

StriveTogether Evaluation Report: 2015-2017 Executive Summary

Presented to: StriveTogether

Presented by: Equal Measure
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Executive Summary

Despite national and international attention since the phrase “collective impact” first came on the scene in 2011, few have articulated a strong model for what collective impact looks like – or ought to look like – in practice. Meanwhile, collective impact has continued to gain traction around the globe among community leaders, nonprofit organizations, education institutions, funders, and community members, among others, as an approach for increasing educational, health, and economic outcomes systemically and at scale. StriveTogether’s model, outlined in its Theory of Action (TOA), attempts to operationalize a set of highly complex community processes that, working together, leverage collective impact to build the civic infrastructure necessary to change systems and improve outcomes at a community level.

In 2015, Equal Measure and StriveTogether set out to understand how civic infrastructure – as articulated through StriveTogether’s Theory of Action – develops within and across communities using collective impact to improve outcomes among children and youth. The Theory of Action, launched in 2013, provides a roadmap for partnerships and communities to build the civic infrastructure necessary to sustainably transform systems and improve community-level outcomes like kindergarten readiness, high school graduation, and postsecondary completion. The model lays out a series of stages, called gateways, that communities work through as they seek to transform systems to better serve children and youth. Since its launch, partnerships in nearly 70 communities have embraced the Theory of Action to guide their own work, becoming part of StriveTogether’s Cradle to Career Network of communities committed to improving outcomes across the cradle to career continuum.

With guidance from StriveTogether’s Network members, we operationalized the Theory of Action by creating an 83-question survey that asked partners across each community to indicate the extent that they saw evidence of the Theory of Action in their community. Over a three-year period (Spring 2015, 2016, and 2017), we surveyed more than 4,000 partners and community members in 14 US communities to understand civic infrastructure development and explore the relationship between this process and improvements in educational outcomes during the same timeframe in 10 of these communities. The evaluation provided a unique opportunity to understand how civic infrastructure develops within and across communities by grounding this understanding in the experiences of partner and community members living and working in those communities. Importantly, however, the evaluation did not stop there. We also explored the association between implementation of the Theory of Action and outcomes for children and youth, and interviewed 25 partners from across these communities to help further understand the on-the-ground realities of such work.

Ultimately, the evaluation set out to answer two key questions:

- 1) What does building civic infrastructure actually look like in action? and
- 2) What is the relationship between civic infrastructure and improved outcomes for children and youth?

Approximately six years after the Theory of Action’s release, we have answers to both of these questions. The evaluation’s findings point to a clear and consistent pattern of civic infrastructure development and highlight areas of success and challenge among Network communities. The data

Network communities included in the three-year evaluation

- 1) Albany – Albany Promise
- 2) Birmingham – Bold Goals Education
- 3) Cincinnati – StrivePartnership
- 4) Dallas – Commit!
- 5) Milwaukee – Milwaukee Succeeds
- 6) Portland – All Hands Raised*
- 7) Racine – Higher Expectations
- 8) Red Wing – Every Hand Joined
- 9) Richmond – Bridging Richmond
- 10) Rochester – ROC the Future
- 11) Spartanburg – Spartanburg Academic Movement
- 12) Tulsa – ImpactTulsa
- 13) Twin Cities – Generation Next
- 14) Washington, D.C. – Raise D.C.
- 15) Winston-Salem – Forsyth Promise

*Did not participate in the 2015 Partner Survey

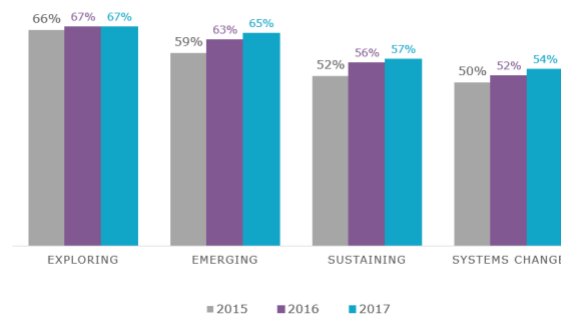
reveal remarkably similar patterns across communities and over time, suggesting that, out of necessity and ease, certain elements of the Theory of Action are initiated before – and to a greater extent – others. These findings provide a clear, data-driven image of how this work takes place. Additionally, the strong association between improvements in civic infrastructure and improvements among contributing indicators provide promise that implementation of the StriveTogether Theory of Action positions partnerships for effecting community outcomes.

Key Findings about the nature of civic infrastructure development

While much has been written about the experiences of communities implementing place-based, cross sector partnerships (regardless of the moniker of “collective impact”), the specific strategies are as unique as the communities themselves. The Partner Survey, administered among partners within the same set of 14 communities over 3 years, however, provided the opportunity to quantify these behaviors over time. While community-specific findings varied, findings reveal remarkably consistent trends in civic infrastructures development according to the process outlined in the Theory of Action.

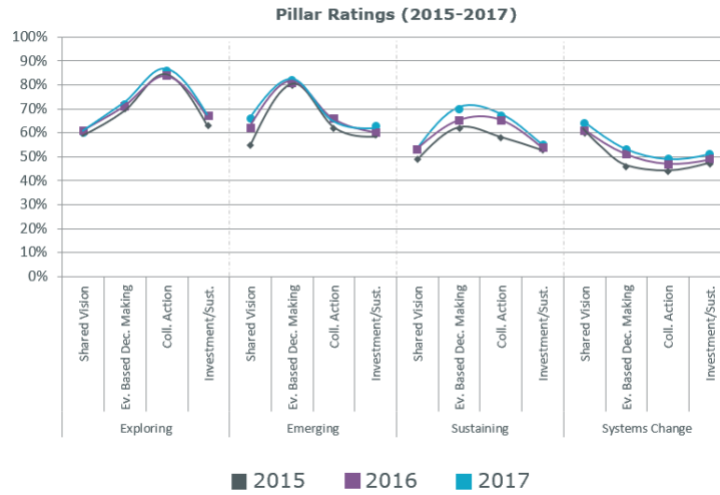
Consistent with the Theory of Action, civic infrastructure unfolds in stages. The evaluation confirmed that civic infrastructure development follows the pattern outlined in the Theory of Action – as a group, communities saw the greatest development in the Exploring gateway, followed the Emerging, Sustaining, and Systems Change gateways, with each showing increases between 2015 and 2017. In essence, communities are “crawling before they’re walking.” The figure below illustrates the civic infrastructure levels of each Theory of Action gateway over three years; this alignment between theory and practice captures two important trends: 1) communities build civic infrastructure according to the stages laid out in the TOA gateways, and 2) this pattern remains even as communities build civic infrastructure over time – evidenced by the year-over-year increases in these ratings during the evaluation period. Importantly, however, communities did show signs of later-stage behaviors, just not to the extent that they saw signs of behaviors associated with earlier stage civic infrastructure development.

Figure 1: Communities exhibit a staged approach to civic infrastructure development



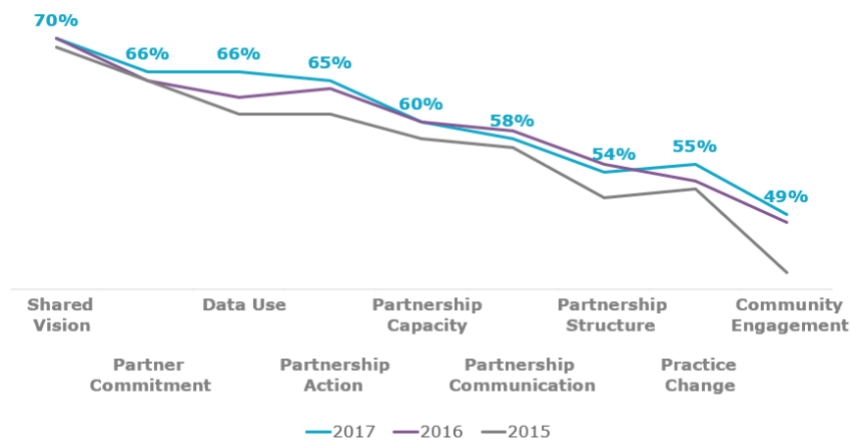
There is nuance to how collaboratives work through each gateway – and it’s remarkably consistent. While the Theory of Action outlines a sequential process for developing civic infrastructure among four gateways, it is not prescriptive about the sequence of pillar development *within* each gateway. The evaluation provides insights into the nuance of civic infrastructure development, revealing where – within each gateway of the Theory of Action – communities most commonly need support, as well as where they’re able to accelerate their work. The consistency of these trends over time, illustrated in Figure 2, reveals that Network communities share similar strengths and challenges in implementing aspect of the Theory of Action. These findings reveal that communities exhibit a clear and consistent sequence of pillar development *unique to each gateway*, and add new insights into the nuance of civic infrastructure development. This more detailed analysis of how civic infrastructure develops may provide guidance for how StriveTogether can support its Network through different gateways of development, as well as where partnerships may want to consider focusing efforts with regards to their stage of development.

Figure 2: Clear trends of civic infrastructure development within each gateway



Civic infrastructure development takes place across nine components – their emergence reinforces the consistent approach to developing civic infrastructure, and has implications for communities within and outside of the Network. A closer look at the core concepts embedded within the Theory of Action’s pillars and across its gateways revealed an even more detailed picture of what civic infrastructure entails – communities must tend to nine civic infrastructure components as they build civic infrastructure in their communities: shared vision, partner commitment, data use, partnership action, partnership capacity, partnership communication, partnership structure, practice change, and community engagement. After reconceptualizing the 83-item survey into “components of civic infrastructure” – remarkably consistent patterns emerged across communities and over time (Figure 3). Communities across the Network see the greatest evidence of a shared vision, partner commitment, and data use, while seeing less progress in practice change and community engagement.

Figure 3: Communities see consistent development of civic infrastructure components over time



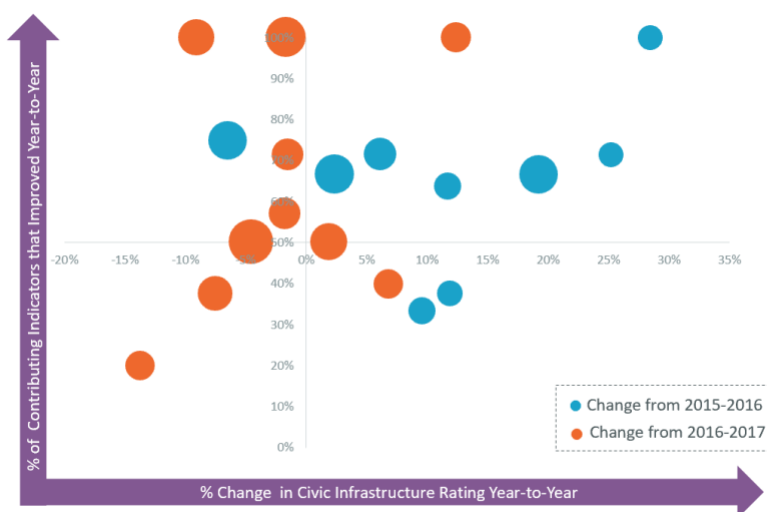
Key findings about the relationship of civic infrastructure to improvements in outcomes

A hallmark of this evaluation was its attempt to tie community processes – the establishment of civic infrastructure – to improvements in the lives of children and youth. Using data on a variety of outcomes provided by a subset of 10 communities, we investigated this association by looking at the extent to which outcomes targeted by partnerships improved relative to improvements in civic infrastructure over the same period. While the number of communities and the outcomes they are focused on limits our ability to make definitive statements, the results show promise that improvements in civic infrastructure contribute to improvements in outcomes – and more specifically the “contributing indicators” that communities are targeting in hopes of changing longer-term outcomes. Contributing indicators reflect those short-term outcomes that partnerships focus their efforts on changing, with the expectation that targeted strategies will influence longer-term outcomes. Examples of contributing indicators include the number of high-quality childcare programs in a community and Pre-K attendance rates, both intended to boost kindergarten readiness. Similarly, communities have tackled FAFSA completion rates and ACT scores with the expectation of boosting postsecondary enrollment.

Improvements in civic infrastructure seem to make a difference in communities. While Partner Survey findings reveal important lessons about how civic infrastructure develops, the ability to connect civic infrastructure to improvements in outcomes for children and youth made this evaluation unique. The findings suggest that improvements in civic infrastructure are associated with improvements in contributing measures, and that strong civic infrastructure overall contributes to positive trends.

In general, the communities that saw the greatest growth in civic infrastructure typically saw the greatest percentage of their indicators improve. In the graphic below, we’ve mapped the relationship between two concepts – year-over-year civic infrastructure growth as measured through annual surveys and year-over-year improvements in the contributing indicators being addressed by these partnerships during the same period (2015-2016 and 2016-2017).

Figure 4: Civic infrastructure strength and development is associated with improvements on contributing indicators for children and youth



*Each circle represents a single community. Circle sizes reflect relative strength of the community's civic infrastructure – the larger the circle, the higher the overall rating at baseline.

The communities that saw the least “growth” – or even a slight decline in civic infrastructure – generally started with the highest levels of civic infrastructure and were able to maintain improvements in indicators (as evidenced by the size of the circles in the upper-left-hand quadrant in the chart above). Similarly, communities that saw strong growth in civic infrastructure but relatively

fewer indicators improve were those with relatively lower civic infrastructure ratings to begin with. It appears, then, that a combination of *growth* and *strong civic infrastructure* (e.g., “high” ratings) are associated with improvements in contributing indicators.

Implications

Taken together, the evaluation findings offer important lessons for StriveTogether and the field.

- 1) **Civic infrastructure can be quantified**, and, when it is, we gain a clearer picture of the work on the ground. The ability to measure civic infrastructure provides an opportunity to identify, address, and improve how individuals and organizations work and work together to improve outcomes for children and youth.
- 2) **Network members have similar strengths and face consistent challenges**. Despite the diversity of communities participating in the evaluation, their experiences building civic infrastructure were remarkably similar. As a group, communities in the evaluation saw the greatest evidence of a shared vision, partner commitment, and data use, while seeing less progress in practice change and community engagement. These trends point to areas of strength to build on, as well as where communities might need additional support to fully realize their potential in building civic infrastructure.
- 3) There is reason to believe that **implementation of the Theory of Action contributes to positive outcomes for children and youth**. The connection between civic infrastructure and contributing indicators shows promise that the work in communities –guided by the Theory of Action – is making a difference.

We began this evaluation knowing it wouldn’t be conclusive, but rather a knowledge building process for StriveTogether, other communities doing this work, and the field. These findings have, indeed, contributed to that knowledge base and position StriveTogether and its Network members to continue to assess and transform systems to improve outcomes for children and youth across the cradle-to-career continuum.