



BRIDGES TO COLLECTIVE VISION:

Supporting Rural Communities' Aspirations for Students by Building on Local Assets, Existing Initiatives, and Shared Goals

"The transformational impact of people working in community to advance strategic goals is clear. We hope that this effort and others like it can serve as a case study for funders who aspire to support collective impact or specific issues in rural communities, yet are seeking an initial entry point."

One out of every seven Colorado students attends public school in a rural district — in small communities where connections between local education, economic development, health, and the environment are undeniable. Rural areas of the state were hit hard by the Great Recession, and recovery in these places has been slower. Access to high-quality education can be a game changer, allowing local residents and systems to demonstrate resilience in the face of evolving economic and social challenges.

To support rural communities, a number of Colorado foundations are currently investing in collective impact initiatives aimed at addressing the root causes of inequity, while others are providing individual grants to organizations and programs tackling specific issues. According to a 2018 report from El Pomar Foundation, 20 percent of foundation giving in 2016 went to rural regions. "While foundation giving continues to increase, there are large disparities between regions and counties," the report found. For example, "the annual average grant dollars received per capita from 2013 to 2017 in Denver County was \$155.70, while Elbert County (a mostly rural area east of Denver and Colorado Springs) received an annual average of \$1.78 per capita during the same time frame."



Both Gates Family Foundation and Wend Ventures share a deep commitment to increasing educational opportunities across the state of Colorado. We also know that targeting resources to students in under-resourced communities can be a profoundly powerful lever for individual and collective advancement. Gates has a long history of investing in the civic infrastructure and economic development of rural communities, and over the past decade we have increased our strategic partnerships with a handful of public school systems in areas beyond the Front Range, including Lake County, Grand Junction, and the Roaring Fork Valley. Through this experience, we have deepened our respect for the unique needs of rural and Western Slope education systems, which present both challenges and opportunities for innovation that carry important lessons for funders and the broader education ecosystem.

With this in mind, in 2018 Gates and Wend launched a joint effort to harness the creative capacity of rural communities to solve problems within their own education systems. With The Civic Canopy as our implementation partner, we supported local groups in Alamosa, Cañon City, and Durango with targeted facilitation, analysis, and strategy development to advance big ideas for their schools, students, and communities at large.

We structured the effort with a few shared beliefs to guide us:

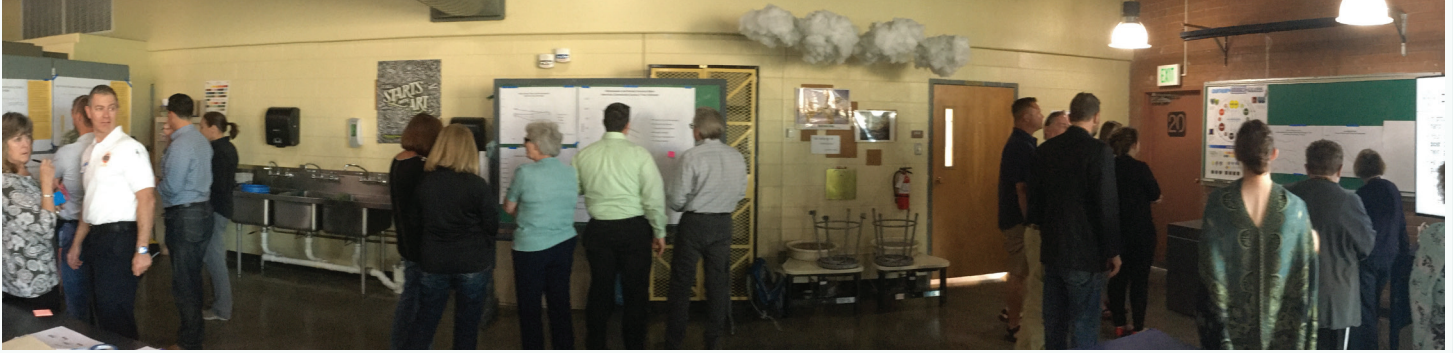
- Local community members are best positioned to understand rural issues deeply and can design the right solutions to the challenges they face.
- Community-led processes don't have to take forever, if an effort leverages existing groups, networks, and ongoing work.
- Relationships — among community members, across sectors, and between grantees and grantors — are the greatest predictor of an effort's ability to achieve transformational and long-term change.

We've learned a lot along the way, yet each of these guiding beliefs has held true — and each community has taken steps to address the central challenge on which they chose to focus. By the end of our six-month engagement, community and business leaders in Cañon City have developed an ambitious vision to create affordable housing for teachers as part of a broader effort to attract top talent to the city; school leaders and mental health advocates in Durango have strengthened a collaborative effort to support students' needs inside and outside the classroom; and in Alamosa, out-of-school-time partners have a plan to work with the school district to address students' social and emotional needs.

The transformational impact of people working in community to advance strategic goals is clear. We hope that this effort and others like it can serve as a case study for funders who aspire to support collective impact or specific issues in rural communities, yet are seeking an initial entry point. Above all else, we have learned that it is possible to gain trust and work towards shared goals when we invite rural communities to build on existing work and local assets, leverage local partners and resources, and follow unexpected twists in the road.

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Initiative Background and Process

In April 2018, Gates Family Foundation and Wend Ventures engaged with The Civic Canopy to design an initiative aimed at helping rural communities in Colorado examine a public education challenge, explore its root causes, and design a locally-driven solution.

This initiative sought to engage communities where at least one of the following was true:

- There is an existing local education effort that needs a boost or recharge - and support from the initiative could be a chance to propel the work forward by engaging the community.
- There is an existing community group or network that has tackled a local challenge in the past, and is now interested in examining an education issue - and support from the initiative could help leverage collaborative strength in a new area.
- There is some pent up energy around an education issue, but the conversation has become polarized — and support from the initiative could help break through gridlock to help reach a common understanding.

Another stated goal of both Gates and Wend was to actively engage foundation program officers throughout the initiative, to ensure lessons learned could inform future grantmaking and rural community engagement. The project team from Gates, Wend, and the Canopy reached out to many funders, nonprofits, and state agencies doing work across Colorado to learn about previous and ongoing efforts that might benefit from added support. Colorado Health Foundation, Donnell-Kay Foundation, The Colorado Trust, Generation Schools, Great Outdoors Colorado, and Colorado Education Initiative each shared valuable insights on areas to explore.

Based on these conversations and scans of quantitative data, the project team distributed a call for proposals targeting six geographies across the state, with a priority for rural areas with fewer than 6,500 students. Local community foundations, recipients of Gates Family Foundation grants across all program areas, and alumni of Gates Family Foundation's Public Leadership Fellowship for senior executives in state and local government helped to distribute the call. The team hosted webinars with each region to answer questions and gather feedback. Three communities applied for support.

Working with The Civic Canopy, the project team designed a four-phase process to engage with each community. The intent was to build capacity with community members so they have additional skills, knowledge, connections, and tools to continue moving forward; provide tangible "leave-behinds" so the community has an expanded toolkit of resources to mobilize; and identify additional resources and opportunities that can bolster continued systems change.

The Civic Canopy utilized a four-meeting sequence designed specifically for the initiative, to support and launch similar efforts in each of the selected communities.



1

**Meeting 1:
Establishing the Foundation
for Collaboration**

- Strengthen relationships among members of the cohort
- Establish a collaborative framework for solving community challenges
- Create and prioritize draft results statements that describe the desired future for the community
- Determine next steps

2

**Meeting 2:
Defining Results and Indicators**

- Finalize results statements
- Review potential indicators and select a set for data collection
- Identify additional partners to include

3

**Meeting 3:
Reviewing Data and Turning the Curve**

- Review data from selected indicators to understand the story behind the data
- Identify strategies to “turn the curve” on desired outcomes
- Brainstorm initial strategies to put into action

4

**Meeting 4:
Organizing for Action**

- Finalize strategies
- Formalize Action Teams
- Build initial draft of Action Map

The Civic Canopy: Theory of Action and Role as Intermediary

Gates and Wend pooled funds to support The Civic Canopy to lead the planning and implementation of the initiative. The Canopy’s research-based Community Learning Model (CLM) provided a methodical way to establish the conditions needed for effective collaboration, by building group commitments and capacity over time. The approach builds from three core beliefs:

- Every individual matters and contributes,
- Communities are filled with assets and solutions, and
- The answers emerge from the collective.



Results are at the center of the model. Defining shared results and taking action to achieve them drives the community learning process. Each Canopy process ensures the various people, perspectives, and systems involved in the work are included in the process. Participants engage in high-quality conversations that clarify values, surface tensions, and tap into creativity — leading to concrete plans that achieve results. Action teams identify benchmarks and use data to assess the impact and quality of actions, learn from experiences, and translate that information into more effective strategies. The continued commitment to these efforts over time helps establish a lasting culture of collaboration that transforms the climate of the community.

More information about The Civic Canopy’s work is online at: www.civikkanopy.org



ALAMOSA



BY THE NUMBERS:

Population estimate (2018):

10,000

Median income: **\$32,785**

School district population
(2018-19): **2,300**

Percent of district students
eligible for free and reduced
lunch (2018-19): **69%**

Narrowing Focus on Youth Expands Possibilities

Alamosa is the population and retail center of the San Luis Valley, a historic town along the Rio Grande Railroad. Known for its outdoor beauty and attractions, such as the historic Great Sand Dunes National Park & Preserve, the area has a host of community assets yet also struggles with unemployment and generational poverty. A number of dedicated coalitions and organizations have worked to address the needs of Alamosa youth, particularly those who have had adverse childhood experiences. While this deep bench of providers is a community asset and has developed local capacity for collaboration, it poses a challenge for the school district to meaningfully and strategically engage external partners. As a result, local activity sometimes overlaps and community members who are engaged in multiple initiatives suffer from fatigue or lack the capacity to collaborate further.

“Overcoming the cycle of poverty and associated negative conditions to succeed in school and prepare for college, employment, and/or careers is a major challenge facing the youth of Alamosa County. This process will ensure that all young people in Alamosa County can obtain the future they envision through education, by focusing community leaders on increased collaboration and coordination of policy, process, and practice to address the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences.”

— Alamosa leaders frame the challenge

KEY PARTNERS

- Adams State University
- Alamosa School District
- Boys & Girls Clubs of the San Luis Valley
- GripTape





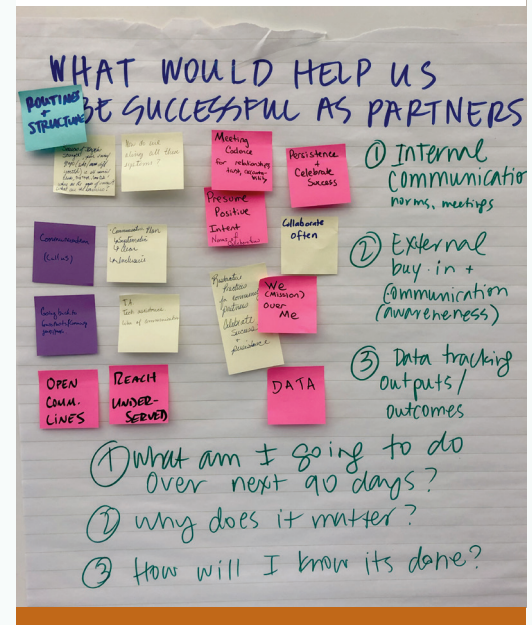
OUTCOMES AND LEARNING

The project began with a team of agencies stepping forward to create their own collaborative effort focused on addressing the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences, that would be inclusive of the Alamosa School District (ASD). Yet, some confusion arose about focus, given the multiple collaborative efforts already underway to support youth in the Valley. Rather than press on as planned — or pull back given the uncertainty — the group paused to reflect on what was most needed at this time, and remained open to multiple pathways. This openness to new paths forward proved valuable, as it led to their joining forces with a school district-led initiative called Social-Emotional Learning / Trauma- Informed Care (SELTIC) that proved to be the best path forward.

Having aligned their purpose and strategy with the district, the local project team and ASD agreed to have The Civic Canopy facilitate a session with key community partners to focus on three common goals:

- 1) Build a shared understanding of the work underway in ASD around SELTIC;
- 2) Map and articulate what ASD and community partners “bring to the table” (i.e. strengths, opportunities, and challenges);
- and 3) Design an action plan with community partners to ensure alignment with the broader SELTIC efforts and build capacity for social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care within each organization.

By aligning community partners within the context of a district-led initiative, the original intent of the planning team was fulfilled — without creating a new effort.



The Alamosa process proved viable despite initial challenges because the convening team demonstrated two critical leadership qualities in the process: courage and humility. It took courage to convene partners in the first place, knowing their initial framing was aspirational and in need of further clarification from the group. It then took even more courage during the early stage of the project, when shortly after launch, they experienced the initial sense of doubt and uncertainty from community partners.

It is tempting to either double down on the original plans, or to simply fold at the early signs of pushback and resistance. Instead, the local leaders remained committed to serving the needs of the community in whatever form was most valuable, and humble enough to let that course be determined by the larger community. That proved to be joining the district-led initiative — which was simply not a known option when the project began. Communities seeking to advance important goals amidst complicated collaborative landscapes might find in the Alamosa story a helpful blueprint for how to proceed with confidence, even while surrounded by high levels of uncertainty.

WHAT'S NEXT

District leaders in Alamosa are taking the lead to create and implement a continuous engagement process in the SELTIC initiative, so that leaders from aligned community organizations can provide feedback, guidance, and supportive resources that address the needs of Alamosa youth.



CAÑON CITY



BY THE NUMBERS:

Population estimate (2018):

16,750

Median income (2018): **\$41,900**

School district population
(2018-19): **3,500**

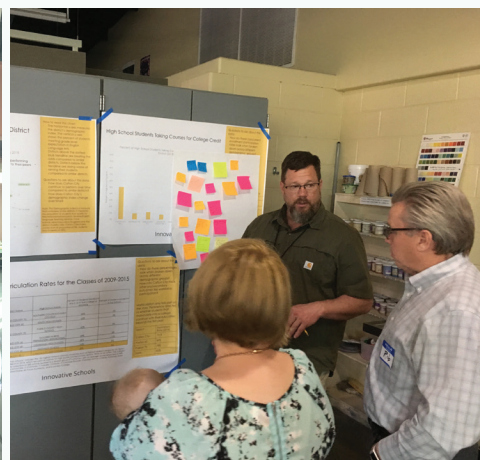
Percent of district students
eligible for free and reduced
lunch (2018-19): **55%**

Recruiting Teachers by Harnessing Main Street's Assets

Cañon City is a small town nestled in the mountains just west of Colorado Springs. Located in the Arkansas River valley and along the beautiful Royal Gorge, the city sits at the outdoor-lover's sweet spot — offering access to world-class rafting and rock climbing, plus a growing network of hiking and biking trails. Although the Cañon City school district is highly rated academically compared to other rural districts, the community persistently struggles to attract and retain high quality educators.

KEY PARTNERS

- Boys and Girls Club of Fremont County
- Cañon City Recreation District
- City of Cañon City
- Echo Childhood Council
- Fremont Adventure Recreation
- Fremont County Communities That Care
- Fremont County Department of Human Services
- Fremont Economic Development Corporation
- Pueblo Community College-Fremont Campus
- Solvista Mental Health
- TechStart
- Valley-Wide Health Services



"The challenge we seek to address is how a rural school district in Colorado might more effectively attract and retain high-quality staff, in light of the fact we receive floor funding from the state and recently adopted a modified four day week schedule. The district struggles to provide a competitive compensation and benefits package to staff, and pressures related to considering a move to a four-day school week have created a values tug-of-war on this front."

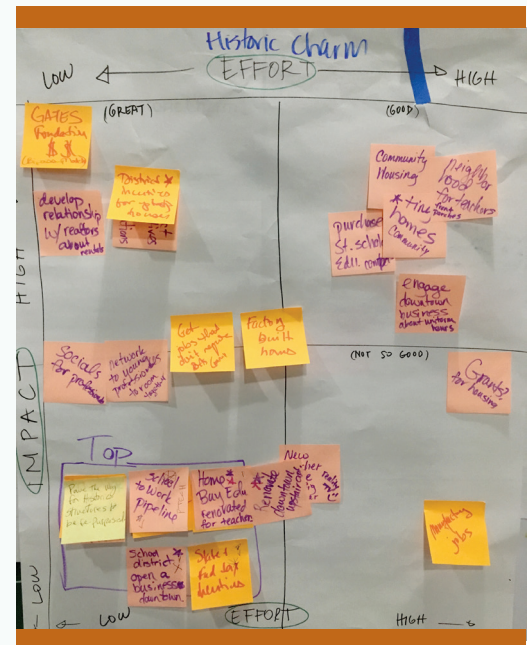
— Cañon City leaders frame the challenge



OUTCOMES AND LEARNING

The influencers of Cañon City came together for the first meeting and never looked back. Participation was consistently high throughout the four-meeting sequence, drawing around 30 leaders to each meeting from the city's civic, economic, health, education, and community sectors. Each meeting was held in a different location, as a way of spotlighting the community's infrastructure assets: Abbey Events Center, Fremont Center for the Arts, Cañon City High School, and Annex Events on Main Street. At the end of each meeting, additional important and missing voices and invited to attend the next session.

The charismatic and action-oriented superintendent of schools provided strong leadership and continuity. He framed the meetings as building on momentum from two recent community engagement efforts: one that had helped the district successfully navigate redesigning the school calendar, and another that took off when Cañon City was selected as a finalist for the television show *Small Business Revolution*, which built widespread excitement among the city's civic, business, and economic leaders.



Starting with a warm public welcome at the first session, the superintendent shared why he included each person to attend. Quickly the group realized that while the initial focus was to bring great teachers to Cañon City, they all had similar challenges — and potential solutions were interdependent. Together, a common statement of wellbeing — *Cañon City thrives because of its adventurous spirit, dynamic people, innovative schools, and historic charm* — shifted the group to focus on a common vision and plan to stimulate employee recruitment and retention across sectors. During the next sessions, the group continued to coalesce and organized into four work groups: adventurous spirit, dynamic people, innovative schools, and historic charm. With assistance from A+ Colorado, a series of visual graphs allowed participants to both analyze data and select relevant activities to guide their action plan.

Cañon City exemplifies the incredible power of having a champion, leveraging community resources, and engaging the right people. Sustaining action beyond the initial foundational meetings becomes possible with setting up accountability and support systems: selecting and organizing ongoing work groups, revisiting common indicators of progress, and setting a calendar for regular meetings. Lessons from Cañon City demonstrate how a close-knit community can design high-impact solutions to broader community challenges when they work together towards a higher, common goal.



To watch a video about this project in Cañon City, visit:
<https://vimeo.com/359114650>

WHAT'S NEXT

Civic, education, and business leaders in Cañon City are continuing to work as project teams to pursue a range of strategies, including seeking tax incentives to build affordable housing for teachers and new recruits from other sectors, expanding school-community internships, developing an online community whiteboard of jobs and volunteer opportunities, and creating a cross-sector, multi-media campaign leveraging the area's ample outdoor recreation and quality of life opportunities.



DURANGO



BY THE NUMBERS:

Population: **16,000**

Median income: **\$60,000**

School district population:
5,400

Percent of district students
eligible for free and
reduced lunch: **27%**

From 'Preventing Teen Suicide' to 'Inspiring Youth Leadership'

Durango is a small community in southwest Colorado, nestled at the base of the San Juan Mountains. Durango School District 9-R is a relatively high-performing Colorado school district, despite having a high percentage of students living in poverty. Over the past few years, the Durango community has experienced multiple youth suicides, a significant increase in youth homelessness, and a marked rise in school-age children experiencing severe and embedded trauma. As a result, school and community providers have identified a significant increase in challenging behavior, along with disconnected and disengaged students. The increased amount of time, effort, and resources that schools and staff regularly spend responding to student social-emotional needs and coordinating access to high-quality support has stretched school and community resources thin.

KEY PARTNERS

- Animas High School
- Boys and Girls Club (Southern Ute Tribe)
- Celebrating Healthy Communities Coalition
- Durango 9R
- Durango Police Department
- La Plata County Department of Human Services
- La Plata County Sheriff's Department
- La Plata Youth Services
- San Juan Basin Health
- School-Based Health Centers (Pediatric Partners)

"The challenge that continues to create significant barriers for our students in Durango is the lack of, and deep need for, coordinated and aligned wrap-around services connected to youth mental health and wellness. Currently, we don't have a space for all of us to come together in order to share our struggles within the school setting, seek help to define what the root problem is, put solutions on the table, and work through a community-wide approach to an effective and collaborative framework that includes procedural clarity and aligned interventions."

— Durango leaders frame the challenge





OUTCOMES AND LEARNING

The group that came to the table for this project was not the first attempting to address the rise in suicides among youth in the area. The Thriving Youth Coalition, led by the public health department and comprised of dozens of service agencies, had been meeting for years but had not found a way to fully engage the schools. The school district's leadership, framing, and deep engagement in the Canopy-led meetings provided an opportunity to engage all participants in a unique space that united the schools and community partners.

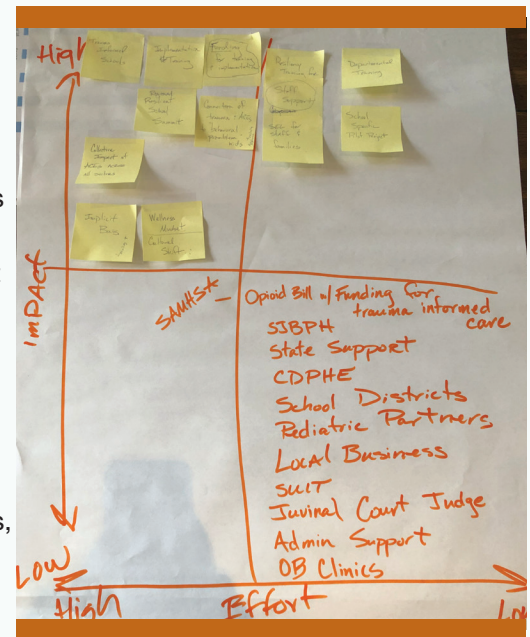
The group quickly adopted Thriving Youth's vision statement, which created synergy and built trust. This was an instant and important shift for a community that often saw a divide between community-based efforts and school district initiatives. Furthermore, whereas charter schools and district leaders are not natural partners in some communities, in Durango this was a defining asset to this emerging coalition.

The process gave participants the chance to explore their common interests and to identify the assets they already have in place, which led to the development of two major projects. The first is to host a Community Youth Summit that will leverage the infusion of resources and collective impact work accomplished through this group. The Sources of Strength Suicide Prevention Program will serve as a foundational prevention lens for this effort to promote collaborative learning and develop shared language. In addition, the group determined that exploring the creation of an alternative school in the area would support the highest need students. Due to the lack of comprehensive, coordinated community-based mental health supports in the region, having a dedicated location could provide students and families with much needed wrap-around services.

Both of these projects reflect lessons from the Durango process that have much broader implications. In districts across the state, community agencies stand ready to partner with schools, but often feel there is no easy way in. At the same time, school leaders often feel overwhelmed by trying to meet the needs of students and families, but don't know or have systems in place for where to turn for help. This process suggests that one productive path is to create school-led action teams aligned with larger community coalitions that help make the resources of a community more accessible. In addition, community-led school-based programs enable schools to be responsive to meet the needs of students in new and innovative ways.

WHAT'S NEXT

A cross-sector coalition of Durango leaders plan to host a Community Youth Summit that aims to build shared understanding and common language around health equity and socio-emotional learning. Additionally, this coalition will continue to work together to design, develop, and ultimately build an innovative learning environment that effectively serves a critical population of Durango children and youth.





Lessons for the Road

This project was designed to effect change in three Colorado communities, but with the hope of providing lessons that are more broadly applicable. As philanthropy increasingly sets its sights on transforming systems, we can overlook fragile conditions at the local level that are necessary for lasting change to take root. Through this project, several lessons emerged that provide a different way of looking at the attempt to accomplish lasting, significant change in a community. We hope they give foundations and community partners alike new vocabulary and frameworks for aligning efforts in pursuit of bold goals.

Build on what has come before. If you want to develop relationships with a community, honor what has come before, and come in willing to reinforce previous efforts rather than launching a new initiative. The drive to be bold and disrupt can unwittingly send a message of hubris and leave a lasting legacy of funder ownership, not community ownership. One way to accelerate change is to look for things already in motion and help to add momentum. This requires a certain humility and risk — fear that you won't make a difference, that impact will be hard to evaluate, or that we won't be able to point to "our contribution." What we experienced was a refreshing appreciation for this approach, and a corresponding unleashing of energy. One partner who came to the table willing to play, but suspicious of intent, was so pleasantly surprised that the group adopted the outcomes another initiative had chosen previously. Rather than framing support as "planning grants for new initiatives," funders can gain leverage by supporting mid-stream initiatives. This doesn't mean that there's no expectation beyond the grant; funders can continue playing a role by connecting the effort to additional resources, leveraging connections, and more. Doing mid-stream initiatives may be an overlooked strategy for time-bound support.

High-quality products emerge from high-quality processes. Complex problems do not lend themselves to simple solutions; they require collaboration among multiple partners with diverse perspectives. This project underscored the importance of creating the conditions for partners to come together in the most productive way possible. Attention to best-practice process design helps alleviate the predictable risks that can accompany new initiatives and allow community members to establish momentum more quickly and get off on the right foot. Strong relationships — among community members, across sectors, and between grantees and grantors — are the greatest predictor of an effort's ability to achieve transformational and long-term change, so it is imperative to focus on getting the process right so the best products emerge over time.

Education is a community enterprise, and best accomplished as a partnership between schools, families, and community agencies. While this initiative was explicitly focused on educational issues, part of what worked in each community was helping to break down the boundaries between schools and communities. In Cañon City, the school district proved to be a vital component of the overarching economic development strategy for the city. In Durango and Alamosa, efforts to help students social-emotional and mental health needs were strengthened by full engagement and ongoing communication with community providers. All too often, school districts feel overburdened by the issues that students and families face that affect educational outcomes, yet feel ill-equipped to meet them. At the same time, community partners and services who could be of help don't know how to interact with schools, which struggle to manage external relationships. By framing education broadly as a community issue that schools, nonprofits, and government agencies all have a unique role in addressing, it is much easier to create strategic opportunities for leveraging the unique assets of each organization and lighten the load that any one entity has to bear.



Let form follow function. While this effort was framed in the same way for each community, each project required a different type of support, and evolved along a different journey. It was critical for The Civic Canopy, Gates, and Wend to adapt their expectations and shift the services provided to each community based on the evolving priorities of the group. In Cañon City, the process as designed served as a helpful tool to build relationships and move the community forward towards action. In Durango, to be effective this process was used to coordinate existing efforts in the public and mental health fields, and create a connection between these efforts and the district and schools. In Alamosa, early convenings did not align with the true needs of the community, but the group pivoted to join forces with school district in new and powerful ways. A one-size-fits-all approach would have counterproductive and run the risk of eroding trust and goodwill in the communities. By allowing the form of each process to align with the function it was best serving, each community took greater ownership and increased the likelihood of sustaining the effort beyond its launch phase.

Inclusion is a process, not an event. It's rare to get everyone on board from the beginning – as initial meetings are successful, others come along because they don't want to be left out. By having an open tent and time built into each session to do some level setting for new attendees, these new partners were able to quickly adapt and contribute to the next steps in the process.

Change happens at the speed of trust (which can move faster than we think). There is often a tension around collaborative community processes between those who want results quickly, given the urgency of the issues at hand, and those who advocate for patience, arguing that it takes a long time to build relationships and establish the conditions for collaboration. This process suggests that both can be true at once. While results are not possible without trusting relationships among partners, building those relationships can be accelerated when attention is paid to the factors that help establish trust. Within the span of four meetings over four months, all three communities had established a solid foundation for ongoing collaboration that is proving resilient even after the terms of the grant.



About the Project Partners



Gates Family Foundation is a private family foundation that makes philanthropic investments statewide that contribute to the quality of life in Colorado, create opportunities for youth, and support stewardship of this extraordinary place. Our education grantmaking is driven by the vision that all children, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, will have access to educational opportunities that support their long-term success.



Wend Ventures is a direct-impact investment portfolio focused on driving transformation and positive change for people, communities, and places worldwide. Guided by the belief that people possess the greatest ability to affect profound change in the world, Wend Ventures aims to support those who innovate, demonstrate, and amplify great work on behalf of their communities. Our education work champions the goals of: creating pedagogical diversity, supporting innovation in education, and ensuring that underserved youth and communities have access to opportunity.



The Civic Canopy is a community-based nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the way pivotal issues are solved in society by facilitating effective conversations and collaborations. The Canopy's work connects diverse groups of people seeking change in their communities and equips them with tools to create meaningful and lasting impact. The Canopy's vision is to create thriving communities in which all participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.