



What Drives Systems Change?

Key Findings and Implications from a Literature Review on Systems Change in Education

This resource is one item in a suite of materials produced for the P-16 Community Investment initiative, a three-year learning engagement funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation across five communities (Buffalo, New York; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Dallas, Texas; the Rio Grande Valley, Texas; and Tacoma, Washington). The initiative seeks to understand and support the development of coherent, high-functioning, equity-centered, place-based systems that span all education sectors from cradle to career. Funders, practitioners, and other stakeholders interested in place-based systems change can use this resource in their work. It was developed by a team from Mathematica and Equal Measure, in collaboration with the foundation and its partners in the participating communities. Mathematica and Equal Measure serve as learning and evaluation partners in this effort.

Key terms used in this resource



Community: the place that is the locus of a systems change effort and the population in that place, which a collective effort or initiative is seeking to serve



Partnership: a place-based, multi-stakeholder effort or initiative working to improve outcomes in a community



Partner: an individual, organization, or institution that is a member of a partnership



Place-based: geographically specific, as defined by the partnership; the unit may be a neighborhood, a city or town, or a state or region, depending on the partnership



Systems change: shifting the conditions—including structures, practices, policies, resource flows, power dynamics, and mindsets—that produce societal problems and hold them in place; typically involves cross-sector collaboration among stakeholders from public, nonprofit, philanthropic, or private institutions, as well as community constituents



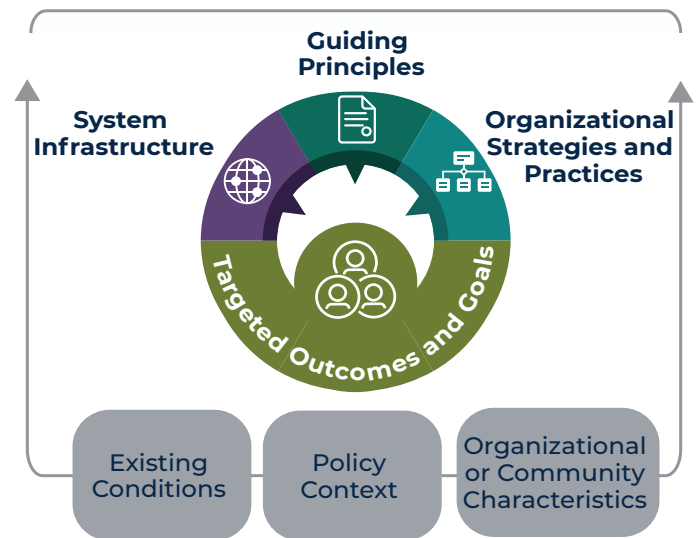
Backbone organization: a coordinating body that facilitates and organizes the work of partners

Introduction

Building on decades-long efforts, various place-based partnerships have emerged seeking to improve the systems that impact individuals' journeys from cradle to career and beyond. Their focus is on "systems change"—that is, shifting the conditions that produce and hold societal problems in place.¹ As interest in investing in systems change grows among philanthropic and community development stakeholders, the field has seen a proliferation of research on systems change success. For funders and practitioners, sorting through the number of studies and determining how their findings can be applied to local contexts can be overwhelming. This brief summarizes the current research on critical components of successful place-based systems change in education, illustrating how these components play out in practice through narratives from five exemplary communities that have embarked on systems change efforts. Finally, it offers implications for funders and program implementers engaged in systems change.

The research literature reviewed suggests that successful systems change partnerships require strong guiding principles, system infrastructure, and organizational strategies and practices. This brief describes each of these conceptual categories and identifies individual components in each category. Community context—that is, the existing conditions, policy context, and organizational or community characteristics in which the partnership operates— informs a partnership's principles, structures, strategies, and practices in different ways. Thus, this brief also identifies specific contextual factors to consider in a partnership's past and present.

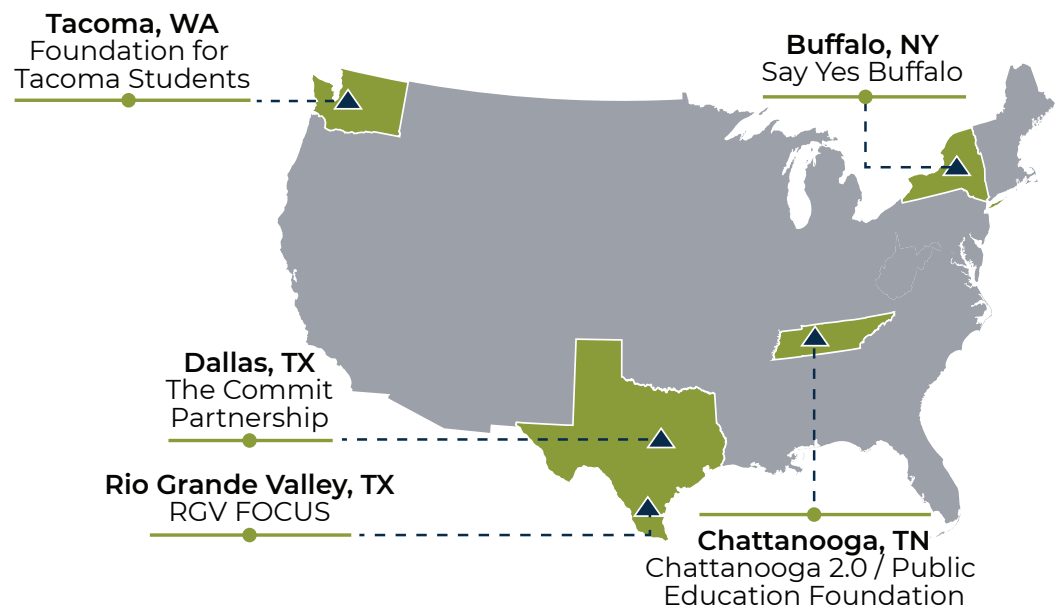
Exhibit 1. Conceptual framework



Together, these key components and contextual factors affect the targeted outcomes and goals of any systems change effort, as illustrated in Exhibit 1.

To illustrate how key components and contextual factors play out in successful systems change efforts, this brief highlights examples from five exemplary communities that have been working to improve educational outcomes and reduce disparities. In each of these communities, a backbone organization (noted below each city in Exhibit 2 below) served as a coordinating body for change efforts. The examples described in the brief are drawn from stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and document reviews conducted by Mathematica and Equal Measure between 2018 and 2020.




Exhibit 2. Five exemplary communities



What are the key components of successful systems change?

The literature describes three types of components that can be critical to successful systems change efforts: (1) guiding principles, (2) system infrastructure, and (3) organizational strategies and practices. Exhibit 3 summarizes examples of key components in each category.

Exhibit 3. Components of successful systems change

 Guiding principles	 System infrastructure	 Organizational strategies and practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equity in vision, mission, and action • Representation and inclusion of community voices • Culture and narrative shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of a coordinating backbone organization • Multi-sector collaboration and alignment • A shared vision and agenda • Policymaker initiation and support • Trust, ownership, and accountability between partners • Sustainable resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involving community partners to support the whole child • Fostering culturally responsive environments • Aligning standards and assessments • Data infrastructure to continuously learn, adapt, and improve

Guiding principles are underlying beliefs about systemic changes, strategies, and practices that are most likely to lead to a system’s chosen outcomes and goals. The literature suggests that successful systems change partnerships often require some set of guiding principles. Absent these principles, the change effort can lack coherence or direction and fail to effectively engage and meaningfully influence the community. Three guiding principles that have motivated many systems change efforts described in the literature are equity in vision, mission, and action; representation and inclusion of community voices; and culture and narrative shifts.

Equity in vision, mission, and action lays the groundwork for a successful partnership. Issues of inequity vary among communities, regions, and within populations.² Some studies suggest that developing an equity lens—that is, being aware of and responsive to specific issues of inequity the community faces—can lay the groundwork for successful systems change. In many cases, this might involve an uncomfortable but critical process of reflection and investigation for implementers of systems change.

To apply an equity lens, implementers can design internal processes and structures and select partners with issues of equity in mind. This includes considering equity when setting a vision for the partnership and its activities and when articulating and assessing progress toward shared goals.³

Representing and including community voices encourages buy-in and supports the partnership’s long-term goals. A systems change partnership that authentically engages the community can be more effective at achieving targeted outcomes.⁴ Several studies suggest that embedding community voices into a systems change initiative can help meet the needs of potential beneficiaries, bridge culture and power gaps within the community, and empower local actors to have greater decision-making authority.^{5,6,7} In addition, inviting input from the community can facilitate sustainability by generating buy-in and deepening engagement.⁸ For example, a descriptive study that explored the role of public schools in community development notes that empowering parents and residents “creates self-sustaining communities” and offers “more accountability for [participating organizations].”^{9,10}

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Equity in vision, mission, and action in Chattanooga and Dallas

A history of racial segregation in Chattanooga, Tennessee, meant that equity could be a contentious issue, with some community members viewing it as a “zero-sum game.” Although Chattanooga 2.0 and other efforts before it focused on equity, framing systems change efforts around economic development and prosperity for all helped Chattanooga 2.0 gain buy-in from multiple partners early on. Over time, equity has continued to be central to Chattanooga 2.0’s messaging. In its 2020 report, Chattanooga 2.0 and partners renewed their commitment to “ending the long history of racial inequity for children and students in local education systems”. The report included a new equity statement and a racial equity scorecard. Today, many leaders explicitly state a personal and organizational commitment to addressing equity, both for moral reasons and to support the local economy. Nevertheless, some in the community still feel that discussions about equity can be divisive, and some have called for racial healing and reconciliation as conversations around equity continue.

Economic considerations were also part of early systems change efforts in Dallas, Texas. Commit and its partners eventually agreed that in order to improve outcomes for students, the city’s history of racial strife had to be addressed directly, starting internally. In 2016, Commit formally adopted a mission that includes a core value of “equity and inclusion.” The organization partnered with the Dallas Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation organization to understand the history of racial inequity in the region, its impact on existing systems in the region, and how those inequities manifest in Commit’s own policies and practices. Commit also engaged an external consultant to conduct an equity assessment of the organization, and in response to the findings created an Equity Committee with the goal of devising a strategy for making the organization a more inclusive and equitable space. As a result of these efforts, Commit has become more intentional about its hiring practices, language, and engagement with the community about the legacy of racism.

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Culture and narrative shifts support long-lasting and comprehensive change. Studies emphasize that a key component of systems change efforts is challenging entrenched “mental models” that sustain systemic barriers and oppression. Changing mindsets about what is possible requires co-creation and knowledge sharing. For foundations, this can mean an internal shift in how they partner with communities and measure success.¹¹ Successful partnerships both issue an urgent call for change on a pressing issue and advance asset-based frameworks to change the conversations occurring between stakeholder organizations and communities. For example, the Road Map Project—a collective impact effort in Washington aimed at improving education outcomes across seven school districts struggling with inequitable outcomes—focused on the *advantages* of speaking a language other than English to reframe the English language learner designation from a deficit to an asset.¹² Widespread adoption of community schools—schools that partner with organizations in the community to integrate academics with student needs outside of school—and emphasis on social and emotional learning have also been associated with shifts in attitudes and perceptions among teachers, students, and community members, which can be a leading indicator of progress in systems change efforts.¹³

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Changing narratives in the Rio Grande Valley

The student population in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas is 91 percent Latinx and 86 percent economically disadvantaged, so the community has had to counteract dominant narratives about what is possible for its students. RGV FOCUS developed a data scorecard comprising 11 indicators of educational success from pre-K through college, which it selected with input from partners and stakeholders. After analyzing the data, it found that the region met or exceeded the state average on nine of them. RGV FOCUS also documented increases in all but one of the outcomes. Celebrating these results helped demonstrate that all students can excel and showed the strength and resilience of RGV’s students and families in the Valley. This has attracted attention, from both inside and outside the community, to the success of the region.

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System infrastructure comprises the organizational processes necessary for successful system functioning. It includes both human and adaptive components, such as the presence of a backbone organization and its coordination of multi-sector partners, as well as technical components such as data infrastructure and funding. Tending to system and partnership infrastructure is a continuous and important aspect of mature collaborative efforts.

A coordinating backbone organization facilitates systems change efforts. Because systems change efforts often involve a range of disparate stakeholders working in partnership, communities can benefit from a backbone organization that facilitates and organizes their shared efforts. The literature suggests that backbone organizations should include independent, dedicated staff who provide organizational and logistical support for sustained partnership operations.¹⁴ They can include foundations, nonprofits, government agencies, universities, or some combination of these.¹⁵

For example, when Proposition 5 in Oregon led to reduced funding for local schools, parents mobilized around the issue and formally started the Portland Schools Foundation. Over time, this collaborative, community-driven effort evolved into All Hands Raised (AHR). AHR organizes leadership councils with representatives from local government, K–12 and postsecondary institutions, local businesses, and nonprofits. AHR’s board of directors sets the objectives and direction of the backbone’s efforts, while strategic leadership groups advocate for AHR’s priority issues at partner schools, facilitating knowledge and data sharing and resource alignment.¹⁶

Each of the communities highlighted in this brief also illustrates the roles that backbone organizations can play in facilitating systems change. For example, Say Yes Buffalo in New York started as a partnership between educators, philanthropists, and business leaders. With wraparound services and college scholarship programs, Say Yes Buffalo has worked to improve college graduation rates and expand the city’s local workforce.¹⁷

Multi-sector collaboration and alignment ease constraints and challenges. The literature indicates that collaborating across sectors and aligning goals can help address complex challenges faced by communities seeking to improve societal outcomes, engage a

wide range of constituencies that support and influence P-16 efforts, and provide access to a greater range of assets.^{18,19,20} As illustrated above, backbone organizations can play a critical role in facilitating and organizing shared efforts across partners in different sectors. Developing productive relationships between community partners, however, can take time and effort.²¹

A shared vision and agenda can drive and sustain change. The literature indicates that a shared vision and agenda can ground a collaborative effort, help sustain partnerships, and guide organizational efforts.²² Developing an overarching vision helps partners coalesce around a common purpose. In doing this, leaders must be able to predict opposition and build consensus.²³ A review of community–school partnerships describes the importance of developing a collective vision by providing space for dialogue and consensus building. In turn, the shared vision “attracts commitment, reinforcing and supporting individual vision that is united under a common purpose.”²⁴ With a common purpose in place, partners then develop a shared agenda, which can involve clearly articulating collaborative goals and developing and sharing metrics to track progress. Importantly, strong leadership promotes a common agenda that can organize and align resources and partners, thus driving action.²⁵

Elected officials and government agency leaders can signal the importance of systems change and support implementation for the long haul. Although nonprofit actors often play a leading role in communities’ systems change efforts, elected and agency officials can promote changes that set standards, legislation, and policy, which are necessary to scale and sustain many components of systems change.²⁶ These stakeholders can also help to secure public financial support, which may be more sustainable than philanthropic resources. In addition to large-scale public funding—such as taxes or levies to fund public education—public financial resources may include budget line items or targeted support for professional and best practice development.^{27,28} Local lawmakers can also support collaboration by encouraging coalition building and pushing agencies to coordinate and share information.²⁹ A case study analysis found that mayors and local officials can be “crucial enablers of collaboration and systems building” by restructuring agencies, controlling funding in the city budget, drawing on resources from citywide or statewide networks of programs, and calling for reports to keep initiatives accountable.³⁰ A community partnership, recognizing the interplay between sectors, can align systems change efforts with local policy agendas and priorities and appeal to local governments for support.³¹

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A shared vision and agenda in Tacoma, Washington

With the Foundation for Tacoma Students acting as its coordinating backbone since 2010, the Graduate Tacoma movement has brought together more than 350 organizations around a shared vision to increase high school graduation rates and promote a college-going culture among all the city's students. The movement was spurred as a response to a 2007 Associated Press article that called Tacoma a "dropout factory," citing research on the nation's lowest-performing schools.

Central to the movement's shared agenda, Graduate Tacoma operates five action networks, each of which focuses on one aspect of the cradle-to-career continuum: Early Learning and Reading Network; Out-of-School Time and Summer Learning Network; Tacoma College Support Network; Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics; and Policy and Advocacy. Graduate Tacoma; has also aligned elected institutional leaders including the mayor, the superintendent, and presidents of local colleges and community-based organizations in its efforts to lift up students and families.

Stakeholders report that through Graduate Tacoma's efforts, collaboration among organizations has increased. Whereas there was some fragmentation among similar organizations before 2010, the dynamics shifted after Graduate Tacoma began convening community partners. People did not want to be left out of Graduate Tacoma's meetings, driven by a shared mentality that "we are greater than the sum of our parts." Now, organizations work together to expand the supports available to students. Stakeholders also note that having consistent school district leadership with a multi-year commitment to Graduate Tacoma's shared vision has been key to success.

Graduate Tacoma's efforts have borne fruit. Between 2011 and 2019, the on-time high school graduation rate in Tacoma Public Schools increased from 62 to 89 percent, and the gap between Black and White students nearly closed. Looking ahead to the next decade of work, Graduate Tacoma's 2030 Community Goal will focus on cross-sector alignment to foster employment and economic mobility.

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Trust and accountability can level power imbalances and foster productive partnerships. Building trust among partners and community members is a long but critical process; establishing trust can support a more equitable and collaborative decision-making process.³² Partnerships develop trust through shifting power and resources among partners, investing in authentic relationships, and developing mechanisms for shared accountability. Trust can also stem from the behavior of foundations and funders. Stable commitments and willingness by funders to show some vulnerability—for example, by offering long-term support for an initiative—increase trust.³³ Accountability practices, such as transparency, goal setting, and measurement of outcomes, can also encourage buy-in from stakeholders and community members. It is important to differentiate accountability from common conceptions of assessment, however. If heavy-handed and punitive, accountability may hinder change efforts.³⁴

Sustainable resources, such as consistent funding, well-trained staff, and supportive policymakers, can support long-lasting systems change. Public resources are important for sustainability, and many initiatives rely on state funding. State agencies with the capacity to collaborate with multiple school districts can serve as a central hub for distributing resources: coordinating access to federal funding and grants, providing professional development, and setting best practices.³⁵ Funders and foundations can leverage their access to resources and connections in support of community initiatives, reducing the burden on community organizations.³⁶ And longer philanthropic grant periods can help ensure adequate time for accessing and stabilizing other resources.³⁷ Initiatives also require dedicated human resources for coordination, research, and implementation. Initiatives can ensure such sustainability with horizontal organizational structures and through prioritizing community members as "co-designers"—ensuring that community needs are embedded in the partnership's mission.³⁸ Indeed, one study points out that the combination of community authority and institutional support is most important for sustainable change.³⁹ Policymakers, business directors, and religious leaders offer important non-financial resources. With their status and influence, they can motivate community members around the movement, bring media attention, and encourage participation and investment from other leaders.⁴⁰

Organizational strategies and practices are the actions that participating organizations take to implement the initiative and achieve targeted outcomes. The literature suggests that involving community partners to support the whole child; using data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve; aligning standards and assessments; and fostering culturally responsive environments can help implement systems change initiatives.

Community partners can work together to develop a holistic approach to supporting the whole child.

Working with a variety of partners from different sectors, especially local community partners, can contribute to a partnership's understanding of the local context to better support children's "out-of-school" challenges—conditions in the community that affect student learning, health, and success.⁴¹ For example, community schools provide holistic supports for various student needs through such partnerships.⁴² In addition to a focus on academics, community schools engage with community-based organizations and local agencies to address students' physical and mental health and basic needs like housing and food. Partnering to support the whole child can facilitate youth development and learning, even as it expands schools' and other providers' learning objectives and role in systems change.⁴³ An explicit emphasis on social and emotional learning is another mechanism for supporting the whole child. A study on implementation of social and emotional learning in Massachusetts highlighted that successful efforts must be adapted to local contexts and involve significant engagement from educators and community members in addition to school district leadership. In the town of Reading, for example, which experienced challenges related to drug use, schools, families, and local health providers worked in partnership to provide "continuity of clinical care" and improve both graduation outcomes and behavioral health outcomes.⁴⁴

Involving community partners in Buffalo and Tacoma to support the whole child

In 2016, Say Yes Buffalo partnered with Buffalo Public Schools and public and private nonprofit health and social services agencies to start the Strong Community Schools and Parent Center initiative at 13 schools. The initiative offers afterschool and weekend programming to students, parents, and anyone in the community regardless of whether they have a child enrolled in Buffalo Public Schools. For example, the initiative offers academic enrichment programs, health and wellness services, and workshops on a variety of topics, including FAFSA completion and tax preparation. Between 2016-17 and 2017-18, participation doubled to 40,000 people, and in 2018-19, programming expanded to 21 schools. Staff at Say Yes Buffalo emphasize that programming offered through the initiative has been critical for integrating and involving parents in the education of their children. Buffalo has secured state resources to support its community schools' efforts and has braided funding from a number of public and private nonprofit agencies to support and sustain the partnership's work.

For several years, Tacoma Public Schools has used a whole child framework focusing on social-emotional learning, positive behavioral supports and interventions, physical and mental wellness, trauma-sensitive practices, signature whole-child practices (such as warm greetings), restorative practices, and advanced tiers of support. The Graduate Tacoma Early Learning and Reading Network (ELRN) has helped to promote these same social-emotional learning practices among a diverse roster of partner organizations. For example, ELRN efforts resulted in expanding Play to Learn, a free program for adults and children to play together, into Tacoma's Eastside and South End communities. The Network has also looked for innovative ways to connect children to resources in community-based settings, leveraging relationships and on-the-ground knowledge to engage non-traditional partners in the work of social-emotional learning. An example is the Books to Barbershops program, which provided free books to neighborhood barbers who predominantly serve boys of color.

Using data can help systems to continuously learn, adapt, and improve. Successful systems change efforts can use data to articulate goals and track progress, better serve their participants, inform practices, and secure buy-in on new policies and initiatives.⁴⁵

Descriptive studies highlight the importance of collecting data on vulnerable populations in the community, including their program participation and retention rates, as part of data-driven decision making.⁴⁶ In addition, organizations participating in the Road Map Project used data to select key performance indicators to identify and track schools in need of services, and adopt early warning systems.⁴⁷ The Road Map Project also used data to generate urgency around the idea that the status quo was not sufficient by raising awareness that target school districts were performing worse on key indicators than other schools with similar characteristics.⁴⁸

Aligning standards and assessments inspires commitment and large-scale improvement.

Standards and assessments can play a central role in continuous improvement, especially in collaborative efforts involving multiple stakeholders. A qualitative study of an education system in Minnesota showed that assessment results, as part of high-quality data, can serve to inform decision making and contribute to large-scale improvement.⁴⁹ Furthermore, standards and assessments can support shared understanding and secure buy-in from stakeholders. For example, a review of systems change efforts to improve after-school programs noted that standards and assessments can help facilitate “buy-in for the system’s quality improvement work and pave the way for assessments and interventions that might otherwise be met with skepticism, resistance or mistrust.”⁵⁰ Studies suggest that when building standards and assessments, however, it is important to embed flexibility to adjust to the initiative’s age and the needs of the population served.⁵¹

Fostering culturally responsive environments promotes common understanding and diverse perspectives.

The literature shows that encouraging a responsive and open environment enables members of an organization or community to feel safe about taking an active part in improving programs.⁵² This environment is in turn beneficial to partnerships because it uncovers the strengths and assets in different communities.⁵³ Some strategies to promote diverse perspectives include having key partnership stakeholders spend time learning about the local community through “culturally centered community walks” and open dialogues, using disaggregated data to determine disparities between groups and gaps in services or offerings, and involving a range of community partners in developing and executing the initiative.⁵⁴

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Using data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve in Chattanooga

Since 2004, the backbone organization the Public Education Foundation (PEF) has managed a linked database for students in Hamilton County, Tennessee. PEF has data-sharing agreements with Hamilton County Schools, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and Chattanooga State Community College, and obtains student data from the National Student Clearinghouse. This robust data infrastructure allows PEF to link student data from kindergarten to postsecondary education and analyze educational pathways for specific student groups and schools.

PEF produces asset-based dashboards that empower educators and administrators to assess how many students are on track for high school graduation and for successful semester-to-semester persistence in college. The dashboards, which use data from past cohorts of students in a high school who have gone on to postsecondary education and enjoyed success to understand whether current students are on track, have revealed that commonly used predictors of success, like the ACT, do not fully explain student success in Chattanooga. As a result, PEF uses a range of other indicators, including attendance, behavior, and course grades. Educators find these indicators to be more “actionable” relative to the ACT because they are updated daily.

In 2019, the district’s budget provided funding for full-time college and career advisors in all high schools. PEF’s relationship with college and career advisors is crucial to the success of the dashboards, to start tracking students at earlier points in the cradle-to-career continuum, and to ensure that information on students is up to date. The asset-based dashboards help college and career advisors be proactive and effectively identify student needs while also making clear to all students that there is a postsecondary pathway for most everybody. The dashboards have also influenced students’ perceptions of their potential. One college advisor reported that some students “thought they weren’t college ready, but once I was able to show them that they actually were really, really close to being able to go, stay, and succeed based on people who have gone before from their high school, it changed their entire perspective.”

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What are the contextual factors that can influence systems change efforts?

A number of factors can affect place-based systems change efforts, including resources; involvement of various stakeholders, such as local policymakers, business leaders, and potential beneficiaries of the work; prior relationships among stakeholders and community members; and differences across stakeholder organizations, such as professional cultures and incentive systems (Exhibit 4).^{55,56,57,58,59} Although some of these factors might initially be outside the control of an initiative, partners can address them over time.

Exhibit 4. Contextual factors that influence the success of systems change efforts

 <p>Existing conditions</p>	 <p>Policy context</p>	 <p>Organizational, community, or neighborhood characteristics</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder attitudes • Community power dynamics • Norms around collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political context • Federal, state, and local policy • Public funding and resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local policymaker participation • Local business sector involvement • Barriers between partner organizations

Stakeholder attitudes, power dynamics, and norms can shape stakeholder attitudes. The literature suggests that several existing conditions can shape initiative progress.

Stakeholder attitudes can critically influence the initiative's success. Attitudes of stakeholders and partners toward the issues addressed through systems change can affect the likelihood of meaningful change, either facilitating or discouraging cooperation.⁶⁰ Systems change efforts often require long-term changes in the mindset and expectations of stakeholders. For example, the Road Map Project required expanding stakeholders' thinking and conversation beyond just student behavior and performance to more systemic issues related to policy and practice that support student success.⁶¹ Stakeholder attitudes can be influenced by historical factors in the community, which are important for partners to identify and acknowledge.⁶²

Community power dynamics require the partnership's careful attention to facilitate sustainable change.

If some stakeholders have greater capacity, organization, status, or resources, they could have a disproportional influence on an initiative.⁶³ This disparity can not only result in change efforts that benefit only a subset of stakeholders, but it can also cause some partners to lose a sense of ownership or agency over the initiative. Crucially, this dynamic can prevent efforts from achieving

lasting sustainable change.⁶⁴ To address these issues, a conceptual study explored collaborative challenges and opportunities in higher education. The study suggests that a natural starting point is understanding and addressing imbalances in the distribution of knowledge, class, and socioeconomic status and how these shape power dynamics in communities, as well as jointly developing norms that govern collaboration between a variety of stakeholders.⁶⁵

Developing norms around collaboration is an integral step. Making upfront investments in norms to support effective collaboration and trust building can save considerable time and energy in implementation. Examples of such investments include developing clear protocols for participation and handling of conflict, defining the roles of all participants, paying community members for their time, establishing incentive structures that encourage funders and other staff members to attend community events, avoiding prescriptive leadership styles, and devoting time for conversations on power, racial equity, and stakeholders' common goals.⁶⁶ If stakeholders recognize their interdependence and mutual interest, they will feel a need to participate productively and commit to collaboration. But trust building among partners takes time and cannot be rushed. Funders should consider time and resources for such efforts when issuing grants and committing themselves to an initiative.

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How a history of collaboration supported change efforts in the Rio Grande Valley

The Valley encompasses 4,300 miles, 37 K–12 school districts, and more than five institutions of higher education. Thus, collaboration between a number of diverse stakeholders is critical to RGV FOCUS’s success.

Since its inception, RGV FOCUS capitalized on a history of collaboration to mobilize partners. Collective efforts to improve student outcomes had been underway for more than 20 years in the region. During this time, school districts, higher education partners, and community organizations collaborated through various councils and advisory boards. Over the years, state policies brought more stakeholders together. For example, statewide accountability measures for K–12 districts, developed in the mid-1990s to early 2000s, sparked collaborations to increase college enrollment. Recently, the Texas 60x30 plan, calling for 60 percent of students to obtain a higher education credential by 2030, created a call to action for the Valley to coalesce around regional goals that meet the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s vision.

RGV FOCUS’s efforts have benefited from a tight-knit community. In the Valley, there is a general culture of shared responsibility for the next generation. As one community leader interviewed said, “There’s a huge commitment to do better than was done for us. If you talk to the superintendents who were born and raised here, they will tell you these are our kids. We would be negligent if we didn’t do something for them.” Many of the community’s teachers, administrators, and leaders grew up in the Valley and share similar backgrounds as students. They are a source of motivation and provide a foundational link between RGV FOCUS and the community.

Given the lack of public funding and philanthropy efforts in RGV, the success of the systems change initiative in the region has come from the “sweat equity” of people in the community—the collective efforts of organizations doing this work on their campuses and organizations, sharing new ideas, and pushing the work forward.

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Political, historical, and policy context can catalyze systems change thinking. The literature suggests that these factors, which might be outside the partnership’s control, can spur or impede initiative progress.

Political context can shape or encourage different approaches to systems change. An examination of the landscape of private-sector engagement in K–12 systems observed that political thinking during the 1980s generated market-based solutions in education. Private-sector participation in public education in turn facilitated a rise in contracting educational services and multi-sector partnerships.⁶⁷ This trend is in stark contrast to the 1960s, decades prior, when the federal government expanded its support for education initiatives under New Frontier and Great Society policies.⁶⁸

Federal, state, and local policies can encourage experimentation and incentivize entrepreneurial activity in education spaces. Policies can encourage risk taking that transforms schools into innovative systems that are responsive to community needs.⁶⁹ A research study on social and emotional learning strategies showed that policymakers can play a role in signaling the importance of various education theories by setting standards and creating legislation to encourage implementation.⁷⁰ Some states have set learning standards for social and emotional learning, indicating its importance and kickstarting reform efforts. Another study observed that the Race to the Top competition and Investing in Innovation Fund grants “stimulate[d] the demand and supply of education services and products in the marketplace,” encouraging the participation of private actors in education solutions through contracting and partnership arrangements and “enhancing the perceived legitimacy of private engagement . . . as a reform strategy”.⁷¹

Insufficient funding and resources are the most common challenge described in the literature.

Many initiatives rely on public funding, but in periods when such funds are insufficient, successful initiatives have also received legislative appropriations, federal and tribal grants, and funding from foundations.⁷² Although grants from large philanthropic organizations are useful for driving initial efforts, sustaining funding over longer periods can be challenging.⁷³ For example, a study on the success of out-of-school-time programming noted that all five cities funded under the grant struggled to find public funding when the grant ended. P-16 initiatives should seek out diversified funding streams.⁷⁴

While the structure of backbone organizations is flexible, the lack of a dedicated and knowledgeable staff can over time impede the backbone's efforts to coordinate P-16 initiatives. Staff members' salaries are the most significant expense for backbone organizations, followed by costs for data processing, communications, and administrative work.

In the absence of sufficient public funding, non-financial contributions from partners can offset some of these costs.⁷⁵

Working with local policymakers to address school funding in Texas

Inequitable and insufficient funding was a persistent challenge in many Dallas schools that led Commit to advocate for a local tax levy and school finance reform bill. In 2018, after the Texas legislature failed to approve an expansion of funding available for Texas students, Commit and its partners created InvestEdTX—an advocacy initiative to expand education funding in the state. Collectively, the participants in InvestEdTX sent more than 8,000 messages and 1,000 calls to almost all Texas legislators.

Commit was critical in helping build support for a new school finance bill by reaching out to its partners in other regions across the state to build a case for reform. Commit established itself as a nonpartisan, data-informed organization that united teachers, legislators, and members of the business community. Teacher testimony was critical for convincing legislators about the need for school finance reform, and Commit drew on its coalition work to leverage these connections politically. Commit also capitalized on its internal personnel and expertise to propose draft language for the new law.

In June 2019, after two years of advocacy and action by Commit and its partners, the Texas governor signed into law an historic school finance bill. House Bill 3 increased funding for Texas public school districts by \$6.5 billion. It expanded per-pupil funding for all Texas students and ensured enough funding to provide full-day pre-K for any eligible 4-year-old in the state. With approval and support from more than two-thirds of the Texas legislature, House Bill 3 took effect immediately in August 2019. Commit now convenes its district partners and provides differentiated guidance to each district to help them identify how to access House Bill 3 funds and foster school improvement.

Organizational, community, or neighborhood characteristics can also influence the success of systems change efforts. At the same time, barriers to collaboration may exist.

Participation from local policymakers emerged as another factor influencing the success or failure of systems change endeavors.⁷⁶ Mayors and other local government officials can be “crucial enablers of collaboration and systems building” by restructuring agencies, controlling funding in the city budget, positioning themselves as centralized resources, drawing on citywide or statewide networks of programs, and calling for reports to keep initiatives accountable.⁷⁷ Buy-in and participation of local lawmakers in P-16 councils, for example, can be important in influencing policy and securing funding.⁷⁸

The local business sector can influence systems change efforts in both direct and indirect ways. In addition to having a window into community needs and a direct interest in building a healthy and educated workforce, businesses can influence economic policy, gain access to decision makers, leverage existing organizational structures, and mobilize resources and funding.⁷⁹

Partnerships must be aware of potential barriers to collaboration between partner organizations.

These include histories of antagonism and differing professional cultures and incentive systems of each organization or entity that may impede partnership efforts.⁸⁰ Existing community dynamics, such as traditions of bureaucratic control and historical patterns of racial and ethnic exclusion,⁸¹ can result in low levels of trust between different stakeholders.⁸² Bringing together actors from different sectors may require each to shed their professionally valued autonomy, adjust their operational structures or procedures, renegotiate their “space and turf,” and recalibrate their vision of the education system as it exists.⁸³ In all these cases, ensuring that all critical systems change components are in place can help alleviate organizational difficulty. For example, having strong leadership and a backbone organization could help defuse conflict, empower weaker stakeholders, and emphasize interdependencies of all participants.⁸⁴

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Rebuilding trust in Buffalo through community representation

Say Yes Buffalo successfully promoted representation and inclusion of community voices in a community that had experienced tension between the school district, teachers, and parents. In 2010, 40 of the 60 schools in Buffalo Public Schools (BPS)—all of them serving communities of color—were not in good standing with respect to federal criteria. Under No Child Left Behind, families could request a school transfer if their school was not in good standing, but there were not enough quality schools in Buffalo to accommodate all the transfer requests. As a result, the District Parent Coordinating Council sued the school district, creating a rift between parents, teachers, and the district. In the same time period, BPS was experiencing frequent turnover of district staff: between 2012 and 2015, the district had six different superintendents. This political context made change difficult.

In 2012, community leaders in Buffalo partnered with the national nonprofit Say Yes to Education to create a local backbone organization dedicated to helping every student in Buffalo graduate from high school and enroll in a postsecondary institution. Since its founding, Say Yes Buffalo promoted representation and inclusion of community voices in order to rebuild trust. Say Yes Buffalo specifically sought to include parent voices in its change efforts and formally requires parents to participate on its Operating Committee. The Operating Committee also includes local government officials, nonprofit leaders, the superintendent of BPS, presidents of local postsecondary institutions, and political officials.

Say Yes Buffalo's efforts to engage the community have addressed some of the imbalanced power dynamics that can hinder sustainable change. Involving parents in the decision-making responsibilities of the Operating Committee has given parents ownership of (and a stake in) the change efforts. Although the Buffalo partnership has its roots in a community-driven civil rights lawsuit, its subsequent work has been referred to as bringing "healing" to a community with a history of racial segregation. Stakeholders in Buffalo consistently cited the trust and culture change fostered by Say Yes Buffalo as necessary for operational and programmatic successes, such as state funding for community schools; at the same time, implicit trust was fostered, in part, through explicit structures and norms of the operating committee.

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Implications

The literature and experiences of exemplary systems change partnerships to improve cradle-to-career outcomes suggest the following implications for systems change funders and implementers:



Prioritize equity in desired outcomes and in the vision, mission, and process of the partnership itself. To address equity in process and mission, partnerships should include shared decision making and vision setting with relevant stakeholders (including parents, students, and other community members) and diversity among partners (including in lived experience, professional experience, sector, and level within their respective organizations).



Support and partner with a backbone organization, which can be key to facilitating multi-sector collaboration. Backbone organizations should focus on coordination, logistical support, knowledge and data sharing, and facilitation of discussion between stakeholders for successful systems change efforts. Partners should perceive these organizations as independent and neutral.



Prioritize collaboration across sectors to shift outcomes at a large scale. Sectors such as K–12 education, post-secondary education, business, government, public health, and nonprofit often encompass large systems of their own. These systems simultaneously or subsequently influence people’s lives. Importantly, collaboration across sectors should be for the purpose of aligning systems or making shifts within them, not just for the sake of collaboration.



Involve diverse community voices to promote buy-in and better meet community needs. Community members and organizations contribute to a better understanding of local context and help initiatives identify and address community needs. In turn, partnerships that involve multiple sectors are better able to center on and support the whole child both in and out of school.



Cultivate trust early on and at multiple levels. Partnerships’ attention to “implicit” factors—such as building trusting relationships and interacting with humility among diverse stakeholders—has helped create the conditions to scale and sustain “explicit” shifts, such as adopting new assessment policies and tax levies, that can lead to improved outcomes over time.



Understand stakeholder and community dynamics, the history of collaboration and efforts in the community, and the political context. Strategies for understanding power dynamics and addressing imbalances include recognizing community members’ historical mistrust and developing a shared agenda with guidance from respected leaders. Leaders should develop collaborative processes that involve parents and stakeholders, including those who have less obvious knowledge and power than others.



Involve appropriate stakeholders and provide supports to sustain resources. P-16 initiatives should seek out diversified sources of funding and non-financial support to sustain their efforts. This can involve meaningfully including a range of community voices to empower and represent the interests and concerns of underrepresented groups to local policymakers.

Literature review methodology



Three existing summary reviews and reference lists yielded 34 studies



Database search yielded 37 studies (screened from 212 studies)



Website search yielded 25 studies (screened from 290 hits)

Inclusion criteria for studies: in English from within the United States; published in the past 20 years; substantive (that is, not a blog post or web page and that provides recommendations on systems change, the education field, or both)



96 total studies reviewed

Acknowledgments

The Mathematica–Equal Measure team extends heartfelt thanks to the many individuals who contributed to the development of this suite of materials on place-based systems change. In particular, we are indebted to the P-16 Community Investment grantees and partners acting under the backbone leadership of Say Yes Buffalo (Buffalo, New York), the Public Education Foundation (Chattanooga, Tennessee), the Commit Partnership (Dallas, Texas), RGV FOCUS (Rio Grande Valley, Texas), and the Foundation for Tacoma Students (Tacoma, Washington). Backbone staff and partners in these communities generously shared their experiences and perspectives and are at the center of this work. At the Gates Foundation, we thank the P-16 Community Investment team—especially Fannie Tseng, Jean-Claude Brizard, Jill Hawley, Lindsay Hunsicker, Lu Jiang, and Christine Marson—for their support, guidance, and encouragement. At Education First, we thank Kelly Kovacic Duran, Bill Porter, Claire Takhar, and Anand Vaishnav, who provided ideas for and feedback on development and dissemination. At Mathematica, we recognize Michael Cavanaugh, Douglas Ortiz, Veronica Severn, Ramya Tallapragada, and Daniel Welsh for their contributions to the literature review; Ann Person and Kristin Hallgren for their thought leadership and guidance in the development of this resource; Liah Carvalho, who co-led our dissemination strategy; Jennifer Brown, for editorial support; Sarah Vienneau, for graphic design support; and Sharon Clark, who led production. At Equal Measure, we recognize Meg Long for her thought leadership and guidance, and Seth Klukoff, who co-led the dissemination strategy.

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