# Striving for Student Success: A Model of Shared Accountability

By Kelly Bathgate, Richard Lee Colvin, and Elena Silva

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**KELLY BATHGATE** is the former sustainability manager at Education Sector. She can be reached at kellybathgate@gmail.com.

**RICHARD LEE COLVIN** is Education Sector's executive director. He can be reached at rcolvin@educationsector.org.

**ELENA SILVA** is a senior policy analyst at Education Sector. She can be reached at esilva@educationsector.org.

## ABOUT EDUCATION SECTOR

Education Sector is an independent think tank that challenges conventional thinking in education policy. We are a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to achieving measurable impact in education, both by improving existing reform initiatives and by developing new, innovative solutions to our nation's most pressing education problems.

The city of Cincinnati and its schools deal daily with the problems that arise from poverty and affect both teaching and learning. More than 70 percent of the city's children live in low-income households.[1] Until recently, less than half of the entering kindergartners were deemed ready to start school. Nearly three in 10 students were dropping out of high school, and most of those who graduated were not well prepared when they enrolled in local colleges.[2]

But in the past four years Cincinnati and two smaller communities across the Ohio River, where there are even higher poverty rates, have started to see real progress across a broad range of academic measures, including kindergarten readiness, eighth-grade math achievement, graduation rates, and college preparedness. Cincinnati has made the greatest gains of any urban district on Ohio's school performance index and has had the most success in bringing down the percentage of students scoring at the bottom on achievement tests.[3]

Local leaders attribute much of this success to a unique partnership involving more than 300 civic groups, philanthropies, colleges, public agencies, nonprofits, and businesses. Called the Strive Partnership of Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky, the group's "cradle-to-career" approach attempts to coordinate every service and support that children and adolescents need, at every stage of their education and development. Offerings include mentoring, tutoring, health care, arts programs, preschool, and financial aid for college.

Of course, such services are available in many low-income communities, from either public or private sources. But they are rarely coordinated or organized around a single goal or vision. In Cincinnati, the vision is to increase the global competitiveness of the local workforce by promoting postsecondary success. Strive has broken that vision down into five goals and set up a system of data gathering and analysis to closely monitor progress, report results, and hold providers accountable for their performance.[4] Moreover, the partnership is operated by a professionally staffed organization and backed by layers of support and leadership throughout the city. "It is critical that we all recognize and embrace the reality that each person in this community *shares accountability* for the success of every child," Strive's annual report says.[5]

In the current school reform atmosphere, in which individual schools and teachers are being judged by their own students' outcomes, this notion of "shared accountability" is rare. Schools, today's reformers argue, should be expected to provide a good education to all children regardless of their family or community circumstances. But the analogues of poverty—poor health care, unstable housing situations, mental health issues, violence, and even hunger—are unrelenting and the relationship between poverty and student achievement is strong. That leads some to argue that school reform can accomplish little in the face of poverty. Strive and its partners, however, believe that, in order to improve students' long-term prospects, what's needed are school reforms as well as a wide range of supports to help children, families, and communities not just cope with poverty's effects but eventually escape them.

That's also the premise behind the Obama administration's Promise Neighborhoods initiative, which has committed $40 million to date to support community-based collaboratives to "strengthen the cradle-to-career educational pipeline for children and youth."[6] Along with Strive and other such efforts, Promise Neighborhoods are part of a national push to put school reform at the center of community and economic development. In announcing the winners of the first round of grants in 2010, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan praised the recipients for

recognizing education as the "one true path out of poverty."[7] And with 22 percent of U.S. children living in poverty today, getting more students on that path is critical.[8]

But little will be accomplished—in Cincinnati, the Promise Neighborhoods, or elsewhere—unless the supports and services essential to fighting poverty are tightly coordinated and the providers are held accountable for their performance. It may seem obvious that, working together, providers can have a greater impact than they can have toiling in isolation. However, for a variety of reasons, that's not how such services are typically delivered. The idea of shared accountability is to not just coordinate these disparate efforts but also to focus them on a common vision for student success that is backed by the collection and analysis of data on a range of related indicators, such as early education, nutrition, and even housing security.

This is not easy. Making shared accountability more than notional poses technical, operational, political, and financial challenges. Such systems require engaging multiple players in decisions about priorities, resource allocation, performance measures, responsibilities, and consequences for participating organizations if performance lags. Some critics fear that broadening accountability for academic results beyond the schools will weaken promising school reforms. And they are right that if everyone is accountable for results, then, in fact, no one is. So, for such agreements to work, the roles and contributions of each partner must be explicitly defined and measurable.

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Cincinnati's Strive is frequently cited as a national model of how shared accountability can work. Now five years in, the partnership seems to have found a good balance between the responsibilities of schools and community service providers for improving

academic outcomes, and its results seem promising. That doesn't mean it hasn't faced obstacles. Even as it works to replicate its success by building a national network of cradle-to-career communities, from Detroit to Boston to Portland, Ore., Strive continues to evolve as a model. In this paper, we present essential elements of shared accountability and consider what other communities can learn from Strive.

## A New Kind of Accountability

Over the past decade the federal No Child Left Behind Act put pressure on schools to raise test scores and close achievement gaps across all demographic and income levels. The law set a lofty goal of getting all students to "proficiency" in math and reading by 2014 and required states to set benchmarks of "adequate yearly progress" for each school and district and hold them accountable for results. The results have been modest, and, even Secretary of Education Arne Duncan acknowledges that most schools won't meet those expectations.[9]

Despite the limited results, NCLB established a necessary and unprecedented focus on improving student achievement across all demographic groups. Now the Obama administration, most states, and leading national foundations have committed to an even more ambitious learning agenda, calling for all students to graduate from high school "college- and career-ready." In pursuit of that goal, more than 40 states adopted new Common Core academic standards. States also are developing new aligned assessments and data systems as well as designing and implementing new policies to increase teacher effectiveness. In addition, federal grants are supporting intensive attempts to turn around the lowest-performing schools. To inspire students, educators, and policymakers, President Obama and other reformers say that educational attainment is critical not just for individual success but also as a foundation for the nation's long-term economic strength.

But inspiration alone is insufficient for helping students who start school far behind their peers master the world-class, career- and college-ready standards that are to underlie these reforms. Massachusetts Secretary of Education Paul Reville argues that "regular schools are too weak… to overcome the influence of poverty." He says

## Promise Neighborhoods: State of the Program

The Obama administration's Promise Neighborhoods program, aimed at providing "strong systems of family and community support," shares key elements of the Strive approach. Focused on the career and college outcomes of youth, Promise Neighborhoods require a single organization—nonprofit, an institution of higher education, or an Indian tribe—to coordinate with the local education agency and to partner with at least one public elementary or secondary school.[1] The work of Promise Neighborhoods communities must include a full needs assessment of local children, a coalition of partner organizations that align with these needs, and a comprehensive longitudinal data system to monitor and support progress.

In 2010, more than 300 communities representing 48 states and the District of Columbia applied for planning grants. Twenty-one communities, including large cities such as Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Philadelphia to small rural sites like Indianola, Miss., and Montana's Northern Cheyenne Nation, received between $400,000 and $500,000 for a one-year planning grant to give communities the time and resources to build the infrastructure for a successful continuum of youth services, from "cradle to career."[2] A year later, the U.S. Department of Education is preparing to award $5 million implementation grants to four to six communities, along with a second round of planning grants to another 10 communities.

The Promise Neighborhoods program is not likely to receive the $150 million requested for the 2012 budget (the 2011 budget request of $210 million was cut to just $30 million). And it is impossible to deny the small scale of the program compared to other competitive federal grant initiatives, such as the $4.35 billion Race to the Top program.

Federal officials, however, openly recognize this challenge and say the larger aspiration of the program is to influence communities to build a continuum of services and private funders to invest in such efforts around the country. "These grantees are representative of a much broader movement of communities committed to Promise Neighborhoods approach," said Jim Shelton, assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement at the U.S. Department of Education. "From the west in California, to the north to Minnesota, east to Massachusetts, and south to Mississippi, an analysis of the initial group of Promise Neighborhoods reflects the tremendous need and great potential of all the communities that applied for planning grants."[3]

Several nonprofits are leading efforts to realize this potential. For example, the Promise Neighborhoods Institute, run by California-based Policylink in partnership with Harlem Children's Zone and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, provides consulting and coaching, and even links aspiring "Promise Neighborhoods" with public and private resources to develop and sustain efforts.

### Notes

1   U.S. Department of Education, Promise Neighborhoods Frequently Asked Questions, 2011. http://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/faq.html

2   The full list of planning grant winners, 2010: Abyssinian Development Corporation ( New York), Amherst H. Wilder Foundation (St. Paul, Minn.), Athens Clarke County Family Connection, Inc. (Athens, Ga.), Berea College (Clay, Jackson, and Owsley Counties, Ky.), Boys & Girls Club of the Northern Cheyenne Nation (Northern Cheyenne Reservation, Mont.), California State University—East Bay (Hayward, Calif.),Cesar Chavez Public Policy Charter High School (Washington, D.C.), Community Day Care Center of Lawrence, Inc. (Lawrence, Mass.), Delta Health Alliance, Inc. (Indianola, Miss.), Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (Boston), The Guidance Center (River Rouge, Mich.), Lutheran Family Health Centers (New York), Morehouse School of Medicine, Inc. (Atlanta), Neighborhood Centers, Inc. (Houston), Proyecto Pastoral at Dolores Mission (Los Angeles), United Way of Central Massachusetts, Inc. (Worcester, Mass.), United Way of San Antonio & Bexar County, Inc. (San Antonio, Texas), Universal Community Homes (Philadelphia), University of Arkansas at Little Rock (Little Rock, Ark.), Westminster Foundation (Buffalo, N.Y.), Youth Policy Institute (Los Angeles).

3   Jim Shelton, "21 Promise Neighborhoods Grantees Representative of Broader Movement," Ed.gov Blog, September 27, 2011.

communities need to build a "healthy platform" for learning that is every bit as supportive of success as what most upper-middle class parents try to provide for their children. "How do we wrap those services and supports around [our] children?"[10]

In the most comprehensive examples of this concept, a health educator or nurse would teach pregnant women about the importance of eating properly and avoiding tobacco and alcohol. High-quality infant and toddler care, as well as parenting classes, would be available. Preschools would prepare children for kindergarten so they are ready to learn from day one. In-school health clinics would offer access to basic healthcare, including vaccinations and treatment of minor ailments, to reduce absenteeism.

After-school providers would align tutoring services and enrichment activities with in-school lessons. Local community colleges and universities would run programs to get middle and high school students ready for college. Workshops for parents would be available on topics ranging from proper meals on test days to English language lessons to domestic violence prevention, resume writing, and job interviewing skills. Individually, none of these services is as powerful as they are together in meeting the needs of poor children. Indeed, the power of the "wrap-around" is in the aggregation of these programs and services into a system, where no single entity, including schools, is solely responsible for educating children and everyone is held responsible for their part.

Perhaps the best known comprehensive or wrap-around services model is the Harlem Children's Zone. Founder Geoffrey Canada started HCZ in the 1990s as an experiment limited to one city block. Today, it serves more than 17,000 children and adults in the Harlem community, and its $75 million annual budget is supported by local, state, and federal funding, augmented by generous grants from local and national philanthropies.

The Obama administration has cited HCZ as one of the models for its Promise Neighborhoods program. But the programs differ in important ways, as federal officials are quick to note. Promise Neighborhoods projects will coordinate existing services, whereas HCZ has expanded the services it offers over time. HCZ operates its own charter elementary and middle schools. In Promise Neighborhoods, schools function as a hub for delivering these services. This makes sense because schools are the primary point of contact between the government and school-age children and their parents.[11] But the lead partners must be nonprofits, higher education institutions, or Indian tribes. In this way, the Department of Education has shifted some of the power over students' lives, and responsibilities for outcomes, away from the schools. That serves to broaden the range of desired outcomes beyond the purely academic to include the developmental needs of students.

In many ways, the Obama administration is trying its hand at a new kind of accountability. While the HCZ staff is ultimately only accountable to Canada (as well as, indirectly, the organization's funders),

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the Promise Neighborhoods recipients are required to illustrate how they will share accountability. In their proposals, several of which cited Strive as a model, grant applicants specifically were required to show how they would define collective goals, identify individual indicators of performance, and use resultant data to hold their partners accountable for results. Applicants also were required to develop memoranda of understanding to clarify the exact role and responsibility of each key partner.[12]

## Elements of Shared Accountability

In 2010, Education Sector convened more than a dozen representatives from state departments of education, city school districts, youth and family service agencies, and other school and community organizations to explore the concept of shared accountability. The group agreed that accountability was essential, that schools must be held accountable, first and foremost, for academic outcomes, but also that schools should not be solely accountable for the educational development of children. From that conversation emerged four key elements required for a robust system of shared accountability:

- An overarching vision of student success.

- Objectives, metrics, and performance targets aligned with the vision for each of the participating entities as well as for the collaborative as a whole.

- A system for collecting, analyzing, and communicating student-level outcomes data as well as information on the partners' organizational performance.

- Strong, sustained, civic leadership, supported by an intermediary organization dedicated to making the community's vision a reality.

Subsequently, Education Sector looked across the nation for communities where these were in place and were contributing to improved student outcomes. We found a number of community efforts that had one or more of these elements. But we found very few that were operating under a model of shared accountability that included all of them.

The Strive partnership came close to employing all the key elements and has been recognized by others for doing so. In a 2011 article published in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, "Collective Impact," authors John Kania and Mark Kramer confirm that it is rare for communities to have these elements in place. Although there are many examples of partnerships, networks, and other joint efforts, they are rarely organized to maximize their impact.[13] Cincinnati's Strive partnership is "distinctly different," they write, because it has "a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants." As such, the story of how Strive came to be, as well as the obstacles and challenges it has faced along the way, provide a useful example for those looking to follow in its path.

## 'Roadmap to Success'

It was a report showing that college attainment in Ohio and Kentucky lagged far behind other states that provided the impetus that led to the formation of Strive. The principal organizers were the Cincinnati-based KnowledgeWorks Foundation and the University of Cincinnati, led by then-President Nancy Zimpher. Other colleges, leading businesses, local foundations, clinics, social service agencies, nonprofits and the three local school districts all came on board in support of the overarching aim to strengthen the skills of the local workforce so that the region can compete in the global economy.[14]

But that vision, like vowing to relieve poverty, was, while laudable and important, too general to guide action. Robert Reifsnyder, the president of the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, recalled that, during a discussion of college readiness at one of the early Strive meetings, "Someone said, 'We're focusing on the ninth grade, but these problems really start in middle school. Someone else said, 'Truth be told, it starts in grade school.' Someone else said, 'Listen folks, if we don't get started by kindergarten, the battle is half over.' And finally we said, 'This is a pre-school issue—it's about kindergarten readiness.'"

## Figure 1. Student Journey to Success
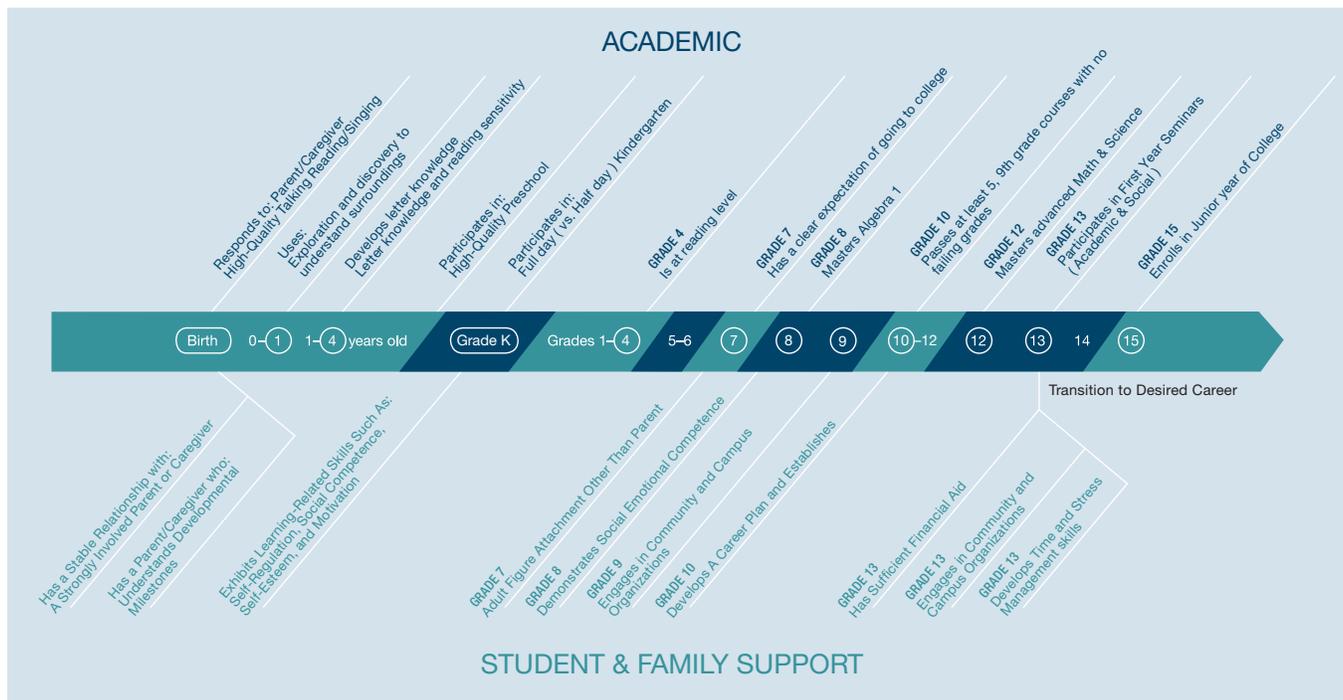


**Source:** Strive Partnership, www.strivepartnership.org

Those insights led to Strive's decision to attempt to deal with the entirety of students' academic and developmental trajectory, rather than trying to intervene at a single point.[15]

To make the vision actionable, the partnership agreed upon five academically focused goals that together comprise a "Student Roadmap to Success." They are: increasing kindergarten readiness; supporting students inside and outside of school; providing academic help; encouraging students to graduate and enroll in college and, finally, complete college well prepared to enter the workforce and succeed.[16] (See Figure 1.)

That roadmap is what keeps Strive on course. But coming to agreement on those goals was not easy. And those seeking to get new collaborations off the ground elsewhere should anticipate that, even if partners agree to participate, it will be difficult at first for them to set aside their own perspectives on how to address an issue. Strive's participants initially found it hard to have substantive conversations about the goals, including how progress would be measured or how they would be reached. There was tension among members of the executive committee, which had been convened to guide the partnership.

"At first, some members just criticized the school district," said Mary Ronan, superintendent of the Cincinnati Public Schools. Local colleges, she said, blamed the schools for sending them high school graduates who needed to take remedial classes.[17] Patricia "Pat" Brown, Strive's former director of Systems Innovation, said "some folks thought the meeting table was where they could point fingers."[18] Strive dealt with this by requiring the members of the executive committee to sign a memorandum of understanding that established norms for how the committee would operate productively. "It's getting

them to understand that this is a partnership and that we all shared responsibility and accountability," Brown said. "Everyone owns a piece of this."

Now, Ronan says, the conversation has changed. "Instead of saying, 'Why are third-grade reading scores so low,' we talk about what we can do to improve them." Instead of criticizing the teachers because graduates need to take remedial classes in college, "we talk about what it is that teachers need to help them get ready." Cincinnati Public Schools is beginning to link its evaluations of teachers back to the local colleges of education where they were trained, to determine which programs are the most effective. The colleges also are Strive partners. "That's a big step for the colleges of education," Ronan said. Partners have realized that "it's not just a K–12 problem; it's a pre-K-to-20 problem."

## Benchmarks of Progress

Getting to consensus on five big goals was a major accomplishment for Strive, but only half the battle. Agreeing to more specific benchmarks of success for the community-wide partnership proved equally important and challenging. For starters, the executive committee agreed on the Roadmap to Success before it assessed the actual needs of the community or settled on the appropriate indicators of progress— something Strive officials say other communities will want to avoid. The choice of which strategies to pursue "need to be based in data, not politics, or friendships or things of that sort," said Jennifer Blatz, Strive's director of partner engagement and advocacy.[19]

In Strive's case, the founders knew where they wanted to head and then began to collect "community data" to identify what stood in the way of students graduating from high school and college. Community-level indicators measure the availability of services and the well-being of whole populations. Such indicators are, by their nature, imprecise and so settling on them required compromise among the network partners. To be selected, indicators had to meet certain criteria. They had to be easy to understand, affordable to collect, and could be changed by local efforts. Strive's partners eventually agreed on 54 indicators, or benchmarks of progress toward the five big goals that mark key points along the continuum

from kindergarten readiness through graduating from college and entering the workforce. They include student test scores, pre-school readiness data, college remediation rates, and dozens of others.

Each provider has a specific role and contribution to make to meet these benchmarks. After bringing together a network of providers, Strive's staff leads them through a planning process to help each provider set their own metrics and goals and align those to community-level indicators. "We're not the experts in mentoring but they are," Brown said. "We'd help them identify a common goal and a plan that would help them reach that goal." To work well, Strive leaders say the plan must assign specific tasks to individual partners, identify the data needed to monitor progress and set annual program performance goals—all of which should be formalized through a memorandum of understanding, explicitly stating results, timelines, and reporting structure. The annual goals or metrics for a mentoring provider, for example, might include improving the mentees' attendance, reducing the number of times they get in trouble, and following them to track whether they are graduating from high school and enrolling in college.

Planning at this level, with specific individual objectives all boiling up to a larger vision of student success, is essential. Without it, the individual work of the partners is only loosely connected, and accountability for results, again, is weak and widely dispersed. Before Strive, this was the case. Some of the services needed by the low-income communities in Cincinnati and the northern Kentucky communities of Covington and Newport across the Ohio River were already in place when Strive started. For example, in the late 1990s the United Way of Greater Cincinnati created a nonprofit organization called "Every Child Succeeds" that brought together 15 agencies to send social workers into the homes of low-income expectant mothers to provide them with parenting advice before and after their children were born. The agencies "agreed to provide this service in an evidence-based way, using the same curriculum, with all of them measuring their impact the same way," the United Way's Reifsnyder said. The agencies created a data dashboard to monitor the providers' performance on key outcomes. The agencies convened regularly to discuss their work and "all were continuously improving the same way."[20]

## Figure 2. Benchmark Example: Percent of Children Assessed As Ready for School at Kindergarten* Cincinnati Public Schools, KRA-L Assessment



**Data Source:** Success By 6®, INNOVATIONS, Cincinnati Public Schools
Benchmark: 59% by 2010
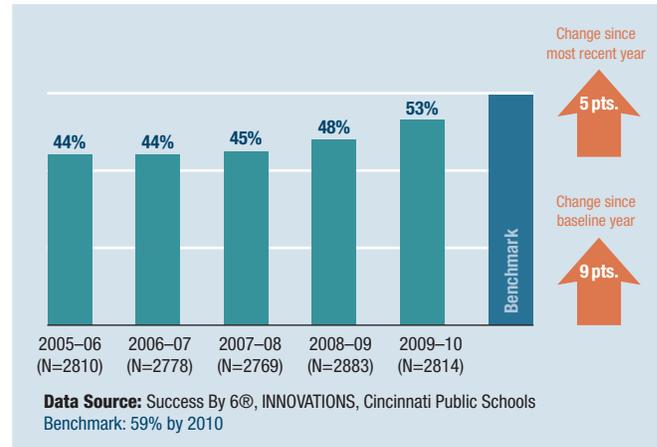
**Source:** 2010 Striving Together: Report Card

Encouraged, the United Way wanted to step up its efforts to support schools and academic outcomes more directly. But, Reifsnyder said, "nobody could paint the picture of what goals we were trying to achieve as a community and as a school system and what strategies…were evidence-based and would have the most impact on those goals." There were "a thousand different programs, initiatives, and entrepreneurial efforts in this school and that school that were all trying to help the education process in our community." As in many communities, there was a lot of energy being expended but it was not organized around improved student achievement. No one even knew what services were being provided, whom they were serving and where there were gaps.

That's not a problem for Strive. Each year, the partnership packages and releases its annual "Striving Together" report card, which shows community progress on all of its indicators. (See Figure 2 and Table 1.) Based on these data, partnership leaders can tailor their efforts, identifying what services or program providers are essential and which are less so. For example, after looking at outcomes data in 2011, the executive committee decided that schools were not improving quickly enough, instruction lacked rigor, the rate of academic progress was too slow, and college had to be made more accessible. Partners are researching ways to improve teaching, and several funders came together to support additional training for principals

**Table 1.** Goal 2, 3 & 4: Every student will be SUPPORTED, SUCCEED academically, and ENROLL in college

| Cincinnati Public Schools | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Current percent or average** | **Change since baseline year** | **Change since recent year** | **Current target** | **Target year** |
| 4th grade Reading | 71% | +16 (2004) | +8 | 84% | 2011 |
| 8th grade Math | 61% | +24 (2004) | +11 | 72.3% | 2011 |
| Graduation | 82% | +10 (2003) | +2 | 95% | 2011 |
| ACT Composite | 18.1 | N/A | N/A | 19 | 2011 |
| College Enrollment | 65% | +7 (2004) | -3 | 70% | 2011 |

**Source:** 2011 Partnership Report

working in the lowest-performing schools. Four local colleges created the "Strive Promise Compact" to eliminate financial barriers to college for low-income students.[21]

Establishing metrics, as well as gathering and tracking data, is only a piece to a strong accountability system. Weak performance must lead to intervention or to a discontinuation of funding. Even if an organization is doing its job well, it may lose support if the collaborative changes its strategy, based on the data it collects. A good example of this was the decision made early on to shift resources to preschool to increase kindergarten readiness. That resulted in a reallocation of money from other purposes, including after-school programming.

Strive tries to determine whether a program receiving funds is having maximum impact by asking whether the program's mission is aligned with one of its five goals and assessing whether the program is well-managed and fiscally accountable. The United Way, which is now one of Strive's most important partners, has ended its support for 33 organizations and shifted resources to 38 new ones by analyzing grantees using that process. The United Way now

supports only seven pre-school providers, down from dozens it once funded. Those decisions were made to "get greater impact, alignment, and accountability," Reifsnyder said.

Julie Sellers, the president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, said the focus of Strive and the United Way on measurable results has caused some concern. "Some groups that were funded over the years weren't funded and others were, because they had data," she said. "That was a very different way of looking at things and there was a lot of pushback, because a lot of social service agencies have fluffy goals and they weren't used to measuring outcomes."[22]

Since Strive began its work, however, the idea of using data to measure performance and make decisions has begun to take hold. Cincinnati was already evaluating its teachers partly on gains in student test scores so there already was a sense that performance and results mattered. But Sellers said Strive's focus on outcomes, as well as the involvement of a large number of external partners, has heightened that awareness. "You feel more accountable when you know your partners are watching and it's not just watching, it's helping," she said.

## Sharing the Data

The purpose of community collaborations or partnerships like Strive is to address the multiple needs of youths. Shared, cross-institutional data systems support that purpose by making real-time, student-level data available to teachers and community providers so they can use it to better understand and address students' learning and developmental needs.[23]

Making such data useful is difficult, however, because partners often collect, store, and analyze data in incompatible and disconnected ways. Some may keep data about their students and their services in Excel sheets; others may house it on the Web; and others may keep track with pencil and paper. Moreover, schools collect a lot of information about students and their academic performance but, due to privacy concerns, it usually is not available to after-school providers, mentors, mental health professionals, or others who could use it to help children more effectively.

With assistance from the Microsoft Corporation, Strive and the Cincinnati Public Schools are working on a data dashboard that will integrate school-related information about each student with information from preschools, colleges, and all the other Strive partners that touch that child's life. As envisioned, the dashboard and data management system will build on the sophisticated system CPS is already using. Teachers and other educators already meet every other week to discuss the needs of individual students, using the school-related data. With the help of school counselors or service coordinators, who serve as a conduit between schools and community providers, they can then identify and recommend the best service to address a student's particular challenges, creating a customized prescription of support services. When fully implemented, teachers and principals also will be able to look at the services being provided outside of schools to individual students, whole classes, and even the school as a whole to identify gaps that may be inhibiting students' success.

Similarly, service providers could access school-related data. An after-school teacher could look at a student's performance on a math test, for example, and use that information in a tutoring session. "Academic and nonacademic student support data

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will be incorporated in one web-based system so that a comprehensive picture of student learning will be available to all stakeholders," says Strive's website.[24] Foundations or other funders will be better able to target their giving to the most vulnerable students and schools. Ideally, parents should have access to the information to get a clear picture of how well their child is progressing academically, and which non-school programs are providing them with services. Students' profiles would follow them from one school to another and from one service provider to another, helping maintain continuity of services. Gathering such sensitive data and making it available to a variety of agencies and adults raises significant privacy issues. So, system designers must create permissions systems that will allow adult service providers access only to the information they need to be as helpful as possible.

"In education, data has traditionally been used for punitive purposes, not for improvement," said founding Strive president Jeff Edmondson. He asserts that "it is the relentless focus on data that, more than anything, has been the key to the partnership's success."[25]

## Taking the Lead

Bringing together a community's myriad of service providers and getting them to pursue a single, shared vision for how to improve outcomes for youths is not easy. It will not happen naturally, and such networks cannot be assembled and sustained by a school district working on its own. An in-depth study of after-school systems in five cities, conducted on behalf of the Wallace Foundation, found that such efforts were

much more successful when they received strong support from the mayor.[26] Even so, mayoral leadership and support for such efforts could evaporate overnight if a new leader, with different priorities, is elected.

Such projects will be more sustainable if they enjoy strong leadership from a number of different sectors. Strive, for example, is guided by an executive committee that includes corporate CEOs, leaders of corporate and private foundations, the superintendents of five local school systems, presidents of local universities, and executive directors of the most influential education nonprofits and advocacy groups. The role of the committee is not just ceremonial or one of oversight. Each member is assigned to a team developing strategies to meet one of its five goals. "One of the key lessons was that we wanted to get them involved in a more formal way," Brown said. The collective influence of the leadership team makes it possible for Strive to act on its collective decisions.

The professionally staffed Strive functions as an intermediary and executes on those decisions. Strive works with service providers to help them continuously improve their outcomes. It advocates for its policy agenda to align community giving around its priorities. It is taking the lead in creating the sophisticated data management system the partnership needs to monitor student progress and provider performance. At its most basic, Strive unites "common providers around shared issues, goals, measurements, and results."[27]

Probably, the most important function of the intermediary is to enforce accountability. For example,

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the Strive executive committee's analysis of recent performance trends on the community indicators showed that schools need to speed up instruction and expect more from their students. In response, network supporters are helping underwrite leadership training for principals and teachers. By publicly reporting trends from year to year, Strive is able to engage the community in a discussion about where it is having the greatest impact, and where adjustments need to be made.

## Strong Results

Strive's results are strong. Over the past four years, the communities showed progress on 40 community indicators. More students are demonstrating proficiency in math and reading and enrolling in college. One particularly bright spot is that the percentage of children who come to kindergarten ready to learn has risen substantially in Cincinnati as well as in Newport and Covington, the two Kentucky communities that are part of Strive. The percentage of Cincinnati students who have been vaccinated has risen from about 70 percent to 90 percent in the past few years. But there is a long way to go. The percentage of students graduating from Cincinnati Public Schools who enroll in college within two years of high school graduation was 65 percent in 2009, an increase since 2005, but a 4 percentage point drop from the previous year.[28]

Perhaps the most visible evidence of how Strive and its partners are addressing the needs of students and their families and supporting student achievement is the community learning centers that operate as service hubs at 16 of the lowest-performing and elementary school campuses that serve the neediest students. The learning centers connect students, their families, and neighborhood residents to health, educational, and cultural programs. For example, all of the students who attend the Ethel M. Taylor Academy qualify for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. More than a dozen businesses and agencies provide services through the center. The school was recognized in 2011 as a national exemplar by the Coalition for Community Schools for its strong academic gains as well as for the depth of the community engagement. The school is also among those in Cincinnati that offer a "Fifth Quarter," a privately funded effort that each June extends the

school year to give students intensive tutoring in the mornings and enrichment activities in fine arts, fitness, technology, and environmental education in the afternoons. Strive and its partners were instrumental in setting up and funding the centers. Now, the centers are attracting new provider partners and more volunteers, and more students are staying in their neighborhoods rather than moving elsewhere.

In another sign of success, more and more local education-related philanthropies are aligning their giving with Strive's Roadmap to Success. The partnership is also attracting more public funds. The Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Social Innovations Fund, which is administered by the United Way, recently received a $2 million federal grant, matched by an equal amount from 14 local sources. Reifsnyder of the United Way said, "Strive is an important part of our thinking through where the United Way wants to drive its funding in the cradle-to-career continuum." In June, a local bank foundation gave $1 million to support the community learning centers, recruit tutors for a program on the Kentucky side of the river, coach providers on ways to increase their impact on student outcomes, and provide training for principals. "This investment will support the priorities of the partnership," Strive executive director Greg Landsman said in a statement.[29] This shift in funding demonstrates that Strive is bringing about systemic changes in addition to helping improve the lives of young people.

## Accountability for All

Interest in the Strive approach is growing. The partnership is already helping seven other communities replicate its model and has plans to create at least 25 "Cradle-to-Career Communities" by 2015. Communities in 28 states are interested in it as well. And the Promise Neighborhoods initiative, which requires recipients of planning grants to include many of the elements that are part of Strive, is moving forward. In December 2011, the federal government will provide $30 million in grants to four to six communities to implement their plans and will support planning efforts in more communities. In the first round of planning grants in 2010, communities were awarded grants of up to $500,000 each to create networks of services and build the infrastructure

needed—such as collaborative leadership teams and inter-agency data systems—to sustain long-term partnerships. They also were required to conduct a needs assessment and build a data system that could help them refine their approach and hold themselves accountable for results.[30] Such momentum indicates that many realize that given the urgent need to drastically improve outcomes for our neediest students, the stakes must be raised for everyone.

> **They also were required to conduct a needs assessment and build a data system that could help them refine their approach and hold themselves accountable for results.**

For the Obama administration, "everyone" includes more than those in the Department of Education and more than those with a focus on education. Promise Neighborhoods are part of the administration's Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, a broader cross-agency effort to move away from "the siloed approach of addressing families' individual problems separately" and toward an interdisciplinary and coordinated approach.[31] Led by the White House Domestic Policy Council, the initiative includes the White House Office of Urban Affairs and the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Health and Human Services, and Education. The administration "recognizes that the interconnected challenges in high-poverty neighborhoods require interconnected solutions. Struggling schools, little access to capital, high unemployment, poor housing, persistent crime, and other challenges that feed into and perpetuate each other call for an integrated approach so residents can reach their full potential."[32]

The administration's approach differs from the segmented way that the federal government has tackled the problems of poverty in the past. Community Development Block Grants, Neighborhood Stabilization programs, Community

Renewal grants, Economic Empowerment Zones, Job Corps, the Youth Opportunity Program and others administered grant programs to improve housing, create jobs or provide training. Each has had its own strengths and weaknesses; none have promoted or been explicitly linked to school improvement efforts. It is hoped that Strive-like Promise Neighborhoods, with schools at the center of city- and community-wide change efforts, will be different.

> …with the proper organizational structure and a commitment from schools, businesses, philanthropies, nonprofits, and other government agencies, it is possible for a community to counter the effects of poverty and social dysfunction more effectively.

Strive has shown that, with the proper organizational structure and a commitment from schools, businesses, philanthropies, nonprofits, and other government agencies, it is possible for a community to counter the effects of poverty and social dysfunction more effectively. What's required is strong civic leadership, agreement on community-wide goals, the willingness of various agencies to share performance and program data and to be held accountable for serving the needs of students and their families.

## Notes

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2. 2010 Striving Together: Report Card. Available at http://www.strivetogether.org/education-results-resource/striving-together-report-card/

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4. Strive's five goals are: increasing kindergarten readiness; supporting students inside and outside of school; providing academic help; encouraging students to graduate and enroll in college; and complete college well prepared to enter the workforce and succeed.

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18. Patricia Brown, in discussion with author, Spring 2011.

19. Jennifer Blatz, in discussion with author, Spring 2011.

20. Robert Reifsnyder, in discussion with author, Spring 2011.

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22. Julie Sellers, in discussion with author, Spring 2011.

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24. http://www.strivetogether.org/education-results-resource-2/learning-partner-dashboard/

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