



Northern Kentucky

Building a Leadership Council

See how community leaders built an overarching leadership council to coordinate and improve youth services.



Taking action: A meeting of the action team on advocacy.

Raising and racing thoroughbreds is Kentucky's most famous industry, but those trying to improve youth services here used to spend lots of time herding cats. That is, trying to bring together the dizzying array of government, educational, business and civic organizations that provide youth services and supports. To make these critical services more effective, Northern Kentucky needed a strong, uniform and regional approach. Standing in the way was an obstacle common to large geographic areas: a mix of rural, urban and suburban communities, and various definitions of which towns, cities, counties and school districts were included. Who could unify them?

"There's a lot of discussion around working together, but because of all the districts, cities and counties, it's difficult." That's what one local stakeholder said in 2010 during the Ready by 21 Leadership Capacity Audit, which assesses a community's leadership capacities through such methods as surveys and interviews. Acting on the results of that audit, leaders from the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, the United Way of Greater Cincinnati and Vision 2015 (a group of

civic, education and business leaders) built a robust leadership council that drives changes in how the region provides out youth services and supports.

Find a Leader

Like many communities, Northern Kentucky had several organizations that, as the audit said, "work together, have logical divisions of labor and complementary strengths, and could be organized to operate under one umbrella." Who would be the umbrella? Rather than create a new organization, the Forum for Youth Investment suggests another option: Expand the role of an existing collaboration that has the respect of major stakeholders.

Expand the role of an existing collaboration that has the connections with major stakeholders.

Fitting that profile was the Northern Kentucky Education Council, a coalition of education, community and business leaders that has been around since the 1990s. In 2010, the council set out to improve the region's educational services through increased efficiency and collaboration.

One major step was defining the jurisdictions that make up Northern Kentucky: six counties, 33 municipalities and 18 school districts. That enabled the council to follow its more ambitious mission: to expand beyond education. But how?



Expand the Mission

Rick Hulefeld, executive director of an education-focused nonprofit called Children Inc., says the “roadmap” for this expanded mission was Ready by 21.

Those systems notably absent ... are child welfare, juvenile justice and parks and recreation.

Ready by 21 guided the council to expand beyond the academic day and follow the “Insulated Education Pipeline” approach: wrapping coordinated, high-

quality family and community supports, as well as basic services such as transportation and health, around the traditional education pipeline. “What Ready by 21 did was broaden our scope and expedite our work,” says the council’s executive director, Polly Lusk-Page.

Here was the challenge: While the Ready by 21 audit found that the council benefited from “active participation by business” and a “strong network of [school] superintendents,” its focus on education left it bereft of many people and organizations that serve youth and families. Missing were the voices of child welfare, juvenile justice, parks and recreation, families and youth. The council moved to add these missing voices.

Grow the Team

To take on its expanded role, the council recruited community stakeholders involved in such areas as health, social services and out-of-school time. That meant more than inviting them to meetings; the council established that its members would come not just from business and education, but also from “civic partners.” It even changed its bylaws to require equal representation from each field on its board.

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Here are some ways that the council has carried out the mission of inclusion:

- For the first time, the board of directors includes a member of the United Way of Greater Cincinnati (which covers Northern Kentucky) and a district court judge. “We never had anyone from the social service sector on our board,” Lusk Page says.
- The council’s six “action teams” also include representatives from business, education and civic groups. Each Team focuses on a specific issue, conducts research and recommends priorities and strategies for the council and its members.
- For example: The action team on Education Accessibility and Lifelong Learning is led by a community college vice president and the head of a public library. The team on Reducing Barriers to Student Learning includes representatives from early childhood development, mental health and dropout prevention — such as the Brighton Center, a nonprofit whose offerings include a homeless youth shelter, literacy services, a food bank and emergency housing.

Move Forward Faster

Building an overarching leadership council has given Northern Kentucky leaders and service providers the foundation to move more quickly with a bolder plan than they once envisioned. “Ready by 21 offered us tools that we didn’t have before,” Lusk-Page says. “We might have gotten to some of these things, but I don’t think it would have been in the same time frame and with the level of expertise.” Boosting the council’s role, one community leader said, has helped leaders “eliminate duplication and focus on the main issues” – improving specific outcomes for youth in measureable ways.

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