Learning from
PROOF POINT COMMUNITIES

// Promise Partnership of Salt Lake *Salt Lake City, Utah*

StriveTogether®
Every child. Cradle to career.

PROMISE PARTNERSHIP
United Way of Salt Lake

// Foreword

StriveTogether is a national movement representing nearly 70 communities across 29 states and Washington, D.C. For almost a decade, StriveTogether has provided coaching, resources and rigorous approaches to these communities to create opportunities and close gaps in education, housing and much more. Its Cradle to Career Network impacts the lives of more than 13 million young people and counting.

Promise Partnership of Salt Lake is part of this national movement, and it is seeing measurable success in applying the StriveTogether framework to eliminate disparities and improve outcomes for youth.

As a StriveTogether Proof Point community, Promise Partnership shares an honor with just over a dozen other communities that demonstrate that collective impact works. To reach Proof Point status, a partnership must have 60% or more of cradle-to-career outcomes trending in the right direction and must show maturity in a number of qualitative measures, including:

• Using student-level data to narrow racial disparities

• Collaborating with the community to make data-informed decisions to bring about change

• Helping develop public policies that improve outcomes in the region and state

• Collaborating with all partners in a consistently effective way

• Leveraging existing financial relationships to impact change

• Building the capacity of backbone staff to understand what's working and what isn't

• Consistently following through on commitments to action

These quality benchmarks are part of the StriveTogether Theory of Action™, a proven framework built on lessons from the Cradle to Career Network. The following case study demonstrates how Promise Partnership of Salt Lake is closing equity gaps and improving cradle-to-career outcomes in their community.

More third-graders at West Kearns Elementary are on track in reading, thanks to community school partnerships and programs built through the Promise Partnership.

// Shared Accountability

At first glance, educational progress in the state of Utah looks, if not quite as impressive as its scenery, at least good. It ranks among the top 15 states on student achievement measures, and for the past several years, its fourth- and eighth-graders performed above the national average in math and reading on the National Assessment for Educational Progress. On the most recent test, Utah students improved, rising to the high 40th percentile in the percentage of students proficient in each subject.

But a closer examination of the numbers reveals a different picture. When you disaggregate the data along racial and economic lines, opportunity gaps emerge between Latino, Native American and students experiencing poverty and their white and economically mobile counterparts. Consider:

- A 30-percentage point performance divide between Utah's Latino and white students
- A 20% proficiency gap in language arts between white and Native American students
- A 20% opportunity gap for students living in poverty

When it comes to proficiency for students living in poverty, Utah drops to 35th in the country. Meanwhile, Utah ranks second to last in the nation in per-student public school spending.

In the Salt Lake region, which in recent years has grown increasingly diverse, schools and districts have tackled these inequities in various ways, to raise scores and close opportunity gaps. But little, if anything, was making a difference. Blame was being assigned in all the usual directions: Parents faulting educators, educators blaming parents, everyone pointing fingers at district and state policies. In short, wrote co-chairs Kirk Aubry and Dr. Rich Nye in a recent Promise Partnership progress report, "We [created] an environment where trust is undermined or destroyed, along with the possibility of working together to succeed."

Community leaders were determined to change that divided culture. They wanted to stop tinkering and start transforming. But they knew that wholesale change of the educational environment was not going to result from, as they put it, a loose collection of programs, initiatives and "focus areas." They had to think beyond single organizations and services and come together as an organized group that co-designed solutions and shared accountability for results.

As a respected and well-resourced engine for social good along the Wasatch front, United Way of Salt Lake (UWSL) had already reorganized itself to take a collective impact approach to community needs. "We used to simply raise money and grant it out," says Bill Crim, the organization's president and CEO. "While many people were helped, it was clear we weren't actually solving problems. Every grant application pointed to more poverty and more problems — and every grant application promised a solution — a perfect example of what some call a 'results paradox.' If we are all doing such a great job, why are many of our biggest problems getting worse?"

Fifteen years ago, UWSL decided to embrace collective impact, an approach through which various sectors work together to solve a common problem. They adopted a mindset of continuous improvement, a discipline that relies on data-driven inquiry to change change systems, not programs. "We went all in," says Amy Ahrens Terpstra, vice president of collective impact partnerships for UWSL, "as opposed to others who sort of dabbled in it." Continuous improvement, she says, "is absolutely essential for understanding what's working and what's not, and for using that understanding to scale work to improve outcomes. It's an absolutely critical tool in changing outcomes for kids." StriveTogether, Terpstra says, helped Promise Partnership make the essential connection between micro-level improvement work and improvement efforts on a larger scale.

UWSL's first forays into education reform

The Promise Partnership region's four-year high school graduation rates are steadily increasing, and gaps between demographic groups are narrowing. 81% of low-income students and 71% of ELL students are now graduating on time.

focused on creating community schools, institutions that bring to bear a wealth of resources, on site, to serve the whole child. Inspired in part by the Harlem Children's Zone and the federal Promise Neighborhoods program, the community school strategy was expanded in 2011 to create several placed-based, cradle-to-career partnerships. Then in 2014, UWSL shifted to adopt the StriveTogether Theory of Action™, a framework based on collaboration, data-driven improvement and sustainability.

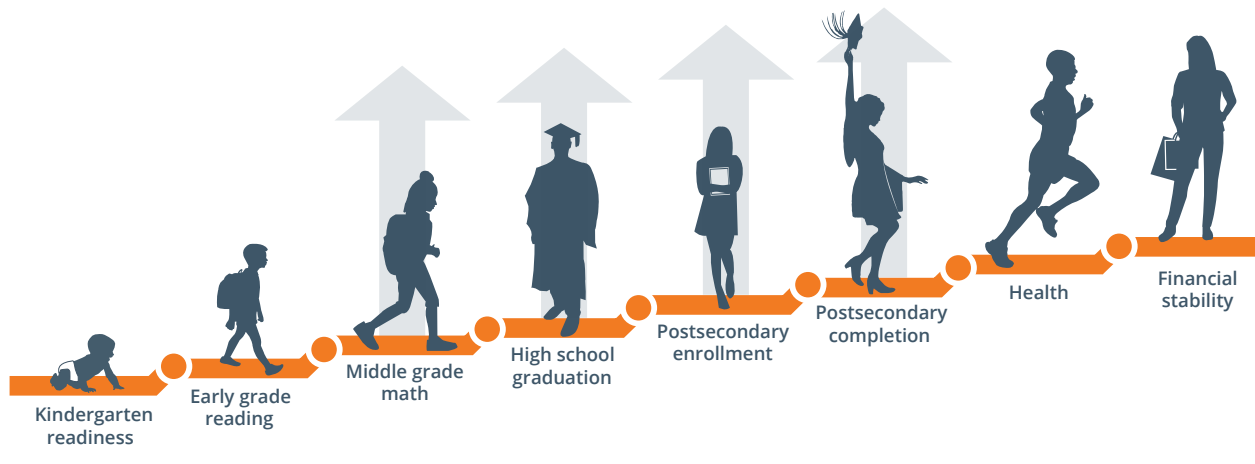With StriveTogether's help, UWSL built out a tiered leadership structure, spanning a number of sectors and including nine civic partnerships and dozens of school-based collaborations, that allows it to tackle both regional and highly local issues.

The StriveTogether Theory of Action™ is based on four principles, four streams of work and six gateways that mark progress to Proof Point and Systems Transformation. The first stream of work is organizing around a shared community vision — one that all stakeholders support. Leaders and community members from sectors like education, housing, transportation, business and government hold themselves accountable

StriveTogether Theory of Action™

PRINCIPLES

ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY · ADVANCE EQUITY · DEVELOP A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT · LEVERAGE EXISTING RESOURCES

PILLARS

SHARED COMMUNITY VISION · EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING · COLLABORATIVE ACTION · INVESTMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

GATEWAYS

EXPLORING · EMERGING · SUSTAINING · SYSTEMS CHANGE · PROOF POINT · SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Promise Partnership facilitates partnerships on the following outcomes

Kindergarten readiness · Early grade reading · Middle grade math · High school graduation · Postsecondary enrollment · Postsecondary completion · Health · Financial stability
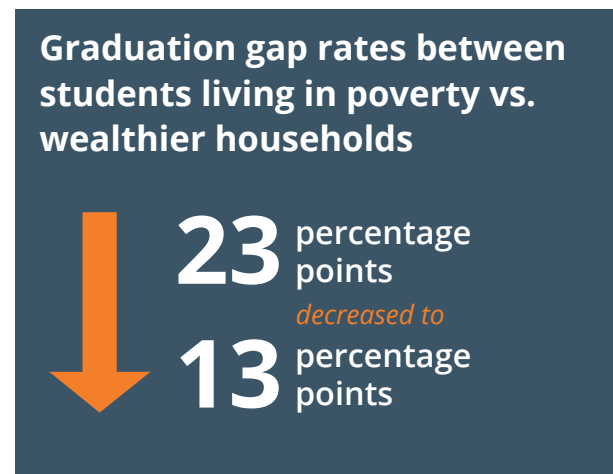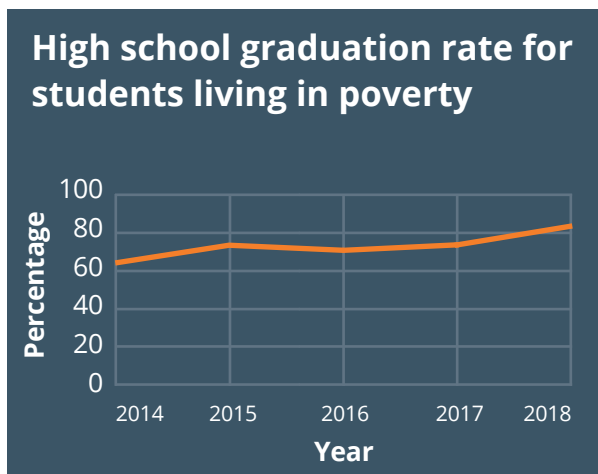
to this vision as they tackle the second stream of work, which is all about evidence-based decision-making. This begins with data that spans the continuum from early childhood through postsecondary completion. Often appearing in the same place for the first time, the information paints a whole picture and helps everyone see their place in it. The communities then pull the data apart, disaggregating it so they can see disparities among demographic groups. As Heidi Black, StriveTogether's director of collaborative improvement, has put it: "We want to help communities see the forest and then the trees."

StriveTogether is committed to advancing equity as one of its four principles; it holds that disparities in outcomes reflect the failure not of children or parents, but of systems — of the

historically ingrained barriers that keep children from reaching their full potential. StriveTogether works to dismantle these systems not just by encouraging network members to collect qualitative and quantitative data, but helping them use that data to guide tough conversations and change attitudes. The information can help people recognize how systemic and structural racism affects youth and their families. Without data, community leaders may never acknowledge these barriers or see the benefits of shifting power dynamics.

As a member of StriveTogether's network, Promise Partnership of Salt Lake now has a powerful partner, connecting it to individuals, institutions and ideas from across the country, to help it reach its simple goal: making sure that

High school graduation rate for students living in poverty

Graduation gap rates between students living in poverty vs. wealthier households

23 percentage points

decreased to

13 percentage points

Source: Promise Partnership of Salt Lake, a member of the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network

all Utah children are ready for school, better in school and successful in life.

To do this, Promise Partnership facilitates partnerships focused on the following outcomes:

- Kindergarten readiness
- Third-grade reading proficiency
- Eighth-grade math proficiency
- High school graduation
- Postsecondary readiness
- Postsecondary completion
- Health
- Financial stability

Since the baseline year of 2014, four out of these eight outcomes have improved on the regional level. Health and financial stability were only recently added. In the communities and schools in which Promise Partnership works most directly, outcomes are improving at an even greater rate. High school graduation for students from low-income households, for example, has increased by nearly 20 percentage points to 81%, and the gap between the graduation rates of low-income students and higher-income students has shrunk from 23 percentage points to just 13.

It's important to note that outside forces — including school leadership, parent voice and changes in state and local policy — are also at play in the partnership region and in Utah overall, and that, in accordance with the principles of continuous improvement, the hoped-for outcomes are not so much dramatic results as they are trends in the right direction. "We've learned from StriveTogether the importance of factors beyond backbone and strong partnership infrastructure," says Danya Pastuszek, chief operating officer for Promise Partnership. The mixed outcome data, which is shared regularly with the public, also underscores the essential point that continuous improvement work seeks to change entire systems. Thus, marked progress takes time.

// Improving third-grade reading by tackling chronic absenteeism

Among the outcomes that most concerned Promise Partnership was proficiency in third-grade reading. The ability to read well at this stage is essential to student success, because it lays the foundation for virtually all the learning that follows. Until third grade, students learn to read, to identify letters and form them into words. After third grade, they read to learn, so they can understand more complicated concepts. If students don't read at grade level by this time, they will struggle for the rest of their school years. Studies show that the ability to read proficiently in the third grade is one of the most important predictors of whether a student will successfully graduate from high school.

In the Promise Partnership region, the latest data on third-grade reading proficiency highlighted some troubling trends: Just 47% of the state's students of color are proficient in reading by third grade, and just 66% of students overall are proficient. Moreover, those figures have dropped since the baseline year — by 12% for students of color and by 6% for all students. There was also a stark gap — 32% — between students from low-income households and other students in the partnership region. Worse, the gaps were widening.[1]

At the same time, over the five years that these gaps widening were growing, the rates of chronic

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[1]Utah State Board of Education Data Queries (2019). DIBELS Proficiency.

school absence in the early grades were steadily increasing. In 2015, 15% of the elementary students in the Promise Partnership region were chronically absent, meaning they missed 10% or more of class time, whether excused or not. Not surprisingly, when children don't show up for school, their academic performance suffers. And as they age, the problem gets worse. Promise Partnership knew that if the absenteeism trend continued, the outcome disparities would not only remain, they would grow.

Until recently, Utah schools had been looking at absenteeism almost exclusively through the lens of truancy; they were essentially ignoring excused absences. The thinking, Jennifer Newell of the Salt Lake City School District told the research lab Regional Educational (REL) West, was "OK, they've been excused. They had a good reason for not being here. We're good. But what we know is that a day missed of school is a day missed of learning, whether or not the student was out sick, or whether or not the student was out sunbathing. So, the bottom line is that we need to be looking at a broader picture." Promise Partnership realized that absenteeism was a symptom of something larger, and that it required a different approach — one of support rather than punishment

Chronic absenteeism was a promising target for the partnership's improvement efforts because it is regularly tracked with easily available data: All schools, and often individual classroom teachers, take attendance every day. And because absenteeism in the early grades was a discrete, well-defined problem, it naturally lent itself to the small, rapid tests of change that are the hallmark of continuous improvement. Under the discipline of a plan-do-study-act, or PDSA, cycle, improvement networks research and define a problem, test out an idea for solving it, analyze the results of the change idea, then adopt, adapt or scrap it depending on what they find.

UWSL and StriveTogether held seven learning sessions over nine months, with eight schools represented by six teams. Two to four people made up each team, which included teachers

and other school staffers, Vista AmeriCorps volunteers and members of UWSL. Each school defined its problem in its own way, guided in the process by UWSL coaches and the tools and techniques, like journey maps and driver diagrams, that helped them literally see the system — to understand how all the individuals and organizations connect and to define the precise problem to solve and the path for doing so.

Throughout their work, the teams kept the StriveTogether principle of "advancing equity" in the forefront. "With StriveTogether, we learned the critical importance of zooming in on the populations most impacted [by the problem] and for whom [school] performance was most impacted," says Terpstra. "So, for instance, a specific goal would be: 'reduce chronic absenteeism among Latino males in X elementary school." Terpstra notes that some team members initially questioned the seemingly narrow focus, but soon saw how taking an equity lens benefited the entire system.

For the first three months — the plan segment of the cycle — the networks did nothing but research. With the help of StriveTogether, network members reviewed national and Utah-specific research on chronic absence. They spoke to teachers, students and parents. They collected data, then disaggregated it by grade level and among racial and income groups, as well as by special education students and English language learners. (Of the 154,484 students in the network schools, 41% were economically disadvantaged, 34% were students of color, 12% were English language learners and 11% required special education.) They also gathered qualitative data by conducting focus groups, taking surveys and otherwise interviewing students, teachers and parents.[2]

"Do you like school?" "Do you feel comfortable at school?" "Do you have friends?" "Are there adults at school you care about?" "Why don't you come to school?" These are the sorts of questions that the surveys posed to students, with network members following up on some in person. (Qualitative data is essential, says Tyler Asman, senior director of

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[2]Utah State Board of Education (2019). Enrollment Data.

In areas of Salt Lake City, Promise Partnership teams are working with middle school teachers to align content across grades, as well as testing a new approach to an online diagnostic tool and math tutorial.

learning and improvement for UWSL, noting that one of the schools "didn't talk to humans at all" during the research process and had to start a new intervention from scratch.)

What the teams found, by also examining student-level data, were a variety of reasons why students didn't come to school, including physical illness, anxiety, depression, learning struggles and family problems. And they often varied among demographic groups. One school looked at two particular groups with chronic absences, one a more affluent, white cohort whose students often missed school for family vacations, and the other a Hispanic group whose students came from low-income households and were absent for "other" reasons. The school decided to target the low-income group because the data also showed that absences among its members had more of an impact on academic performance than it did for students in the higher-income, white group. (Again, they looked through the equity lens.)

Data in hand, the network next got down to the business of testing interventions — the act part of the cycle. Depending on what they learned from individual schools and parents, the groups tried out both universal and targeted interventions. One school noticed a particularly troubling absenteeism pattern among its special education students. Significantly, the data showed that students with individual education plans started the school year with lower rates of chronic

absenteeism than the general student population but ended the year with higher rates of chronic absence.

Addressing the problem, different schools piloted different ideas: Hanging oversized attendance posters in prominent places for all to see; holding competitions with rewards for improved attendance; assigning adult mentors of students' choosing; offering free donuts and holding dance parties. At one school, the principal counseled one student while the two did their nails together. Another mentor played cards with a student, using a deck inscribed with Spider Man pictures. "It turns out that's what it took to get him to school," says Asman. "The focus was on having a caring adult at the school."

As they tested the strategies at their individual schools, the teams continuously shared information with each other, in real time, asking questions and learning faster — and failing faster — than they would have had they been working alone. The team that tried the adult mentoring intervention, for example, soon learned that while it worked, it was not at all scalable; expanding it would take up resources and time that school staff simply did not have. In keeping with the StriveTogether principle of sustainability, the school moved to a system of peer-to-peer mentoring.

"The containment of this intervention was a good example of leveraging existing resources," says Pastuszek. "Interventions were designed to

use the existing capacity of the teams. The teams early on did a great job of defining skills and assets, really playing to everyone's strengths. And each team had a designated leader who between sessions broke down barriers [to progress] and made sure everyone was motivated and active."

Students who met reading benchmarks in third grade rose

8% ↑ **17%**

What resulted from all these efforts was significant: Chronic absenteeism among students with disabilities at Moss Elementary School declined from 21% at the start of the 2015-16 school year to 17% at the end of the year, and the proportion of these students who met reading benchmarks in third grade rose from 8% to 17%. Moreover, after interventions, the rates of absenteeism went down for all students. "What was most exciting is that they were on par with their peers," says Asman. "And it inadvertently led to better tracking for all students and to compelling tracking and reward systems. It fundamentally changed the culture."

There is no question that collaborative impact and continuous improvement can be difficult and time-consuming work: Practitioners must wear the hats of researchers, doers and observers. The results can be discouraging and must be transparently reported. The approach can conflict with educators' fundamental instincts. "Nobody gets into education for riches or glory; they get into education because they want to fix things," Asman observes. "Improvement work is taking a group of fixers and asking them to slow down their fixing."

But Promise Partnership has embedded the improvement efforts in, and aligned them with, practitioners' day-to-day responsibilities. UWSL leveraged existing relationships with district leaders, teachers, students and out-of-school part-

ners, and StriveTogether brought crucial coaching and capacity building to the effort. The teams soon enough adapted to this new way of working.

Says Pastuszek: "We aren't asking them to do more. We are just supporting them to do it smarter, and to do it differently. We are creating the structures that help them learn from each other, codify what they're learning and better engage the insights that their students, parents and other experts have to offer." Asman observes: "Once you get past the 'I don't have time,' people are actually hungry for it, because they had been doing extremely hard work without any markers of progress. But with continuous improvement, you can show 'x' amount of progress on this particular thing and know that there is a reasonable expectation of it having an impact on the larger outcome."

Significantly, a goal of the absenteeism effort was not just to improve attendance and third-grade reading, but to improve the ability of all the UWSL staff and partners to use improvement science in all its work — to force-multiply. So, the United Way contingent also conducted an internal improvement network, aimed at bringing more efficiency and effectiveness to workplace meetings. After all, the members of the backbone organization believed, they couldn't serve as effective improvement coaches if they weren't also doing the work themselves. The result of their efforts was an overall 30% improvement in the quality of meetings, as determined by such factors as starting and ending on time, making assignments and clarifying roles, which resulted in more voices being elevated and more decisions made.

Still, Pastuszek says, "We are very much a work in progress." And as the partners build their knowledge and skills, the assistance provided by StriveTogether has proven invaluable, they say. "We've had lots of support to help make these ideas stick," Pastuszek says. The network members have started asking more thoughtful and probing questions, she notes, and UWSL has learned how best to build data capacity. "Using StriveTogether's approach, you can share the work of creating survey tools and visualizing data," she says. "You can support core impact and improvement team

> **"You can support core impact and improvement team members as they collect qualitative data from students, study the results of interventions and pivot [their] approach. StriveTogether's approach is intentionally designed to draw in multiple types of expertise and to divide up the work of improving outcomes."**

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StriveTogether's collaborative improvement methodology helps communities working toward better cradle-to-career outcomes for every child. Collaborative improvement combines the best thinking from across the field of social change and the health care sector's approach to continuous improvement. Collaborative improvement starts with the premise that change can only begin with action. Equity is a core guiding principle that helps ensure communities go beyond universal strategies and focus on youth and families facing the greatest barriers due to the color of their skin or poverty.

The methodology includes learning from nearly 70 network members that apply this approach as they advance through the StriveTogether Theory of Action™ toward systemic community change.

One lesson from the school-based networks was of how difficult it was to scale improvements at the district level. The attendance work exposed limitations and other problems with district policies and processes, as well as with the inadequacies of state truancy laws, leading to a new focus on case management rather than punishment. But working at this level has proved challenging. "Within schools, we did a good job," says Asman, "but when we started [an improvement effort] at the district level, we found it hard to do PDSAs without the schools in the room. At the district, they were dealing with policies, and policies don't

lend themselves to micro improvements."

As to third-grade reading, the state has not yet made progress. As of 2017-18, opportunity gaps were not only not closing, they were growing. And while proficiency rates for higher-income students remained relatively flat, proficiency rates for students of color and students from low-income households were dropping. Officials say the declining numbers may have something to do with new ways information is being collected, but they are nevertheless cause for concern. As the partnership continues to tackle third-grade reading, they can hold up their progress with chronic absenteeism as an encouraging and potential scalable step.

Here is a snapshot of Promise Partnership's efforts on three of the other benchmarks it tracks:

Kindergarten readiness

Serving a region with 48,000 children from low-income households who are ages 5 and younger, Promise Partnership is driven by research that shows that what happens at the beginning of the educational pipeline greatly determines what comes out the end.[3] For these students in particular, early childhood education reduces the need for special education and leads to higher earnings and other positive outcomes. Recent studies show an impressive 13.7% return on investment in programs that serve children from birth to age 5. That's significant because 65% of children from low-income households in the Promise Partnership region are not ready in literacy when they start school.[4]

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[3]American Community Survey (2017). 5-Year Estimates of Individual Poverty.
[4]Utah State Board of Education Data Queries (2019). Kindergarten Readiness.

The Promise Partnership is addressing two factors that influence kindergarten readiness: preschool attendance and early developmental growth.

Promise Partnership is addressing two factors that influence kindergarten readiness: preschool attendance and early developmental growth. And in these areas, the partnership again distinguishes itself.

In one of the qualitative measures that got the partnership to Proof Point, Promise Partnership helped draft and secure passage of two significant bills in the Utah legislature, one creating a state Early Childhood Commission and another to align the state's multiple readiness efforts. As part of the latter effort, the partnership helped develop the state's first kindergarten readiness measure, the Kindergarten Entry and Exit Profile (KEEP). The first two years of data for reading and literacy show that five out of six achievement gaps are narrowing slightly in reading and literacy.

In South Salt Lake, an area with a high number of immigrants speaking multiple languages, the partnership's "grassroots fellowship" program works to develop community leaders. The fellows facilitate conversations about education and child development with young parents, helping them to prepare their children for kindergarten and the years of schooling. As trusted messengers who speak languages from Arabic to Somali, they can reduce the communication and cultural barriers that have prevented community connections in the past.

Among the fellows' contributions is administering an Ages and Stages questionnaire that helps parents determine whether their children are developmentally on track. In just three months, the fellows connected with over 500 parents and doubled the number of childhood screenings. Encouraged by the results of this outreach, the partnership is now working with child care providers, pediatricians and others to increase participation even further.

Eighth-grade math

Another key benchmark is the proficiency in math by the eighth grade. As the partnership notes, four of the fastest-growing careers in Utah are in science, math, technology and engineering (STEM) fields. And here again, achievement shows equity gaps. Forty-two percent of the Promise Partnership region's students overall are proficient in math by the end of the eighth grade, but the rates for students of color, students from low-income households and English language learners are just 23, 22 and 10% respectively.[5] Results in postsecondary education seem to follow these trends: One third of Utah students re-enrolling in postsecondary education are not on track in math, requiring them to take remedial courses. And there are continued gaps: 20% of the Utah students in remedial courses are

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[5]Utah State Board of Education Data Queries (2019). 8th Grade Math Proficiency.

Latino, even though Latinos represent just 10% of the population.

Since the partnership started to address the eighth-grade math problem, the gaps have not narrowed. But there are outliers. In late 2017, a math improvement team examined low-income schools in the region with high math achievement. At the same time, research suggested the importance of parental involvement. The team conducted PSDAs at one of the network's middle schools, holding dinners with parents to try to get them better engaged. But this effort alone proved insufficient, so the team also started making visits to parents' homes. With training by the Utah State Board of Education, teachers paired with local volunteers to visit all targeted homes in the region, with the goal of building trusting relationships.

At the same time, partnership teams are working with middle school teachers to align content across grades, as well as testing a new approach to an online diagnostic tool and math tutorial. To help improve math instruction, 16 teachers in the regional partner schools are awarded scholarships and priority enrollment in a University of Utah program for enhancing STEM education in the elementary grades.

Postsecondary readiness

The Promise Partnership region's four-year high school graduation rates are steadily increasing and gaps between demographic groups are narrowing. What in 2013-14 was a 23% difference between higher-income students and students from low-income households is now just 13%, with 81% of the latter group graduating on time. A 14% gap in the graduation rates between white students and students of color is now 11%, and a 23% gap between English language learners and non-English language learners has narrowed slightly so that 71% of these students are now graduating on time.[6]

One school backed by a partnership facilitator is Cottonwood High School. Of Cottonwood's highly diverse student body, an exceptionally high percentage — 12 — are refugees, 18% are English language learners and about half are from households experiencing poverty.[7] In just the past three years, graduation rates for the entire Cottonwood student body rose from 72% to 80%. But the gains for English language learners were even greater: On-time graduation rates rose from just 64% in 2014-15 to 75% three years later.[8] That rate was better than the district's overall, even though Cottonwood has higher levels of poverty. For this success, partnership members credit improved data collection, summer credit recovery programs and data-based early warning system that helps educators identify students at risk.

Yet Promise Partnership knows it has much work to do on this benchmark at a time when a high school diploma is insufficient for a living wage. The challenge is clear when it looks at factors that influence readiness for higher education. Just 59% of the students in the partnership region earned a score that was the minimum for college readiness on the ACT. Less than half — 48% — of students in the region enroll in college within one year of high school. And 65% do not complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is essential for taking advantage of grants and other forms of financial aid. Notably, that is the worst FAFSA completion rate in the nation.

This distinction, along with input from students, teachers and community partners, led to another scaled improvement project: The school joined with the Utah College Advising Corps and the Utah Higher Education Assistance Authority to increase FAFSA completion rates. Now the partnership is working to build on that success with a multi-district network aimed at improving rates across its entire region.

Again using the tools of improvement science,

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[6]Utah State Board of Education Data Queries (2019). High School Graduation Rates.
[7]Utah State Board of Education (2018). School Enrollment Demographics.
[8]Utah State Board of Education (2019). High School Graduation Rates by Demographics.

Graduation gaps decreased between white students and students of color from

14% to 11%
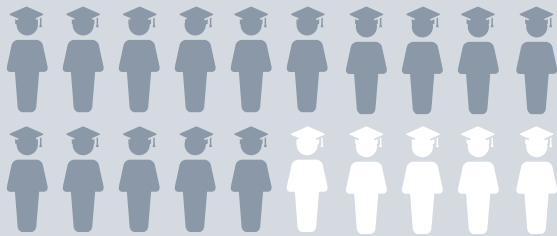
81% **Students living in poverty graduating on time**

On-time graduation rates role for English language learners rose from

64% to 75%

Source: Promise Partnership of Salt Lake, a member of the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network

each school-based team has set a population outcome and a so-called SMARTIE (specific, measurable, ambitious, realistic, time-bound, inclusive and equitable) target. They have identified school-specific drivers of FAFSA completion — such as awareness of the document's importance, access to meals and child care during FAFSA completion events, and trust in government data systems — and begun testing interventions that address these factors. A team at Kearns High School, for instance, is trying out designated FAFSA nights, community-wide messaging and outreach to students via faculty and social media and to parents via social media. As of the 10th week of the most recent FAFSA season, schoolwide FAFSA completion rates were 6 percentage points higher than they were in the fifth week of the 2017-2018 FAFSA season.

During the PDSA cycle, the Kearns High team also learned important lessons about which interventions to abandon and which to scale. Early on, the team hypothesized that setting appointments at specific times on FAFSA night would boost participation. Yet, of the students who made appointments, only 31% showed up. So, in the study phase of the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle, the team chose to swap out the scheduling intervention for a different one.

Promise Partnership credits StriveTogether for crucial support in guiding the partners through the process of continuous improvement. The

network's theory of action, says Pastuszek, lent rigor to their efforts, as well as a spirit of aspiration. It anchored the partners' strategic planning and shepherded them from one benchmark to another. It provided essential overall guidance and nitty-gritty technical assistance. "We have the theory of action, but what are the mechanics of the partnership day to day?" Pastuszek asks. "What exactly is results accountability? How do you actually run a meeting? What are the mental models and tools that take you from not being together [to real collaboration]?" StriveTogether answered all these questions, she says. It also showed the partners how to embed a race equity commitment into everything they do.

For their part, StriveTogether leaders praise Promise Partnership of Salt Lake for its exemplary capacity for and commitment to collaborative impact. Both continue to grow stronger and deeper. "Salt Lake does an amazing job of providing support from the grass roots on up," says Heidi Black, StriveTogether's director of collaborative improvement. "The typical way is to build systems from the top down. They built partnerships from the bottom up. As a result, they have very strong community and school connections. But they also have done a great job in engaging leaders."

While StriveTogether's approach can be adapted for any community, Promise Partnership's experience is unique because of the backing

More third-graders at West Kearns Elementary are on track in reading, thanks to community school partnerships and programs built through the Promise Partnership.

of UWSL. Investment and sustainability make up one of four pillars of work in the theory of action, and operations support and staff capacity are critical to engaging stakeholders and policymakers to close disparity gaps and improve outcomes. Its staff of 94 and annual budget of $12.2 million make UWSL one of the largest and strongest "backbone" organizations in the StriveTogether network. "Their staffing is one reason they are so strong," says Black. "It speaks to the power of a community that backs its support with resources. That creates the time and space to improve systems by making them more equitable."

As the StriveTogether communities move through the theory of action, they pass through five gateways of progress — Exploring, Emerging, Sustaining, Systems Change and Proof Point — until they reach their sixth and final destination: true Systems Transformation. That means that systems are now organized around the needs of children and families rather than institutions. In such communities, at least four of the seven cradle-to-career outcomes are improving; at least four critical disparity gaps have been reduced or eliminated; and at least one sector beyond education is improving.

After just a few short years of exemplary collaborative impact work following the theory of action, Promise Partnership now has only this final milestone left to reach.

"People want to work together to solve problems but sharing accountability for population-level results is the key challenge," says UWSL's Crim. "The world does not encourage or make it safe for people to hold accountability for things outside their control. Collective impact is about getting people to step back and say, 'I can be accountable for the whole,' and to trust that by working in a rigorous way we can actually solve big problems."

ABOUT STRIVETOGETHER

StriveTogether partners with nearly 70 communities across the country, providing coaching, resources and rigorous approaches to create opportunities and close gaps in education, housing and so much more. Together, the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network impacts the lives of more than 13 million youth - including nearly nine million children of color.

StriveTogether®

Every child. Cradle to career.

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