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Reinventing statewide education 'ecosystems'

Date Published: 06/12/2014 Author: Dane Smith

ST. PAUL LEGAL LEDGER CAPITOL REPORT

The Harvard Business School recently published a paper, as part of its U.S. Competitiveness Project, headlined "Reinventing the Local Education Ecosystem," analyzing a particularly ambitious national movement to improve educational and economic outcomes.



The lengthy Wikipedia explanation of "ecosystem" is all about biology and the natural environment, of course. But the definition begins with these five words: "An ecosystem is a community." And the Harvard paper gets right away to how collaboration and symbiotic interaction by the entire larger community are critical for this particular movement.

The paper describes a growing national "Strive Together" network "founded on the belief that educational outcomes could improve (emphasis added) beyond what the public school district could do alone by addressing the full range of a child's other needs — nutritional, medical, social, etc. To accomplish this, the [original Strive Partnership in Cincinnati] focused the whole community on a shared set of outcomes that spanned a young person's life from "cradle-to-career."

At the core of this distinctly businesslike model is the "intense use of data at all stages of a young person's development to measure progress, determine which service provider programs (such as tutoring, pre-school and after-school activities) were effective in helping children, and steer resources toward spreading those practices across existing programs and systems."

The Harvard analysis elaborates on the implementation of this model in Toledo and San Diego. But a look at the Strive Together website shows "emerging" or "sustaining" partnerships up and running in almost 50 communities and regions. And few states are more active in this movement than Minnesota, with official Strive Together chapters established or forming in five rural and greater Minnesota communities (Austin, Itasca County, Northfield, Red Wing and St. Cloud) and in the Twin Cities (called Generation Next) and led by former Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak.

The Star Tribune recently devoted a lengthy feature article on the success in Cincinnati, describing how businesses, foundations and nonprofits, parochial schools and public school districts, all collaborated to rather dramatically lift key indicators, from kindergarten readiness to high-school graduation and post-secondary completion rates. And not just for the large and mostly low-income black community, but also for the concentration of poor white children of Appalachian stock in the region. That experience holds great promise for Minnesota's substantial population of low-income rural white households.

The Harvard Business School is interested in this movement for obvious reasons. Business leaders increasingly are finding common cause with social and racial justice advocates for closing the achievement and attainment disparities that burden low-income families and communities of color. Unless this growing part of our population does better, the private sector will have fewer customers, less demand, and a less productive workforce to supply the demand.

As the Star Tribune article points out, business leadership played an integral and perhaps the most important role in building the Cincinnati model. And the business involvement in the Minnesota partnerships — by large corporate entities such as General Mills, Target and the United Way — is substantial.

The Harvard paper noted in the Cincinnati experience that "while nonprofits and governments delivered the services to children, the business community played an important role in galvanizing community resources

(including millions of dollars) and contributing expertise." In Cincinnati and in many or perhaps most Strive partnerships, the United Way serves as a backbone organization or leading partner.

The Strive model is not the only and may not necessarily be the very best specific brand of cradle-to-career ecosystem that our kids and businesses need. Minnesotans have come together relatively well in some racially diverse rural communities, Willmar and Worthington for instance, with formal "integration collaboratives" that were established some two decades ago, as pointed out in a recent report by the national group Policy Link, and in a 2012 Growth & Justice report, "Whole Towns Coming Together for All Students."

But the philosophy behind this movement also is sound and conservative, as timeless as our Minnesota constitution of 1858, which put a high premium on a uniform and equal public education. Disparities threaten that sacred principle. And this restorative movement needs attention, energy, resources and more effort from both business and government, and the non-profit and philanthropic sector.

The 88th Legislature (2013 and 2014 sessions) got a good jump enabling this movement with its "World's Best Workforce" K-12 funding and policy package. It specifically calls out a broader cradle-to-career responsibility, from kindergarten readiness to career readiness, and it requires districts to engage their communities and produce specific plans to reduce their gaps.

Strive or Strive-like partnerships and collaboration will help fulfill that cradle-to-career mandate to school districts. Business owners and managers could and should take the lead in launching and incubating these partnerships in dozens more communities, from Ada to Zumbrota. But they also need to stay humble, listen, and engage as partners rather than simply taking charge.

Jeff Edmondson, managing director of the national Strive effort, described in some detail an attitude of humility among business leaders that helped Cincinnati succeed: "Having a few business leaders involved from the beginning, who know there is no 'silver bullet' to improving educational outcomes and who appreciate the complexity of this kind of work, helps tremendously to bring along their peers."


"We like to say that the partnership moves at the speed of trust," Edmondson said in the Harvard paper. "The business community served as a critical accelerator when leaders stopped thinking about their role as bringing intelligence and money to the table, and instead saw their value as sharing their core expertise. Once they embraced and accepted that complexity, [they] learned to work within a collective impact approach rather than on stand-alone efforts."

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A version of this column originally appeared in the St. Paul Legal Ledger Capitol Report on Thursday, June 12, 2014.

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Diversity accelerates in rural Minnesota

Date Published: 04/03/2014 Author: Dane Smith

ST. PAUL LEGAL LEDGER CAPITOL REPORT

A recent report by the national research group PolicyLink features three maps showing Minnesota's changing demographics over the course of 60 years, with each of our state's 87 counties shaded to indicate the evolution of our diversity.

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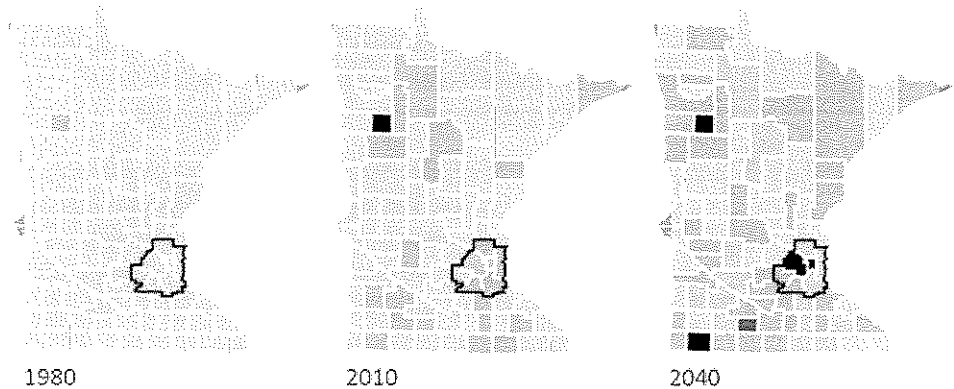
Listening closely to kids

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PERCENT PEOPLE OF COLOR, 1980 , 2010, AND 2040

Legend: Less than 10% 10% to 19% 20% to 34% 35% to 49% 50% or more



Source: Policy Link, U.S. Census Bureau, Woods & Poole Economics.

The 1980 map is almost all homogenous, with people of color comprising more than 10 percent of the population in only one county. The 2010 map shows considerable change, with six metro-area and 18 non-metro counties at 10 percent or more people of color, including several at 20 percent or more. (People of color, as defined in the PolicyLink report, includes American Indians.)

Showing even more change, the 2040 map projects most rural counties will have more than 10 percent people of color, and more than a dozen counties are projected to have between 20 percent and 50 percent people of color.

That 2040 projection represents a bright future for a Greater Minnesota that can become greater still as it reflects a greater diversity of the world's cultures. We can thrive and compete more effectively in a global economy when we ourselves are more worldly. And in rural Minnesota, once resigned to decline and depopulation, the recent surge in Latino and African immigrant populations has contributed to actual growth (sometimes, even, all the growth) in some counties.

The PolicyLink report highlights Worthington and Willmar, two rural cities that have seen economic growth as a result of their growing immigrant populations. The report also praises promising local efforts to improve workforce training and to support small business development and entrepreneurship, capitalizing on the influx of new talent and energy.

But the report wisely puts extra emphasis on meeting the needs of children, reflecting the growing consensus in Minnesota — shared by experts and business leaders — that our economic future depends on eliminating the education opportunity gap that exists for low-income students and students of color.

Diversity accelerates in rural Minnesota: Growth and Justice

Among more than a dozen policy recommendations for moving Minnesota toward more equitable growth, one stands out: Minnesota must create cradle-to-career pipelines to prepare students and workers for lifelong success.

Noting the evidence-tested effectiveness of high-quality early childhood education, the authors of the report advise communities to develop local "pipeline approaches that follow children throughout their education."

Most people in rural Minnesota don't need national experts to tell them this common sense fact. And some towns and regions already are forming broad multi-sector partnerships to work on their birth-to-career pipelines. These partnerships are working in collaborative and comprehensive ways, in and out of schools, focusing on the best evidence and data to find out what's most needed and what's most effective in getting kids all the way to career and college readiness.

A premier example of local leadership includes new "student success" partnerships that are germinating in Austin, the Itasca County area, Northfield, Red Wing and St. Cloud. These partnerships have in common a specific theory of change developed by the Strive Together network based in Cincinnati. But the principles in this theory are being replicated in other rural Minnesota communities as well, as demonstrated by the progress in Willmar and Worthington, and the trend hopefully will become a statewide movement.

Each of the Strive partnerships relies on a broad and formal collaboration among local schools and colleges, parents and students, nonprofits, businesses, philanthropies, and other community partners. Each partnership is developing a birth-to-career roadmap for their students, with specific goals such as kindergarten readiness or reading proficiency by third grade, and establishing action networks to identify specific interventions to achieve the goals. There is strong emphasis on data and results and multiple measures of academic, social and developmental success, as well as the fostering of personal relationships that often are crucial to unlocking human potential.

Although the Strive model aims to close opportunity gaps for low-income students and students of color, the framework is focused on improving the performance of all students. All children will do better when the entire community has a stake in birth-to-career improvements and supports postsecondary and to career readiness.





The theme of the PolicyLink report, "Minnesota's Tomorrow: Equity is the Superior Growth Model," represents agreement among economists and business leaders that greater equity is critical for a healthy and growing economy across the state. Most of the projected growth in rural Minnesota will come from people of color. Reducing economic inequality and eliminating racial disparities will help Minnesota's rural regions grow and compete. And when the whole town gets to work improving and supporting the birth-to-career pathway for their students, everyone is bound to do better in the long run.

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A version of this column originally appeared in the St. Paul Legal Ledger Capitol Report on Thursday, April 3, 2014

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In Cincinnati, they're closing the achievement gap

Article by: Kim McGuire

Star Tribune

May 10, 2014 - 10:37 PM

CINCINNATI – When educators nationwide want to look at proven ways to turn around a struggling urban school system, this is the city they visit.

Over a decade, Cincinnati Public Schools' graduation rate has jumped from 50 to 80 percent. And in the past five years, the reading and math proficiency of its elementary students has climbed in many schools.

Those gains have been fueled by big improvements in the performance of black students, who make up more than half of the district's 30,000 students. In 2006, 2007 and 2010, black students' graduation rates surpassed those of whites.

"We have seen many examples of a school having tremendous growth in a relatively short ... time, but Cincinnati ... is one of the strongest examples I know of where a system ... has made dramatic gains in a short period of time," said William Robinson of the Darden-Curry Partnership, a University of Virginia venture that runs a school-turnaround program.

Cincinnati's success has drawn the attention of educators struggling to bridge the achievement gap between white and minority students. In few places is that gap more persistent than Minnesota, which has seen marginal gains for students of color despite spending millions of dollars in the past decade. In Minneapolis, about 40 percent of black students graduate on time, compared to about 70 percent of white students.

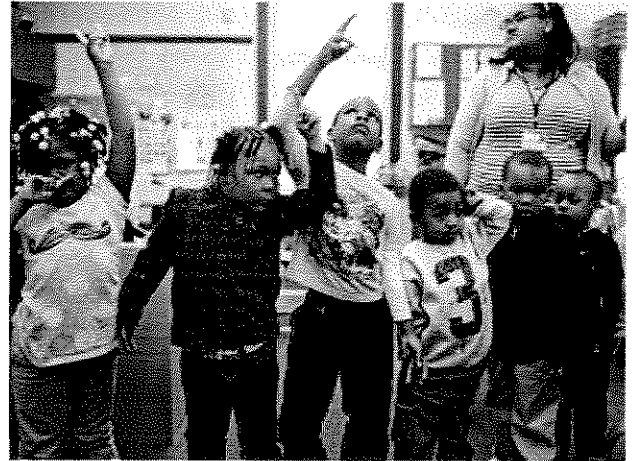
Cincinnati attributes its success to measures, big and small, that ensure its poorest students receive the basics in the classroom and out, including tutoring, mentoring, food and health care.

Businesses routinely answer the call for funding and volunteers, often working through the Strive Partnership, a local nonprofit that operates under a framework being duplicated across the country.

In the Twin Cities, Generation Next, a group led by former Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, is modeled after Strive and backed by corporate giants such as Target and 3M.

Yet Cincinnati school leaders seldom talk about closing the achievement gap. Instead, they say they're helping all of their students.

"We realized a long time ago that when you help one group of students, you usually help all students," said Cincinnati



Della Goodwin-Sebron's preschool class lined up to change classes at Rothenberg Preparatory Academy, an elementary school in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Photos by Meg Vogel.



Davosha Holmes dropped an egg that had been soaking in vinegar for two days and went through an oxidation process in her science class at Rothenberg Preparatory Academy. The school is one of the district's success stories, where 99 percent of students live in poverty.

Photos by Meg Vogel.

Superintendent Mary Ronan.

Feeding body and mind

On a recent school day at Rothenberg Academy, an elementary school that is one of Cincinnati's success stories, the work of improving learning outcomes was underway.

Clad in a referee's shirt and wearing a whistle, Principal Alesia Smith patrolled the halls, reminding her students that state tests were looming and that it was time to focus.

Her no-nonsense message was delivered with a sweet offer — juice and doughnuts.

"Are you hungry, baby?" she asked a girl in a worn jacket. "You go tell them Mrs. Smith said to feed you."

At Rothenberg, 99 percent of students live in poverty. In the school's laundry room, volunteers wash students' clothes, often after the city has cut off water to their homes.

Poverty is a strong barrier to academic achievement. But in four years, Rothenberg has shed its "failing" state label, and many of its students have almost doubled their proficiency in reading and math.

Today, the school, once slated for demolition, has been renovated outside and inside.

Smith, hired to oversee turnaround efforts, also has turned to instinct to help the students, giving them rules, routines and safety. "We really had to love them past all their pain and disappointment and get them to trust us," she said. "And I'll tell you, that's a lot of work."

Still, says Smith, work remains. "You're forever turning it around, because you have new kids that are coming in," she said. "But now you've created a culture where turnaround is what we do."

The Cincinnati district has been reinventing itself for more than a decade. In 2000, it began an ambitious effort to revitalize its high schools, some of which weren't graduating almost half of their senior classes.

With \$3 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, it shrunk most of its high schools and gave each a focus. Some catered to students interested in health careers, while others restructured classes around performing arts. Students were also allowed to select their high school as long as they stayed in the district.

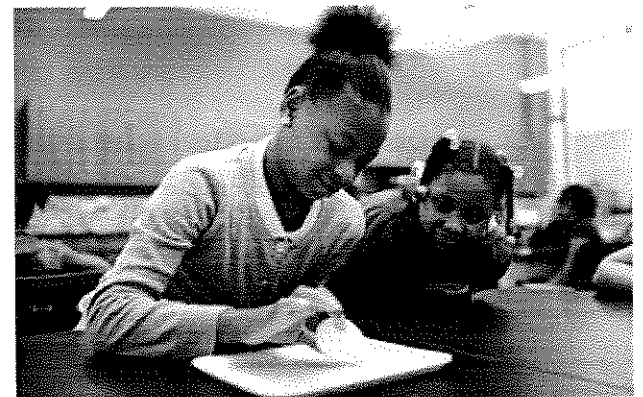
Once the graduation rate veered upward, the district turned its attention to 16 low-performing elementary schools. Thirteen were rated "Academic Emergency," the lowest ranking from Ohio's Department of Education. At some of the schools, less than 10 percent of students were proficient in reading or math.

Kicked off in 2008, the Elementary Initiative called for school audits, success plans for each child, and an intense focus on



Principal Alesia Smith poses for a portrait after patrolling the hallways of Rothenberg Preparatory Academy. The Cincinnati Public School has between 400 and 420 students from preschool to sixth grade. Every day Smith greets her students by name with a hug and smile.

Feed Loader,



Fourth-graders Shalana Crompley and Davosha Holmes inspected an egg that had been sitting in vinegar for two days in their science class.

Feed Loader,

math and reading. It also established a summer program called the "Fifth Quarter" that extended learning time at struggling schools.

Learning how life works

Outside the Oyler School, a stately brick building in the heart of Lower Price Hill, young men crowd narrow streets, fiddling with an old car up on cinder blocks.

Most Lower Price Hill residents are descendants of white Appalachian coal miners who moved to Cincinnati in the 1940s for factory jobs. When those jobs dried up, poverty moved in. Today, about one-third of Oyler's prekindergarten through grade 12 students are so poor that they qualify for food sent home by the school. Dental disease is rampant.

Last fall, a dental clinic opened at Oyler. It's a crown jewel in the school's Community Learning Center, which provides on-site health services, counseling, after school programs and child care.

The center embodies the district's recognition that if its poorest students are to succeed, they cannot be hungry, sick or lack basic services.

"We don't have families disappearing like we did," Ronan said. "A student can see the nurse, get the medicine, or if they need to see a counseling session, they can get those, too. There's more time for classroom instruction."

No U.S. district has employed the on-site social services model on such a large scale. Cincinnati has opened centers in 36 schools and is routinely visited by school leaders from across the country.

Each center reflects community needs. At Oyler, the emphasis is on health care. In addition to the dental clinic, there's an on-site pediatrician and a vision clinic, the nation's first such facility in a school. The district provides the location, while the service providers foot operating costs for the centers. Most services are paid through Medicaid.

Volunteers, including dentists, play a significant role. Since opening last fall, Oyler's dental clinic has treated about 1,000 patients. Many had never been to a dentist, said Paul Randolph, executive director of Growing Well, which coordinates health services at Oyler.

District officials concede that the centers haven't always paved the way for an increase in test scores. Still, they say, they help Oyler's students have an equal chance at success with their more affluent peers.

"Our kids are slowly seeing ... the normal way that life is supposed to be," said school resource coordinator Jami Harris. "You're not supposed to be in pain. If you're hungry, you're supposed to ... have food. We're changing the culture."

Investing in things that work

When Shawn Pearson sought GE Aviation co-workers to volunteer at Aiken High School, it didn't take long to round up almost 70 people.

The Cincinnati-based company is heavily invested in the district. Its foundation has provided \$25 million over the past eight years. It routinely sends an armada of mentors into the schools, including Aiken, where they have helped shape the school's transition to project-based learning with an emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math.

"It's very satisfying to ... teach some things," said Pearson, an engineering manager. "And it's significant for them to have someone ask about their grades or give them a hard time if they're not trying."

Cincinnati's business community has played an integral role in turning around tough schools. In many cases, their help has been funneled through Strive, which has convened businesses, social service agencies and higher-ed institutions to help improve education in the Cincinnati area.

Strive's guiding principle is straightforward: Bring people together. Have them agree on a few common goals. Develop a way to measure success toward goals. Keep programs that work; drop those that don't. Hold everyone accountable.

When research showed that one-to-one tutoring was boosting achievement, Strive and its partners rounded up 1,000 tutors. "You'll see that there are things that are being leveraged in a school district that have very little or no impact," said Greg Landsman, the partnership's executive director. "And it's up to us as a community and a partnership to have those tough conversations about what's working. We know [tutoring] works."

Unequal at an early age

This year, the Strive Partnership and United Way began a campaign to provide subsidies to get every 3- and 4-year-old into a quality preschool program. That effort is expected to cost up to \$17 million annually.

While the school district has succeeded at narrowing achievement gaps at many grade levels, black kindergarten students enter school far behind their white peers.

It's one of the racial inequities officials acknowledge still plagues the district. In addition, black boys often academically lag behind black girls.

These are just some of the reasons why the district continues to pursue new reform initiatives. There is already talk of refocusing on high schools as class sizes grow and test scores slip at some.

Ronan said even she's not sure which initiative is having the most impact. "That's something ... researchers can sort out if they want," she said. "It's my job to throw everything I have at the problem."

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