



## Together for Students: **FIVE KEY LESSONS FROM OUR COLLECTIVE IMPACT INITIATIVE**

For the first time in decades, more than 50% of our nation's public school students live in poverty. The challenges faced by young people today are too broad for any single school, organization or agency to solve alone. But imagine a school where children are at the center of their education experience and have the support of the entire community behind them. United by this vision for student-centered learning, our three national organizations — the Coalition for Community Schools, Communities In Schools and StriveTogether — decided to work together to invest in young people.

With support from the Ford Foundation and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, we created the Together for Students initiative, a multi-year grant to support our local network members in transforming how their communities work together to meet the needs of every student.

Now, after our first year of implementation, we've learned a lot. We've had early success and moments of failing forward. In this brief, we want to share the five biggest lessons we've learned so far in the hopes that other organizations and communities can also learn from our experience.

## how we got here:

# a short history of Together for Students

Together for Students began in 2016 when leaders at the Coalition for Community Schools, Communities In Schools and StriveTogether came together to rethink the ways we support and serve students. For decades, we had each been pursuing a student-centered vision in our own way. Collectively, our organizations have relationships with network members in more than 300 communities across the country, all dedicated to improving educational equity. Our leaders realized that we could achieve our shared goals more effectively if we and our network members aligned our assets and expertise instead of continuing to work separately.

Our leaders agreed on a shared vision for student-centered learning and principles for working together, described in the report *Aligning Networks to Enable Every Student to Thrive*. To share our bold new vision with our network members, we held a conference with over a hundred

communities. Then, we issued a call for proposals from communities working to build strong, cross-sector partnerships to put students at the center of their education. We awarded planning grants to 10 groups across the country. In 2017, we selected four of the 10 planning communities to receive multi-year implementation grants. The awardees were our local network members at Thrive Chicago in Chicago, Ill.; Learn to Earn Dayton in Dayton, Ohio; United Way of Greater Lehigh Valley in Lehigh Valley, Pa.; and Communities In Schools of Memphis in Memphis, Tenn.

These four local network members spent the first year of Together for Students deepening their community partnerships, engaging with parents and students and building broad support for student-centered learning. The grantees completed their first year of full implementation in March 2020.

### FALL 2016

Aligned national partners come together to put students at the center

Create the *Aligning Networks to Enable Every Student to Thrive* report

### FALL 2017

Announcement of Together for Students Challenge

Funding provided by the Ford Foundation and Chan Zuckerberg Initiative

### SPRING 2018

10 Communities selected to receive planning grants:

- Birmingham, Ala. (United Way of Central Alabama)
- Chicago, Ill. (Thrive Chicago)
- Dayton, Ohio (Learn to Earn Dayton)
- Fresno, Calif. (Fresno Cradle to Career)
- Lehigh Valley, Pa. (United Way of Greater Lehigh Valley)
- Memphis, Tenn. (Communities In Schools of Memphis)
- Milwaukee, Wis. (United Way of Greater Milwaukee and Waukesha County)
- Nashville, Tenn. (Metro Nashville Public Schools)
- Vancouver, Wash. (Vancouver Public Schools)
- Washington, D.C. (DC Public Education Fund)

### FALL 2018

Planning grants close

Funds for implementation grants announced from anonymous donor

### WINTER 2019

Aligned national partners evaluate applications and select four local network members to receive implementation funds for three years:

- Chicago, Ill. (Thrive Chicago)
- Dayton, Ohio (Learn to Earn Dayton)
- Lehigh Valley, Pa. (United Way of Greater Lehigh Valley)
- Memphis, Tenn. (Communities In Schools of Memphis)

### SPRING 2020

Year one of implementation ends

Aligned national partners and local network members share their lessons from Together for Students so far

## lesson one:

# shared principles help us work together successfully

When we began the Together for Students initiative in 2016, we knew that it would be hard to align three distinct organizations and all of their local network members. In some communities, our network members were already working closely together, but in many others, a sense of competition, limited resources and misunderstandings had created tension and misalignment. To encourage collaboration and highlight our shared values, our leaders agreed on five principles at the heart of our work: trusting relationships, cross-sector partnerships, purposeful engagement, actionable data and shared accountability.

From day one of Together for Students, these principles haven't just lived on paper — they've guided our efforts at the national and local levels. In moments of difficulty, our core principles have brought us back together and reminded

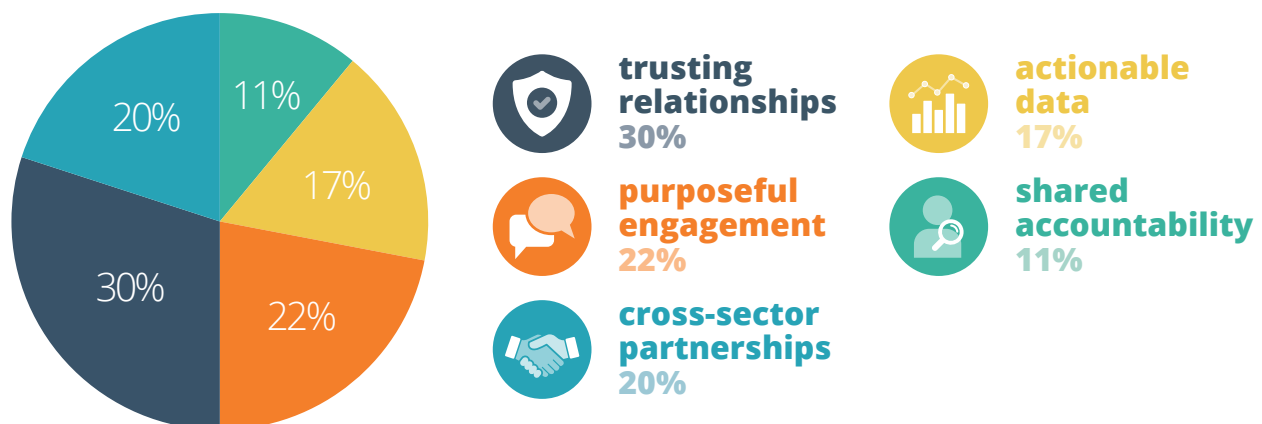
us to keep the needs of students at the center of everything we do.

In addition to using each of the core principles daily in our Together for Students work, we've learned different lessons from each:

- Trusting relationships are the foundation of Together for Students, making all other pieces of our work possible.
- Cross-sector partnerships and purposeful engagement have been especially important for our local network members in building coalitions and increasing community support for Together for Students.
- Actionable data and shared accountability go hand-in-hand to make sure the work of Together for Students is on track and that all partners are pushing toward the same goals.

## Our Focus on Each Core Principle

(percent referenced by TFS leaders)



## lesson two:

# trusting relationships are the key to success, and there are many ways to build them

One of the most important lessons we've learned from Together for Students is that trusting relationships are the foundation for collective work. At both the national and local levels, we have carefully and intentionally built genuine relationships with our partners. In just two years, our four local network members have developed relationships with hundreds of community partners, from district leaders to business executives to parents and students. These genuine relationships help Together for Students partners cooperate and pursue shared goals even when they may not have worked together in the past. Some of the ways the local network members have built trusting relationships are through creating

ative impact work. With this understanding, our local network members have given some reluctant partners space while continuing to share information and offer their support. They realize that with time a hesitant partner may open to the idea of working together.

In a different approach, our national leaders and local network members enthusiastically encouraged a reluctant partner's participation in Together for Students, going out of their way to accommodate them. For example, some local network members changed meeting times to fit the partner's schedule, reached out more often or directly communicated how valuable the

**"At the end of the day, it's all about relationships. ... It's about finding the people that have 'yes' on their heart for the work. That's how you're going to make traction and make things move. It's all about how we're building authentic, true, honest relationships."**

■ TOGETHER FOR STUDENTS LOCAL NETWORK MEMBER

a shared goal, making time for consistent communication, and understanding that building trusting relationships takes time and effort.

Even though they're necessary, we've learned that building trusting relationships isn't always easy. Difficult histories between groups and a sense of competition for resources made some potential partners reluctant to share work as part of Together for Students. Recognizing the need for trusting relationships, the four local network members have adopted several strategies to improve difficult relationships and start building trust.

First, they understand that trust isn't established overnight. Some partners need extra time and effort to feel comfortable participating in collec-

partner's participation would be in Together for Students. One of our national leaders said, "We intentionally and relentlessly invite [reluctant partners] to the table. I say, 'You gotta be there. We can't do this without you.'"

Finally, we've learned that trusting relationships require the ability to have difficult conversations and a willingness to forgive mistakes. Several leaders at the aligned national partners described moments in their Together for Student work where they had to recognize, apologize and ask forgiveness for a mistake. When handled directly, the partners were able to find a joint solution and move forward. One leader described how apologizing for a mistake, while difficult, ultimately strengthened the relationship with the other aligned national partners.

## lesson three:

# collective impact work is challenging, with lots of opportunities to fail forward

As a rule, collective impact work is difficult and complicated. It takes time and skill to manage complex partnerships. In our work so far, we've learned that Together for Students isn't an exception. At both the national and local levels, we've learned how to address these challenges and fail forward.

Together for Students leaders at both national and local levels have grappled with managing a large group of diverse community members on top of also doing their organization's work to support students and families. A leader at one network site said that at times the effort to lead the Together for Students partnership could be a full-time job.

Another lesson we've learned is that staff turnover is an inevitable part of any project, and it presents unique challenges and opportunities within a partnership. In the first years of Together for Students, every aligned national partner and local network member has experienced staffing changes, whether within their own organization or through a partner organization. In collective impact work, staffing changes at one organization can have a larger impact on the work of the group. Through this experience, we've learned that the most significant challenges from staff turnover are setbacks caused by the time it takes to:

- Find and hire a new person for the role;
- Develop new, trusting relationships;
- Build a full understanding of the Together for Students initiative; and
- Generate support for the work.

Recognizing that turnover is inevitable and that it has the potential to delay the project, both

national and local leaders have developed ways to smooth staff transitions by:

- Embracing the opportunity to start fresh and create a new relationship;
- Developing manuals with standard operating procedures;
- Overlapping time between the individuals leaving and starting the role; and
- Creating thoughtful transition plans to hand off relationships.

Among our aligned national partners, we've learned two unique lessons about where we can fail forward. These lessons were not present among the local network partners. The first lesson is that it can be difficult to make sure all leaders involved with Together for Students have the same understanding of the project. While the national leaders are very supportive of Together for Students and want it to be successful, they don't always feel they have clarity about the purpose of the initiative. In some cases, national leaders wondered whether they understood the goals of Together for Students in the same way as their counterparts in other organizations. They often felt they needed better alignment across the partners. The second lesson at the national level is that, in some instances, national leaders are concerned that shared work could get overlooked. Together for Students is only a piece of each national organization's portfolio. Talking about Together for Students, one national leader said, "I think that's one of the potential threats of initiatives like this: that they can get swallowed up and pushed aside, just with everything else going on."

## lesson four:

# Together for Students has experienced early wins and found positive lessons about what conditions will lead to long-term success

Together for Students local network members have only completed one full year of project implementation. So we haven't seen population-level changes yet, but we have learned that Together for Students has had early wins in laying the groundwork for long-term successes. One major lesson from the first year of implementation is that the initiative has helped advance local partnerships. In the four local network sites, partnerships with cross-sector organizations, parents and students have grown in size and quality because of the Together for Students grant.

The aligned national partners and local network members have identified other factors, in addition to the shared core principles, that also help create the conditions for long-term success. Each factor offers an important lesson about what's necessary in successful collective impact work.

Shared goals, where all partners agreed on the long-term outcomes they wanted for students, helped create authentic support for Together for Students work. Having these shared goals also encouraged the belief that more can be accomplished by working collectively than by working separately.

The ability to create win-win opportunities, so that all partners feel they are both contributing to the shared work and benefiting through

their participation, has been very important in Together for Students. One local network leader described the need for win-win initiatives by saying, "It has to be as much a win for another organization. They have to be able to see that by them providing support in a certain way they're eventually going to gain something."

Another condition for success at both the national and local levels was recognizing and respecting their partners' unique strengths. Many leaders in Together for Students express a sincere acknowledgement of the abilities and expertise their partners bring to the shared work. This recognition also helps identify which partners are best able to handle different parts of the project.

A final lesson we've learned is that flexibility and willingness to compromise, while not sacrificing the core mission, help create successful partnerships. Together for Students leaders have consistently been willing to change their way of approaching a task to accommodate and support the collective efforts of the broader group. This happened in small ways, such as willingness to meet at times decided by partners, and in larger ways. For example, one national leader described the importance of holding true to their core tenets while allowing flexibility for their local affiliates when it would create better collaboration with local organizations.



## lesson five:

# Together for Students is even more valuable to communities in need during times of crisis

Together for Students and other collective impact initiatives are uniquely poised to support students and families through times of crisis, both individual crises as well as communitywide crises. Unfortunately, the collective work of Together for Students has been put to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic. We don't know the long-term impacts Together for Students will have for students and families. But we are starting to learn lessons from the aligned national partners and local network members about how we can continue to center the needs of students in these unpredictable times.

The pandemic, while devastating and tragic, presents a unique opportunity to make the case for collective impact. We've learned that the national aligned partners and our local network leaders are hopeful about the benefits that their collective impact work can offer in such a difficult moment. In two local network sites, the COVID-19 crisis has even deepened support for Together for Students. Community partners realize how working together can provide better support for students when they need it most.

Despite the pandemic, national and local leaders are developing unique and creative ways to continue supporting students now and into the future. Although school closures and social distancing requirements have changed the way students participate in school, our local network members are adapting to the new reality, finding different ways to build and sustain trusting relationships and persisting in their efforts to put students at the center.



**“If partnerships can’t work together now to help triage supports for kids — when we know the equity issues that exist in our communities are only going to be exacerbated by this current environment — if you can’t come together to collaborate in this moment, when can you?”**

■ TOGETHER FOR STUDENTS LOCAL NETWORK LEADER

## about us

# Coalition for Community Schools



Supported by the Institute for Educational Leadership, the Coalition for Community Schools evolved since 1998 as an ecosystem of national, state, and local cross-sector leaders that promote community schools as an equity-driven, researched based strategy, and fights for justice and investments for young people's access to resources, supports, and opportunities they deserve to advance their hopes and fulfill their social responsibility.

The strengths of the Coalition are the close relationships we have with thousands of grassroots to grassroots leaders, organized in networks to expand their knowledge, skills, beliefs, and practices; and our ability to prepare, support, and mobilize leaders, to create transformative and innovative solutions to disrupt the status quo, and eliminate systemic and structural barriers to equitable outcomes in education.

## Communities In Schools



Working directly in 2,300 schools in 25 states and the District of Columbia, Communities In Schools builds relationships that empower students to stay in school and succeed in life.

Our school-based staff partner with teachers to

identify challenges students face in class or at home and coordinate with community partners to bring outside resources inside schools. From immediate needs like food or clothing to more complex ones like counseling or emotional support, we do whatever it takes to help students succeed.

## StriveTogether



StriveTogether is a national movement with a clear purpose: helping every child succeed in school and in life from cradle to career, regardless of race, ethnicity, zip code or circumstance. In partnership with 70 communities across the country, we provide coaching, resources and

rigorous approaches to create opportunities and close gaps in education, housing and so much more. We use data to illuminate problems and solutions, tackle tough conversations and deliver impactful results for more than 12 million children and counting.



## ABOUT STRIVETOGETHER

StriveTogether partners with 70 communities across the country, providing coaching, resources and rigorous approaches to create opportunities and close gaps in education, housing and so much more. Together, the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network impacts the lives of more than 12 million youth.

**StriveTogether**<sup>®</sup>

Every child. Cradle to career.

125 East Ninth Street  
Second Floor  
Cincinnati, OH 45202  
513.929.1150

[StriveTogether.org](https://StriveTogether.org)

332 South Michigan Avenue  
Ninth Floor  
Chicago, IL 60604

