

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

# Case Study: Cincinnati, Covington, And Newport

Collaborating to accelerate social impact

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In 2006, Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky's school leaders realized that the region's students were slipping further behind in their preparedness for college and careers. As a dwindling number of employers demanded ever-higher levels of education, it was becoming clear that students were simply not succeeding in school. Ohio ranked a discouraging 42nd out of the nation's 50 states in the attainment of bachelor's degrees among its youth. Nearby Kentucky was almost at the bottom, ranking 49th.

This was not news to the city's nonprofit providers. They were working hard to build a better future for the area's youth but were often providing siloed services and using distinctly different approaches. Not surprisingly, the result was a community and educational system that was, according to Cincinnati State's president Dr. O'dell Owens, "program rich" but "system poor." Put another way, a great deal of work added up to little traction against a problem that threatened the next generation's preparation for life and work.

The Strive Partnership of Cincinnati, Covington and Newport began with conversations between Dr. Nancy Zimpher, the former president of the University of Cincinnati, and Chad Wick, the former CEO of KnowledgeWorks. This conversation expanded to include Cincinnati's superintendent of schools, broadening the discussion to strengthen the public schools and create stronger pathways for students to enter college.

## Fast Facts:

- **Community:** Cincinnati, OH, and Northern Kentucky
- **Problem:** Students leaving high school not prepared for college or careers
- **Results:** 10% increase in graduation rates in Cincinnati since 2003; 16% increase in college enrollment rate in Covington, KY, since 2004
- **Differentiating Feature:** The Strive Partnership's Student Roadmap to Success outlines a series of systemic interventions that guide The Strive Partnership's cradle to career efforts.
- **Leaders / Lead Organization:** The Strive Partnership
- **Philanthropic Support:** KnowledgeWorks, Greater Cincinnati Foundation, United Way of Greater Cincinnati

KnowledgeWorks, a leading education foundation, provided resources for this effort, which eventually came to be called The Strive Partnership. The Greater Cincinnati Foundation, the United Way of Greater Cincinnati and other universities from around the region got on board, and the emerging group began to conduct research into what actually works in increasing student success. Then, they jointly defined a vision for how to increase student achievement. The resulting plan recognized and incorporated a set of key points in a young person's life that are critical to student success. These were the basis for The Strive Partnership's "student roadmap of success." This roadmap guides the way forward by laying out the collaborative's perspective on what it takes to make all young people successful.

**Out of this work, The Strive Partnership developed five broad goals for student success in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky:**

- Be prepared for school,
- Be supported inside and outside school,
- Succeed academically,
- Enroll in college, and
- Graduate and enter a career.

**With the community focused on each goal, Strive partners have since seen 40 of its 54 indicators for student success move in a positive direction. On the following core indicators, The Strive Partnership has reached needle-moving change of 10 percent or more over the baseline in the following areas:**

- Greater preparation for school,
- School test scores, graduation rates and college enrollment in Cincinnati schools, and
- College readiness, retention rate and graduation in many of Cincinnati's colleges.

These amount to stunning achievements over just five years.

**Detailed roadmap to goals:** *shared vision and agenda*

Underlying The Strive Partnership's progress is its Student Roadmap to Success. This roadmap diagram shows a series of systemic interventions needed for cradle to career progress for each child, based on education and child development research. The roadmap describes five life stages: early childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, transition from school or postsecondary training into a career. The map has critical checkpoints at each stage—and the indicators for tracking success all along the way. Using the roadmap allows the collaborative participants to align the community's efforts.

The roadmap was a critical part of the process for creating a shared vision, along with an agenda for moving forward. Its adoption was not easy. Core partners grappled with the research and Cincinnati's data over several years before agreeing to this course of action.

**Structured to sustain impact:** *dedicated capacity and appropriate structure*

The Strive Partnership realized that the roadmap and clear goals were not enough in themselves. Success also hinged on creating a robust structure. Initially, that structure was led by a large steering committee that met quarterly to review changes in the incoming data and to provide feedback on the process. By design, it represented a range of community members from across sectors. Continuing today, a 30-member executive committee meets quarterly to oversee the collaborative's efforts and make recommendations on the general direction of the effort. The executive committee houses five subcommittees or strategy teams focused on the core priorities of the partnership, including "teacher and principal excellence" and "advocacy and funding alignment to support innovation." The Strive Partnership also has 10 "collaboratives," which are networks of providers and school officials that are focused on specific goals, such as early education. They provide the specific interventions needed along Strive's roadmap to success and receive support from the Strive staff in one or all of the following areas: facilitation and coaching, data analysis, communications, advocacy and grant-writing.

KnowledgeWorks contributed staff and funding to support these collaborative efforts. Strive's dedicated capacity consists of six people, that include an executive director, two programs directors, one director of the collaborative's data work and two support personnel. This core group is responsible for supporting data management and use and for administrative and facilitation tasks across the network. In addition, Strive has a number of part-time coaches that provide support to its network of collaboratives and a contracted government affairs consultant to support the collaborative's advocacy work.

**Data-informed decision-making:** *use of data to set the agenda and improve over time*

Key to The Strive Partnership's process and success is data. From the beginning, data informed The Strive Partnership's strategy and shaped its process. Each of the collaborative networks has made a significant commitment to data collection, to collectively discussing the data's implications and to using it for continuous improvement. Strive regularly reports its progress against those metrics to the community. Currently, Strive is working with partners to create advanced data systems, most notably a common Learning Partner Dashboard. The dashboard will collect in-school

and out-of-school data about each student in a shared system to make targeted interventions possible. Strive has worked closely with Cincinnati schools' legal team to respect privacy issues.

**Foundation of funders provides stability:** *sufficient resources*

A trio of Cincinnati funders—KnowledgeWorks, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, and United Way of Greater Cincinnati—further helped the collaborative's efforts by helping guide funding towards strategies and programmatic efforts recommended by the collaborative. KnowledgeWorks has continued to fund The Strive Partnership's dedicated staff through contributions of \$500,000 per year. Strive also has received commitments from two other foundations that will provide funds primarily to their partners, ensuring that they are capable of continuing their high-quality services. Despite two changes in school district superintendents and changes in the leadership of the committees, The Strive Partnership continues to function effectively and to build momentum.

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**SOURCES**

- Johnson, Lawrence, Shane Burris, Simon N. Jorgenson and Michael J. Sharp, *College Access and Success: Strive*, The University of Cincinnati.
- *Vision / Road Map*. [StriveNetwork.org](http://StriveNetwork.org). Strive, 2011.