been elusive. The babysitter she had was expensive and smoked heavily, causing her children to frequently be sick with ear and other infections. In CentroNía's suburban Maryland center in Takoma Park, she found not only good preschool programs for her children, but a support system for herself.

“CENTRONÍA HAS BEEN LIKE A FAMILY TO ME. They have been there for me in tough economic times. My children are more independent, they are better nourished, and my older daughter can recite the alphabet in both languages,” Salazar says. She also says that CentroNía has helped her personally with workshops on how to open a bank account, job references, and more that have helped her get back on her feet after she was unemployed for eight months. “Without CentroNía, I would have gone back to Guatemala” she says, ending her hopes for a better life for herself and her children.

The Investment Partner: CentroNía

From the day it opened its doors more than 20 years ago in a church basement, CentroNía has focused on improving the lives and opportunities of children and families living in low-income communities. Today, CentroNía is a nationally recognized, multicultural learning community which has pioneered an innovative and responsive approach to education that helps children, youth, and families achieve their goals.

In the more than two decades since its founding in 1986 by BB Otero, CentroNía has grown from a child care program serving 15 children to a multi-

faceted educational and family support center serving more than 2,500 children, youth, and families in underserved communities. It now operates a headquarters in Columbia Heights, 10 co-located sites in the District of Columbia, the center in Takoma Park, MD, and a bilingual charter school. CentroNía’s innovative programs promote bilingual fluency and draw power from the diversity of the communities they serve.

CentroNía has helped thousands of children and families dare to dream, and then given them the support to realize those dreams. And in the early 2000s, CentroNía as an organization had big dreams of its own—to take its work to new levels. The journey toward achieving its vision has been exhilarating and challenging. Throughout the process, however, CentroNía has remained true to its mission and core values to provide exceptional educational and family support services to a diverse population.

The Challenge

In the early 2000s, the leadership of CentroNía had fully embraced the idea of growth. More and more of its families were moving out of the City to suburban Maryland in search of affordable housing and jobs. As a result, CentroNía was feeling pressure from families to provide its services in

suburban jurisdictions. Representatives from the local government and community groups in neighboring counties to DC, as well as within DC, were asking CentroNía to consider expansion.

The fundamental challenge was *how* to grow to serve more diverse populations while staying true to its mission, core values, and identity.

“Organizations that are led by minorities are pigeon-holed. We were viewed as a Latino organization with a niche,” explains founder BB Otero. “We asked ourselves, if we’re going to scale, could we really be a citywide or regional organization? And can we be accepted in the Black community, or a suburban community, and still keep our identity and be who we are? This is a city that has often been segregated. It’s difficult for the City to see that a minority organization can serve a broader population. We’ve always known we could be more expansive.”

At the time it became an investment partner of VPP in 2003, the organization was serving 322 children at its flagship center in Columbia Heights. Its goal was to become the premier education leader for bilingual multicultural children in the Washington DC metropolitan area, expanding its services to new families and communities. CentroNía’s goals for the VPP investment were:

- Expand from a single facility to managing child development programs, charter schools, and adult learning services at additional sites;
- Build a high quality program model to establish itself as the premier provider of early childhood and out-of-school programs and services;
- Document its methodology and refine its evaluation processes and outcome measures; and
- Strengthen the organization’s leadership, community presence, and ability to advocate for children.

Supporting CentroNía in the expansion of its programs, particularly into suburban Maryland, was a significant part of the VPP investment, as was helping the organization develop the systems and infrastructure to buttress a larger and more complex organization while remaining true to its core mission and values.

The Action

Planning Was Bedrock for Success

Venture Philanthropy Partners began working with CentroNía in 2002, initially providing funding and support for a strategic plan. The planning process was crucial to helping the organization gain a common understanding and

support among all of its stakeholders about the opportunities to pursue and how to pursue them, and to ensure that CentroNía’s plans were consistent with the needs of the community, market realities, and other trends.

According to Otero, CentroNía had already begun looking at incorporating public education into its offerings and to expand in other parts of the District and beyond.

“We knew public education had to be a part of our work at some point. The seed of the idea for the charter school had been planted before VPP’s

arrival, but the strategic plan CentroNía completed helped nurture and grow the concept,” she said.

The planning process came at an apt time, as the organization had begun to receive inquiries from officials and groups in Montgomery County about potentially offering its services there.

Given its own internal growth goals and the inquiries from groups outside the organization, CentroNía had many important questions to consider during the planning process.

- Is CentroNía a DC-based organization or is it regional?



- Should CentroNía expand further in the District or move to another jurisdiction?
- How does CentroNía go to scale, and what does it mean to go to scale?
- What capacity has to be built within the organization to go to scale?
- As we grow, how do we ensure that our core values and mission remain strong and consistent throughout our expanded organization?

CentroNía established a strategic planning committee that included members of its board, staff, community partners, and external experts. The organization deliberately had broad representation to ensure that they were taking a regional view, and that they had a thorough understanding of the political landscape. Included in the committee were people who understood social services and the

needs of communities in addition to the expertise of the staff.

With VPP’s support, CentroNía engaged an external consultant to facilitate and structure the planning process.

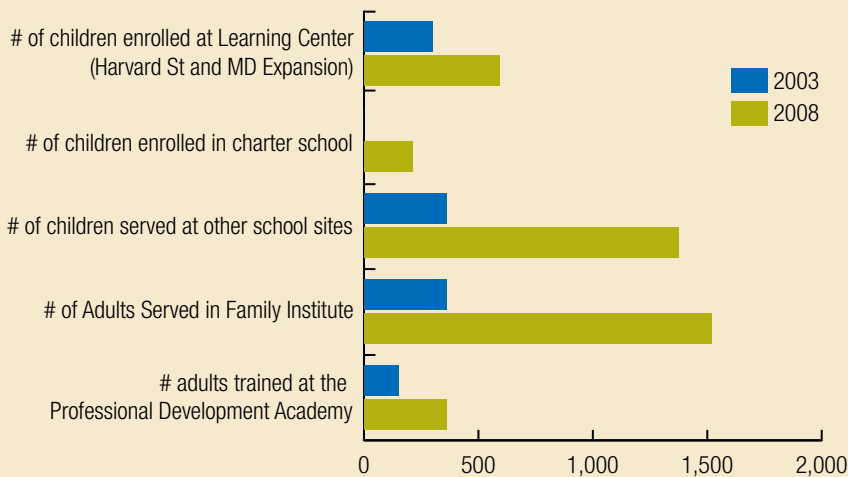
“We had to take a good hard look at every nook and cranny. We had to look in every closet to see what was in there, assess it, put it back if it belonged, or remove it if it didn’t. It was uncomfortable because introspection is not comfortable,” said board member Joanne Williams.

Planning Led to Meaningful Action

With the help of VPP’s \$2.4 million investment over a five-year period, CentroNía was able to achieve the goals outlined in its strategic plan. VPP’s financial investment and strategic assistance was focused on the following actions:

- Restructuring of the management team to better support the organizational growth that the organization wanted to achieve;
- Streamlining technology, administration, operations, finance, and human resources functions. This included CentroNía’s recruitment of a Chief Operating Officer, Program Manager, Human Resources Manager, and IT Manager to strengthen its senior team;
- Creating stronger, more robust financial and human resource functions including deploying new software to facilitate tracking and management;
- Developing an outcomes framework for the organization that identifies key outcomes for each program area to advance/guide work toward improved quality and accountability; and
- Strengthening and expanding the board which involved recruiting new board members who brought exceptional educational, business, legal, and development expertise, and improving the engagement of the board through Committees to support the strategic direction of the organization in areas such as finance, development, communications, and governance. The organization also recruited members for the formation of the DC Bilingual Public Charter School Board.

CentroNía Growth in Numbers Served: 2003-2008



- Providing financial support to hire a consultant to rebrand the organization.

The Results – Smarter and Faster Growth

The VPP investment provided the funding and strategic guidance that enabled CentroNía to achieve its goals and objectives for advancing its work. The results of this effort are growth for the organization both in terms of the numbers of children served and the quality of the programs, and of increased capacity at all levels of the organization.

Results for Children and Families

During the investment period, CentroNía:

- Doubled the number of children enrolled at Learning Centers;
- Successfully opened bilingual charter school;
- Opened a new center in Takoma Park to serve children and families in Langley Park;
- Increased the number of children served with after school programming and tutoring at other sites by more than 50%;
- Tripled the number of adults served at Family Institute; and
- Doubled the number of adults trained through professional development programs.

Organizational Results

Board Development

As CentroNía expanded its presence and role within the region, it needed to expand its board to represent the diversity of the region as well as add functional disciplines that could support a larger and more complex organization. The process to expand the board began before the VPP investment, but the strategic planning and board development processes came together during the investment and supported each other. During the course of the VPP investment, CentroNía moved from a grassroots board to a board that included new constituencies and skills sets, particularly in the area of development and communications. This new board has helped to drive growth, expand its funding sources, and keep the organization on track with its strategic plan.

Although the board was already well-established and participatory, says Otero, its work with VPP marked a turning point. “The strategic planning process as a whole was really fundamental in the development of the board,” Otero says. “The board found its voice in the organization in a way that has continued. There was an opportunity for board members to step into leadership positions that may not have otherwise happened.”

Board member Joanne Williams, along with board chair Carmen Ramos

“The strategic plan helped us make the incredible leap to think outside the box about what it would be like to go to scale. It involved every layer of the organization, from the board to the staff to the leadership. On the program side, I felt like [the planning process] provided us with a blueprint that mapped out five years of programmatic growth linked strategically with administrative growth. We weren’t just building programs, but also providing the undergirding to be successful.”

—Eileen Wasow, Senior Advisor, Early Childhood Education Programs

Watson and board member Ruth Anna Stolk, note that they were particularly fortunate to be active in the partnership with VPP from beginning to end as board representatives in the strategic planning process. “It was good for each of us: one was Latina, one was white, one was African American. We represented the diversity of the organization and sometimes looked at things differently.”



“One of the most significant accomplishments for CentroNía is the work they did on board development. The experience, expertise, and leadership that the organization brought to its board is critical to its success today as well as for the future,” said VPP President and CEO Carol Thompson Cole, who worked closely with CentroNía.

Expanding the Network

With the support of VPP, CentroNía was able to make its vision to provide services regionally a reality. During the time of the investment period, CentroNía expanded its presence within the District—with a bilingual charter school and afterschool and tutoring programs at 10 sites—and opened a new center in Langley Park to meet the demand of its constituents, many of whom had moved into suburban Maryland. Critical to its ability to expand was the capacity

of CentroNía’s leadership to forge new partnerships and develop relationships with key players in the DC Public School System and in Montgomery County.

VPP partners who had had long careers in City government and education were able to tap their networks to introduce CentroNía to partners who could help them in the District as well as in Montgomery County.

“[VPP Partner] Steve Seleznow brought an understanding of school systems and knew education well. [VPP President and CEO] Carol Thompson Cole brought a whole different set of relationships and her deep knowledge of the city and its politics. She’s been a very helpful mentor,” says Otero.

Strengthening the Organizational Infrastructure

A major aspect of the VPP investment was helping the organization enhance

and develop the systems within to support its growth and ensure its sustainability for the long term. To that end, the VPP investment helped CentroNía implement financial systems and hire a Chief Operating Officer to streamline the systems. The organization brought its IT department in house, and implemented accounting and outcomes management software to better track its financial and programmatic performance.

Better information is a theme that emerges from all aspects of VPP’s investment in CentroNía. Otero lists the new software systems that VPP funding made possible for CentroNía to launch: “finance, human resources, development, facilities, outcomes. Alongside that is human capacity. For example, we had one part-time person doing HR. Now we have three people in HR, which allows us to look at benefits and salary scales to get a competitive edge in hiring. Being an employer of choice was part of our strategic plan.”

Outcomes Management

As CentroNía enhanced its operations on every front, staff was committed to measuring the success of its work in more objective ways. But while the commitment was there, making it a reality was a challenge. It required new ways of thinking and working.

Chief Academic Officer Eileen Wasow recalls: “The most critical

“At the end of the day are the kids in better shape? Did all of this create better outcomes for children? Has our work strengthened the community? Those are the critical questions we always ask whether at the end of a major investment or a one-evening activity. We can safely say yes.”

—BB Otero, President and CEO

thing that came through the outcomes process was aligning our diverse programs and really getting staff to think about outcomes as a way of enhancing program quality. That was a real shift for us. Previously, we just had lots of good stories to tell about kids who made great leaps or read 100 books in a summer. VPP pushed us kicking and screaming. The process seemed imposed by VPP but it proved to be quite valuable. We were able to come back to this issue of quality as a touchstone for the CentroNía brand.”

Now CentroNía has a full-time person responsible for outcomes management. By collecting information and documenting its work, Wasow says they have been able to continually improve their programs while also en-

hancing their ability to raise funds. They can now move beyond good stories to hard data and evidence that demonstrates the value of what they are doing and the impact on children and families.

“They now have a tremendous mindset about outcomes,” says VPP’s Eleanor Rutland. “They have the methodology and tools. They’re positioned to use information and data to drive decision making.”

“From my point of view,” says Chief Development Officer Julia Howell-Barros, “the focus on outcomes is useful because program directors are much more involved in the proposal development process. Outcomes are embedded in all aspects of the organization. It’s made grant writing and reporting much less of a mystery. Now we have a real sense at the end of the day how these children are going to be changed. I’m seeing a much higher success rate in terms of our proposals. There’s better data and better information.”

Expanding but Retaining Core Values and Brand

The how and why of expansion also raised some important issues with regard to CentroNía’s brand and the ability to deliver that brand consistently throughout all of its sites. After

KEY INFORMATION

- > Investment duration: **2002 – 2008**
 - > **\$2,420,000** invested
- > **738** more children served (229% increase)
 - > Revenue increased from **\$6.9 to \$13.1 million** during investment
- > **\$1,920,000** leveraged funding
 - > **3** new sites and **10** new school-based programs

many years of operating as Calvary Multicultural Bilingual Learning Center, Otero and her colleagues had heard many complaints that the name was too long and confusing for some since the organization had long moved out of the church where it was founded and had no religious affiliation.

One of the early milestones of the VPP investment was the development of a communications plan, according to CentroNía Chief Development Officer Julia Howell-Barros. The name change came about as part of that planning process. VPP funding helped support CentroNía in hiring the Metropolitan Group, who guided the branding process that led to the creation of its new name. CentroNía comes from a combination of Spanish, Swahili, and Esperanto. Centro means “center” in Spanish, and Nía means “our” in Esperanto and “purpose” in Swahili.

“The relaunch of the new brand happened very successfully. We involved youth in the process as members of our design team. Everyone knew the brand. We had a whole new sense of our capacity for communications, after a six-month period of the re-branding process. VPP’s support forced us to do what we were already going to do, but at an accelerated speed.”

Just as important as creating the graphic representation of the brand was reinforcing what the brand means among all staff and the board.

“You can walk into any of our sites, you know it’s a CentroNía site. It has certain characteristics—its color, architectural style, design elements. [But we also have] constant work around how we work with people, how we treat people, the presence of management around the organization,” says BB Otero.

Otero said that they made a point to hire people from the local community at each of their sites, but also made

sure that long-time staffers who know the organization and its mission were on the staff of the new locations as well. It was also important that everyone see the organization as a whole and not just their particular piece.

“In our typical fashion we built design teams that brought people together, including our bus driver, the head of operations, the cooking staff, and teachers.” The efforts were successful, she says, because the whole organization participated. “By the time it happened buy-in was complete,” Wasow says. “We have a really phenomenal brand platform that’s exciting to look at and read.”

But more than a new name and a new logo, CentroNía has a brand that it lives every day and that reflects its core mission and values. The organization has made a conscious decision to inculcate its values and mission into every interaction it has among its staff, the families and children it serves, and among its board.

Conclusion

“The VPP partnership was the best of business community meeting the best of nonprofit community and it was a meld. There was some pull and tug and sometimes there were clashes. But after going through the pull and tug, you come out with a blend of the best,” said board member Joanne Williams.

Before its partnership with VPP, CentroNía was on a growth trajectory. However, VPP’s support, both in terms of dollars and strategic assistance, helped the organization achieve its goals faster and provided a structure for thinking through every challenge, while at the same time never losing its soul. CentroNía today has achieved many of its goals. The economic downturn has presented new challenges for CentroNía, but the work that it has done on organizational development and the systems it has in place have helped its staff, board, and executive leadership navigate the difficult times and positioned them well for the future.



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