

Strong Start for Kids

An Interview with Carra Cote-Ackah,
President, Vanguard Group Foundation and
Executive Director of Community Stewardship, Vanguard

EDITORS' NOTE Carra Cote-Ackah leads Vanguard's global philanthropic and volunteer programs that strengthen communities and families. She also serves as Vice Chair of The Surdna Foundation; Senior Fellow at the Center for High Impact Philanthropy; Executive Forum Member of Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship; and member of Young Presidents' Organization (YPO). She holds a B.S., summa cum laude, from Vanderbilt University; an M.A. from Duke University; and an M.B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania.



Carra Cote-Ackah

COMPANY BRIEF Vanguard (vanguard.com) is one of the world's largest investment management companies. As of October 31, 2019, Vanguard managed \$5.9 trillion in global assets. The firm, headquartered in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, offers 423 funds to its more than 30 million investors worldwide.

How do you define your role at Vanguard?

Within Community Stewardship, we aim to make progress on intractable social issues. That means we're creative, collaborative, and persistent across our portfolio of programs. I lead a small, enterprise-focused team that designs global programs and effectively deploys our time, talent and resources to strengthen communities. We drive value by promoting community impact globally, empowering an engaged crew (what we call our employees), and supporting Vanguard's brand and reputation.

How critical is C-Suite commitment to being successful in these efforts?

Our leadership team considers Vanguard a caretaker of our clients' investments in the broadest sense. We're committed to developing products and services to serve our clients' interest and give them the best chance for success, and also to investing in both the workplace and the communities in which our crew live and work. Many of our leaders are active in the community and serve on non-profit boards and committees. There's also a dedicated group of senior leaders that oversees Vanguard's global philanthropic programs throughout the year.

Our leadership team helps shape our approach to community investments. In addition

to social impact outcomes, they're well aware of existing research that shows that high-quality community programs can also drive employee engagement. We have year-round opportunities that make it easy for our crew to get involved, including episodic service days, skills-based volunteering options, and a robust workplace giving campaign and matching gift program, among many others. Approximately 80 percent of our employees participate in at least one of our programs, which is well above the corporate average and a real testament to our mission-driven culture.

Is it important that the areas that Vanguard supports align with its business?

We act as stewards for our 30 million clients' hopes and dreams through prudent and aligned investment management. Using our core expertise, we have developed and offer a suite of free experiential financial literacy programs for classrooms and homes that will prepare the next generation of investors to have the best chance at economic success.

In 2015, we took a hard look at where we thought we could make the greatest difference, knowing there was no shortage of deeply important topics on which we could focus. In the end, the same investment philosophy that we share with our clients helped shape our cornerstone philanthropic focus: investing early pays off. Now in its fourth year, the Vanguard Strong Start for Kids Program™, our signature charitable initiative, gives young children living in poverty the opportunity to grow, thrive, and learn with a focus on improving kindergarten readiness. These early investments provide high-quality, nurturing environments and have been shown to have a meaningful and measurable impact on lifelong outcomes, such as educational attainment and economic success.

Since the Strong Start for Kids Program launch, Vanguard has committed more than \$30 million in grants to agencies in Arizona, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. Examples of our work include funding in-home visits by trained practitioners to improve parenting and caregiver skills, expanding high-quality early learning programs, providing more than 450,000 books to children from low-income families, and supporting key systems and

policies that promote improved child outcomes. This work is co-funded by crew and corporate contributions. We are investing in tomorrow by supporting the development of young children today.

How critical are metrics when doing this type of work?

Metrics are extremely important, but they are secondary to strategic clarity across our philanthropic programs. Before selecting non-profit partners and the metrics by which our work will be evaluated, we first needed to define the issues on which we wanted to focus. What are the specific outcomes and impacts that our charitable efforts hope to have within a community?

We selected particular strategies within early childhood that are evidence-informed or have demonstrated investment merit. We then use metrics to provide a more holistic view of the health of a family or a community, as well as in our ongoing diligence to help assess progress and drive action. Having a learning agenda helps us adjust our metrics to know what's working and where we may need to foster more innovation.

How critical is it for Vanguard to build a diverse and inclusive workforce?

Vanguard has prioritized initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion, not only because it's the right thing to do, but because it's a business imperative. Research has proven that companies that value diversity of thought, experience, and background perform better. We have a diversity and inclusion lens across so much of what we do, from onboarding and crew learning experiences to development opportunities with our Crew Resource Groups and job training programs that help ensure we are promoting the most qualified individuals. We also have an equity and inclusion approach that influences the selection of our Strong Start for Kids projects. Kids and families in certain zip codes and of certain demographics are too often limited in their potential. We must do better to close these gaps so that children who start behind don't stay behind.

Our global community-focused work is ever-evolving and responsive to the growing employee, client, and stakeholder demand for responsible, ethical corporate behavior. Having been at Vanguard for three years, I'm proud to contribute to our legacy of community impact and to lead within a purpose-driven company. ●