Collective Impact Case Study:

E3 Alliance

This case study accompanies a [video interview with Susan Dawson](), the president and executive director of the E3 Alliance

Summary

Imagine a community where all students enter kindergarten ready to learn. They succeed in school, earn a college degree, and then contribute to advancing regional economic prosperity. This is the vision in Central Texas, and the foundation for a collective impact initiative that is known as E3 Alliance (E3), or Education Equals Economics.

Key Facts

Initiative / backbone name: Education Equals Economics (E3) Alliance

Year initiative formed: 2006

Mission: E3 Alliance uses objective data and focused community collaboration to align the education systems so all students succeed and lead Central Texas to economic prosperity

Geography: Central Texas (Greater Austin)

Impact area(s): Education and Youth, Workforce Development

Problem

In the early 2000s, Austin was one of the nation's fastest growing cities. It had a vibrant business sector, entrepreneurial spirit, and the fastest growing child population in the nation – including a low income student population that had recently doubled and an English Language Learner (ELL) population that had tripled.[1] This rapid rate of growth was not without its challenges for the region of Central Texas:

- 50% of Central Texas kindergarteners were starting school unprepared. [2]

- Achievement gaps were drastic. Standardized test scores of ELL students were up to 40% lower than non-ELL students. [3]

- Local universities were not producing enough qualified graduates to meet human capital needs in engineering and technology, so local companies were spending as much as $100,000 per hire to import talent to the region.[4]

The region of Central Texas saw an explosion of jobs for the highly educated, but the jobless rate for those with limited education increased. While existing education programs were making some positive progress, the region's education outcomes were not improving quickly enough to be competitive in a 21st century global economy.

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[1] Gourgey, Hannah, Interview with FSG, Jun 6, 2013.

[2] "The Impact," E3 Alliance. Accessed May, 2013, http://e3alliance.org/the-impact/the-impact/

[3] "The Impact," E3 Alliance.

[4] "The Impact," E3 Alliance.

Getting Started

A small group of Central Texas business and community leaders, incorporated as Austin Area Research Organization (AARO) was concerned about Austin's future economic prosperity. They believed that to drive true change, they needed effective regional collaboration. In 2006, AARO joined with the University of Texas at Austin and the Austin Community College to form the E3 Alliance.

Structure

E3 Alliance serves as the backbone organization for Central Texas education, from cradle to career. Representatives from cross-sector stakeholder groups hold seats on E3 Alliance's board, goal teams, and task forces. These goal teams and task forces set strategies for each goal in the Blueprint for Educational Change (the group's common agenda), and existing local organizations design initiatives and programing to implement the strategies.

The initiative is funded by over 40 companies, foundations, and community organizations.

Results

E3 Alliance has demonstrated strong early results, channeling over $4 million in education funding to the region and engaging over 200 cross-sector actors in the initiative - including 22 school districts, eight higher education partners, 61 community organizations, and 111 businesses. These collaborations have resulted in the creation of promising data-driven programs to achieve the Blueprint's goals.

For example, RAISEup Texas, a regional collaborative contributing to the broader E3 initiative, developed and launched an approach to middle school instruction that resulted in a 21% decrease in struggling learners - students reading two or more levels below their grade level - from 2011 to 2012 alone.

Additionally, enrollment for Texas State's School of Engineering tripled, and the number of students in the regional science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) pipeline more than quadrupled – results that they believed to be unprecedented in the country.[5] Longitudinal data will continue to track the progress of these students and report what degrees they earn and jobs they take.

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[5] Dawson, Susan. Interview with FSG, June 6, 2013.

Five Conditions of Collective Impact

Common Agenda

The Blueprint for Educational Change was facilitated by E3 Alliance and serves as the common agenda for the Central Texas region. Informed by research, data analysis, and community engagement, the Blueprint captures the partners' shared vision that the "Central Texas education system will be strong and aligned, enabling each student to succeed from 'cradle to career,' and ensuring regional economic prosperity."[6] The Blueprint focuses on four priority goals to drive systemic change in Central Texas: 1) school readiness; 2) eliminating achievement gaps; 3) high school, college and career success; and 4) community accountability.

Shared Measurement

Data lives at the center of E3's work and the initiative. Working with community partners, E3 defined measurable, time - bound objectives for each goal in the Blueprint. They then set indicators to measure the level of collaboration and the success of action strategies. To track progress towards indicators, E3 uses a publically available data system that connects PK-12 data with higher education and workforce data. The student-level data is de-identified, but connected within the database allowing analysts to track longitudinally and across the region. Data is then aggregated and linked to census, workforce, and other datasets, allowing E3 Alliance and its partners to analyze information quickly and effectively.

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Community actors, school districts and businesses formed goal teams. These teams align their activities in support of action strategies to address each goal in the Blueprint. For example, in support of having every student read at grade level, E3 and KLRU Public Broadcasting convened regional stakeholders to improve and align summer learning programming across the region.

Continuous Communication

E3 fosters regular communication within goal teams, with the E3 board and with community stakeholders, and convenes bi-monthly free regional sessions to share education information and research with the community. Peer groups (e.g., superintendents, college presidents) are convened regularly for strategic planning and coordination. Additionally, E3 holds an annual community leaders' summit, publishes an annual progress report and maintains an easily navigable website for the community, rich with information about the initiative.

Backbone Support

E3 is registered as a 501(c)(3) with an annual budget of just over $1 million and a core staff of 10 professionals. In addition, E3 Alliance raises and passes through about $1 million in funding to school districts, nonprofits, and other collaborative partners. From 2006 - 2008, E3 analyzed data and engaged over 700 participants from across the community to surface the best ideas about education reform. In

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[6] "Our Story,"E3 Alliance. Accessed May, 2013, http://e3alliance.wpengine.com/who-we-are/our-story/

2008 they hosted a gathering for 150 community leaders to create their common agenda. Today, E3 continues to serve as a convener and facilitator, regional data manager and analyst, and leads systemic alignment and resource generation for initiatives guided by the Blueprint.

Lessons Learned

Make data accessible and useful: With longitudinal data tracking, "the education system in Texas is widely understood to be data-rich, but because that data is rarely accessible or usable, it is also information-poor."[7] E3 learned that by partnering with stakeholders to "[transform] a wealth of often inaccessible, hard to understand, and conflicting data into useful information for decision-making, [they could] have a broad and deep impact on schools and students."[8]

Balance partner with push: Faced with the challenge of how to engage with relevant community stakeholders, E3 learned that the best approach was to partner by default whenever possible, but be willing to push when change was slow to emerge, explaining that "ultimately, the pay-off in working with reluctant organizations comes with relentless persistence and abundant patience."[9] A recent E3 blog post outlines a decision tree that helps to diagnose when partnership truly is not an option, then offers guidance and cautions about how to push gently and effectively.

Balance inclusiveness and expediency by getting to know partners and politics: E3 has often faced the challenge of balancing the desire to slow down to incorporate *all* relevant stakeholders with the need to maintain momentum to progress the work. Acknowledging that there was no magic answer, E3 has learned that knowing their partners and the political dynamics was helpful in navigating this balance. Additionally, they discovered strategies for incorporating the opinions of stakeholders who were not in the room so their voices could be included without slowing the process to have them all physically present.

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[7] Thomas, Shawn. *From Information into Action: Using Data to Drive Collective Impact.* Posted March, 2013. Accessed May, 2013. http://www.fsg.org/KnowledgeExchange/Blogs/CollectiveImpact/PostID/421.aspx

[8] Thomas, Shawn.

[9] Gourgey, Hannah. *To Partner or to Push: Embracing the Creative Tensions of Collective Impact.* Posted Jan., 2013. Accessed May, 2013. http://www.fsg.org/KnowledgeExchange/Blogs/CollectiveImpact/PostID/400.aspx

Contact

For questions or comments on this report,
please contact:

Jennifer Splansky Juster
Director, FSG
jennifer.juster@fsg.org

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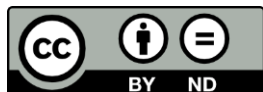
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