



Strengthening Pathways to Employment:

Five Communities Collaborate to Identify Outcomes, Share Solutions for Workforce Development

Communities across the country are setting out to ensure that current and future workers—especially those from low-income areas—can find pathways to 21st-century jobs. StriveTogether and Living Cities recently joined together to support five communities engaged in this work.

Convened over a 20-month period starting in early 2014, the Prepare Learning Circle was designed to drive collaboration around workforce development and employment outcomes in communities that are part of the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network.

“Having a successful economy in our region means having successful systems in place to prepare workers for high-wage jobs and remove barriers to those jobs,” said learning circle participant Ryan Twiss, who works with the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership. “Everything we do is about bringing employers, educators and other partners together to strengthen those systems.”

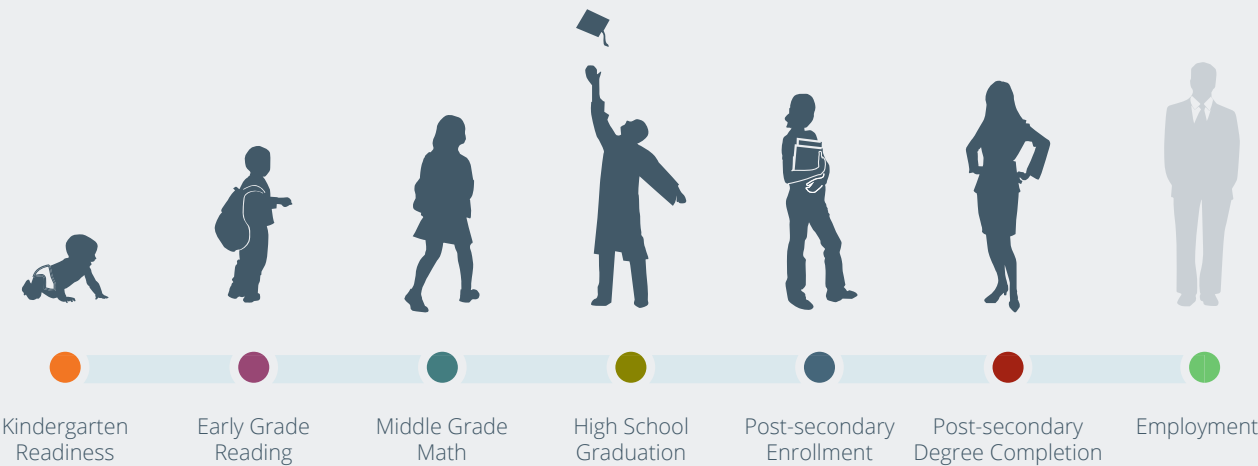


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The Seventh Outcome



Recommended employment outcome goal:

- A post-secondary graduate will be employed on a path to self-sufficiency.

Recommended core indicator:

- Number or percent of post-secondary* graduates employed one year after graduation.

Recommended contributing indicators:

- Percentage of graduates employed in high-demand sectors.
- Unemployment rate for graduates.
- Percentage of students connected to a career.
- Percentage of working-age population employed with some college.
- Percentage of job openings that require post-secondary education.
- Proxy measures for the path to self-sufficiency (e.g. jobs with benefits, student loan debt, net worth, homeownership, income/rent ratio, etc.)
- Labor force participation rate.
- Percentage of adults moving into graduate school connected to high-demand sectors.

Recommended contextual indicators:

- Percentage of 16 to 24-year-olds not enrolled in school and not in the labor force.
- Communitywide unemployment rate.
- Communitywide poverty rate.
- Percentage of people earning a living wage communitywide.
- Non-employment rate.

*Post-secondary includes two-year and four-year programs as well as industry-recognized credentials/certificates.

Note: All data are ideally disaggregated by race, gender and other demographic characteristics relevant to the local community context.



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This isn’t easy work. Whether in Northeast Indiana or anywhere else, the challenges associated with connecting youth and low-income residents to good jobs are many and varied. The work requires extraordinarily high levels of coordination across government, education and business. In addition, outcomes data can be hard to come by. In particular, communities often have a tough time measuring the extent to which their workforce readiness endeavors are actually getting results—for workers and employers alike.

Another participant in the learning circle was Janice Urbanik, executive director of Partners for a Competitive Workforce, a Cincinnati-based collaborative. One of the biggest challenges for her group and others like it is engaging employers in shaping workforce solutions. “Employers need to communicate their needs, help revise training curricula and then evaluate it, and improve their internal systems and practices to strengthen recruiting and retention for workers,” she said.

Urbanik said another challenge is ensuring that students and low-income residents can find support to prepare for and find good jobs. “People need access to affordable quality child care and transportation to allow them to be available to work,” she said. “They also need financial aid to ensure they can get the training they need to build their skills.”

The Prepare Learning Circle was established to help participants step up to these and other challenges. Individuals from the Cincinnati area, Northeast Indiana and three other regions participated in site visits, networking and capacity-building activities. They also shared and captured emerging lessons from their work, received strategic assistance in continuous quality improvement and collaborated in the development of the “seventh outcome” and associated indicators for measuring results on the career end

of the cradle-to-career continuum (see box). In addition, participants received grants to strengthen their collective impact efforts back home.

ALIGNING CAREER PROGRAMS WITH EMPLOYER NEEDS

Ryan Twiss participated in the learning circle with two colleagues: the continuous improvement manager for the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership and a senior official with the region’s Workforce Investment Board. Twiss said it was “an invaluable opportunity” to connect with other communities doing similar work.

Northeast Indiana is a hub for defense and advanced manufacturing industries, but the region has struggled to create systems for ensuring that local residents have credentials and support to obtain these jobs. Twiss’s organization recently convened a collaborative of businesses, community partners and educators to chart a path toward boosting the portion of area residents with high-quality degrees or credentials to 60 percent by 2025. The group’s name, appropriately enough, is the Big Goal Collaborative.

Twiss said members of the collaborative are focusing their efforts on improving career and technical education (CTE) programs, which the partnership’s data showed were not necessarily aligned with employer needs.

“We often feel in this work like we are building the plane as we go,” Twiss said. “There really is no playbook for strengthening CTE programming in a way where you can show measurable results. So having this chance to work with other communities and try to lift up the best strategies and outcomes has been a game-changer.”

One early result of the Northeast Indiana partners’ participation in the learning circle is increased coordination among the CTE programs in the region. The collaborative used grant funds it received through the learning circle to make small grants to the region’s five school-administered CTE centers. The grants allowed center staff to set aside time for shared planning with a focus on continuous improvement. The CTE staff also participated in capacity-building sessions organized by the collaborative.

“This is the first time they have formally come together to share information and develop a common strategy for strengthening their impact,” said Twiss of the CTE programs. Through their collaborative efforts, the programs have been able to raise more money from the school districts to support their work. Another result of the increased coordination is the creation of several new precision machine and welding training programs aligned with employer needs in the region. “Having that network and confidence and access to grant funding and other supports has launched those new programs,” Twiss said.

BUILDING A ‘CROSS-SECTOR MOVEMENT’

Also participating in the learning circle was Angelo Gonzales, executive director of Mission: Graduate, which calls itself a “cross-sector movement” to improve education in central New Mexico. In early 2014, Mission: Graduate convened employers, educators, nonprofits and government representatives to develop strategies for keeping more high school and college graduates in the region. The new partnership is called the Employment Network. According to Gonzales, data gathered by Mission: Graduate shows that central New Mexico loses many of its high school graduates to surrounding states such as California, Colorado and Texas.

As the Employment Network got to work, its data findings prompted participants to focus their attention on the crucial question of how to make sure high school and college graduates are well prepared for jobs in the region. The collaborative’s analysis showed that significant numbers of high school and



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post-secondary graduates are entering the region’s labor market without foundational competencies, limiting their chance of success. According to data collected by Mission: Graduate, students in Albuquerque had a post-secondary degree attainment rate of 38 percent, while regions that are known for attracting skilled young workers—areas like Austin, Texas, and Portland, Oregon—tend to have rates of 50 percent or more. Increasing degree attainment and connecting students to quality jobs in the region became a rallying cry for members of the Employment Network.

Like the Big Goal Collaborative, Mission: Graduate was represented in the Prepare Learning Circle by three people: Gonzales, his data and research manager, and an employer engagement consultant who works with the collaborative. Gonzales echoed Twiss’s comments about the value of sharing best practices with other communities around the country that are wrestling with workforce issues. He also said that Mission: Graduate was able to share its successes with the learning circle on activities such as engaging employers in collective impact work.

Gonzales also appreciated the training the group received in StriveTogether’s approach to improvement. Founded on the tenets of results-based leadership, the StriveTogether model emphasizes four key principles for improvement: engaging the community; focusing on and eliminating locally defined disparities; developing a culture of continuous improvement; and leveraging existing assets.¹

[1] See <http://www.strivetgether.org/blog/2016/05/success-by-design-not-by-chance-building-capability-to-achieve-results-at-scale/>

“We have gotten a lot more sophisticated in Mission: Graduate about understanding how to apply the principles of results-based leadership to our work,” Gonzales said. “I credit the Prepare Learning Circle with helping us think much more clearly about these different frameworks for continuous improvement and how to make the most of them.”

AT THE END OF THE CRADLE-TO-CAREER CONTINUUM

As part of their work, the five communities in the Prepare Learning Circle were asked to come to a consensus on an employment outcome measure for cradle-to-career partnerships across the country.

StriveTogether’s Cradle to Career Network has operated for seven years with six clearly articulated outcomes from kindergarten readiness and early-grade reading to post-secondary degree completion. Now, thanks to the work of these five communities, StriveTogether is recommending an optional seventh outcome and associated indicators (see box on page 2) that will help gauge what’s happening on the career end of the continuum. The outcome measures the percent of post-secondary graduates who are employed and on a path to self-sufficiency one year after graduation. The outcome is considered optional because of the challenges associated with gathering the necessary data on everything from student progress to employment status and earnings. Another hurdle is the need for state and federal policy changes to make this data more accessible to all partners. Improving data quality and expanding access to this kind of data are the goals of the Workforce Data Quality Campaign.²

Despite the challenges around data accessibility, Gonzales said he found it “enormously helpful” to be part of the process of naming the seventh outcome. He added that Mission: Graduate’s Employment Network already has adopted the outcome as the focus of its work. “That has helped us create real clarity around what we are doing. There is a shared understanding across all the partners of what our work is about,” Gonzales said.

In the past year, the Employment Network has connected with the New Mexico Higher Education Department to identify data sources for assessing progress toward this new outcome. Fortuitously, the network found that the state has data on the percentage of college graduates who are employed one year after graduation. “It’s not perfect data, but it is a start—and it is helping us move closer to having the systems in place for measuring the outcomes we all want,” Gonzales said.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT IN ACTION

The collaboratives that were part of the Prepare Learning Circle represent employers, community-based organizations, government, higher education, K-12 schools and more. StriveTogether tallied 150 engaged partners across the five communities. And now, thanks to their participation in this pilot collective impact initiative, all of these partners are better equipped to work together to boost career outcomes in their regions.

“Any time you have a chance to clarify your outcomes and your purpose and the language you are using to drive your work, it is time well spent,” said Twiss of the learning circle experience. “And to be able to learn with other people in other communities who are doing work that is similar to ours was icing on the cake.”

[2] See <http://www.workforcedqc.org/>

Prepare Learning Circle Participants

Mission: Graduate (Central New Mexico)

Mission: Graduate’s Employment Network is working to increase educational attainment within central New Mexico’s workforce. The group works with school district and college leaders to take action on strategies that are intended to improve the career readiness of local graduates, while exposing them to potential careers to help them find gainful employment in central New Mexico.

Thrive Chicago (Chicago, IL)

Thrive Chicago’s Employment at a Living Wage Change Network is focused on improving workforce outcomes for opportunity youth through two channels: 1) facilitating a cross-sector strategy development process that activates new knowledge about who opportunity youth in Chicago are, who serves them and what strategies we should pursue collectively as a city to reduce their number in Chicago; and 2) testing and scaling innovative practices to better recruit, prepare, match and retain opportunity youth in Chicago in entry-level jobs through a hiring fair strategy.

All Hands Raised (Multnomah County, OR)

All Hands Raised recently convened a cross-sector task force to increase the number of local high school students moving into careers in manufacturing and construction. The partners have launched a targeted campaign to increase awareness and positive perceptions of construction and manufacturing careers among high school counselors, teachers and school leaders. In addition, two demonstration high schools are currently working with All Hands Raised to test and scale a set of core practices that help more students—especially underrepresented students—complete career-technical pathways.

Big Goal Collaborative (Northeast Indiana)

Convened by the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership, the Big Goal Collaborative unites businesses, community partners and educators to chart a path toward the goal of increasing the number of residents with high-quality degrees or credentials to 60 percent. Members of the collaborative are focusing their efforts on improving career and technical education (CTE) programs, which the partnership’s data showed were not necessarily aligned with employer needs.

StrivePartnership/Partners for a Competitive Workforce (Cincinnati, OH)

Partners for a Competitive Workforce is a partnership in the tri-state region of Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana focused on coordinating workforce efforts under a common umbrella. Priorities include: connecting business with qualified workers; aligning education with employer needs; and improving work readiness services to help individuals obtain and retain gainful employment.

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Founded in 1991, Living Cities harnesses the collective power of the world's largest foundations and financial institutions to build a new type of urban practice that gets dramatically better results for low-income people, faster.

About StriveTogether

StriveTogether works with communities nationwide to help them create a civic infrastructure that unites stakeholders around shared goals, measures and results in education, supporting the success of every child, cradle to career. Communities implementing the StriveTogether framework have seen improvements in kindergarten readiness, standardized test results, and college retention.

Learn more about the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network at strivetgether.org

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Every child. Cradle to career.

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