Theory of Action: Creating Cradle to Career Proof Points

Implementing the Theory of Action

The Theory of Action is based on StriveTogether’s Framework for Building Cradle to Career Civic Infrastructure. The Theory of Action consists of five Gateways: Exploring, Emerging, Sustaining, Systems Change and Proof Point. Within each of the five Gateways, there are a series of quality benchmarks that are key steps in developing and sustaining a partnership. Meeting the quality benchmarks in the Exploring, Emerging and Sustaining Gateways leads to System Change and ultimately Proof Point.

Partnerships implementing the Theory of Action effectively demonstrate four principles as they move from building a partnership to impacting outcomes:

1. **Engage the Community**
   - The work of the partnership must be grounded in the context of the community. Partnerships engage a broad array of community voices through building awareness and information sharing; involving and mobilizing the community towards improvement; and co-developing solutions and strategies with community members.

2. **Focus on Eliminating Locally Defined Disparities**
   - Inequalities in student achievement are defined by each partnership using local data and context. Partnerships make intentional efforts to eliminate disparities in achievement.

3. **Develop a Culture of Continuous Improvement**
   - The work of the partnership focuses on the use of local data, community expertise and national research to identify areas for improvement in a constant and disciplined manner that ensure Partners invest in improvements.

4. **Leverage Existing Assets**
   - The partnership builds on existing resources in the community and aligns resources to maximize impact.

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### Gateways:

#### Exploring

- A cross-sector partnership with a defined geographic scope organizes around a cradle to career vision.
- The partnership publicly releases a baseline report card to the community with disaggregated data.
- The partnership selects community level outcomes to be held accountable for improving.
- The partnership commits to using a continuous improvement process to guide the work.
- An anchor entity is established and capacity to support the daily management of the partnership is in place.

#### Emerging

- The partnership selects community level outcomes to be held accountable for improving.
- The partnership selects core indicators for the community level outcomes.
- The partnership has in place the necessary capacity to support the daily management of the partnership.
- The partnership engages investors to support the operations and collaborative work of partners to improve outcomes.

#### Sustaining

- The partnership collects and disaggregates baseline data by key sub-populations for core indicators.
- The partnership prioritizes a subset of core indicators for initial focus.
- Collaborative Action Networks are engaged and/or formed to improve community level outcomes.
- The partnership mobilizes the community to improve community level outcomes.
- The partnership develops plans to change, support, or inform local, state, or national policy to improve community level outcomes.

#### Systems Change

- Collaborative Action Networks collectively take action to improve the community level outcomes using continuous improvement.
- Opportunities and barriers are identified by the Networks and lifted up for partners to take action to improve community level outcomes.
- Partners allocate and align resources to improve community level outcomes.
- Partners use a variety of data to continuously improve and implement strategies that intentionally accelerate outcomes for populations facing persistent disparities.

#### Proof Point

- The partnership operates with roles and responsibilities as defined in the accountability structure.
- The partnership consistently informs the community of progress, including the release of an annual report card.
- The partnership communicates a common, consistent message across internal partners.
- Partners effectively communicate in ways that demonstrate shared accountability for results and build community engagement.
- Partners consistently build capability and staff are supported with sustainable funding to implement the evolving partnership strategy.
- Public and organizational policies change to support improvement of community level outcomes and narrow disparities.

#### GATEWAYS:

- Organizations, institutions and community members align their work to support the cradle to career vision
- Student-level data is accessible and used regularly by relevant partners to inform actions to improve outcomes and narrow disparities
- Collaborative action efforts are sustained to improve outcomes and narrow disparities
- Partners are engaged and/or formed to improve outcomes and narrow disparities
- Community members are involved in the co-development of solutions to improve outcomes
- Public and private dollars are targeted to spread and sustain data-driven practices
- Partners are supported with sustainable funding to implement the evolving partnership strategy
Evidence-based Decision Making:

Communities often come together to support promising educational programs, instead communities should come together to identify the most important outcomes for children and commit to finding the best ways to drive improvement in those outcomes. Organizing around outcomes, identifying indicators for the outcomes and collecting local data to determine areas of need and promising practices/activities makes this work fundamentally different. Engaged stakeholders who understand local data to form a data team is one strategy commonly used to select indicators, collect local data, communicate the data to the community and provide analysis expertise on behalf of the partnership. As partnerships progress in the work, the collection of data moves from aggregated community-wide data to program and student level data. Partnerships seek ways to make data available on a consistent basis in order for those serving students to have the data they need to continuously improve their services; this includes the use of systems, processes and people. This process involves building trust with stakeholders and complying with federal laws (FERPA & HIPAA) which regulate how data can be shared.

DEFINITIONS:

Community Level Outcomes: Academic points along the cradle to career education continuum that are proven to be key levers that need to be moved in order to achieve the cradle to career vision and goals. Non-academic community level outcomes may be selected in addition to academic community level outcomes. (e.g.: Kindergarten Readiness).

Core Indicators: The specific measures that are being used to track progress on moving the community level outcomes and have been agreed upon to be the main metric, or one that directly measures an outcome. (e.g.: % of students assessed ready for Kindergarten upon school entry)

Baseline Data: Data that is gathered as an initial data set that will be used later to provide a comparison for assessing improvement on community level outcomes.

Key Sub-populations: Populations in which the partnership determines a need for a more intentional focus in order to eliminate disparities in academic achievement. These sub-populations are determined using local context and data and could differ across partnerships.

TImely Manner: Access to data is not delaying the decision making or action-taking of parties relying on it to work effectively.

Local Data: Different types of measures that help to understand local context and impact for the geographically defined scope of the partnership.

Collaborative Action:

Several different types of action take place through the implementation of the Theory of Action. Collaborative Action is about community members coming together to use data in disciplined manner to collectively move an outcome. Collaborative Action uses a process of continuous improvement that includes the following components:

- Focuses on improving outcomes and indicators
- Uses local data
- Leverages existing resources;
- Includes the voice of the community (where appropriate)
- Ensures action is within the sphere of control of those involved

Collaborative Action requires participation from both practitioners and leadership. In the early stages of the work, Networks are engaged or formed; they then develop charters and action plans using disaggregated student level data and ultimately identify practices/activities that improve community level outcomes. Through their work, Networks identify opportunities for partners to improve outcomes.

DEFINITIONS:

Continuous Improvement Process: An ongoing effort to improve services and supports for children and families over time in order to improve a community level outcome. These efforts can seek “incremental” improvements over time or “breakthrough” improvement all at once.

Collaborative Action Networks: Groups of appropriate cross-sector practitioners and individuals who organize around a community level outcome and use a continuous improvement process to develop an action plan with strategies to improve that outcome.

Investment & Sustainability:

Initiating or redirecting resources (time, talent and treasure) toward data-based practices on an on-going basis, usually requiring a shift in behavior, particularly in regards to funding and policy. In the initial stages of a partnership, securing multiple years of funding for the operations, including staff of the partnership (see key staff), is critical to long-term success. As the partnership matures, the work focuses on allocating existing resources and identifying new resources (including: knowledge, time, volunteers, skills, financial contributions or other in-kind services) to practices and activities that have an impact on community level outcomes. Policy changes are often a lynchpin for removing barriers that potentially inhibit improvements to community level outcomes. In the latter stages, a Partnership should seek to impact changes in policies to ensure impact over the long-term. Engaging the community in the work of the partnership also ensures long term sustainability.

DEFINITIONS:

Anchor Entity: An organization or entity that commits to acting as the fiscal agent and ensuring the partnership’s long term sustainability. Can provide additional functions such as housing partnership staff.

Key Staff: (can be provided in-kind or loaned to the partnership):

- Partnership Director: A full-time dedicated staff person that provides leadership and management to ensure that the mission and communications of the partnership are put into practice.
- Facilitator: Supports continuous improvement action planning
- Data Manager: Supports analysis, measurement, integration, and reporting of data
- Communication Manager: Supports the cohesive internal and external communications of the partnership
- Community Engagement Manager: Supports and builds relationships with the broader community; actively engages community in the work of the partnership

What is the Theory of Action?

The StriveTogether Theory of Action is a continuous cycle of qualitative and quantitative data gathering and analysis, as a guide to implementing the Framework. The Theory of Action provides clarity and direction in order to ensure that the StriveTogether approach increases consistency in approach across the country. Network members work together to increase buy-in to the Theory of Action, as well as buy-in to the Framework and the resulting impact of this work. Network and holds partnerships accountable for implementing a collective impact effort with rigor.