

Mobilizing the Community to Improve Outcomes

Cincinnati's Successful Formula for Transformative Change

On November 8, 2016, the Cincinnati community expanded access to quality early learning opportunities through a historic ballot initiative. Issue 44, also known as the Cincinnati Preschool Promise and Cincinnati Public Schools levy, will generate \$48 million in revenue for schools, with \$15 million going toward making two years of preschool available and affordable to every 3- and 4-year-old in the city. What did it take to achieve this victory, and how might other communities follow a similar mobilization process to achieve results?

Start with the data

Local data illuminated that more than 40 percent of Cincinnati's children enter kindergarten unprepared. The gap is even greater for low-income children. National research shows quality preschool makes a big difference, and the benefits stay with children throughout their lives. For example, the [national Early Childhood Longitudinal Study program shows](#) that students who attended a preschool program scored higher on reading and math tests than did children who received parental care. Studies also show a reduced use of special education services among preschool participants, leading to cost savings for school districts and the government, according to the Center for Public Education.

The benefits of quality preschool extend to parents, neighborhoods, employers and entire communities. Quality preschool is also a sound economic investment, with returns estimated at \$4 for every \$1 invested¹. Yet preschool remains expensive for most American families. Child care costs for a 4-year-old is more than in-state public college tuition in nearly half of states, [according to a study by the Economic Policy Institute](#). Government programs subsidizing or providing preschool education have become a national priority.



Make the case

The path to victory began with a regional commitment to early childhood. In 2003, United Way of Greater Cincinnati launched Success by 6 as a communitywide effort to get at-risk, low-income children ready for kindergarten. A few years later, [StrivePartnership](#) was formed as a cross-sector group of leaders focused on the cradle-to-career success of every child, expanding the regional focus. This group's intent was not to launch a new program, but to create a backbone organization to facilitate local partners' alignment, goal setting and investment toward a common vision for transforming education and creating equitable outcomes for kids.

StrivePartnership's Student Success Network worked with Cincinnati Public Schools and

Cincinnati Children’s Hospital to gather data for continuous improvement. Success by 6 leveraged the data to provide learning supports for district leaders and early education professionals. In Northern Kentucky, they partnered with local providers to increase access to high-quality early learning. With belts tightening in Ohio and Kentucky state capitols, their coordinated efforts spurred corporate and philanthropic leaders to make investments in evidence-based strategies that helped dollars go farther — producing innovative solutions to persistent challenges along the way.

With an entire community in motion, Cincinnati saw increases in school readiness. But fewer than half of young people entered kindergarten ready to succeed, and it soon became clear demand for preschool slots was higher than the space available. There needed to be an effort to increase overall access to high quality early childhood education. In 2010, StrivePartnership joined regional partners to launch an ambitious set of [Bold Goals](#) for education, health and employment, establishing universal preschool for area 3- and 4-year-olds as a key strategy for improving school readiness.



Motivate community action

When leaders looked for a model for universal preschool, Denver fit the bill. The Denver Preschool Program had been running since 2006, funded by a sales tax increase approved by voters. The increase funded a year of preschool for 4-year-olds over 10 yearsⁱⁱ. In partnership with other local stakeholders, Cincinnati Preschool Promise (CPP) was formed with an initial proposal that would take the Denver approach a step further by funding both 3- and 4-year-olds. Having a clear goal of two years of quality preschool for every child gave CPP a galvanizing message that was easy to communicate with the community and helped build the coalition necessary to build a public campaign.

In 2013, the CPP team knew that it would make a proposal whose destiny would lay with voters at the ballot box. Team members needed a public-facing campaign with a compelling vision, data as evidence and a high-functioning organizing and outreach strategy reflective of their grass-roots beginnings — from the ground up. Before they began reaching out to the public, they entered a planning phase that included research and polling. Although universal preschool polled well, CPP chose to wait and implement an aggressive community organizing program that would build momentum in communities over three years. This was a critical decision, given that the city had not had a successful levy increase to support education since 2008. And organizers likely remembered the vote on a 2011 failed attempt to pass a levy increase requested by the school district. A longer sustained effort would offer more opportunity to educate the public with deep, grass-roots strategies, including listening sessions with parents, providers and neighborhood leaders; and collecting signatures and contact information for meaningful pledges of support.

This type of cross-sector collaboration was novel. “I don’t recall — prior to StrivePartnership — those

kinds of deep collaborations across powerful organizations,” said Ozie Davis from the Avondale Comprehensive Community Development Corporation, a Cincinnati nonprofit charged with organizing neighborhood projects.

Build a strong coalition

This effort did not get across the finish line without strong cross-sector, cross-community relationships on the ground. In 2013, CPP launched a community engagement campaign, using house meetings, public events and street teams armed with clipboards in hand to share information and collect signatures from supporters. The kickoff caught a surge of support when participants in the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber of Commerce’s Leadership Cincinnati Program launched an awareness campaign that included the Preschool Promise Pledge, signed by more than 160 business and community leaders, elected officials and the presidents of both the University of Cincinnati and Xavier University, which showed broad regional support.

“When we birthed the concept of Preschool Promise, the business community didn’t get why preschool is important,” said Leslie Maloney of the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation, a previous Leadership Council member for StriveTogether. “To see a seismic shift in attitudes and beliefs and willingness to support, they get it. It’s an example of one sector that has become significantly more involved.”

Faith communities also played a major role. Cincinnati’s Crossroads Church held fundraisers to help pay for the effort, and there was also a major boost brought by the AMOS project, a faith-based initiative focused on social justice issues that signed on as supporters backed the commitment of more than 60 congregations. In 2015, [AMOS hosted a community meeting at a local church](#) and pledged support to Preschool Promise. The group later took

to the streets with what they called the “people’s platform” to register new voters in support of the programⁱⁱⁱ.

Members of the business community backed [a report from the RAND Corporation](#), a public policy research organization, after vetting the potential impact of an additional \$15 million through the Preschool Promise over five years. They validated what leaders had been saying for years — investment in expanded early care and education shows a 4 to 1 return on investment and long-term economic impact, especially for poorer families in the region. Young professionals joined the campaign as community ambassadors and took to the pages of the Cincinnati Enquirer, the local newspaper, to make a case for increased funding^{iv}.



[YP steering committee Co-chairs William Thomas and Jay Shifman collaborated on an op-ed](#) following their successful young professionals event in support of CPP, noting that “young people of all races and political persuasions from across our city showed up in numbers not seen in support of other recent efforts. Many of the young professionals at the event don’t have children of their own, but there was one theme: These are all of our children.”

Finish strong

In the end, by November 8, 2017, the CPP campaign collected more than 10,000 signatures, held more than 500 events and, on election day, ran a “get out the vote” program on par with presidential campaigns, also on the ballot that day. Volunteers made phone calls and worked the polls, with individuals assigned a given location to be sure that taxpayers remembered to vote on Preschool Promise in addition to the various candidates they would choose for the day. That night, Cincinnati Preschool Promise passed by an overwhelming margin. The result is an increased levy totaling \$48 million over five years. And the new infrastructure and deep relationships from the organizing effort will help to ensure systemic policy change for communitywide results.

“I’m proud the Cincinnati community rallied behind strengthening quality schools and expanding quality preschool, which are critical to our city’s workforce, neighborhoods and future,” said Greg Landsman, former executive director of StrivePartnership, who stepped away to take the helm of the Cincinnati Preschool Promise initiative. “A strong start for our children means a strong future for Cincinnati. It will help the entire community by producing the workforce essential to create and keep good jobs and healthy neighborhoods.”



Work ahead

Expectations are high for implementation in the 2017-18 school year, where an estimated 1,000 more students will have access through the new program. Luckily, the infrastructure from the community-driven campaign effort persists. United Way of Greater Cincinnati has been chosen as the home for the new funds and expansion plan, with a board of directors nominated by United Way, Cincinnati Public Schools and Cincinnati Preschool Promise, representing parents and early care and education providers, educators and business and community leaders. Among the top priorities for the community is not only to set the table for increasing access for 3- and 4-year-olds, but increasing quality across the board.

“We know we don’t have enough quality preschool seats,” Stephanie Byrd, new interim executive director for Cincinnati Preschool Promise. “We estimate that 7,700 children will want to participate. There are about 7,100 preschool slots, and only about 40 percent of them are quality. Our challenge and our opportunity are to increase the number of quality seats, especially in communities where access and resources have historically been limited.”

This work not only calls for the more than \$7 million in new funding for tuition assistance, but technical assistance for providers and professional development for educators. Funds made available by the levy increase will help improve quality in early care and education programs across the region — helping the work that has been incubated in this community reach more young people and moving the work closer to population-level results for kids.

Formula for transformative change

Greg Landsman, former StrivePartnership executive director who helped to spearhead Preschool Promise from an idea to a ballot measure, identified

the following as key elements to the success of the initiative:

- **Develop a compelling vision for change around shared outcomes** — Cincinnati Preschool Promise (CPP) was built on the strength of a clear vision to support kindergarten readiness: Two years of quality preschool for every child.
- **Organize a broad, initial coalition of programmatic and philanthropic partners** — Broad coalitions helped to extend the work in Cincinnati and later offered a stunning example of cross-sector, cross-community buy-in to make a case for change.
- **Plan your work and work your plan** — CPP took the time to build an initial strategy for organizing, communications, research and fundraising, prior to engagement. The right execution put them in the position to make their policy change objective a regional priority.
- **Share your campaign with the community** — This people-powered operation was characterized by listening sessions with communities and families, letters to the editor and house parties, and volunteers collecting signatures and voter registration forms in the streets.
- **Develop a strategy to bring key partners into a winning coalition** — Don't leave out your stakeholders. Business and faith leaders, elected officials and others with significant influence can lend a powerful voice to help you make your case.
- **Ensure there is a plan to sustain that systemic policy change** — CPP and coalition leaders did not simply plan for a win at the ballot. Issue 44 represents a policy victory that will support ongoing efforts to transformative results for children and students.

About StriveTogether

StriveTogether leads a national movement of 71 communities to get better results in every child's life. We coach and connect community partnerships across the country to focus efforts and close gaps, especially for children of color and low-income children. Communities using our approach have seen measurable gains in kindergarten readiness, academic achievement and postsecondary success. The StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network reaches 8.2 million students, involves 10,800 organizations and has partners in 32 states and Washington, D.C. Visit strivetogether.org.

About Cincinnati Promise

Cincinnati Promise is a non-profit organization, expanding access to quality preschools in Cincinnati. Preschool expansion is made possible thanks to a significant investment from taxpayers who approved a 5-year Cincinnati Public Schools levy in 2016. The levy includes \$33 million a year to strengthen K-12 education and \$15 million a year to expand access to quality preschool. Visit cincy-promise.org.

About StrivePartnership

StrivePartnership is a Cincinnati partnership comprised of leaders from the education, business, philanthropic, nonprofit, civic, and faith communities who believe in the importance of education and the impact of working together to change the system of education for every child, from cradle to career. Visit strivepartnership.org.

ⁱ Karoly, Lynn A., and Anamarie Auger. "Informing Investments in Preschool Quality and Access in Cincinnati: Evidence of Impacts and Economic Returns from National, State, and Local Preschool Programs." *RAND Corporation*, 2016. Report.

ⁱⁱ StrivePartnership. *Striving Together: Report Card Student Progress on the Roadmap to Success*. 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of Mayor Michael B. Hancock. "Mayor Hancock and Early Childhood Leaders Propose Renewal of Denver Preschool Program." 11 June 2014. Letter.

^{iv} Krebs, Natalie. "Promising a Future: Faith and education leaders lay out details of the proposed Preschool Promise." *City Beat*, 2 Dec. 2015, www.citybeat.com/news/article/13001178/promising-a-future. Article.

^v Thomas, William, and Jay Shifman. "Opinion: YPs leading way on Preschool Promise." *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 17 Nov. 2015. Editorial.