

## Implementing the Theory of Action

The Theory of Action is based on StriveTogether's Framework for Building Cradle to Career Civic Infrastructure. The Theory of Action consists of five **Gateways**: Exploring, Emerging, Sustaining, Systems Change and Proof Point. Within each of the five Gateways, there are a series of **quality benchmarks** that are key steps in developing and sustaining a partnership. Meeting the quality benchmarks in the Exploring, Emerging and Sustaining Gateways leads to System Change and ultimately Proof Point.

Partnerships implementing the Theory of Action effectively demonstrate four **principles** as they move from building a partnership to impacting outcomes:

### 1. Engage the Community

The work of the partnership must be grounded in the context of the community. Partnerships engage a broad array of community voices through building awareness and information sharing; involving and mobilizing the community towards improvement; and co-developing solutions and strategies with community members.

### 2. Focus on Eliminating Locally Defined Disparities

Inequalities in student achievement are defined by each partnership using local data and context. Partnerships make intentional efforts to eliminate disparities in achievement.

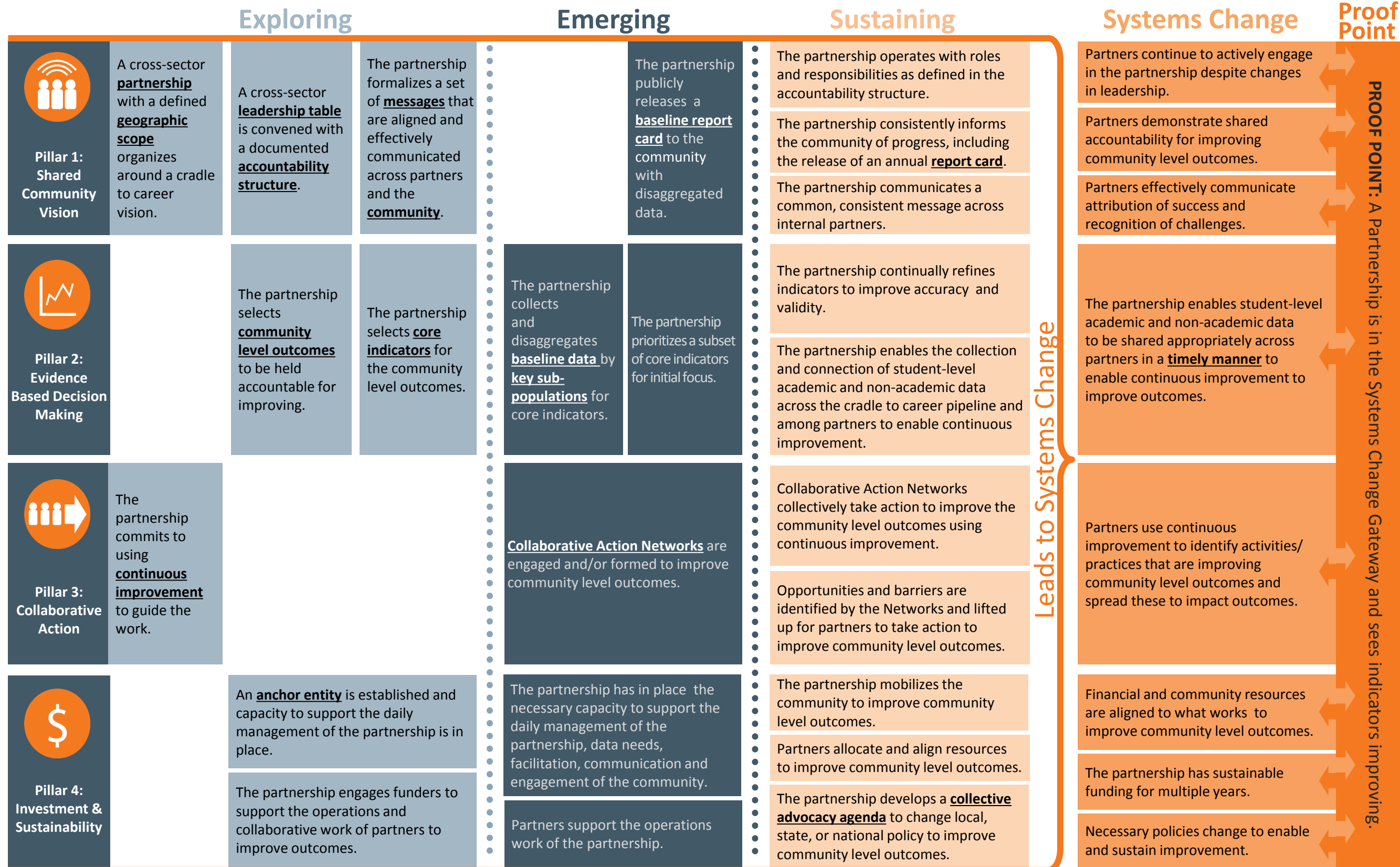
### 3. Develop a Culture of Continuous Improvement

The work of the partnership focuses on the use of local data, community expertise and national research to identify areas for improvement in a constant and disciplined manner that ensure Partners invest in practices that work.

### 4. Leverage Existing Assets

The partnership builds on existing resources in the community and aligns resources to maximize impact.

## GATEWAYS:



Leads to Systems Change

**BUILDING**

**IMPACT**

## Shared Community Vision:

Schools alone do not make up the full education equation - all of the programs that touch a child contribute to his or her success. Partners come together around a vision for improving educational outcomes beginning at birth through post-secondary education/training until securing a meaningful career. Cradle to career partnerships typically evolve over time starting with a few critical leaders representing various sectors and evolving into several different teams that meet regularly to ensure improvement on outcomes. Committed leaders are critical to the success of a partnership as well as effectively communicating the work to partners and the community.

### DEFINITIONS.....

**Partnership:** A group of organizations, systems and stakeholders who come together to jointly move a cradle to career agenda in their community. Several sectors need to be represented within the partnership including: early childhood education, K-12, higher education, community-based organizations, philanthropic, civic/government, and business.

**Geographic scope:** Needs to be sufficient to impact population level outcomes, policy and funding decisions.

**Leadership Table:** Group of cross-sector CEO-level members of the organizations participating in direction setting of the partnership, must include: K-12, higher education, philanthropic and business leaders.

**Accountability Structure:** The organizational framework that depicts the different teams within the partnership and outlines the roles and responsibilities of each.

**Messages:** Formalized statements about the partnership developed for a specific audience to effectively communicate a common understanding of the vision, purpose and work.

**Baseline Report:** Initial report to the community that provides recent data for each of the partnership's community level outcomes and the key sub-populations for which the outcomes are disaggregated.

**Community:** Individuals in the defined geographic scope who are directly affected by the quality of the education pipeline, and therefore must be clearly understood, actively involved, and eventually satisfied by the impact of the partnership.

**Report Card:** Report to the community highlighting changes in community level outcomes and the sub-populations for which the outcomes are disaggregated. Includes contextual information around each data point, the strategies to improve that outcome, and year-to-year progress against time-bound targets and baseline data.

## Evidence Based Decision Making:

Communities often come together to support promising educational programs, instead communities should come together to identify the most important *outcomes* for children and commit to finding the best ways to drive improvement in those outcomes. Organizing around outcomes, identifying indicators for the outcomes and collecting local data to determine areas of need and promising practices/activities make this work fundamentally different. Engaging key stakeholders, who understand local data, to form a data team is one strategy commonly used to select indicators, collect local data, communicate the data to the community and provide analysis expertise on behalf of the partnership. As partnerships progress in the work, the collection of data moves from aggregated community-wide data to program and student level data. Partnerships seek ways to make data available on a consistent basis in order for those serving students to have the data they need to continuously improve their services; this includes the use of systems, processes and people. This process often involves building trust with key stakeholders and complying with federal laws (FERPA & HIPPA) which regulate how data can be shared.

### DEFINITIONS.....

**Community Level Outcomes:** Academic points along the cradle to career education continuum that are proven to be key levers that need to be moved in order to achieve the cradle to career vision and goals. Non-academic community level outcomes may be selected in addition to academic community level outcomes. (e.g.: Kindergarten Readiness).

**Core Indicators:** The specific measures that are being used to track progress on moving the community level outcomes and have been agreed upon to be the main metric, or one that directly measures an outcome. (e.g.: % of students assessed ready for Kindergarten upon school entry)

**Baseline Data:** Data that is gathered as an initial data set that will be used later to provide a comparison for assessing improvement on community level outcomes.

**Key Sub-populations:** Populations in which the partnership determines a need for a more intentional focus in order to eliminate disparities in academic achievement. These sub-populations are determined using local context and data and could differ across partnerships.

**Timely Manner:** Access to data is not delaying the decision making or action-taking of parties relying on it to work effectively.

**Local Data:** Different types of measures that help to understand local context and impact for the geographically defined scope of the partnership.

## Collaborative Action:

Several different types of action take place through the implementation of the Theory of Action. Collaborative Action is about community members coming together to use data in disciplined manner to collectively move an outcome. Collaborative Action uses a process of continuous improvement that includes the following components:

- Focuses on improving outcomes and indicators
- Uses local data
- Leverages existing resources;
- Includes the voice of the community (where appropriate)
- Ensures action is within the sphere of control of those involved

Collaborative Action requires participation from both practitioners and leadership. In the early stages of the work, Networks are engaged or formed; they then develop charters and action plans using disaggregated student level data and ultimately identify practices/ activities that improve community level outcomes. Through their work, Networks identify opportunities for partners to improve outcomes.

### DEFINITIONS.....

**Continuous Improvement Process:** The on-going effort to use local data in a disciplined manner to improve efficiencies and effectiveness of processes and action.

**Collaborative Action Networks:** Groups of appropriate cross-sector practitioners and individuals who organize around a community level outcome and use a continuous improvement process to develop an action plan with strategies to improve that outcome.

**Charter:** A tool for Collaborative Action Network members to hold each other accountable to shared measurements and to the partnership. This is a 'living' document that should be updated regularly and contains the following components: Purpose Statement; Problem Statement; Project Scope; Membership; Operating Principles.

**Action Plan:** A document that outlines the strategies that a Collaborative Action Network will work on collectively during a given time frame. This is a 'living' document that should be updated regularly and contains the following components: Long and Short-term Targets, Measures, Projects and Action Steps.

## Investment & Sustainability:

Initiating or redirecting resources (time, talent and treasure) toward data-based practices on an on-going basis, usually requiring a shift in behavior, particularly in regards to funding and policy. In the initial stages of a partnership, securing multiple years of funding for the operations, including staff of the partnership (see key staff), is critical to long-term success. As the partnership matures, the work focuses on allocating existing resources and identifying new resources (including: knowledge, time, volunteers, skills, financial contributions or other in-kind services) to practices and activities that are having an impact on community level outcomes. Policy changes are often a lynchpin for removing barriers that potentially inhibit improvements to community level outcomes. In the latter stages, a Partnership should seek to impact changes in policies to ensure impact over the long-term. Engaging the community in the work of the partnership also ensures long term sustainability.

### DEFINITIONS.....

**Anchor Entity:** An organization or entity that commits to acting as the fiscal agent and ensuring the partnerships long term stability. Can provide additional functions such as housing partnership staff.

**Collective Advocacy Agenda:** Shared plan for influencing public policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic and social systems and institutions.

**Key Staff** (can be provided in-kind or loaned to the partnership):

- **Partnership Director:** A full-time dedicated staff person that provides leadership and management to ensure that the mission and core values of the partnership are put into practice
- **Facilitator:** Supports continuous improvement action planning
- **Data Manager:** Supports analysis, management, integration, and reporting of data
- **Communication/Community Engagement Manager:** Supports internal and external communications and engagement of the broader community

## What is the Theory of Action?

The StriveTogether Theory of Action is a continuum of quality benchmarks that acts as a guide to implementing the Framework.

With different approaches to collective impact emerging in communities throughout the country, Network members wanted to ensure that the StriveTogether approach remained rigorous.

The Theory of Action provides clarity and guidance to partnerships in their work. It increases consistency in approach across the Network and holds partnerships accountable for implementing a collective impact effort with rigor.

