

Enhancing Collaboration Between the Goodman Street Boys and Girls Club and the Geneva City School District

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Introduction

Our driving question is: How can increased collaboration between the Boys and Girls Club (B&GC) of Geneva and local elementary schools inform and improve academic programming and supports? In Geneva, NY, there are two different Boys and Girls Club locations: The Teen Center and Goodman Street. The Teen Center is for students between fifth and twelfth grade, while Goodman Street caters to students who are in kindergarten through fourth grade. The students at Goodman attend two different elementary schools in the community, which are West Street and North Street Elementary. Goodman Street has been described by B&GC board members as a future “literacy center” with a strong focus on improving students’ literacy skills and helping them to foster an appreciation for reading. As future elementary school teachers, we chose to focus on this aspect of the Boys and Girls Club, at the Goodman Street location, because we recognize the importance of community and school collaboration for promoting students’ success.

The Boys and Girls Club of Geneva has been making a strong effort to communicate with local schools about students’ academic performance in order to improve on their ability to serve their club members; however, there is still room for

increased collaboration and communication. The issues that we hope to address include a lack of academic resources for B&GC staff, an inconsistent and relatively limited line of communication between staff and the teachers in the schools, and an absence of a central location for school resources, information, and assignments that B&GC staff can access. The primary goal of our project is to identify one or more strategies and tools through which Geneva B&GC staff and local elementary school teachers can communicate with one another about students' academic needs and performance. The hope is that this might result in a shared space for academic resources, tools, and the expectations of both teachers and B&GC staff .

Analysis of the Organization

The Boys and Girls Club is an after-school program that promotes character and leadership, education and careers, health and life-skills, the arts, sports, fitness, and recreation. The mission of the B&GC is to help young people reach their full potential as productive, caring, and responsible citizens. The B&GC provides a safe space for students to come after school to receive homework help and to participate in enrichment activities. Throughout these experiences, participants are forming positive relationships with their peers and with others in the community. Nationally, the B&GC serves approximately four million young people each year. This includes participants who are 5 years and younger, all the way up to students who are 16 and older. The majority of members are ages 6-9 years old. Primarily, the members come from three ethnic groups: Caucasian, Black/African-American, and Hispanic/Latinx (Boys & Girls Club of

America, 2016). Research has identified various positive impacts of going to the Club, both short- and long-term. A survey of B&GC alumni identified these as keeping them safe, developing their character, and advancing their education. The majority also considered the Club a staple in their community, and felt that participating in the Club encouraged them to give back to the community in which they lived (Boys & Girls Club of America, 2016).

As Boys and Girls Club alumni have identified, academic support is of key importance to their success both in and out of the club. Many of these former club members explained that without the B&GC, they might have dropped out of school and many say that they would not have even gone to college had it not been for the Club in their community. The majority also said that they became much more committed to their overall education because of the B&GC (Boys & Girls Club of America, 2016). In this way, we believe that the B&GC of Geneva can have a positive impact on their members by increasing communication between their staff and teachers at West Street and North Street Elementary about homework, class assignments, and student reading levels.

Connection to the Literature

A study by Cosden et. al (2004), outlined various “protective factors” associated with participation in homework programs similar to the Boys and Girls Club. They found that these included normalizing academic achievement by seeing others studying, encouraging good study habits, and preparing students to participate in class (Cosden et. al, 2004). Findings like these highlight the importance of having effective,

well-organized, academic programming and supports at places like the Boys and Girls Club of Geneva. They also demonstrate the positive effects that this can have on students, both in and out of school. As we are focusing on improving academic programming and supports at the B&GC, this article is relevant for our project and can inform the recommendations that we make for communication/collaboration between the B&GC staff and local schools.

Another article by St Pierre et. al (2001) discussed one of the multicomponent interventions of the Boys and Girls Club, which involved their staff meeting with school teachers on a monthly basis in order to converse about the needs of students. They found that, “Boys & Girls Clubs’ collaborations with local schools were successful in their overall goal to work together to carry out the program” (St. Pierre et. al, 2001). This demonstrates that increasing communication and collaboration between teachers and B&GC staff can help students succeed with their assigned homework, come to school more prepared, and can also have a long-term effect on their school achievement.

Lastly, research by Carruthers & Busser (2000) focused specifically on a B&GC location in the Southwestern United States. After interviewing staff, Club members, and parents, results showed that 78% of members identified school skills as the most important thing that they learned at the B&GC. Researchers also found that stakeholders, which included teachers, believed that the program was having a positive impact on youth in the three areas of nurturing environment, positive behavior, and self-esteem/competence. These findings are significant to our project, as they demonstrate the ways in which collaboration between the B&GC and other community

members can have a positive impact on student success in a variety of areas and contexts.

Methodology and Findings

To investigate our driving question we relied on both observations and conversations with individuals involved. Our observation was relatively brief, but enabled us to understand the nature of the Goodman Street Center, the resources available, and how the tutoring program currently operates. We also engaged in conversations with B&GC staff, Hobart and William Smith Colleges tutors, and West Street and North Street classroom teachers. We asked these various parties questions about their roles, current practices, and future goals.

The other resources that we utilized included the 21st Century Grant evaluation report, an open line of communication with B&GC board members, and a relationship with various Geneva City school teachers. Our goal was to identify multiple tools/resources that can foster a consistent, open line of communication and encourage collaboration between the local elementary schools and the staff and volunteers at the Goodman Street B&GC location.

Our meetings with the Director of the Boys and Girls Club, Chris Lavin, revealed the nature of current practices at the clubs, and also his future goals for the Goodman Street location in terms of academic supports, communication with local schools, and Power Hour. Lavin described current practices at both Boys and Girls club locations, Goodman Street and the Teen Center. He believes the weekly meetings that are

currently happening between middle/high school teachers and staff at the Teen Center are beneficial, as they allow tutors to get more information on curriculum, student behavior, academic expectations, and student progress. He would like to see similar collaborative meetings between elementary school teachers and Goodman Street staff. Looking forward, Lavin described his vision for the Goodman Street location as a “literacy center,” where students can practice reading and improve on foundational skills. He also sees a lot of potential in using iReady and Imagine Learning during Power Hour, as these are educational programs that are used at West Street and North Street schools that provide individualized instruction for students in Math and ELA.

Rebecca Czajkowski, the HWS Student Coordinator for Goodman Street, described the ways in which Power Hour currently operates and the extent to which she communicates with teachers at West Street and North Street schools. Czajkowski explained that Power Hour is usually very short, and occurs at various times for students at different grade levels. Ideally, she says it should be a full hour long but currently only runs between 15 and 30 minutes. She has found that during Power Hour, many students do not have homework to do and if they do have some, staff feel that they are not adequately prepared to help them with it. Staff often have to print out additional worksheets for students who do not have homework, but they do not have the resources available to do this every day. When asked about how staff communicate with local teachers and schools, Czajkowski explained that she has personally found this difficult and extremely limited. She has only been able to meet with one administrator from North Street, and has communicated through email with one second

grade teacher from West Street. The second grade teacher communicates on an irregular basis and is only able to share information about her own classroom and curriculum.

Three paid HWS tutors at Goodman Street also discussed what resources they have/would like to have available at the club, the extent to which they are trained, and what else might be helpful for increasing collaboration with the schools. The staff members do not feel that they are properly trained in tutoring, and for the most part do not have experience with the Common Core Curriculum. The HWS tutors explained that their training focused on how to deal with problem behaviors, but feel they were not given instruction on how to work academically with children or how to engage them.

Tutors also expressed that they have no collaboration or communication with the teachers. They would like to know what their students are doing in class, what they struggle with, what reading levels the students are on, and what the focus of the lesson plans are in school. The tutors think it might be helpful to receive a newsletter from teachers about what is happening in school. They also feel that they do not have enough information about the backgrounds of the children they are working with. The tutors said that they would be willing to take the extra step and go over student information and classroom curriculum to help benefit the students, both academically and socially. The tutors would also like more practice worksheets from the school to aid and support the Power Hour portion of the B&GC day. They believe that having a form or note that float between the schools and the B&GC could help increase communication between themselves and students' teachers.

Overall, Boys and Girls Club tutors do not feel that they are prepared to help students with homework assignments. They believe that Goodman Street lacks some academic resources and supplementary materials that could be useful for students during Power Hour. In addition, they think that the club should have more information on students' backgrounds, and that tutors need to be properly trained to assist students academically. They would like to find a way to increase communication with their students' teachers and the local schools, whether this be through meetings, emails, notes, etc.

A first grade teacher at West Street School described her current knowledge of the Boys and Girls Club, the extent to which she communicates with staff, and her willingness to help in various capacities. This teacher is aware that the B&GC has a homework time (Power Hour). Sometimes, students in her classroom that attend the B&GC ask to take an extra book with them to use during Power Hour, and she gladly lets them take whatever they need. She also heard that B&GC was trying to adopt the PAWS language that is used at the school. This teacher thinks this is a great idea, because she has noticed that behavior problems often start at B&GC and are brought back to school.

This same teacher shared that she has never personally communicated with the B&GC staff, but she sees value in this communication/collaboration. This teacher does not have contact information for B&GC staff, but would love if someone reached out to her and updated her through email about her students' progress and behavior. She thinks that B&GC tutors could attend grade level meetings. Additionally, she would be

willing to send a monthly newsletter to give B&GC staff updates on what students are learning, and she would be willing to go out and help tutor! This teacher provided a few suggestions of what she thinks the students should be doing after school including, but not limited to: playing math games, fluency games, and utilizing iReady and Imagine Learning. She does not believe that everything has to be directly correlated to the State Standards, because practicing basic Math and ELA skills are equally important.

A second grade teacher from West Street also talked about the ways in which she personally communicates with the B&GC and what she would be willing to do in terms of improving this communication/collaboration. This teacher communicates with Czajkowski about her own classroom, but is not sure that other teachers do the same. Occasionally, she sends the current word study lists to Czajkowski through email, so that students can practice at B&GC. After these emails are sent, she does not receive any updates from B&GC staff about her students and would like to. This teacher would also be willing to send more information about students' reading levels. She does also see value in collaborating and communicating with B&GC, but does not want to have to attend additional meetings and feels email would be the most useful form of communication. While she does not see value in attending additionally meetings, she does believe that tutors could come to grade level meetings.

This teacher believes that rather than doing homework, B&GC should offer them an extension of what they are doing in school to practice basic skills, sight words, and reading/writing because these skills are important for students to be doing after school.

She thinks that students can also learn and practice these skills through educational games and online software, like iReady and Sumdog.

One, third grade teacher from North Street School (NSS) spoke about how instrumental the Boys and Girls Club has been in his classroom. This teacher emphasized the importance of B&GC for the students who need the extra help both academically and emotionally and benefit from an additional support system. He currently has two students involved in the B&GC, an academically high achieving student and a student who receives significant accommodations. The student who receives services started the year struggling to get her homework and assignments done for class. After going to the B&GC she turns in her homework everyday. While he does not directly speak to any of the staff about his students, his students come into school telling him what they did the previous day at the B&GC and who they hung out with. This teacher, therefore, feels he has a general sense of what is going on at the B&GC because of this relationship with his students and believes the B&GC has helped with behavior problems in his classroom.

This teacher understands it might be too difficult for the staff members of the B&GC to individually email each teacher about what their students did each day, but would love to have some way to know exactly what the students were working on or to be able to tell the staff to prioritize certain homework assignments/projects. He also mentioned that NSS has a PAWS night every other week, that most of his students attend, and thinks it would be great to see B&GC staff come to make a stronger

connection with the kids outside of the B&GC. He thinks fostering this relationship would also open communication lines between B&GC staff and teachers.

While this teacher does not see the lack of communication as detrimental to his students, he does see value in creating more avenues of communication. This teacher would love to see the B&GC utilizing iReady and Imagine Learning during Power Hour when students finish their homework early. He has found kids are struggling with math fluency in grades 3, 4, and 5 and thinks it would be great for them to practice their math fluency skills. This teacher also mentioned the B&GC using “wrap ups” as a math fluency tool and fun math game for the students who finish their work early. He would also like the kids to find a way to practice their general writing skills during this time. This teacher would also be happy to have a way to communicate with the B&GC staff online about different tools for the kids to use during Power Hour.

A fourth grade teacher from North Street School explained what she knows about the B&GC organization and discussed the ways in which she would be willing to communicate with staff at Goodman Street. She thinks that communication could be something as informal as writing notes in students’ agenda or a quick email. This teacher would personally like to know who her students are working with at B&GC and what they are working on. Overall, she would like to be made aware of on any progress and/or concerns about her students, both academically and behaviorally. For example, she described that there was once an issue with one of her students at the B&GC and she was not notified of it. She thinks for this reason, and many others, it is important to improve communication between B&GC staff and the schools. This teacher would be

willing to learn how to use Google Classroom or another online forum to communicate with staff, as long as she had proper training over the summer months.

Another fourth grade teacher at North Street School has many students in the B&GC program and understands that they are supported with the homework/tutoring program. This teacher has sporadically attempted to communicate with staff through emails and agendas about homework. However, she feels that having a specific person to talk to, ultimately a liaison, about their concerns or any important information about the students would be beneficial. This teacher also thinks that email is a bit easier than phone calls and that the agendas have been useful as a communication tool, when students remember to bring them to and from the B&GC. This teacher values collaboration with the B&GC and feels that it is imperative to helping her students and she would love for students who finished their homework to be able to use iReady or Imagine Learning. Finally, this teacher would also be happy to learn and work with an online resource as a way to communicate with the staff at the B&GC as long as she had the proper training.

A fourth/fifth grade AIS provider at NSS described his feelings about the B&GC and the extent to which he values communication/collaboration with the B&GC staff. This teacher believes that communication/collaboration is a two-way street and does not feel like he should put the time and effort in if they are not willing to come half-way. As an AIS provider, he feels that collaboration is so important, because his struggling kids need the extra help. However, this teacher does not know what his students do at the

Boys and Girls Club, except for Power Hour, but if the kids do not have homework he does not know how else the students are getting enrichment.

When asked about how he would like to increase collaboration and communication with the B&GC this teacher said he would be in favor of B&GC staff coming to NSS staff meetings to discuss what they are doing, what they need and want and just open the door for face to face communication. He feels that email is a bit impersonal and making a more personal connection would help break down some barriers. He also feels that because he does not know who these people are, he does not know who to talk to or what to talk to them about.

This teacher would love to see students at the B&GC practicing math fluency, and thinks that the school could help provide them with appropriate math and reading materials. He would like to know what they are using for online games, and if they match NSS games or enrichment services. He would also be more than happy to work with an online forum to make the B&GC program better for the kids and thinks it could be a better way to communicate with the staff. He is also seeing NSS pushing towards the Google Classroom route and thinks that it would be an easy solution.

Overall our findings indicate that current communication and collaboration with local schools and teachers occurs primarily over email, is somewhat limited and is often inconsistent over time. Teachers at West Street and North Street Schools value communication between themselves and the B&GC; however, they are often unsure who they can contact and how. Teachers also explained that they are more than willing to help out, either by visiting the Goodman Street location, offering suggestions for

academic games/practice, and/or communicating with staff through email, meetings, newsletters, or student agendas.

Recommendations

Through our conversations, observations, and meetings with the Boys and Girls Club, local elementary teachers, and HWS paid tutors, we have come up with various recommendations to increase communication and collaboration. These recommendations involve utilizing school events, online tools, meetings, informal communication strategies, and additional resources.

In order to improve communication and collaboration, B&GC staff and tutors should become more involved in the school community, especially in terms of attending school events. For example, West Street School holds PAWS night twice a week to encourage parents and students to come back to school between 3:15 to 7pm. “PAWS night activities focus on health and wellness, academic and technology connections, family connections and homework support” (<http://www.genevacsd.org>). Activities are set up around the school and provide opportunities for enrichment as well as for interactions to occur between students, teachers, and parents. If B&GC staff and tutors came to PAWS night, they would also be able to make these face-to-face connections with their students’ teachers. This might help the tutors know what the students are learning in school and how to work with content students might be struggling with.

Using online tools can also be helpful for teachers and tutors at the B&GC by allowing for more frequent and effective communication. Tools such as email, Google

Classroom, and/or Blog Spot can be used to foster the sharing of resources and information. For example, many teachers would like to hear from tutors about what happened at the B&GC, as it would allow them to easily keep track of what was happening in terms of behavior and academics. Similarly, tutors would like the chance to talk to teachers and to ask them questions about how to help the students academically, especially with regard to the Common Core curriculum. Teachers are willing to share this information with tutors, however, they believe that emails can become overwhelming quickly and that they would be happy to look into other forums for online communication.

Google Classroom is an online tool that may be one option for facilitating communication. It is a site where teachers can create a site specifically for uploading documents, instructions, and calendars for their students. Teachers shared they would be willing to use this, if properly trained. Some classrooms in West Street and North Street Schools have started piloting this online software and have already found success with this program. The school district is trying to explore this avenue further and would like to implement it into every classroom in the near future. Then, teachers could share their Google Classroom pages with the B&GC staff so they would be able to access school documents and have additional resources for when students do not have homework for Power Hour, or for when they finish their work early. These resources could range in difficulty to ensure that students are working with appropriate materials. Teachers and staff could also communicate about students' progress through Google Classroom. Google Classroom offers different folders for extra worksheets,

upcoming assignment information, and can include up to date information about the students' reading levels.

Blog Spot is another online tool, similar to Google Classroom, where teachers create a blog specific to their class and update it on a daily basis. In Blog Spot, teachers have a space for each subject area, including ELA, Math, Science, etc. Then, they can upload images and/or commentary about what students are currently working on in these areas and can link additional resources, including extra worksheets and online games for each subject. B&GC staff could utilize these blogs as a resource to allow them to become easily aware of anything important about school work/academic success of their students, and to give them access to appropriate additional and supplementary materials. This online tool also has a way for B&GC staff to communicate with teachers, by allowing them to leave comments on the blog. These comments/questions are then sent to the teachers directly for review, and then they are able to reply back. Creating Blog Spot blogs for each classroom would increase communication/collaboration between teachers and the B&GC, as it is an outlet for providing useful insight and information.

Another way to increase communication between teachers and B&GC staff is to have staff members or teachers write notes to one another about what happened at school and what the student should be working on. In the Geneva City School District (GCSD), students are provided with an agenda book at the beginning of the school year and are responsible for bringing them to and from school on a daily basis. Notes can be written in these agendas, by both teachers and B&GC staff. This simple form of

communication could ensure that both parties are aware and updated about students' behavior, work, and progress.

Designating a liaison between the local elementary schools, and Hobart and William Smith (HWS) would be a way to facilitate many of the lines of communication and to coordinate meetings with staff and teachers. These meetings could be online, through email, or in person. Additionally, the liaison at each elementary school could be held accountable for making sure that teachers are actively communicating student progress to the B&GC. Finally, an HWS paid tutor can act as a liaison by giving each tutor the necessary information they need to help students with their homework as well as relaying information to other tutors. A liaison position at Hobart and William Smith would also ensure the continuation of the program after students graduate or if they find it difficult to take on this responsibility in addition to those on campus.

The B&GC currently uses folders detailing information about each of the students that attends the Club; however, the Club might consider creating separate folders that include a sheet for the staff to fill out about student work, behavior, and progress at the B&GC for that week. These folders often contain sensitive information, and need to be stored away from the children. At the end of each week, these sheets would be placed into a central location, likely at the front desk, to be taken to West Street and North Street schools. A designated staff member, or liaison, could then take the folders to their respective schools and place them in the Main Office/teacher mailboxes. This would ensure that teachers are frequently updated on their students' performance at the B&GC.

A staff directory for both the B&GC and the schools may help eliminate confusion about who teachers and staff members could contact if they have any questions or are seeking collaboration. Through conversations with teachers at the elementary schools, we have found that teachers do not know who they should contact at the B&GC about their students. The student liaison would be in charge of creating these directories, which would need to be updated each year and would differ for each location. The directories could include relevant teacher emails, B&GC staff emails, website links, and phone numbers.

Many teachers create weekly/monthly newsletters for their classroom, if teachers could extend these newsletters to the B&GC, staff members would be notified about what topics/concepts they can focus on during Power Hour. These letters could be distributed, either through email or by hand, to help keep B&GC staff informed.

West Street and North Street Schools also conduct weekly grade level meetings. The B&GC staff could join these weekly meeting and could help the staff members have a better understanding of the students they are working with and how to best support them academically. These meetings are for teachers to discuss students in their classrooms, the curriculum, and any challenges they are facing. These meetings would also create a face-to-face meeting for the teachers and B&GC staff, and further promote working relationships. This could also be a great way to open lines of communication about what the students need academically and how to best serve them, both in school and at the B&GC.

Additionally, we found that many teachers are even willing to make visits to the B&GC to see how the students are doing during Power Hour, and to offer anything they can to help support them. This collaboration, of teachers coming to the B&GC, could help students recognize that this after-school program and their teachers are part of a team that is willing to work together to help them succeed. Additionally, this would be another way of creating an open line of communication between the tutors and the teachers about curriculum, academic performance, and behavior.

Our last few recommendations are specific to Power Hour, as we have found that B&GC tutors and staff feel they need more resources/supplementary materials for students during this time. Increased communication/collaboration with teachers would likely provide suggestions to address this issue. Geneva City School District already utilizes online programs such as iReady and Imagine Learning for Math and ELA. Students have their own login information for both sites, and if this information was shared with B&GC staff and kept in student folders, students could also use these programs at the B&GC to practice their skills. For this to occur effectively, Power Hour would need to be structured in a way that would allow for a rotation of students in and out of the computer room. Through our review of the literature, we found that recommended homework time is 10-20 minutes per grade in school, therefore, Power Hour rotation times should be specific to students' grade levels (Donaldson-Pressman, Jackson, & Pressman, 2014). Grouping students by grade level and having a set rotation schedule would ensure that all students at the B&GC would have time on the computers if they so choose.

Another activity that students could be doing during Power Hour is playing educational games. When talking with classroom teachers, we found that they believe practice is always helpful and that students should not always be working on mastering new material, especially after school. Instead, they should be working on fun and hands-on games that can work on social skills as well as allow them to practice previous academic skills. Some recommended online educational games could be Sumdog, FunBrain, and Free Rice. Sumdog and Funbrain are interactive games that range in grade level and subject area. Free Rice practices vocabulary, and when players correctly match words with their definitions, rice is given to the World Food Programme, which is then donated to developing countries. Finally, teachers suggested the use of board games such as Go Fish, Monopoly, Trivial Pursuit, and basic card games. These games could enhance students skills on counting, taking turns, and following directions.

In addition to educational games, there are many ways that B&GC can provide students with opportunities for skills practice in a variety of subject areas. During Power Hour, the B&GC could have books available for students, at and above their reading levels, so they are able to practice their literacy skills. Increasing the number of books and labeling them with levels would be helpful for both B&GC tutors and students. Whether students read individually or with a tutor, reading a book at or around their level would be most beneficial for their learning. In addition to reading, students could practice writing skills at the B&GC, especially if blank writing sheets and prompts were available for students to use during Power Hour. Teachers also mentioned that math

fact fluency is an essential skill for students to develop. As the B&GC is supplementary to school programming, many teachers would appreciate their students practicing these math skills there, and they could help provide/suggest appropriate materials for this to be able to occur.

Conclusion

Our project highlights the importance of increasing/improving communication and collaboration between Boys and Girls Club staff and local teachers. Our conversations with various stakeholders demonstrated the ways in which they value these strong relationships between their community and school organizations. We believe that communication and collaboration can be improved by utilizing various school events, online tools, meetings, and other informal communication strategies. We hope that these recommendations can be utilized by the Boys and Girls Club of Geneva and the Geneva City School District, to inform future decisions that they make regarding communication and collaboration.

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