

MOBILIZING A CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIVE FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

LESSONS FROM PROJECT U-TURN, PHILADELPHIA'S CAMPAIGN TO REDUCE THE DROPOUT RATE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The last five years have seen an explosion of interest in—and concern about—graduation rates as a critical indicator of the success of high schools. Municipal, school district, and community leaders nationwide have begun to grapple with the dropout challenge—in stark contrast to five years ago, when the issue garnered little systemic attention. This inattention was due, in part, to a long-held belief that the problem was not that big and that little could be done. There was limited public discourse on the dropout problem and, as a consequence, no coordinated strategy for investment and action.

Today, cities across the country seeking a coordinated strategic approach to reducing dropout rates look to Philadelphia, where a sustained cross-sector collaborative—Project U-Turn—has made significant advances in putting struggling students and out-of-school youth on the public radar and improving options for that population. Project U-Turn is a citywide collaborative campaign that focuses public attention on the dropout crisis and designs strategies and leverages investments to resolve it.

Philadelphia's experience can help other cities understand how they can shape an agenda to improve youth outcomes, and explore the ways in which a staffed cross-sector partnership can move beyond institutional silos and sustain a commitment to improving outcomes for youth through changes in municipal and district leadership.

Mobilizing a Cross-Sector Collaborative for Systemic Change details the three major phases of Project U-Turn:

- > *Laying the Foundation* gives lessons from the early days of the organizing work, as partners joined the Collaborative and began to grapple with data on the population.
- > *Building a Strategic Partnership* explores the work of developing strategic priorities based on data collected, and of securing support and input from leaders across the city.
- > *Embedding the Work in Systems* describes the partnership's efforts to embed and coordinate the work of improving graduation rates across multiple sectors and at multiple levels.

STRATEGIC ACTION

While Philadelphia has long had on-the-ground efforts devoted to disengaged youth, citywide strategic action on behalf of this population took off in 2004, when it was selected by a group of national funders to participate in the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) Strategic Assessment Initiative, coordinated by Jobs for the Future. Core funders included the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Mott Foundation, along with significant local investment from the William Penn Foundation.

Through this initiative, a lead intermediary was selected in each of the five participating cities to build and coordinate a cross-sector partnership to improve outcomes for off-track and out-of-school youth. In Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN), a local youth education and workforce development organization, took on that role and has served as the coordinating intermediary. Its members worked together to launch Project U-Turn and, as city leaders put it, they have embedded this work “into the DNA of the city.”

A Framework for Action

As a participant in the Strategic Assessment Initiative, Philadelphia organized its efforts around a framework devised in 2004 by YTFG with Jobs for the Future and JD Hoyer. The participating cities undertook strategic action in four areas:

- > The collection and dissemination of data on the population of struggling and out-of-school youth
- > The development of an expanded set of options for struggling students who are not on track to graduate with their peers (e.g., those who are over-age and lacking significant credits for their grade) and out-of-school youth
- > The design of a political strategy for removing policy barriers and creating new incentives to address the dropout crisis
- > The mobilization of constituents to act on improving outcomes and options for struggling and out-of-school youth

The collaboration's efforts are producing results: the number of schools for off-track and out-of-school youth—called Accelerated Schools in Philadelphia—has grown from one to thirteen in five years, and public and private resources raised to support reengagement and more effective education for these young people have reached \$73 million. In addition, Philadelphia's graduation rate has gradually increased, with a small but steady portion of that increase—2 percent—directly attributable to the new Accelerated Schools.

Behind these numbers is a sea change in how local leaders and institutions grapple with a collective challenge and how they perceive the youth who leave school. For example, the dropout challenge is now publicly embraced by the mayor, the superintendent, and other key leaders as a crisis with significant municipal impact. Beyond the school system, Philadelphia's city agencies are central players in the effort to keep youth on track to graduation.

In Philadelphia, Project U-Turn has focused on improving graduation rates, but the lessons described here are applicable to other issues and other communities. For example, as cities take on President Obama's challenge to ensure that all young people earn a postsecondary credential, there is increasing interest in building cross-sector community collaboratives focused on that goal as well. The lessons here can be adapted for use in a variety of educational and economic focus areas, as well as different geographic areas—urban, rural, and regional.

Perhaps the most significant test for sustaining Project U-Turn has been the mayoral and district leadership changes of the last two years. Because of important early and ongoing steps taken by the Collaborative, these leaders have embedded Project U-Turn-endorsed strategies for addressing the issues of struggling students and out-of-school youth into their strategic priorities. The inside/outside strategy

Conditions for Success:

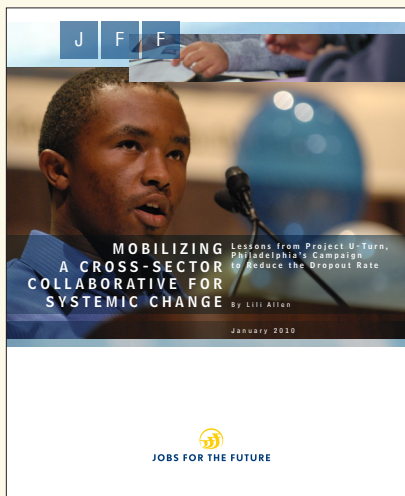
Building City Commitment and Action

Five key factors underpin Philadelphia's success in focusing attention on—and addressing—the city's dropout crisis:

- > A funded, staffed intermediary organization to drive the agenda toward action and to coordinate resources
- > Actionable data that impel policy and practice changes
- > Two levels of partnership: a broad stakeholder group and a smaller strategic planning team
- > Structures, such as work plans, that keep partners engaged and mutually accountable
- > A committed local funder

operating in Philadelphia provides lessons for the field on the promise of a stable and focused partnership in keeping a community focused on an enduring municipal challenge.

Philadelphia's progress over the last five years in building a system of options for off-track and out-of-school youth also holds lessons for other communities on the role that two entities—both a cross-sector collaborative and a coordinating intermediary—have to play in building awareness and marshalling resources in moving a cross-systems agenda. Philadelphia's strategy is applicable to various types of community advocacy and organizing, including efforts focused on youth outcomes, postsecondary success, and economic development. Key results of the efforts of both the Project U-Turn collaborative and PYN as a strong intermediary have been commitments from high-level leadership to address a critical challenge, along with grassroots support for reforms.



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