Executive summary

To achieve better and more equitable outcomes for every child, cradle to career, communities are working to transform systems. According to the StriveTogether Theory of Action, systems transformation occurs when communities build civic infrastructure that enables every Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Asian youth and family and those experiencing poverty to have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential, cradle to career. This is a result of partnership with system leaders in making fundamental and institutionalized shifts in policies, practices, resources and power structures to eliminate structural racism and advance equitable outcomes.

The StriveTogether Systems Change Assessment relies on two data sources: (1) benchmark assessments prepared by backbone staff and (2) qualitative data from focus groups with partners involved in the cradle-to-career partnership. The assessment and interviews are centered around theory of action benchmarks. Partners, including leaders, practitioners and youth and families closely involved in work to eliminate educational disparities and improve outcomes, provide unique perspectives on the relationships between the partnership and partners, how the partnership functions and the types of sustainable changes made in local systems through examples of shifts in policies, practices, resources and power structures.

Milwaukee Succeeds has built a strong partnership environment where multiple sectors are engaged in collaboration over competition toward a common goal. The partnership has successfully aligned resources to community-identified needs and centered lived experience in service of equitable outcomes throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

The benchmarks that Milwaukee Succeeds focused on in this Systems Change Assessment were:

- **Benchmark 4.1**: Multiple sectors are aligned and accountable to the cradle-to-career vision, and youth and families contribute to decision making.
  - **Status**: MET
  - **Recommendation**: Establish formal pathways for youth and families to be direct participants in partnership priority setting and decision making.

- **Benchmark 4.3**: The partnership supports a cross-sector data infrastructure that enables partners to shift policies, practices, resources and power structures.
  - **Status**: MET
  - **Recommendation**: Focus on actionable data and closing the loop with community members and partners on data that’s being collected.

- **Benchmark 4.4**: Sustained collaborative action efforts shift policies, practices, resources and power structures.
  - **Status**: MET
  - **Recommendation**: Relationships are strong across partnership; codify how to sustain these through succession planning.
• **Benchmark 4.7:** The partnership advocates for changes to local, state and/or national policies based on the perspectives of youth and families. Policies change to advance equitable outcomes.
  - **Status:** MET
  - **Recommendation:** Formalize policy roles for youth and families.

• **Benchmark 4.8:** The partnership aligns public and private resources to spread and sustain data-informed strategies.
  - **Status:** MET
  - **Recommendation:** Continue the exciting and innovative community engagement practices already in motion.

Based on this systems change assessment, Milwaukee Succeeds in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is operating in the Systems Change Gateway.*

*StriveTogether is partnering with the Cradle to Career Network to study the impact of COVID-19 and its implications on data. Therefore, Proof Point designation of partnerships will be on hold until 2024.

## Findings

### Shared community vision

**Benchmark 4.1:** Multiple sectors are aligned and accountable to the cradle-to-career vision and youth and families contribute to decision making.

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**Criteria:**

- Partners from at least three cross-sectors take aligned action (e.g., align goals, structures, activities, etc.) to support the cradle-to-career vision; cross-sectors can include:
  - Philanthropy
  - Business
  - Community-based organizations
  - Faith-based coalitions or organizations
  - Public sector (housing, human services, criminal justice, etc.)
  - Health care system

- Youth and families have formal roles within the partnership and co-develop partnership strategies.

**Examples include:**

Milwaukee Succeeds’ partners are involved in and committed to the work, and the partnership has helped create an environment of collaboration over competition where multiple sectors are engaged. As one partner stated: “Milwaukee Succeeds has successfully built a framework where everyone feels comfortable, supported and valued, and the competition is kind of pushed out of the conversation and is more about working together toward the common goal. That has not been done before. We have always competed in many aspects and I think this has just brought us together in a unique way and has attributed to other work happening more successfully.” Additionally, teams are looped in on the work and able to continue on in each other’s absence. One partner elaborated: “my team is briefed on this — if I’m gone today, my team knows what’s happening.”
At the onset of the pandemic, community organizations working in the early childhood field and beyond were brought together primarily by Milwaukee Succeeds with a shared goal of supporting child care providers who were not being formally identified as first responders. Because of this, they didn’t have access to the materials or equipment to provide safe care for children. Milwaukee Succeeds brought in funding to purchase PEE for providers, created curbside pick-ups and went out to the community and drop off PPE materials. They continually brought the community together to talk about current issues and how to address them consistently. One partner mentioned: “The connections that have been made in these coalitions have been invaluable to a lot of us, and have also helped to increase the access to other groups that were not necessarily always connected to larger institutions and government organizations... It is extremely action driven.”

After the pandemic hit, it was apparent that with cold weather, a group of Latina-run, home-based early child care providers wouldn’t be able to keep their windows open for ventilation. The Greater Milwaukee Foundation (GMF) wanted to provide grants for HVAC and air purification needs, but as these are small businesses and not nonprofits, they were unable to do so. GMF spoke with the woman who oversees these child care centers, who was able to get a non-profit fiscal agent, the Latino Entrepreneurial Network, to make the funding request from GMF with information on the needed HVAC systems that the providers had already identified. GMF would not have known about this need had they not been involved in the early child care coalition convened by Milwaukee Succeeds. Thanks to this partnership, they were able to provide a grant that centered the voices of the community, and moving forward know that there are ways to be innovative in supporting for-profits and the community.

Milwaukee Succeeds convened the 2021 Design Your Future Summer Fellowship, which facilitated the leadership and decision-making of 58 youth (majority non-white) ages 13-22 in setting their partnership’s strategies and tactics for high school success for Black males. This fellowship was designed by six Youth Ambassadors during the spring of 2021. Youth engagement has continued through a second cohort of six Youth Ambassadors who are working with partner organizations to co-lead their Youth Forward MKE Coalition, which is implementing the strategies and tactics designed by the Design Your Future Fellows. Youth Ambassadors have leadership roles in the coalition —including decision-making on how to allocate $100,000 in Violence Prevention Grants funded by the Greater Milwaukee Foundation

Recommendations:

Assessment reviewers were impressed by Milwaukee Succeeds’ strong cross-sector partnerships, and saw an opportunity for growth at the community engagement level, especially considering the role that community decision making plays in Systems Change and Systems Transformation communities. Much of the partnership’s centering of lived experience seems to come from community proxies (e.g., child care providers). Consider ways in which youth and families can be more directly engaged in not only providing perspectives, but also in formal decision-making roles, including co-development and implementation of strategies. Partners shared that they would like to see more opportunities to hear directly from youth and families, and to hear more about how community members are being continuously engaged (e.g., what’s next for parents who participated in the PACC fellowship? How are the Design Your Future grants being implemented?). From partners: “How do we do a better job of collectively communicating and intentionally collaborating and sharing whether we are supporting other work, being aware of it, or jumping on board?” Look to the Theory of Action benchmarks to see what it
takes to move forward into the next gateway — Systems Transformation communities are generally operating in the “Collaborating” and “Shifting Power” stages of the Community Engagement Spectrum.

Learn from other partnerships shifting decision-making power to community members:
- January 2022 Learning Forum: Shared Community Vision
- Network stories: Disrupting traditional power structures for youth engagement
- Network stories: ROC the Future supports racial equity by centering community voice

**Evidence-based decision making**

**Benchmark 4.3: The partnership supports a cross-sector data infrastructure that enables partners to shift policies, practices, resources and power structures.**

**Status:** MET

**Criteria:**
- The partnership has established data infrastructure (people, processes and technology) to collect, analyze, share and apply data across partners. Data may include:
  - Population-level, program-level and individual level data
  - Data about youth outcomes and data about how systems and institutions support youth
  - Quantitative and qualitative data
  - Stories, including youth and family voice and perspectives
- The partnership’s data infrastructure has enabled organizations and institutions to make changes that better serve youth and families.

**Examples include:**

Partners shared that Milwaukee Succeeds is pushing for a focus on equity and disaggregated data — across focus groups, it was clear that the partnership aspires to have a clear reach to Black and Brown students and specific zip codes with the greatest need. The partnership uses disaggregated data to determine the scope of the work.

In their early child care work, Milwaukee Succeeds has a robust data infrastructure that the community is able to use to make systemic shifts, particularly in policy. The partnership has created an early child care dashboard — which can be easily accessed on their website — that shares information such as local child care costs, access to child care by zip code and where the child care deserts are. This dashboard has made a difference in how funding is distributed by targeting it to the areas where it’s most needed. As a result, partners are hearing from child care programs that these funds are helping sustain their businesses, which in turn means children are cared for while their parents or guardians are working.

The ECE Coalition Data Workgroup has successfully received Milwaukee-specific data from the Wisconsin Early Care and Education Workforce Study from the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families and the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; previously, only state and regional data was available. This allowed the workgroup to generate a first-of-its-kind analysis of the demographics, educational attainment, compensation and career aspirations of Milwaukee early child care workforce. The data was used extensively in the partnership’s successful advocacy for the city of Milwaukee’s $7 million ARPA investment in the early child care workforce.

**Recommendations:**
Partners mentioned Milwaukee Succeeds shifted from 11 priorities to focus on two, and expressed a desire for continued support in the areas that are no longer partnership priorities. Are there ways partners can continue being supported in these areas?

Milwaukee Succeeds has an impressive and robust data infrastructure, and multiple data streams were identified through the partnership’s self-assessment and focus groups. In order to continue narrowing down on partnership priorities and strategic planning, honing in on what data is actionable — and concisely sharing that data with stakeholders — will be key. Additionally, closing the loop on the data that is being collected will be crucial in effectively communicating the partnership’s work both internally and externally — sharing information about recommendations following data collection, how the data will be implemented, and what systems indicators are being shifted now which will lead to improved outcomes. In California, for example, Cradle to Career Fresno County repurposed the narratives they submitted in their 2021 Civic Infrastructure Assessment as a progress report they shared out with their community.

Collaborative action

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<th>Benchmark 4.4: Sustained collaborative action efforts shift policies, practices, resources and power structures.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status: MET</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criteria:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Collaborative action efforts are sustained over time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Partners manage transitions in organizations to maintain involvement in collaborative action efforts.</td>
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<td>• Partners scale and spread practices that advance equitable outcomes.</td>
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Examples include:

To sustain their early literacy networks work, Wisconsin Reading Corps was initially incubated at Milwaukee Succeeds and became a standalone entity in 2015. Using a data-centered approach — where continuous improvement and PDSAs are built into the model — Reading Corps boosts foundational reading support for children who are struggling to read so that they can become successful learners and stay on pace with their peers. As a result of Milwaukee Succeeds’ private investments and the collective lobbying efforts of their Policy Workgroup, Wisconsin Reading Corps received public investments from the state of Wisconsin, which it has used to expand locally in Milwaukee as well as into 12 additional communities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, early child care providers in the ECE Coalition identified that they were struggling with their own mental health and needed resources to support the mental health of the children they serve. In response to the financial barriers to high-quality mental health trainings available, coalition members raised funds to provide free mental health training to all providers in target zip codes which have predominantly Black and Brown residents. After the initial round of training, participants asked for additional resources to put what they learned into practice. The Coalition secured additional funding to develop and distribute resource kits and bilingual activity guides to supplement the training. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and ECE Coalition members identified the opportunity to expand these trainings and resources to families of young children as the next step. The Coalition secured another round of funding to develop and pilot these family trainings and resources. Based on
positive feedback on the pilot, Coalition member the Children’s Coalition for Mental Health (CCMH) restructured their existing grant funding from the Medical College of Wisconsin’s Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment to serve an additional 300 families in the summer of 2022 as the next step in an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement and multi-sector collaboration to support the mental health needs of educators and families of young children.

**Recommendations:**

The partnership has done incredible work building strong relationships with partners and members of the community. Assessment reviewers saw succession planning as an important next step in codifying relational history to ensure that work continues seamlessly across the partnership through transitions. Consider including a formal process for succession planning on a key partnership document, such as a charter. StriveTogether is offering a series of collaborative workshops on succession planning with Alma Advisory Group in 2022 — learn more and register for sessions here. The [Place-based Partnership Toolkit](#) developed with the Nonprofit Finance Fund also includes tips for navigating leadership transitions.

**Investment and sustainability**

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<th>Benchmark 4.7: The partnership advocates for changes to local, state and/or national policies based on the perspectives of youth and families. Policies change to advance equitable outcomes.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Status:</strong> MET</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• The partnership has a diverse coalition (including youth and families) of policy champions and advocates supporting local, state or national policy changes that benefit Black, Indigenous, Latine and Asian youth and families and those experiencing poverty.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• At least one public policy change (includes public institutions) has been made to advance equitable outcomes (policies exclusive to the continuation of the partnership do not satisfy this criterion).</td>
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**What are some examples?**

Partners called Milwaukee Succeeds’ diverse coalition of policy champions a safe, welcoming space where everyone is invited to participate and share their voice. The partnership has done a great job of turning the traditional top-down approach on its head and letting community guide the work. As one partner expressed: “As it grew, the ECE coalition is a reflection of the Milwaukee early child care community. I appreciate the purposeful way that they have added voices and people to the table. The coalition has taken advantage of every possible opportunity to put forward voices and bring Black and Brown community together to have a seat at the table and be representative.”

The Parents Advocating for Child Care (PACC) Fellowship is an eight-month virtual training program for parents to explore what’s working and what’s not working in child care and to learn how to advocate for change. In the initial 2020-21 cohort, 19 parents successfully advocated to elected officials about child care, while showing an increase in knowledge and skills related to advocacy, child care, government and data. Local communities were able to build long-term relationships with their fellows, which included adding fellows to advisory committees and leadership tables. Fellows played a role in the Wisconsin
Partnership’s work to secure a $29 million increase in funding in the 2021-23 state budget for the Wisconsin Shares subsidy program, which offsets the cost of child care for working parents whose incomes are at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level.

Comprised of four network members, including Milwaukee Succeeds, the Wisconsin Partnership engaged systems leaders who are trusted voices for state-level policy changes. They brought early child care providers and parents to the decision-making tables. The Wisconsin Partnership informed how the state allocated federal COVID-19 relief funding to support child care, including the Child Care Counts Payment program, which to date has brought $587 million to support 3,600 child care programs across the state.

**Recommendations:**

Milwaukee Succeeds truly shines in its policy work, and there is much to be celebrated here! In thinking about next steps toward Systems Transformation, consider ways in which youth and families can have formalized decision-making roles, including in co-developing and implementing solutions. What steps can the partnership take to increase community capacity for advocacy and policy work? What are the opportunities for youth and family to take on leadership roles in this work, including in determining what the partnership’s policy priorities and strategies are? For example, RGV FOCUS created a work group involving parents and community members to help build their skills in agenda building and goal setting; work group participants chose their policy priorities and led meetings to advocate for their needs. Youth Forward MKE is a great start — how can this work be progressed even further? What are additional areas where community leadership can be formalized, developed and grown?

**Investment and sustainability**

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<th>Benchmark 4.8: The partnership aligns public and private resources to spread and sustain data-informed strategies.</th>
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<td><strong>Status:</strong> MET</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Data-informed strategies are scaled through the alignment of public and private resources.</td>
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<td>• Youth and families influence how resources are allocated.</td>
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**Examples include:**

Milwaukee’s early child care providers are 98% women, with two thirds of them identifying as women of color, and the partnership centers their perspectives in setting goals and priorities for policy work. Additionally, the partnership supports providers in sharing their expertise with city and state legislators, and provides the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families with their insights to inform state policy development and implementation. This includes securing $7 million in Milwaukee ARPA funding to support their priorities of investing in stipends to improve compensation and retention within the early child care workforce, and to strengthen and diversify pathways into the workforce. The ECE Coalition also informed and successfully advocated for the state’s allocation of ARPA funds, bringing more than $56 million to Milwaukee early child care programs to stay open, keep staff employed and safely serve children throughout the pandemic. Nearly half of the early child care providers in Milwaukee run by people of color reported that they would have closed their doors without this financial support.
Milwaukee Succeeds was instrumental in creating the community-centered grantmaking model for the MKE Response Fund, which provided over $6 million in grants, within seven targeted issue areas, based on the proposal review and recommendations of partners and community members. This model is being continued by the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, who recently shifted decision-making power on a $100,000 grantmaking portfolio focused on youth to the Youth Forward MKE Coalition and Ambassadors.

The partnership’s FAFSA Completion campaign provides a clear example of measurable improvements to youth outcomes — one that has been institutionalized by partners and where policies have shifted at the state and local levels to sustain these gains. Before they convened K-12 partners to work on FAFSA in 2017, the city-wide FAFSA completion rate was only 38% and no one was working on improving those numbers. After two years of working on school-centered capacity-building and prioritized strategies, coupled with improved access to data that their backbone team collected and shared with school partners to fuel continuous improvement, the city-wide rate jumped to over 70% and has surpassed the overall completion rates for the state of Wisconsin. Furthermore, their backbone team convened partners and led the advocacy of institutional policy changes at the state to provide schools with student-level FAFSA data to further improve outreach and outcomes. Locally, Milwaukee Public Schools just announced it was making FAFSA completion a requirement for graduation — further evidence that partners are now owning the results of this work.

**Recommendations:**

As mentioned before, policy is an area where the partnership has had incredible successes. Continue the impressive work, especially around the innovative and exciting aspects of community engagement, such as with the community-controlled grantmaking model. There may also be an opportunity to engage with and learn from other partnerships doing similar work, such as Baltimore’s Promise. Their B’More Invested community grantmaking initiative is structured so there are two community members per funder, allowing community voice to drive decision making for allocating money toward people of color-led, community-based alternative solutions to systemic issues.

**Conclusion:**

The work Milwaukee Succeeds has done in pursuit of shifting outcomes and narrowing equity gaps for youth and families is remarkable, and there is potential for this work to grow in scale and impact. The partnership’s policy work stands out as particularly notable — specifically, how Milwaukee Succeeds has partnered with statewide policy champions and other network members to successfully shift policies at the local and federal levels — and codifying the lessons learned in this area would benefit the Cradle to Career Network as a whole. Partners continually expressed their appreciation for Milwaukee Succeeds as a strong leader and convenor holding equity as the center of data work and shifting resources to youth and families with the greatest need. By creating pathways for community leadership, the partnership is well positioned to accelerate shifts to advance equitable outcomes on their way to Systems Transformation.

**Appendix:**
Assessment reviewers:

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Shared community vision focus group participants:

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