



# Project SOAR

## Closeout Site Visit Summary

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## Foreword

The ROSS for Education (ROSS-ED) Project SOAR grant program was an effort to improve access to higher education among high school students residing in public housing by hiring navigators to help them prepare and submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) that is required to obtain financial support to attend college and postsecondary trade schools. Nine grants were awarded. This report summarizes the interviews conducted by PD&R staff upon the closeout of the grants and outlines the critical factors that the local partners and HUD staff indicated as essential to successful program implementation and execution. The report also provides context for an upcoming quantitative analysis expected to show how navigator assistance affected FAFSA submission and college attendance rates.

The findings presented in this report are not only relevant to the ROSS for Education Project SOAR grants themselves but can be more broadly applied to future initiatives to support the self-sufficiency of HUD's youngest assisted residents.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Appleton', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Seth D. Appleton  
Assistant Secretary for Policy Development and Research  
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

## Acknowledgments

The authors and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Policy Development and Research (PD&R) division are grateful to all the people who shared their time and experience with the research team. Thank you especially to the HUD Staff, community partners, and PHA program staff who helped us learn about the setup and effects of the ROSS Project SOAR FAFSA program. We are grateful also for the participation of multiple PD&R staff serving on interview teams and for the guidance of PD&R Program Evaluation Division Director Carol Star.

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## Executive Summary

In 2017, Resident Opportunities and Self-Sufficiency (ROSS) for Education (ROSS-ED) Project SOAR (Students + Opportunities + Achievements = Results) grants were awarded to nine public housing authorities (PHAs) around the country. The grants funded educational navigators to work with young residents of public housing from age 15 to 20 years old and their families to submit the standard application for seeking financial aid from institutions of higher education, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The purpose was to increase the application rate and thus increase the chances that students would continue their education beyond high school.

The navigators provided wide-ranging guidance to students in their assigned public housing areas to prepare them to apply to postsecondary educational institutions—either college or trade schools—with the specific target of ensuring that each student completed and submitted the FAFSA. In the summer of 2019, researchers from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Policy Development and Research (PD&R) conducted qualitative interviews with navigators and PHA staff from all nine Project SOAR sites as part of the grant closeout activities to understand how the new program had worked. The results of those interviews are reported here. Moreover, the interviews will provide context for an analysis of FAFSA application rates from the public housing students and from a comparison group of students who did not receive navigator help. The quantitative analysis is expected by the end of the December 2020.

Key comments and suggestions that emerged from interviews with PHA program executives and ROSS navigators are addressed to two primary audiences.

For Congress/HUD:

- Navigating the FAFSA and college application process is complicated; parents and youth need support that they are not getting from schools; providing that support in the neighborhood, or partnering with the neighborhood school, may help students and parents
- A two-year grant is not enough time to set the program up, build trust with the families (FAFSA is very invasive in terms of family finances), and see the students through their final 2 years of high school and their first 2 years of college. Without a longer view, the program is less likely to succeed.
- Sufficient funding is needed to support full-time employment of at least one—ideally two—education navigators PLUS the costs of making the program work, including training for the navigators, food for events with parents and students, transportation and other incidentals, and SAT/ACT fees.
- The grant should not be limited to students only while they live in a development. Families move. Once a student is in the program, navigator support should continue.

For PHAs/subgrantees:

- Outreach. Door knocking is one of the most successful methods for outreach and student recruitment.
- Introduction meetings. Start as soon as the school year begins.
- Parents. Parental cooperation is essential. Engage parents early in the process with the students, and schedule meetings convenient for them and their students (after school and on the weekends). Also, find out if the parents need services as well.
- Location. Services and activities must be on-site in the housing development or at the school most of the students attend. Stable technology has to be available for successfully completing the FAFSA.
- Contact Information. Obtain as much contact information as possible from students and parents at intake because phone numbers, emails, and addresses may change quickly.
- College visits. These are an important part of the program. They allow youth a chance—some for the first time—to visualize a future beyond their housing. “If they can see it, they can be it.”
- Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) with schools. Partnerships with schools are important for getting the data needed. Places with school choice made this very difficult.
- Age versus grade of participant. Rather than specifying an age range for students, make the program grade based and focused on results in addition to FAFSA completion.

In addition, PHA staff suggested operating the grants on a parallel track with Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) case management and counseling for adults and helping heads of household prepare for the General Educational Development (GED) test. They also suggested bringing program alumni back to work at PHAs during summer, believing that having peer counselors model success could multiply the effect of the education navigator. One individual suggested that HUD could support the PHAs who want to use Section 3 to employ returning SOAR participants for the summer.

In conclusion, based on the qualitative evidenced gathered for this report, the ROSS SOAR program model was effective at providing education navigation services to children and their parents in public housing. PHA staff and counselors appreciated the help of a direct navigator who would work with their youth population directly rather than providing them with referrals or handing students off to a third-party service provider. The most striking commonality among the grantee sites is that they all wish to—or are finding ways to—continue to operate the program as best they can post-grant because they found it to be so valuable to their populations. Further, most wanted to not only continue the program but also expressed a desire to expand it to reach more youth. A few sites were successful at continuing the program beyond the grant period with non-federal resources.

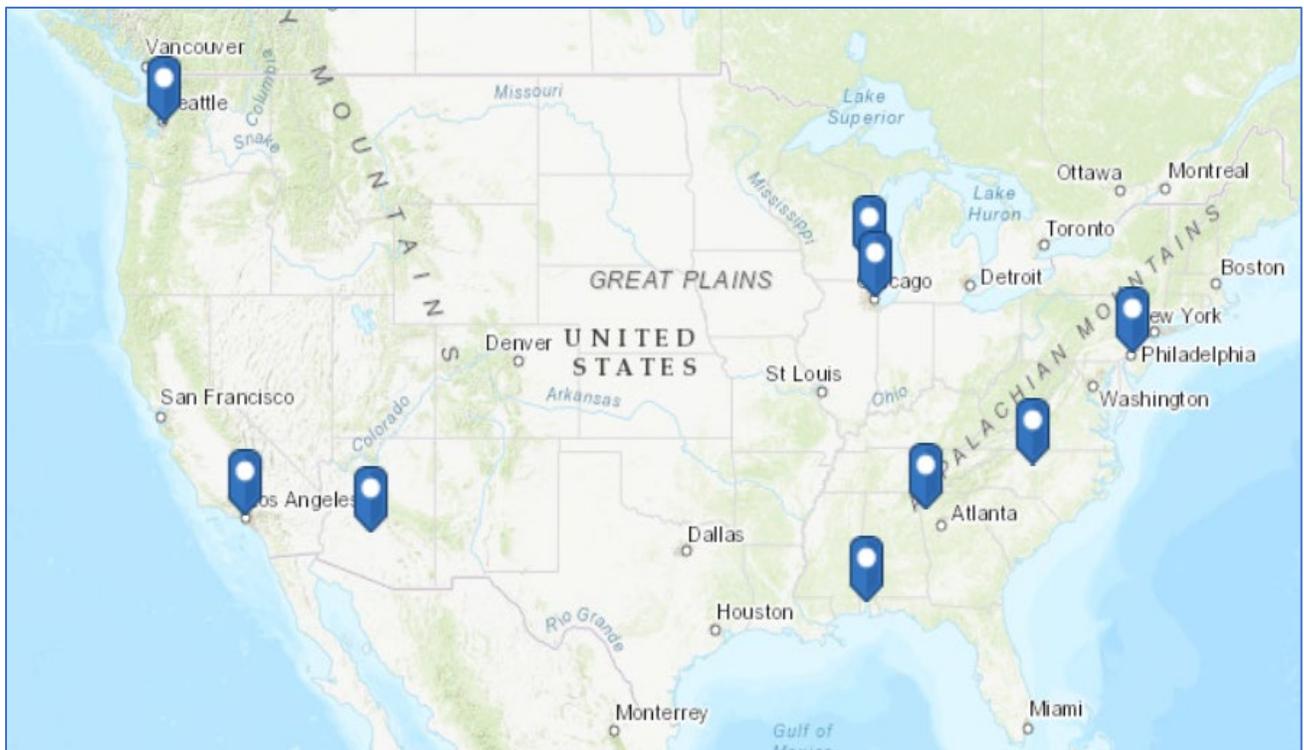
Overall, individuals communicated that this program was a good way to prepare students growing up in public housing toward a future of economic self-sufficiency. Some people observed across several sites that the effects radiated beyond the youth who had already participated, particularly those participating youth that were able to model and mentor to their younger siblings. Indeed, as one education navigator said, “The effects of the program will be realized after a few years as there is a switch in culture. For each family, if the oldest of four (kids) goes to college, s/he is providing a road map to his/her siblings on the future. Families with good experiences have younger siblings in line.”

## ROSS SOAR Program Background

The ROSS for Education (ROSS-ED) Project SOAR (Students + Opportunities + Achievements = Results) provided funding through grants to nine public housing authorities to hire educational navigators who would work with their youth from the ages of 15 to 20 years old and their families. The navigators provided extensive and wide-ranging guidance for students in their assigned public housing areas to prepare them to apply to postsecondary educational institutions—either colleges or trade schools—with the specific goal of ensuring that each student completed and submitted the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The nine sites received funding and started their work in 2017. The grants were set up to allow for random assignment of housing units within the larger PHAs; for smaller PHAs, all youth in the age range were eligible. This report presents qualitative observations. A separate quantitative report will be published by December of 2020.

Appendix A of this report contains detailed summaries of all the sites.

*ROSS SOAR PHAs*



### ROSS SOAR Caseloads

Site	# of Navigators	Total Students Eligible	Average Students per Navigator
Seattle Housing Authority	3 FT	1832	611
Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles	3 FT	1006	335
City of Phoenix Housing Department	3 FT	504	168
Chicago Housing Authority	3 FT	2551	850
Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee	1 PT	262	262
Northwest Georgia Housing Authority	1 PT	210	210
Housing Authority Prichard	1 FT	306	306
High Point Housing Authority	1 PT	202	202
Philadelphia Housing Authority	2 FT	472	236

FT = full time. PT = part time.

Note: Provisional data—Do not cite.

### Data Collection

Between June and September 2019, researchers with the Policy Development and Research division (PD&R) of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reviewed program documents and conducted structured interviews with PHA personnel and education navigators from all nine sites that participated in the ROSS SOAR Program. PD&R researchers collected grant applications, agreements, data from the HUD data-tracking tool, and materials developed by the education navigators for participants.

Interview guides were developed and used to collect information from PHA executives, SOAR program supervisors, and the education navigators hired with the grants. Interview questions explored how the program was launched in each PHA, what efforts and resources were dedicated to the project, and what the participants considered the most important components of the program. The interviewers also examined what worked in the grant activities, unexpected challenges and outcomes, and lessons learned and what it would take to keep such an effort going. Students and their families were not formally interviewed.

Interviewers recorded responses through notetaking or, in some cases, a digital recording device. Information from the interviews was discussed among the teams, and common themes were distilled using Excel and NVivo 12. Team members also completed site visit summaries to further capture findings.

In meeting the objectives of this assessment, the report addresses the following research questions concerning program experience, activities to date, and outlook:

- What were the overall program experiences and accomplishments, and what is the outlook for the future of the programs developed in the grantee PHAs?
- How did the administration of the program and the work of the navigators evolve?
- How did grantees use the data-tracking tool provided by HUD?
- What was the extent of the services provided by the navigators?
- What are the greatest realized benefits of program participation?
- What are the recommendations for improving the program structure?

This report examines critical factors that HUD staff and partners indicated were essential for grant implementation and execution along with challenges that hindered efforts to engage the youth, special components that enhanced community efforts, and recommendations that could be applied to future efforts by HUD.

## Observations

Although this analysis is descriptive, insights into the successes and challenges of the programs set up by the participating PHAs are distilled below in a summary of the key issues that emerged.

### Critical Factors for Success

#### Program Duration

Staff at almost all sites recommended a longer duration for the SOAR grant program for several reasons.

- At the start of the program, the first priority at all the sites was activating partners and hiring qualified candidates to fill the navigator roles, which took time. In those sites that offered only part-time positions, PHA staff often turned to known community members or volunteers and encouraged them to apply. In some cases, that approach worked out well; in others, hires who were a bad fit had to be replaced later or were let go, and navigator duties were added to responsibilities of existing staff.
- During the projects, grants managers felt that the lengthy time needed to staff up detracted from their ability to start affecting youth trajectories quickly, especially given the short timeframe of the grant. The navigators pointed out that gaining the trust of residents with whom they worked—both the students and their parents—took a long time.
- Toward the end of the grant timeframe, some staff members also expressed that “(navigators) can’t do their best work at the end when they are looking for another job.”<sup>1</sup> Even at sites that found ways to continue the SOAR program after the grant expiry date, the

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<sup>1</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee.

short duration of the grants meant that navigators did not know whether they would still have a job going forward until September 2019. Sites that had replaced navigators, in which the PHA staff had to spend additional time ramping up and the new navigators needed time to gain familiarity and trust with the program participants, also had less time for the actual work of providing the youth guidance.

- The short duration of the program also led some respondents to suggest that program pilots or demonstrations in the future working with young students in PHAs run for a minimum of four years so “you can grab them as high school freshmen and see them all the way through.”
- Many navigators also made the point that those students going away to school for the first time needed first-year transition support and would likely also need reminding to recertify their FAFSA in the ensuing years while they remain in school. A longer program timeline would make that situation possible.
- Finally, some PHA staff suggested that future grantees be mindful not to end the grant before the school year ends because in most states, “The kids are in school ‘til June, and they have to fill out a lot of forms before school starts up in August.”<sup>2</sup> To cope with that circumstance and any delays that may have resulted from the temporary and partial shutdown of the federal government at the end of 2018 and beginning of 2019, several sites obtained no-cost extensions to carry their work through September 2019 before closing out the grant.

#### Navigator Workload

Navigator workload was mentioned as a factor in every site, and staff expressed that a minimum of one full-time navigator was key.

- In no instance did we find a supposed part-time navigator who worked only part-time hours. Instead, we found in the smaller PHAs that the part-time navigators went above and beyond to serve the youth as a matter of course. In the two rural southern PHAs especially, the part-time navigators played multiple roles as evidenced in one case where that individual facilitated both as a school board member and a PHA board member. Those intertwined relationships were leveraged by the navigators to align what the local schools and the PHAs were trying to accomplish with the mission of the SOAR program.
- Reliance on part-time navigators, wearing multiple facilitator hats and working extended, unpaid hours, established a misperception of “adequate” staffing needs in the program even while, importantly, created an overall strong SOAR program.
- Staff at multiple sites that had a single navigator expressed the opinion that more candidates for the education navigator positions and less navigator turnover would have been possible had a full-time position been offered or a position with a backup navigator. Staff at some sites that had a single navigator expressed the opinion that more candidates for the education navigator positions and less navigator turnover would have been possible had a full-time position or a position with a backup navigator been offered.

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<sup>2</sup> Northwest Georgia Housing Authority.

- Youth who engaged in the education navigation process needed support, and staff gave examples of students who would have fallen through the cracks had the navigator become ill or moved on. Staff also believed that more than one navigator was needed. Given the time investment to gain trust, navigators repeatedly worried about what would happen to “their kids” should a fallback navigator not be available to help if they became ill or unavailable for other reasons.

### Activities and Best Practices

Below we describe the methods used for reaching students and what worked best for the PHAs. Navigators developed several strategies early on to establish a presence within the PHA for themselves and for the SOAR program. Outreach started with multiple tactics, including advertising the program via fliers included with the rent mailings; posting information around the PHA offices, where they would be seen by all who came in to recertify for housing; going door to door, knocking and leaving door hangers and fliers; and inviting students and families to a kickoff event, such as a cookout or a pizza party. Door knocking and talking to residents directly was found to be much more effective at all sites than mailings or fliers.

- After the kickoff activities, small meetings were more effective for student engagement, FAFSA completion, and teaching participants about other requirements for college applications, such as taking the SATs and assembling and sending transcript data and teacher recommendations for students.
- Grantees learned that involving parents early in the process was the best way to gain access to the youth, and many sites organized parent orientation sessions to explain the program and get buy-in.
- Because of the school and work commitments of students and their families, the navigators often adjusted their schedule to work from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. All of them also scheduled occasional weekend time and posted office hours.

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*SOAR Voices: “After 5 [PM] the older students can start coming in, before that maybe the younger students. Most older kids have to help take care of their younger siblings, feed them, do homework with them, and finally after taking care of all that they can start with their schoolwork. We had to accommodate that.”—Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee*

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### Locations

Staff at several PHAs found that despite offers of space from partners or other sites, for the program to be successful at reaching youth, facilities had to be on site at the PHAs. That

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*“At first the education navigators spent most of their time at College Depot, in the Phoenix public library. They learned that the SOAR youth would not come to them. So now they spend most of their time on site at the housing sites.”—Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee*

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condition was more difficult in scattered site housing situations where an easily accessible central location was not available. Staff at PHAs that lacked infrastructure thought they needed better partners, computer labs, and cooperation from community centers.<sup>3</sup> Where those spaces were available but were not at the housing sites, PHA staff had to find money for transport cards or bus passes for the students. In any event, those sites lacking stable spaces with working technology struggled at times.

When partnerships with high schools resulted in offers of space to meet with students, the program was more successful.<sup>4</sup>

### Participant Engagement

- Staff at several sites mentioned that once a student first entered the program, it was advantageous to get as much information as possible on intake and create at least a rudimentary action plan with the student in case the student was subsequently hard to find. Navigators sometimes had difficulty getting good contact information for program-eligible youth because cell phone numbers often changed and move-outs occurred. A quantitative report on the program will be published in August 2020, and it may address the percentage of eligible population that was engaged in the program.
- Two navigators created a short Google survey to gather information from both students and parents to help them understand the student's starting point. The survey included a link for the parents to information on college or postsecondary opportunities.
- Providing exposure to life beyond high school was powerful. All navigators who spoke about college visits thought they were effective in helping SOAR youth envision a future path in education. In the words of one navigator, "They can't be what they cannot see." Some navigators worked hard to arrange college tours or help students participate in local college fairs. Others arranged Professional Days, for which they brought in professionals to talk about their jobs and activities.

Most sites mentioned providing participation incentives. Rather than presenting one big reward at FAFSA completion or graduation, navigators believed that incentivizing and celebrating the incremental steps was important.

- Some navigators were able to turn to their PHA boards or community partners to provide resources. Once students engaged with the SOAR activities, progressive incentives were found to be helpful in getting them to achieve program milestones.
- Several sites combined tablet or phone giveaways with the requirement to attend events and provide information. This served as a win-win scenario in that it was a strong incentive for students to keep up with the SOAR activities while giving the navigator solid contact information, which often was not available from the PHAs.

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<sup>3</sup> Philadelphia Housing Authority.

<sup>4</sup> Northwest Georgia Housing Authority.

- In one case, the navigator was able to get passes from the local chamber of commerce to the popular county fair for any SOAR youth who provided contact information and signed an MOU to share their grades from school with the navigator.
- Not all incentives were financial. One navigator made a point to meet the school bus several days a week to high-five the kids who mentioned something they had learned. Others celebrated small victories with congratulatory texts for a passed test or a raised grade. Many navigators also went into their own pockets for the occasional ice cream party or pizza snack.
- The SOAR activities themselves were also designed as incentives. One of the well-received programs designed by a navigator was called Hope Certificates. During vacations or over summers, the navigator would arrange for trainings from community partners—such as local YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, or the local police department—and provide certificates (for example, CPR certification or babysitting certificates) for short-term immediate wins tied to education.

Other activities related to engaging SOAR participants included providing financial literacy programs.

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*“When we first started with the personal finance workshops, kids would say, “Why I need this?! I don’t have any money!?” but by the end [of the program] they would understand more about saving and spending and had a healthier relationship with the topic. They got certificates at the end of it, and one student used her certificate of completion to get a job working at the local bank.”—Navigator, Philadelphia Housing Authority*

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Successful activities covered the financial literacy requirements of the program and met the students where they were or in ways they wanted to get there. One navigator designed an event called “paint with a twist,” in which the students painted a dollar sign and wrote on the walls about what the money meant to them.

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*“They drew a dollar sign, and while they’re painting...they’re talking about money for college and scholarships and things like that. I...saw one where it was bound by a chain. So it was either this the money for college they had to obtain, or this was holding them back is not having the money. Or (they drew it surrounded by) blood because those that had money got it through drugs....It was a starting place for the conversation. And for me to understand why they didn’t want to talk about money right off.”—Navigator, Philadelphia Housing Authority*

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Financial education was not always successful as a hook into the program. Philadelphia, especially, reported lackluster results when their match partners, a local bank, provided a talk about mortgages, but “It was what the match partners were offering, so we put it out there.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Philadelphia Housing Authority.



## Challenges and Barriers

Below are some of the barriers or challenges most often mentioned by the sites.

### Geographic Dispersion

Some grant sites ran into major challenges due to the wide geographic dispersion of the target population, either in terms of scattered site housing or when the PHA youth attended several schools in the area. Navigators had difficulty building a cohort model in areas that were district-less or that offered school choice.

- The program seemed to be more effective in places where youth from the PHA went to a limited number of schools. The navigators were better able to establish connections with the school guidance counselors and gain access to online gradebooks.
- In sites with PHA youth concentrated in only a few schools, navigators were very successful in establishing partnerships with guidance counselors, principals, or other school staff. Navigators could arrange for MOUs giving them accounts on the school's online gradebook systems (such as PowerSchool or Canvas), which allowed them to more easily look over SOAR students' progress and offer advice once the youth gave permission for their information to be shared.
- In sites in Chicago, Phoenix, Philadelphia, and Milwaukee, where SOAR-eligible PHA youth attended many different schools, the navigators were unable to establish good partnerships with school guidance departments. In sites with school choice schools or scattered site housing, navigators stated that students kept more to themselves or did not interact with each other either at home or at school, which made building a cohort difficult.

### Hidden Costs

- PHAs asked that HUD "be up-front with the PHAs about how much they are going to have to put in to make the program work." The grant pays only for the navigator salaries, but other expenses were necessary to run the program successfully. Those expenses included supervising the navigators, providing transportation for youth to service sites, and providing training for navigators.
- Among the most cited hidden costs were—
  - Food for the youth.
  - Transportation for students to and from programs and college visits.
  - Money for ACT/SAT preparation.
  - Prizes and materials for workshops and more funds for youth who participated.
- Many PHAs wished that the funds would help provide for administrative costs and materials.

### Parental Concerns

In some cases, navigators described the goals of parents and children as being in conflict. The prospect of the children becoming more economically self-sufficient caused the parents to fear losing their support system. Often, older children help with childcare, bring added income into the household, serve as interpreters, or provide emotional and other support to parents. Fear

of the unknown was also be a factor if neither the parents nor the youth knew of anyone who had left their area before.

Some parents also worried that a child's departure to school would negatively affect their benefits, and in most sites, that is a valid concern. PHAs could reduce the size of a housing unit or increase the size of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) when the official household size was reduced, leaving the family short of room if the student returns during the summer or drops out before program completion.

Finally, parents were afraid that information provided for the FAFSA could be abused—a common rumor was that the FAFSA could be used by anyone to get a loan or that the FAFSA itself is a loan application. This made parents more reticent to share the needed data to complete the FAFSA form. Even knowing that the FAFSA uses the same information the residents have already provided to the housing authority did little to quell those fears.

#### HUD Rules

At times, PHAs bristled with the limitation of the ROSS SOAR program to residents of public housing units only or, in the case of experimental sites, to randomly selected Asset Management Project (AMPs) within PHAs. Navigators perceived that when the navigation service was finally trusted and valued, housing residents who could move up to Section 8 units felt penalized because their student would not be able to continue getting help from the navigators (in many cases, the navigators continued the help anyway).

A recurrent theme was that PHAs thought that the program should be expanded beyond just public housing so as not to discourage “moving up and out”. One PHA director mentioned that they were resisting converting to 100 percent Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) because then they would not be eligible for funding for activities like ROSS SOAR.

Finally, the experimental design created control groups of youth who would not be served in larger PHAs; those PHAs that had randomized selection for participants disliked that situation. Respondents believed that the random selection was done without input from the sites and resulted in selections of populations that were difficult to manage. For example, one site found that intervention and control sites were across the street from each other, which made it difficult to not serve youth who were not in the experiment group when their friends next door received that service. Another site selected to be an AMP was a senior home; another was housing where, by the time the experimental sites were selected, many of the youth had aged out, making it difficult to reach the program goals of high FAFSA completion rates. Grantees hoped that in the future, experiments could take into consideration proximity of the units and give more thought to the population of the selected housing units.

## Recommendations

Recommendations and ideas expressed for expanding and extending the program are summarized below.

- Sites wanted funding to get SOAR program alumni to come back to talk to the younger participants or work as education navigators or interns themselves. Staff thought that “This population can’t afford to work in unpaid internships,” but they represent a source of valuable work for the programs.
- PHA executives hoped to operate the ROSS SOAR program on a parallel track with the FSS (Family Self Sufficiency training) and GED programs offered to the heads of households.
- Program administrators disagreed about how the age range of students’ eligibility for program participation should be delineated. Some liked the 15-to-20-year range because they could still work with recent graduates and get them back onto an educational track or continue to work with them when they went to their training or postsecondary schooling. Others wanted to stick specifically to grades (freshmen through seniors in high school.) Perhaps program administrators could allow for both or either, depending on their populations.
- Program administrators urged a longer time horizon for future programs so that they could hire solid navigators, build trust, and be able to provide post-enrollment support for participants who do go on to postsecondary education to encourage their persistence.

## Budget-Related Items

- PHAs need to budget for student transport, bus passes, and food for activities and on college visits. Some PHAs were able to use their discretionary funds to pay for those activities, but some wished they had better understood the full array of costs when writing their grant applications.
- Navigators and PHA staff wanted help obtaining ACT and SAT waivers to enable their participant youth to take the test more than once to try to get their score up without paying the fee each time. Others wished to also offer access to test-prep courses.
- A minimum of one full-time navigator is necessary. Some respondents strongly believed that one person cannot be the sole navigator, and backup has to be available or else “their students” could fall through the cracks.

## Comments from the Navigator Staff

- Navigators would like professional development opportunities and training in trauma-informed care. Navigators requested their desire to attend the National College Access Network conference as an example of other training, expressing excitement that last year, the conference included a session on how to connect with housing programs to help kids go to college.
- Navigators missed the peer-to-peer administrative calls, which began between navigators and HUD across the ROSS SOAR sites but then stopped halfway through the

program. Those calls, although informal meetings, were seen as a good forum for sharing strategies, knowledge, and ideas.

- Navigators also asked for more web-based communications with other SOAR navigators and communication between public housing staff among and between sites.
- Some of the improvements requested by program staff were relatively low cost with an anticipated high impact—for example, additional funding for the provision of transportation for students to visit campus and for snacks and other food items during meetings and events with navigators because access to food often is a serious issue for these youth.
- Larger issues expressed were that the timeframe for the program was too short. Gaining the trust of the residents—both parents and students—and getting the work off the ground took longer period than expected. PHA staff believed that having one or even two full-time navigators to do this work would be most effective.
- The most striking commonality among the sites is that they all expressed a desire to or are finding ways to continue to operate the program as best they can post-grant because they found it to be so valuable to their residents. Most wanted to expand the program to reach more youth, as well. Staff at many sites expressed that this program was a good way to help young people growing up in public housing to look toward a future of self-sufficiency. Many staff also expressed a feeling that the effects of the program were already radiating outward, beyond the youth who had participated to their younger siblings and other younger children in the community.

## Conclusions

This research effort was designed to examine and understand more about whether the ROSS SOAR program model was effective at providing education navigation services to children in public housing. On the ground, from talking to program participants and staff, we find that the answer is yes. Respondents appreciated having a direct navigator who would work with their youth population rather than having another coordinator hand them off. As with a teacher or a guidance counselor, the most compelling outcomes seemed to be with the most active navigators who walked with youth through their education journeys.

The most striking commonality among the sites is that they all wish to or are finding ways to continue the program as best they can post-grant because they found it to be so valuable to their populations. Most PHA staff wanted to expand the program to reach more youth, as well.

In one case, now that the SOAR grant is ending, the education navigators are being transitioned to the Choice Neighborhood grant and will continue their work but only with the youth in the Choice Neighborhood sites. Another PHA is requesting funding for two permanent college navigators from their board going forward. Some PHA executives appreciated the ROSS SOAR program more than other programs they ran, such as FSS.

Nonetheless, if the only definition of success is the number of FAFSAs completed or number of youths continuing to college, then it is too early to tell how successful the program was. The structure of this report did not allow for relating individual examples of success, such as the student in Los Angeles who was guided through her offer letter by a navigator and only then understood she was getting a full free ride to Yale. Or the youth whose navigator accompanied

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*“I wish [HUD] would put more money in project SOAR and less money in FSS. We’ve given all these people all this money that they escrow, and when it’s done, they say okay, I’m going to buy me a car, or whatever, without any of them moving out of public housing.”* Program Staff, Northwest Georgia Housing Authority.

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her to a ceremony to receive a scholarship and award because she had never been out of her hometown overnight before. Some thought the program should be in all housing authorities because we “have to help these families move forward.”

What was most often expressed was that this program was a good way to focus those growing up in public housing toward looking at a future of self-sufficiency. PHA staff also believed that the effects were going beyond the youth who had already participated.

As one education navigator said, “The effects of the program will be realized after a few years as there is a switch in culture. For each family, if the oldest of four (kids) goes to college, s/he is providing a road map to his/her siblings on the future. Families with good experiences have younger siblings in line.” This sentiment was echoed in several sites.

## Appendix: ROSS SOAR Site Summaries

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## Seattle Housing Authority

### Background

Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) is a Moving to Work authority managing about 8,000 units. One in 10 public school students in Seattle lives in SHA-supported housing.

SHA already has a lot of education-focused efforts and many initiatives aimed at teens, including partners who offer college guidance and support. The SOAR grant dovetailed with education programming targeting younger kids that SHA offers; it filled a gap. Project SOAR provides dedicated resources to focus on steps to postsecondary education, and it complements existing tutoring programs. In contrast to other available college-support programs, SOAR allows for reaching out to individual students at home and at school. It also offers the chance to develop individualized approaches and guidance and relationships with parents of target-age youth.

Seattle is an experimental site; therefore, only some of the projects were selected to receive services.

### General Educational Environment

- Partnership with Seattle Public Schools to provide services to SHA students, such as strategies to support students and families who have suffered traumatic experiences; kindergarten registration held at SHA communities.
- An activity program that allows students to prepare for obtaining a high school diploma and an associate degree (AA).

### ROSS SOAR Program Highlights

3 full-time (40 hours/week) navigators  
Diverse population

1,832 students

Connecting expectation to chosen careers (for example, becoming a doctor or an engineer)

Navigate the school system and requirements  
Hiring good navigators (a former SHA and first-generation college graduate)

Going door-to-door was useful

### Barriers

Perception of whether college is needed

Cultural sensitivities associated with large immigrant population (for example, the belief that girls do not need to go to college)

Cultural gap between families and school staff

Trust—not wanting to provide SSN and tax returns

Kids needed at home to help the family

Lack of experience, bad planning, difficulty translating their current situation into essay topics

Negative peer pressure

Lessons learned

Parents do not understand the steps—FAFSA, admissions, accepting financial aid, fees to reserve dorm

Parent buy-in is important

Engage with youth on items other than FAFSA

Two years is too short; building trust takes time

More navigators are needed

Culturally aware outreach worked well—coffee time with Ethiopian parents, for example

Bring school administrative staff to community events

Funds needed for SAT preparation, food at events, incentives, interpreters

Wrap-around services (such as food insecurity)

Allow for SOAR services for all SHA residents

## Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles

### Background

The Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) currently serves 6,941 households in public housing. Overall, HACLA has 24,296 children ages 6 to 17 living in HACLA-assisted units (section 8, or public housing). Project SOAR was operated as part of Kids Progress Inc. (KPI), a nonprofit run and operated by HACLA. KPI's goal is to empower children living in HACLA communities to build a viable, stable future and become self-sufficient, independent adults.

HACLA contracted the implementation and daily operation of Project SOAR to Southern California (SoCAL) College Access Network (CAN) via its member organization College Access Plan (CAP). The three navigators are employees of SoCAL CAN, not the PHA, and they administer their services in schools. The site-based program was interesting because it has not been tried in Southern California before. SoCAL staff had to learn about housing and were able to contact the middle, unknown kids (those that go directly home from school).

This was an experiment site, meaning that navigators provided their services to selected projects. The projects selected were Avalon Garden, Gonzague Village, Nickerson, Ramona Gardens, and William Meade.

### General Educational Environment

- School counselors are overworked and focus on high achievers.
- Dropout rates are high after the 8th grade (about 37 percent).
- Boys are hard to engage after middle school.
- Students have a choice; many go to charter schools.
- Many people misunderstand how high school grades affect high school graduation and college access in California. For example, a D in freshman or sophomore year might allow a student to graduate from high school but cannot get one into a California college.

### Program Highlights

Three full-time (40 hours/week) navigators—not employees of the PHA but SoCAL CAN	Recruitment—Door-to-door; via residential council meetings
Drop-in model—worked well because of word of mouth	One-on-one counseling, writing essays, homework, quizzes, test prep, financial budgeting, FAFSA completion for older students
Used community rooms, PHA library, computer lab	Younger students—homework help, long-range planning
Navigators adjusted work schedule to accommodate students	Plans developed for the appropriate age group

### Barriers

Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles Profile

Gang presence and ties to gangs

Lack of access to Public and Indian Housing (PIH) Information Center (PIC) data (navigators were contractors)

Implementation issues in the beginning caused by leadership change at the PHA

Computers were too slow; firewall blocked the FAFSA website; Google drive stopped working (many students cannot afford Microsoft Word)

Funding needed for food for activities and college trips

Funding needed for emergencies, unexpected expenses.

Lessons learned

Need for dedicated space to work and to meet

Need for functioning computers with the necessary software and internet access

Need for MOU—with the PHA detailing needed items (space, computers, access to data)

Let families know about the program during annual housing recertification

Age requirement not ideal; use grades instead

Start with lower grades—middle school

Need money for wraparound services

Need to hire educational specialist who can effectively navigate the educational system; important to provide accurate information.

Bring back university partnership funds

## City of Phoenix Housing Department

### Background

The City of Phoenix Housing Department provides public housing, Section 8 housing vouchers, affordable rental apartments, and single-family homes to more than 35,000 area residents. The Project SOAR grant was administered under the Housing Service Coordination, Support Services division. In addition to Project SOAR, the division administers Family Self-Sufficiency, Senior Services, Caseworker Services, and Jobs Plus programs. The housing authority also has a Choice Neighborhoods grant, which they will use to transition their navigators to neighborhoods receiving that grant once the SOAR grant has ended.

The program has a partnership with College Depot (a program of the Phoenix Public Library). College Depot provides training and resources related to postsecondary education and college enrollment. The Project SOAR navigators were hired by College Depot. The project used MSW (Master of Social Work) interns each semester and trained them to do what the navigators did. This was not an experimental site; navigators provided services to all students ages 15 to 20.

### General Educational Environment

- Strong community services are available via College Depot.
- They do not have an MOU with high schools.
- The PHA does not have scholarships.

### Program Highlights

3 full-time (40 hours/week) navigators	504 students
Knock-talk—door-to-door outreach	Texting (with specific questions), emailing, flyers
Field trips	Office hours on site
Referring parents and kids to needed resources (food boxes, free dental care, counseling, JobPlus, etc.)	Referring parents and students to College Depot events
Financial literacy	Post-acceptance assistance
Outreach to parents (work with the whole family)	Help navigate the college system

### Barriers

Bilingual services would have been better; kids speak English, but parents often do not	Need funds for snacks, college visits, lunch
Too short a time period to establish trust with the students	Social context need to understand the needs of the families
Need for the Department of Education to address language and cultural issues	Transportation—sprawling city

## City of Phoenix Housing Department Profile

### Lessons learned

Work with the whole family and get them on board, understand the other needs  
Engage kids younger  
Take field trips

Employ bilingual staff

Navigators need to be on site

Develop strong partnerships with a school

## Chicago Housing Authority

### Background

The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) provides homes to more than 63,000 households. CHA is a Moving to Work (MTW) public housing authority, which allows them some flexibility with their funding and program administration and is, in addition, a RAD (Rental Assistance Demonstration) site. CHA's Resident Service Division works with a broad range of partners to achieve four goals: academic achievement, increasing earning power, fostering economic independence, and enhancing stability and quality of life (focused on seniors and their well-being). Project SOAR was a service provided through their resident services.

At this site, the ROSS SOAR navigators are called Education Program Specialists (EPSs). They provided one-on-one coaching to age-eligible youth. Per their website, the Education Program Specialists were there to help residents ages 14 to 20 years old explore available college or postsecondary education programs, complete applications (college admission, program, and scholarship), save money, and persist to graduation.

For the purposes of the ROSS SOAR evaluation, Chicago was selected as an experimental site, meaning that only some of the Asset Management Project (AMPs) were selected for services. Selected projects were ABLA, Altgeld Gardens, Cabrini Area, City Gardens, Dearborn Homes, Lawndale & Bridgeport, Oakwood Shores, Lake Park, Horner, Scattered Sites, Trumbull Park Homes, Washington Park, Wentworth Gardens, West End, and Westhaven.

### General Educational Environment

- Universal FAFSA completion is encouraged by the City of Chicago schools.
- The city supports school choice, in which students have the option of selecting which schools they will attend.
- CHA has an MOU with the school district—however, not with the charter schools.
- CHA nonprofit division has an agreement with City Colleges for tuition assistance.

### ROSS SOAR Program Highlights

Three full-time (40 hours/week) navigators (EPS)	Case load 200–300 students per navigator.
Total eligible students: 2,817	Outreach included door-to-door, mailings, cold calls
Worked closely with FamilyWorks and PHA staff	High visibility (offices in computer labs, project office)
College tours	One-on-one counseling
Connecting careers with career paths	Finding jobs for non-college-bound children

### Barriers

Charter schools means students attend a variety of schools	Hard to engage with guidance counselors
Younger kids harder to recruit and keep engaged	Parents burned by other providers at the PHA, therefore unwilling to participate

Chicago Housing Authority Profile

Need money for transportation

Need to provide snacks for meetings and lunch for college tours

Lessons learned

Start with younger kids

Provide all services for all community members regardless of whether they receive housing assistance

## Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee

### Background

The Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee (HACM) includes 4,000 public housing or tax credit units. In 2015, HACM was awarded \$30 million in Choice Neighborhoods implementation grants.

The housing authority has developed several programs that focus on economic self-sufficiency, education, homeownership, public safety, and health care. As a condition of the lease, the housing authority requires participation in the Education Initiative, which was developed to improve school attendance and achievement for students living in Highland homes and scattered sites. An educational specialist works with the families to improve school attendance and achievement and to increase parental involvement in their children's education. For the 2018–2019 school year, 275 youth participated in the initiative, and the seniors had a 94 percent graduation rate.

### General Educational Environment

- These communities have the poorest schools and a high incarceration rate.
- Students are distributed among charter, choice, and public schools.
- One school requires FAFSA completion for graduation.

### ROSS SOAR Program Highlights

One full-time(40 hours/week) navigator  
Scholarship money from HOPE VI grants

Engage parents first

Partnership with the Milwaukee Technical College  
Celebrate the small stuff

262 eligible students

Eligible families informed about SOAR at  
annual recertification

Food important to get people to attend  
events

Use summer for transitioning to college

### Barriers

Things needed today

Transportation

Worries about increases in rent  
Lack of exposure to the possibilities

Lack of knowledge about the postsecondary  
experience

Access to school systems when not enough  
students go to any one school.

Parents' issues, such as mental health

Lessons learned

Today's needs more immediate; planning for the future is hard

Housing authority now used for educational information

Need funds to cover costs—food, transportation, incentives

Use SOAR as seed funding to demonstrate proof of concept for money from foundations

More navigators needed

Fight rumors about others applying for loans using their FAFSA data

Trust from the community takes time; Two years is too short

Need trauma-informed care

## Northwest Georgia Housing Authority

### Background

Northwest Georgia Housing Authority (NWGAHA) manages 846 public housing units in Rome and Rockmart, Georgia, with another 741 housing choice vouchers available for use in either location. SOAR is provided directly through the housing authority.

### General Educational Environment

- Most students from the PHA attend one of two high schools.
- The navigator has deep connections to the limited number of schools the PHA youth attend. The education navigator (EN) is a local school board member and clearly delineates her work for the housing authority as EN from her work as an elected official.
- Advisors try to counter the message that “College is for the rich” or that the greatest value to the family is if the student gets work right after high school rather than spends time on further schooling.
- For the younger high school students, Rome High School has designed a college and career pathway and requires participation from each student.

### ROSS SOAR Program Highlights

The Northwest Georgia Housing Authority has one part-time EN. The EN reports to the Resident Service Coordinator but also communicates directly with the housing authority’s Executive Director. Given the EN’s past experience working with the housing authority and her current role on the school board, the EN has been given a lot of authority with respect to the day-to-day operations of the ROSS for Education/Project SOAR program. The EN maintains a presence in the main Rome high school, which allows her to provide assistance to counselors and reduce their workloads and gives her more reliable access to students.

### Barriers

Most parents do not have high school or college diplomas themselves and are unable to help with keeping track of schedules or requirements of college and financial applications. Parents fear that the household will falter without the emotional or economic support the students provide should they go away. Also, the parents do not trust the FAFSA process and often are reluctant to provide tax and income information.

Obtaining a high school diploma in the Rome, Georgia system does not necessarily prepare a student academically or socially for college.

Despite having a several colleges within the city and several more within a 90-minute commute, transportation is a major barrier for students. Public transportation has a limited schedule and a route that passes only one of the local colleges.

Lessons learned

Students and families need to have the technology necessary to connect to education resources and their schools.

More than one person should be available to serve as a navigator; backup is necessary.

Program services must be provided during a variety of flexible and weekend hours to reach the youth and families.

Funds must be available to pay for pre-enrollment fees, placement testing, and applications.

The program would be stronger if the housing authority could use Section 3 to employ students returning from college for the summer.

## Housing Authority of the City of Prichard

### Background

The Housing Authority of the City of Prichard (HACP) has 307 public housing units through the city of Prichard. In 2010, HACP was awarded \$20 million in Neighborhood Stabilization Program 2 (NSP2) grants. They successfully used the grants to rehabilitate 46 abandoned or foreclosed properties, demolish 100 blighted structures, and develop a land bank to maintain 170 vacation properties for future development, among other programs.

The community has two high schools—13 schools altogether, 10 public and 3 private. The navigator was able to meet with students in the schools as well as at housing complexes.

Prichard was not an experimental site; therefore, all eligible students received Project SOAR services.

### General Educational Environment

- MOU with school, which allows education navigator to be on site at schools and to access grades
- Worked closely with the school guidance counselor

### ROSS SOAR Program Highlights

One full-time (40 hours/week) navigator	306 eligible students
Partnered with the Army—provided support and resources during the summer months for the kids	Partnered with local businesses—for example, a local funeral business provided food for Project SOAR
Partnered with alumni	Provided ACT/SAT waivers so kids could take the test again to try to get their score up
Professional Friday	Effects of the program will be realized a few years after, as there is a switch in the culture
Provided pipeline to college	Helped kids who may be under the radar

### Barriers

Generational poverty—do not know there is another way	Kids are raising kids
Parents focus on athletics more than education	60 percent leave college because they are not ready and need a helping hand
Funds needed for services (food, computers, etc.)	Need access to information about what education can provide

Lessons learned

Provide a safe place for parents to grow

Need more funds for livable wage

Need parents to buy in

Advertise during recertification

Alumni organization helped with services  
needed for success

Need adult-orientated programs to help parents

Age range should be broader to include everyone

Convening for navigators across sites needed to  
learn about best practices

Basic counseling needed (nutritional classes,  
personal hygiene, anti-bullying)

## High Point Housing Authority

### Background

High Point Housing Authority (HPHA) serves 1,145 households through public housing. It is a Moving to Work (MTW) PHA with an FSS program. The public housing developments are spread across the city. Most are low-rise buildings with older construction. Carson Stout, one of the developments, has most of the resident programming, including a chess program and an art program.

In addition, HPHA has received a grant to Wake Forest School of Medicine Northwest Area Health Education Center's 2019 Summer Camp Med to educate about, expose to, and engage SOAR participants in medical professions. The program is designed to recruit, educate, and prepare high school students for careers in health professions.

High Point provided Project SOAR assistance to all eligible students who reside in the PHA. High Point got a grant and will be extending the program. They say it is invaluable, and they have seen real progress and positive effects.

### General Educational Environment

- Many students would be the first in their family to go to college, and they have a general lack of familiarity with the process.
- Grades are not reflective of readiness; some students with high GPAs still struggle with basic skills, such as reading.
- The community has three main schools, which focus on matriculation.
- The housing authority has an agreement with those schools.
- Few community resources are available for students.

### Program Highlights

One full-time (40 hours/week) navigator  
Financial literacy—learning about  
spending and saving, difference between  
grant and loans

Provided students with good idea about  
different options available after high  
school

Meet the students where they are.

Youth surprised that they could go to  
college

Total students: 211; 130 on the active roster  
High touch, labor intensive

Knocking on doors was most solid outreach

Competed with after-school programs; adopted  
schedule around the school hours

Unlike the school system, housing authority had the  
trust of parents; consequently, the program worked

### Barriers

Need more training

Need funds for snacks, college visits, lunch

## High Point Housing Authority Profile

Lack of good soft skills, such as public speaking and essay writing, among students

Need to address language and cultural issues by the U.S. Department of Education

Lack of knowledge of boarder options: future expectations of the students vary; first-generation families do not understand the process, permanent residents think their only option is work, and American-born residents are afraid of cost  
Effect on rent

### Lessons learned

Longer time period needed—first year spent time ironing out the kinks

Age range is correct—allows navigators to work with high school graduates

Extend program to Section 8 students

Need peer mentoring

Case load too high for the navigator (100 students)

Need the family on board

## Philadelphia Housing Authority

### Background

Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA) is the largest landlord in Pennsylvania, with 13,400 public housing units. Their Project SOAR is housed under the Youth Services Manager. They are a ConnectHome site, giving them the ability to use free tablets as an incentive for recruitment.

Both of the navigators have a history of either working with the PHA or living in the community, which was more important to the program managers than was their knowledge of the financial aid process. Management also strongly believed that resident councils needed to be involved in the project. Many times, the outreach was conducted after receiving approval from the resident council. PHA staff felt stronger about selecting sites with strong Rental Assistance Contracts (RACs).

Philadelphia was an experimental site; however, some of the sites selected randomly were inappropriate. One was a senior residence; some control and experimental sites were across from each other; and in other sites, the students aged out of the program, which meant that their selection pool was smaller.

### General Educational Environment

- Philadelphia has school choice; students could elect to go to charter schools.
- Some charter schools provide help with FAFSA completion and college application.

### ROSS SOAR Program Highlights

Two part-time education navigators  
Used their strengths for outreach, such as painting, creating a documentary, basketball

Financial literacy, such as the difference between loans and grants  
Recruit hard—boots on the ground the most effective method

472 eligible students  
Helped with a wide range of needs (essays, tutoring, goal setting), FAFSA completion, finding jobs  
Provide as much as information about the program as possible when students come in  
Recruit kids as they come home

### Barriers

Using financial literacy as a hook—not the correct audience  
Parents hesitant to provide information online  
Transportation  
Appropriate partners important; financial institutions were not appropriate

No computer lab at some sites  
Residents councils sometimes interfered in their work  
Supplies (paints, basketballs, etc.)—many paid for out-of-pocket by navigators  
PHA newspapers providing information about Project SOAR ineffective

Lessons learned

Allow change in partnership (important because that was used as matching funds)

Money for supplies, transportation

Need a hook (food) to get students in the door

Two years too short, navigators finally get parents to trust them, and the program ends

Students have different struggles; need to keep that in mind.

Provide incentive for families whose students are in Project SOAR

Develop program objectives by year of school (7th grade, 8th grade)

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development  
Office of Policy Development and Research  
Washington, DC 20410-6000

