

Aligning Networks to Enable Every Student to Thrive

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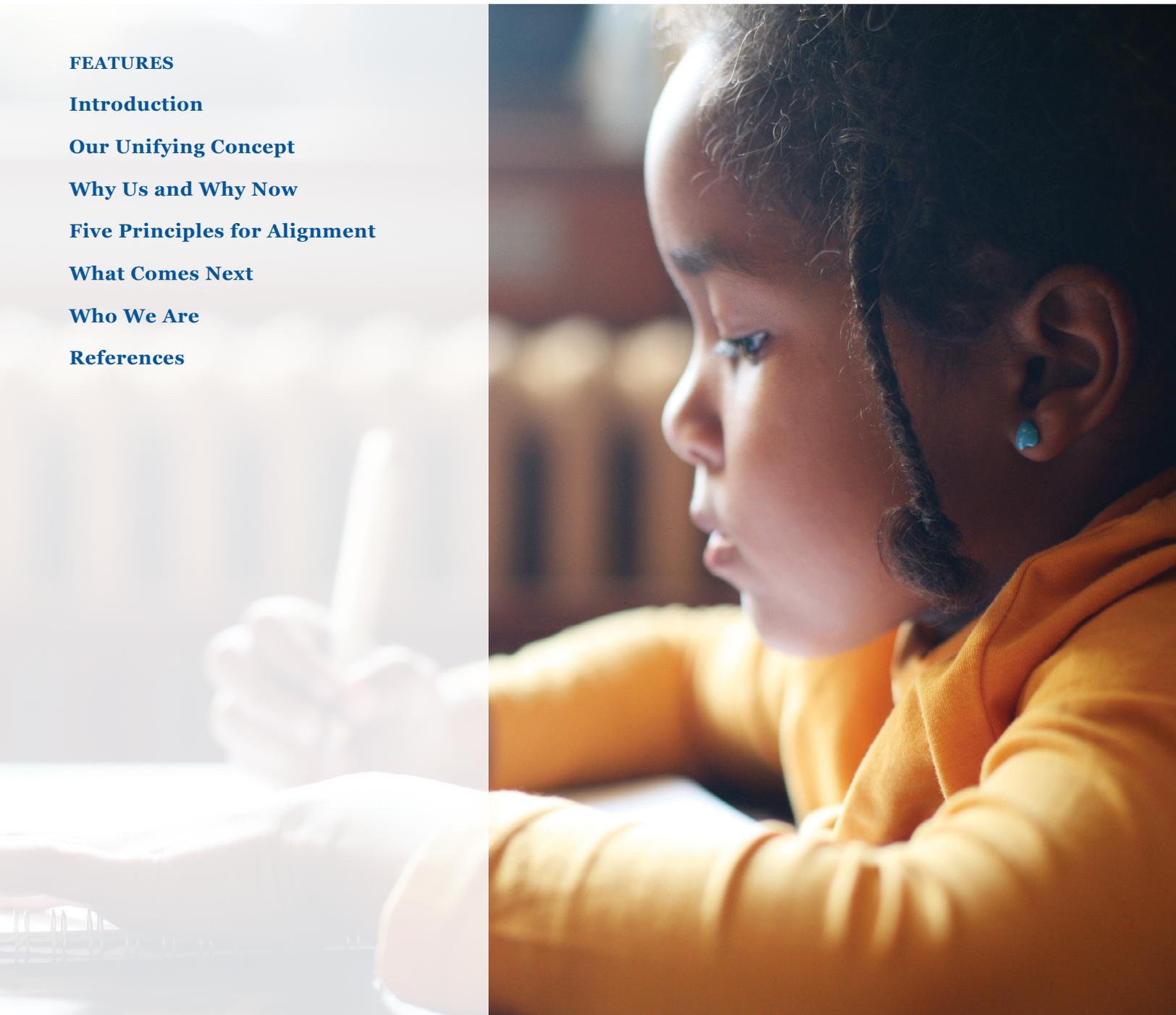
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INTRODUCTION

Poverty, isolation and race all contribute to a widening opportunity gap in our communities. When young people face multiple barriers to learning and lack opportunities to grow, they start life steps behind and often fall further behind as they grow up.ⁱ

But it doesn't have to be that way. In hundreds of communities all across the country, our three nonprofit networks - The Coalition for Community Schools, Communities In Schools and StriveTogether - have been making measurable progress toward educational equity. **Now we come together to say explicitly that we can achieve our shared goals more effectively if we align our assets and expertise across networks, across school districts and across communities.**

The urgency of our mission is amplified by changing demographics, a widening economic gap, and a growing body of research that directly links inequity with negative outcomes for both the individual and society.ⁱⁱ

In the U.S. today, about [15 million](#) children live in poverty, or roughly 21% of our nation's young people. For a family of three, that means just [\\$20,160](#) a year to cover housing, clothing, food, transportation, medical care and all of life's other expenses, including educational enrichment opportunities. Analysts estimate, for instance, that low-income children miss out on [6,000 hours](#) of expanded learning time, putting them at a severe disadvantage compared to their more affluent peers.

Economic struggles often are magnified for children of color. Just over 10% of white children live in poverty, compared to 30% for Hispanic children and [38%](#) for black children, though the absolute number of poor white children is highest. Not surprisingly, high school achievement rates reflect similar variations: While 87% of white high school students graduate on time, the figure is 76% for Hispanic students and [73%](#) for African American students.

Given these profound shifts, there has never been a more important time to invest in young people. Removing barriers and creating opportunities to enable all students to reach their potential is not the job of a single individual, organization, program, or school. Addressing inequity is in our collective moral, democratic, and economic interest. It is a shared responsibility, and we intend to lead by example.

One essential strategy for ending inequity is to take a systemic approach that pushes all of our institutions to become more student-centered. Our public schools are central to this work, but they are not alone. We need a wide variety of institutions and their leaders to step up and collaborate with families and communities to address the needs of young people and create more and better enrichment opportunities for them.

WHY US AND WHY NOW

Over the past several decades, a widespread movement has emerged to put students at the center of the education process by aligning resources to their needs on a one-to-one basis. This movement goes by different names — community schools, integrated student supports, wraparound services — but the principle of student-centered education remains constant.

In addition to matching resources to individual learners, community leaders and practitioners are working across sectors to change how organizations, institutions, and community members work together to change mindsets, behaviors, practices, and policies. The goal of all this is to improve population-level outcomes across the cradle-to-career continuum through smarter data access and use, resource alignment, practice-sharing, shared ownership and accountability, and policy changes.

Multiple independent studiesⁱⁱⁱ have shown that at-risk students can thrive when their learning and developmental needs are addressed individually and they have the opportunities they deserve. With the passage of ESSA, Congress endorsed this more holistic view of education by specifically authorizing federal funding for non-academic interventions, such as wraparound services and community schools. As some of the largest nationwide networks advocating individualized, student-centered supports and opportunities, we believe the time has come for wider adoption of this proven approach.

Together we have relationships with more than 300 communities across the country. In many communities there is good alignment among our groups, but it will surprise no one that challenges and misunderstandings have cropped up in some locations. By working together more intentionally, and jointly with other partnership networks, we know we can strengthen the good work that is already happening in local communities.

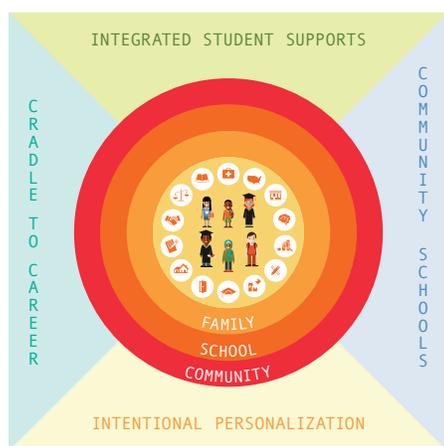
OUR UNIFYING CONCEPT

This is why our organizations have come together to publicly express our agreement with one unifying concept: **Our public education systems and entire communities must be designed around supporting the success of children.**

Our children must always be at the center of our thinking and our action if we are to enable them to thrive. In graphical terms, education ought to look like this:

What does it mean to be student-centered? The simplest definition might be this: **Every student and family will have at their fingertips the high-quality services and opportunities they need in order to thrive.**

From food and shelter to high-quality mentoring and enrichment activities, the needs of every individual student are carefully considered and provided for.



For decades Communities In Schools, StriveTogether and the Coalition for Community Schools have espoused a similar philosophy. Almost 25 years ago, for instance, CIS founder Bill Milliken enunciated the Five Promises of student-centered education:

1. A relationship with a caring adult.
2. A safe place to learn and grow.
3. A marketable skill to use upon graduation.
4. A chance to give back.
5. A healthy start and a healthy future.

Meanwhile, the Coalition for Community Schools has long framed its student-centered approach in terms of Conditions for Learning:

1. Early childhood development is fostered through high-quality, comprehensive programs that nurture learning and development.
2. The school has a core instructional program with qualified teachers, a challenging curriculum, and high standards and expectations for students.
3. Students are motivated and engaged in learning — both in school and in community settings, during and after school.
4. The basic physical, mental and emotional health needs of young people and their families are recognized and addressed.
5. There is mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents, families and school staff.
6. Community *engagement* promotes a school climate that is safe, supportive, and respectful and connects students to a broader learning community.

StriveTogether embraces these philosophies through its four core principles^{iv} and a rigorous methodology for data-informed decision making that is grounded in community context.

Whatever the precise wording, the concept of student-centered learning is nothing new. It boils down to ensuring that students and their families have the opportunities and supports they need to thrive. We all have been pursuing the same vision for many years, each in our own way. And though we intend to maintain our organizational distinctiveness, we also believe that need and circumstances have uniquely aligned in this moment to make the vision attainable.

If every organization in the education and youth service space would unite to put students at the center, we might close both the achievement gap and the opportunity gap within a generation. To start, our three groups intend to lead by example, aligning our efforts to drive greater impact for more children.

FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR ALIGNMENT

As we move toward this unifying concept of student-centered education, five principles will drive our work:

- Trusting relationships
- Cross-sector partnerships
- Purposeful engagement
- Actionable data
- Shared accountability

Trusting Relationships: Cooperation across our networks will require a level of trust that can be all too rare in the nonprofit sector. But if we hope to achieve collective impact on behalf of [15 million kids](#) living in poverty, or those on the edge of poverty, there is simply no other way. Three guidelines will help to deepen our trust, allowing us to keep students—and not self-interest—always at the center of our work:

- We must go slow to go fast.
- We must go together to go far.
- We must proceed with urgency around shared work because trust grows from doing work together.

Cross-Sector Partnerships: We recognize that trust can be difficult when resources are limited, putting various stakeholders in what might seem like a competitive position. But each of our organizations is built on partnerships, and we know from experience that impact depends on working in a smarter and more coordinated way. By making the choice to view each other as partners who share ownership and responsibility, we can be more strategic in deploying our resources to benefit the most possible students. Any other approach would fail the test of a truly student-centered philosophy.

Purposeful Engagement: In our individual work, each group has slightly different priorities for engaging stakeholders, so by working together we can engage more broadly and more authentically than ever before. But our engagement efforts must be context-sensitive, because change could be especially difficult for struggling schools in poor communities, where successive waves of “reform” have eroded any sense of agency. When your voice is not being heard, everything seems to come from the top down. So it is critical that parents, caregivers and students are engaged in helping to interpret data and design more informed solutions together with educators and other practitioners in the field. This process of action-oriented engagement to develop solutions that target the root of the issue and fully recognize local context is our best hope for finding impactful solutions that can be improved over time.

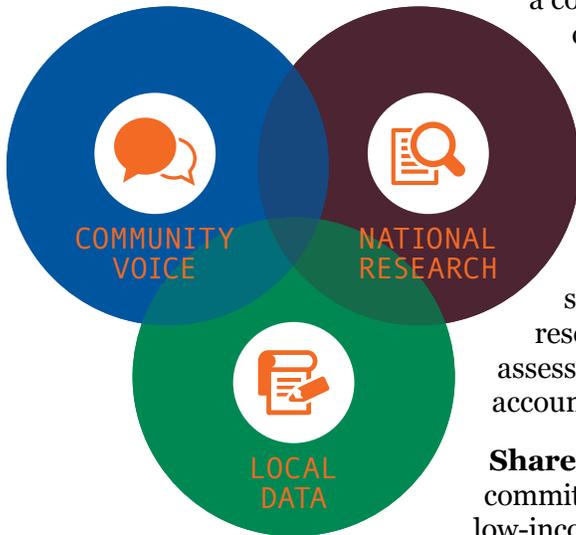
We understand that individual children live and learn within the context of family and community, and the voices of these stakeholders must be included. We know that schools are the primary institution for educating our children, yet too many reform efforts have treated schools as problems, rather than partners. Finally, we recognize that individual practitioners in schools and nonprofit organizations are irreplaceable assets and deserve to have a clear voice in any student-centered reform.

Thus, in working together to put students at the center of education, we are committed to engaging fully with families as well as leaders and practitioners in schools and communities. Every voice should be heard.

Actionable Data: Effective data use is absolutely fundamental to making education student-centered. But numbers alone cannot tell us everything we need to know, and statistics can mask the complexity of the problems and the inequities that students face.

We need youth, family, community voice and wisdom to help understand that complexity. Such wisdom, complemented by what we know works for children, can help drive resources to meet unique student needs. This depth of analysis can also identify policy issues that data alone may not illuminate.

Numbers and narrative can often seem like opposing forces that must somehow be balanced, with all of the posturing and positioning that implies. But what if we aim to blend, rather than balance? Instead of a continuum, what if story and statistics could be reconceived as concentric circles? In order to truly understand the needs of individual students, we must redefine “data” in such a way that it becomes both-and, not either-or. Our approach looks like this:



Some may differ over the relative size of the circles, but we agree that all three elements are needed to get an accurate picture of an individual student’s place and progress. School-level data are not enough, nor is the qualitative narrative of a student’s community or the high-altitude view provided by national research. Only a multi-faceted data lens will allow us to accurately assess a child’s needs, track and measure progress, and hold ourselves accountable for meeting those needs.

Shared Accountability: On behalf of the students we serve, we are committed to accepting shared accountability for results. For too long, low-income children have been failed by many institutions in society and by wave after wave of reform. For these children, promises and good intentions are not enough. Leaders and practitioners across sectors must own their unique individual contributions as well as collective action. By tracking progress toward measurable population-level outcomes for every child and aligning efforts across institutions, shared accountability is possible across academic, social-emotional, physical and civic participation measures^v.

We know from experience that wraparound services produce results in both learning and well-being, especially when families and communities are engaged in the process. But we need scalable and cost-effective ways to measure these outcomes. In order to demonstrate the clear value of this work, we need to make sure that the time and energy invested in aligning partners around the individual needs of children leads to measurably improved outcomes, with accountability shared by all.

Trust, partnerships, engagement, data and accountability: These are the shared priorities that will drive our joint efforts to put students at the center of education.

WHAT COMES NEXT

After years of growing separately, our three networks today serve millions of students across the country. But in a nation where 15 million kids live in poverty—and [6.6 million](#) live in *extreme* poverty—we are still far from ensuring that every child in need is receiving the benefits of student-centered education. At the institutional level, there are [66,000](#) Title I schools in America where a majority of students face each day bearing the burdens of poverty and all of the academic difficulty that entails. The need, in other words, is staggering.

Both experience and evidence have shown that offering student-centered supports and opportunities can mitigate the effects of poverty and empower citizens for the future. We have seen the effectiveness of this

approach at the individual, school and district levels. Now we need to see population-level change, and that can happen only if all of us are pulling in the same direction, working together strategically to align.

This cooperation is already happening in many places and on many levels—Communities In Schools, for instance, is a member of the Coalition’s Steering Committee—but we are committed to being even more intentional and strategic in finding new ways for working together. Going back to our five principles for cooperation, we are pursuing five specific opportunities to more closely align our work:

- **Trusting relationships** — We will foster trust by developing strong communication and information structures from the national level to the local level. We will bring together leaders from all three groups to share knowledge and encourage local collaboration and planning. While encouraging better communication among our networks, we also will look for shared advocacy opportunities, allowing for better, more unified communication with policymakers.
- **Cross-sector partnerships** — We will invite more partners into the conversation, exploring opportunities for joint efforts. While we recognize some partnerships are already in place, we want to ensure that key players from education, health, housing, labor, safety, and commerce are all at the table in each community driving the agenda for success. Anchor institutions, such as hospitals and postsecondary institutions, are another vital part of communities that we must engage.
- **Purposeful engagement** — We will model engagement through shared webinars, joint meetings on capacity building, and conference opportunities that encourage learning across networks.
- **Actionable data** — We will work together to support local communities as they seek to collect and manage data. We will seek to provoke generative conversations about designing local and state information systems for driving data-driven decisions and breaking down silos to ensure significant progress in student and family outcomes.
- **Shared accountability** — We will develop real-world case studies from the field, showing what it looks like when two or more of us do the hard work side by side in a school district to support as many students as possible. We will report back on our collective work to share the lessons from these communities. In essence, this takes alignment from theory to practice, makes us accountable for follow-through and builds the evidence base for achieving collective impact locally. This experience, in turn, will be helpful in broadening the push for student-centered education to even more stakeholders.

Ultimately we hope to see entire states redesign their education systems to put students at the center and provide them with the individual support they need. But the first step is simply to bring our own work to more schools and students in a joint effort that leverages our individual strengths and resources. In that sense, our alignment effort can be viewed as “proof of concept” for a better way to deliver education across the board—and we simply can’t afford to fail.

WHO WE ARE

Coalition for Community Schools — Since 1997, the Coalition for Community Schools has been bringing together educators and community partners to realize our vision of schools as centers of flourishing communities where everyone belongs, works together, and thrives. Housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership, the Coalition is an alliance of national, state and local organizations in education K-16, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government and philanthropy as well as national, state and local community school networks. Its mission is to unite school, community and family for young people’s success.

Community schools share a common set of principles: fostering strong partnerships, sharing accountability for results, setting high expectations, building on the community’s strengths, and embracing diversity and innovative solutions.

The Coalition supports a network of more than 100 community schools initiatives moving toward scale across the country, from New York City to Albuquerque, from Cincinnati to Oakland, from Nashville to Portland. It also advocates on behalf of community schools at local, state, and federal levels, builds capacity, convenes a variety of leadership networks with our partners and conducts and synthesizes research.

Communities In Schools — For nearly 40 years, Communities In Schools (CIS) has worked to close the achievement gap by connecting at-risk students to a wealth of resources available in their communities. By placing a social service professional inside under-resourced schools, we help ensure that 1.5 million students every year get the vital social services they need, including nutrition, clothing, counseling, after-school programming and more.

For the more than 150,000 students each year considered most likely to drop out of school without additional support, CIS creates rigorous, customized plans that span everything from basic needs for accountability, academic progress and social-emotional learning. Working with more than 11,000 community partners, we can efficiently mobilize existing resources on behalf of those who need them most, resulting in a national graduation rate of 92% for case-managed students.

Our model, known as Integrated Student Supports (or ISS), has been extensively studied with more than a dozen third-party evaluations stretching back more than a decade. ISS has been proven to reduce dropout rates and improve graduation rates in both traditional public schools and charter across every type of setting—urban, rural and suburban.

StriveTogether — StriveTogether brings proven expertise from real-world experience and a nationally recognized collective impact approach that enables communities to create local education ecosystems to support children from cradle to career.

This approach helps align existing resources to increase impact by using data to determine what works best for children. We support communities by bringing together cross-sector leaders from the education, business, non-profit, philanthropic, and civic sectors in developing shared outcomes and indicators of success to use across programs and systems, identifying promising practices and allowing for meaningful dialogue about local disparities and solutions to close achievement gaps.

Finally, we work with communities to regularly use data to consistently implement and improve strategies through continuous improvement practices that help partners make sense of what the data is telling them and effectively change how they serve children and families accordingly.

Built on lessons from StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network Members over the last decade of work, our Theory of Action for building strong cradle to career partnerships offers quality benchmarks that distinguish this work from traditional collaboration and other collective impact approaches. With this methodology in hand, communities are able to organize themselves to improve six shared outcome areas at the population level: Kindergarten readiness, early-grade reading, middle grade math, high school graduation, college enrollment, and degree/certification completion.

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¹Low-income and minority students are [more likely](#) to face academic challenges that arise from limited developmental experiences at an early age and compound over time. As a result, The Annie E. Casey Foundation found that low-income and minority students are about [30% less likely](#) to have proficient reading skills by the end of third grade, a hallmark that researchers agree is essential for future success.

²[Researchers have identified](#) a strong relationship between high levels of wealth inequality and a lack of social mobility. One reason for this could be that the driver of social mobility, education, suffers in countries in more unequal countries. [Additional impacts](#) that have been linked to unequal societies include increased crime, obesity, stress and anxiety, and lowered civic engagement.

³[A review](#) of nine student-centered support programs found that, when implemented with fidelity to an evidence-based model, such approaches helped to narrow the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers. The models in the study focused on reducing barriers to learning, increasing chances for success in school and expanding positive student development opportunities.

⁴StriveTogether articulates these principles and methodology in their [Theory of Action](#).

⁵StriveTogether and the Coalition for Community Schools both have relevant impact frameworks. The StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network has identified [six measurable outcome areas](#) all member communities track from Kindergarten Readiness to degree completion. Based on their rationale framework, the Coalition suggests [nine results](#), both short and long term, that are essential for student success.



Strive Together
Every child. Cradle to career.