

Learning from

PROOF POINT COMMUNITIES

// E3 Alliance Austin, Texas





Cover photo caption:
In Spring 2019, E3 Alliance hosted deliberative dialogues with communities across the Central Texas region on success after high school.

// Foreword

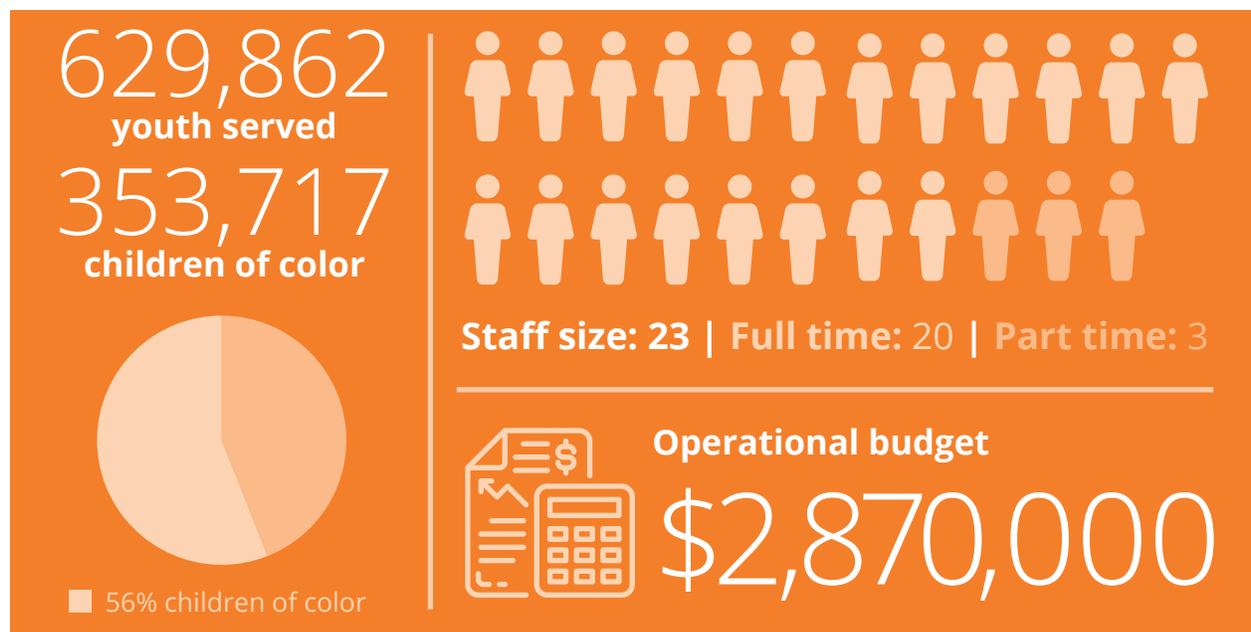
StriveTogether is a national movement focused on ensuring that every child succeeds from cradle to career, regardless of race, ethnicity, income or zip code. Founded in 2011, the organization works through a network of communities that partner across sectors to break down systemic barriers to economic opportunity. This includes addressing structural inequities in education, housing and other systems that are critical to children's long-term success.

StriveTogether convenes its network members around common challenges and to foster connections for peer-to-peer learning. StriveTogether also builds capability across its network with customized training, technical assistance and coaching. StriveTogether then codifies network learning to assist communities in identifying and adopting shared goals, collecting and using data to improve practices, and pursuing meaningful change. In doing so, StriveTogether helps to improve outcomes for kids while simultaneously empowering practitioners and leaders across the country to be more impactful in their work as individuals, organizations and systems. Nearly 70 communities across 29 states and Washington,

D.C. are members of StriveTogether's Cradle to Career Network.

Foundational to StriveTogether's work is a commitment to four key principles: engaging the community; advancing equity; developing a culture of continuous improvement; and leveraging all existing resources. These principles underpin the entirety of StriveTogether's work, including its signature Theory of Action™, a proven framework for making meaningful, lasting, community-driven change to improve the lives of children.

The following pages detail some of the many ways that StriveTogether assists network members to achieve greater impact. Specifically, the case looks at the collaboration between StriveTogether and E3 Alliance, an Austin-based nonprofit that works to improve outcomes for the more than 600,000 children and students living in Central Texas. A member of StriveTogether's Network, E3 Alliance has successfully used StriveTogether's methodologies to increase outcomes spanning the cradle-to-career continuum, including rates of kindergarten readiness among preschoolers living in poverty.



Source: Data reported by E3 Alliance in the 2018 StriveTogether Civic Infrastructure Assessment. Children of color estimated based on the percentages reported in the disaggregated population data.

// Introduction: The Value of Collaboration

In many ways, StriveTogether and E3 Alliance (E3) are an obvious fit for collaboration. Both are early pioneers of collective impact, a model for improving community outcomes at scale. Both have a long history of helping to improve outcomes for kids and families, and both are strong believers in the importance of data to inform decision-making. However, it is exactly because they are so similar that E3 was initially hesitant to work with StriveTogether, says Susan Dawson, president and executive director of E3.

“We were a bit skeptical of joining forces with StriveTogether because we were already doing the work of adapting our own theories of systems change and defining them for ourselves, so it wasn’t clear what value we would get from working with them. But then we saw that while we were busy doing the work, we also needed to have the tools that StriveTogether had honed down and figured out how to use, like how to keep a working group going and effectively define roles and hold folks accountable. So, instead of us having to dedicate some of our limited staff capacity to researching all the tools that are possibly out

there, we could go to the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network,” Dawson said. StriveTogether’s framework for collective impact reflects learning from across the Network enabling E3 to build staff capacity easily and quickly.

One of those tools is StriveTogether’s Theory of Action™, a framework for community-driven change to improve the lives of children on a systems level. It’s a simple and powerful approach based on four principles and a sequenced set of activities that provides a roadmap for creating better opportunities for young people on a systems level. StriveTogether acts as the guide.

There are four pillars of StriveTogether’s Theory of Action™: develop a shared community vision; practice evidence-based decision-making; engage in collaborative action; and ensure the sustainability of the work over the long-term. The theory of action is StriveTogether’s “secret sauce,” explains Jennifer Blatz, the organization’s president and CEO. Born out of the experiences of network members, StriveTogether’s Theory of Action™ has been refined four times

StriveTogether Theory of Action™



Photo caption:
Children who are ready for kindergarten are four to five times more likely to be performing on grade level by third grade.



“Our principles ground us. Our gateways guide us and our pillars drive progress from cradle to career.”

based on work happening in communities across the Network. In a recent evaluation by Equal Measure, the approach was found to be an effective tool for building the kind of civic infrastructure necessary to create better outcomes for young people.

To help communities navigate the Theory of Action™, StriveTogether breaks down each of the four pillars of work into seven milestones called gateways. Each gateway includes a series of quality benchmarks for building a cradle-to-career community infrastructure. Meeting these benchmarks puts communities on the path to closing disparities and improving outcomes for every child.

“Our principles ground us. Our gateways guide us and our pillars drive progress from cradle to career,” says Blatz. “Every step we take is focused on proving what’s working – or not – and then improving from there. Data – quantitative and qualitative – is at the core of this work. Qualitative data comes to us in the form of stories and lived experiences by the very kids and families affected by inequitable systems. Data drives accountability and accountability drives results for kids.”

E3 shares that commitment to data and has effectively used it to bring together stakeholders across a range of sectors and organizations to increase kindergarten readiness among children in Central Texas, as discussed in the next section.

// Communicating with Data

Across the country, millions of young children enter kindergarten unprepared to succeed in the classroom. Children who enter kindergarten before they are “ready” are three times less likely to read proficiently in third grade.

For years, the rate of kindergarten readiness among preschoolers in Central Texas had been holding steady at roughly 50%, and the 50% not ready for kindergarten were overrepresented by children experiencing poverty. But in 2015, that kindergarten readiness rate plummeted as students entered school having experienced the impact of reduced state and federal funding for critical services for families with children 0-3. Service cuts included speech, occupational and physical therapy, family counseling services, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. At the same time resources were shrinking, demand was growing. In 2015, the population of children

living in Central Texas grew by 8%, while the area’s population of children experiencing poverty grew by 24% during the same period.

“We weren’t talking about a small, unnoticeable shift in school readiness,” says Laura Koenig, senior director of community solutions at E3 Alliance (E3). “The early childhood coordinator at one of our region’s largest school districts told me that she usually gets one call a year about a child who is so emotionally dysregulated that they are hiding under their desk. That year she was receiving one call per campus and they have over a 100 elementary school campuses in their district.”

As E3 staff began researching the impact of the loss of services on kindergarten readiness, they realized that they had been focusing their work on just one aspect of the problem, says Koenig. “We were having play-and-learn groups and training campaigns while families were not getting enough to eat, sending children to school hungry, living in deep, toxic stress for a long time.”

It was humbling to realize that despite their best intentions, they were not affecting readiness at the level needed to counteract state and federal funding cuts.

To more meaningfully address the declining rates of kindergarten readiness, E3 needed to engage healthcare professionals, including mental health providers and also pediatricians, who are generally a trusted authority among parents and thus more likely to successfully convey to parents the importance of preparing their children for kindergarten. Though E3 had not previously worked with medical professionals, they nonetheless understood that the healthcare providers would likely be coming to the issue of kindergarten readiness from a different perspective than that of the educators, and that bridging that gap would be imperative to effectively collaborating. To that end, E3 worked with StriveTogether to provide cross-sector partners with Results Count™ workshops that were



In June 2019, Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed into law HB3, representing an investment in education and educators of \$6.5 billion for the biennium (with the potential to access another \$8 billion depending on district implementation of innovative funding efforts) and culminating an 18-month process that commenced at the beginning of 2018 with the formation of a year-long, bi-partisan Commission to reform the state’s school finance system. This bill included ground-breaking funding for full-day Pre-K based in large part of E3’s longitudinal school readiness studies and the impact of Pre-K on school readiness. StriveTogether network members had advocated and mobilized a statewide coalition for these reforms that could prove transformative in improving equitable outcomes for the 5.4 million students (representing 10% of the nation’s children) that are educated within the state.

customized to focus on kindergarten readiness in Central Texas.

Pioneered by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Results Count™ is a collection of tools and techniques that help professionals to adopt a results-oriented, equitable approach to their work, as emphasized in StriveTogether's Theory of Action™.

"Results Count™ provided a common framework and set of tools, based on powerful data, to all of these groups who had never worked together before," says E3's Koenig. "It was extremely helpful to have that common language and information for them to work from, and really galvanized their work."

In 2009-10, E3 Alliance convened regional stakeholders and child development experts to create the state's first comprehensive, multi-competency school readiness assessment, called Ready, Set, K! The assessment has proved transformative in empowering stakeholders to make data-based decisions for increasing kindergarten readiness. For example, school districts use the robust, student-level data from Ready, Set, K! to develop support for individual students, communicate with parents about their child's strengths and areas of growth, and shift budget priorities, while the community uses it to understand the factors affecting school readiness and to build strategies to address these factors.

Through the Ready, Set, K! data, E3 discovered that children who attend pre-kindergarten are three times more likely to enter kindergarten ready for school, even when taking into account student demographics. The data went on to show that children who are ready for kindergarten are then four to five times more likely to be performing at grade level by third grade. Based on these findings, E3 identified two goals: to increase the number of eligible children who enroll in free, public pre-kindergarten programs; and to increase the effectiveness of pre-K programs.

An action team implemented a variety of initiatives across Central Texas to increase pre-kindergarten registration. Pediatricians,

StriveTogether's collaborative improvement methodology helps communities working toward better cradle-to-career outcomes for every child.

It includes four elements:



1. EQUITY

An explicit focus on race equity and equity for youth living in poverty. Strategies are tailored to connect people to opportunity, remove structural barriers and eliminate disparities.



2. RESULTS COUNT™

Results Count™ to help leaders and groups move from intention to action by building critical leadership competencies such as being results based and data driven and adaptive leadership.



3. CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Continuous improvement which encourages communities to adopt or abandon efforts based on results.



4. HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

Human-centered design that focuses on user-centric, creative problem-solving to engage people impacted by the work.

working in partnership with E3, gave “Pre-K Prescriptions” to patients, including information for enrollment in English and Spanish. To reach families that may be undocumented, partners tailored information requests – instead of asking for parents’ proof of residency, they now ask for proof of address. Also, the team worked with district superintendents to make sure each district had a dedicated phone line for pre-k enrollment. Additionally, E3 supported a noted Texas musician in creating a music video highlighting the importance of pre-kindergarten in English and Spanish. The video is shared in doctors’ offices and through Austin Community College, Univision and the city’s TV channel.

To track the effectiveness of these efforts, districts submitted monthly pre-kindergarten enrollment data during the fall semester for three years. Districts participating in the effort saw a 7% increase in enrollment for two consecutive years after the initial pilot year. The enrollment campaign helped identify best practices and resources that are now part of a state toolkit on pre-kindergarten enrollment.

Despite the strong efforts at schools districts for many years, after the surprising drop in readiness in 2015, E3 and districts realized they had to work across health, mental health, and education sectors in new and different ways to address the many years of hardships caused by cuts in early childhood funding. The Results Count™

workshops provide an effective way to bring together these sectors as never before toward a common goal of improving school readiness. The effort not only improved student outcomes, but also strengthened relationships between collaborators. As part of the workshops, participants determine where their roles and responsibilities start and stop, what Koenig refers to as “the boundary on their authority.” In doing so, they were able to identify where they can add the most value, an understanding that translated into meaningful increases in efficacy and resources for the Ready, Set, K! campaign.

“We went from really having to do a lot of outreach to doctors ourselves to having one of our partners, a foundation that is primarily focused on healthcare, offer to take over that work because they knew that they’d get better engagement with medical providers since they are already known in the medical community,” explains Koenig. “They were able to get many more doors opened and then they added project leads who worked with us to develop additional tools. They’d really internalized the data that we all had through Results Count™ and based on that data had ideas on how to make the campaign even more effective.”

The foundation’s place of authority in the community strengthened relationships with pediatricians.



Photo caption:
*Pflugerville ISD
students getting their
flu immunizations.*



Photo caption:
Self-appointed delegates from the deliberative dialogues collaborated with other community leaders, transitioning tactical ideas into tangible steps and determining three priority initiatives.

// Increasing Impact through Collaborative Improvement

Results Count™ workshops are just one of the many tools that StriveTogether offers Network members to help them implement the Theory of Action™. Another is training on how to approach the work of systems change through the lens of continuous improvement. Specifically, StriveTogether has developed its own take on continuous improvement, called Collaborative Improvement, that helps communities accelerate progress towards improving the lives of children at a community level.

For E3, this meant learning to sometimes shift away from its long and successful history of employing large-scale, quantitative and qualitative research studies towards the very rapid-cycle, short-term methods for collecting and analyzing data that StriveTogether promotes as part of the practice of evidence-based decision-making. Doing so helped E3 to ensure that they are investing their limited resources into the most effective strategies for increasing

kindergarten readiness among preschoolers living in poverty, according to Dawson.

“StriveTogether has adapted some of the most efficient tools from healthcare and manufacturing that force you to iterate, test, iterate, test, find something that works, start to scale up, and iterate again before taking it to a whole school. Those are tools we have wanted to add to our repertoire, and we have been able to benefit a lot from them,” Koenig says.

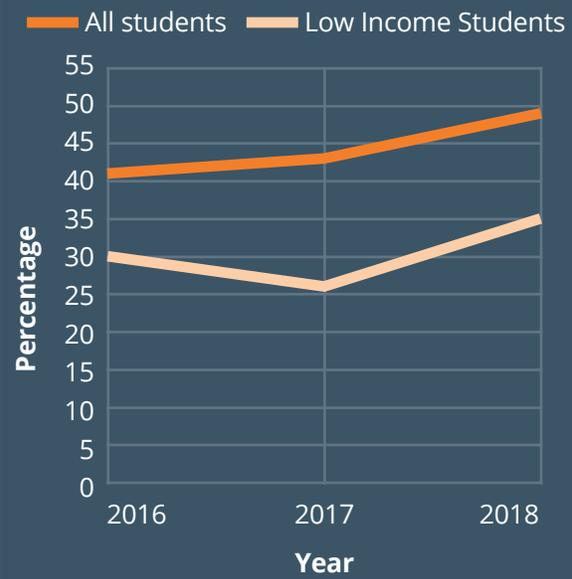
As an example, consider E3’s early strategy to increase kindergarten readiness involving teacher trainings that E3 pursued and then abandoned after a small pilot demonstrated a lack of impact.

In Texas, all teachers are required to use a standardized monitoring tool to gather data on each student’s progress, including children enrolled in prekindergarten programs. However, teachers rarely have the time to reflect on what the

data says about their students' educational needs. In response, E3 and its partners designed a program to give teachers the space and guidance to reflect on the assessment data and think through how to revise their teaching in response. Though many of the organizations wanted to launch the program as a large, multi-district mentorship initiative, they eventually agreed to begin with a much smaller pilot of ten teachers from two school districts, with the understanding that the pilot would be expanded if the teachers found it helpful.

Pilot participants were surveyed about how useful they found the program. Most indicated that studying the assessment data had not proved very helpful. However, when asked what else might be useful to the participants, many replied with a similar need – the administrators evaluating their performance were neither familiar with developmentally appropriate education practices for preschoolers nor appropriate academic standards. As a result, teachers either didn't look to the administrator for advice and mentorship, or felt that they were penalized and undervalued in the evaluation.

Kindergarten Readiness



change, and an approach that E3 now embraces, says Dawson. “We are getting better at deciding that rather than doing a full qualitative research study, an empathic interview with five students, or five teachers, may inform you in a way that you hadn't thought about.”

“Our network members realize becoming a Proof Point is not the ultimate destination, and we have a way to go.”

Based on the teacher's feedback, E3 dropped the pilot program on assessment data and instead developed a new initiative designed to educate administrators for prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms about appropriate practices and ways administrators can better support teachers in these classrooms. E3 and partners have piloted this new initiative with 75 administrators in 5 districts, to positive reviews. Based on that pilot, E3 is planning to expand the program in 2020.

This idea of asking the members of the target population – in this case, the teachers – is core to StriveTogether's emphasis on community-driven

Similarly, E3's willingness and ability to continuously collect data, evaluate its work and revise course as necessary, is another key component of StriveTogether Theory of Action™ and Collaborative Improvement model, and is one of the reasons E3 has been so successful in Central Texas, says StriveTogether's Blatz. “Because E3 and its partners have strong relationships, the second they can have data that shows, ‘we did X strategy and it had this impact’ - which is the data they get through our approach - they have all of the structure and relationships in place to be able to scale that really quickly. And it becomes a self-sustaining model.”

Source: Data reported by E3 Alliance in the 2018 StriveTogether Civic Infrastructure Assessment.



Photo caption:
E3 Alliance President
and Executive Director
Susan Dawson was
recognized as the Cradle
to Career Champion at
the StriveTogether Annual
Convening in 2019.

// Conclusion

Since E3 joined the Cradle to Career Network in 2013, they have worked hand-in-hand with StriveTogether to improve outcomes from kindergarten readiness to chronic absenteeism among high school young men of color. E3 is respected throughout the network for its commitment to racial equity, effective use of data and the ability to bring together a range of partners from a variety of sectors and organizations around a shared vision. Yet E3 hesitated to be singled out as a Proof Point community in the theory of action.

“We actually avoided the process and put it off for a long time,” Dawson said. “This was like asking for an audit. What’s the real value for us? But as other communities participated, we thought our work was just as proven as their work and we went through the process.”

The process involved surveying dozens of E3 partners, getting their input and codifying different ways they had worked together collaboratively then holding multi-day interviews on a range of topics in the theory of action framework. While the process was time consuming, Dawson said they benefited by taking the time to reflect about what was working and not working.

“It was gratifying to sit in a conference room with funders, school district partners and community partners saying things that we had never heard them say in person because we had never asked them. And they’d say things like, ‘Our school district would never have been in the place that it was without the work of E3; you’ve made every student better in everything that they’re doing.’”

E3 became a Proof Point in 2018, a designation reserved for communities that have maintained or improved 60% of the cradle-to-career outcome indicators.

Achieving Proof Point is a critical milestone in the work to get better results for every child. Blatz explained that systems-level change takes time and celebrating success is important.

“Our network members realize becoming a Proof Point is not the ultimate destination, and we have a way to go. There are no quick fixes when so many young people are caught up in a mesh of systems designed to fail them,” Blatz said. “The Cradle to Career Network brings communities across the country together to build better systems that yield better results for every child.”

ABOUT STRIVETOGETHER

StriveTogether partners with nearly 70 communities across the country, providing coaching, resources and rigorous approaches to create opportunities and close gaps in education, housing and so much more. Together, the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network impacts the lives of more than 13 million youth - including nearly nine million children of color.

StriveTogether[®]

Every child. Cradle to career.

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