The StriveTogether, Target, United Way Learning Cohort

Inside the Backbone:
Lessons learned from supporting collective impact

Summary

These three vignettes highlight work by a cohort of United Way communities working closely with StriveTogether, United Way Worldwide, and Target to build and sustain civic infrastructure in support of the success of every child, cradle to career. In these communities United Ways are providing the main backbone functions: driving the establishment of the partnership accountability structure, getting agreement on common outcomes, supporting data-driven action, and generally working behind the scenes to drive the work forward.

Partnerships in these communities are demonstrating how to support improved cradle-to-career outcomes by combining the Strive Framework with the mobilizing and scaling power of United Ways and Target’s commitment to supporting school improvement efforts across the country.

Special attention is given to work that exemplifies the four pillars of Strive’s Theory of Action:

- **Shared Community Vision**: A broad set of accountable, cross-sector community partners come together to implement a cradle-to-career vision for education and communicate that vision effectively.

- **Evidence Based Decision Making**: The integration of professional expertise and data to make decisions about how to prioritize a community’s efforts to improve student outcomes.

- **Collaborative Action**: How data is used collectively by partners to move a community level outcome.

- **Investment and Sustainability**: There is broad community ownership for building cradle-to-career civic infrastructure and resources are committed to sustain the work of the partnership to improve student outcomes.

In StriveTogether’s Theory of Action, the partnerships in these communities are working in the Exploring and Emerging Gateways. They are focused on accessing and collecting data and putting supports in place necessary for data-driven decision making such as an accountability structure to organize their work, prioritized outcomes and baseline data. They also are releasing a baseline report, building capacity for data analysis, mobilizing collaborative action networks, and securing financial and staff resources to support continuous improvement.
Investment & Sustainability: Engaging Community in San Diego’s City Heights Partnership for Children

In October 2011, the Unified School District of San Diego voted unanimously to participate in the City Heights Partnership for Children (CHPFC) and its approach to assuring improved cradle-to-career outcomes for children and families in one of the city’s toughest neighborhoods. Despite a packed school board agenda, more than 50 parents, community leaders, and funders showed up to testify in favor of the Partnership’s vision to champion health, wellness and success “for every child, every step of the way.”

Getting the Partnership to that launching point wasn’t easy, recalls Tad Parzen, the executive director of CHPFC, which is based at United Way of San Diego County (UWSD). It’s involved long hours in school cafeterias, libraries and parent centers building trust with parents who have seen many initiatives come and go, one-on-one meetings with skeptical school principals, and aligning a range of community-based organizations and foundations concentrated – but not well-organized – in City Heights, a densely populated, four-square mile neighborhood Parzen terms the “epicenter of vulnerable youth” in San Diego County.

Authentic community engagement, coupled with leadership from United Way of San Diego County, which has signed on as the anchor entity for CHPFC and is helping lay groundwork for region-wide collective impact efforts, are two factors that have helped position the Partnership as something different, local leaders say.

CHFPC builds on years of investment in City Heights by Price Charities, a public operating foundation, where Parzen served as executive vice president, and the California Endowment, which designated the community as one of 14 participating in its statewide Healthy Communities initiative.

Engaging parents and schools

In previous years, Price Charities supported formation of the City Heights Educational Collaborative, which organized Parent Centers in three of the 13 schools that feed into Hoover High School. During the past two years, the Partnership has helped to expand the number of parents engaged in the “Hoover Cluster” from about 30 to 130. Students, teachers, and principals, as well as representatives from non-profits, philanthropy and the Partnership join with parents each month for highly structured, facilitated meetings that focus on issues such as outreach to bi-lingual parents, implementation of the Common Core state standards, combatting chronic absence, and improving rates of reading and math proficiency. The meetings also focus on and identifying proven practice in those and other areas within cluster schools to lift up and spread.

The invitation to parents, students, teachers, and principals in the Hoover Cluster to support the Partnership’s work was clear, said Parzen. “We said we want to accomplish something together. We know something needs to be different in how the systems that serve people interact so they can be more effective for children in need. As we see kids fall through cracks over and over again, the solution has to involve a set of systems more responsive and adaptive to the needs on the ground.”

The Partnership is responding and adapting to those needs on the ground in different ways. It has played a “broker role” with Price Charities and other partners in establishing health clinics at schools in the Hoover cluster, as well as establishing vision screenings that have provided nearly 500 students with glasses, and mobilizing parent “Promotoras” – highly trusted Latino community leaders and advocates skilled in delivering
informal health education in their neighborhoods – to provide other parents with a summer learning toolkit to help them get their children ready for kindergarten.

Parzen said he is learning the best community engagement is one where he listens more, talks less, and lets parents make the case for the Partnership. At a meeting in early 2011 with parents prior to the school board vote, some parents challenged Parzen on whether the Partnership would be different from previous initiatives, as well as his commitment to the community, since he doesn’t live in City Heights. “This sentiment began to ‘bubble to the top’ of the meeting,” said Parzen, who acknowledged he was “not getting the message across” and he was speaking “too systemically.”

But at the same meeting, a City Heights parent leader who had worked in one of the Price Charities’ Parent Centers stood up and vouched for the Partnership and Parzen, stating she would not support either “unless I believed in this work or believed we can do it,” Parzen recalled. That changed the dynamic in the room, and the meeting eventually became a turning point. “They started talking among themselves – not all of it was pretty,” he said. “There were some challenges from within community, and some people were fearful that we might overtake what they were already doing,” he said. Heated and emotional meetings would follow, “but were able to keep it together because at the core there is a strong group of folks who believe in it, our intent to enhance the work – not overtake it, was earnest and the need was clear,” Parzen said.

Community conversations led by United Way

At the same time the Partnership was meeting with parents in the Hoover cluster, United Way of San Diego County was engaged in a more formal process to listen to what parents and other residents had to say about improving educational opportunity in the city. Inspired by United Way Worldwide’s Campaign for the Common Good, launched in 2010, and training sessions on mobilizing communities around education, income and health, UWSD launched a series of structured community conversations – based on the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation’s model – in the fall of 2010 with hundreds of everyday citizens in 40 communities.

A May 2011 report, Voices for the Common Good: San Diego Speaks Out on Education, distilled themes from the conversations, including the belief that many parents felt shut out by public schools because of language and culture barriers and a strong belief that school can’t do it alone – educating kids is everyone’s business.

Combined with data gathered by the University of San Diego and development of an Education Vision Council that includes Parzen and other community

Defining ‘Community Engagement’ in a cradle-to-career partnership

According to the Strive Network’s Theory of Action, community engagement at the beginning or transactional stage involves awareness campaigns, social media and other mostly one-way communication between a partnership and a community. At the transitional stage, community advisory committees are formed and community conversations are convened to encourage more two-way communication between the partnership and the community. At the transformational stage, issue specific workgroups are formed to foster joint decision-making and co-ownership of outcomes. Community engagement is not a linear process – all three stages will be evident throughout a partnership that is constantly reaching out to different constituencies. “A major lesson learned in this work has been around making sure the purpose of the engagement is appropriate for the audience and at the appropriate depth,” wrote Carly Rospert in a recent series of articles for the Strive Network. “A partnership would be able to engage a small group of teachers at a much deeper level around curriculum alignment than they would a large group of business leaders around the same subject.”
leaders, UWSD moved to address key issues, including improving rates of student attendance in the early grades – a key indicator of whether children will be proficient in reading by the end of third grade. United Way supports The Children’s Initiative, a local non-profit that focused on system reforms to improve children’s health, education, safety and economic security, and their Data to Action campaign to improve school attendance. Gathering parents in groups of 15 to 20 to help identify solutions to chronic absence and other issues has proven critical, said Karen Sprigle, Senior Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer for UWSD, because they have surfaced transportation issues that were preventing families from getting their children to school, as well as beliefs that regular kindergarten attendance is not necessary.

“It is not enough to have parents on a committee,” Sprigle said. “They can try to represent their counterparts, but it is more powerful to have a larger voice. United Way in the last three years has developed a reputation as an organization that can help lift up other voices.”

UWSD also is using community conversations to identify solutions to health and workforce issues, and is incorporating the listening session format into its donor relations and fund development efforts. For the past several years “instead of doing stand-up pitch, we did a community conversation” with community groups and funders. “We started asking aspirational questions, then tied those to United Way’s work and why it is important to volunteer or give to that.”

United Way’s “ethos of listening, learning and acting on that information” helps anchor the work of the Partnership in the community, Parzen said. “There is no wavering from that principle, which ensures legitimacy in the community at all levels and provides public agencies with the capacity they might not have otherwise. Because United Way has gone through a deep process that ensures not just organized community voice, but informed community voice.”

**Engaging the larger community**

United Way of San Diego County’s involvement is helping the Partnership extend its influence beyond City Heights. “Once United Way came into the Partnership, we then had a regional effort engaging the broader community on how City Heights can be a starting point for a regional framework,” Parzen said. Elected officials, the business community, and other agencies are buying in, in large part because of United Way’s credibility in the region and its clear fit with the Partnership’s aspirations. “Collective impact is about a ‘united way,’” Parzen said, “a united vision and a united methodology to see it through. That culture suits our approach to social change. Only united can it happen and it cannot happen merely in the rhetoric. It has to happen in the reality, and the only reality that can move it forward is in a united way.”
Evidence-Based Decision Making: Using Data to Support Continuous Improvement in Spokane

In fall of 2012, Spokane Public Schools launched its first-ever Early Warning System, a data management tool many districts around the country are adopting to target interventions for students at risk of dropping out of high school.

Spokane’s system was developed following a series of reports and studies commissioned during the past three years by Priorities Spokane, a cross-sector coalition of community stakeholders and citizens working on a range of health, education and economic initiatives — including tackling the district’s 25 percent dropout rate.

A 2012 report, analyzing longitudinal data for 7,000 students from the district’s high school graduating classes of 2008 and 2010, estimated that nearly 85 percent of all dropouts could have been identified and helped while they were still in elementary or middle school—based on student attendance, disciplinary and course completion data.

That data galvanized school and community officials, led to creation of the district’s data system, and — most important — a process to share it with community partners. The lesson emerging from Spokane is that cross-partner data management systems critical to collective impact efforts to improve cradle-to-career student outcomes are only as good as the school-community partnerships that back them up.

Shortly after the Early Warning System was launched, Spokane Public Schools reached out to Spokane County United Way (SCUW), Empire Health Foundation, the Center for Children’s Studies at Eastern Washington University and the Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement at Whitworth University to convene three meetings in early 2013 with United Way grantees and other community organizations that provided mentoring, after- and out-of-school time programs and other services to students.

The formation of the School-Community Partnership Committee, which now includes more than 60 community-based organizations, school district officials, government and philanthropic investors who meet on a monthly basis, resulted from a realization that it will take everyone to assure kids don’t slip through the cracks, say Sally Pritchard, Vice President for Community Impact and Leslie Crane, Community Impact Associate at SCUW.

“Over past three years, the district has said ‘We cannot do it alone,’” Crane said. Although the school district has good partners in the community, it doesn’t know enough about which ones are serving which kids at what times after the school day and over the summer.

And community-based organizations need school attendance, behavior and course completion data to help tell them if their programs are helping the children and youth they are serving get and stay on track for graduation.

The United Way of Spokane County is “one of a number of organizations that got alarmed at high school graduation rates and asked ‘what can we do to help?’” said Pritchard. “Our Board adopted improving graduation rates as an organizational priority. As a result, we are providing more funding to targeted intervention programs. We’ve said new dollars will go to what is helping keep kids on track.”

Formalizing data sharing

One outcome from the School-Community Partnership Committee is the development of agreements that strengthen data sharing between schools and community organizations. Spokane Public Schools is now getting annual reports from more than 35 community partners that allow it to inventory programs and align them so students get help at the right time, place and frequency. For example, community groups mobilize about 300 volunteers a year to provide mentoring
to 1428 students during the school year. That data allows the district and partners to work together to assess which students need mentoring and when – such as during the transition from middle to high school.

Although the data system is not a tool for evaluating programs, it is helping the district and community groups identify interventions that can be scaled up across schools.

The ability to better target interventions is what makes the Early Warning System’s individualized and timely data so powerful, said Pritchard. “Teachers and principals always had data, but it was in reams of papers. Now they can look each student up on their dashboard and see that Johnny is in the red zone because he is not coming to school and we are kicking him out (for bad behavior) when he gets here. But if you look at his test scores, you can see he is bright kid and he is on track academically. And that takes you to a different conversation” about how to help.

Data sharing also helps the school district be more effective in sharing its resources with community organizations. The local Boys and Girls Clubs was walking children six blocks to their building for an after school program, until the district provided them with a school district bus. A program that offers after school and summer programs for Native American children — a population with a 50 percent average high school graduation rate in Spokane — wanted a room in a community center. The district instead gave them use of a school building at no cost. And another key outcome of the School-Community Partnership Committee was the decision to hire a full-time school community partnership specialist with funds made available by the United Way and Empire Health Foundation.

Data sharing also is helping target community support to schools that need help the most. In 2009-10, one of Spokane’s five high schools issued nearly 1500 short term suspensions in attempt to improve school discipline — even though the district estimates a single suspension decreases odds of on-time graduation by 20 percent. In response, organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, faith-based groups and Empire Health stepped up to provide professional development to teachers on how to work with students suffering from trauma, and use community service as an alternative to suspension or detention.

It takes trust all around

School districts and community-based organizations both have experienced having data used against them to point fingers, cast blame, and lose civic support. Building trust through open dialogue and solving problems together has been essential part of using Early Warning System data effectively, Spokane leaders say.

Community groups may have initially come to the School-Community Partnership table because they were concerned about the impact of school data on their funding, said Pritchard. But the School-Community Partnership Committee has helped set a different tone: it’s assumed everyone wants to learn together what can move the dial on high school graduation rates. “No one is presenting this with a hard, high-stakes attitude,” said Pritchard. “And that is developing the trust to fail forward — because that is where we learn.”

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**Defining ‘Continuous Improvement’ in a cradle-to-career partnership**

The Strive Network defines continuous improvement as the process by which a program is evaluated on a regular basis and improvements are made based on data. Data management systems enable continuous improvement by aiding the collection, analyzing, and storing of data at both the student and community level. They also promote evidence-based decision making, in which Partnerships integrate professional wisdom with the best available data from empirical sources to make sound decisions about how to deliver education services and programs that promote cradle-to-career outcomes. Data managers are important to maintaining continuous improvement. Geoff Zimmerman, director of continuous improvement for the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati, says strong data managers are able to build relationships and work with partners to develop a community accountability system that incorporates data across the cradle to career education pipeline. They are also bring the capacity to collect, analyze, and report data in ways that measure a Partnership’s impact and that facilitates evidence based decision making and continuous improvement.
The United Way and other partners are using data management systems to treat community-based organizations as professionals who want to use that information to do a better job, added Crane. “They want to develop as professionals, be treated as professionals. No one is proposing to let just data sort out the programs ... instead, it is ‘how can the data help have the conversation and the relationship?’”
**Shared Community Vision: Building the Accountability Structure for Albuquerque’s Mission: Graduate Partnership**

Mission: Graduate has what James Collins, author of *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, calls a Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal: in just the next seven years, add 60,000 Central New Mexico citizens to the ranks of those who’ve earned an associate’s, bachelor’s, or graduate degree.

Anchored by the United Way of Central New Mexico, it is a goal that has enlisted and broad coalition of partners, including the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque Public Schools, Rio Rancho Public Schools, and Central New Mexico Community College, as well as by local hospitals, businesses, media and elected officials.

Few disagree that an all-out effort is needed, especially in terms of closing large gaps in degree attainment among different populations of students. Currently, only 21.4 percent of Hispanic adults and 24.6 percent of American Indian adults in Central New Mexico have a post-secondary degree, compared to 49.1 percent of white adults and 51.8 percent of Asian American adults.

And, to underscore their commitment, Mission: Graduate partners all have signed the Central New Mexico Education Compact, agreeing to the initiative’s collective impact agenda and cradle-to-career outcome indicators, including measurable improvement in the region’s rates of school readiness, reading and math proficiency, high school graduation, college completion, adult education and high wage employment.

But even with commitment and wide community support, Mission: Graduate needed an operating framework that showed how different partners and constituencies would work together in ways that were accountable achieving the initiative’s results, across different levels of engagement.

**Clarifying roles and responsibilities**

As the initiative began to take shape at the end 2012, leaders tried for the first time to flesh out the initiative’s accountability structure, said Mission: Graduate Executive Director, Angelo Gonzales. The initial version called for establishment of a Vision Council composed of CEO-level leaders, an Operations Team with committees for marketing, data, fundraising, and community engagement, and Strategy Groups made up of new and existing initiatives responsible for Mission: Graduate’s priorities. The structure was depicted as an “atomic model” with a sphere for each entity circling Mission: Graduate’s 60,000 degree goal.

Although that structure got across that message that the initiative would be not be a top-down organization, it still didn’t clarify how Mission: Graduate would actually operate. As the initiative’s leaders began to prepare for Mission: Graduate’s formal launch this fall, it became clear a different type of structure, and ways to communicate it to constituency groups as well as general audiences, were needed, Gonzales said.

**Aligning the work to outcomes**

“We needed a way for the community to see themselves in the work and for us to have a conversation with people in the community — whether a family, an organization, or school leaders,” he said. “We needed a structure where we could point to where people could engage with us.”

What’s emerged during the past several months is an accountability structure that allows for those varying levels of engagement by community groups, clarifies roles, and tightens alignment of the work to Mission: Graduate’s goals.
For example:

The 16-member Vision Council, co-chaired by Dr. Kathie Winograd, President of Central New Mexico Community College, and Jim Hinton, President and CEO of Presbyterian Healthcare services, is responsible for developing and guiding advocacy efforts, demonstrating the commitment of civic leaders to the 60,000 degree goal, rallying the community around it, and providing high-level fundraising and policy support.

An Operations Team comprised of the organizations that will provide the data management, communication, management and other backbone functions, including the United Way of Central New Mexico as the leader of the team, with the University of New Mexico Center for Education Policy Research serving as data manager, and the universities Network for Educational Renewal providing support for community engagement. “Multiple organizations playing backbone roles by committing resources and staff time is a powerful thing – to have that many organizations interested in engaging in that deep level of the work,” said Gonzales.

In addition, the Operations Team will serve as the “connective tissue” for the accountability structure. “What has been so clear is how critical communication is to do this work,” Gonzales said. “We can do newsletters and have a great website, but at the end of the day we have to have two-way communication embedded at every level, and this Operations Team will help us make sure we are communicating vertically with the Councils and the Networks and also horizontally, so we do not create new silos.”

Community Support Councils will include three standing entities to assure Mission: Graduate’s data, research and policy agendas are aligned to the initiative’s outcomes and include representatives from three rural counties surrounding Albuquerque. The other Councils will be led by existing community organizations and are responsible for engaging in sustained, two-way conversations with parents and families, youth, educators, businesses and employers, non-profits, faith-based and voluntary organizations and others who can help “lead the charge” for Mission: Graduate with policy makers, local foundations and others. These dialogues will also be critical for identifying existing community assets that can be incorporated into Mission: Graduate’s collaborative action plans.

Collaborative Action Networks responsible for “moving the needle” on Mission: Graduate’s cradle-to-career outcomes, from improving access to quality early childhood education and drop-out prevention and recovery to assuring equitable access to higher education and adult education. The Networks will be convened by existing partner organizations and include a mix of experienced practitioners who will develop action plans for specific outcomes, using local data to identify and scale up what’s working. The Networks represent the deepest level of engagement in the initiative, Gonzales said. “They will make sure that data is front and center, track core outcomes on an annual basis, and look at contributing data much more regularly to help improve our work.”

The clarity of Mission: Graduate’s accountability structure is helping diverse partners find a place in it. For example, the Area Rotary Presidents Group, which represents eight Rotary clubs in Central New Mexico, has agreed to form a Community Support Council comprised initially of the presidents and other top Rotary leaders and, over time, will grow to include other members who are involved in education and service programs. It would work with the appropriate Collaborative Action Networks to improve their connections to local schools and job training agencies, Gonzales said.
One major employer in the region that has formed a close relationship with an Albuquerque middle school wants to create a Community Support Council with other business that will focus on partnering with schools. “You can see coming out of this group a concrete primer on how other employers can do deeper engagement with schools,” said Gonzales. “It is not me going out and saying ‘you should consider partnering with schools,’ but the ones who are already doing it with other businesses and saying ‘this is what we have learned.’ It is mobilizing them as messengers.”

**Closing opportunity gaps**

The Central New Mexico Education Compact partners have signed onto makes “elimination of achievement gaps ‘that perpetuate inequitable outcomes throughout the educational continuum from preschool through college’” a top priority. And Mission: Graduate’s accountability structure makes closing opportunity gaps a fundamental responsibility for all partners, regardless of their role. That reflects the Vision Council’s understanding that “we cannot get to core results without acknowledging the gaps that persist across the community and having some intentional strategies to close them,” said Gonzales.

Such strategies will help assure equitable access to high quality early education, extended learning, tutoring and enrichment support for elementary, middle, and high school students, and connections to asset-building programs for low-income families, Gonzales said. Mission: Graduate will also work make sure all students have access to rigorous college prep course work and dual-credit programs, as well as address institutional barriers low-income and minority students face in higher education systems.

Focusing on equitable outcomes has been a part of the Mission: Graduate vision since the start, but as the initiative’s began to unpack data showing disparities in degree attainment, that emphasis accelerated. “It became clear that closing the opportunity gap is a central result,” said Gonzales, and that Mission: Graduate must recognize “issues such as poverty and income are at the root of lot of barriers to student success.”