

Aligning for Impact: Connecting Promise Neighborhoods and the Cradle-to-Career Civic Infrastructure

Leaders at all levels, from the board room to the living room, are working in communities across the country to fundamentally change how they support children’s success from cradle to career. This work focuses on rethinking how limited resources are best used to meet the needs of each and every child and family. There are numerous initiatives underway to help communities as they take on this challenging, long-term work that requires going beyond programmatic interventions to achieve systemic transformation. Two of these efforts include Promise Neighborhoods and StriveTogether’s work to help communities build cradle-to-career civic infrastructure. (Please see the FAQs section for descriptions of each initiative.)

These initiatives were recently featured in a report released by **Education Sector**¹ that highlighted how they could benefit each other by aligning their frameworks and sharing what they are learning. Such alignment would be logical and powerful given the similarities in their conceptual underpinnings, namely utilizing data and community expertise to identify what works on the ground and matching those resources to the unique needs of individuals and families.

Before discussing how to achieve that alignment, it is important to understand the differences in the geographic scope and breadth of issues covered by each effort. Geographically, Promise Neighborhoods focuses on neighborhoods while StriveTogether focuses on cities or regions. In terms of issues addressed, StriveTogether is committed to improving educational outcomes, while Promise Neighborhoods is rooted in strong schools and educational outcomes but also works more broadly on child development factors such as health and wellness.

So how can these efforts align in a community? The visual below depicts how a community can connect one or more neighborhood-based efforts with existing or emerging city or regional efforts.



¹ See: <http://www.educationsector.org/publications/striving-student-success-model-shared-accountability>

In this case the regional structure enables communication between various neighborhood efforts, the neighborhood efforts can feed innovations surfaced in their community up to the system-wide level, and policy and practice changes identified by the regional effort can be implemented and tested in partner neighborhoods. The potential benefits to both types of partnerships from this alignment are numerous.

Alignment with neighborhood-based efforts enables regional partnerships to:

 **Test policy/systems and change ideas on the ground.** Often, the programmatic or structural changes identified by a regional partnership are difficult to implement all at once across a community. By partnering with neighborhood-based efforts, the regional effort has a readymade “innovation lab” to pilot and test ideas, and gather data about their effectiveness, before rolling strategies out more broadly. In addition, regional efforts have the chance to learn from neighborhood based partners about what works.

 **Engage community more effectively in decision-making.** Regional partnerships often struggle to engage community because they are, by definition, broad and therefore not rooted in specific community needs and issues. By connecting to neighborhood efforts, regional partnerships can more effectively engage community members in dialogue about potential programs and policy change ideas.

Alignment with regional partnerships enables neighborhood-based efforts to:

 **Rapidly spread innovations.** Neighborhood-based partnerships often produce innovative solutions to local challenges through their deep understanding of the local community dynamics. However, these innovations often stay within their neighborhood boundaries because they have no way to scale them to other neighborhoods. By connecting to regional efforts, they can tap into a ready infrastructure to rapidly align community resources around innovations, enabling them to spread to other communities far more quickly and sustainably.

 **Remove policy barriers.** Ideas on the ground in one neighborhood may not be implemented in another because of institutional or policy barriers. By connecting to a regional effort, neighborhood efforts have increased access to decision-makers and those decision-makers have a mechanism to respond systemically rather than fielding multiple one-off requests from each separate community or initiative.

 **Access data.** Neighborhood-based efforts often struggle to access critical information, such as student performance data from the school district, that would help them better identify the specific challenges and potential solutions that could improve outcomes in their community. Connection to regional partnerships sometimes facilitates access to data, and to the decision-makers who control the data, while streamlining data and research requests to decrease the burden on institutions.

In order to achieve these benefits, there are five key areas for the leaders in a given community to intentionally connect across neighborhood and regional partnerships:

- 1) **Aligned Leadership.** Both Promise Neighborhoods and StriveTogether look to bring together key leaders across sectors to help champion, guide, and advocate for the work over the long term. Thoughtful alignment across these leadership tables is critical to ensure 1) constant flow of information, 2) minimization of duplicative requests of time, resources, and political capital, 3) consistent messaging about how the efforts are mutually reinforcing, and 4) commitment to common standards of practice regarding the use of data.
- 2) **Aligned Outcomes.** Both initiatives look to create a dashboard of regional and neighborhood level outcomes that will remain the focus of the effort over the long term. Ensuring consistency across these outcome sets—and recognizing that there may be some differences—is critical for achieving improved outcomes over time.

In order to achieve these benefits, there are five key areas for the leaders in a given community to intentionally connect across neighborhood and regional partnerships:

- 3) **Aligned Action.** The Promise Neighborhood effort must be one of the priority strategies of the regional partnership. With this in place, leaders can quickly translate and disseminate lessons from the neighborhood-based work to inform work across the region.

- 4) **Aligned Data Systems.** While it is critical that community-level outcomes are consistently used across sites, it is equally ideal that the data system adopted by the region and neighborhood to gather, report, and use information at the child level is consistent or compatible. This will enable practitioners and decision-makers to have a consistent mechanism for using data to inform action and continuously improve.
- 5) **Aligned Advocacy.** Both Promise Neighborhoods and StriveTogether promote the development of an advocacy agenda aimed at policymakers and funders to support efforts that produce results for children. Developing a joint agenda will have greater impact at the local, state, and national levels, although each may also choose to pursue individual agendas as well.

By aligning the work of each partnership along these five dimensions, communities will be able to more seamlessly connect their efforts and, with this integrated approach, realize greater benefits for the children and families they serve.

Frequently Asked Questions:

What is a Promise Neighborhood?

A Promise Neighborhood is both a place and a strategy. A place eligible to become a Promise Neighborhood is a geographic area that is distressed, often facing inadequate access to high-quality early learning programs, services, and schools, and with low high-school and college graduation rates, high rates of unemployment and crime, and indicators of poor health. These conditions contribute to and intensify the negative outcomes associated with children and youth living in poverty. Children and youth who are from low-income families and grow up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty face educational and life challenges above and beyond the challenges faced by children who are from low-income families who grow up in neighborhoods without a high concentration of poverty.

A Promise Neighborhood is also a strategy for addressing the issues in distressed communities. Promise Neighborhoods are led by organizations that work to ensure that all children and youth in the target geographic area have access to the continuum of solutions needed to graduate from high school college- and career-ready. Within a Promise Neighborhood, organizations ensure a high level of participation in high quality cradle-to-career supports for children and youth, so that a greater proportion of the neighborhood is served and neighborhood indicators show children making significant progress over time.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the vision of the program is that all children and youth growing up in Promise Neighborhoods have access to great schools and strong systems of family and community support that will prepare them to attain an excellent education and successfully transition to college and a career. The purpose of Promise Neighborhoods is to significantly improve the educational and developmental outcomes of children and youth in our most distressed communities, and to transform those communities by:

1. Identifying and increasing the capacity of eligible entities that are focused on achieving results for children and youth throughout an entire neighborhood;
2. Building a complete continuum of cradle-to-career solutions of both educational programs and family and community supports, with great schools at the center;
3. Integrating programs and breaking down agency silos so that solutions are implemented effectively and efficiently across agencies;
4. Developing the local infrastructure of systems and resources needed to sustain and scale up proven, effective solutions across the broader region beyond the initial neighborhood; and
5. Learning about the overall impact of the Promise Neighborhoods program and about the relationship between particular strategies in Promise Neighborhoods and student outcomes, including through a rigorous evaluation of the program.

To date 41 communities have received planning or implementation grants from the U.S. Department of Education as part of the formal Promise Neighborhoods program. Eligible entities include (1) nonprofit organizations, which may include faith-based nonprofit organizations, (2) institutions of higher education, and (3) Indian tribes. In addition to the 41 communities funded by the Department of Education, there are dozens of Promise Neighborhood-type efforts across the country—operating without Promise Neighborhoods program grants— that could benefit from alignment with broader regional efforts.

What does StriveTogether mean by Cradle-to-Career Civic Infrastructure?

Civic Infrastructure is a term that describes the structures, processes and tools that enable communities to work together more effectively, use data more strategically, identify and improve on what works more consistently, and move resources in a more coordinated way to support the success of every child from cradle to career. Like the physical infrastructure of a city, the civic infrastructure has several critical components:

- **Shared Community Vision** consists of bringing together stakeholders at *every level* (grass roots and grass tops), across *all sectors* (from education to community to business and beyond) of the community around a unified vision and goals. These stakeholders then need to be organized in a partnership where they are mutually accountable for achieving their shared goals (the skyline of a physical infrastructure).
- **Evidence Based Decision Making** includes agreeing on which high level data points we want to move because we believe moving them will indicate real impact for kids; along with the local data, expert research, and community knowledge that are used to determine the right path to achieve that impact. This combination of data provides the foundation (or ground the infrastructure is built upon) for making decisions.
- **Collaborative Action** brings together those who are most interested and integral to moving the selected outcomes in a new and more efficient way that uses all forms of data to identify what practices are or could have the greatest impact for kids in their community, creates plans to spread those practices, and monitors their collective success in order to keep improving over time (in essence a more efficient way of constructing buildings to fill in the skyline).
- **Investment & Sustainability** requires true community ownership and involvement in the work to sustain it through the inevitable ups, downs and leadership changes that will occur; and it requires the realignment of resources, both public and private, existing and new, to support the infrastructure itself and what the teams on the ground have identified as being most effective for kids (the electrical grid that powers it all).

Collectively these pieces embody the civic infrastructure, and while each piece is singularly important, doing individual pieces well is not sufficient to achieve the kind of impact we want to see. For true cradle to career transformation a community must connect it all together into their own civic infrastructure.

Do we have to pick one concept or the other?

No. The work of building a cradle to career civic infrastructure at the regional level and launching Promise Neighborhoods at the local level are mutually supportive, and if both efforts are started in concert the ability to achieve the alignment described in this paper is even greater. The Framework for Building Civic Infrastructure developed by StriveTogether can frame and inform work at both the regional and neighborhood level. The Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink has a growing body of tools and resources that support both bodies of work.

Which effort should we attempt to implement first?

Both a Promise Neighborhood and StriveTogether model can be implemented simultaneously in the same community if it is ready to do both. If not, then the decision depends primarily on the willingness and readiness of leaders at the regional and/or neighborhood levels to invest capital to build cradle-to-career supports, and the geographic scope within which those leaders are willing and/or able to invest their capital. It may make sense to start with a Promise Neighborhood initiative if an organization(s) and community members in one specific neighborhood are already providing high-quality direct services and want to scale up to a full continuum or a larger neighborhood; are well organized and ready for action; and/or if leaders don't feel the regional players are ready for coordinated systemic action or would contribute to their efforts. If scaling impact broadly across a wider population is a primary focus, then building the regional cradle-to-career civic infrastructure may be a good starting place.

What are the costs and structure for the back office or infrastructure?

This question gets to one of the key differences in the structure of the role of the lead agency in a Promise Neighborhood or a backbone organization with StriveTogether. As such, it's a bit like comparing apples and oranges.

StriveTogether's back office team works includes a Director to work constantly with the partners engaged in the vision, a data analyst to support the collection, management, analysis, and reporting of data for use by partners, and facilitation to develop action plans on-the-ground. This team should influence countless millions of dollars that are needed.

Promise Neighborhoods' lead agency must also be a direct service provider in the neighborhood. As the lead agency in a Promise Neighborhood, the organization's back office capacity must include the ability to coordinate and engage partners on data, accountability, as well as coordinate and integrate programs. In addition, as the backbone of a direct service organization, the Promise Neighborhood lead agency must have the ability to raise funds for direct services, oversee finances, evaluate programs, implement or manage a database on clients, manage human resources, and all the other administrative functions of a direct service organization.

Civic Infrastructure

The cost of building civic infrastructure is minimal compared to the influence it can have over the millions of dollars invested in the success of children. To build the civic infrastructure, communities need to select an anchor or "backbone" organization that will be responsible for organizing the partnership, housing the staff that are required to keep it going, and coordinating resource alignment in the

community to support the work. In general, the annual budget for the backbone is about \$500,000. The funding primarily supports a few key roles including a director to work with the partners engaged in the vision, a data analyst to support the collection, management, analysis, and reporting of data for use by partners, and a facilitator to help teams develop action plans on-the-ground. However, the regional partnership that this team supports should influence both the public and private resources that are currently invested in a community, helping them to redirect their investments towards what works.

Promise Neighborhoods

Building capacity for the lead agency in a Promise Neighborhood depends on the existing back office capacity of the direct service organization as well as the number of direct services the lead agency provides. A good guideline is that direct service organizations spend about 20% of their overall budget on a back-office to support the work of their programs.

How would we get started?

There is basic information on the Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink (<http://www.promiseneighborhoodsinstitute.org/Technical-Assistance/Funding>) and StriveTogether (<http://www.strivetgether.org/our-approach/>) websites, and you are welcome to reach out to the staff listed below for more information.

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