



Harvard Family
Research Project



Complementary Learning in Action

Alignment Nashville

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About this series: As complementary learning takes root across the country, *Complementary Learning in Action* shares innovative examples and lessons learned from those initiatives. This series documents the ways that diverse cities, counties, and states are employing complementary learning approaches to serve children across ages and across settings. It highlights key themes and emerging strategies to help build knowledge and inform others in the field.

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Alignment Nashville

At a recent community meeting, a diverse group of local organizations and leaders discussed Alignment Nashville's new school readiness project, "Essential Literature." The goal of the project is to expose all 4-year-olds in the City of Nashville to 10 common books so that they will enter kindergarten with a common foundation of concepts and stories. Grappling with fundamental logistical questions—Who would provide the books? Who would read them to children?—the committee members spearheading the project were inspired by the community's creative and collaborative response. A representative from a book purchasing organization suggested that his organization refocus their efforts on purchasing the preselected books for Nashville families. Another local organization pledged volunteers who could read the books to children at daycare centers. An early childhood professor from a local community college offered to incorporate the books into her teacher training curriculum. Others joined in, including a graphic designer who committed to designing bookmarks with effective reading tips and a public library representative who agreed to distribute the bookmarks to parents. By the end of the meeting, "Essential Literature" was off the ground.

What is complementary learning?

Across the country, there is growing recognition that even high-performing schools cannot do it alone. National discussions reflect the need for additional supports to help bridge the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. In this setting, Harvard Family Research Project is leading the national conversation about complementary learning—the idea that systems that intentionally link nonschool supports with each other and with schools can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed.

Complementary learning is taking root in many forms across the country. Some initiatives link two or three supports for children and youth, while others create comprehensive systems. As these initiatives develop, HFRP is learning from their innovations and sharing strategies, challenges, and insights with others in the field.

This snowball-style process is working to build collaboration all around Nashville. Under the leadership of Alignment Nashville (Alignment), diverse community members and organizations are coming together to leverage existing resources in support of Nashville's youth and the Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS). This effort is devoted to helping public schools succeed and ensuring a comprehensive, quality education for all of the city's children and youth.

History: Finding Common Ground

Like many urban centers, Nashville has long struggled with how to improve student achievement and effectively prepare youth for college and careers. Unlike some cities, Nashville benefits from a business community that actively supports public education, including a Chamber of Commerce that sees schools as the key factor in the city's vitality.

In 2002, the Chamber of Commerce hired a consultant from Vision Link, Inc. to explore how the community could more effectively support public education. After extensive interviews with community stakeholders, it became clear that there were many partnerships between schools and

community organizations, but that there were also duplications of effort and resources, gaps in quality programming, and an overall lack of data. Traditionally, public schools had worked with individual nonprofits to provide localized programs that each served 20–100 students out of the 75,000 students in the system. Recognizing that these programs reached relatively few students and had little documented evidence of impact, Vision Link’s Doug Zimmerman recommended a city-wide effort to coordinate and leverage existing efforts. The Chamber of Commerce signed on, and Alignment Nashville was born.

To create Alignment Nashville, the Chamber of Commerce worked with business community representatives to bring together twenty local organizations and twelve city leaders for a series of meetings. In these early meetings, the focus was on establishing a common vision that all participants could commit to. Tom Cigarran, Alignment’s Operating Chair, recalls telling the committee, “We’re not gonna undertake any actions or go outside the room until we’re all on the same page.

And we’ll just keep meeting and talking until we get there.” The initial conversations were not always easy. Cigarran recalls, “There was fear, and there was concern, and there was interest, and there was excitement, and there was a whole series of different . . . perspectives and ideas about how we ought to do what we ought to do.” Despite some participants’ concerns about the roles of and implications for individual organizations, there was an overall commitment to working together and creating a plan of action, with the interests of the city’s children always at the heart of the effort.

After months of extensive talks, the committee emerged with a mission to align existing community organizations and resources in order to help MNPS realize its strategic plan, which is revisited and redeveloped every 5 years through a community-wide collaborative process. Alignment leaders stress that their first rule of thumb is never to question or work outside of MNPS’s strategic plan. As stated in Alignment’s operating principles, “Committees do not determine WHAT to accomplish; instead, committees determine HOW to accomplish what MNPS has determined is needed through its strategic planning process.”

Snapshot: Alignment Nashville

Location
Nashville, TN

Start date
2002

Types of partners
Chamber of Commerce, Mayor’s Office for Children & Youth, local businesses, local nonprofits, local foundations, federal government agencies, city libraries, higher education institutions

Mission statement
To create a system to bring community organizations and resources into alignment so that their coordinated support of Nashville’s youth has a positive impact on public school success and the success of our community as a whole.

Website
<http://www.alignmentnashville.org>

“The key is that you have to get people to reorder their priorities... to make room in their existing money and budgets for these activities that are strategic... that are really gonna make a difference.”

—Tom Cigarran, Operating Board Chair

In 2007, Alignment became an independent 5013c organization. It works with more than 100 local organizations, each of which, in contributing time and resources to the effort, becomes eligible to participate in collaborative funding proposals. Alignment’s infrastructure is supported by a variety of funding sources. The school system contributes \$150,000 annually, as well as administrative staff and office space. The city government allocates \$100,000 annually, and Vanderbilt University provides \$50,000 annually for evaluation, research, and other activities. The Chamber of Commerce donates office space and financial support. Local philanthropists have provided over \$700,000 for operational costs and staff salaries over the last 4 years. Additional funds are provided by local corporations and some national funders (e.g., United Way, National Science Foundation, America’s Promise, Amerigroup). Alignment projects and partner nonprofits have also received funding from other national sources, including the U.S. Department of Education and the Centers for Disease Control, due in part to collaborations with local researchers and to the efforts of Alignment’s grant writer.

Building Connections: A Collaborative Process Supported by Key Champions and Data

In addition to its diversified funding structure, Alignment leaders point to three factors that have helped them get the effort off the ground: a collaborative structure, key champions, and a commitment to using evaluation.

“[We were] looking for an infrastructure and a structure that would create and nurture strategic alliances across the city.”
—Sydney Rogers, Executive Director

Collaboration

Alignment is built on a collaborative structure that was designed to create continuity and to withstand political and budget changes. Alignment’s leadership consists of a Board of Directors, an Operations Board, and an Outcomes Committee. (Membership of these boards and committees includes major community leaders, such as the Mayor, the Chairwoman of the School Board, the Director of MNPS¹, MNPS staff and principals, heads of local businesses and nonprofits, parents, and university researchers.) These three entities oversee a set of committees that mirror the school district’s departments and focus on specific age groups and issues. The primary committees—each of which is composed of volunteers from a range of backgrounds and organizations—are prekindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school, 16–24 out-of-work and out-of-school, and a series of health committees. Each committee creates and coordinates a project that supports one or more components of MNPS’s strategic plan. This structure keeps Alignment’s efforts focused and well coordinated. Creating this collaboration in the first place has meant getting people to think differently about their work. As Cigarran explains, “The key is that you have to get people to reorder their priorities . . . to make room in their existing money and budgets for these activities that are strategic . . . that will really make a difference.”

¹ Director is MNPS’s term for the role that is often referred to as superintendent.

Champions

Prominent champions and supporters have helped to encourage such new ways of thinking. Business leaders are making a heavy investment of time and dollars. The mayor, whose Office of Children and Youth has spearheaded prekindergarten initiatives and high school reform, also champions the effort. School district leaders joined Alignment early and continue to be critical supporters, and Alignment staff have all worked hard to build relationships with school staff of all levels. For example, when Alignment and affiliated community organizations wanted to work with schools on a new program to develop leadership among high school students, the local teachers' union was concerned about the need for teachers to change their instructional practices and about the increased burden of training and certification. Alignment worked with a supportive teacher whom Executive Director Sydney Rogers describes as "inspirational" and who became a model for the program, encouraging other teachers to undergo training and certification. Once early successes of the program became evident, "there was no problem getting people to volunteer," Rogers recalls. She points to another example of a supportive principal who has championed the effort, deciding to postpone retirement because of his excitement about the collaboration between Alignment and the schools. As Rogers describes the power of such models and motivators: "It becomes the thing to do . . . [and] when they see it works . . . they want to be a part of it!"

Data

Using evaluation for accountability and continuous improvement in programs is another core Alignment principle. Alignment leaders are committed to measuring the outcomes of all of the committees' initiatives and using that data to make informed and strategic decisions about where and how to invest to support learning. Each committee is expected to design an evaluation plan at the outset of each project; Alignment's Outcomes Committee, comprised of 12 researchers from local higher education institutions and nonprofit institutes, supports and oversees the committees' evaluations. Graduate students from local universities and a part-time evaluator support committees' work. However, with the rapid growth of Alignment's programs, the need for a full-time evaluator is becoming clear.

"Its vision is aligned with Nashville, to reinforce the notion that we're not a burdensome project that's being placed in the schools; but, that we're a project placed by the schools to relieve a lot of that burden."
—Jeffrey Dotts, Associate Director,
Children's Health Initiative

Local colleges and universities have played a central role in both evaluation and program development. From the beginning, researchers have been invited to serve on committees, create accountability and evaluation systems, and help develop quality programs. Community colleges are active in providing teacher training to support such programs as Essential Literature and Developing Community Leaders. Universities have assisted in bringing in new funding, developing programs, and creating opportunities for national exposure. For example, Alignment collaborated with Vanderbilt researcher Maury Nation and Meharry researcher Paul Juarez to apply for and receive a grant from the Centers for Disease Control to implement and evaluate a community-wide bullying prevention effort. The collaboration, which was attractive to CDC for its integrated, community-wide nature, benefits the universities, Alignment, and Nashville as a whole. Leaders hope it will serve as a national model.

Looking Ahead: Balancing Scale and Quality

In the last few years, Alignment has begun to move beyond planning to implement a number of new projects and initiatives. As it moves forward with these efforts, its leaders are working to increase the number and size of its projects while maintaining a well-coordinated and manageable structure. Although its board members are excited about the prospects of an even larger system, Alignment is focusing for now on making the existing projects successful. As Cigarran reflects, “The quality of decisions that are being made, and the quality of the programs that are being developed, addresses so many problems.”

To support ongoing efforts, Alignment continues to build community partnerships and pursue new funding. Leaders hope to maintain Alignment’s diverse funding structure and to seek additional program-based grants that would help sustain new programs and support the local nonprofits with whom it partners. In the long term, Alignment hopes to institutionalize successful programs and turn them over to MNPS or other member organizations, allowing the schools to coordinate and fund quality opportunities for students.

One of the critical next steps in this process is to build evaluation strategy and capacity. Because most initiatives are only a couple of years old, program evaluations are in their early stages. Among the evaluation projects being developed are a core survey for parents, teachers, and students to assess a common set of outcomes across all of Alignment’s programs, and a logic model for each project and committee. In addition, the evaluation consultant is working to create a longitudinal study that uses Social Network Analysis to examine the structure, process, and implementation of Alignment. These projects should result in a quality improvement framework that will help Alignment better assess the effectiveness of its projects and make strategic decisions about future initiatives.

As Alignment begins to create a more visible community presence—including a new website and increased transparency within the community—it is committed to a collaborative and inclusive process. Its leaders and partners strive to convey through action their belief that solutions to public education are more effective when they are the result of a committed, thoughtful, and engaged collaboration.