



NORTHFIELD HEALTHY COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

Making People the Priority

Northfield Healthy Community Initiative (HCI) helps to make Northfield a better place for kids to grow up. HCI is a convener at heart — listening to community to identify needs and opportunities, then pulling partners together to create inclusive solutions that support and empower young people.

“If we’re spending most of our time in our office, we’re not doing our jobs.”

Zach Pruitt
Northfield Healthy Community Initiative

INNOVATION

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HCI is built on collaboration and always asking itself, "Whose voice are we not hearing?" This approach has led to community support for many "outside of the box" ideas.

BREAKTHROUGH

HCI centers its work around inclusion, collaboration and resourcefulness. Every successful program in its growing portfolio grew from those values. HCI creates decision-making spaces that elevate community voice. This ensures that the resulting solutions reflect the community and have buy-in from a diverse group of partners.

THE PATH TO EASY

HCI finds lessons in its past work that inform future programs. That feedback loop of listening helps the organization stay flexible while staying focused on results for kids. Sometimes that means sacrificing a broader reach in favor of a deeper impact with the people they're able to serve.

LEADING WITH A NEW VOICE

HCI has placed more than 150 young people on boards and commissions across Northfield through its Youth on Boards initiative. After some early stumbles, HCI worked to improve its program design and get more proactive in preparing each student. This effort helped give more young people a voice in community decisions.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION



A mobile food shelf arrives in a neighborhood where Somali women collect and distribute meals to neighbors.

A community school is built where, regardless of socioeconomic background, youth and families come together for everything from academic support to Zumba dance classes. For the first time ever, a two-year degree program opens in Northfield, making college more accessible to low-income students.

There is no typical project at Northfield Healthy Community Initiative (HCI) because the 25-year-old organization evolves with community needs. Its efforts might be diverse, but its cause is singular: bringing community members together to put their best efforts and expertise toward making a positive impact on youth. There are, of course, many different ways to achieve this, but every piece of HCI's work is bound together by a single thread: the organization's dedication to keeping its fingers on the community pulses. By constantly checking vital signs, HCI continually adapts its work to better fit the people who live in Northfield. "If we're spending most of our time in our office, we're not doing our jobs," says Zach Pruitt, HCI's executive director.

"Our work has to be community-owned. It has to be owned by partners. That only happens when you have relationships with folks. That doesn't happen over email or in an office. It's about face time."

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CHARACTERISTIC **No 1**



HCI has built a team of people who live the work. It's more than just a job to HCI staff; it's a chance to make a tangible difference in the community. Zach's approach to problem-solving is a continuous commitment to improvement, which gives staff members permission to adapt and keep trying new things, even when something doesn't go the way they planned. "We're not the ideal job for everyone, and that's okay," says Zach. There's never a typical day at HCI, so it requires highly adaptable individuals who can meet challenges head-on, pivot quickly and be open to new ideas. "In recruiting, we look for people who can be flexible and intentionally hire staff who can live with nebulous structures," says Sandy Malecha, senior director at HCI. The organization seeks dynamic individuals who say yes to risk, new ideas and problem-solving.

Keeping track of the pulse of the community sometimes takes the form of a spreadsheet where staff members track the number of times they hear families in a particular program raise certain issues, such as housing or child care. Other times it means ending meetings with open-ended questions, such as, "What needs do you see?" or "What other work should we consider?" Community input is even built into staff reviews. Instead of just getting feedback from an HCI supervisor, employees also identify community partners who should weigh in on their work and how it's progressing. HCI's community-first mentality not only wins the organization partners but also helps HCI's team ensure the community continually finds value in its work.

That was the case with HCI's work on early-childhood issues. Staff members realized that neither they nor any of their partners had connections with in-home child care providers. To remedy that, HCI dedicated significant staff time to allow an HCI employee to sit down individually with nearly every in-home child care provider in the city to ask what they were frustrated about and how HCI or the community could better support them. Those conversations transformed the direction of HCI's early-childhood work moving forward.

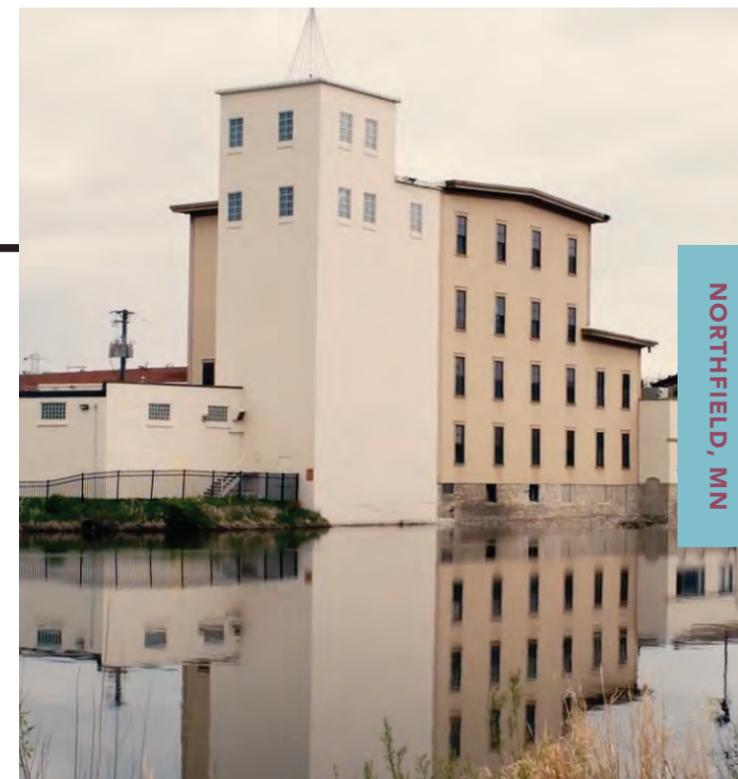
The organization had originally planned to pursue ways to connect in-home providers to existing training or resources in the area, but what it learned was that day care providers actually wanted access to curricula and community-led activities they could bring into their homes. In response, HCI partnered with one of the nation's leading educational providers to lower the cost of its curriculum so in-home providers in Northfield could afford to purchase it.

"When we start to hear something over and over again, it helps to guide our priorities," says Zach. "We're not always in a position to immediately act on them, but we have been really good at hearing those things, finding funding opportunities and making those links to make that happen."

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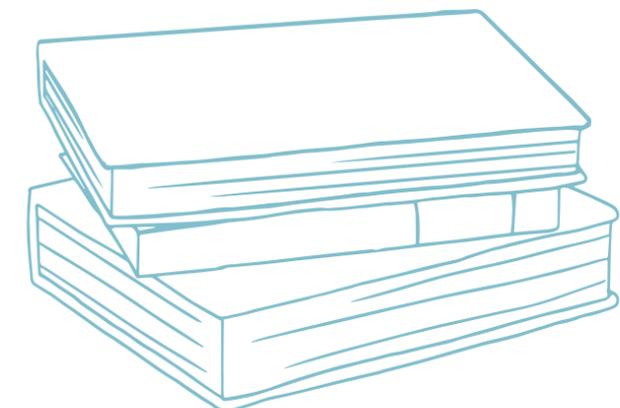
Zach Pruitt

Northfield Healthy Community Initiative



It also connected day care providers to the local public library and arts guild. Now, eight times a year, those organizations visit providers' homes and lead literacy and arts activities for the kids.

"There's a level of connectedness there," says Zach. "We repeatedly try to listen to community members across different levels so we're not locked into what we've always done."



THE PATH TO EASY

In 2015, the partners behind Tri-City Bridges to the Future, an HCI program that connects at-risk youth to resources that help them graduate from high school or find a career, found themselves at a standstill.

The tension started over paperwork requirements. Some partners contributed state or federal dollars to the program, while others had money from private investors. Each pool of money came with a different set of rules and regulations organizations needed to follow. Partners with government money often faced the strictest requirements. Students who wanted to qualify for that money needed the proper documentation — something that wasn't easy for all youth to find.

"We're working with immigrant families, kids on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA] and kids that don't fit a paperwork checklist," says Sandy Malecha, senior director at HCI. "These are kids who often have no idea where their birth certificates are."

On top of that, many of the youth didn't have access to their Social Security numbers, adding yet another barrier preventing those students from accessing federal funds through the Tri-City program.

"Those state and federal policies don't always serve kids the best. We create so many obstacles for people who actually need the resources," says Zach. "Systems are set up for fear that someone is going to cheat them of something. It's frustrating for the organization that has to implement [those requirements] and for partners that see the challenges it presents for youth."

The HCI team looked back at past work to find a good path forward. Years before the Tri-City program started, HCI and a different group of partners had launched a similar program called Tackling Obstacles and Raising College Hopes (TORCH). Early on, the partners planned to have a more formal registration process and list of core program pieces in which all students would participate. The partners quickly scrapped that approach when they realized a better way to support youth was to lower the barrier of entry and make it as easy as possible for students to get in.

CHARACTERISTIC No 2



After HCI added youth members to its board, the organization began to notice other areas in the community — such as funding — where decisions were made about young people without their input. That observation inspired HCI to start two pools of money controlled fully or partially by youth, including a grant program called Investing in Youth. The review committee in charge of those funds (made up of board members, youth and adults from the community) reads proposals on a monthly basis and picks 35 to 50 projects to fund a year. "That pool of money developed in large part because of the youth on our board," says Zach. "They noted there were great ideas in the community, including many from youth themselves, that could make a difference for young people and reach a wide swath of the community if they just had a little bit of money." In response, HCI repurposed funds the organization had planned to spend on communications and redirected it toward the grant program. Board members started to recognize that putting money into community projects was a more creative and effective way to get the word out about HCI compared with traditional marketing. "Youth changed the dynamic of our board," says Zach. "Meetings became more lively. They asked questions about why we did things the way we did and pointed out when some of our logic may have been outdated and slightly off the mark."



NORTHFIELD STUDENTS



NORTHFIELD STUDENT

The idea of minimal enrollment became a lens through which HCI began to view the rest of its work.

They also switched the program to an à la carte list of options, allowing youth to pick the parts of the program they wanted to be involved with, rather than requiring students to follow a preset path.

“We recognized that otherwise you have the potential to lose young people you don’t want to lose,” says Zach. “Our resources belong to the community and the people we serve. It may mean sometimes our outcomes aren’t as numerically impressive as other efforts, but that’s something we’re willing to live with. Hopefully we’re serving anyone who is interested in being involved in the program.”

The idea of minimal enrollment became a lens through which HCI began to view the rest of its work. With some of the state and federal funds tied to the Tri-City program, finding a way to make it easier for students to qualify for the program wasn’t as simple. The partners realized it would take years to change federal policy, so in the meantime they figured out a way to build a workaround system that would put youth first.

A big piece of that was finding a way to support young people throughout the registration process before they officially qualified for government funds. For many kids, that meant helping them get a driver’s license so they could drive to work or help out with younger siblings. To do that, finding flexible funding became an immediate priority. For programs with multiple financial streams, Zach says HCI has learned it’s critical to have a chunk of money with few strings attached that can help fill in gaps and tie different pieces of the program together. “In order to access bigger pools of money, there must be some funds that help in the cases where it doesn’t all line up quite yet,” he says.

With that flexible funding, the Tri-City partners were able to immediately demonstrate their commitment to the youth. In turn, this encouraged students to stick with the program through the more rigid parts of the application process, giving them the opportunity to eventually access bigger pools of funding that could go toward tuition support or rental assistance.

LEADING WITH A NEW VOICE

When Paul Wehling looked over the blueprints the city of Northfield’s planning commission was reviewing, he noticed a detail that stood out.

The proposed sidewalks in the new city plans didn’t connect to the charter school in town, even though many of its students walked or biked to school. At the time, Paul was one of the newest members of the commission, and the youngest — a junior at the very high school he brought to the attention of his fellow commission members.

“Adults had looked at these plans many times, and that idea hadn’t risen up,” says Zach. “But his new eyes and willingness to raise the question resulted in a different option.”

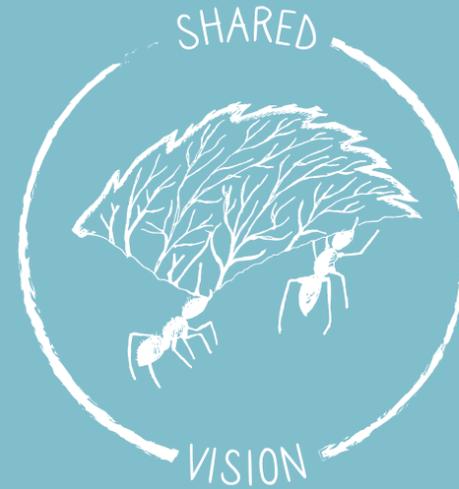
Since 2014, HCI has placed more than 150 youth, including Paul, on boards and commissions across the city through its Youth on Boards initiative. “If we’re going to make decisions that impact youth, youth should have a voice in that decision-making,” says Zach. For more than a decade, HCI led by example by placing up to four youth members on its board every

year, including one who always sat in the role of board co-chair. That internal commitment blossomed into an official program that has since grown to include 22 boards across the city of Northfield. “We realized we could potentially create a tipping point where it became the norm,” says Zach.

When the program first launched in 2014, HCI ran up against two challenges: making sure youth actually went to board meetings and ensuring that, when they got there, they understood the organizational culture well enough to feel confident participating. To stem attendance problems, HCI got better at finding ways to remind students when a board meeting was coming up via texts or social media. The organization even turned to snail mail, sending out postcard reminders in the hopes that parents would see the note, too, and give their kids an extra push to show up.

After each meeting, HCI required students to fill out an online form that asked them to list two or three major topics the board had discussed. The strategy not only kept youth accountable for their attendance

CHARACTERISTIC No 3



A few years ago, an organization approached HCI with an idea for an initiative it wanted to start on behalf of local immigrant families. Yet when HCI spoke with immigrant community members, it found many of them weren't interested in the same idea. "We spend a lot of time listening, and we don't assume we know the answer from the start," says Zach. "The last thing we want to do is generate efforts that don't actually meet needs in the community." Zach describes the process of those initial conversations as arrows going in many different directions. HCI facilitates discussions to find common goals and actionable initiatives that give residents a common direction toward which to work. Many times this can be as simple as shifting the priorities of projects already in the works — or, in the case of the initiative for immigrant families, sharing with potential partners when a new project idea doesn't align with the goals of a community.

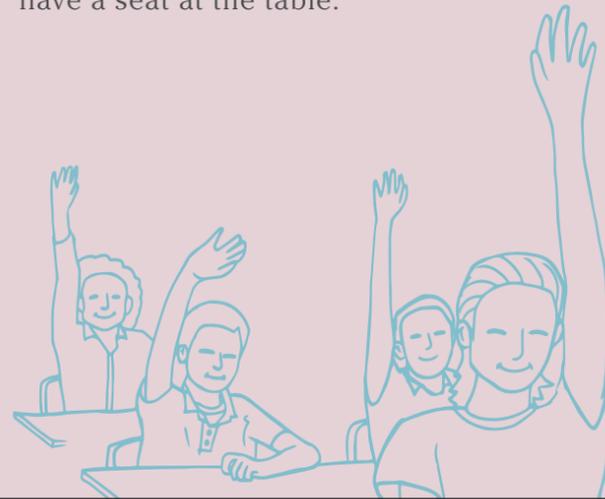
but also helped them synthesize and sort through the new information they learned. At the end of each form, there was a space where students could list any questions or frustrations they had. Their responses went straight to the Youth on Boards director, who checked in with each student from the program once or twice a month. The school district made staying connected easy by giving the program director an office at the local high school.

what they should wear to the proper etiquette of how to share opinions during meetings. On top of yearly orientations, the more than 80 students in the program meet once a month before school to listen to a speaker and debrief about their individual experiences.

"[This program] has allowed for a different kind of thought and diversity in these spaces. Oftentimes the same voices are heard over and over again, especially in smaller communities," says Zach. "This has been a way to help broaden that narrative and make sure young people have a seat at the table."

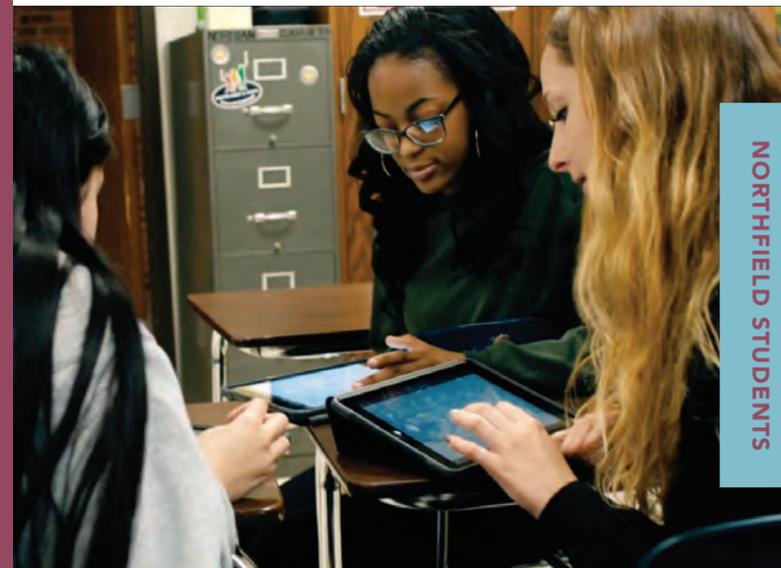
"All of these steps are us trying to be proactive before challenges emerge," says Zach. To make sure students felt prepared to join a board, HCI got better at designing the program's two different annual orientations around the questions and concerns students continually brought up. For the first orientation, youth attend a group meeting held at the end of the school year.

For the second, students meet one-on-one with the program director and get to ask about the specific culture and unwritten rules of how a board operates — from



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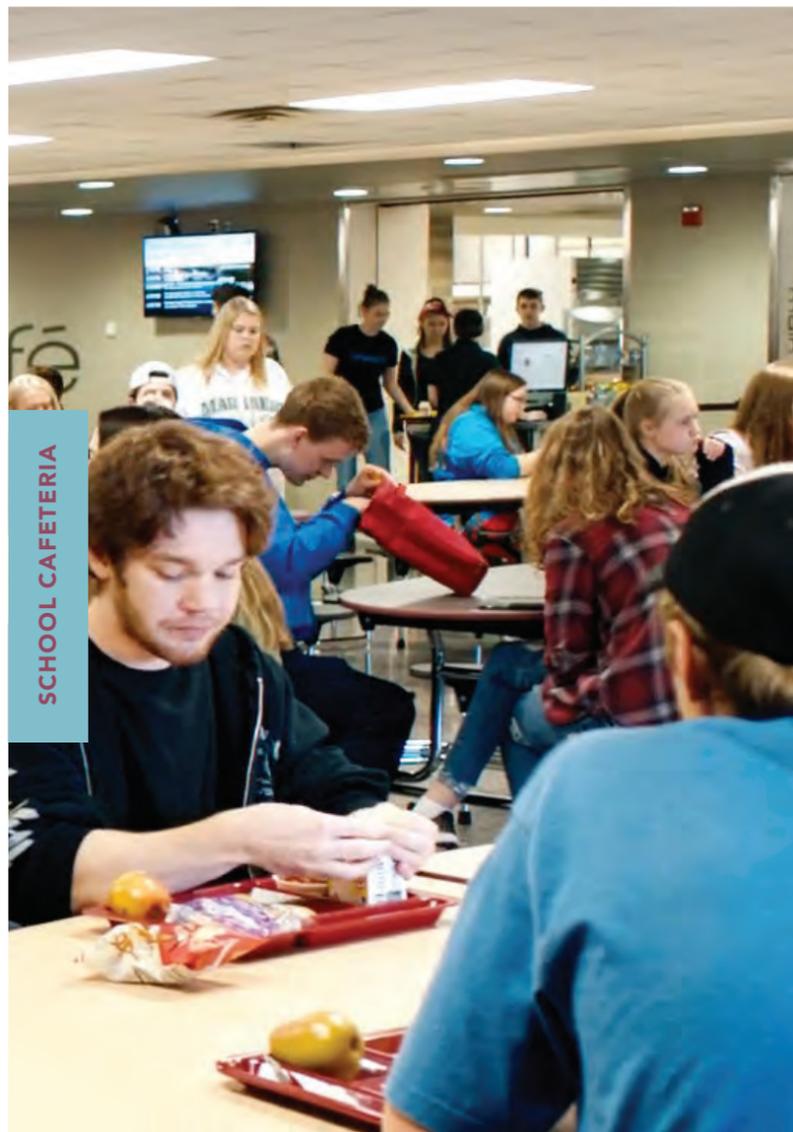
HCI TEAM MEMBERS



NORTHFIELD STUDENT



DOWNTOWN NORTHFIELD, MN



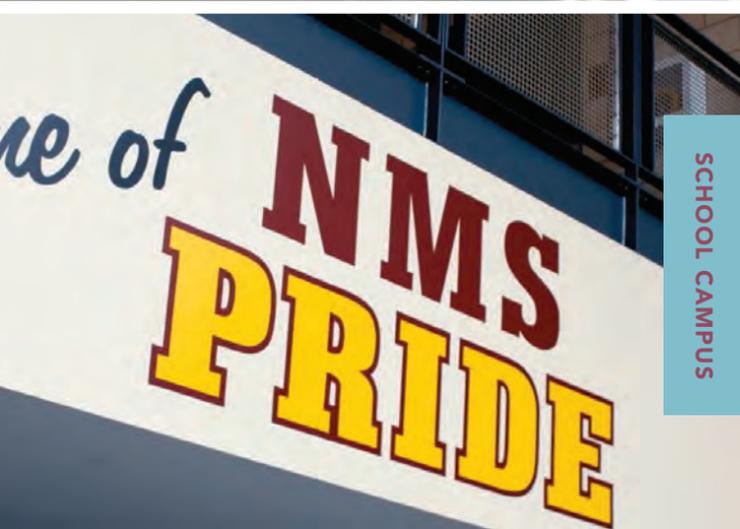
SCHOOL CAFETERIA



NORTHFIELD STUDENT



NORTHFIELD STUDENTS



SCHOOL CAMPUS



NORTHFIELD STUDENT