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Success factors: How can stakeholders build community alignment?

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The success of Promise programs depends on multiple partners working together; collective impact strategies offer one model for building this kind of alignment.

Promise programs' transformative goals cannot be achieved without the engagement of multiple partners with a shared vision. Cross-sector collective impact strategies, whether formal or informal, offer one avenue for building alignment. Partners should be engaged early in the design phase to reach consensus around the critical need the program is designed to address. Successful program implementation will require the ongoing engagement of key partners and accountability mechanisms to keep them connected and working in the same direction.

Policy Considerations

- Promise stakeholders must attend to building avenues for ongoing alignment; collective impact strategies offer one potential model.
- Strong leadership teams who can understand and speak to the needs of multiple sectors are an essential part of the alignment process.
- Key alignment partners may include K-12 and postsecondary education representatives, philanthropy, business, government, youth-serving nonprofits, and economic and workforce development entities.
- Successful navigation of key transition points—such as high school to college or college into the workforce—may require additional partners.
- Data tools and regular reporting of results can support monitoring and progress, build accountability, and help keep partners at the table.

What We Know

Promise program funding alone does not transform communities or institutions. Clear and succinct messaging; wraparound student support at transition points from secondary to postsecondary education, from college and university, and into the workforce; and embedded evaluation are critical components. An additional Promise program success component is community alignment.

Whether a program resides at the community, institutional, or state level, alignment refers to the degree to which diverse stakeholders working across sectors buy into its goals and do their part to make it succeed. This element is essential if the transformative potential of Promise programs is to be achieved.

Transformative goals are an integral part of Promise models. These goals often have common themes related to enhanced workforce preparedness, economic development, increasing enrollment at the secondary or postsecondary level, increasing population or homeownership in a city or region, and/or creating greater equity in access to education. Promise program transformation goals require a new way of thinking about scholarships—not as limited, competitive opportunities for a given number of qualified students, but as open-ended and inclusive opportunities for all students to increase their potential, and in turn, contribute to the economic health of their community.

Stakeholder alignment is intertwined with identification of a critical need. The alignment process begins during the early design and engagement process, and centers on the task of defining and reaching consensus around a critical need. Through this process, stakeholders see their concerns recognized, develop a common vision, and understand their role in reaching their shared goal. Designing a Promise program in the absence of clear consensus around critical needs can be problematic because a program's structural features must provide the incentives necessary to meet these needs. For example, the critical need in Kalamazoo was revitalization of the public school district serving the urban core, so usage of the Kalamazoo Promise is

restricted to public school graduates. In Columbus, it was increasing the school district's low college-going rate, so a robust college-access organization already active in the schools was enlisted as a founding partner. In Tennessee and many other states, the goal is workforce development; thus, usage of Promise dollars is restricted to shorter-term credentials and two-year institutions.

Experience suggests that ongoing cross-sector alignment, whether ad hoc or organized formally through a collective impact strategy, is the critical element in whether Promise programs will ultimately achieve their goals, especially those related to transforming schools and communities. Effective alignment can also support fund development and sustainability of programs over the longer term. There are different ways to create alignment, including forming stakeholder groups, using data as a tool for accountability, and explicitly tightening transitions along the pipeline.

The collective impact framework¹ is a community alignment strategy that emerged around the same time as the Promise movement, modeled in part on the [Harlem Children's Zone](#).² In many Promise communities, stakeholders realized that fixing one point on the educational continuum, such as scholarship funding or high school college readiness training, wouldn't make much difference unless all parts of the continuum improved at the same time. No single organization, however innovative or powerful, could accomplish this alone. Instead, the ambitious mission became to coordinate improvements at every stage of a young person's life, from cradle to career.

¹ Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). [Collective impact](#). *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(4), 36–41. This magazine article presents a model of successful cross-sector collaboration for social change.

² Harlem Children's Zone. (n.d.). [Our Approach](#).

“ It takes more than parents and teachers to help our students. It takes entire school districts, colleges and universities, city and county government, businesses, and all community organizations getting involved, removing barriers, and making a difference in students’ lives.

Joe May, Dallas County Community College District ”

Some Promise programs are embedded within formal collective impact strategies. Both the [Dallas County Promise](#),³ as administered by the [Commit Partnership](#),⁴ and the [Oakland Promise](#),⁵ as led by [Oakland Thrives](#),⁶ emerged using this strategy. The programs go beyond place-based scholarships supporting interventions along the life course from birth to career, to achieve specified short- and long-term outcomes. The work is data driven and involves a diverse stakeholder group mutually accountable to goals, jointly established and monitored over time. For instance, the collective supporting the Dallas County Promise comprises multiple school districts, Dallas College, the Dallas College Foundation, numerous neighboring colleges and universities, industry partners, and nonprofit organizations. In other communities, Promise programs have sparked cross-sector collaborations that resemble collective-impact strategies, even if not formally labeled as such.

Strong alignment of relevant partners is essential not just during the design of a Promise program but throughout its implementation.

Recommended Reading

Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). [Collective impact](#). Stanford Social Innovation Review, 9(4), 36–41.

This article presents a model of successful cross-sector collaboration for social change.

Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2013). [Embracing emergence: How collective impact addresses complexity](#). Stanford Social Innovation Review.

This article describes how the collective impact approach to dealing with social problems can help organizations cooperate and adapt to the continually changing circumstances that surround these issues. The approach suggests that multiple organizations and stakeholders seeking to address the same issue adopt a shared framework for cooperation defined by the “five conditions of collective impact” that encourage participants to pool their resources and efforts in pursuing solutions to social issues.

Program-Specific Studies

Reeves, R. V., Guyot, K., & Rodrigue, E. (2018, June). [Gown towns: A case study of Say Yes to Education](#). Brookings Institution.

An in-depth report on the history and essential elements of the Say Yes to Education model of community-wide social change (including a college Promise as well as other student and community supports), as well as the evolution and effects of Say Yes to Education programs in Buffalo, NY, Guilford County, NC, and Syracuse, NY.

Miller-Adams, M. (2009). [The power of a promise: Education and economic renewal in Kalamazoo](#). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

This book is the first comprehensive account of the Kalamazoo Promise. The author discusses the emergence of the place-based scholarship model and explains why this unprecedented experiment in education-based economic renewal is being emulated in communities around the nation. Chapter 4 addresses the challenge of community alignment in the early days of the Kalamazoo Promise.

³ Dallas County Promise. (n.d.). [Partners](#).

⁴ Commit Partnership. (n.d.). [We are the Commit Partnership](#).

⁵ Oakland Promise. (n.d.). [About Us](#).

⁶ Youth Ventures Joint Powers Authority. (n.d.). [Oakland Thrives](#).