



Community Collaboration to Increase High School Graduation Rates: Case Study of Nashville

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This case study was undertaken as part of the Center for Child and Family Policy’s evaluation of America’s Promise Alliance. Its purpose is to inform the work of communities dedicated to using a collaborative approach to improve future prospects for their youth. In 2010, America’s Promise Alliance provided funding to Nashville for a community coordinator position to support collaboration around dropout prevention. To tell Nashville’s “collaboration” story, we interviewed the community coordinator in the fall of 2011. The executive director of a non-profit organization also participated in this interview. We also drew information from previous interviews with the coordinator and four community partners.¹ The views in this case study represent voices from Nashville’s government, business, and non-profit sectors.

A Snapshot of Nashville

Nashville is located in north central Tennessee along the Cumberland River. Home of the Grand Ole Opry, Nashville has been nicknamed “Music City.” But the city has other strengths, in addition to its thriving music industry. According to the community coordinator, *“It may sound like a cliché, but Nashville has a spirit where people want to act in the best interest of their young people.”* In 1963, the city and county governments consolidated their operations, creating a more unified backdrop for city and school planning. Today, over 600,000 people call the Nashville Metro area home. Vanderbilt University, the Metro government, and the state of Tennessee are the major employers.

In 2002, Nashville took a hard look at the *“need for and capacity of”* community leaders and resources in various sectors—government, business, education, non-profit, and others—to work together to improve the lives of children and the community as a whole. In response, leaders created Alignment Nashville. This non-profit organization is solely dedicated to community collaboration and the alignment of resources—all in the interest of supporting the success of children, schools, and community. In 2008, Nashville served as a pilot site for a Dropout Prevention Summit funded by America’s Promise Alliance. Funding to support the community coordinator position followed in 2010 and 2011. More recently, the city has mentored other communities on collaborating around educational improvement. As one community leader said, *“We have a system of structures and processes, and the combination of the way it works together is pretty powerful.”*

¹Previous interviews with the coordinator occurred in the fall of 2010 and with community partners in the spring of 2011.

Building a System for Collaboration

Early stakeholders

Nearly a decade ago, the charge for collaboration in the interest of serving youth and the community was led by several Nashville business leaders. They centered their efforts on the major findings of a study commissioned by the Chamber of Commerce which were twofold: 1) the education system was “*failing Nashville’s kids*”; and 2) the community’s well-being was suffering as a result. They brought in business, government, education, and other community leaders to develop a model for collaborative change.

It was an ambitious concept: a community-wide collaborative structure that ensured strategic planning, quality services, capacity building, accountability, and sustainability. To a large degree, the approach resulted from a team piloted by business leaders. Said one community partner:

It is a systematic way of renewing collaboration over time. There are really two things that make it work: the structure and process have been really well-defined by the people in the community, but it’s been led by these business people who also use the same principles in their company.

Others with influence—the mayor, the superintendent, leaders in higher education—were integrally involved in early discussions and planning, and they were highly supportive. However, the aim from the outset was to design a system and a process that could transcend changes in leadership and agenda—two areas that often hamper sustained educational change.

A collaborative structure

In 2005, with private funds, the 501(c)(3) Alignment Nashville was created to function as the “*framework*” for collaboration. The organization was created as a separate entity to allow educational, city, and community leaders to deliver high-quality programs with greater efficiency. The mission was straightforward and explicit in the organization’s name: align what agencies are already doing with priorities identified by the school district and the community in their strategic plans. As one non-profit leader said:

One of our principles of committee work is that everybody leaves their agenda at the door and looks for community-wide solutions...We use these strategies and tools for building consensus throughout our meetings, always knowing that we’re lining up behind the school district’s strategic plans.

Currently, an executive director and seven staff members support the work of Alignment Nashville. Twenty-two committees form the backbone, with more than 200 organizations represented. The committees are structured around grade level/population and social/health issues. Committee membership is limited to 15-20 members, ensuring diverse perspectives within a group that is not unwieldy in size.

From the beginning, Alignment Nashville was more than “*just a collaborative on its face.*” One of the original community partners remembers the early planning sessions like this:

[We said] we're going to define the principles of this organization, what everybody's going to work together on, and we're not going to leave this room until we agree.... So we have principles of operation, we have principles for our committee work [that say] this is how we collaborate [and] everybody's voice is heard. And those principles, how it would work, were laid out in the beginning.

Each component of the organization is designed to promote consensus, shared leadership, and communication. For example, governance of committees is shared by a high-level district leader (chair) and a community representative (vice-chair). Alignment of programs and the cross-fertilization of ideas occur through the steering committee, where chairs of the content-specific committees convene monthly. A peer review process ensures accountability and support for committees and programs.

Funding from America's Promise Alliance supports the work of Alignment Nashville, and the community coordinator is housed within these offices. There were distinct advantages to this arrangement. Alignment Nashville had existed for five years at the time the coordinator position was funded. During that time, the organization had developed a well-established committee structure and achieved a high level of awareness in the community. These inroads provided the coordinator with a point of entry in various community sectors (health, education, government) and a vantage point for promoting collaboration across institutions and agencies. In turn, the coordinator works with committees, schools, and community organizations, strengthening the connections across these groups and contributing a stronger voice around services that support dropout prevention.

A collaborative process

The work of the committees is governed by a set of steps designed to keep members “on track.” For example, committees follow a five-stage process that includes tactical planning, community engagement, pilot testing, evaluation, and institutionalization. Committees have the autonomy to generate their own tactical plans and strategies, but they also undergo capacity-building workshops to ensure that they have the needed skills and an understanding of the overall mission.

Within the prescribed steps, interaction among committee members builds trust, understanding, and credibility. Said one community partner, “*It's in those committees that we're getting work done, but we're really developing the relationships.*” Alignment Nashville staff play supportive roles, filling leadership gaps on committees if they occur, and steering the process by asking committees directed questions to clarify “*definitive components.*”

Once committees finalize their tactical plan, they issue an “Invitation to Participate” (ITP). The ITPs are designed to align programs and process. Committees identify needs and expected outcomes in the ITPs; interested organizations then respond to the ITPs with program proposals within the given framework. While the ITPs define the agenda, they also allow for creativity, as this non-profit leader describes:

The [ITP] says, “Here's what we as a think-tank, the design team, have come up with, led by the school. And we would like you to help us with this. And here's what we need your help with.” And we don't define exactly how they're going to do it. The [ITPs] define the outcomes we're looking for and they suggest areas in which a community organization or high-end institution or anybody could respond, but they don't prescribe it.

Responses to ITPs have come from expected sources (e.g., non-profit organizations and foundations), as well as from some unexpected sources whose creative proposals prompted committees to look at services in unique ways. Committee discussions on the merits of ITP proposals are spirited, dynamic, and free-flowing. The review process has allowed committees to identify new resources which they might never have considered and pair new partners who might never have collaborated before. For example, two organizations that submitted separate ITP proposals might be asked to collaborate on a presentation at a conference. The result has been a more innovative and efficient use of resources.

While the ITPs serve as a tool for aligning process and programs, they also function as an important mechanism for increasing community awareness and participation. Weekly announcements on Alignment Nashville's email network are disseminated to over 2,000 people. These recipients are encouraged to disseminate the ITPs to their own networks to ensure an even wider distribution.

How does all of this structure and process translate to services that support Nashville's youth? The evolution of the Developing Community Leaders Committee suggests how a concept can come to fruition and go to scale. The idea originated with a group of principals who wanted to find a way to keep nontraditional student leaders engaged in school. As one community partner described:

[Principals] were the ones that developed the concept and solutions. They didn't want to give up on any child and they wanted to develop a program, a process where these kids are learning leadership skills in a very formal way. And they would also have opportunities to participate in meaningful ways. And then a third component was showing [students] that they could go to college.

Principals formed the Developing Community Leaders (DCL) Committee, designed a plan, and put out ITPs to community organizations. Now offered in 10 high schools in Nashville, the DCL curriculum includes leadership development, college preparation, and service learning. Teachers receive professional development on the curriculum. Students develop and take the lead on community projects—for example, assisting pregnant and parenting teens or helping senior citizens to access services. In 2011, the Youth Board of the DCL Committee conceptualized, planned, and implemented a Leadership Event.

The DCL Committee (now called Service Learning) is currently working with the school district to implement the curriculum in all of the district's high schools. These innovations might have occurred without the support of a collaborative group like the DCL Committee. However, having a structure and process in place helped move principals' agenda forward in systematic ways which have resulted in the institutionalization of the initial idea. As one Nashville partner said, the structure, the principles, and the process "make the collaboration work."

What supports collaboration?

Nashville partners concur that leadership at the highest levels has been critical for creating and sustaining a successful collaborative group. Powerful leaders bridged the business and education communities, brought key players to the table, and pushed a vision for a collaborative entity to support youth. Having leaders with clout gave Alignment Nashville "enough legs" to survive and flourish under a

new mayor and four different superintendents. Still, said one partner: *“If the school district's not in everything, then it's probably not going to work that well.”*

Nashville community partners speak to the power of a systems approach, based on their own experience and success. Said the community coordinator, *“It's really being intentional—thinking about systems and structure and process.”* Alignment Nashville is the guiding structure that connects individual partners and agendas. Within the organization, the committee structure prompts stakeholders with different areas of expertise—for example, housing, health, and education—to find common ground. The committees also provide a structured venue for partners to learn *“where they're duplicating and where they can complement.”* The ITP process sparks innovative ideas, engages new partners, and ensures alignment of both the process and the programs. The board of directors seeks to *“support and remove barriers”* for the work of the committees. As the community coordinator noted, the entire process is *“transparent”* and *“authentic,”* conducive to building trust, connections, cooperation, and capacity.

While common goals *“keep people at the table,”* structure and process enable them to do their best work. Guidelines for committees are intentionally designed to ensure alignment, quality, and peer support. The power of this approach is eloquently stated by this Nashville partner:

A lot of people have told me over the years, “We don't want to put so much structure in. We want it to be more organic.” And I thought there was a lot of validity to that from the beginning. And I don't think it's necessarily wrong, but here's my observation. If you put together a collaborative and you let things just sort of play out the way they're going to play out, my estimate is that 25 percent to 30 percent of what you're going after is going to actually work. In our case, because of the structure and the process --and we're deliberately trying to make it work, like you would in a business-- you get more like 90 percent. So you can do it [the other way] and you're going to get some kind of result, but I think that the difference in the results that you're going to get is going to be huge when you have structure and process behind it.

The importance of resources cannot be underestimated for supporting collaboration in Nashville. Early on, architects of the plan called for a sustainable funding scheme for Alignment Nashville in which four major partners (education, city, business, and higher education) provide financial support. Partners continue to be held accountable for this funding.

Staffing is also a key component for success. As one person said, *“You can't do this without full-time staff. I don't know how anybody could think about being successful without people who work on it every day.”* Having savvy business leaders with foresight, as well as a unified voice under Alignment Nashville, has allowed the collaborative to leverage significant funds from a wide range of sources to support direct programming in the schools.

Meeting the challenges

Alignment Nashville has provided a vehicle for community collaboration since 2005. Partners refer to a *“well-oiled machine”* when describing the structure and process that support collaboration around youth services. Still, the complexity of an urban landscape with extensive programs for youth offers

several ongoing challenges. For example, even with Alignment Nashville's extensive communication network, one partner noted that the process "*could be better.*" Added another, "*Communication will always be a huge barrier.*"

Engaging the vast array of youth service providers in the collaborative process has also posed some challenges. As one partner noted, engaging stakeholders goes beyond simply getting them "*to the table.*" Success depends on knowing what knowledge and skills various stakeholders bring to the table, as well as what committees need:

Keeping committee membership fresh is really important. Not having more members necessarily, but having the right members. It's kind of a continued evaluation of that mix because projects change as time goes by. So it seems to me that the mix of who's on a committee guiding a project should change as well.

Challenges to engagement also include reaching potential partners who have thus far resisted participation in the process. As one community partner noted: "*One of the barriers is that people don't immediately get engaged or don't immediately have access and then they step back. They may not be as patient for things to take hold.*" Nashville's approach to engaging partners that are "*on the sidelines*" has been proactive, yet measured. The focus has been on improving the work of the collaborative to demonstrate its value to others. As two community partners explained:

It really bothered us at first and we thought we had to do something about it, try to make them come to the table. But we don't really have to make them come to the table. What we really have to do is just take what we have and make it work really, really well, and then they'll want to be a part of this. And really that's what's happened.

What I'm trying to do is just encourage more and more folks to get in, to join together, to try to experience it themselves. And then as they do it more and more, they themselves find the benefits and they can bring others in.

Over time, Alignment Nashville has learned to be clearer about its collaborative process, developed a more formal structure for communication, and found ways to better educate the community about the organization's mission and opportunities for participation. Still, refining the process and strategies takes time. For example, it took 2-3 years to fine-tune the ITP process. As one partner said, "*We were trying to figure this out and we didn't have any models to follow. There were some rough edges and people would say, 'Well, that's never going to work, and so they just walked away.' Now, they see the value.*"

As is often the case with these endeavors, Nashville is "*building the plane while flying it.*" At the same time, Alignment Nashville is a "*learning organization.*" It is deeply committed to assessing its components, identifying needs, and taking a proactive approach to filling the gaps. There is no "*business as usual.*" The process is dynamic. What remains steady is a continuity of vision and structure. At this point in time, the collaborative is well-established, the network is far-reaching, and the system promotes alignment and integration. The system Alignment Nashville has refined for developing collaboration has equipped the community to address the challenges that persist, and even take them in stride.

Lessons Learned

Interviews with the community coordinator and community partners in Nashville revealed valuable lessons about how partners collaborate to improve future prospects for youth. While the following “lessons learned” highlight the particular strategies that have worked well in Nashville, they may also have implications for the work of others dedicated to using a collaborative approach.

- **High-level leaders with vision and influence can mobilize community-wide support and leverage resources.** In Nashville, business leaders and others pushed an idea, called for community engagement, proposed a model for collaboration, and leveraged resources to make it happen.
- **A well-defined collaborative structure promotes a unified vision.** Alignment Nashville is clear in its mission and goals. It promotes a shared agenda, has wide visibility, and serves as a vehicle for engagement at all levels of the system. Its reach in the community is both wide and deep.
- **A structured yet flexible collaborative process promotes efficiency, accountability, and autonomy.** In Alignment Nashville, guidelines facilitate and mold the work of committees, while capacity building ensures the appropriate knowledge and skills. Flexibility within these guidelines ensures creative solutions to programming needs and wider participation by service providers.

Summary

The purpose of this case study is to inform the work of communities dedicated to using a collaborative approach to improve the lives of their youth. Interviews with the community coordinator (funded by America’s Promise Alliance) and community partners provide a picture of what collaboration looks like in Nashville. Collaborative efforts occur through, and are driven by, Alignment Nashville. Since 2005, this non-profit organization has provided a vehicle to enable effective strategic planning, program alignment, and community engagement. The structure and process that support collaboration are highly formalized through Alignment Nashville. Community partners believe that this strategy has led to a greater alignment of resources and services, as well as an increased level of impact on youth.