



Getting the Questions Right

*Exploring the Role of Community Engagement in
Preparing All Young People for Post-Secondary Success*



Discovering what kids need to succeed

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The Search Institute team took the lead in facilitating the meeting and preparing this report. We are particularly grateful to our University of Minnesota colleagues who co-designed this project with us: Robert Bruininks, Karen Seashore, and Dale Blyth. Sharon Olson at the University of Minnesota and Sarah Armstrong at Search Institute provided invaluable administrative support for the project.



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INTRODUCTION: GETTING THE QUESTIONS RIGHT

Ensuring that young people are equipped and prepared for success in a competitive global economy and knowledge-driven society is a multi-faceted challenge requiring multiple complementary strategies. Much of the effort to date has focused on strengthening, reforming, or otherwise changing the formal education system. At the same time, there is a growing sense that engaging the broader community is also a key, but under-tapped, strategy. Yet there appears to be little consensus about what is meant or what strategies might be effective.

For some, the logical link between success in a global economy and community engagement may seem to be a stretch. That is the task of the education system, it might be argued. However, there is growing recognition that **young people's learning and readiness for work are affected by much more than what happens in the school**, as important as that may be. Their experiences in their families, neighborhoods, community organizations, and other places also contribute to, or undermine, their pathway to adulthood.

In recent years, a number of initiatives have emerged that seek to align communities for “collective impact” for young people’s success from “cradle to career.” These efforts recognize the collective and cumulative role that many experiences in families, schools, and communities play in shaping young people’s trajectory for growth, learning, and post-secondary readiness.

However, as these partnerships across the United States develop collective impact strategies, a vexing challenge has emerged that transcends models and approaches: How do you authentically engage the community as a part of the solution? Indeed, what does community engagement even mean?

In June 2013, Search Institute and the University of Minnesota convened two dozen diverse stakeholders in the Twin Cities for a conversation aimed at examining the opportunities and challenges of community engagement—not to develop new strategies, but to stimulate questions that could shape an ambitious research agenda on **what it really takes to authentically engage community members in preparing young people for post-secondary success.**

Building on personal experiences in community engagement, the conversation then focused on the challenges of community engagement. Difficult realities were recognized: too many young people are not fully prepared for post-secondary opportunities, and the decks are stacked against low-income youth and youth of color. Throughout the conversation, the group explored both the opportunities and obstacles to effective community engagement, recognizing that each term—*community* and *engagement*—are ambiguous and understood differently by different stakeholders.

This summary report invites you to participate in—and contribute to—this conversation.

THE CONTEXT: COLLECTIVE IMPACT FOR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

In cities and towns across the United States, the leaders of educational systems, government agencies, businesses, corporations, nonprofits, and other important organizations are coming together to find scalable strategies to address the urgent need (Display 1) for improving student outcomes in the United States. Of particular concern is the vexing challenge of improving success for young people—particularly youth of color—who continue to fall behind.

Many communities are developing and implementing strategies under the banner of “collective impact,” which emphasizes “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem” (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 36). These cradle-to-career initiatives begin with early childhood education and extend through the completion of postsecondary certificates and degrees. Some are part of national initiatives such as Strive, Ready by 21, and the federally funded Promise Neighborhoods program. Others are local efforts on independent paths.

Although there are many differences between these community-wide partnerships, they all aim to prepare young people for life in a competitive global economy and knowledge-driven society. As such, many are strongly focused on improving the educational performance of low-income students and students of color, groups that historically have not been served well by or succeeded in K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions.

DISPLAY 1

INSIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE **The Urgent Need for Action**

The 21st Century Readiness and Skills Gap

Over time, both trade and technology have increased the number of low-cost substitutes for American workers with only moderate cognitive or manual skills. . . . As machines and low-paid foreign workers have taken on these functions, the skills associated with them have become less valuable, and workers lacking higher education have suffered. . . . Many more people than we would care to acknowledge won’t have the education, skills, or abilities to prosper in a pure and globalized market, shaped by enormous labor reserves in China, India, and other developing countries. Over the next decade or more, even if national economic growth is strong, what we do to help and support moderately educated Americans may well determine whether the United States remains a middle-class country. (Peck, 2011, pp. 64, 71)

Is Improving Student Outcomes Achievable at Scale?

Once the global leader—after World War II the United States had the highest high school graduation rate in the world—the country now ranks 18th among the top 24 industrialized nations, with more than 1 million secondary school students dropping out every year. The heroic efforts of countless teachers, administrators, and nonprofits, together with billions of dollars in charitable contributions, may have led to important improvements in individual schools and classrooms, yet system-wide progress has seemed virtually unobtainable. (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 36)

The Challenge

“Without the involvement of family members and community leaders, reform efforts often lack the moral authority and the personal relationships that can powerfully move many students to strive and succeed.”

These collaborations face many challenges in creating and sustaining partnerships aimed at achieving such ambitious objectives. These challenges include securing the participation of key organizations, agreeing on a common agenda, and coordinating the networks through which the partnerships conduct their work. A number of researchers have begun to study how collaborations approach these and other complex tasks, most notably John Kania, Mark Kramer, and their colleagues at FSG. Their widely read articles on “collective impact” in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* describe many of the benefits and challenges of these multi-sector collaborations (e.g., HanleyBrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2011, Kania & Kramer, 2013).

One of these challenges is authentically engaging community residents, smaller organizations, and informal networks in investing in the educational and life success of the youngest generation. As difficult as it is for collective impact initiatives to engage the people who exist at what might be called the *grassroots* of their communities, the challenges of truly engaging leaders and residents who live and work at the *grassroots* are often even greater. When grassroots engagement is the goal, it is almost always difficult just to identify and agree upon the organizations and individuals that need to be engaged, much less to find the times, places, and formats within which effective engagement can occur. It is particularly challenging—and rewarding—when that engagement needs to bridge differences in age, race, culture, language, income, and other boundaries.

Though community engagement is part of the lexicon of collective impact and is receiving increased attention, many partnerships struggle to define, understand, and operationalize engagement as part of their data- and outcome-driven frameworks. (See Display 2: Some Definitional Challenges.)

Why Engage?

If engaging communities is so challenging and complex, is it really worth the effort? Or is it more productive to focus on changing the attitudes and actions of people who work within and with schools and systems? After three decades of standards-based reform in K-12 education, **asking systems to reform themselves from within has not produced the results we need and that our students deserve.** For example, despite the best efforts of many policy makers, educators, academics, and other experts, there have been no significant improvements in the reading and math performance of American 17 year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) since the 1970s.

DISPLAY 2

INSIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE **Some Definitional Challenges**

This report focuses on the idea of “community engagement,” which itself includes two nebulous terms that are often used for many different purposes. Each word can mean different things to different people and in different contexts.

Community—Community is a concept used in multiple, sometimes competing ways. It may refer to:

- *Communities of place*, or geographic or physical places, including neighborhoods, cities, and larger metropolitan (or rural) areas.
- *Communities of affiliation*, which may include communities of identity, such as religious, cultural, ethnic, national, political, or other subgroups.
- *Communities of affection*, in which one has a sense of belonging, trust, and mutual care, which has also been described as a “psychological sense of community.”

Of course, subcategories may be aligned or overlapping, with one feeling a sense of belonging in a physical neighborhood in which he or she connects with others who share an ideological, cultural, or religious identity.

For the purposes of this report focused on community engagement in education, community refers to both formal and informal institutions, organizations, and networks beyond the formal institutional system. Formal systems beyond schools include businesses, law enforcement, youth-serving programs and networks, child and family services, law enforcement, libraries, parks, recreation, health care, religious institutions, and others. It also includes individual stakeholders such as parents, extended family, mentors, and neighbors.

Engagement—Though there are many other uses, engagement is often used in the context of community engagement for education in the following ways:

- *Influencing decisions*—In some cases, community engagement is framed as asking parents and other community members to weigh in on or advocate for critical educational priorities. These efforts are often guided by a belief that those who are affected by decisions have the right to be involved in the decision-making process.
- *Supporting educational initiatives*—This approach seeks to influence community members to support educational priorities that are identified by school leaders or other policy makers. This support can range from political support to participation in activities to taking individual actions that are aligned with the identified priorities.
- *Unleashing community capacity*—This approach asserts that communities have intrinsic capacity and resources that contribute to student success that may or may not tie directly to the institutional concerns of the education system. This approach seeks to tap the non-school resources of communities as active contributors to students’ success through their core capacities, recognizing the complementary educative value of non-academic growth and learning to students learning and success.

Each of these perspectives—which are not mutually exclusive—is reflected in this report and among the people who participated in this conversation. In general, the final description is most aligned with the tenor of the dialogue that informed this report.

In addition, there are compelling reasons to conclude that **community engagement can play a critical and unique role in improving student outcomes**. For example:

- *Motivation*: Without the involvement of family members and community leaders, reform efforts often lack the moral authority and the personal relationships that can powerfully motivate many students to strive and succeed.
- *Untapped resources*: A growing body of theory and research points to the largely untapped potential contributions that families, neighborhoods, and out-of-school opportunities can make to students' educational engagement, persistence, and achievement. (See Display 2, for examples.)
- *Time*: Over the course of their educational careers, young people spend only about 15 percent of their lives in school.

But even if authentic community engagement in educational success is desirable, is it really possible? Could public will be sparked and channeled to help achieve a goal such as doubling the percentage of young people who earn a postsecondary certificate or degree after high school? Examples from other areas of American life suggest that it could. The environmental movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and other efforts to implement profound social change all began with leaders and organizations and initiatives, but they moved beyond reform to engage the hearts and minds of the people whose lives they sought to improve and of the nation as a whole.

In education, the creation and expansion of the modern high school in the 20th century inspired a movement that made earning a high school diploma the social norm for almost all young people—a remarkable achievement, given that high school graduation rates were in the single digits at the start of that century.

The Opportunity

The time has come to think clearly and creatively about creating what Harvard economist Ronald Ferguson (2007) has called a 21st century social movement for excellence with equity. The growing number of communities across the nation that are working to implement cradle-to-career educational partnerships present a unique opportunity to understand what it might take to start and sustain such a social movement, and what such a movement might do for young people and the organizations that serve them. Each of those local partnerships has a need and a sincere desire to engage their residents in the work of change. Some have launched formal efforts to operationalize community engagement. Others are just beginning to identify the obstacles that must be overcome.

Why Engage the Community for Student Success?

Not Just a Schools Issue

Closing the achievement gap is not just a school problem. We are all responsible for helping students succeed. **The way the general public talks about the problem is very different from the way professional educators, politicians, and the media frame the issue.** Professionals typically refer to the achievement gap as a “school issue,” which requires school administrators and staff—and in some cases, parents—to come up with solutions. Most of the participants in the deliberative discussions [facilitated by the Kettering Foundation] saw the problem very differently. More than 90 percent of those who answered questionnaires after attending the forums agreed that “ordinary citizens need to take this issue seriously and participate in efforts to reduce the achievement gap.” (Kettering Foundation, 2010)

Social Capital for Children

“Schools cannot provide children with all of the support they need to learn. The concept of social capital refers directly to the well-established finding that people who have stronger and more resilient networks of relationships with other people are healthier, happier, and live longer. For children, this means that they have multiple supportive relationships with adults and institutions that support their development and that the adults in their lives know and work with each other. **Social capital is one of the factors that is most frequently identified with children’s and adolescent resilience—their capacity to cope with both small and large disturbances in their lives.** The greater the child’s social capital, the less likely it is that there will be breaks in the safety net through which they may fall.” (Kruse & Seashore Louis, 2009)

Education in Community

“**The public school has never functioned alone or in isolation. Where it has succeeded, it has functioned as part of a large configuration of institutions, including families, churches, Sunday schools, and reform schools, committed to essentially complementary values.** . . . My assertion is not the powerlessness of public schooling—far from it—but rather the limitations of public schooling. And the moral is simple: The public school ought never to take the entire credit for the educational accomplishments of the public, and it ought never to be assigned the entire blame.” (Cremin, 1975/2007)

From Isolated Innovations to Collective Impact

“There is scant evidence that isolated initiatives are the best way to solve many social problems in today’s complex and interdependent world. **No single organization is responsible for any major social problem, nor can any single organization cure it.** In the field of education, even the most highly respected nonprofits—such as the Harlem Children’s Zone, Teach for America, and the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP)—have taken decades to reach tens of thousands of children, a remarkable achievement that deserves praise, but one that is three orders of magnitude short of the tens of millions of U.S. children that need help.” (Kania & Kramer, 2011)

Beginning a Dialogue

In this context, a small group of faculty from the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs and College of Education and Human Development began a conversation with Search Institute (a nonprofit research and improvement organization focused on young people's success) about ways we might contribute to the field in shedding light on the challenge of community engagement for post-secondary success. Our hope is to work together and with other partners to study current efforts to engage communities in the work of collective impact. The ultimate objective would be to articulate approaches to effective community engagement that could be integrated into the work of cradle-to-career partnerships across the nation.

To begin the conversation and identify potential and priority research questions, we convened a group of local leaders who are interested in these issues for a one-day design lab on June 19, 2013. Participants included community members, educators, nonprofit leaders, and others from the metropolitan area of Minneapolis-St. Paul (Display 4). The stated purpose of the conversation was:

To develop critical research questions to guide a national study on what it takes to authentically engage community members in preparing all young people for post-secondary success.

The group spent one day grappling with its own experiences and understandings of community engagement for young people's educational success. Though no major consensus or conclusions were reached, the conversation offered a wealth of insight into the issues, challenges, and opportunities for the field. Thus, highlights from this conversation are offered here in hopes of expanding the conversation—even as we look toward new, systematic opportunities to explore these issues, with an ultimate goal of contributing insight to guide efforts to strengthen and broaden focused efforts to prepare all young people for post-secondary success.

DISPLAY 4

Design Lab Participants

(Affiliations reflect roles at the time of the design lab.)

- **Dale Blyth**, Extension Professor, University of Minnesota
- **Mary Kay Boyd**, MKB & Associates
- **Robert Bruininks**, Professor and President Emeritus, University of Minnesota
- **Karen Cadigan**, Former Director, Minnesota Office of Early Learning
- **Laura Carson**, Finance & Community Impact Director, United Way of Greater Lafayette, Indiana
- **Pam Costain**, President and CEO, AchieveMinneapolis
- **Ann DeGroot**, Executive Director, Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board
- **Hector Garcia**, Executive Director, Chicano Latino Affairs Council
- **Michael Goar**, Executive Director, Generation Next
- **Tom Holman**, Director, Morning Foundation
- **Dan Hoverman**, Superintendent, Mounds View Public Schools
- **Alberto Monserrate**, CEO and Co-founder, Latino Communications Network; Chair, Minneapolis Board of Education
- **Bruce Murray**, Northside Achievement Zone
- **Jeremy Myers**, Associate Professor, Augsburg College
- **Kent Pekel**, President and CEO, Search Institute
- **Michael Rodriguez**, Associate Professor, University of Minnesota
- **Gene Roehlkepartain**, Vice President for Research and Development, Search Institute
- **Elaine Salinas**, President, Migizi Communications, Inc.
- **Karen Seashore**, Regents Professor, University of Minnesota
- **Dane Smith**, President, Growth & Justice
- **Terri Sullivan**, Director of Community Strategies and Learning, Search Institute
- **John Till**, Vice President, The Family Partnership
- **James Toole**, President and Executive Director, Compass Institute
- **Wokie Weah**, President, Youthprise
- **Marnie Wells**, CEO, Camp Fire Minnesota

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Our conversation began with our personal experiences. Each person in the conversation has been part of some kind of community engagement effort in the past. These experiential lessons frame how we approach the issue. Participants each shared their personal experiences with community engagement in the past. These stories gave a sense that community engagement is most powerful when it

“Community engagement is most successful when it respects the wisdom of the community and that the wisdom is in the people.”

- is catalyzed by a serious need or problem that affected people directly and that gave a larger sense of purpose
- is organized around a shared vision that is aspirational, value centered, and hopeful
- respects the wisdom of the community and that the knowledge is in the people
- is focused on achieving tangible results
- emphasizes building trust and relationships, listening to diverse people and giving them voice
- emphasizes listening to and telling stories, creating meaning, and building mutual understanding
- is an open, people-led process, but has catalysts who provide leadership and coordination
- leverages the resources that are available in the community, recognizing that community had something essential to add
- is not afraid to go against the grain
- sometimes involves big actions, but sometimes focuses on small-scale community activities
- is sometimes formal and organized, but is sometimes focused on people in the neighborhood who just want to make something happen
- meets people on their own turf, terms, and timetables

SOME CHALLENGES IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

What critical challenges must be addressed or overcome in our communities in order to increase the post-secondary readiness of all young people? Though participants have had powerful experiences in community engagement, they also recognized the challenges, including the following:

- There is a lack of consensus among educators, policy makers, and the public that community *actually is important* for young people’s educational success. In many instances, educators and the public fundamentally believe that education is the responsibility of schools and, perhaps, parents. Therefore, community engagement may be nice, but it’s not necessary.
- Rapid social change has made it more challenging to identify a shared set of priorities and expectations regarding young people’s education and success—recognizing that some “shared” value systems of the past were really just the value systems of a dominant culture.
- A lack of mutual trust, respect, responsibility, and communication across differences, including differences in culture, age, and income, is a major barrier to broad community engagement. Some of this mistrust is rooted in a history of generational trauma and marginalization. Community members who have been marginalized can fear losing their own identities if they become part of collaborative efforts aimed at creating unity and commonality.
- There is a subtext of skepticism that youth, families, and community members actually have the capacity and knowledge needed to be part of the solution, not just the source of problems to be overcome. Thus, there is a lack of recognition and support for the potential and real contributions and roles of people, networks, and organizations in communities in contributing (directly or indirectly) to young people’s educational success.
- The meanings of both “community” and “engagement” are unclear, or, at minimum, not explicit. For example, what one group considers “engagement” may be considered by another to be “marketing.” Similarly, for some, the “community” to be engaged may consist primarily of organizations and programs within a geographic area. For others, the “community” that needs to be engaged is made up of individuals and networks.
- Finally, there are the challenges of any effort to create and sustain meaningful change, including the gap between people’s values or aspirations and their actions; resistance to change in existing systems and institutions (as well as individuals); and holding in tension the shared goals, priorities, and strategies of the whole with the individual priorities and commitments of different individuals, networks, and organizations.

“The meanings of both ‘community’ and ‘engagement’ are unclear, or, at minimum, not explicit.”

INSIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE

Challenges in Community Engagement for Student Success

The Persistence of Neighborhood Inequality

“Despite urban social transformation . . . most neighborhoods remained stable in their relative economic standing despite the inflow and outflow of individual residents. . . . There is an enduring vulnerability to certain neighborhoods that is not simply a result of the current income of residents. . . . Neighborhoods possess reputations that, when coupled with certain residential selection decisions, reproduce existing patterns of inequality.” (Sampson, 2012)

The Challenge of Self-Interest

“The fact is that political opinions are inevitably rooted in economic interests of some kind or another, and only comparably few citizens can view a problem of social policy without regard to their interest. . . . As individuals, men believe that they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other. As racial, economic and national groups, they take for themselves, whatever their power can command.” (Niebuhr, 1932/1960)

Challenges Identified in Parent Involvement

“This paper . . . [examines] shifts over time in the intent and purpose of the law [Title I parent involvement provisions] as well as recurring challenges that impede the application of the law in practice:

- A decrease in the focus on and commitment to building the capacity of families and school personnel to create and sustain partnerships that support children’s learning and development.
- The promotion of “random acts” of family engagement versus systemic initiatives.
- A focus on compliance versus an improvement mindset for family engagement.
- A shift in the emphasis of family engagement from collective growth to individual development.
- A limited commitment to monitoring and evaluation.” (Mapp, 2012)

A SHARED VISION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

What might an “engaged community” that is focused on student success look like? Though the design lab participants did not flesh out a comprehensive vision, several key elements of a vision of community engagement were identified, some of which were the flipside of the challenges.

“There is a sense of unified purpose focused on student success, which is reinforced with consistent expectations and aligned policy and funding.”

- People experience **neighborliness, cohesion, and interdependence** across the community and across differences, including differences of culture, income, religion, and age. This is fundamental to creating a culture of mutual trust, respect, and responsibility.
- There is a sense of **unified purpose** focused on student success, which is reinforced with consistent expectations and aligned policy and funding. The gap between schools and communities dissipates as the mutually reinforcing, but distinct, roles of each are clearer.
- **Mutual accountability** mechanisms or expectations between schools, families, youth, and communities are in place and make explicit the important roles that each plays in student success. This would include clear accountability for systems, explicit responsibilities for students and families, and state and federal policy frameworks that reinforce a sense of shared responsibility.
- A **critical mass** of people, programs, and institutions in the community recognize that they have a stake in young people’s success, and they understand the roles they can play. They recognize that “we’re all on the hook” for young people’s success, and conditions are such that people have meaningful opportunities to contribute.
- **Data systems and infrastructures** are in place that allow for identifying priorities, focusing resources, and guiding continuous, adaptive improvement, growth, and engagement.
- The **wisdom and capacity** of the community are recognized, tapped, and unleashed around shared priorities.

Different Approaches of Community Engagement in Education

Engagement to Reform Education

“The purpose of community engagement in public education is to build and mobilize constituencies to support their public schools. For systemic reform initiatives such as *Schools for a New Society*, public engagement fulfills a variety of critical needs. First, such engagement can help improve the design and implementation of the reform by tapping the ideas and expertise of parents, citizens and community constituencies committed to improving school and school system performance. Second, engagement can help build a permanent constituency for the reform, a critical asset in a fluid political terrain in which superintendents and school board members are often transient. Third, engagement can strengthen the legitimacy of the reform, as constituencies come to understand, believe in and support the reform efforts. Finally, building community engagement around specific reforms such as SNS also contributes to the broadening of community participation in public education, thereby strengthening the role public education can play in enhancing democratic action.” (Fruchter, Gray, & Branch-Smith, 2006)

A Community Organizing Perspective

“Data suggest that [community] organizing is contributing to school-level improvements, particularly in the areas of school-community relationships, parent involvement and engagement, sense of school community and trust, teacher collegiality, and teacher morale.

“Our findings suggest that organizing efforts are influencing policy and resource distribution at the system level. Officials, school administrators, and teachers in every site reported that community organizing influenced policy and resource decisions to increase equity and build capacity, particularly in historically low-performing schools.

“Data indicate that participation in organizing efforts is increasing civic engagement, as well as knowledge and investment in education issues, among adult and youth community members. Young people reported that their involvement in organizing increased their motivation to succeed in school.

“Our research suggests that organizing groups achieve these schooling and community impacts through a combination of system-level advocacy, school- or community-based activity, and strategic use of research and data. **Continuous and consistent parent, youth, and community engagement produced through community organizing both generates and sustains these improvements.**” (Mediratta et al, 2008)

OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Building on the conversations about the overall vision, opportunities, and challenges of preparing youth for post-secondary success, participants in the lab brainstormed opportunities and obstacles for advancing community engagement in several action areas: Informal supports (neighborhoods, families); school improvement (within schools); community institutions other than schools, and public policy. Below are some key ideas that surfaced.

	OPPORTUNITIES	CHALLENGES
Informal Supports (Neighborhoods, Families)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A growing demographic of retirees who could be engaged with students in schools• Youth want to support and be part of community• Everyone can do something in a social movement for kids• Diversity brings different strengths and provides opportunities to enrich understanding and culture• A growing base of multi-cultural and multi-generational leadership is emerging• The vast majority of parents care and want to do the best for their children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The difficulty of reaching a critical mass of residents• Communities tend to operate in silos and isolation• Family and student mobility undermine community connections• An inability to envision success; unclear goals, benefits, or concrete actions for engagement• Fear or suspicion between youth and adults in communities• The complexity of accessing volunteer opportunities• No measurement that quantifies the gap, need, or progress
School Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Educate the community to ask questions of the district and demand change• Align K-12, higher education, and life, including an urgent need for an educated, skilled workforce• There are lots of resources in community. Imagine 10 community volunteers for every student, instead of one teacher for every 30 students• School can become community hubs, with potential for multi-	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A bureaucratic mindset of public institutions. School systems can have rigid boundaries that make it difficult to partner.• Scale/size of urban school districts inhibits authentic engagement• Schools have not built the capacity to effectively use volunteers. It is hard to organize outside resources to be effective in academic success• It is hard to recruit volunteers, especially for significant amounts of time. Work culture does not permit individuals to volunteer. And often

OPPORTUNITIES

CHALLENGES

Community Institutions Other than Schools

- purpose use by the community
- Lots of knowledge, experience to share with students, including historical perspectives

volunteers with time are not of the same cultural background as students

- Community organizations have strength in family engagement; could partner with schools
 - Provide opportunities from institution to share costs, data, information, resources, and professional development
 - New forms of alignment around vision, goals, and measures
 - Institutions have historical memory and staying power
 - Faith communities want to engage with young people but they have no direct connection
- It is hard to know which institutions exist and the points of contact
 - Competitive funding creates a lack of incentives for collaboration
 - Leaders in community organizations are often not from the community
 - A lack of shared measures/data
 - Not enough focus on observing communities in action
 - Hard and expensive to coordinate between multiple agencies
 - Lack of strategic focus/priority on a clear goal: college readiness

Public Policy

- Community engagement can organize residents to impact policies that will influence educational success
 - The Minnesota Youth Council can be a voice for this issue
 - Education and schools remain highly valued, despite inequities and failures
 - Hold up effective practice to encourage innovation
- Policy options are polarized
 - There is limited policy cooperation between schools and other government-funded services
 - Economic, social, regional segregation
 - Testing regimes are confusing to teachers, parents, and students
 - Policy has not kept pace with innovative practices
 - Not enough communities are represented by people in power

EMERGING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A wealth of research possibilities arose from the design lab, suggesting the need for sustained engagement in these questions. During the event, numerous potential research questions were identified. Subsequently, an online survey was distributed to participants to rank the potential questions based on how important it is to address each question in first phases of research. Below are all the research questions that surfaced, rank ordered within each section based on participants' feedback. Items in **bold** were those where the consensus is that they "must" or "should" be examined in a first phase of research.

Definitional and Contextual Questions

"How do people in diverse communities understand community and engagement?"

- 1. How do people in diverse communities understand community and engagement? How do these understandings affect participation, sustainability, and impact?**
- 2. What community, family, social, cultural, policy, and economic conditions and norms enhance or thwart effective community engagement? How have these changed over time? How do they vary by community, region, and location (urban, suburban, small town, rural)?**
- 3. What external conditions and structures, and internal beliefs, values, and capacities motivate and/or inhibit community leaders, residents, and families from becoming engaged in contributing to young people's educational achievement?**
4. What are parent, youth, and community educational aspirations and expectations for young people's post-secondary education? Are there particular community beliefs and behaviors that seem to correlate with improving educational outcomes?
5. How do organizations and partnerships seeking to implement community engagement in education define community? How do they define engagement?
6. How is community engagement similar to and different from other forms of participation and organizing? How is community engagement similar to and different from other forms of participation and organizing?

Questions of Effective Practice

- 7. What strategies appear to be effective for engaging communities across lines of race, class, and culture?**
- 8. What characteristics and practices of schools enhance or inhibit effective community engagement in student's educational success? In what ways do schools contribute to and take advantage of community engagement in educational success?**

9. **What are best practices in community engagement focused on student educational success? What factors and strategies contribute the most to effectiveness, sustainability, and impact? How do these factors vary in different contexts, such as low-income communities, communities of color, and urban and rural communities?**
10. **What messages, channels, and supports motivate, improve, and sustain community engagement?**
11. **What might be the components of and processes for effective community engagement approaches in collective impact?**
12. **What lessons can be learned from diverse youth-focused community engagement approaches, initiatives, and partnerships, including Strive, Promise Neighborhoods, Ready by 21, Promise Communities, and Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth?**
13. What roles do data have in enhancing or suppressing community engagement in student success? What kinds of data are most effective in motivating and sustaining community engagement, investment, and accountability? What data can undermine community engagement?
14. In what ways are various people and resources in communities engaged in students' educational success, including youth-serving organizations, faith-based organizations, neighborhood associations, businesses, and skilled retirees?
15. What factors contribute the most to effective community engagement? Do these factors vary based on the area of impact (e.g., policy impact vs. increasing social capital)? To what extent is community engagement facilitated or hindered by age, sector, or outcome foci or by cradle-to-career and whole child/youth emphasis?
16. What strategies and activities do communities have underway to strengthen collective efficacy among community members to impact educational outcomes?
17. What are the obstacles to effective community engagement in a collective impact strategy?
18. What lessons, strategies, and models from other contexts (e.g., economic development, international development, health care and public health, and social movements) can inform community engagement efforts focused on student success?
19. What factors such as vision, focus, funding, communication systems, power structure, decision-making approaches, leadership, and policies contribute to or inhibit sustained collaboration for community engagement?

“What strategies appear to be effective for engaging communities across lines of race, class, and culture?”

20. How does active youth leadership in community engagement strategies affect priorities, approaches, sustainability, reach, and impact?
21. How does the approach taken (e.g., strength-based, focused on a specific action or target) enable or hinder community engagement around educational success?
22. How are power and influence shared between community members and positional leaders?

Questions of Contribution, Impact, and Outcomes

23. **To what extent do various forms of community engagement uniquely contribute to student success, including post-secondary readiness? What contribution does community engagement make compared to other strategies for educational improvement and reform?**
24. **How do the focus, level, type, breadth, and depth of community engagement affect educational success? For example, what is the differential contribution of community engagement focused on out-of-school-time systems alignment compared to engagement focused on empowering individual action (civic action)?**
25. **Through what mechanisms does community engagement contribute to students' educational success? For example, does it enhance student motivation and educational expectations, increase resources for schools, increase personal engagement in supporting student success, etc.?**
26. **What is the return on investment of investing time, money, and political capital in community engagement around educational success? How does this return on investment compare to other potential priorities?**
27. **What is the relative contribution of different community factors, sectors, political structures, and strategies in educational success of young people? How do these vary by community, culture, socioeconomic status, and focus of engagement (such as the age of student or a specific goal)?**
28. **How do collective impact partnerships evaluate their community engagement efforts? Are there measures of effective community engagement in collective impact?**

“To what extent does community engagement contribute to student success, including post-secondary readiness?”

CONTINUING THE DIALOGUE AND INQUIRY

Many factors, strategies, and systems have a role to play in improving post-secondary outcomes. As a nation, we must continue efforts to strengthen schools, improve teacher preparation and quality, increase family involvement, and implement many other strategies at local, state, and national levels. In the midst of all these efforts, however, community engagement remains a largely untapped strategy. It requires the same kind of rigorous thinking, careful implementation, and strategic investment as the others.

Critical Questions

Many questions remain in making a compelling case for whether and how such an investment would pay off. We must ask: **Is community engagement absolutely necessary for improving young people's post-secondary success?** Answering that question requires shedding light on three sub-questions, which approximate preliminary elements of a theory of change:

- What non-school community factors contribute to young people's educational and post-secondary readiness, particularly for low-income youth and for youth of color?
- What do the people, networks, and institutions of a community do that create, enhance, or, perhaps, diminish the presence and strength of these factors in young people's lives?
- What strategies are most effective in stimulating, supporting, and sustaining community commitment and action to strengthen these factors, particularly for young people facing the greatest challenges?

The answers to these questions require systematic investigation of what is meant by "community engagement" and how it is manifested in practice. Building on the expertise of many who have rich and diverse experiences working in communities, we must collectively articulate and document conceptions of community engagement that are clearer, more actionable, more inclusive, and, ultimately, more impactful in ensuring that all young people are prepared to be successful in a competitive global economy and knowledge-driven society.

Next Steps

The dialogue reflected in this report joins a broader conversation locally and nationally about the contribution of community and the role of community engagement in learning and in preparing young people for post-secondary success. The urgency of the issues makes it tempting to jump immediately to new interventions and strategies. However, our intent is, instead, first to be systematic and intentional in **listening to and learning with many diverse efforts already underway**, thus contributing to their success. In this spirit, our next steps focus on three strategies:

1. Expand the conversations about community engagement with other stakeholders and in other places, sharpening an articulation of the definitions, goals, challenges, opportunities, and questions.

2. Launch or stimulate qualitative and quantitative research initiatives that shed light on the priority questions identified in this report, thus enhancing understanding of whether and how community engagement contributes to addressing the challenges of preparing young people for success in today's competitive global economy and society.
3. Actively work with coalitions and practitioners who are seeking to engage diverse communities in developing and implementing strategies that not only hold promise for improving youth outcomes but also offer learning opportunities that inform and test theory and research in the crucible of real-world experience.

An Invitation

The participants in this conversation began with an assumption that engaging communities as collaborators in and contributors to young people's educational success and readiness to participate productively in the economy and society was a worthy, even essential, priority. The design lab dialogue reinforced these dispositions, based on people's own experiences and understandings. Participants shared a conviction that engaging communities as active, intentional contributors to young people's success was a critical, if challenging, strategy as part of collective impact initiatives.

At the same time, it was equally clear that foundational issues and questions remain unresolved, beginning with a shared understanding of what we mean by community engagement and whether (or under what conditions) it can contribute to improving young people's post-secondary success. The invitation, then, is to engage with these questions in a ways that not only shed light on the issues, challenges, and opportunities, but also increases shared capacity and commitment to align and link efforts to ensure that all young people are ready and able to participate and thrive in the 21st century.

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