Community Dialogues for Action with
Neighbors Helping Neighbors on the Main Line
(CDAs with NHN)

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NHN stands in the gap for our underrepresented neighbors while educating and reforming the entities that serve them to create a more empowered community where everyone has the tools and resources they need to thrive.

 at

Introduction

"You have to Maslow before you Bloom."
—Action Research Team Member, on meeting basic needs before higher-level learning can happen

"Once the physiological and safety needs are fulfilled, an individual becomes motivated by love and belonging needs. These include loving and being loved, belonging in a community, and having friends and family."
—Shannon L. Navy, "Theory of Human Motivation—Abraham Maslow"

"The children are calmer, with each other. When I come here and I see the kids, it's love. They play, I don't really see the arguing and bickering. I don't see that here."
—Parent/Caregiver of a child enrolled in *The Homework Club*

"In this space, the children have experienced success in a way that matches expectations."
—Teacher/Tutor in *The Homework Club*

"It's a nice time out of my day where I can just do my work and focus. You also get to see your friends. Sometimes your friends have the same work as you, so you can work together. The tutors help a whole bunch."
— *Homework Club* student

"We are going to start a fruit tree initiative. We'll be growing fruit here, and in the neighborhood. It will teach the students measurement: the planting so far apart and down so deep. That's how I teach area. They're having fun and then they don't forget it. The *Garden Club* is not *Homework Club*, but it's still *Homework Club* – they just don't know it."
—Muneera Walker, Founder & Executive Director, Neighbors Helping Neighbors on the Main Line (NHN)

This document tells the story of a one-year journey of discovery and program evaluation, from June 2024-June 2025. Our focus is Neighbors Helping Neighbors on the Main Line (NHN), a grassroots nonprofit that was founded by Muneera Walker in 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic came to the United States. NHN is situated within a majority Black community in Ardmore, PA. Ms. Muneera, as she's called by the children we spoke with, embodies the mission of NHN: "to stand in the gap for our underrepresented neighbors

while educating and reforming the entities that serve them to create a more empowered community where everyone has the tools and resources they need to thrive."

As a s/hero, Ms. Muneera has long been a leader in her community working towards the NHN vision that "one day, every person will have fair and even access to the resources and opportunities they deserve." She radiates a quiet yet determined energy, with the presence of a person who keenly notices everything that happens around her, exercising her voice with care and clarity. She lives out a "head and heart" approach to mobilizing staff, volunteers, and the community at large; in short, Ms. Muneera can both strategize and empathize. After 5 years building NHN, Muneera and NHN's Director of Operations Bree Davison have developed 3 strong programs within the community: Education Empowerment, Food Security, and Outreach & Resource Linkage.

It's worth knowing who partnered with NHN on the journey described in this document. "We" are the Social Justice Initiative (SJI), an organization housed at Bryn Mawr College whose mission is: "to co-create space and dedicate time for dialogue, reflection, relationship-building, and action to dismantle the structures and systems of injustice that perpetuate social inequities and disparities, honoring inherent interconnections and interdependencies." Dr. Darlyne Bailey is the Founder and Executive Director of the SJI, and Sarah Spath is the Director of Programs. Over the last several years, we have gotten to know NHN through collaborating on several projects. This document is the culmination of *Community Dialogues for Action with Neighbors Helping Neighbors on the Main Line* (*CDAs with NHN*), which was a year-long project to support the program evaluation of NHN's main offering for school-age children in the Education Empowerment program: *The Homework Club*.

Darlyne and Sarah first met Muneera when NHN was an internship placement site for the course *Advancing Racial Justice* that we were teaching at Bryn Mawr College. *Advancing Racial Justice* was a Praxis course, designed to connect students with community-based organizations where they could apply the principles of equity they were learning in the classroom. Muneera and NHN were introduced and recommended to us by a colleague at the College.

The first time Muneera appeared in our classroom, she confidently strode in to speak with the undergraduate students about how she stands firm in her commitment to justice for everyone. With what we soon learned was her characteristic ability to use simple, clear language that everyone can understand, Muneera held the students' attention as she described her work at NHN in addressing the urgency of racial justice in her community. Throughout that semester, we recognized her as a fellow advocate and educator. We knew that we had found an ongoing community partner.

Like Muneera, we at the SJI believe strongly in bringing both "head and heart" to important work, and indeed to our lives. It is our intention to illustrate both principles at work in *The Homework Club*, within the larger context of NHN's full offerings. Some of what you read will include more technical academic language, while other parts will include more storytelling to help you imagine what it's like for the children and families who engage with NHN. Feel free to read this as one long story, or to jump around from section to section. However you approach your reading, we know that you will discover, like we did, that the incredible value that NHN brings to the community is undeniable!!

Part I – The Process: How *CDAs with NHN* Unfolded

<u>Community Dialogues for Actions (CDAs)</u>

Dr. Darlyne Bailey has 30+ years of research experience in communities both large and small. Over that time, she has constructed a form of participatory research called *Community Dialogues for Action* (*CDAs*). She is Professor Emeritus and Dean Emeritus of the Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research (GSSWSR) of Bryn Mawr College, and is committed to using this form of research to engage community-based experts in asking and answering questions that matter to them. Darlyne identifies as Black, from a multicultural family. Sarah Spath completed the Secondary Transition to Teaching program at the Indiana University School of Education, graduated from the GSSWSR Master of Social Service program, and has a combined 15 years of experience in teaching, tutoring, training, and providing other forms of learning support in both higher education and human services settings. Sarah identifies as White.

As we got to know each other, NHN and the SJI both noticed a strong mission and values alignment between the two organizations. This natural fit led to the collaboration detailed in this report: *Community Dialogues for Action with Neighbors Helping Neighbors on the Main Line* (*CDAs with NHN*). The aim of *CDAs with NHN* was to support the program evaluation of its central educational offering – *The Homework Club* that provides afterschool support at no cost during the school year Monday-Thursday, 3:00-5:00pm. Additional programming includes a *Garden Club* (created and still designed by Bree Davison, NHN Director of Operations) that reinforces application of knowledge learned in school, particularly math skills; and *Asé Ardmore*, a two-week empowerment camp offered to school age children in August to identify, celebrate and use the gifts within themselves to prepare for the upcoming school year and beyond. Information about the other two programs surfaced from time to time during *CDAs with NHN,* but this project stayed focused on *The Homework Club*.

CDAs situates itself at the end of the continuum from action research through participatory action research (PAR) and community-based participatory research (Duran & Wallerstein, 2003). In social work community practice and other disciplines, these types of participatory research foster collaboration with a community (Ohmer, Mendenhall, Carney, & Adams 2022). For example, the Neighborhood Story Project is a form of PAR, with a core commitment to community participation in addressing questions of inequality (Thurber, 2019). *CDAs* conceptualize the relationship with the community studied as a "we" relationship, and the research process as co-created from beginning to end through 6 phases (Bailey, Spath & Koney, 2025). Crucially, *CDAs* is grounded in Dialogue as theorized

by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire throughout the entire process. This Dialogue depends on epistemological curiosity, and searching for meaning together with the recognition that all can teach and all can learn (Leistyna, 2004).

Research and Action Process – 6 Phases

CDAs with NHN began in Dialogue, with a conversation in June 2024 between the SJI researchers and a group of interested people affiliated with NHN: staff, volunteers, teachers/tutors, and parents/caregivers of children who attend *The Homework Club*. *CDAs* recognize that it really does take a whole village to properly care for its own!! The goal of bringing together this group of stakeholders was to form the Action Research Team (ART) that would guide the project. The two SJI researchers joined this group of 7 community-based experts as "co-inquirers" in designing and conducting the research.

The setting for this and all other meetings throughout the project was the building rented by NHN, a former mechanic's space with a large garage as the main gathering area and a smaller office area on one side. NHN moved into this space in 2023. It is located within a walkable distance to and from the homes in the community, and is called "A Space for Neighbors." Muneera's skills in design have created a homey atmosphere, affirming of Black identity and welcoming of all identities – complete with: couches, tables, and hand drums; sky blue paint on the walls; a cornucopia of decorations; an abundance of food for distribution; and children's handprints on the inside of the garage door. Every meeting there includes an offer of food, whether to share with the group at the moment or to take home for later. This was the context within which the ART worked.

As part of evaluating *The Homework Club*, the ART also looked at how to address the structural inequities in education that directly affected their community. The ART members worked together to identify research questions and explore the answers through gathering data, studying to understand the data, generating recommendations, and disseminating their findings. *CDAs with NHN* intentionally elicits the thinking and amplifies the voices of those who are usually left out of the policymaking conversations that directly impact them, a process critical for equitable and sustainable systems change. In working with NHN, the SJI used the 6 Phase iterative process described in Figure 1.

Figure 1
6 Phases of *CDAs with NHN*

(1) Dialogue • Develop Action Research Team (ART) • Establish common understanding of project, mission, and CDA goals	(4) Dissemination • Share findings with other internal NHN stakeholders • Facilitate ideas and connections
(2) Discovery • Define/redefine research questions • Identify data sources • Gather data	(5) Developing Plans • Determine implications • Prioritize actions that emerged from the Data Review & Analysis, and Dissemination phases
(3) Data Review & Analysis • Investigate data • Generate collective understanding • Develop recommendations	(6) Delivering Results • Act on recommendations • Evaluate actions • Evolve for greater impact

Research Questions

Before beginning the work with the Action Research Team (ART), the SJI researchers received IRB approval[1] from Bryn Mawr College in May 2024, focusing on 3 primary questions for adult participants. The ART then began meeting in June 2024. The Dialogue and Discovery phases were characterized by establishing priorities, developing more refined prompts for the primary questions, identifying formats for collecting data, and identifying the people with whom to talk. The ART set a clear priority to articulate what goes

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[1] IRB stands for Institutional Review Board. All research involving human subjects must be submitted to the IRB for review, to ensure that the process is ethical and complies with regulations. The goal of any institution's IRB, including at Bryn Mawr College, is to protect the welfare of the human subjects who consent to be part of the research.

into "the secret sauce" of NHN's approach. In July, the SJI researchers received IRB approval to add the community-based experts to the ART. In September, the SJI researchers received approval to expand the scope of data collection from adult respondents to include the school-age children served by the *Homework Club*. The ART also discussed and then added several prompts underneath each primary question for adults. The final list of IRB-approved research questions is included below:

<u>Adult Respondents</u>

1. Are there specific aspects of the Homework Club, the NHN Community Garden, and/or Asé Ardmore that your child (or the children) talked about the most?
   a. What seems to stick with your child over time from their experiences with NHN?
2. Since involvement in the Education Empowerment program(s), have you seen any changes in your child (or the children) and if so, in what ways?
   a. For example, did you notice any differences in how they behaved after coming home from Asé Ardmore?
   b. Was there any emotional impact that you noticed in the children and/or in yourself?
   c. Does it feel different when you and your children are at A Space for Neighbors than other places that you go?
3. Is there anything else you would like to see from the Homework Club, the NHN Community Garden, and/or Asé Ardmore, for the children or for yourselves?
   a. Considering the new start times and other changes in the school district, if NHN had a magic wand, what would you recommend they do?

<u>Child Respondents</u>

1. What is it like being a part of the NHN *Homework Club*?
2. Is there a difference between school and *Homework Club*?
3. Has the *Homework Club* been helpful?
   a. If so, in what ways?

Data Collection

The process of *CDAs with NHN* was iterative, meaning that the ART circled back to earlier phases as needed to refine questions, identify additional data sources, and give feedback on data collected. The ART formally met a total of 11 times between June 2024 and May 2025. In consultation with their collaborators on the ART, the SJI researchers

collected data from 18 adults and 16 children in the following formats for a total of 34 participants:

- 5 Focus Groups with Adults – one with the ART, two with NHN Teachers/Tutors, one with Parents/Caregivers, and one with members of the Board
- 3 Adult Individual Interviews – one with a grandparent, one with a parent, and one with Muneera Walker, the Founder and Executive Director of NHN
- 16 Child Individual Interviews – 6 of elementary school age, 10 of middle/high school age

The SJI researchers also collected data through:

- Participant Observations of NHN events – meaning that the SJI researchers participated in activities at the Grand Opening of NHN's building and bookbag giveaway event, alongside community members and other NHN stakeholders
- Nonparticipant Observations of *The Homework Club* – meaning that the SJI researchers observed what it is like at *The Homework Club* without participating in the tutoring activities
- Reviewing Archival Data – meaning that the SJI researchers read scholarly articles and news articles relevant to the work that NHN is doing

During this Data Review & Analysis process, Darlyne, Sarah, and a third ART member named Rachael conducted the data collection. All 3 of us underwent CITI certification,[2] a 10-hour training that covers best practices for ethical research that involves human beings. All adult respondents signed Consent forms that explained the purpose of *CDAs with NHN,* safeguards for confidentiality of the data collected, the minimal risks, and benefits of participation. For child respondents, a parent/caregiver signed a Consent form, while the child signed an Assent form that explained in simpler language all that is listed above.[3]

Generating Meaning

During Dissemination, the ART met as a whole to discuss the findings and make meaning of what the respondents had shared. Darlyne, Sarah and Rachael then conducted

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[2] The CITI Program provides a series of trainings for researchers in multiple settings in topics related to research, ethics, compliance, and safety. https://about.citiprogram.org/

[3] Consent can only be provided by those who have reached the legal age of 18. For minors, two forms are required: Consent of a Guardian, and Assent – the minor's own willingness to participate as well.

a thematic analysis. All 3 read through the data and identified themes, or topics, that were repeated by multiple respondents. This provided for inter-rater reliability when the 3 of us agreed that we saw the same themes emerge from the data; we knew that the themes were reliably true to what the respondents were saying. The thematic analysis highlighted four themes that can be thought of as ingredients in "the secret sauce." The ART as a whole discussed these themes during the Dissemination and Developing Plans phases, confirming what rang true for them and identifying possible actions as a result. This report is part of the final phase, Delivering Results, as a way to share the results and recommendations of the project with the community at large.

Part II - Context: The Role of Out-of-School Time (OST) Programs

The Homework Club offers one-on-one tutoring for school-age children from 3:00-5:00pm Monday-Thursday during the school year. Volunteer tutors work with middle/high school children on their homework during the first hour, and then with elementary age children during the second hour. The children gather in small groups at long folding tables arranged into a U shape. The working atmosphere is reminiscent of a coffee shop or a busy library – there is an underlying quiet, layered with pockets of focused conversation, punctuated by moments of laughter or cries of frustration with a thorny math problem. The tables are set up facing the garage door where the NHN van drives up for the Food Security program's weekly distributions.

Behind the children on the opposing wall are the refrigerator and food storage area, with adult tutors and other volunteers moving amongst the children to offer support or complete their own tasks. Ms. Muneera is an anchoring presence among them all, periodically interacting or answering questions while also packing up food into bags or coordinating other projects. Thus, the children regularly see the adults at work as a model for completing their own work.

Out-of-School Time (OST) programs like *The Homework Club* have existed in some form in the United States for the past two centuries, and have seen significant growth in the past few decades due to increased federal funding streams and interest from researchers (Mahoney, Parente, & Zigler, 2009; Woodland, 2008). Comprehensive community organizations like NHN that integrate OST programming into a larger community building mission can trace their lineage back to the settlement house movement of the late 19th century (Blank, 1998). The goals of settlement houses were to address social concerns at the community level, rather than focusing on individual charity (Blank, 1998).

OST programs include both afterschool and summer programs. They provide critical support to working parents for afterschool and summer childcare, while contributing to positive developmental outcomes in academics, socialization, and physical health (Mahoney, Parente, & Zigler, 2009). Simply attending OST programming alone is not enough to guarantee good outcomes for the children who participate; the programs must be high-quality. Characteristics of high-quality afterschool programs include establishing positive relationships between the children and staff (Woodland, 2008), engaging in activities that promote academic and social development (Vandell, et. al., 2022), and providing opportunities for collaborative learning (Yu, et al., 2022).

Afterschool OST programs also function as a protected space for children and youth between 3-6pm, peak hours for juvenile crime and arrests (Jensen, et al, 2018; Mahoney, Parente, & Zigler, 2009; Woodland, 2008). These programs can have very positive outcomes

among children in marginalized communities. For children of immigrants, who may not have access to the range of extracurricular activities enjoyed by their middle-class mainstream peers, OST programs located within their neighborhoods take on an important cultural and developmental function (Lee & Hawkins, 2008). Latino/a adolescents have been shown to benefit from OST programs that support positive peer processes, collaborative learning, and other socio-emotional skills alongside academic skills such as in STEM (Yu, et al., 2022). A national longitudinal study showed that high quality afterschool OST programs geared towards economically disadvantaged and/or minoritized youth promote higher test scores, higher task persistence and work habits, higher social skills and reduced misconduct, and reduced use of drugs/alcohol (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007).

Afterschool OST programs are also favored by Black families, who enroll twice as many of their children as White families, specifically seeking programming that is culturally relevant in contrast to the systemic racism of the schools (Case, 2020). For young Black males in particular, who can struggle with the rigid structure of traditional schooling, an OST program with the flexibility to identify and meet their specific interests and needs can support stronger academic and social outcomes (Woodland, 2008).

Part III – The Results: What We Learned about *The Homework Club*

Let's take our story back to the Action Research Team (ART) and *CDAs with NHN*. As a reminder, the ART was made up of the two Social Justice Initiative (SJI) researchers and 7 community members affiliated with NHN who were recruited by Muneera: volunteers, teachers/tutors, and parents/caregivers of children who attend *The Homework Club.* This group functioned as "co-inquirers" throughout the project.

This section will discuss the findings that emerged, organized by four themes that make up the "secret sauce" of NHN's *Homework Club*:
- Cognitive Learning
- Affective Learning
- Family Support & Engagement
- Advocacy with Systems

The first two themes are related because each is a domain of learning that happens at *The Homework Club:* cognitive and affective. Several members of the ART were K-12 educators, and frequently referenced Bloom's Taxonomy. The Taxonomy is a foundational educational framework that classifies 3 domains of learning: Cognitive, which describes intellectual learning; Affective, which describes emotional/attitude learning; and Psychomotor, which describes learning for physical performance (Munzenmaeir & Rubin, 2013) [4] The Cognitive domain has historically been the most influential of the 3 parts of the Taxonomy, detailing increasingly higher-order levels of intellectual learning. In fact, the Cognitive domain became so important in guiding how teachers teach and assess their students' learning, that many educators have never used or even heard of the other two domains. Nevertheless, children in *The Homework Club* receive as much support in affective learning as they do in cognitive learning. This is a powerful combination that engages both "head and heart," deepening overall student engagement. We also want to note that these learning themes directly result from the work of NHN to fulfill the first part of its mission statement, to "stand in the gap for our underrepresented neighbors."

The ART also drew on Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a theoretical framework, frequently quoting the educational proverb that appears on the first page of this report: "You have to Maslow before you Bloom." In the 1940s, Abraham Maslow famously developed this framework that ranks levels of human needs. The idea is that basic needs

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[4] Benjamin Bloom worked with hundreds of colleagues in the 1950s to create the original taxonomy with 3 domains of learning. This taxonomy is foundational for educators when they develop learning objectives for their lessons and when they assess how well students are learning. Of the 3 types, the Cognitive domain is the most well-developed, with multiple guides on how to use it and a revised version that was published in 2001 (Munzenmaeir & Rubin, 2013).

like food and shelter must be met before fulfilling higher-level needs like esteem and self-actualization (Navy, 2020). Both Bloom's and Maslow's frameworks have been highly influential, as well as revised, critiqued, expanded, and otherwise applied to a variety of human contexts. On a basic level, however, by putting the two frameworks side by side, the ART recognized that NHN's work to meet community needs through its other two programs – Food Security and Outreach & Resource Linkage – is critical to the success of its Education Empowerment programs, including *The Homework Club*. This framing helps us understand the second two themes as well: Family Support & Engagement, and Advocacy with Systems.

In discussing these four ingredients in the "secret sauce," we will use the voices of the community as collected in the Focus Groups and Interviews alongside scholarly and news articles to discuss why these ingredients matter. First, we want to briefly note how we organized the groups we spoke with. Even though we separated the adults into Focus Groups by role (ART Members, Teachers/Tutors, Parents/Caregivers, Board Members), the results among all adults were similar enough that we're reporting the Adults as a single group. Differences did emerge between the two age groups of children (elementary and middle/high school age), likely due to developmental differences. Therefore, we report those two groups separately.

Ingredient 1: Cognitive Learning at NHN

Walking into *The Homework Club*, one of the first things you notice is how focused everyone is on their work. An adult tutor is helping a high schooler practice test questions for next week's Calculus exam. A college student tutor is talking with a middle schooler about how to set up difficult math equations now that the material is coming at a quicker pace during class. A volunteer sits on one of several couches with an elementary schooler who is quietly reading out loud from his favorite book, a reward for finishing homework early.

> "Oooh, Miss Muneera checks our grades at the end of every quarter. They have to get better each quarter, and if they're not, you might have to go. Because this isn't a place to be joking around. We're here to do homework, and not to fool around."
> —*Homework Club* student

> "I sometimes scoop and tap and sound things out."
> —*Homework Club* student, referencing learning techniques for reading skills

"She came home yesterday and said she read a book all by herself, she was so proud of that."
—Parent/Caregiver

"At the beginning, when [my child] was starting here, every day…he said, 'can I have my phone?' But he started coming to camp, and no more [asking for the phone]. His mind was full."
—Parent/Caregiver, in reference to the *Asé Ardmore* summer camp

"If you can learn a song on the radio, you can learn this. Make that your song for awhile."
—Teacher/Tutor, in reference to ways of reinforcing memory skills with the children

"While it is two different structures, the homework and the play, we are strategic about *what* we let them play: games of strategy, counting, memory…altogether it's collectively still educating them."
—Ms. Muneera

NHN clearly accomplishes what it sets out to do with *The Homework Club*: to provide afterschool help with homework for school age children. The children and adults we spoke with talked about academic learning, describing both outcomes (such as higher grades) and process (such as strategies for learning). In the revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy published in 2001, the Cognitive domain ("what do I want learners to know?") lists the following elements of intellectual learning: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Munzenmaeir & Rubin, 2013). NHN's *Homework Club* teaches and reinforces these cognitive skills both with homework practice and through offering a range of other educational activities for when students are done with homework.

Figure 2 shows the top Cognitive Learning themes that emerged from the data collection. All 3 age groups mentioned academic or homework activities, learning activities, and specific skills being learned. Younger children named more foundational skills, like reading and specific learning strategies, while older children named grade improvement across the more comprehensive groups of skills they are learning in school. Adults also recognized the impact on academic performance, with heightened valuing of overall learning support and the enrichment activities that foster creative thinking.

Figure 2

Top Cognitive Learning Themes by Age Group
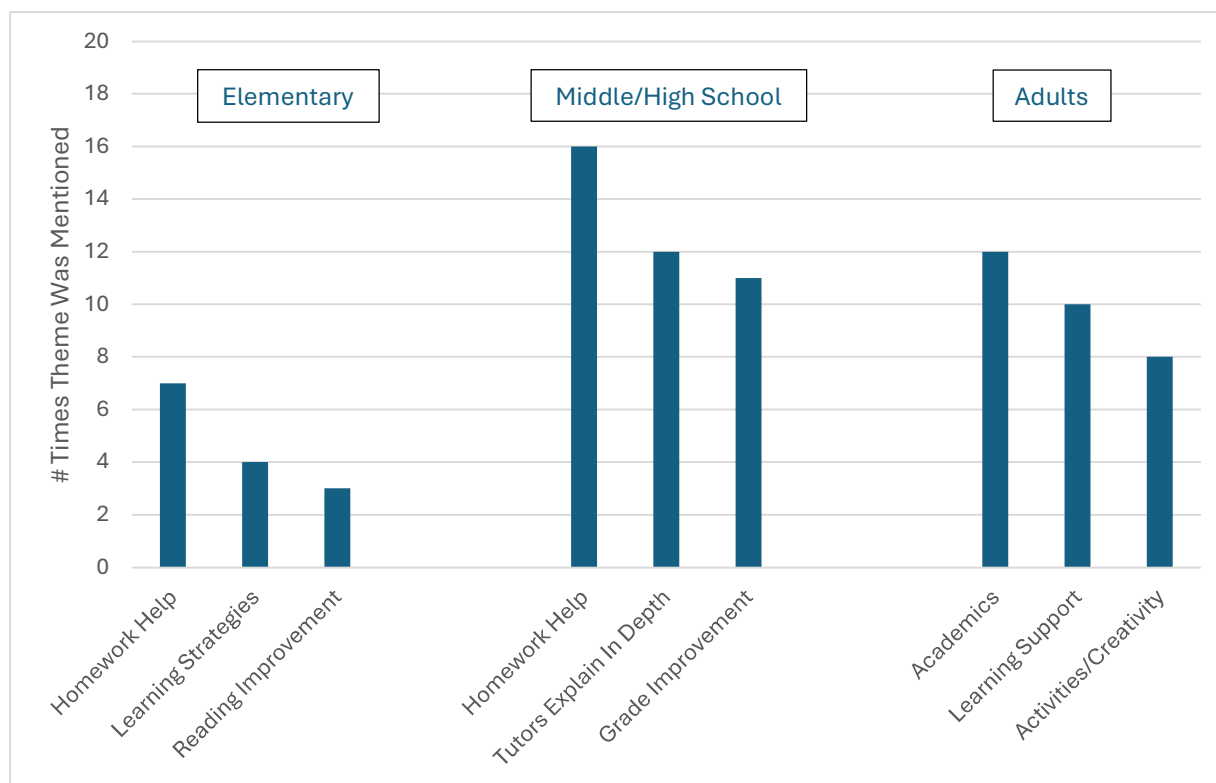
The culture of focus and concentration that you encounter at *The Homework Club* was not developed overnight. Muneera and others described the origins of the Education Empowerment programs before there was a building to house NHN's work.

As schools were going online at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Muneera launched a socially distanced community school and an online tutoring program to ensure that students would not be left behind in learning. The local school district already showed decades of an achievement gap for Black students. This is part of a larger trend in line with other suburban districts that have a similar proportion of Black students in the student body, around 9% (Hanna, 2025).

Muneera also started distributing bookbags with school supplies, and food for children who needed free/reduced cost lunch. Both a tutor and a child described a program she conducted outside, teaching about different countries of the world through snacks and reading to the children.

During the first year of *The Homework Club*'s operation, Muneera worked to create and sustain relationships with the children and families, providing structure and discipline. If a child engaged in disruptive behavior or otherwise was not there to work, she firmly

asked them to leave until they were ready to return, clearly communicating high expectations that they could do better. In one instance, a child declared, "I'm ready to learn" after returning, and has focused on schoolwork ever since.

The fruits of this structure and expectations were apparent during our observations. One snowy day Sarah arrived early and found herself outside for a few minutes with two children who had arrived by school bus, and were waiting for someone to come and open the door. Both of them immediately walked in when a volunteer got the door open, sitting down to work busily even before a tutor arrived.

NHN's practices that support cognitive learning are in line with research on what goes into high-quality Out-of-School Time (OST) programs. When afterschool OST programs are highly structured and explicitly teach children how to learn, they can be extremely effective at improving school attendance and reading skills, while lowering rates of suspension (Jensen, et al, 2018; Vandell, et. al., 2022). Multiple students and adults at NHN spoke about valuing the choices and range of activities such as games, flashcards, or reading books that are available after homework is done. One of the other Education Empowerment programs, the *Garden Club,* reinforces math skills through planting during the spring, while hand drums and music support skills of remembering and understanding. OST programs that help students persist in the STEM pipeline consistently offer: opportunity, achievement, and choice (Hargrave, 2015), as well as a combined focus on social and academic development (Young, Ortiz, & Young, 2017). For African American students, interactions with adults who create counter narratives to help them see themselves in STEM fields are especially crucial before the high school years (Hargrave, 2015). The academic achievement of children from low-income households improves when they have access to the time and spaced practice of one-on-one tutoring and reading instruction that programs like the *Homework Club* offer (Lee, et al., 2017).

Ingredient 2: Affective Learning at NHN

As the above section has already hinted, cognitive learning is seamlessly intertwined with affective learning at *The Homework Club.* Bloom listed the following elements of Affective learning ("what do I want learners to think or care about?"): receiving, responding, valuing, organizing, and characterizing (Munzenmaeir & Rubin, 2013). An elementary age child excitedly talked about reading a book that Ms. Muneera had acquired specifically to fit his interests and insisted on showing Sarah the book. A middle school age child came into the office to proudly show Ms. Muneera the 'A' she had gotten on her recent test, and basked in the warm praise that she received. Children excitedly engaged in coloring activities with a volunteer.

The children value Ms. Muneera and the other tutors, which supports their learning how to value themselves and their work.

"In social studies, I also have to debate…Because I'm nervous, Ms. Muneera helped me, gave me good ideas. 'Don't be afraid, just do it.' And I got my grades up, an 87. She helped me to understand I don't have to be afraid."
—*Homework Club* Student

"I feel like you get more help here than at school. Half the time teachers just re-state the question. I'm more on task here because it's not a lot of people, and it's not a whole bunch of class clowns. And all your friends…it's just one or two friends. It's more calm here."
—*Homework Club* Student

"I think that he felt like he wasn't smart, and he believes in himself now."
—Parent/Caregiver

"Before bed, I ask him, 'what was your favorite part of the day?', and he always says *Homework Club*. It has to do with the friends he has here. I think he loves Ms. Muneera very much."
—Parent/Caregiver

"He came in with intense focus and a look on his face, and seemed to be very much to himself. But in here, he seemed so totally different. I saw him coming around, and now he can take charge."
—Teacher/Tutor, referencing observed change in a child over time

"I can get the kids to understand what the rules are, why there are rules, and what they need to do for their education so they believe in themselves as much as I believe in them. I tie together how important their attendance is to learning their concepts and being able to do the tests; so they see that every effort asked of them has real purpose, and that without those particular pieces they aren't going to be able to do their work."
—Ms. Muneera

The way that adults at NHN model how to engage with work and with each other is a key aspect of the affective learning for the children who attend. In a pre-college STEM program for students of color, the elements of making people feel welcome, an ethic of care, and a culture of high expectations were foundational to its success (Hargrave, 2015). Multiple children and adults commented on feeling welcomed at NHN, and the love that is

all around the children. While the children are at *The Homework Club*, there is an abundance of snacks both for their food security and to make them feel welcome. Going back to Maslow's hierarchy, the children and families know that NHN cares about meeting their needs. This practice meets both the basic needs of food and the emotional needs of love and belonging (Navy, 2020). That attention to needs sets the stage for the high expectations that increase personal agency, motivation, and achievement, including among children who are English language learners or from immigrant families (Lee, et al., 2017).

      Figure 3 shows the top Affective Learning themes that emerged from the data collection. All 3 age groups highlighted relationships and some form of emotional engagement/learning. Whereas all children found it fun to be at *The Homework Club*, younger children were more self-focused on their emotional engagement while older children could comment on the environmental context. The adults were also more focused on the structured environment and noticed increased levels of pride within the children.

Figure 3
Top 3 Affective Learning Themes by Age Group

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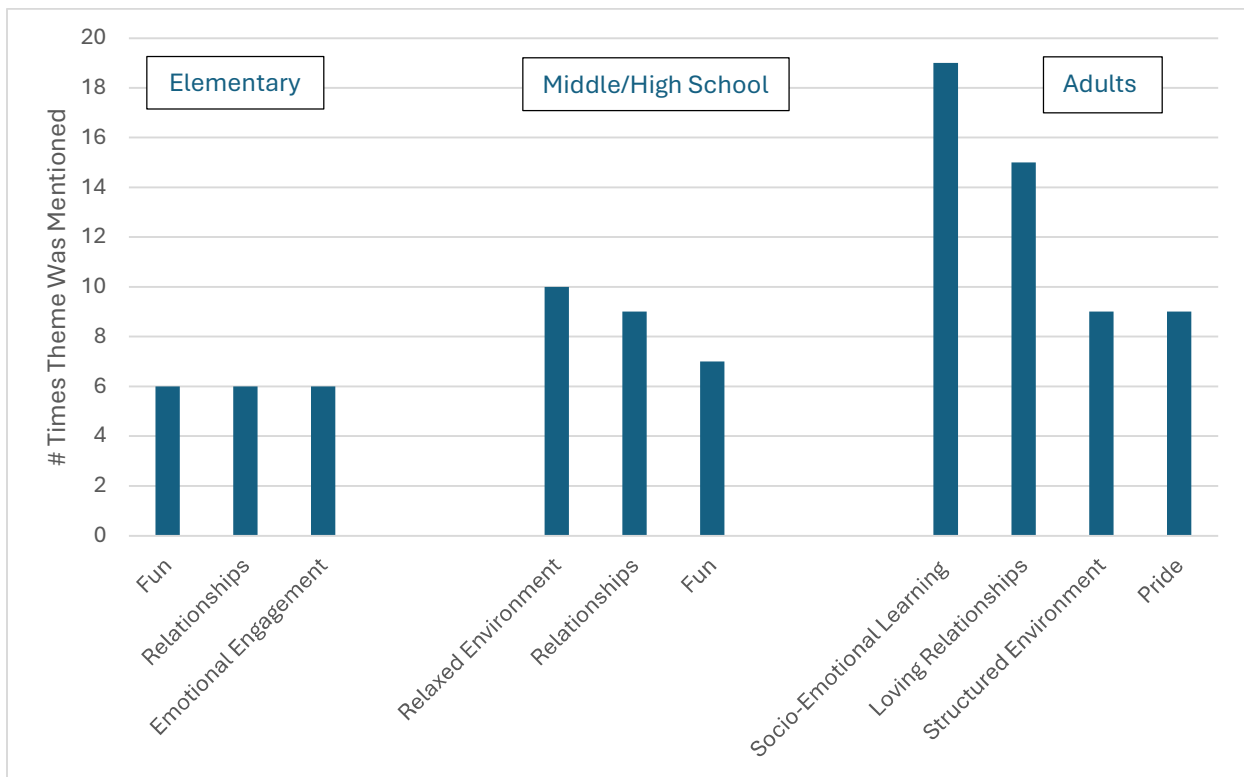
Even if children at NHN did not also demonstrate high academic achievement, the welcoming space for expressions of cultural identity would be impactful on its own (Lee & Hawkins, 2008). During the month of Ramadan, for example, NHN tutors took care to send snacks home with children who were fasting, for them to eat after sundown. The affirmation of children's racial-ethnic identity, and positive relationships with adults in culturally relevant settings can decrease behavioral difficulties and teach social skills (Augustine, 2022; Woodland, 2008). Building ethnic pride and recognition also contributes to the development of cultural wealth, a concept that includes social capital and aspirations within a community (Lee, et al., 2022). OST programs can also help young Black males develop a critical consciousness that equips them to navigate the effects of racism in their lives (Woodland, 2008). Several parent/caregiver and teacher/tutor participants spoke about the racism the Black children encounter during regular school hours, including a culture of low expectations for their abilities. This impacts learning, as children who feel a sense of belonging at school consistently have higher levels of academic achievement, and higher levels of motivational, socio-emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Korpershoek, et al., 2020). The *Asé Ardmore* program at NHN, which centers Black history and cultures, is but one example of how NHN helps all students develop a critical consciousness. It's also worth noting that White children and adults were equally as enthusiastic in their love of NHN as were children and adults from minoritized backgrounds.

High quality OST programs also teach work habits and task persistence (Vandell, et. al., 2022). For example, one of the children spoke about tutors helping her keep reading when she was feeling "mixed up." Low-income and minoritized children show greater perceptions of self-efficacy when enrolled in an afterschool OST program (Lee et al., 2017). Multiple adults pointed to examples of increased self-confidence and pride in the children with regard to their work and their abilities.

Some of the increased self-efficacy and confidence can be accounted for by how the adults model skills of interpreting and responding. An NHN tutor shared how the new daily dashboard used in the local school district shows average grades in real time. The tutor added that families and children can react with panic when scores look low for reasons other than a child's achievement, such as if an overworked teacher forgets to input an assignment. One of the children who we spoke with was particularly grateful to the tutors for how they reassure the students by helping them interpret the dashboard more accurately.

Ingredient 3: Family Support and Engagement

One of the most impactful ingredients in NHN's "secret sauce" is the way the other two programs – Food Security and Outreach & Resource Linkage – integrate with the Education Empowerment programs through Family Support and Engagement. We can write about the different programs as though they were separate, but the children and families who are part of NHN don't see them as separate programs. Successful OST programs have to balance the different things that families want, such as productive homework time and fun activities (Mahoney, Parente, & Zigler, 2009). NHN accomplishes this through creating a vibrant community atmosphere, with different facets of Muneera's work as one holistic experience for all involved. Providing basic and communal needs that have otherwise been divested greatly supports the last part of NHN's mission, to create "a more empowered community where everyone has the tools and resources they need to thrive."

> "We do our work, and we get a snack…She helps the community, she brings us food – like, everybody in the neighborhood. Sometimes I come here like, yeah, this is great."
> —*Homework Club* Student

> "Since I came here, I felt welcome. Because everyone was nice to me, and they were helping me a lot. And my [parent/caregiver] was so happy about it…Every day I come here, and they can help me do what I have to do."
> —*Homework Club* Student

> "Had I not been able to work with Ms. Muneera I wouldn't be able to [pursue a personal goal]. The level of relief I have…for years I've been focused on my children, and now I get to focus on me."
> —Parent/Caregiver

> "At home…her mind isn't always on 'I'm gonna do a project.' If she comes to Ms. Muneera, she knows there's a project, and she can't get away with it. I've heard Ms. Muneera and seen her do this with other kids. I'm like, 'let's get the project done,' but my mind is on 6 different things. But her focus is on the kids. I can too, but I'm multi-tasking."
> —Parent/Caregiver

"With trauma, [there are] parents who don't feel secure helping with homework or advocating for what they need... but here, they can be very open about what's going on in their life, and get solid advice."
—Teacher/Tutor

"When the kids first started coming here, if there was something they weren't interested in, they would run out the door. But now I'm noticing they still want to be here even for programs for adults."
—Ms. Muneera

When NHN celebrated its Grand Opening, that June weekend was a sweltering 100+ degrees. Nevertheless, it seemed that the whole community in Ardmore gathered under the tent and umbrellas on the concrete lot outside. Darlyne and Sarah talked with Board members and listened to speeches from local government and community leaders talking about the impact Muneera had had on their lives; volunteers dished out food at the long tables inside, some of whom could also be seen during *Homework Club* while the children work at those same tables; a band played music; Darlyne joined the drumming circle, and Sarah danced. A misting station gave relief from the heat, which was a next iteration of the water hose a child described during a "water party" after *Homework Club* on a hot day in a previous year. When it was her turn at the microphone, Muneera took time to look at each of the children who was present, and to tell them with conviction that "Ms. Muneera is proud of you. The world is waiting for your gifts!"

Figure 4 shows the top Family Support and Engagement themes that emerged from the data collection. All three age groups mentioned the food and some form of help to the family. Younger children were more likely to comment on the proximity of NHN to their homes, while the older children could articulate more comprehensive forms of support to their families and the community. Adults commented on how much the children love the place, an enthusiasm that spills over into family engagement at NHN.

Figure 4

Top 3 Family Support and Engagement Themes by Age Group
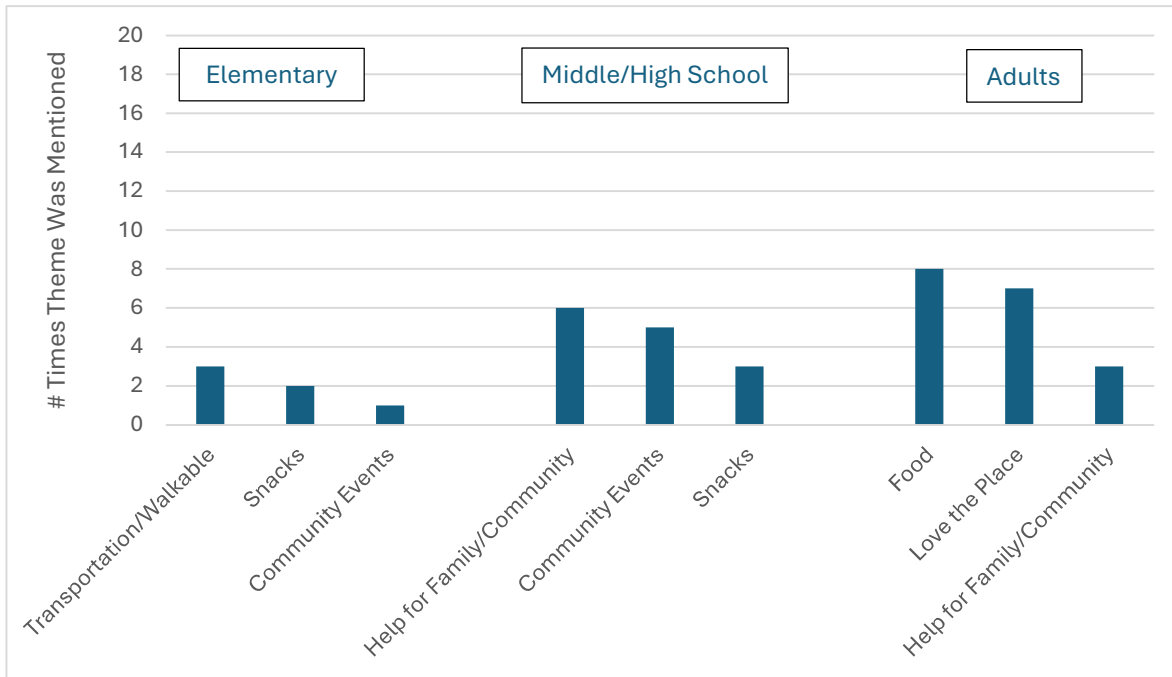
Studies of other OST programs have shown that higher levels of parental involvement in afterschool activities correlate with higher levels of motivational beliefs among the children who attend (Camacho-Thompson & Simpkins, 2022). Family engagement also builds community (Woodland, 2008). During the Grand Opening, Ardmore's sense of community was on display when one person felt faint from the heat, and multiple adults immediately kicked into gear to provide water, fans, a place to sit, and attentive care. Children and adults alike spoke to us about the events that NHN hosts, like a SuperBowl party, and the backpack and school supply giveaways in the park down the street every August. When Darlyne and Sarah attended a giveaway, they noticed how the sharing of resources we all need, like food and school supplies, was folded into a similarly celebratory atmosphere of connection and fun. Hosting events, meeting basic needs, and providing a community garden are all good methods to increase family engagement and build overall community (Lee, et al., 2017).

These events are but one strategy NHN uses to engage families. Communicating program impacts, asking for caregiver involvement, and providing a variety of ways to be involved have all been shown to promote engagement (Case, 2020). NHN's overall approach is holistic, such as how adult volunteers in food distribution conduct their work alongside the children at the *Homework Club*. As parents/caregivers collect their children

at the end of the day, there is an easy atmosphere of conversation in pockets around the main room. The volume gets louder, with tutors and volunteers talking with some of the parents/caregivers. Children mill about with snacks while tutors put things away for the next day. Many of the parents were grateful for a place their children could go for enriching activities and a sense of welcome while they were still at work. When ART members gathered before the meetings that planned out this project, it was clear that conversations to swap health advice and the impact of the current changing political environment were a regular feature of interactions at NHN.

Ingredient 4: Advocacy with Systems

The final theme, Advocacy with Systems, speaks to the middle part of NHN's overall mission: "educating and reforming the entities" that serve the community. Muneera described how she will schedule Zoom calls with government representatives and invite members of the community to gather at NHN and join the call as a group. This practice not only brings more voices into the conversation, it also enhances the collective message from the community on the issues involved. Zooming together is also a form of the modeling that NHN does so well, where adults can see and learn from how Muneera and fellow neighbors are speaking in these forums.

"I let them know that I don't understand what I'm doing."
—*Homework Club* Student, on self-advocacy with tutors

"The bookbags started during Covid to get the free and reduced lunch to the kids."
—Parent/Caregiver, on NHN's origins advocating for the needs of the children

"It was instant. She was instantly like, 'I got you.'"
—Parent/Caregiver, on Muneera's responsiveness to asking for help with advocacy

"I recommend that you take the consultations you are using here and go into the school district to show them an approach. Here, the children feel more confident. There's kinesthetic movement, using songs. It's more enjoyable to be themselves, be more of a risk taker. Here, they're more able to advocate for what they don't understand."
—Teacher/Tutor

"I've known for years her devotion to the community and being an advocate for the betterment of the community, and helping people slipping through the cracks."
—Board Member

"The entire school district would start teaching under the guise of the strategic plan 67 of us created in 2015 that addresses all of these things. It's student driven, with life skills. It's all built into that plan."
—Ms. Muneera, suggestion if NHN had a magic wand

NHN has a profound impact on families as a whole, through facilitating advocacy and community voice with systems that impact them, like elected representatives and the local school district. One parent/caregiver spoke about reaching out for help when their child's educational needs weren't being met. The parent/caregiver was trying to advocate for their child, but wasn't sure how to do it well. Another parent/caregiver described unsupportive interactions with a teacher when a child was struggling to understand an assignment. Muneera immediately responded, "Set up a meeting." Muneera attends school meetings with parents, regularly interacts with teachers, and generally models the advocacy skills that parents can then practice on their own. She has also expressed appreciation where the school district has listened and taken some of the concerns seriously.

Figure 5 shows the top Advocacy with Systems themes for adults only. A few children mentioned their own self-advocacy, so we included one quotation above to again illustrate how the children pick up on what the adults are modeling.

However, children are not included in Figure 5 because they did not speak of advocacy at the system level. Adults spoke about how NHN helps both the school district and themselves, as well as the context of historical and current inequities in the schools.

Figure 5

Top 3 Advocacy Themes: Adults
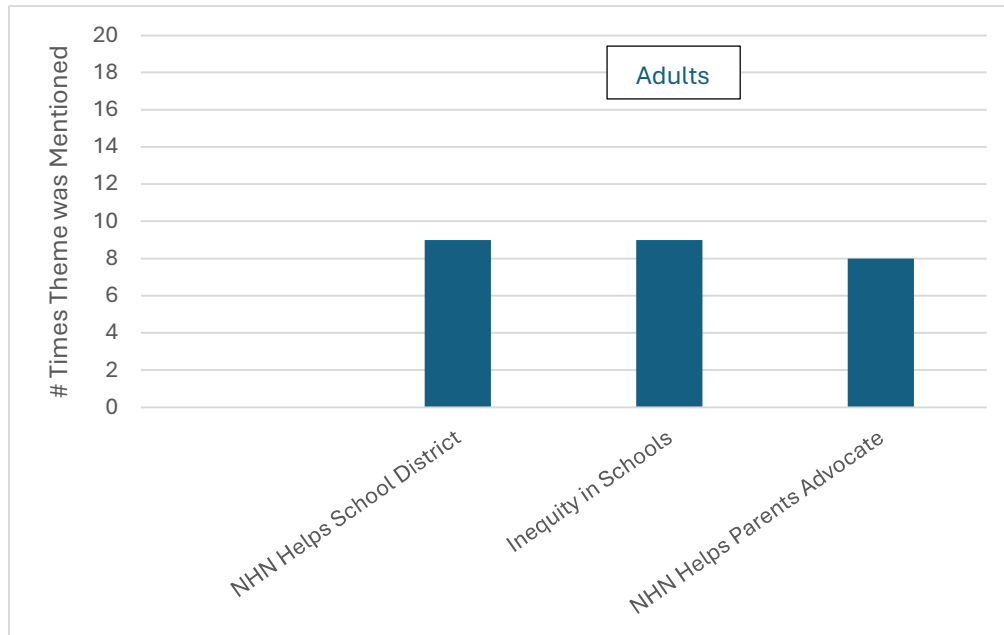
NHN's work can be characterized as part of the settlement house tradition dating back to the late 19th century. Settlement houses don't dispense charity; instead, they approach social ills by pulling from community strengths and community leaders to work towards the general welfare (Blank, 1998). Settlement houses foster community organization and cooperation around common problems, using strategies that support active involvement by the community (Ohmer, Mendenhall, Carney, & Adams, 2022). In addition to directly supporting student learning, Muneera also builds relationships with the school district. She stays in communication with teachers about the curriculum so that *The Homework Club* can better support student learning. With parent/guardian permission, she also monitors grades to support children's development of accountability for their work.

There are great benefits to cooperation or integration between schools and OST programs. A study of an English language learning OST program integrated within a school found that tutors perceived advocacy as creating a welcoming environment, voicing what is needed within the institutional context, and promoting student learning (Ridley, King, Yoon, & Yi, 2019). In a study of how school staff perceived the work of another OST program integrated into schools, the researchers found that the OST programs boosted interpersonal skills, while taking on greater responsibility for ensuring the effectiveness of program fit for student needs (Ruhr & Danforth, 2024). While NHN is not integrated within

the school district, it does take on the responsibility to foster the close partnership that leads to the benefits described here.

Conclusion

By approaching its work with both "head and heart," Neighbors Helping Neighbors on the Main Line (NHN) delivers outstanding results in *The Homework Club* and its other programs. We have focused in this document on the major themes that emerged from the Focus Groups and Interviews that we conducted with NHN stakeholders, but it's worth pausing to also note two smaller, though no less important, observations that we made.

Going back to Bloom's Taxonomy, NHN also fosters learning in the third domain: Psychomotor learning ("what action(s) do I want learners to be able to perform?"). This domain includes skills of perception, simulation, conformation, production, and mastery (Munzenmaeir & Rubin, 2013). *The Homework Club* has incorporated a curriculum to teach the practice of cursive writing, while *The Garden Club* gets the children's hands into the soil to learn about math.

We also observed a familial aspect to NHN's work, particularly in the relationships with Ms. Muneera. She was described as a community aunt. One teacher/tutor commented on her "very strict motherly discipline. 'Mother Muneera has come out!' You can tell when a mother vs a teacher is disciplining." Some parents/caregivers look to her as an example, and learn from her as well. In this way, *The Homework Club* in general and Ms. Muneera in particular take on a bridge role between parenting and teaching, reinforcing the structure that supports the children's overall learning and development. For this reason, we acknowledge succession planning as a key next step in NHN's development as an organization, to ensure continuity in the work and community relationships.

Finally, we would like to highlight the recommendations that emerged from the Focus Groups and Interviews. Both child and adult respondents noted the depth of individualized learning that happens in *The Homework Club* in contrast to the more rigid curricular requirements that the school district adheres to. Adult respondents talked about ways to further the partnership between NHN and the district. For example, there was discussion of progress the school district has made in learning from NHN, and suggestions that NHN could offer professional development to teachers. At the same time, there is a long way to go in terms of addressing the historical racism that underlies the inequities experienced by the community.

A concrete mechanism to address the historical racism would be to provide funding for NHN's programming. Increased financial support could allow the Education Empowerment programs to:

- Celebrate the children's accomplishments with enriching field trips
- Visit local colleges to show the children possibilities for their future

- Purchase a building with a larger space to accommodate more concurrent programming
- Purchase more school supplies, books, and computers for use at giveaways and in the *The Homework Club*
- Hire more tutors from the community
- Provide consulting to other localities, to duplicate the success of NHN elsewhere

More than one adult commented on Muneera's ability to stretch resources and her commitment to draw on everything within her reach to serve her community. During the bookbag giveaway, she purchased more supplies midway through the event when they were starting to run out. She finds room within her budget to supplement food resources when donations in a given week don't meet community need on their own. She networks and connects with anyone and everyone, mobilizing the energy of those around her in service of the greater good. This includes the two researchers from the Social Justice Initiative, who have donated part of their time to produce this report, and the other members of the ART who donated all of their time to the project. In the true spirit of participatory action research (PAR) in general, and *Community Dialogues for Action (CDAs)* in particular, we hope this project leads to greater investments being made in NHN.

Through the process itself, the SJI researchers were changed. In having this opportunity to work closely with the Action Research Team (ART), as in all authentic relationships, we learned more about ourselves and the power of meaningful connections. The "head and heart" ethos that we encountered is infectious, and helped us to deepen our understanding of the co-responsibilities that exist within a community-centered space.

In short, directing resources towards NHN means directing resources to a historically divested community that is mobilized to take care of each other. For those who care about everyone having what they need, investing in NHN is both a way to give back and to experience a boost to one's own "head and heart"!!

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How NHN Fulfills its Mission by Offering *The Homework Club*
"The Secret Sauce"

NHN stands in the gap for our underrepresented neighbors...

Cognitive Learning | Affective Learning

While educating and reforming the entities that serve them to create a more empowered community...

Advocacy with Systems

Where everyone has the tools and resources they need to thrive.

Family Support and Engagement