

// Hot off the press!



Network Insights
Northfield Promise
Northfield, Minnesota

Lessons from the Northfield Promise Racial Equity Team launch

Northfield Promise, a StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network member serving Northfield, Minn., launched their Racial Equity Team in late 2019 to create an equitable environment for the students and families in their communities. Despite the unforeseen obstacles of 2020, they made huge strides in their pilot year. Highlights included:

- Revising the social studies curriculum to be more inclusive and culturally responsive with leadership from the teacher's union president, a social studies teacher who was on the team
- Aligning the superintendent's personal performance measures with the school board to ensure that the district culture shifts to increase feelings of belonging for students of color
- Adopting a new school district policy to no longer name district buildings after individuals, and to change within one year the names of all buildings currently named for people
- Expanding the translation of daily school materials in the move to distance learning and adding bilingual staff to work with Spanish-speaking families to help navigate school work and access online school portals (read more [here](#))
- Using data during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify gaps in access to internet connectivity and devices among communities of color and addressing these issues in a targeted manner



Additionally, the data-driven work over their first year led to some key insights that will be used in driving change for the team's 2021 goals. Here's a summary of what they learned:

- Youth participation should be a starting point in decision-making processes [here](#)
- The timing of change can't be forced though tools such as tapping key resources and lifting up small wins can help urge it along and maintain team momentum [here](#)
- Lifting up lived experiences directly correlates to positive results [here](#)
- Vital insights on equity team creation, which you can read [here](#)

Read the full article below.



// Youth participation is vital in the decision-making processes

The team at Northfield Promise understands the importance of trusting young people to lead. After all, youth engagement has always been a founding principle of their equity work. But the launch of their Racial Equity Team in late 2019 — which was intentionally designed to include three students with prior experience on boards and commissions — drove that lesson home.

“[Our Racial Equity Team] experience was a valuable reminder of the power of youth engagement and voice,” says Zach Pruitt, executive director of the Northfield Healthy Community Initiative, which houses Northfield Promise. “Their voices and vision led to different actions than [we would have seen] if they hadn’t been present in those conversations.”

What makes students uniquely qualified to pave the way toward closing the achievement gap? Lived experience is part of it — the students on the team shared their experiences within the school system with their former teachers, including at a district-wide staff in-service program. One student called it “life-changing,” and spoke to the power of being vulnerable in sharing struggles with the teaching community to inform changes in areas such as curriculum design based on this insider information.

The Equity Team saw students constantly thinking beyond the scope of current projects. Their engagement is reflected in a push to continue this work on a larger scale, work that includes revising curriculums through an anti-racist lens and ensuring that classes are reflective of the diversity that they see in their communities.



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- Zach Pruitt, executive director of the Northfield Healthy Community Initiative





There's also an inherent sense of urgency for youth as they work within a system with a definite personal end date. With graduation dates doubling as finish lines, students want to see changes implemented while they're still around. This makes them all the more motivated to follow through the work quickly and efficiently while also holding others accountable in their respective roles.

// Timing can't be forced, but change can be nudged along

One of the big surprises from the Northfield Promise Racial Equity Team's pilot year was how quickly some changes can be made. The Northfield community supported efforts to pass policies that would put an end to the glorification of often racist historical figures through the naming of school buildings. The school board decided to move forward with this resolution, and the changes will affect two existing school names, as well as revisions to the school mascot.

But that's not to discount the importance of slow steps. A lot of this work is a long-term investment. Generating trust among those involved is crucial to keeping a steady pace. It's often impossible to predict how certain outcomes will play out, or what shape they might take when they've been achieved. A key takeaway is to simply nudge the work along its own path, without trying to force it in one direction or another.

In practice, this might look like putting the building blocks in place that can serve as catalysts for change further down the road. By focusing on youth voice from the beginning, Northfield Promise was able to create the kind of community trust that allowed for the accomplishments they achieved within the last year.

The Northfield Promise Racial Equity Team also learned that, for these long-term goals, documenting changes as they happen and lifting them up can keep momentum going. This focus on small wins is a strategy they'll continue to prioritize moving forward.

// Lift up lived experiences

The ability to learn, not just from the work, but from the community itself, played a key role in all of these wins. The district superintendent has been a champion of the Equity Team's work from the start. While that social capital and organizational muscle helped move the team's agenda forward, the superintendent's mindset has made all the difference. According to Pruitt, the superintendent's approach to "being open to the answers that come from within the community and from students" has been critically important in creating equity.

This is the same framework the Northfield Promise team operates from. As they focus their efforts on this year's priorities, which include increasing parent engagement and extending the reach of the Racial Equity Team's work, the organization's mission is to serve as a facilitator.



“Part of our approach to all this work is to not try to direct too much,” Pruitt explains. “We create space and create opportunity and then get out of the way — or figure out what is needed to excel, or where we can put resources to accelerate this kind of work. We don’t have the answers, we’re not ahead in any way. We’re just trying to figure it out, too, and I think we have a commitment to continue to work on it.”

This approach has led to an impressive amount of work accomplished as a community in this area, and it’s only the beginning. Northfield as a whole has learned to put their trust in the community, in the youth and the work.

The answers will come.

// Additional guidance on equity team creation



Consider the composition of the team

Include equitable representation from every community that will be directly or indirectly affected by the work of this team. Consider as well what kind of balance you need to not only lift up lived experiences but also hold power to influence change. In Northfield Promise’s case, the team is composed of:

- Three high school students
- Elementary school principal
- School district superintendent
- City representative
- County representative
- President of the teachers union
- One community organizer & parent
- Human Rights Commission member
- Two backbone staff from Northfield Promise

“[StriveTogether has] pushed us to recognize where we are more equipped to do or try something than we may originally realize.”

- Zach Pruitt, executive director of the Northfield Healthy Community Initiative



Having coaches — particularly for backbone staff — can also be beneficial. According to Pruitt, “We have been so grateful for the long-term coaching model from StriveTogether with this work. I have appreciated that they walk alongside the backbone staff, continually providing resources, insights and reflections. They also have pushed us to recognize where we are more equipped to do or try something than we may originally realize.”



Create intentional space for convening and context

Though the bulk of the Northfield Promise Racial Equity Team's first year occurred throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, they were able to convene in person before the school year started in 2019 for a kickoff meeting. Pruitt cited the importance of this meeting as a way to not only allow all members an opportunity to meet and get to know one another, but also as a way to keep momentum going once in-person gatherings were no longer allowed. As part of their kickoff, the team spent time talking about the history and policies of Northfield, including how the ways in which the region's systems were built lent themselves to inequitable outcomes, as a way to provide context for the work they were setting out to do. These intentional conversations — as well as regular check-ins and meetings throughout the year — are vital tools for keeping members engaged at times when it may feel the work is slow-moving.

Distinguish between when to facilitate and when to lead

The backbone organization's role in creating an equity team is mainly one of facilitation, and it is important to distinguish between the need for leadership versus guidance. One of the main factors to the Northfield Promise Racial Equity Team's early successes was the backbone staff's ability to create space and opportunities for the rest of the team but allow the other members to take charge in both decision making and action.

