

Collaboration at the Center: Building a Community Consortium for Real Change

By Michael Selkis

March 13, 2025

Across the nonprofit and education sectors, there's a spirit of innovation in the air. From conferences to classrooms, conversations often center around the newest tools and technologies—especially Artificial Intelligence (AI)—as if they alone will solve the longstanding challenges facing marginalized communities. And while technology can offer support in important ways, we know from experience that sustainable, transformative change requires something far more powerful: **collaboration grounded in relationships, trust, and shared purpose.**

At 82nd Street Academics, we are stepping into this moment by forging meaningful partnerships with organizations that are deeply committed to addressing the real, complex needs of our communities. Together, we are creating a **Jackson Heights Community Consortium**, a coalition of nonprofits, educators, and community-based organizations working side by side to support families, uplift students, and build systems that foster lasting equity and opportunity.

Our work has begun with two extraordinary organizations: *The Relationship Foundation* and *The Center for the Integration and Advancement of New Americans* (CIANA). These partnerships represent the heart of what true collaboration can accomplish. But they are just the beginning. We are actively recruiting other organizations to join us in this growing consortium—because the scale of the challenges we face requires collective strength and a shared commitment to transformative action.

Starting with Relationships: SEL at the Core of Community Transformation

Our partnership with *The Relationship Foundation* places social-emotional learning (SEL) at the core of our work. Building on the foundational work of Dr. Marshall Rosenberg and his groundbreaking book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, The Relationship Foundation has created practical, accessible modules for teachers, parents, and students alike. Their approach weaves together key topics such as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), trauma-responsive education, empathy, healthy relationships, and the impact of digital communication on emotional health.

One of their most innovative contributions is the connection they've drawn between Depth of Knowledge (DOK) questioning strategies and the emotional states of students. This insight is a game-changer in fostering student voice, engagement, and academic success. By teaching the language of feelings and fostering a culture of empathy and understanding, The Relationship Foundation empowers students and families to advocate for themselves in ways that build stronger, more supportive communities.

At 82nd Street Academics, we are proud to embrace The Relationship Foundation’s framework as our **foundational SEL approach**. Their work doesn’t just complement our mission—it strengthens every aspect of it. Together, we are committed to ensuring that every child, family, and educator in our community has access to the social-emotional tools they need to thrive.

Welcoming New Americans with Dignity, Respect, and Opportunity

The second anchor in our consortium is *The Center for the Integration and Advancement of New Americans* (CIANA), a nonprofit that serves immigrants and newcomers to New York City, with a focus on populations from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. CIANA offers language instruction, legal assistance, civic education, case management, and specialized services for asylum seekers—meeting people where they are and guiding them toward social and economic self-sufficiency.

What makes CIANA’s work particularly powerful is its commitment to cultural competence and linguistic accessibility. With a staff and volunteer team fluent in Arabic, French, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish, CIANA ensures that every person they serve feels seen, heard, and valued.

82nd Street Academics is partnering with CIANA to expand educational services and community outreach in Jackson Heights. Together, we’ve developed a **holistic integration model** that supports new immigrants from their earliest days in this country. We are helping families navigate school systems, access adult education opportunities, and preserve their cultural heritage while building a future here in New York City. CIANA doesn’t just offer services—it offers hope and belonging.

A Growing Consortium for Change

These two organizations—The Relationship Foundation and CIANA—are the first members of what we believe will be a powerful and expanding **Community Consortium for Change** in Jackson Heights. We are actively reaching out to additional partners—nonprofits, grassroots groups, educational institutions, and social service agencies—to join us in this work.

Our vision is to create a **network of organizations** that:

- Conducts asset mapping and gap analysis to identify and meet community needs.
- Applies jointly for grants and funding opportunities.
- Designs and delivers programs that address literacy, social-emotional health, food security, safety, and culturally responsive leadership.
- Works together to support students, families, and educators with an emphasis on sustainability, equity, and impact.

We aren’t here to make speeches at conferences or to celebrate imagined victories in distant boardrooms. We are here to do the hard, often unglamorous work of showing up, listening, and building systems that truly serve our communities. **And we are inviting others to join us.**

Where Technology Can Help—and Where It Can't

As we build this consortium, we recognize that technology, including AI, has a role to play. One of our goals is to explore how AI tools could help us **identify funding opportunities in real time**, connect us with like-minded organizations, and streamline communication across sectors and languages. If designed in partnership with the people on the ground, these tools could accelerate our efforts and allow us to focus more of our time on direct service and community engagement.

But technology is not a replacement for human connection, for the trust that builds when you meet families face-to-face, and for the deep, sustained work of healing systems that have historically failed marginalized communities. **Solving real problems requires showing up and doing the work. It requires listening, humility, and sustained collaboration.**

Moving Forward, Together

At 82nd Street Academics, we are committed to this path. With The Relationship Foundation and CIANA as our partners, and with more organizations joining us every day, we are building something transformative—something that can change lives today and build brighter futures for tomorrow.

We hope funders and supporters will see the importance of what we are doing and invest in this **community-driven, collaborative model** for systemic change. Because our communities deserve nothing less.

This is just the beginning. We are ready. And we invite you to join us.