

From Theory to Action

The Investment Partner

The research was clear—strong academic and character-building programs could help children succeed in school and increase their chances of continuing education beyond high school.

Harvard classmates Darin McKeever and Vin Pan put theory into practice and founded Heads Up. By recruiting and training college students to serve as tutors and mentors, the duo sought to fuel the dreams and aspirations of children living in some of Washington D.C.’s toughest neighborhoods. Not only would the children benefit by gaining exposure to high-performing college students, the college students themselves would gain valuable experience from their interactions with these young people, many of whom were struggling to finish high school and had no family history of attending college.

By 2001, Heads Up had grown to become one of the largest providers of after-school services to children in the District, providing tutoring, mentoring and summer learning programs to 600 students in five sites across the city, mostly in neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River.

The Investment Opportunity

Pan had served as director of Harvard’s community service organization, Philips Brooks House, with McKeever as deputy. Impressed by the concept and the founders’ initial success in scaling the program and building partnerships with local schools and universities, VPP identified Heads Up as its very first investment partner.

VPP’s six-year, \$2.1 million partnership aimed to help Heads Up:

- Serve at least 2,400 children and teens through programs at 25 sites by 2007, a six-fold increase over five years;
- Measurably demonstrate its positive impact on children, teens, and college students;
- Be considered by D.C. universities and undergraduates as the preferred youth-related community service and service-learning program;
- Play an influential role in shaping out-of-school-time policy in the District, the region, and nation; and
- Be high-performing, with excellent operations and a highly effective, well-trained staff.

Staff and Board Development

Through VPP’s business planning process, improved staffing capacity was identified as a key priority to allow Heads Up to reach their aspirations for growth, with an eye towards helping the founders spend less time on day-to-day managerial tasks, and more time building partnerships and providing broader strategic guidance.

With VPP’s support, Heads Up recruited a chief financial officer, followed by directors of operations and development. A curriculum specialist was brought on board to help Heads Up redesign and strengthen its programs.

VPP’s connections also helped Heads Up attract new board members who were helpful in expanding funding streams from corporate and high-net worth donors, while building stronger partnerships with universities in order to recruit top-level college student volunteers. These efforts bore quick results, as the number of applications from college students seeking to become Heads Up tutors skyrocketed. Heads Up tutors would later report that their experience with the program made them more likely to pursue a career in teaching or public service.



The improvements in staffing, board leadership, fundraising, and tutor recruitment enabled Heads Up to quickly scale from six to 10 sites in the first two years of the VPP investment. Over the six year investment period, Heads Up grew its annual budget from \$2.3 to \$3 million, with VPP helping to secure \$3.9 million in leveraged funding.

Curriculum and Performance Management

By tweaking its program schedules to be more closely aligned with the D.C. public school calendar, they determined that Heads Up could serve more students for the same cost. “We had always matched our schedule more closely with the universities because of our college student participants. But we realized we could fill their gap with teachers in the schools, both providing coverage that better matched parents’ needs and more deeply engaged the schools in which we work,” explained McKeever.

To ensure its curriculum remained effective and appropriate, Heads Up developed student program reports to continually monitor program performance and satisfaction levels among students and their families. In 2005, Heads Up launched a partnership with

Policy Studies Associates to re-evaluate its theory of change and develop specifications for an evaluation plan.

Results

Numerous studies and data analysis confirmed what Heads Up supporters believed—the program had a positive impact on all of its key constituencies, including the children it served, the college student volunteers, and local schools.

According to a study of available 2004 and 2005 SAT-9 reading scores for Heads Up’s third and fifth grade:

- The average year-over-year gain in SAT-9 Normal Curve Equivalent scores was 4.0, greatly outpacing the expected average gain of zero;
- The percentage of Heads Up students scoring at or above national average increased from 30.2% in 2004 to 38.1% in 2005;
- 59% of students had a positive gain in scores;
- Heads Up students reached reading proficiency at twice the rate of other students in the same schools;
- Average reading levels for Heads Up students increased by one full grade; and

- The program earned a parental approval rating of 94%.

Despite these successes, various funding issues would ultimately keep Heads Up from reaching its goal of serving 2,400 children. At its peak, Heads Up worked at 10 sites, serving 1,300 kids annually.

Heads Up’s Future

Heads Up came to realize that their continued growth required a different organizational approach. With VPP’s support, Heads Up sought to identify a strategic partner that would help them to carry on the work in ways that would best serve the needs of the community

In the fall of 2010, Heads Up announced a partnership with the Center for Youth and Family Investment (CYFI). This merger with CYFI—an affiliate of VPP Investment Partner Friendship Public Charter Schools—helped to bring the Heads Up into more schools and serve larger numbers of children in need. The partnership represents a new chapter in Heads Up’s history and an exciting opportunity to further its mission to serve the city’s low-income youth.



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