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# Improving Outcomes for Opportunity Youth

*A Data Driven Approach*



**StriveTogether**  
Every child. Cradle to career.

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# Improving Outcomes for Opportunity Youth: A Data Driven Approach

There are over 6.7 million American youth between the ages of 16-24 who are neither employed nor enrolled in school. Each year, over one million additional American youth disconnect from the education system or job preparation programs that are designed to aid them as they prepare for their futures.<sup>1</sup> This population of millions is referred to as Opportunity Youth, a title that reminds us that investing in them represents an incredible opportunity for our nation. Such an investment not only better prepares these youth to find fulfilling careers, while helping businesses fill roles that have long been vacant due to a lack of skilled candidates, but it has the potential to disrupt the cycle of poverty for generations to come.

A growing body of research, an increased national interest, and the encouraging work being done on the ground in community programs and partnerships across the country, reveal that the time to act on behalf of these youth is now. This population has become disengaged and disconnected from educational and career opportunities for a multitude of reasons. According to a recent study by FSG, these reasons include:

- a mismatch between available education options and a youth's needs and goals
- policies that focus disproportionately on discipline over rehabilitation
- a lack of special services that allow youth to remain engaged (such as childcare or transportation)
- educational disruptions caused by involvement with the foster care or juvenile justice system

In order to address these challenges, we must first understand them, along with the needs of Opportunity Youth. How do we reengage them? How do we better aid in their overall development? How do we connect them to educational and career opportunities? And how do we succeed when we're currently facing barriers ranging from fragmented services, a deficit of high quality, high-impact programs, and a lack of funding?

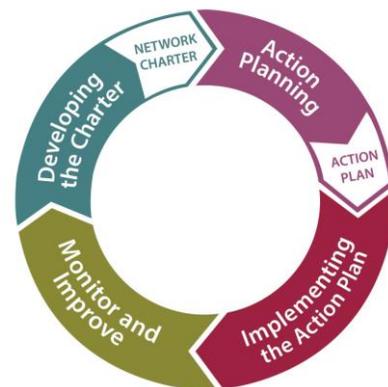
We can succeed by engaging in collective impact, helping communities better address the challenges facing Opportunity Youth and necessary supports for these youth, ultimately focused on improving their educational and career outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Hanleybrown, Tallant, Steinberg and Corcoran. "Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth." 2012.

Members of StriveTogether’s Cradle to Career Network achieve collective impact by implementing the Theory of Action, encompassing work within four pillars: shared community vision, evidence based decision making, collaborative action and investment and sustainability. In collaborative action, appropriate cross-sector practitioners come together to impact a specific indicator defined by the cradle to career partnership, such as the percent of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders reading proficiently or the percent of high school students graduating within four years. These partners collectively identify and scope the problem, interpret the data, and utilize data to adopt and scale practices that improve student outcomes.

### The Collaborative Action Process



Collaborative action is a cycle comprised of four parts: developing a charter, developing an action plan, implementing action and monitoring and improving action. The use of a continuous improvement process, an ongoing effort to improve the quality of products, services, or processes, is critical in collaborative action. These efforts can seek "incremental" improvement over time or "breakthrough" improvement all at once; processes are constantly evaluated and improved in terms of their efficiency, effectiveness and flexibility.

Charters and action plans are tools that network members use to hold each other accountable to shared measurements and action. The tools are ‘living’ documents that networks update regularly. A charter speaks to the scope of the work taken on by the network; it details the problem area they are working to impact and how members will work together to accomplish their goals. An action plan outlines the strategies that a network will collectively work on during a given timeframe. Embedded in an action plan are long- and short-term targets, measures, projects, and specific action steps. While implementing action, network members institute and closely follow a continuous improvement process, using local data to develop to improve outcomes.

Encouraged by StriveTogether's unique approach to improving student outcomes, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supported the opportunity to deepen and expand this collaborative action process for Opportunity Youth. With their assistance, StriveTogether was able to convene and coach four select cradle to career partnerships where networks were focused on improving outcomes for the Opportunity Youth population:

- The Albany Promise: Opportunity Youth Action Team
- Boston Opportunity Agenda: Boston Service Youth Network (BYSN)
- The Strive Partnership: Youth Career Access Network (Youth CAN)
- Raise D.C.: Disconnected Youth Change Network (DYCN)

These four networks were at different points in establishing their effort to improve outcomes for Opportunity Youth. BYSN has been in existence for over 20 years, while Youth CAN has been around for four years. The Albany Promise and Raise DC were in the very early stages of their

efforts, having recently formed networks focused on impacting outcomes for Opportunity Youth. Though each community faced unique local challenges in addressing the Opportunity Youth population, these networks all shared a similar make-up and commitment to reengaging Opportunity Youth in their community. Three networks focused on increasing the number of youth who graduated with a high school diploma or equivalent, while the other network focused on increasing the number of youth served by partners who achieve competency in employer expectations and requirements. Using local data, community voice and expertise (including youth voice), and national research, community members came together to identify and understand their local Opportunity Youth population, as well as craft and implement strategies to impact outcomes for these youth.

### **Data Lens: Using Local Data, Community Expertise and Voice and National Research**

The foundation of the collaborative action approach is a multilayered data lens used to identify a problem, determine strategies, and continuously improve. This data lens provides a frame for understanding how multiple types of data can complement one another and inform action. Ultimately, StriveTogether posits that this data triangulation is necessary to optimally inform and implement action. While local data remains the primary factor from which all decisions should be based, community expertise and voice coupled with national research play a vital role in informing the focus and action that a network takes to improve an outcome.



#### **Local Data**

StriveTogether defines local data as different types of measures/indicators that are available to help understand local context and the impact or relation to national research. Local data can be especially challenging to obtain for the Opportunity Youth population. Raise DC’s Disconnected Youth Network noted, “given that no single entity is responsible for monitoring the number of disconnected youth, their needs, or the delivery of services, collecting local data was particularly challenging.” Local data is critical to painting a picture of the challenges and strengths within a specific community. Disaggregating this data provides additional information by illuminating challenges and potential areas of focus for a network’s efforts to have the greatest impact with the limited number of community resources. In addition to understanding the problem, local data can be used to identify bright spots where youth may be beating the odds. Local data is also critical for implementing a continuous improvement process and is necessary for identifying local practices which are having an impact on a specific outcome. Without local data, it is extremely difficult to determine practices that are improving outcomes for Opportunity Youth in a community.

One of the first questions commonly asked about the Opportunity Youth population is, “How many youth in our community are disconnected from work or school?” Given the disconnected nature of Opportunity Youth, even getting a handle on the number of Opportunity Youth within a given community can be difficult to determine. Many communities turn to the American

Communities Survey or U.S. Census data to get an estimated number of how many youth age 16-24 in their community are disconnected from either education or employment. Networks also used the high school drop-out rate within their community to compile a snapshot of the potential number of Opportunity Youth. In some cases, networks disaggregate this data by zip codes, schools, age, or race/ethnicity to better understand where a network might narrow their scope to have the greatest impact.

Local data allowed The Albany Promise and Raise DC Networks to focus their scope, identify gaps, inform policy recommendations, and better understand national research. Albany, NY saw a current graduation rate of 55%, with an annual student drop-out rate of 17%. 2013 unemployment rates in Albany were 6.9% and, within three particular neighborhoods, 75% of students receive free and reduced lunch. Based on this compelling local data, The Albany Promise decided to initially focus their efforts to reconnect 16-24-year-olds without a high school diploma or GED within three low-income neighborhoods. Raise DC's Disconnected Youth Change Network (DYCN) examined existing local data to determine how DYCN would focus its collaborative efforts. Given the gaps in local data, DYCN helped execute and expand a youth voices survey, conducted by a member organization, to uncover causes and barriers to reconnection. Using available data, DYCN is defining policy recommendations to drive leadership action, including a policy barrier and a capacity barrier. Currently, there are several policies that have age restrictions, preventing this key demographic from accessing necessary support services (e.g. public transportation subsidies only go up to age 21). DYCN members also compiled a central information repository detailing return-to-school options that spanned across traditional DCPS schools, alternative and adult charter schools, and nonprofits that provide adult basic education services. Through this effort, the data revealed that DC currently does not have enough "seats" to accommodate all youth who have dropped out of school. By using local data, DYCN and the Opportunity Youth Action Team have been able to understand national research in a local context and better able to pinpoint specific gaps and opportunities on which to act.

While the use of local data for The Albany Promise and Raise DC focused on understanding the local context, identifying bright spots and gaps, informing policy recommendations, and better understanding national research, the Boston Youth Service Network and The Strive Partnership's Youth CAN (who are further along in the collaborative action process) are collecting local programmatic data and using this data to practice continuous improvement. For the last five years, BYSN has collected data annually from each member program. With the existing data collection tool, BYSN is able to paint a picture of the number of youth served by BSYN members and the demographic make-up of these youth. Their action plan focused on taking data analysis to the next level, using their data collection tool to examine whether dosage, age, or the different types of barriers experienced by Opportunity Youth had impact on outcomes such as GED attainment, post-secondary enrollment or employment. BYSN has partnered with a local organization which will provide data analysis to unpack these practices and combination of practices having positive impact. Once the data analysis is complete, BYSN has a structure in place to ensure that its member organizations can collaborate to deconstruct these gaps and develop a plan to ensure that Opportunity Youth receive the support they need to be

successful.

Youth CAN has collected common programmatic data for the last four years. Partners analyze data annually to examine the impact their programs are having on youth employment readiness and to share best practices. In 2009, Youth CAN developed and piloted an assessment to determine specific factors that contribute to a youth's ability to be ready for and successful in the workforce. This assessment also helps begin to create a standardized method to collect and measure data/outcomes, with the long-term goal of eventually implementing these processes in all youth-related employment programs. Through the analysis of this initial pilot, Youth CAN members learned that younger youth scored higher than older youth in employment readiness. Additionally, those who had prior work experience scored lower than those with no work experience. The post-assessment data indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-assessment scores for youth who successfully completed the training programs; of the 491 youth who completed the program and completed both the pre- and post-assessments, it was determined that there was a 500% improvement in scores at the end of the summer employment programs.

Though members learned a substantial amount of information about their program outcomes, the data collected was not able to provide detailed information on possible program improvements due to the design of the questionnaires. Over the next several years, Youth CAN worked to improve the assessment to better serve their clients, target interventions to individual youth needs, and increase youth ability to meet employer expectations in the workplace. Ultimately, the job readiness assessment was transformed from pencil and paper to an online job readiness assessment with the goal of expanding the assessment to all agencies serving Opportunity Youth. In addition to the job readiness assessment, Youth CAN has also developed an online application to help better prepare youth for future employment opportunities.

### **Community Expertise and Voice**

Community expertise and voice is qualitative input that provides meaning and context around national research and local data. This meaning and context can be especially powerful when trying to understand or find root causes behind local data, as well confirming or enhancing national research. All networks recognized the need to engage and listen to community expertise and voice, including the voice of Opportunity Youth. Several networks utilized the expertise and voice of youth to gain insights into how to implement a particular strategy or to provide deeper context and meaning around barriers that Opportunity Youth face in education and employment. This information helped networks refine or reconsider specific strategies. Members of the networks who worked directly with Opportunity Youth invited their participation in Network meetings. Youth were also asked to provide input while creating surveys or materials. Gathering community expertise and voice in an authentic and meaningful way, particularly the voice of Opportunity Youth, is a shared challenge among communities.

The Albany Promise's Opportunity Youth Action Network and BYSN are engaging youth to better understand some of the challenges youth face and to garner their support in advocating for

Opportunity Youth. As part of their action plan, the Opportunity Youth Action Network plans to identify youth who are actively engaged in TASC (high school graduation equivalent test in New York) Prep Programs in early 2013 and who are willing to work toward successfully completing the exam. Once they have successfully passed the exams, these youth will become ambassadors of the Opportunity Youth Action Network.

BYSN integrated community expertise and youth voice in establishing a Youth Committee to identify youth barriers to success; youth learned to develop surveys and facilitate focus groups to better understand barriers faced by Opportunity Youth. In addition, youth were engaged in developing a plan to affect policy by aiming to impact funding streams and educate their peers through community organizing and training. Youth and adults have worked together on advocating for needs; together they have visited city councilors annually. While a youth committee member represents the work of the youth committee at monthly BYSN meetings, BYSN is working to more intentionally integrate and align the work of the Youth Committee with the work of practitioners.

Raise DC's DYCN and Youth CAN engaged the voice of the customer in refining strategies and products that are meant to be utilized by youth. DYCN is exploring the development of a virtual re-engagement platform that can be used by out-of-school youth and adults who are assisting them to understand the full landscape of educational options (HS/GED/ABE) that are available. When developing the action plan, DYCN recognized the importance of engaging Opportunity Youth in the design of this portal. As one of the action steps, DYCN conducted several youth focus groups to ensure that the potential users define the information and usability requirements for a proposed virtual platform aimed at reengaging Opportunity Youth. These focus groups will continue to play critical role to testing, refining, and advertising the platform once it is developed to ensure that it meets their needs and is an accessible tool for them.

Youth CAN engaged youth in the validation and testing of their work readiness assessment tool. Youth CAN also integrated community expertise by supporting collaborative action network members in developing detailed specs for the tool, as well as engaging employers to better understand the skills they thought were necessary for youth to exhibit in order to be employable. Youth CAN members were drawing on their own experiences with youth navigating online job applications to develop tools that could be better used to assess their learning.

### **National Research**

National research provides a base of knowledge to inform the local data and community expertise around key factors impacting outcomes for Opportunity Youth. FSG's *Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth* is a robust data source that provides an economical call to action, as well as outlines a variety of barriers Opportunity Youth encounter and several indicators that communities could collectively work together to improve. In many cases, networks utilized this data to create a case for the work of the network and to validate local data and community expertise and voice. National research may also provide insight into best practices that could be incorporated into the action plans developed by networks.

BYSN used national research, particularly *Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth*, to give them a better understanding of the issue and a common language. National research also helped them identify challenges and underscored the importance of collaboration. The information contained in this report reinforced the importance of data as part of the collective impact process. The national research was extremely beneficial in helping to define Opportunity Youth as a whole, as well as the various segments of this population. The FSG report helped to create a common language for the various stakeholders working on this issue in Boston, and also highlighted the complex and interconnected challenges facing Opportunity Youth.

For Raise DC, national research framed the work and provided direction for the DYC. The research on *The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth*<sup>2</sup> has provided a concrete means for the DYC to frame its work not just based on a moral imperative, but an economic one. Also, the existing research on high-risk populations and the causes and barriers to reconnection provided direction regarding local data analysis and project selection. For example, researchers and on-the-ground practitioners highlight key populations of young people who are at high-risk of disconnecting from school.

### **Lessons Learned**

Working with StriveTogether has provided each of these communities the opportunity to not only move their work forward, but also to learn from challenges experienced during the process. In some cases, networks were able to embrace the concept of “failing forward” by leveraging their obstacles into a learning experience.

For instance, BYSN came head to head with challenges involving their local data collection, including how to organize and utilize a large amount of data that had been collected for years but never analyzed. Recognizing that they did not have analysis expertise among members of the network, BYSN reached out to another organization who was able to loan in-kind support to provide the analysis expertise and work directly with the network coordinator to build additional capacity within the network. BYSN was able to draw on the strength of their partnership and relationships with others in the community to secure this additional support. The network leveraged existing resources in the community to build capacity around data analysis within the network.

The Albany Promise began this work relying so heavily on the data that they were getting lost in it— essentially “analysis paralysis”. Because of this, too much energy was being used to understand the data, rather than using the data to inform their work. They changed their course of action and started focusing on using data for decision-making to strategically guide the work of the network forward. This is an important lesson that is applicable to many partnerships— limiting the analysis of data is often necessary to be able to move forward and implement action.

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<sup>2</sup> Belfield, Levin and Rosen. “The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth.” January 2012.

When developing its action plan, Raise DC's DYCN overlooked the powerful potential that could be harnessed among the network members themselves to build upon, improve, and scale existing work. The network had developed an action plan focusing its efforts on two pilot sites that were not fully-invested in the collaborative action work of DYCN. This focus shifted the ownership of the work away from the education partners who were currently engaged as part of the network. After several months of attempting to gain traction with the pilot sites, the pilot never got off the ground. Moving forward, the network has learned to recast its approach to emphasize how network partners themselves can better serve this critical subpopulation of youth. The network learned two critical lessons: (1) *Action must start from within the network's circle of influence.* Network members must own the responsibility of implementing an action plan. However, when additional partners are necessary to enhance existing work, these new partners must be fully integrated into the network. (2) *Do "with," not "to."* Deep engagement with all partners is critical at every stage, from scoping the data to developing the action plan. This level of engagement ensures buy-in at all levels and sets the network up for better success during the implementation phase.

Despite some of the obstacles faced by networks, all made strides in utilizing local data, community expertise and voice, and national research to improve outcomes for Opportunity Youth. Recognizing the adaptive nature of this work is critical for those seeking to make systemic change. The ability to recognize and own challenges that can prevent the work from even moving off the ground is a key tenet of the collective impact process. Communities were also able to move forward by leveraging existing resources, expertise, or shared momentum so as not to reinvent the wheel. It is through this reflection, where mistakes are turned into opportunities for growth, that communities begin to see change.

## Conclusion

Understanding and utilizing a data lens is critical for impacting outcomes for youth across their academic and employment trajectories. The Opportunity Youth population exemplifies the need to intentionally collect and analyze data from the national, local, and stakeholder perspective to develop strategies to help impact outcomes as these youth reengage with programs and services in the community. Though each network experienced unique local context in their efforts, collectively they were able to use data to create and align strategies aimed at serving Opportunity Youth. As communities continue to recognize the exigent need to identify and reengage Opportunity Youth in both education and employment, effectively interpreting data to highlight strategies and continuously utilizing data to improve outcomes provides unlimited opportunities for youth and their communities.

## Learn More!

StriveTogether connects, supports, and facilitates a growing network of communities that are committed to building the civic infrastructure necessary to support the success of every child from cradle to career. To learn more about StriveTogether and the latest innovations in the growing movement of cradle to career education, visit our [website](http://www.strivetgether.org) and check out our [blog](#)!