

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

# Case Study: Nashville

More is not always better. Despite the work of more than 175 nonprofits working separately to improve Nashville's public schools, by 2002, the system was near failure. High school graduation rates hovered around 58 percent and school attendance was dismal.

Most dispiriting was the wasted effort by all these nonprofits, whose net impact was negligible, if not negative. Each organization was addressing problems in the schools individually and no attempts had been made to coordinate efforts. Vast monetary and human resources were pouring into the district. Yet, the result was an administrative drain on the schools and ineffective support for students. Serving an urban district with more than 75,000 students who lived amid a poverty rate of more than 65 percent, Nashville's schools faced a daunting challenge.

A study conducted by the Nashville Chamber of Commerce in 2002 shone light on the fragmented nature of this support network. And with clear data to show the way, the city's business leaders seized an opportunity to focus and coordinate all the disparate efforts aimed at youth. Born from the business community's investigation and analysis was Alignment Nashville. Designed as a nonprofit intermediary, it began by pooling the thinking and advice of more than 100 nonprofit leaders and community members to develop a vision shared by all.

Building on Alignment Nashville's progress, the city's mayor convened a group to address student truancy once researchers connected it with graduation rates, school performance, youth crime and public safety. Then in 2010, community leaders worked diligently to develop what they called the Children and Youth Master Plan. It was the city's first overall formal roadmap for how Nashville

## Fast Facts:

- **Community:** Nashville, TN
- **Problem:** High school graduation rates as low as 58%
- **Results:** 20% increase in graduation rates at Nashville Public Schools since 2002
- **Differentiating Feature:** Alignment Nashville's formalized collaborative structure includes dedicated staff, 22 committees, an operating board and a system for regularly inviting others in the community to participate
- **Leaders/Lead Organization:** Alignment Nashville, Mayor Karl Dean, Councilman Ronnie Steine
- **Philanthropic Support:** Local public funders—Nashville Public Schools, Mayor's Office, Nashville Chamber of Commerce. Other granters—America's Promise, State Farm, National Science Foundation, Centers for Disease Control

would actually connect youth with needed services. Several significant reforms emerged from that effort. For example, research showed many youth had a hard time literally getting transportation to school and other programs. In response, the city created new bus stops, instituted fare waivers for qualifying students and touted these changes with several citywide marketing campaigns. Moreover, this snowballing activity genuinely reflected the city's longtime culture. As Councilman Ronnie Steine put it: "Nashville, with its consolidated city-county government, has a long history of collaboration. Anyone trying to act on their own in this town quickly realizes they are on the wrong bus."

Getting Nashville's school efforts on the same bus has definitely paid off. Graduation rates at public schools have risen by more than 20 percentage points, to 83 percent, since 2002. Nashville has also shown a 35 percent to 40 percent reduction in student truancy in the last few years. Who should take the credit? Maybe that's not the real question. Rather, it's how can you tell what's working. Indeed, one key challenge in any community-wide effort is attributing progress to a specific set of interventions. Nashville is particularly complex, with multiple collaboratives and a reform-minded school district. While Metro Nashville Public Schools were the driving force behind graduation improvements, Alignment Nashville and other collaborative efforts in the city were integral to the progress. The striking shift in student outcomes would not have been possible without the coordinated efforts of the school, the mayor's office, Alignment Nashville, government entities, nonprofits, and the Chamber of Commerce. In other words, each played a key and complementary role.

### **Five key things have made the Nashville collaborative successful in increasing graduation rates:**

#### **Data leads to unity:** *shared vision and agenda*

As noted, Nashville came together in 2010 to create a formal shared roadmap for the city, the Child and Youth Master Plan (CYMP). Mayor Karl Dean delivered the initial call to action but the plan was painstakingly developed by a 52-person taskforce consisting of leaders from schools, government agencies, businesses and nonprofits, along with youth and parents. The taskforce was divided into topical committees—for example, separate focuses on out-of-school time, health, safety and the like. This is where most of the work was done. The groups started by analyzing data on a broad set of youth outcomes to set and prioritize goals. Armed with that critical information, the committees established strategic objectives and specific implementation strategies for each. And they had to hurry to do it. The mayor set a six-month timeframe for the development of the CYMP. This very-short deadline stirred some groans. But it also created a sense of urgency, and forced the group to put aside politics and individual agendas in support of the common vision. The Ready By 21 Quality Counts—a nationwide

initiative that offers tools and technical assistance to improve the quality and reach of community programs for—also provided critical support to Nashville.

As a working rule, Alignment Nashville has committed itself to supporting the school district's strategic plan and carefully aligns its work with the district's vision.

**Empowered community members:** *community members as partners and producers of impact*

Right from the beginning, youth and families contributed to the development of the CYMP—at every level. A high school student served as one of the three co-chairs for the CYMP, and other students took places on the taskforce. The taskforce worked closely with the mayor's standing youth council and removed barriers to student participation—for example, by scheduling meetings after the schools' 3 p.m. close and by assisting with transportation. Youth members also took responsibility for a creating large-scale survey of 1,000 city youth. They wrote, administered and analyzed it themselves. The broader community got actively engaged, too, mainly through listening sessions involving hundreds of residents and youth. The taskforce employed a variety of meeting formats to gain community insights, such as small group discussions and one-on-one exchanges. At each, translators enabled Hispanic participation.

**Well-known leaders attract partners:** *effective leadership and governance*

In calling for the development of the citywide Child and Youth Master Plan, Dean stepped up to a daunting challenge. The convening power of the mayor and Councilman Steine, in particular, was critical for the resulting broad, cross-sector engagement. Indeed, when asked why they participated in the CYMP, most participants simply responded: "Because Mayor Dean or Councilman Steine asked me." The mayor's office also used its power to allocate funding and resources to support the collaborative strategies. It also has acted as a strong advocate for education reform in Metro Nashville Public Schools. And this advocacy continues in hard economic times. Despite budget cuts in other areas, the mayor's office has allocated funds from the Metro City government's general operating budget to education-related programs.

The power of a strong leader can be seen as well in the city's progress on truancy rates. Dean summoned a three-day conference on truancy in early 2008, bringing in representatives from the Metro Police, Metro Nashville Public Schools and the Juvenile Court. Among other strategies, the group devised an aggressive approach to attendance. Putting the strategy into place, Dean created the Metro Student Attendance Center, which involves a partnership among a number of government entities. It identifies and provides early intervention for chronically truant students.

**Formalized structure:** *dedicated capacity and appropriate structure*

Alignment Nashville is an outstanding example of a formalized collaborative structure. It encompasses:

- **Committees:** The collaborative developed a sophisticated committee structure to ensure its partners have a meaningful role. Each of the 22 committees meets monthly and has a chair and vice chair in addition to its standing members. Specific guidelines exist for committee membership and most have between 10 to 20 members.
- **Dedicated staff:** More than seven individuals work directly for Alignment Nashville, organizing and supporting the committees.
- **Operating Board:** Alignment's operating board is composed of the chair and vice chair of each committee. Committees report out on their work in monthly meetings, and the board provides oversight, collaboration and accountability.
- **Community alignment:** At least yearly, the committees issue an invitation to participate (ITP), which is an open call to interested community organizations to share their expertise. Committees select organizations based on their ITP responses to determine which resources best align with a given initiative. Today, there are more than 300 organizations participating in Alignment initiatives.

Similarly, the mayor's office has committed resources to coordinate the CYMP and tapped into a pool of college interns to provide additional capacity. Experience had shown that dedicated resources were necessary but not sufficient for the CYMP's success. Among those making significant contributions was Laura Hansen of the Mayor's Office for Children and Youth. The architect for the CYMP work, she was uniquely suited to take on the coordination role, given her extensive experience in strategic planning and project management.

**Diverse fundraising success:** *sufficient resources*

Alignment Nashville has been remarkably successful in its fundraising efforts and consistently disperses almost half of its funding to partner organizations through grants. The collaborative is able to raise more than \$1.1 million each year. The base funding of \$450,000 per year comes from Nashville Public Schools, the mayor's office, and the Nashville Chamber of Commerce. An additional \$550,000 annually comes from federal and foundation grants, such as America's Promise, the National Science Foundation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and State Farm.

---

**SOURCES**

- "MNPS Way Ahead of the Curve for Graduation Rates." Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools. October 2011.
- *Children and Youth Master Plan*. Mayor's Child and Youth Master Plan Taskforce. July 2010.
- *Alignment Nashville 2010 Annual Report*. Alignment Nashville. 2010.