

SCOOP

(Social Celebrations, Organizations, Opportunities and People)

The Sanaghan Group was the lead consultant in this five year, collaborative process. We helped design and facilitate the planning meetings, wrote the white papers that benchmarked process and articulated next steps as well as facilitated the Mayor's Council and the Operations Council.

Background/Context

Trenton, New Jersey is a northeastern city with a population of 85,000+ people. There are over 18,000 school-aged youth (K-12). Mayor Douglas Palmer has been the Mayor for over 16 years. There is a strong sense of "territoriality" in Trenton that is both historic and deep. In the past, this territoriality has prevented collaboration and cooperation across neighborhoods and service providers.

Trenton has four political wards (i.e., North, South, East, West) that could be experienced by an outsider as four smaller cities each with its own unique culture, demographics, opportunities and history. People often are more proud of their ward than they are of the city.

People tend to be protective of resources, suspicious of outsiders and take care of their own. Cooperation, when it happens, tends to be opportunistic rather than long term. This sense of territoriality has not served the citizens well. This has changed.

This case study is about how an integrated, collaborative service program for youth was created and implemented throughout the city. This collaborative initiative (SCOOP) received the national "City Liveability Award" in 2005 from the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

The Journey

In 2001, the Mayor convened the first city-wide "Youth Summit" for all the youth service providers in the city. He asked the school Superintendent and the Director of Recreation, Natural Resources & Culture (DRNR&C) to co-sponsor this historic event. The primary purpose of this summit was to create a more integrated and coherent network for youth services throughout the city.

Several factors created the need for this kind of summit:

1. The money from the federal government was dwindling. Service providers were competing with each other for limited slices of the "pie".
2. Many service providers were providing redundant program for youth (e.g., there were lots of basketball programs).
3. Many of the youth were underserved due to the limited number of available programs.
4. Many of the programs did not reflect the interests or needs of today's youth.
5. Often, youth could not participate in quality programs due to transportation, communication and security issues.

The Superintendent asked a trusted consultant who had deep experience in collaborative practices and strategic planning to help plan and facilitate the day long event. The consultant met several times with representatives from the school district and DCNR&C to plan and design the Summit.

The initial Youth Summit was designed to be highly interactive and participative and involved over 100 service providers as well as 10 youth representatives. During the day three major themes were explored:

Summit participants looked at the past efforts to provide meaningful programs for youth and distilled some lessons learned

They did a S.W.O.T.S Analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) of current programs for youth

They created a future picture or “preferred future” of what an integrated network for youth services might look like for the city.

The day was designed to involve everyone and hear all the voices and perspectives, especially the students. It became apparent to the participants that they had to collaborate with each other if they were to reach their shared aspirations. They committed to create a planning process over the next several months that would move them toward more integration and coherence. Several important steps took place:

Surveys

As planning for the initial Youth Summit was taking place, there were also two different survey processes being conducted. One was conducted by DRNR&C and one by The College of New Jersey (a local university). Their goals were to create a comprehensive survey of all the programs available to youth throughout the city. This was done by surveys, focus groups, visiting programs, talking with youth and knocking on a lot of doors to check things out.

It took almost a year to conduct both surveys and it created a detailed snapshot of all available programs. This was the first time the city had such an accurate and comprehensive picture of youth services.

Although there were many important findings, three stood out:

1. Females were vastly under represented regarding available programs – less than 10% of the female youth participated in or had access to quality programs (editor’s note: it is now over 50%)
2. One of the wards had most of the programs! Not surprisingly, the most affluent ward was well-served while the less affluent wards were vastly underserved (editor’s note: now there is a better distribution across all 4 wards)
3. The types of programs available did not meet the diverse needs and interests of the youth so participation was low throughout the city

Mini-Summits

After the initial Summit, the director of DRNR&C conducted a series of “mini-summits” in the four wards throughout the city. The purpose of these interactive meetings was to solicit feedback on the summit findings and seek advice about what kind of programs parents and youth wanted in their neighborhood. Hundreds of citizens participated in these mini-summits.

After the Summit was over, the surveys completed and the feedback rounds were conducted, the planning consultant was charged with creating a report that would identify explicit next steps describing what it would take to create “an integrated network for youth services” throughout the city. In a collaborative dialogue with the school Superintendent and the director of DRNR&C, the consultant wrote a white paper that made several strong recommendations. These recommendations detailed the collaborative mechanisms needed to create an integrated network for youth services.

The superintendent, director and consultant then met with the Mayor to discuss the proposed plan and gain his approval; at the end of the meeting, the Mayor told the group, “You need to make this happen as soon as possible”.

The SCOOP Initiative was born. . .

The Mayor agreed to create the Youth Advocacy Cabinet (YAC) that he co-chairs with the director of DRNR&C. This high level group meets quarterly to discuss strategy, set policy and make any difficult decisions that are needed (e.g., resource allocation). Their primary responsibility is to look across the city to ensure access, equity and quality programs available for all youth. Their meetings are facilitated by the planning consultant.

The YAC includes the Mayor, Police Chief, School Board President and Superintendent, the Director of the Housing Authority, the President of City Council, the Director of Health & Human Services, the Provost of a local college, and the president of the county United Way and the Director of DRNR&C. (Recently, they have added a respected member of the clergy as a representative of this important stakeholder group)

The Mayor also created the Operations Council (OC) which consists of a direct report of each member of YAC. The purpose of the O.C. is to take the recommendations from the YAC and implement them. This group is co-chaired by an assistant superintendent of schools and the recreation director of DRNR&C. This group meets monthly at the school district’s administrative office

The first important responsibility of the members of YAC was to identify their key representative to the Operations Council. The planning consultant communicated to the Mayor that this would be the most important decision to be made in creating an integrated youth network. The right people had to be assigned to the OC, or the initiative would fail. We could not settle for the “usual suspects” or people with some time on their hands. This had to be seen as a primary responsibility for highly qualified and motivated individuals.

Editor’s Note: One of the challenges of collaborative and cross-boundary work is the selection of the “right people” for the “right task”. Too often, volunteers or well-intentioned people who want to help just aren’t the right people for the task at hand. It takes real discipline to choose the appropriate individuals given the challenge and not get swept up with enthusiasm and pick people who are merely “interested in helping”.

As a result of the YAC discussion, several important criteria for members of the Operations Council were negotiated and agreed upon. Then each YAC member nominated a direct report (who they could hold accountable) that met the established criteria:

The “Right” People

1. They had to be decision makers. The O.C. members have the power to make decisions that have direct implications for their own organization. We wanted to avoid “I have to check with my boss before I can commit” syndrome.
2. They had to be “players”. These members had to have both the skills and reputation for getting things done. This was not a think tank or group of theorists.
3. They had to be “savvy”. These members had to understand how to deal with the behind the scenes “stuff” that regulates most complex organizations. In any city there are complexities around turf issues, departmental cultures, politics, power, history, etc.
4. They had to be collaborative. They had to be able to work with others in a team work approach. They were given little glory but a lot of work to do. These members could not be cowboys or lone wolves.

The Mayor charged the Director of DRNR&C to be the “owner” of this collaborative, city-wide effort and identified her department as the lead agency that would facilitated the implementation of the SCOOP Initiative. He promised to provide the necessary resources and support to help make SCOOP successful and clearly communicated that he would hold the director accountable for the results.

SCOOP was on its way.

In the first year of the SCOOP Initiative, the Operations Council created three key operating mechanisms that helped support the integrated network and sustain the collaborative efforts of service providers throughout the city.

1. The SCOOP web page

Historically, the city government published a booklet every few years that identified the available programs for youth. It was often incomplete and obsolete before it was printed and distributed. We knew this had to change.

DRNR&C and the school district have worked together to produce a user friendly, informative web page that fully describes all the programs and services available for youth throughout the city.

The web page was designed by students (elementary, middle and high school) and allows any student, parent or guardian to look up the available programs and choose their educational and recreational experiences. The selection process is categorized by neighborhoods, dates, locations or programs. Student focus groups provide ongoing feedback about the web page content, useability and relevance. It is continuously updated by service providers and they have safeguards and protocols in place to ensure timely and accurate feedback.

2. Transportation System

At the initial summit, it was discovered that even if we had great programs for our youth, they could not get to them. There is a very limited public transportation system in Trenton and many of the parents/guardians do not have cars.

The YAC charged the Operations Council with creating a safe, reliable and free transportation system so that any youth had access to any program site they wanted to visit. It took about a year to do research, organize all the details involved in the creation of a transportation service and test their thinking and processes. They had to deal with issues as varied as communication, insurance, scheduling, union rules, safety, etc.

The Operations Council worked closely with the school district (they had busses) to deal effectively with each issue. They also leased some busses from local churches which had its own set of challenges.

They created a “shuttle service” that services all program sites. Each bus has a certified driver and bus aide. They utilize a walkie-talkie system to communicate between busses. A centralized radio system links all busses with central office and SCOOP sites. Police monitor communication, conduct daily site inspections and follow the busses to ensure safety and communicate to the community their strong support of the programs.

A snapshot – A participant’s perspective:

In the initial dry run of the bus shuttle system, we had YAC and O.C. members along with some students participate in the pilot run. The goal was to work out the “kinks”. There were plenty of kinks to work out! There were glitches with communication, timing of schedules, even finding the right recreation sites! You name it, we experienced it.

We had planned for a “debriefing” session to identify problems and solve them. We only had two hours to do a full debrief and we weren’t looking forward to it because we believed that it would become a very critical meeting.

There were 30 participants in the meeting and the facilitator put people into several mixed groups and had them identify several problems. Each group reported out what they believed was a problem to be solved and a master list was created in front of the whole group.

Participants were then given the opportunity to choose the problems they wanted to work on and come up with some solutions. No one blamed anyone else for a problem. People focused on solving the problem and moving things forward. It was amazing to see people working together, proactively and positively to create real solutions. We knew we had achieved a moral victory. That meeting set a “tone” for the future and communicated to everyone that we are here to solve problems together, not point fingers. That “tone” permeates our meetings even today. The next week, we safely transported hundreds of students.

3. The student identification system

When the parents were asked about their greatest concerns regarding SCOOP, the safety of their children was at the very top of their list. If they were going to entrust their children to the program, they had to make sure that they would be safe within each program site, especially while being transported to and from the programs.

The YAC also charged the Operations Council with creating and implementing a student tracking system for any youth who were participating in a SCOOP program. The OC invested in a technology-based program that would be able to monitor students throughout the program network. It was the biggest up front investment of the entire SCOOP Initiative but the OC strongly believed that if they were to establish a long term, integrated network, it was essential to make the investment in technology.

A registration process throughout the city was instituted that obtained parental/guardian permission to participate in SCOOP programs. Each youth that was “registered” received a laminated photo I.D. with technology chips embedded in them. These I.D. cards have the name, address and school the youth attend.

Each student who comes to a SCOOP site is scanned into a database before they are allowed to participate in any programs. This allows the student to be tracked by where they are or where they are going at all times. It can be determined where a student is, within 3 minutes, even if they are on a bus halfway across the city.

If parents/guardians don’t want their child participating at a specific program site, this is encoded into their I.D. card and they will not be allowed to disembark at that site.

Current Snapshot – 2006

1. There are 13 SCOOP sites with over 5000 students registered and participating in over 100 programs throughout the city. (This is triple the number of students before the SCOOP Initiative was launched.) The services are from 3:30 until 9:00 pm, five days a week and include Saturdays from 9:00 until 2:00.
2. Youth Summits are conducted yearly to bring together all the service providers in the city. The purpose of these all day meetings is to share progress toward stated goals; identify problems and challenges; share information across different systems and create new programs and initiatives. These are designed to be highly participative and engaging. The Mayor attends these summits.
3. Youth forums for teens are conducted every year and involve 75 – 100 youth throughout the city of Trenton. They are careful not to just invite the “choir” to this important meeting and work hard to ensure that a broad diversity of students participates. These forums are professionally facilitated by members of the Operations Council and a professor from The College of New Jersey. These forums create real time data to key questions affecting youth. Each student receives a summary of their day’s work before they leave the meeting.

The primary purpose of these forums is to listen to the concerns of the youth. The information generated informs the yearly Youth Summits. Teen representatives from the forum make formal presentations and recommendations at the Youth Summits. These recommendations have resulted in meaningful changes in program design, quality and access.

To build in accountability, the Director of DRNR&C attends the youth forums and reports back to them what has been done to address their previous year’s concerns and aspirations.

“It is very important that, as leaders, we listen to our youth and create programs that meet their interests and needs. The information that is created in the yearly Youth Forums not only helps inform our thinking but holds us accountable for responding to their issues and concerns.”

Mayor Douglas Palmer, 2006

4. In the initial stages of SCOOP, recreation sites and schools were utilized as primary program sites. There are many organizations in Trenton that provide quality programs for youth (e.g., CYO, YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, the 4H Club, Girl Scouts, etc.) and many have their own buildings to conduct their programs.

The Director of DRNR&C and the members of SCOOP have reached out to interested parties and expanded the SCOOP network to include nine new partners and nine new sites. This is the next phase of the integrated network. These external partners meet monthly with the Director of Recreation (he reports to the Director of DRNR&C) to share information, problem solve, build relationships and connection with each other.

Each “partner” must agree to several, non-negotiable criteria before they participate in the SCOOP Initiative. For example: 1) their organization must be willing to provide programming for any of the youth participating in SCOOP; 2) they must have adequate security and safety measures in place including background checks of all personnel; 3) they must utilize the SCOOP photo I.D. system and; 4) they must provide some free programming to SCOOP participants (some of these organizations charge for their programs), etc.

Over the next few years, SCOOP hopes to continue to expand their network with responsible partners throughout the city and county.

“We watched SCOOP real closely. Over time they built an impressive program. A lot of our kids attended and enjoyed some of their programs. When they asked us to come on board, we were reluctant at first. The criteria they established seemed fair but it was definitely a change. So far, they have been honest and open. Lots of transparency, no bull, they are here to help all kids. So far, so good.” A new network partner

Future Aspirations – 2007 and Beyond

1. Creating a Higher Education Network (H.E.N.) There are several local colleges and universities located near Trenton (i.e., Princeton, Rider University, The College of New Jersey, Mercer County Community College). These institutions currently provide tutoring and mentoring services to students in the school district. Some even have “community service” as a graduation requirement.

They have found that, although the support and services provided are well-intentioned, they could be a much better organized, connected to each other and better designed to realize their full potential. Our goal is to create a coherent approach to tutoring and mentoring in Trenton.

In the future, the focus of their efforts will be on math and science. (School district data has identified these as primary focus areas) Initially, they will work with four schools to start small and learn from the process. Each university will “adopt” one of the four schools rather than having four different universities working in one school. There will be both school district “facilitators” and university facilitators to ensure good communication, effective transitions and relationships.

The goal over the next few years is to have over 1000 university and college students meaningfully engaged in all of the schools.

2. Clergy Engagement: In the near future, we need to meaningfully involve more clergy in the SCOOP Initiative. They have found that churches and pastors are deeply interested in helping and supporting members of their own “flock”. It is sometimes challenging for the clergy to think outside their own church and see the needs of the youth across the city.

Currently, three churches are part of the expanded network and the initial success is encouraging. The SCOOP Initiative will work with The Concerned Pastors of Trenton to get them more involved to show them how being one of the partners will not only help their own parishes but other youth across the city.

The Mayor's appointment of a highly credible pastor to the Youth Advocacy Cabinet communicated how important it is to have the clergy at the table.

3. **Becoming a Chess City:** The Operations Council has recently been engaged in doing research on the educational impact of chess on student achievement. We have found that meaningful involvement with chess improves student test scores, self-esteem, critical thinking skills and self-discipline. In short, they do better in school.

Currently, we have three functioning chess clubs involving about 50 students at SCOOP sites. There are several informal chess clubs in some of the schools. Over the next three years, we want to have 50 chess clubs with at least 1000 students involved. We want to have a chess club in every school, recreation site and affiliated partner organization.

We want to create a chess culture throughout the city with our students learning and competing with each other, with other students in the surrounding counties and with Philadelphia and New York. In the summer of 2006, we held our first "Chess Camp" for students, which is an intensive learning experience for students of all ages. We hope to have this "camp" every year.

Lessons About Collaboration. . .

1. Relationships Matter

This may well be the most powerful lesson of all. In cross-boundary – collaborative work, problems and challenges are unavoidable. It is essential to build meaningful relationships with everyone throughout the initiative. When a problem does arise, you can then bring the right people together to help solve the problem and not blame each other. When there is mutual respect embedded in the professional relationships, people will stretch a little, answer that e-mail or phone call quickly, lend a hand or a resource because they know you as a person and, most importantly, they trust you.

Relationship building takes time, patience and authenticity but the pay-off is worth the investment. Most plans look great on paper but it is people who implement them. Pay attention to relationships.

2. You have to stay at the table

When you are trying to organize something as complicated as SCOOP there are hundreds of details and plenty of hurdles along the way; after the big ideas are created, someone has to do the difficult work. Much of this is detailed, even tedious, but someone has to do it. If things get "difficult", people have to be willing to stay and resolve the differences. This takes patience, tenacity and the willingness to listen. When you are working with bureaucratic systems with their unique structures, cultures, histories and ways of doing things, you have to understand their complexities and show how they can help you. This takes time, persistence and care.

3. Leadership has to pay attention to the process

In a multi-year effort it is easy to lose focus and create the next bigger and better initiative. The three key leaders (the Mayor, the School Superintendent and the Director of DRNR&C) all paid attention to this complex initiative. The Mayor attends all YAC meetings as well as the Annual Youth Summits and Youth Forums. The Superintendent is always available for support, important meetings, strategizing and problem solving. He talks about SCOOP in faculty meetings, with the community and at board meetings. The Director has communicated to internal and external stakeholders that this is one of the top priorities for

her department. All three model the way as we build this initiative.

4. Meaningful symbolism is important

As the Mayor convened the first Youth Summit, he insisted that the school Superintendent and the director of DRNR&C co-sponsor the meeting. He wanted them to model collaboration and partnership from the very beginning.

The YAC is co-chaired by the Mayor and the director of DRNR&C. This communicates to the top leaders that this is an important initiative.

The Operations Council is co-chaired by an assistant superintendent of schools and the recreation director and are held at the school district's headquarters. A member of the Operations Council attends the quarterly meetings of the Youth Advocacy Cabinet to create the necessary organizational linkage between the two groups.

YAC and OC members attend the Youth Summits to convey respect and lend credibility to them.

5. The client has to be in the room

In collaborative work, you don't plan for someone, you plan with someone. With SCOOP, the youth were our clients. To create the best programs for Trenton youth, we asked them for program ideas, we involved them in the Youth Summits along with adults, their ideas, suggestion and recommendations influenced decision making and policy and they are consistently surveyed about program quality and design. They believe they have a "say in the matter" that is reflected by how we conduct business with them.

6. It helps to have power

The fact that the Mayor was meaningfully involved and championed this effort throughout its creation and implementation was critical to the success of SCOOP.

The Mayor signaled by word and deed that this initiative was important to him. This enabled the city departments to coordinate and cooperate across their silos and political boundaries. There was little bickering or posturing because it was clear what the Mayor wanted.

The Mayor had the "power" to call all the relevant parties to the table when needed. He chaired and led the quarterly YAC meetings and convened special meetings when necessary. Not surprisingly, attendance at these meetings was very high.

At the YAC level, all the top administrators are at the table, no seconds allowed. When they leave the quarterly meetings, they are very clear on what needs to get done. They communicate this to their direct reports and collaborative implementation occurs.