

StriveTogether's Theory of Action and Civic Infrastructure Assessment

Communities across the country have embraced the concept of collective impact, and over the past several years StriveTogether has worked to support this momentum by establishing a Network of communities working to build cradle to career partnerships. With different approaches to collective impact emerging in communities throughout the country, Network members want to ensure that the StriveTogether approach remains rigorous, calling for a more defined structure around what it means to do this work with quality.

StriveTogether established a continuum of quality benchmarks called the Theory of Action. The Theory of Action is based on StriveTogether's Framework for Building Cradle to Career Civic Infrastructure, which consists of four pillars: Shared Community Vision, Evidence Based Decision Making, Collaborative Action and Investment and Sustainability.

Pillar Definitions



Pillar 1: Shared Community Vision: A broad set of cross-sector community partners come together in an accountable way to implement a cradle to career vision for education and communicate that vision effectively



Pillar 2: Evidence Based Decision Making: The integration of professional expertise and data to make decisions about how to prioritize a community's efforts to improve student outcomes



Pillar 3: Collaborative Action: The process by which networks of appropriate cross-sector practitioners use data to continually identify, adopt and scale practices that improve student outcomes



Pillar 4: Investment & Sustainability: There is broad community ownership for building cradle to career civic infrastructure and resources are committed to sustain the work of the partnership to improve student outcomes

The Theory of Action serves as a more detailed guide to implementing the StriveTogether Framework. It consists of **five Gateways:** Exploring, Emerging, Sustaining, Systems Change and Proof Point. Within each of the five Gateways, there are a series of **quality benchmarks** that are key steps in developing and sustaining a partnership. By crossing through each Gateway, there is a greater likelihood for sustained impact and improvement over time. These quality benchmarks are essential for ensuring a community transforms how they serve children. Most importantly, communities achieve population-level impact when the community level outcomes set by the partnership consistently trend in the right direction.

The Civic Infrastructure Assessment is a baseline assessment that helps communities gain a deeper understanding of their partnership work around building cradle to career civic infrastructure, while also helping StriveTogether ensure quality, rigor, and appropriate support within the Cradle to Career Network. The assessment is a tool to help communities identify unique strengths and obstacles as they progress through the Theory of Action while achieving specific quality benchmarks.

StriveTogether's methodology for this assessment included an online tool where Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative staff and other appropriate partners answered questions related to each of the quality benchmarks they believe their partnership has met or is working on. The questions in the Civic Infrastructure Assessment pertain to the quality benchmarks in the Exploring, Emerging and Sustaining Gateway. In the corresponding Theory Action reflecting the partnership's progress, benchmarks in the Sustaining Gateway are on-going and therefore it is only noted whether or not a specific benchmark has been meet. When completing the baseline assessment, partnership staff provided supporting documents, when appropriate, to demonstrate that a quality benchmark had been achieved.

Structure of Report

This report is structured around StriveTogether's Theory of Action. In the Progress section, the Gateway in which the partnership is operating is outlined. Partnership progress is presented according to the four pillars of the StriveTogether Framework upon which the Theory of Action is based. StriveTogether recommendations are incorporated into the feedback organized by pillar; partnerships may consider these initial recommendations as they continue building cradle to career civic infrastructure.

Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative submitted a baseline Civic Infrastructure Assessment on April 1, 2014; the following report reflects progress up to that point.

Progress in the Theory of Action

Overall, Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative is operating in the Emerging Gateway, having accomplished all of the quality benchmarks in the Exploring Gateway. The Emerging Gateway is the second Gateway in the Theory of Action. Partnerships in the Emerging Gateway are continuing to build the partnership after developing a strong fundamental foundation. Partnerships in the Emerging Gateway are actively seeking to collect baseline data to establish a baseline report and determine initial focus areas for the partnership, including using disaggregated data when possible to identify key subpopulations. In the Emerging Gateway, Collaborative Action Networks and strategies are established that will impact community level outcomes. Lastly, partnerships are establishing the necessary capacity to sustain the work of the partnership. Within the Emerging Gateway, the partnership is working on a number of benchmarks and has completed a benchmark in the Sustaining Gateway.

Progress According to the Four Pillars of the StriveTogether Framework



Pillar 1: Shared Community Vision

In September 2011, Charleston community leaders came together to form the Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative (TCCC) to address local education and workforce challenges. TCCC's geographic scope includes three counties (Berkeley, Charleston, Dorchester); this footprint encompasses four school districts enrolling approximately 111,200 students. Sectors from across the community have aligned in support of the partnership's work, including: business, philanthropy, early childhood education, K-12 education, post-secondary education, civic/government entities, community-based organizations, and local volunteers. Partners are actively engaged and identified community outcomes across the cradle to career continuum which they have committed to improving to achieve TCCC goals.

A cross-sector Board of Directors, comprised of executive-level community leaders, provides both governance and strategic direction for the partnership; leaders represent business, philanthropy, post-secondary education, K-12 education, community-based organizations, and other local stakeholders. Meeting monthly, the Board provides thought leadership to guide TCCC work. Board members have allocated time, talent, and resources to move the work forward, in lieu of additional backbone staff capacity, which includes participation on the Executive Committee and/or subcommittees. The partnership has developed an accountability structure with defined roles and responsibilities for all tables, including: Board of Directors, Community Leadership Council, Collaborative Action Network conveners, Collaborative Action Network members, and Goal Area Advisory Councils.

TCCC has crafted key messages to communicate the primary tenets of the work both internally and externally. The vision, mission, and core values are driven by messaging that reflects the data-driven and collaborative nature of collective impact work, as well as the shared responsibility across the community to achieve educational goals. TCCC created a Communications Plan that identified motivations and reservations, objectives, strategies, and tactics for different target audiences. Internally, partners receive updates and share information through in-person meetings, e-mail updates, and partnership development opportunities. To

reach the community more broadly, TCCC utilizes its website, collateral materials, roadshow presentations, local media, newsletter, and community conversations.

StriveTogether Recommendations

Accountability Structure:

TCCC has fostered broad cross-sector representation and engagement within the partnership and amongst the Board of Directors. We would encourage the partnership to continue this level of robust leadership engagement. Participation from key leaders in community organizations ensures that the community is accurately represented and that local decision-makers and “resource influencers” are at the table; resource and funding alignment needed to impact outcomes ultimately relies on the participation of those leaders. TCCC might consider including the Board of Directors, Executive Committee, and additional subcommittees or support teams on the accountability structure graphic to create an overarching visual of all tables that help move the work of the partnership forward.

Communication:

Communication strategy has been an intentional area of focus for the partnership. We recommend TCCC continue to utilize the plan to refine communication efforts, particularly when considering key messaging to unique stakeholder audiences. As communication strategies are implemented, the partnership might consider continually analyzing the SWOT of TCCC Communications. To maintain and re-engage audience interest, the partnership might consider strategies that provide consistent updates, communicate early wins, showcase the value-add of the partnership, and attribute success to Networks or organizational partners. StriveTogether recently released a Strategic Communications Plan Template that may be helpful as the partnership further builds out key messaging and thinks about strategies to measure communication impact; the Template is available on the Partner Portal.

The partnership should continue to maintain broad cross-sector representation and begin to think about what transition or on-boarding plans may need to be in place in case of changes in leadership. TCCC might consider an on-boarding packet that includes partnership information, roles and responsibilities as outlined in the accountability structure, channels of communication, and key messages or talking points, if not already complete. TCCC recognizes that effectively communicating collective impact can be difficult with a wide breadth of stakeholder audiences. The StriveTogether communication [blog series](#) provides suggestions for media, strategies, and tactics to leverage stories to communicate this work across an array of audiences.

As the work of the partnership continues to evolve, consider the need for establishing regular channels of communication among partners by creating opportunities, processes and structures for teams to interact with one-another. We encourage the tables to provide feedback about how they would like to communicate within their group and across the partnership more broadly. StriveTogether recommends the partnership consider methods for intentionally and meaningfully connecting the work of the different tables to maintain consistent communication and to maximize the work within the partnership. This is particularly vital once Collaborative Action Networks form and begin to implement their work. Some partnerships within the Cradle to Career Network have found value in developing a web-based platform for partners to share resources, receive updates, and cultivate discussions around key topics of interest.

Baseline Report:

TCCC should continue to work towards the release of a baseline report in June 2014, with steps indicated in the Baseline Report Project Plan. We recommend the baseline report include messaging that describes the selected indicators used to measure partnership benchmarks and include messaging around why these indicators were selected by framing data within local context; also consider including historical data when available (starting with a baseline from when the partnership was initiated). Additionally, we would recommend that the partnership identify time-bound targets for each of the indicators. Time-bound targets help identify an end goal the partnership can work toward while also creating an additional accountability mechanism. The partnership should include data disaggregated by key sub-populations in the report, when applicable, to demonstrate the partnership's commitment to eliminating locally defined disparities within these sub-populations. Once the baseline data is collected, consider using StriveTogether [Community Impact Report Card](#) (CIRC) to communicate the baseline data on-line. Releasing the report card will be an opportunity for the partnership to generate additional community awareness about the partnership and also an opportunity to engage parents and students. Consider a release strategy that includes conversations with the community where stakeholders could engage in dialogue around the indicators.



Pillar 2: Evidence Based Decision Making

The partnership has identified five goals for impact spanning the cradle to career continuum. Within the goal areas, nine core indicators have been selected:

- % of students assessed ready for kindergarten (each district uses a different assessment)
- % of students meeting or exceeding 3rd grade ELA PASS Assessment
- % of students meeting or exceeding 4th grade math PASS Assessment
- % of students meeting or exceeding 8th grade math PASS Assessment
- % of students meeting or exceeding 8th grade science PASS Assessment
- % of students graduating on time
- % of students enrolling in post-secondary education within 1 year of high school graduation
- % of first time Freshmen retaining fall to fall (post-secondary)
- % of students graduating from post-secondary 150% on time

Within the five goals, TCCC has also identified potential Family & Community Support indicators in the Road Map to Success; metrics have not been determined for all support indicators. The partnership is actively advocating for a statewide kindergarten readiness assessment to reliably capture readiness across all four school districts. Data has been collected for six indicators; K-12 data is disaggregated by free/reduced lunch as a key sub-population for initial focus.

TCCC has developed a process and set of criteria to vet indicators for prioritization; criteria include: need exists, data exists, momentum exists, staff and facilitation capacity, and indicators selected across the continuum. A landscape analysis was also conducted to determine areas for opportunity. The partnership will use these criteria to ultimately prioritize indicators and begin to convene Action Networks.

StriveTogether Recommendations

Data Collection:

The partnership should continue to collect baseline data for all indicators in preparation for the release of the baseline report. Data sources have not yet been identified for post-secondary enrollment and completion. TCCC might consider working with the school districts to collect data from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#), which provides valid and reliable data for post-secondary enrollment. Local post-secondary institutions can often share their completion data with the partnership to track that indicator. We commend TCCC for amplifying the need for a common kindergarten readiness assessment across the region and recommend the partnership continue to advocate for this work. The partnership might also consider working with the school districts to identify a common readiness assessment. We have seen this type of collaboration act as “low hanging fruit” and an opportunity for the partnership to demonstrate its value-add to the community.

When possible, data should be disaggregated by the key sub-populations identified by the partnership in an effort to eliminate locally defined disparities and begin to close the achievement gap.

The partnership may consider identifying Family & Community Support Indicators as contributing indicators to track as critical levers for primary core indicators. Contributing indicators can inform strategies or projects implemented by Networks as a means to impact core indicators. The outcome pyramid provided in the appendix demonstrates how multiple indicators interact with one another when a partnership begins to delve into collaborative action.

Prioritize a Subset of Core Indicators:

After the majority of indicators are identified and baseline data is gathered, we recommend that the partnership continue with plans to prioritize indicators utilizing the pre-defined set of criteria. For a manageable scope, we recommend TCCC identify no more than two to three indicators for initial focus. After identifying the sub-set of indicators the partnership will prioritize, the partnership should determine the best approach for convening the Collaborative Action Teams focused on a specific indicator. This process might include leveraging the work and resources of existing collaboratives in the community already working toward impacting core indicators.

Core Indicators vs. Contributing Indicators

Core Indicator: The specific measures that are being used to track progress on moving the community level outcomes and have been agreed upon to be the main metric, or one that directly measures an outcome. (e.g.: % of students assessed ready for Kindergarten upon school entry)

Contributing Indicator: Indicators identified as contributing to the associated outcome and the prioritized core indicators but are not the direct or main metric (measure) being used to track progress on improving the outcome (e.g.: % of children assessed as ready using Pre-school assessment data)



Pillar 3: Collaborative Action

TCCC is committed to an outcomes-based approach that includes using data for continuous improvement. The partnership plans to facilitate Action Networks’ action plan development, which will include the use of data for continuous improvement. TCCC has partnered with local business Cummins, Inc. to leverage Six Sigma Black Belts for continuous improvement expertise. Once indicators are prioritized, TCCC plans to launch

Collaborative Action Networks to engage practitioners in action planning to implement strategies to impact indicators. The partnership has begun to consider a value exchange between TCCC and the Networks and recognizes the need to provide: data expertise, communication support, and facilitation.

StriveTogether Recommendations

Continuous Improvement:

Continuous improvement is a quality improvement process that uses data to establish shared outcomes and to determine whether or not a specific intervention has the desired impact. Data is used to measure whether or not the expected results were achieved. The process starts with the identification of a shared measure and requires data to be used in a continuous manner. The ultimate goal of continuous improvement is to determine practices that impact a shared outcome identified by the partnership. Once these practices are identified, it should result in more resources going towards those practices that generate impact. Continuous improvement requires a discipline that is uncommon in the social sector and varies from simply using evidence based decision making. It requires a feedback loop to determine if the action implemented actually results in the intended outcome and it affords the ability for every program, regardless of how they are currently operating, to improve. We encourage TCCC to continue to support the utilization of a continuous improvement process across the partnership and within Collaborative Action Networks (once formed). To leverage the continuous improvement expertise of partners – Cummins, Inc., Boeing, Robert Bosch LLC – the partnership might consider helping additional partners or community stakeholders understand continuous improvement within the scope of this work and, ultimately, begin to embed the process within their own organizations to develop a culture of continuous improvement.

Collaborative Action Networks:

Once the Collaborative Action Networks are formed, we recommend they focus on improving one core indicator, as opposed to forming around a strategy or content area. The Collaborative Action Networks should use data to help identify gaps and areas of need within the community, which can drive the strategies ultimately implemented by Collaborative Action Networks to impact benchmarks. TCCC might also consider engaging existing collaboratives or organizations working around an indicator to convene or co-convene a Network. Some partnerships have been able to benefit from the capacity these existing collaboratives can provide; collaboratives may have capacity to provide facilitation or convening support to Networks, thereby eliminating some of the strain on capacity resources of backbone staff.

As the partnership thinks through the formation of Collaborative Action Networks, two methods for engagement may be helpful to consider. An invitation to engage can be used when no current networks exist around a given outcome. The partnership can invite practitioners, funders, or other stakeholders to engage with the partnership and form a Collaborative Action Network. This should include workshops or sessions to familiarize potential network members with the roles and responsibilities of a network and the process of continuous improvement. A request for engagement (RFE) is another method to engage networks. If a network exists or a group is already focusing on a given outcome, this can be an effective strategy. An RFE invites the existing group working directly toward a given outcome to engage with the partnership and morph into a Collaborative Action Network. Additional members may need to become part of the Network. With this method, Networks identify a priority indicator the network plans to impact and a commitment to share and use data for continuous improvement.

After the Networks are convened with members poised to implement strategies, the Action Networks should develop charters and action plans. A charter is a tool that team members use to hold each other accountable to shared measurements and action. The charter contains the following components: Purpose Statement; Problem Statement (what does our local data, including disaggregated local data, tell us about this indicator, why we should spend our time focusing on it); Project Scope (which part of the problem statement will we initially focus on); Membership; and Operating Principles. The charter typically does not state the strategies a team will employ to impact the indicator; rather, it states the initial part of the problem the team will work on. An action plan is a document that outlines the strategies that a team will work on collectively during a given time frame, typically over the course of a year. Action plans should be updated regularly and contain the following components: Long and Short-term Targets, Measures (including measures for each of the projects), Projects and Action Steps. Both of these documents are 'living' documents that should be updated regularly. One challenge that we often see with Networks is taking on too much work initially. We would recommend that each team look for areas where they think they could have the most impact instead of taking on too much and not accomplishing it.



Pillar 4: Investment & Sustainability

The College of Charleston serves as the host (backbone) organization for the partnership during the initial three-year incubation phase; TCCC plans on ultimately becoming a stand-alone 501(c)3. The university provides research support, fiscal agency, regional and statewide influence, advising, and operational facilities. Until recently, TCCC utilized one contract position to provide daily management and oversight for the partnership; a full-time CEO dedicated to the work of TCCC was just hired and will begin on May 19. Job descriptions have been drafted for a Data Visualization Specialist and a Collaborative Network Facilitator.

TCCC has engaged a number of traditional and non-traditional funders within the partnership and on the Board of Directors. The partnership has also initiated a pledge campaign to raise operations funds for the three-year incubation. To date, TCCC has received commitments totaling \$1.2 million over three years to ensure initial sustainability. Many partners sitting at the Board of Directors have made substantial financial pledges to support the work, while others have provided in-kind support.

StriveTogether Recommendations

Capacity to Support the Partnership:

Staffing a partnership is vital to ensure sustainability over the long term. As the work of the partnership evolves, TCCC should consider identifying additional capacity to provide the necessary support for data management, communications, community engagement, and facilitation. As the Action Networks convene and continue to implement strategies, it will be critical for this capacity to be in place. Engaging both traditional and non-traditional funders around capacity for these roles may be helpful. Different partner organizations can potentially fund capacity or provide in-kind resources or support, including support for operations, strategies, practices, or community campaigns.

TCCC has done commendable work around building a pledge campaign and recognizing the need for sustainable, multi-year funding. As Collaborative Action Networks begin to develop action plans and utilize data to unpack practices impacting indicators, we recommend that TCCC engage funders around a point of interest on the cradle to career continuum. Partnerships have seen funders with priorities aligned to a certain indicators provide funding or support to practices, projects, or strategies identified by Networks to ultimately move outcomes. The business sector has expressed interest in working with the partnership to further develop and support a plan for career readiness.

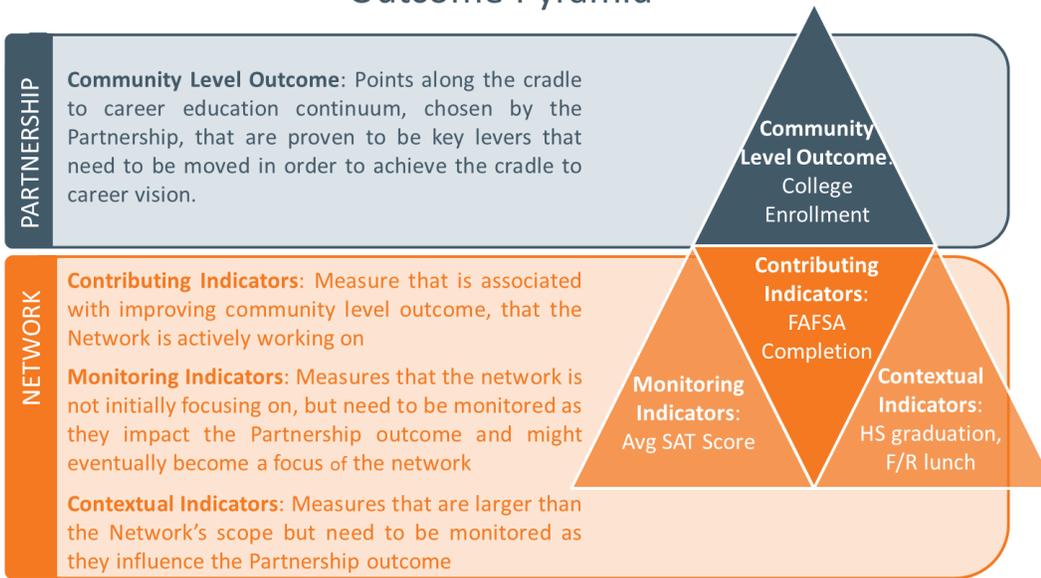
Collective Advocacy Agenda:

The partnership has collaborated with other local efforts to advocate to state legislature around the reinstatement of a common kindergarten readiness assessment. This effort can be used to catalyze a collective advocacy agenda for institutional, local, state, and federal policies. TCCC partners should continue to build relationships with partners in the community to collectively pursue changes in policy, harnessing the power of multiple constituents to improve outcomes. The partnership may consider further developing relationships with elected officials to enable policy changes. Policy recommendations will likely arise and evolve as Collaborative Action Networks begin to implement action plans and both opportunities and barriers are identified.

APPENDIX



Outcome Pyramid



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