

# Changing the Conversation

## A case study of school district involvement in a collective impact initiative

The Road Map Project began in 2010 as a cradle-to-career collective impact initiative with an ambitious goal: to double the number of students in South King County and South Seattle who are on track to graduate from college or earn a career credential by 2020. This goal includes a commitment to close achievement and opportunity gaps for low-income students and children of color and to increase achievement for all students.

At the heart of this work is the belief that cross-sector collaboration is necessary to address systemic disparities and advance educational equity. For the past six years, the Road Map Project has brought together the seven school districts in the region and diverse partners around a common agenda to improve outcomes from birth through postsecondary completion. The backbone organization for the Road Map Project is the Community Center for Education Results (CCER). In 2012, the seven districts collaborated to secure a competitive \$40 million Race to the Top award from the U.S. Department of Education, which provided an infusion of funds to support district efforts aligned with the Road Map Project.

*Support provided by Road Map Project influenced the work of Highline Public Schools and their partners by shifting norms, policies, and procedures within the district.*

This brief shares key findings from a case study of how Highline Public Schools and its community partners have contributed to the Road Map Project, as well as how the project has influenced the district's efforts to improve opportunities and outcomes for young people. The brief also shares recommendations and reflection questions for collective impact initiatives looking to improve school district engagement.

### DATA DETAILS

#### 20 interviews

District leaders  
District staff  
Community partners

#### Document review

District documents  
Project materials  
Race to the Top reports  
Media reports

Highline Public School District is the fourth-largest school district in the initiative and includes 16 percent of all Road Map Project students. The district's student demographics include:

**64%**  
of students qualify  
for free or reduced-  
price lunch

**76%**  
of students are  
racial/ethnic  
minorities

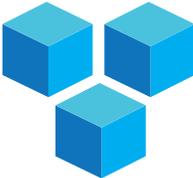
**25%**  
of students are  
English language  
learners

# Highline contributions to the Road Map Project

Active since the start of the Road Map Project, Highline Public Schools contributed to the project’s innovations in early learning, data disaggregation practices, and high school–to–college transitions. For example, the district pioneered college success coaches and worksite visits for students and piloted tools on behalf of the Road Map Project.

## Road Map Project support provided to Highline

The Road Map Project supported the district and their partners by attracting new resources to the region, convening practitioner networks, and increasing capacity to use data. Highline Public Schools and their community partners reported that the most useful supports were those that were aligned to promote innovation and adoption of new practices, built capacity while respecting the autonomy of districts and their partners, and oriented participants toward collective learning and collective action.



### RESOURCES

- New initiatives
- Infrastructure
- Professional development



### NETWORK CONVENING

- Regional meetings and working groups
- Visiting model programs
- Shared professional development



### DATA CAPACITY

- Regional reports with trends
- Improved access to data
- Linked data across systems

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## Road Map Project influences on Highline Public Schools and their partners

Support provided by Road Map Project influenced the work of Highline Public Schools and their partners by shifting norms, policies, and procedures within the district.

### Challenging the status quo and motivating change

Regional data provided by CCER generated a sense of urgency within the district and provided leverage to push for new policies and initiatives. By comparing Highline Public Schools to districts that have similar socioeconomic profiles, participants said regional reports “removed the easy excuse” that performance was low in their district because of student demographics. Change was possible because other districts in the region were making progress in promoting educational equity.

“ [We] used the data [CCER] gave us in the year-end report to make a case for change ... The reality is: You can't blame it on demographics because our surrounding districts have the same demographics and they're doing better. That was powerful. *Highline Public Schools leader*

## Thinking differently about community assets

Road Map Project bolstered Highline Public Schools' efforts to focus on the strengths and potential of all students, especially in relation to English language learner students and the perspective that speaking a language other than English is an asset rather than a liability. This asset-based approach extended to the important role of communities and community-based organizations and encouraged the district to create more authentic community partnerships.

“ I think CCER has been tremendously helpful in terms of continuing the conversation, making sure the conversation is about priorities, and having school districts be responsive to their communities.  
*Highline Public Schools partner*

## Refining policies and procedures

Early in the initiative, Highline Public Schools adopted a strategic plan that mirrored the goals of the Road Map Project. The district revised their data sharing agreement and took steps to make it easier for smaller organizations to partner with them. The district also adopted several new policies and practices related to high school completion and postsecondary readiness, such as providing in-school SAT testing and expanding re-engagement programming. Involvement in the initiative also spurred more frequent use of data, such as new internal reporting procedures around FASFA completion rates.

## Improving education pathway connections and fostering a cradle-to-career perspective

The Road Map Project enabled Highline Public Schools to strengthen pathway connections among early learning providers, the district, community-based organizations, and postsecondary institutions. The district invested in programs, training, and initiatives to expand access to early learning and bolstered re-engagement programming for opportunity youth.

## Promoting stronger cross-district collaboration

Participants stated that the Road Map Project's main influence on the broader region was the promotion of stronger cross-district collaboration at multiple levels. The initiative encouraged districts to learn from each other—rather than reinventing the wheel—and led districts to measure their progress against regional data. Participants expressed that a regional approach to education reform has provided “power in numbers,” both in pooling resources and in encouraging districts to take bold steps to implement new practices that need widespread community support.

“ I think normally districts see themselves as a... context of one. And, to be in the context of a region... when we can say that we're leading or innovating in a given area, then it's inspiring. And when we're lagging in a given area it can put pressure to step up our game.  
*Highline Public Schools staff member*

## Challenges

Case study participants cited four main challenges associated with their participation in this collective impact partnership:

- Tension between local and regional priorities, which makes it difficult to align efforts across organizations and districts
- The need to better connect the Road Map Project's data and activities with the day-to-day experiences and practices of partners
- The need to increase understanding between community-based organizations and schools
- Lack of a full set of systems-level strategies to guide the work of the Road Map Project

## Stakeholder recommendations

Case study participants offered several recommendations for the Road Map Project that could apply to collective impact initiatives that are looking to improve school district engagement.

- Focus on issues with a strong sense of urgency, opportunities for cross-district learning, and a clear rationale for collaboration
- Promote scalable models and practices that are easily integrated into the existing structures of districts and community-based organizations
- Broker resources on behalf of the region and work to ensure equitable access to resources based on community need
- Develop proactive communications strategies that tell the district's story and engage community members in school improvement and equity initiatives
- Use the external backbone organization to bridge differences between community-based organizations and schools



## Reflection questions for the field

- Is your initiative working on an issue that has a shared sense of urgency and a clear rationale or need for regional partnership?
- How can your initiative advance promising practices in a way that respects the autonomy and expertise of districts and community-based organizations?
- What steps are necessary to promote a collaborative environment in which both community-based organizations and school districts are clearly represented and heard?
- How can your initiative's backbone organization help community members better understand what is happening in schools and help schools use project data for continuous improvement?

To download the full report, go to: <http://bit.ly/highline-roadmap-casestudy>

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