

The Strategic Plan

for the Stark Education Partnership

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Organizational Description, Vision and Beliefs

The Stark Education Partnership is an independent organization that leads in supporting and improving education in Stark County. It works to create and respond to opportunities that will add substantial and measurable value to education and in doing so offers the county's school districts and schools new and cooperative ways to transform education.

All that the Partnership undertakes grows out of a vision that focuses on the central role of education in a thriving Stark County. This vision holds that all students in the county will follow a challenging curriculum that will lead to timely graduation from high school with the skills and knowledge to secure meaningful and satisfying employment and to enroll in postsecondary education that will result in similarly rewarding careers, preferably in Stark County. It recognizes that successful learning is lifelong, and requires not only specific skills but flexibility and a tolerance for ambiguity. Students will be taught by caring, competent and qualified professionals, who will be supported in their work by a community that is committed to effective education, by parents who are knowledgeable about and participate in their children's education, and by school administrators from throughout the county who see themselves as educational leaders and who are dedicated to pursuing innovations that will be reflected in continuous improvement in their schools.

In devoting itself to pursuing this vision, the Partnership has developed a number of beliefs that bear directly on its operations. These beliefs include:

- Systemic change in schools and classrooms, as opposed to piecemeal efforts at improvement, is essential if all students are to learn at high levels.
- Systemic change requires both new thinking about the roles of individuals and institutions that are responsible for education and new capacities in educators at all levels.
- Systemic change must be driven locally and collaboratively.
- Systemic change depends upon continuous improvement.
- Comprehensive change and the improvements that arise out of it will take time; sustainable change requires long-term goals and closely monitored interim outcomes.
- Private sector leadership and support are critical elements in fostering systemic change.
- The private sector fulfills important roles including: building trust among various stakeholders; seeking out and offering opportunities to develop and apply promising practices in the schools; helping school systems develop new capacities; gathering, targeting and monitoring the application of new resources; and promoting accountability on all levels of education.

Mission

The Stark Education Partnership engages schools and school districts in fostering comprehensive education reform. The Partnership collaborates with educators and with business, community and civic leaders to build capacity that will lead to sustainable improvement in the county's schools.

Pathway to Change: The Partnership as a Reform Support Organization

In pursuing its mission, the Partnership has determined to function as a reform support organization (RSO). It seeks to become and to be recognized as one of the leading reform support organizations in the country.

RSOs work with schools and school systems to promote systemic change. RSOs can be any kind of organization – among them are large national nonprofit organizations, universities, foundations, consulting firms and local education funds. What distinguishes these organizations is not how they are configured but how they think about themselves, what their purpose is, what activities they undertake, and how they engage other organizations and individuals in their work. RSOs have several common characteristics.

First, they work with schools and school systems to promote change across districts. They help reconfigure the roles, structures and relationships that have for too long hobbled education. In promoting these changes, they focus on widespread and continuing improvement.

A second characteristic of RSOs is their emphasis on capacity building. It is now widely accepted that the best, and perhaps the only, effective way to improve outcomes for students is to improve the skills and knowledge of the adults in and connected to the school system. These include teachers, principals, district leaders, school building and central office staffs, parents and other caregivers. RSOs design or help develop programs (often implemented by the school district or others) that enable these adults to develop and expand the capacities that will improve student learning and lead to better outcomes.

The third important characteristic of RSOs is that they work with the district to *support reform*. RSOs seek to build a community's educational enterprise by providing information, importing and/or developing promising practices, and encouraging innovation. They embody the concept that is reflected in the Partnership's beliefs – that knowledge, investment and encouragement from the private sector can make a significant, positive difference in public education.

There has been some investigation of the attributes of an especially effective RSO. Leading RSOs may not necessarily possess each of these attributes, but they do reflect many of them. An effective RSO:

- Demonstrates ability to build or improve district and community capacity.
- Engages in a working partnership with the district based on this ability.
- Identifies promising educational practices – those that are seen as having a significant likelihood of fostering educational success – and modifies them to suit specific district and community needs.
- Applies promising practices to develop new and build on existing district and community capacity.
- Leverages resources from the community and nationally for innovative efforts at education reform.
- Collaborates with diverse groups and individuals in designing approaches to improvement and reform.
- Sees reform as a long-term process and makes commitments accordingly.
- Engages in ongoing assessment of its work.
- Reports on and disseminates information about the outcomes of its work.

These characteristics are reflected to a significant degree in the Partnership's work.

Toward a Theory of Action

Successful relationships – those that move school districts toward change that is geared to produce better outcomes for students – between school systems and RSOs are marked by trust. This has great resonance in Stark County, where individual districts have sometimes been isolated from one another and from their communities. Organizations like the Partnership have been, for one reason or another, at times isolated from the schools that they exist to serve. A theory of action for the Partnership suggests that it continue to build the relationships that will lead to positive results:

Education improvement in Stark County requires new connections among districts, educators and stakeholders and to emerging knowledge, new ideas, promising practices and sufficient resources. The Partnership makes these connections and, in doing so, builds on the trust it has developed among all stakeholders.

The Partnership will work to add to existing knowledge and to promote innovative ways of tackling challenging educational issues. This will result in increased collaboration in constructing and implementing initiatives that are geared to improving outcomes for students throughout Stark County. These initiatives will be directed to increasing the capacity of educators, to promoting shared and effective leadership, to realigning traditional educational structures, and to informing the community about and involving it in education improvement.

The Partnership will promulgate specific and measurable outcomes for each initiative it undertakes. Special emphasis will be placed on monitoring and reporting on interim results and on making midcourse corrections during the course of an initiative. These efforts will, over a time period defined for each, have impacts on teaching and learning as measured by such indicators as student attendance, persistence, and performance. Efforts in Stark County will attract positive recognition within and beyond the county and lead to additional resources to support the reform work.

Core Areas and Strategic Roles

Pursuant to its mission, the Partnership's work will concentrate both on building capacity among educators and other education stakeholders and on engaging stakeholders in developing and implementing approaches to comprehensive change. The Partnership will focus on four core substantive areas throughout the seventeen school districts in Stark County. In addition, and aligned with its opportunistic approach, the Partnership will seek out promising ideas and programs outside these areas that may interest one or more of the districts with which it works. The core areas are:

- 1. Professional development.** The Partnership will import and collaborate in the development of programs and strategies to build new and stronger capacity in the county's teachers and to promote more effective classroom teaching.
- 2. Re-aligning the various educational sectors in the county through a P-16 initiative.** The Partnership will help foster a seamless system of education in Stark County that begins in pre-school and continues through postsecondary education. In doing so, the Partnership will encourage the design and implementation of strategies that promote persistence and graduation from high school and enrollment in appropriate postsecondary education institutions.

3. **Leadership.** The Partnership will encourage new approaches to leadership by educators in Stark County. This includes collaborations among district leaders, new models of leadership training and the design and implementation of shared and distributive leadership models in the county. Leadership will have a second critical dimension for the Partnership; it will act on its beliefs to provide leadership in efforts to foster systemic change.
4. **Engaging the community in the reform process.** The Partnership will reach out to public officials, businesspersons, civic and organizational leaders, families, students and residents of the county to inform them about education in the county and progress in transforming it. The Partnership will also seek to involve these stakeholders in efforts to promote comprehensive change in education.

In pursuing activities in these core areas and others that may arise, the Partnership will play a number of strategic roles. These roles will vary with opportunity and shift with demand, and the organization will play more than one role at any given moment. These strategic roles are:

1. **Advocate.** The Partnership will endorse the benefits of education reform for Stark County within and outside the community. In so doing, it will stress the connection between effective education, economic well-being and quality of life. The Partnership will also promote efforts among funders and civic leaders to enable the county's school districts to garner the attention and resources to embark on education improvement efforts.
2. **Broker.** The Partnership will seek out and suggest new and promising educational practices to the county's school districts, assist in customizing these practices for use in Stark County, foster collaborative efforts among the districts in program and resource development, and leverage local and national funding to support education improvement in the county.
3. **Convener.** The Partnership will bring together various sectors of education, the county's school districts and other stakeholders to receive information, consider issues, and generate collaborative responses to educational concerns. These discussions and meetings will lead to coherent approaches to engender better student achievement.
4. **Educator.** The Partnership will provide information about educational policies and practices to various sectors of education, business and the community. It will seek to bridge the divides among these diverse stakeholders on education issues and, in so doing, will develop and disseminate ideas and suggest paths toward positive change.
5. **Fact-finder and researcher.** The Partnership will investigate issues and develop both formal and informal means of reporting on issues to districts, the community and constituencies, including funders, inside and outside Stark County.

Assessment and Evaluation

As deep and lasting change takes time, the Partnership believes it is crucial that outcome be monitored closely for short-, medium- and long-term results and that these results be shared with stakeholders across the community. All of the Partnership's work is geared to reaching the long-term result of sustainable improvement in student performance through the path suggested in its developing theory of action. This requires setting a number of short and medium-term objectives, paying detailed and continuing attention to interim results, and, where necessary, making mid-course corrections in the activities that the Partnership is undertaking as it moves toward its ultimate goal of better outcomes for students in Stark County schools.

In line with its beliefs and its chosen mode of operation as a reform support organization, the Partnership will develop short- and medium-term performance measures for each programmatic activity it undertakes. Templates will be developed to measure progress for each activity, and board meetings will be organized to report on, analyze and discuss progress in meeting the interim objectives. In this way, Partnership board and staff will be able to make adjustments based on analysis of and reflection on relevant data while an activity is underway rather than considering why an initiative did not have the hoped for outcomes after it is completed. The Partnership will periodically disseminate its findings about what it is learning from its work to educators, funders and other interested parties.

Meeting the Mission: Goals, Strategies and Selected Activities

The following goals and strategies for the Partnership are broad. They reflect the core areas of interest, the multiple roles that the Partnership seeks to play in improving education in Stark County, and both the need and desire for it to create and respond to opportunities that conform to the general goals and strategies presented in this plan. They invite the formulation of specific outcome measures, strategies and tactical approaches for specific initiatives.

Goal One: Engage schools and school districts in Stark County in comprehensive efforts to reform education by reorganizing and re-aligning existing educational structures and relationships.

Strategy A: Continue to provide leadership in the design and implementation of a P-16 Compact for Stark County.

1. Serve as a convener of county-wide meetings that include all sectors of education along with business representatives and others to plan a P-16 Compact.
2. Prepare a plan that reflects commitments of the major stakeholders by June 30, 2003.
3. Seek local, state and national support for implementing aspects of the plan.

Strategy B: Continue to promote innovative approaches to school design.

1. Support the Canton school district in developing a plan and implementing strategies to complete and sustain the Timken Regional Campus.
2. Collaborate with national and regional funders to build on the Freshman Academy model to help develop and bring to scale, on a mutually agreed-upon schedule, a “small high schools” model in the county.

Strategy C: Foster new thinking about roles and relationships in education in Stark County.

1. Convene district superintendents periodically to consider leadership issues as well as emerging ideas and practices about shared and distributive leadership.
2. Serve as the primary link between education and business in the County and import relevant business practices to education while promoting business support of education.
3. Encourage increased family participation in education by developing materials that foster awareness of education policies and practices and encouraging schools to adopt approaches that facilitate family involvement in student learning.

Goal Two: Collaborate with educational leaders, funders and local business to build the capacity of educators throughout Stark County.

Strategy A: Collaborate with the county’s Educational Service Center and district superintendents to regularly assess the needs of teachers and administrators in Stark County.

Strategy B: Help to develop and bring to scale innovative county-wide approaches to educator recruitment, retention and professional development.

Strategy C: Collaborate with the service center and the districts in determining appropriate leadership development models for Stark County and provide guidance in seeking funds to test these models in the county.

Goal Three: Provide leadership to the community in developing a vision and understanding of effective education and in collaborating to realize and sustain it.

Strategy A: Engage community stakeholders in meetings and discussions, informed by data, about the importance of effective education to the economy and quality of life in Stark County.

Strategy B: Explore the creation of task forces, consisting of diverse stakeholders, around developing innovative solutions, arising out of best practices, to local educational needs.

Strategy C: Work with districts to align instructional goals and strategies with relevant federal and state policies.

Strategy D: Foster shared fund-raising and development strategies among the districts to develop cooperative approaches to meet common needs.

Strategy E: Export successful aspects of the Stark model.

Goal Four: Expand existing and design new communications and outreach efforts to highlight educational success in Stark County and to disseminate the results of the Partnership's work.

Strategy A: Provide reliable information and facts about education in Stark County through an active communications program.

1. Continue to produce and disseminate Achievement!, the Partnership's newsletter, expanding both its frequency and readership.
2. Issue "occasional papers" on selected educational issues.
3. Explore the use of media advisories, op-eds, expanded use of broadcast media and similar dissemination strategies.

Strategy B: Pursue opportunities to draw attention to the Partnership's work in promoting comprehensive education reform.

1. Prepare and disseminate an annual report.
2. Seek appropriate venues to make presentations on the work of the Partnership in promoting education reform in Stark County.
3. Sponsor meetings and conferences with noted education experts and disseminate the proceedings.
4. Pursue opportunities to interact with leading national and local education reform support organizations.
5. Increase the use of technology to enhance communications and recognition strategies.
6. Create an advisory committee, consisting of board members and others to make recommendations about communications and recognition strategies.

Goal Five: Design and implement a comprehensive development program to ensure that the Partnership has sufficient resources to fulfill its mission and to carry out its planned activities.

Strategy A: Pursue local and statewide development opportunities from businesses and individuals.

1. Establish a special development committee, consisting of board members and others, which will work closely with staff in identifying and pursuing local and statewide development opportunities.
2. Pursue a capital campaign that seeks local support.

Strategy B: Pursue funding for specific projects from national and regional foundations.

1. Seek out new relationships with national and regional funders and be prepared to act on these relationships to develop funding opportunities for the Partnership.
2. Re-establish relationships with the Gund and Jennings Foundations and seek to collaborate with the KnowledgeWorks Foundation.
3. Explore the feasibility of sponsoring an annual conference that highlights issues addressed by the Partnership and invite national and local funders along with representatives from leading reform support organizations.

Goal Six: Maintain an effectively governed and efficiently managed organization.

Strategy A: Ensure that the board of directors remains committed to the Partnership's mission, knowledgeable about its activities, and dedicated to helping it garner the support it requires to meet its goals.

1. Prepare three-year financial and development plans, with measurable outcomes, to be approved by the board at an annual retreat.
2. Establish program advisory committees consisting of board and non-board members.
3. Develop assessment and evaluation templates for each program for regular review at board meetings.
4. Review this strategic plan annually and make necessary adjustments.

Strategy B: Ensure that the Partnership has qualified and sufficient staff to carry out its mission and programs and that the staff is properly supported.

1. Review staffing needs in the light of the strategic plan.
2. Review all job descriptions, processes and procedures, and compensation policies, making necessary adjustments.