

ROAD MAP PROJECT

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

BACKGROUND

Some of the most intense demographic and economic changes happening in America today are occurring in the King County, WA suburbs south of Seattle. These communities, which grew alongside the nearby port and airport of Seattle and Boeing airfield throughout the mid-twentieth century, have been transformed in the last few decades.

Take the small city of Tukwila. As recently as 1990, more than 80 percent of this suburb's roughly 12,000 residents were white. Today, Tukwila's population exceeds 19,000 and is a mix of ethnicities and cultures from around the world. More than one-third of the city's population is foreign born, including many Latin American immigrants as well as refugees from Asian and African nations. Another growing share of residents is African American, reflecting increased in-migration from neighborhoods in Central and South Seattle where real estate prices are rising. Along the way, Tukwila has been transformed economically, too, as its poverty rate jumped from 9 percent in 1990 to 24 percent in 2006–2010.

Schools have been on the front lines of these dramatic economic and demographic changes. Across seven school districts in Seattle and south King County (including Tukwila School District):

- 66 percent are students of color
- 58 percent are low-income students
- 167 different languages are spoken at students' homes
- 16 percent are English-Language-Learners

These communities sit amid one of the nation's most knowledge-oriented economies. According to Brookings research, the Seattle region exhibits the 5th-highest demand for education, and 7th-highest demand for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) skills, among the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas. To date, the region has filled those jobs mostly by importing well-educated workers from elsewhere in the country, or from abroad. Yet the future of Seattle's south suburbs, and the region as a whole, will depend on how they adapt to these changing demographics and meet the new needs of their current student populations and future workforce.

THE INNOVATION

To take on the region's education challenges, a consortium of public, private, and nonprofit stakeholders in the Seattle region launched the Road Map Project in 2010. The collective impact project, coordinated by the Center for Community Education Results and supported by an array of regional funders, aims to double postsecondary educational attainment and close achievement gaps for the almost 120,000 students in the suburban school districts of Auburn, Federal Way, Highline, Kent, Renton, and Tukwila, as well as the public schools in South Seattle.

Similar to the Strive Partnership model conceived in Greater Cincinnati, a wide array of organizations work together on a series of initiatives that embrace a "cradle to college/career" approach to improve educational outcomes. Work groups with representation from the participating districts and other regional stakeholders (including community colleges, nonprofits, housing authorities and mayors) meet regularly to review the latest performance data, develop strategies, and implement action plans to address the needs of different groups, including young children from birth to third grade, English language learners, and those making the transition to postsecondary education. They have adopted a common set of metrics to track progress toward agreed upon goals. This approach is particularly novel in a region characterized by a high degree of jurisdictional fragmentation and frequent lack of coordination among public and private actors.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In December 2012, the Road Map Project released the first Road Map Project Results Report, a regional report card with data documenting the region's increasing needs and challenges, in addition to examples of progress and achievement that have already been made. The report, along with a host of additional work plans, project updates, and data products can be found on the Road Map Project website, www.roadmapproject.org, a rich resource developed by the partnership to organize and spur collective action.

CONFRONTING SUBURBAN POVERTY IN AMERICA

Among the accomplishments the Project has achieved thus far is greatly increasing the percentage of Road Map Region students who apply for Washington State's College Bound Scholarship, which covers the cost of tuition at public institution rates for low-income students. The Road Map Project used a data-driven strategy to increase that share from just 51 percent in 2009 to 89 percent in 2011-12. Also in 2012, eight cities in the Road Map Project received the National Civic League's "All-America City" designation for their joint plan to improve third-grade reading levels, one of 14 national awardees in a competitive field of more than 100 reading plans. The region's plan builds off the existing Road Map Project framework and goal.

The U.S. Department of Education recognized the Road Map Project's leadership in December 2012 with a \$40 million Race to the Top-District grant, which was awarded to the seven-district Road Map District Consortium. The grant will support a focus on personalizing education across the Road Map region and helping more children prepare for success in postsecondary education, particularly in the STEM fields that drive Seattle's regional economy.

CHALLENGES

The Road Map Project has contended with a number of challenges in its first few years, including:

- A history of competition over collaboration in the south King County region; the lack of a strong tradition of concerted system improvement work among educational institutions across the "cradle to college" continuum; limited data-sharing (particularly challenging in a region where 20 percent of students move during each school year); and siloed delivery systems.
- Record population diversity: Among the region's first graders 34 percent are English language learners and they speak more than 167 different languages; many are refugees resettled in the region without necessary supports. A recent Road Map Project regional Parent Forum provided free transportation and language translation into 13 primary languages.
- A thin community-level safety net in south King County. Historically, the City of Seattle has been by far the region's major public funder of human services but, as poverty has moved south, investment has not been able to shift with the need. Private philanthropy still tends to invest in the traditional areas of central city poverty and has not yet caught up with poverty's dramatic shift southward.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Suburban school districts, like municipalities, are accustomed to competing with one another for resources. Yet as more suburbs confront the reality of growing poverty and the need to connect their residents to economic opportunity, collaboration is taking root. The Road Map Project provides an innovative example of an effort to unite jurisdictions around the critical issue area of education.

Policymakers, practitioners, and funders can support similar collaborative efforts and encourage existing actors to work better together across jurisdictions in multiple policy areas by:

- Identifying and reducing barriers to integration and collaboration, by explicitly authorizing (or giving funding preference to) efforts that cross jurisdictional lines within a region, as in the Race to the Top-District competition; and
- Catalyzing regional capacity, by incubating and supporting organizations like the Community Center for Education Results that can help local leaders create and advance an explicitly regional strategy to solving shared challenges that arise from suburbanizing poverty.