

# Sand Hill Foundation

*As a collaborative evolves, so too must a grantmaker.*

## The Big Idea

Sand Hill Foundation's adaptability helped sustain a long-term funder-nonprofit collaborative even as leadership roles shifted, nonprofit capacities improved and funding partner staff turned over.

## The Story

Sand Hill Foundation, a regional funder in Silicon Valley, California, recognized that small one-off grants were not making the type of impact the foundation wanted. With the recession in full swing, nonprofits were experiencing significant financial challenges, and Sand Hill's executive director, Ash McNeely, began speaking with colleagues about their interest in collaborating to address capacity needs of local nonprofits. Within six months, three funders were on board to collectively support nonprofits serving young people during out-of-school time.

In 2010, Sand Hill and its partners launched the Silicon Valley Out-of-School-Time Collaborative with the joint goals of developing the organizational capacity of providers and improving the quality and effectiveness of out-of-school programming regionally. During the first three years of the collaborative — the capacity-building phase — four funders supported grantees with a mix of financial and nonfinancial supports. OSTC hosted five learning community meetings per year so that grantees could learn best practices from each other and from experts on a wide range of capacity-building topics, including scaling, finance, program design, program evaluation and staff management.

During the capacity-building phase, McNeely chaired the OSTC by coordinating meetings, gathering input from participants to set meeting agendas, establishing and managing consultant contracts (e.g., a facilitator and/or an evaluator), and soliciting and sustaining ongoing support from funding partners. At the end of each OSTC learning community meeting, participants reflected on its value by discussing aspects of the meeting that worked well and aspects to change for next time. The amount of time McNeely dedicated to supporting OSTC during this phase was significant — she went from 0.4 full-time employment to 0.8 full-time employment and hired a program associate so that she could allocate the proper amount of time to OSTC.

Elise Cutini, executive director of Silicon Valley Children's Fund, a grantee partner and current co-chair of OSTC, said, "At the beginning, Sand Hill was the lead agency — they set the vision for the collaborative and committed significant resources to support that vision. Sand Hill's

## Sand Hill Foundation

Sand Hill Foundation funds organizations that envision a better future for low-income individuals and families by providing local residents with pathways to economic, physical and environmental security.

TYPE OF FUNDER

### Family Foundation

GEOGRAPHY/ISSUE

From the Pacific Coast to San Francisco; health and opportunity, environment and sustainability, and small capital needs

TOTAL ASSETS

\$63 Million

ANNUAL GIVING

\$4.6 Million

NUMBER OF STAFF

4 part-time staff

WEBSITE:

[WWW.SANDHILLFOUNDATION.ORG](http://WWW.SANDHILLFOUNDATION.ORG)

executive director planned and designed the collaborative meetings, communicated with partners between meetings and handled meeting logistics. Committing such a significant amount of the executive director's time to this initiative signaled to the collaborative partners that Sand Hill was fully committed — which inspired other executive directors to also engage in the initiative at a high level.”

Sand Hill used a couple of strategies to create a collaborative relationship between OSTC funders and grantees. At the very start of the initiative, Sand Hill organized a kickoff meeting that immediately set the tone for OSTC members. Cutini recalled, “The group of executive directors did not know one another prior to the meeting, but we were instantly connected. We met at a beautiful setting, and the funders treated us very well from the outset. They presented a vision of us working and learning together. We quickly realized we either needed to commit to participating in the collaborative wholeheartedly or not participate at all. Nobody could send his or her second in command, like a chief operating officer or associate executive director. The funders showed that they were committed to helping us develop professionally by first asking us what skills we wanted to develop and then providing pertinent speakers and opportunities for us to share and learn from one another.”

The multiyear grants Sand Hill provided to grantees also demonstrated its commitment to shifting the paradigm between funders and grantees. “This type of funding signaled to grantees that we were going to be working in partnership with Sand Hill and the other funders. We were encouraged to feel comfortable communicating honestly about how things were going, and the

funders would accept the feedback because they were committed to learning. Multiyear funding is less about a funder assessing what can be accomplished in 12 months and determining whether or not to fund you again — it's more about engaging in a learning process and building a relationship with honesty and trust," Cutini said.

As the capacity-building phase came to an end, the funders offered a second phase of the initiative — supporting expanded nonprofit programming. The grantees chose to use the funding to develop their social-emotional learning efforts. At this time, McNeely's role began to shift. At the annual funder-only retreat, she raised the idea of transitioning the governance model from funder-driven to grantee-driven. They reached a consensus to make the shift because, ultimately, the funders envisioned grantees sustaining the collaborative without highly engaged funders. The grantees were, at this point, making all major decisions about how funding would be allocated at their organizations. As part of this new phase, the group decided that McNeely would transition to a participant and advisor while two new co-chair nonprofit leaders drove the collaborative forward.

A key element to the smooth leadership transition was Sand Hill's willingness and ability to let go of the helm. McNeely recalled, "Initially I had to think through not just letting go of leadership of the collaborative, but also letting go of the management of contracts with the facilitator and evaluator. And, most importantly, I had to let go of the budget. The grantees need to have control of the money, the people and the process. That's what it means to really lead a collaborative. I had to let go of all those pieces," McNeely said.

Another strategy that helped with the governance transition was building time into grantees' budgets for staff to participate in OSTC. Sand Hill and their funding partners recognized that participating in OSTC required staff time and provided funding to grantees to help offset personnel costs. Because co-chairs of the collaborative have more responsibilities and a higher level of engagement than other collaborative members, they receive a larger stipend.

In addition to the shift in leadership and governance, OSTC weathered significant staff turnover among both funding and nonprofit partners during its six years. Sand Hill Foundation's consistent support of and engagement with new individuals joining OSTC helped hold the collaborative together through many changes.

As the collaborative evolved, so too did the structure and tools needed to nurture its success. When the funders first shaped the new collaboration, they developed a charter. "A year into the initiative, we realized we needed some kind of a document that says how we operate, our rules of engagement, roles, leadership, etc. Creating the charter was a very helpful step toward sustaining the collaborative," said McNeely. The grantees did not have the same need for this type of structure, but the charter was valuable during the first phase for framing the goals of the initiative.

Facilitators also played an essential role in communication between meetings. After the governance transition, the executive director co-chairs realized that they did not have the time to do all the intergroup communications that had been done for the past three years. As a result,

they decided to outsource this work to trained facilitators. In the past year, they initiated a monthly newsletter for keeping collaborative members informed about upcoming meetings, evaluation deadlines and relevant happenings in the out-of-school-time field. They also created an online “work space” where all documents could be shared and easily accessed, and coordinated optional conference calls featuring deeper-dive learning topics.

Sand Hill Foundation has remained a committed player throughout the evolution of the OSTC. From recognizing the need for collaboration to convening funders and grantees to ultimately transitioning the work to nonprofit leaders, Sand Hill demonstrates what successful collaborations can look like from the start.

## LEARNING NOTES

### **+ Executive director participation demonstrates commitment.**

Sand Hill’s dedication to the collaboration was evidenced by the significant amount of time the executive director invested in supporting and coordinating the initiative. *What role, if any, does your executive director play, and what message does his/her level of participation signal to collaborative partners?*

### **+ Set a collaborative tone early on.**

Sand Hill explored potential partnerships with funders through one-on-one meetings and then conveyed to nonprofit executives its intention to engage in honest conversations, develop meaningful partnerships and support a flexible learning process. *What strategies will you use to set the right tone for a successful collaborative effort?*

### **+ Roles may change as the collaborative evolves.**

After several years at the helm, Sand Hill shifted the ownership of the collaborative. *What are the collaborative partners’ roles, and are they appropriate given what the group is trying to achieve? If not, what needs to change, and how will you make the change happen?*

### **+ Collaborative leaders can be grantees.**

Although Sand Hill and other funders initiated the Silicon Valley Out-of-School-Time Collaborative, nonprofit grantees eventually took on the leadership role: managing the budget, setting meeting agendas and overseeing consultants. *Do your collaborative leaders, especially those representing grantees, have proper decision-making authority regarding the budget and process?*