youthCONNECT started with a few simple questions:

Could Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP) develop a network of high-performing nonprofits to work collectively to improve education, employment and healthy behaviors for vulnerable youth? Is there potential to create a model for meaningful, systemic change over the long term?

Five years later and the answer to both questions is a resounding yes!

As a network, we showed up, dove in and supported each other throughout. youthCONNECT represents the best in collaboration, putting innovative solutions into practice, measuring outcomes and then creating a ripple effect by scaling and replicating what works.

The Social Innovation Fund and other funders came forward to co-invest in our initiative, and together youthCONNECT has served more than 21,000 vulnerable young people. We are deeply humbled by the youthCONNECT network’s achievements.

Together, we proved that an intentional, empathetic and data-driven approach to problem-solving can create far-reaching impact. Along the way, we have deepened our knowledge of what works through rigorous evaluation methods. We are refining our framework and discovering new ways to have a greater impact.

It’s a broader community of government, philanthropy and nonprofits that fortifies youthCONNECT. We are a network of individuals from diverse cultures, who work at a variety of organizations. What we share are values, and these values drive us to power the dreams of young people.

We want to take a moment to reflect, celebrate and give thanks.

The last five years have been devoted to the creation and evolution of youthCONNECT. Through countless brainstorming sessions, strategic discussions and interactions with our six network partners (College Summit-NCR, KIPP DC, Latin American Youth Center, Whitman-Walker Health, Urban Alliance and Year Up-NCR), VPP, Child Trends, Monitor Deloitte, the Social Innovation Fund, match funders and other friends and advisors, we catalyzed a network of nonprofits in the National Capital Region.
The youthCONNECT model is a network of high-performing nonprofits working collaboratively in a single location, like a school, to improve the education, socio-emotional, career and healthy behavior outcomes of vulnerable youth, ages 14-24. The defining characteristics of the youthCONNECT model are:

- Network partners, individually and collectively, work toward a shared set of outcomes. These shared and agreed-upon outcomes are called our Common Outcomes Framework;
- Network partners help to build an open environment that supports the sharing of information, data and best practices to solve problems and strengthen program design, program delivery, and performance evaluation; and
- Network partners proactively leverage each others’ resources to ensure youth receive the support they need to become successful, self-sustaining adults.

Now that there is a model, VPP can help create multiple networks of nonprofits to better the lives of young people across the National Capital Region. Our goal is for the youthCONNECT model to be adapted throughout the Region.

**Benefits of youthCONNECT for the youth served**

Over the last five years, the youthCONNECT network has provided 21,176 youth with a range of services and support to help them develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors needed to access and succeed in postsecondary education and in the workplace. Some benefits* include:

- High school completion rates increased over time, so that more young people were able to enroll in college or participate in a career preparation program;
- Nine in ten youth applied for college which is an important step for self sufficiency;
- Eight in ten youth completed FAFSA, enabling more youth to qualify for college scholarships, grants and loans; and
- Three quarters of youth obtained work experience, and a similar amount enrolled in post-secondary education, helping them to be prepared for the workforce.

*Note: For each indicator, data was collected for a subset of the total population served. For example, in 2014-2015, information on FAFSA and college enrollment was provided for 905 youth across the four organizations collecting data on these indicators.

**Additionally, network partners were able to:**

- Work collaboratively to proactively problem-solve, share resources and leverage one another’s strengths;
- Build organizational capacity within their nonprofit organization to collaborate, evaluate programs and collectively support improved youth outcomes; and
- Develop the talent and leadership of middle management within their respective organizations.
VPP concentrates capital, expertise and collaborative multi-sector networks to develop transformative solutions to our Region’s most critical social challenges.

From the very beginning, VPP has been a philanthropic investment organization that provides strategic assistance to its investment partners to strengthen and expand their proven programs. Thus it was natural for VPP to assume the role of the “backbone” for the youthCONNECT network. In this role, VPP would provide the necessary support for the network’s development.

**Backbone Support for youthCONNECT**

- **Big Picture Guidance**
  - Strategy – Work with network partners to develop a strategic agenda;
  - Funding – Provide funding for the network and make connections with funders to garner additional resources;
  - Advocacy – Monitor policy news and identify opportunities to provide context and educate leaders on policies affecting youth; and
  - Evaluation – Lead the development of shared outcomes against which the network partners’ activities are measured. Support data collection and assessment of each program’s performance.

- **Meeting Support**
  - Facilitator – Guide the network’s meetings towards group consensus and action; and
  - Logistics – Support collaborative meetings by scheduling, setting agenda and capturing next steps.

- **Functional Scaffolding**
  - Communications – Manage and coordinate external communications; and
  - Research and Analysis – Support continuous network learning by researching, aggregating and analyzing data to find trends and report back to network partners.
Through youthCONNECT, each network partner developed and expanded their innovative programs, and then implemented rigorous evaluations of their programs. These evaluations are underway. Most results will be available in 2016 and 2017. In the meantime, here are some promising findings from each of the network partners.

“*Our accomplishments to date have focused on creating a structure and putting systems in place for the network to sustain itself in the long run. Each network partner is hitting important milestones in terms of the youth they serve, and they are united in their belief that the process had been positive for their respective organizations and for their own professional growth and development.*”

**Carol Thompson Cole, President and CEO, Venture Philanthropy Partners**
College Summit—National Capital Region is part of a national organization that demonstrably increases college enrollment rates by building capacity within school districts to guide students through college preparation and the application process.

“We were able to carry out our most rigorous evaluation to date. We learned what works and doesn’t work in schools, what our educators and students want to see more of and where there are barriers to successful implementation. A lot of this was information that we had previously heard, but it was great to have the confirmation of the evaluation. We are using that information to inform our program redesign.”

Onuka Ibe, Vice President of Program, College Summit
College Summit–National Capital Region further grew its core services and evaluated and expanded its Launch model, a new curricula based on developmentally-appropriate activities and lessons targeted towards 9th through 11th graders. The investment allowed them to expand their college preparation and application program offerings to more than just 12th graders. Thus treating all four years of high school as a launchpad to college.

Innovation

Preparing Students for College

83% of youth served completed a FAFSA application
KIPP DC is a college-preparatory public school that provides a world of opportunities to students from educationally underserved communities in the nation’s capital.

“youthCONNECT created an opportunity for a unique roundtable of program managers—partly because none of us were managing directors at our organizations. For example, we weren’t at the very top, but we were all managing other growing professionals. So this idea of being a middle manager begs the question: who is in your peer group? youthCONNECT became my source for peer support.”

Tevera Stith, Director of KIPP Through College, KIPP DC
KIPP DC wanted to serve more youth in the Region, and provide a model for other KIPP sites and schools that struggle to get their students across the college finish line. KIPP DC implemented and evaluated KIPP Through College, a program focused on comprehensive support to ensure that all KIPP alumni have the tools and support they need to succeed in college.

Innovation

Ready For College

82%

of KIPP DC high school graduates matriculated to a two or four-year college within 20 months of graduation.
The Latin American Youth Center provides culturally competent services to some of the most disconnected youth in the National Capital Region. It provides over 50 multi-lingual programs in education, workforce investment, art, media and more.

“youthCONNECT allowed us to create new partnerships we had never thought of before. Our expansion into public schools was inspired by our network partners who were already partnering with schools. Now we serve young people who may already be out of the school system and provide prevention services to students, who are at risk of disconnecting within the school system.”

Susana Martinez, National Director Promotors Pathway, Latin American Youth Center
Latin American Youth Center expanded and evaluated Promotor Pathways, an intensive new case-management model for reconnecting youth. The youth served by Promotores include some of the District’s youth who are the most disconnected from educational or employment opportunities and face multiple barriers to success including homelessness, lack of a high school diploma and involvement with the criminal justice system.

**Innovation**

Promotor supported youth were 33% less likely to likely to have a child than their peers.

**Empowering Youth to Make Healthy Choices**

33%
Urban Alliance prepares high school students from under-resourced neighborhoods for the world of work and a life of self-sufficiency through a 10-month paid internship, mentoring and professional development training.

“The truth is we would be a really different organization without youthCONNECT. Our partnership with VPP and the network partners really helped develop and strengthen three of our organizational departments. And we are using evaluation and performance management to think more critically about every aspect of our organization—not just our programs.”

Dan Tsin, Director of Data and Accountability, Urban Alliance
Innovation

The youthCONNECT investment has supported Urban Alliance in three key areas:

• Creating a model curriculum outreach program for high school and disconnected youth;

• Forming a high quality, experimental design study to confirm program objectives of high school graduation rates and college enrollment rates; and

• Growing the number of youth served by its high school internship program and creating an alumni services department.

Going And Staying In College

80%

college persistence rate reported for students served.
Whitman-Walker Health has a comprehensive approach to improving adolescent health in Washington, DC and promotes responsible decision-making among youth. The approach includes sexual and reproductive health education programs that teach students to make decisions that help reduce their risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

In 2010, Metro TeenAIDS was selected to participate in youthCONNECT. Then in 2015, Metro TeenAIDS became part of Whitman-Walker Health in a new strategic collaboration.

“We benefited from the opportunity to partner with Latin American Youth Center Public Charter School Career Academy and KIPP DC. These partnerships allowed us to learn how to adapt our program for various school settings. This opportunity was possible because of the trust we built around the youthCONNECT table.”

Christy Robinson, School Services Manager, Whitman-Walker Health
Whitman-Walker Health expanded the number of youth who receive effective sexual education in Washington, DC by providing a sexual education curricula to 7th through 12th graders and by building the capacity of school staff to teach sexual education in public charter schools.

**Promoting Healthy Choices**

48% of students served reported avoiding physical fighting, cigarettes, alcohol and other drugs.
Year Up–National Capital Region

Year Up-NCR offers a one-year intensive training program that provides youth with technical and professional skills, college credits, an education stipend and corporate internships.

“Young people need the most support during transition points in their lives. In a relay race, a baton gets passed between two runners who, for a moment in time, both have their hands on the baton. It could be like that for us in the network, with two or even three network partners helping a youth through a transition. And we would think about how we could all lean on each other to help this youth get to the next stage. Because we were all holding on, it was less likely the young person would fall through the cracks.”

Ronda Harris Thompson, National Director of Alumni Relations, Year Up
Year Up-NCR created the Healthy Behaviors Initiative. It was made up of various health education and access services. This includes a life skills curriculum focusing on domestic violence, nutrition, legal resources and working well with those in authority.

**Innovation**

Retention rate reported for youth in Year Up-NCR programs.

70%
VPP knitted six unique nonprofits into a cohesive network. It took a deliberate effort to form and cultivate the network, and so today, they are working together to make sure youth do not fall through the cracks.

Network Partners Collaborated With Each Other, A Few Examples:

- A number of network partners leveraged each other’s strengths and best practices because of the increased trust and familiarity that grew between them. For example, the Latin American Youth Center began using the National Student Clearing House as a data source because Urban Alliance was using it and recommended it. Now National Student Clearing House data is being used throughout the network by multiple network partners; and

- Official partnerships have developed between network partners. For instance, KIPP DC and Year Up-NCR have developed a formal agreement to connect KIPP DC’s eligible students to Year Up’s program. This is noteworthy because KIPP DC is developing alternative pathways for youth who do not pursue a four-year college path.

Evaluation Made the Network Partners Stronger

- Creating the Common Outcomes Framework was an opportunity for network partners to develop a theory that articulates the services and supports that enable vulnerable youth, ages 14 – 24, to successfully transition to adulthood. The network partners developed shared goals, built cross-partner relationships and identified gaps in their own data collection processes;

- Many network partners developed enhanced performance management capabilities which enabled several to undertake randomized control trial evaluations as well as other quasi-experimental studies; and

- youthCONNECT provided an opportunity for individuals in one or two person evaluation departments to explore topics and strategies with peers from one of the six network partners. They offered each other advice on topics such as survey design, data sources and reporting.

Network Partners Worked Collectively to Advocate for Change

- Network partners joined forces to advocate for policy recommendations. For example, they identified transportation as a common challenge faced by youth throughout the Region, so they drafted a letter to the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments to encourage a regional youth-friendly transportation plan. The youthCONNECT network was invited to testify and as a result, new language was added to the transportation master plan that referenced the transportation needs of low-income families.

Successful Place-Based Setting Implementation at the Latin American Youth Center Career Academy Public Charter School

- Multiple network partner programs delivered services in a single location. This coordination not only demonstrates that partners can adapt their program models for various populations and locations, but also proves the ability of youthCONNECT network partners to work collaboratively in one place.
Lessons Learned

VPP and the youthCONNECT partners are committed to sharing lessons learned and providing updates on our work with other nonprofit groups and funders who may wish to work collaboratively with others to serve populations in need.

• **Relationships are important:** Even when individuals within a group have skills that can support collaboration, group formation is a complex, time-consuming process that must be carefully nurtured;

• **Empower network partners:** The network partners’ executive directors had anticipated that VPP, in its role as the funder, would pre-determine the network’s goals; however, VPP empowered the partners to determine the network’s goals and direction;

• **Consider time demands:** Participants in a network of this nature need to be cognizant of the significant time commitment that is required from leadership and front-line staff;

• **Encourage staff-level communication:** When possible, network partners should encourage communication with staff at their respective organizations who do not participate in network activities to further integrate the collaborative partnership;

• **Test big ideas on a small scale first:** The network found it helpful to create a microcosm of the approach we were trying to implement before targeting large-scale change. This was the objective behind trying Latin American Youth Center Career Academy Public Charter School as the single location to deliver all of the youthCONNECT network partner programs;

• **Communicate clearly and often:** Ensure that the network’s successes and key decisions are clearly and broadly communicated across partners and stakeholders;

• **Record, save and reference past lessons:** Learn as you go. Initiate regular reflections on successes and challenges with network partners for them to learn and share the evolution of the work, facilitate smooth on-boarding of new colleagues and share progress with the field; and

• **Stay connected:** The network’s stability and future is driven by the degree to which individuals, at all levels of each organization, continue to reach out to one another and work with their peers across the network to share best practices, solve problems and leverage each other’s expertise.
The Future of the youthCONNECT Model

We’ve accomplished a lot in these five years, but the future is even more exciting. Here’s what we’re planning:

• The youthCONNECT model is being adapted regionally. We have served over 700 students at Suitland High School in Prince George’s County, MD with five nonprofit partners (College Summit-NCR, Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, Maryland Multicultural Youth Center, Urban Alliance and Year Up-NCR), Suitland High School and VPP.

• youthCONNECT has become a key component of VPP’s new cross-sector initiative, Ready for Work: Champions for Career and College Ready Graduates in Prince George’s County, a large-scale effort to ensure that our Region’s most vulnerable youth in Prince George’s County are career and college ready as they graduate from high school. The youthCONNECT model serves as the way in which more youth will obtain foundational life skills that employers seek and increase their success in college.

• youthCONNECT is combined with two other strategies: increasing the number of students graduating with academic and technical skills and connect them with work experiences that prepare them for careers and college.
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