

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

Case Study: Philadelphia

Philadelphia was facing a high school dropout epidemic that threatened the potential of the city's youth and the capacity of the region's future workforce. Only about half of the entering ninth graders slated to graduate in the classes of 2000 through 2005 in the city's public high schools graduated on time, and only a slightly higher proportion would graduate at all within a six-year time period (54-58 percent). From those classes alone, researchers estimated 30,000 students left school with no diploma.

To combat this crisis, the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN), a local youth workforce intermediary, brought together a broad collaborative that would launch the Project U-Turn campaign. It was made up of representatives from the mayor's office, school district, service providers, family court, child welfare system, advocacy groups and local funders. With funding from the Youth Transition Funders Group and the William Penn Foundation, the collaborative commissioned research to understand the dropout problem, and created a call to action with roles and responsibilities for all sectors of the community. The group then developed a detailed roadmap and work plan and began to align resources and programs toward practical solutions with an initial focus on juvenile justice and child welfare populations.

Today, coordination among city government, the school system, philanthropic entities, service organizations and young people themselves has never been more focused on getting students to graduation day. More students are on track to graduate, available slots in alternative and accelerated high schools have nearly

Fast Facts:

- **Community:** Philadelphia, PA
- **Problem:** On-time graduation rates as low as 50%
- **Results:** 6% increase in graduation rate between 2006 and 2011
- **Differentiating Feature:** Project U-Turn's partnership with Youth United for Change, an organization of disconnected youth, has provided insight and generated buy-in among those the collaborative serves.
- **Leaders/Lead Organization:** Philadelphia Youth Network (a local youth workforce intermediary)
- **Philanthropic Support:** William Penn Foundation, Youth Transition Funders Group

doubled and graduation rates are up by 6 percent. In 2011, Harvard Kennedy School included Project U-Turn as one of its “36 Noteworthy Government Programs and Practices.”

Along the way, Project U-Turn has faced tough choices and real challenges. By choosing to tackle multiple systems at once (juvenile justice, child welfare, and education), the collaborative chose a slower but potentially more permanent path to change. From Project U-Turn’s perspective, focusing on the easiest kids (juniors and seniors close to graduation) might have created larger short-term gains but would have sacrificed the institutional changes required to sustain the gains.

Data sharing also has been difficult, creating problems in tracking progress at the sub-group level. The collaborative began with commissioned research that linked graduation data with data about youth in the juvenile justice and child welfare system—the initial targets of the effort. Since the initial report, however, Project U-Turn has had to rely on the schools district’s data, which does not disaggregate these sub-groups.

Lastly, project U-Turn has faced four changes in Philadelphia’s superintendent of schools, a key partner in their pursuit of higher graduation rates. Nevertheless, the district’s latest strategic planning process illustrates the collaborative’s success in overcoming this revolving-door challenge. By working very closely with multiple institutions across the community, Project U-Turn’s perspective continued to be represented on many of the district’s planning committees, as well as in much of the input given by community members and parents.

Four key things have made Project U-Turn successful in beginning to turn around the dropout problem:

An inside/outside approach: *cross-sector engagement*

The collaborative approaches the problem from two sides, operating both within the school district and city government infrastructure and outside of the normal bureaucratic and political channels through teaming with external organizations aligned with the same strategy. This comprehensive approach ensures that the collaborative can push for important changes that may be at odds with what the district or the city might want, without compromising key partnerships within the system.

Meaningful youth participation: *community members as partners and producers of impact*

Many collaboratives focused on youth issues, including graduation rates, struggle with getting young people, themselves, involved. Not so for Project U-Turn. In 2009, it partnered with Youth United for Change (YUC), which had just organized

youth who were not in school, or were in alternative high schools. The purpose: to advocate for issues related to the public education system. The youth named their chapter of YUC “The Pushout Chapter,” reflecting the sentiment among many “dropouts” that they did not choose to leave school. Rather, they believed they are pushed out by factors beyond their control. Youth for Change staff—many of them former disconnected youth themselves—then bring the views and ideas of the group to the collaborative, as well as seek to align their advocacy with the collaborative’s vision.

Staffing to facilitate action: *dedicated capacity and appropriate structure*

Through the support of the William Penn Foundation, PYN’s vice president, Jenny Bogoni, is able to focus on daily operations of Project U-Turn. She creates agendas, facilitates the steering committee, pushes the work ahead between meetings and maintains relationships with the broader partner group. One important benefit of Bogoni’s active participation is the creation of the steering committee’s work plan of required activities. Having a current document that captures the committee’s consensus view allows partners to respond quickly to opportunities related to funding and policy change. The foundation also funds a policy analyst within the mayor’s office, and a data analyst and a director of a re-engagement center at the school district.

Metrics, metrics, metrics: *use of data to set the agenda and improve over time*

The network uses a unique four-part dashboard to gauge progress. It measures the six-year cohort graduation rate, the percentage of first-time 9th graders on track to on-time graduation, the number of youths on waiting lists for alternative high schools, the available slots in those programs, and the dollars earmarked for the Project U-Turn agenda. All stakeholders receive updates to ensure everyone is working from the same data.

SOURCES

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