

## Contents

Collaboration Overview .....	1
Collaboration Purpose .....	2
About the Collaboration .....	2
Collaboration Structure .....	3
Promising Practices .....	4
Lessons Learned .....	6
Accomplishments .....	7
Resources .....	8

## Collaboration Overview

[Project U-Turn](#) began in 2004–2005 as a city-wide collaborative to address the dropout crisis in Philadelphia. As of 2011, Project U-Turn has representatives from over 50 organizations, including the school district, city agencies, foundations, youth-serving organizations, universities, parents, and young people. By identifying and examining the problem, promoting the crisis as a system-wide issue rather than an education issue, involving and sustaining a diverse array of partners, and working to both prevent students from dropping out as well as re-engage those who have already dropped out, the collaboration has achieved a number of key accomplishments and has been able to grow through its best practices and lessons learned.

Project U-Turn’s collaborative structure includes the following:

- A flexible arrangement with no Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or rules of engagement
- A consistent and sustained collaboration membership
- Regularly scheduled monthly meetings and pre-meetings, as necessary
- A workplan developed and updated every two years
- Key priorities that are identified every six months to ensure flexibility
- Strategic funding decisions

The collaboration’s promising practices include:

- Being able to support the Philadelphia Youth Network to work as an intermediary
- Building relationships and trust
- Providing funds to partners to ensure sustainability
- Linking funds to the workplan and identifying partners to pursue or receive funds
- Conducting a needs assessment
- Sharing data

The collaboration learned the following lessons:

- Involve the right people who have decision making capabilities, resources, and a collaborative mindset
- Recognize where the collaboration is on a developmental trajectory
- Manage leadership transitions within and outside the partnership by educating new leaders, having consistent partners, and embedding its work within the work of different systems
- Be flexible and willing to adapt as needed

## Collaboration Purpose

---

“[Project U-Turn](#) is a citywide campaign to understand, focus public attention on and most importantly, resolve Philadelphia’s dropout crisis.” [Philadelphia Youth Network](#)

Originally, the collaborative was focused on studying and fully understanding the dimensions of the dropout crisis. The key questions were:

- Who drops out in Philadelphia?
- When do they drop out?
- Why do they drop out?
- What are some characteristics we can know about them, e.g., how near or far from graduation are they, based on high school credits earned? What public systems do they populate?

Through their analysis of the dropout problem in Philadelphia, Ruth Curran Neild and Robert Balfanz found that during the 2003–2004 school year over 13,000 students became dropouts or near dropouts in Philadelphia. More information on the dropout problem in Philadelphia can be found in their report, *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia’s Dropout Crisis, 2000–2005*.

Based on that information and additional findings from the report, the collaborative focused on developing a plan to reduce and eliminate the dropout issue including drawing attention to the dropout crisis and leveraging resources to resolve the issue.

## About the Collaboration

---

- [Project U-Turn](#) recognizes that the dropout issue is something that has an impact on all systems and is not only a school-focused issue. Because of this, the collaboration situated the work within the youth workforce development system where Project U-Turn operates as a subcommittee of the local youth council. The committee focuses on all dimensions of the dropout issue, including economic implications for the city. Project U-Turn’s programmatic initiatives focus both on supporting prevention and in-school interventions to reduce the number of youth dropping out of school as well as efforts to support the reengagement of youth who are no longer in the school system.

- The collaboration began in 2004–2005 when Philadelphia was one of five cities selected to receive a grant from the [Youth Transition Funders Group](#) (YTFG), a set of regional and national funders dedicated to improving educational outcomes for disconnected youth, to focus on the dropout crisis.
- The grant from YTFG required a cross-sector collaboration to drive strategic action and gain community support for addressing the dropout problem in Philadelphia. Having this provision within the initial funding requirements provided the catalyst for the development of Project U-Turn.
- The city-wide collaboration is predominately focused on a policy agenda rather than on a program, although key partners in the collaborative design and implement programmatic interventions aligned with the key priorities of Project U-Turn.
- As of 2010, Project U-Turn incorporates over 50 organizations with a core steering committee of 22 organizations and agencies including representatives of the school district, city agencies, foundations, youth-serving organizations, universities, parents, and young people.
- The [Philadelphia Youth Network](#) (PYN) acts as an intermediary to support the collaboration by coordinating and building relationships between all the participating organizations and supporting development of the agenda, workplan, and funding efforts.

## Collaboration Structure

---

The collaboration is **intentionally structured to provide flexibility** for members to act in concert or individually on issues as they arise. While there were discussions of developing MOUs or rules of engagement early on in the process, the collaboration realized that establishing these formal structures would be counterproductive. Because of the diversity of organizations involved, the collaboration recognized the need for flexibility in order to allow participating members to act both as a united collaboration and as individual organizations supporting diverse agendas. This has been critical, especially for advocacy groups that at times need to oppose district and city policies. Rather than have a formal structure, PYN acts as the intermediary that helps to coordinate with members and link the organizations together.

Key aspects of the Project U-Turn structure include:

### Establish Continuity of Involvement and Sustainability

Through a focus on relationships and trust, the collaboration has been able to sustain a core group of members with over 50 percent of the original partners continuing to actively participate. While in some cases the members of the organizations have changed, the organizations at the table have remained relatively consistent. The collaboration has also strategically added new organizations that embrace common goals and support the new efforts that the collaboration has undertaken.

### Hold Monthly Meetings and Pre-meetings

The collaborative meets monthly. Prior to the meetings PYN, as the intermediary, ensures that all members of the collaborative are aware and comfortable with what is going to be discussed

and understand the realities of collaborations. For example, PYN staff might call a member prior to the monthly meetings when the topic to be discussed is something that is politically difficult or uncomfortable for that member. PYN staff work with the member to provide strategies for addressing the issue. By addressing issues prior to the meeting, it ensures that the group meetings run smoothly and that partners are able to have open and honest communication.

## **Develop and continuously update a workplan**

Approximately every two years the collaboration works together to update its workplan. The workplan is extensive and acts as a wish list and map of what should be done. The plan includes objectives and issues for each goal, e.g., which items need funding, if there is funding on hand, and who might be involved in that item. The collaboration recognizes that all organizations might not be working on all areas of the workplan, and that many of the items in the plan do not demand that organizations do additional work outside their scope.

## **Identify key priorities**

Based on the workplan, every six months the collaborative updates its key priorities and structures its meetings around its priorities. It recognizes that the priorities laid out in the workplan may need to shift based on the current context (e.g., political shifts, opportunities available, and challenges). By reviewing priorities regularly, the collaborative is able to adapt as needed.

## **Identify funding gaps**

During the development of the workplan, the collaboration links items identified in the plan to funding. This allows it to identify which items need additional funding, come to consensus about which actions they will pursue, and be more strategic when funding and RFPs become available.

## **Promising Practices**

---

The following are examples of practices that have helped the Project U-Turn work collaboratively to alleviate the dropout crisis in Philadelphia.

### **Have an intermediary and the funds to support it**

The ability to fund an intermediary—PYN—has helped to sustain the collaboration and ensure good working relationships between partners. Having an intermediary dedicated to the work is not cheap—there are costs associated with staff time, meeting costs, and other partner costs. But an intermediary's work coordinating and connecting members on all levels, leading additional fundraising efforts, and managing the work plan helps to engage all partners, ensure that they feel comfortable, and sustain the collaborative. For Project U-Turn, funds associated with the intermediary also allow partners to participate in activities (e.g., conferences) as a collaborative that they might not have been able to afford without additional support.

## Build relationships and trust

Building relationships and trust have been important priorities throughout the collaboration. As the intermediary, PYN focuses on relationship building and management, coaching members of the collaboration on how to work together and helping them to have open and honest communication within meetings.

## Provide funds to partners

Through a close relationship with the William Penn Foundation, a regional foundation that has provided major support to the collaboration, Project U-Turn is able to provide small grants to organizations to help sustain their participation. For example, the collaboration might provide a small grant to a local parent organization to help disseminate information to other parents in Philadelphia about Project U-Turn's efforts.

## Link funds to the workplan

Project U-Turn seeks funds to support its collective efforts, as well as those of individual organizations. Every two years, the key partners work together to update the Project U-Turn workplan. Funding requests are then made based on the objectives and funding needs identified in that plan. In addition to providing a clear set of priorities and objectives, the workplan acts as a tool that shows all partners what money has been raised, where it will be spent and where they still have funding gaps, and the partners responsible for the work. Once funds are procured, the funds for that line item go directly to the partners who were identified to do the work. Because the decision-making process occurs in advance, all members of the collaboration know who will be receiving which funds when they are available, and what the expectations are for their work. For some items within the workplan, there may not be a partner identified. In these cases, an RFP or a partner may be identified at a later point.

The funds for items within the workplan are raised collectively through the collaboration and individually to support Project U-Turn goals. For example, there may be some line items within the workplan where the school district is better positioned to pursue funding than the collaboration as a whole. In addition, there are many tasks outlined in the workplan that fit within the scope of work of a member organization and therefore do not require additional funds.

## Conduct a needs assessment

Before the collaboration moved forward, an in-depth analysis of the dropout problem in Philadelphia was conducted. This report, [\*Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000–2005 \(PDF, 50 pages\)\*](#), by Ruth Curran Neild and Robert Balfanz, used the Kids Integrated Data System (KIDS), a set of data that merges individual level data from the School District of Philadelphia, and Philadelphia's Department of Public Health, Department of Human Services, and Office of Emergency Shelter and Services. By using this comprehensive data set, the collaboration was able not only to understand the number of youth who dropped out but also to identify predictors and factors related to graduating and dropping out. The collaboration used this report to develop a call to action, [\*Turning it Around: A Collective Effort to Understand and Resolve Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis \(PDF, 26 pages\)\*](#), and purposefully linked the release of the report with a call to

action at the beginning of the campaign. This reinforced that the dropout issue was not just viewed as a problem, but as a problem that could be addressed by the city through specific actions by a variety of stakeholders.

## **Create a data dashboard**

Annually, Project U-Turn uses data to track the progress of the collaboration's efforts along five dimensions: 1) the current graduation rate, 2) the rate of ninth-grade students on track for on-time graduation, 3) the number of available seats in multiple pathways alternative education, 4) the number of youth asking to be reconnected, and 5) how many dollars have been leveraged for the collaborative. Early on this information was shared publically to raise support, but it is now used as a method for internal evaluation. In addition to using data to evaluate the collaboration, Project U-Turn looks at whether its message and goals are still relevant within the city, and whether organizations and members continue to value the collaboration and remain engaged.

## **Lessons Learned**

---

The following are lessons that Project U-Turn has learned as they collaboratively work to alleviate the dropout crisis in Philadelphia.

### **Involve the right people**

Project U-Turn has found that it is important not only to invite the right organizations to the table but to invite the right people from those organizations. To do this, they found that it was important to do the following:

- Involve those with decision-making capabilities. This means that members are able to make decisions at the meeting without needing to receive approval from others within their organizations.
- Include people who can bring resources including financial resources, in kind resources, and expertise to the collaboration.
- Promote a collaborative mindset among members, so they can see themselves as part of something larger than their own body of work. The collaboration found that data can be used to drive the work strategically and help members understand what their roles are and how the collaboration's goals and actions relate to their individual organizational goals.

### **Maintain a developmental trajectory for the partnership**

Throughout the course of the collaboration, Project U-Turn has found that it is important to recognize where the collaboration is in the developmental process (e.g., laying the foundation, strategizing, or operationalizing and implementing), to recognize how that influences which partners, and which people should be involved.

### **Manage leadership transitions within and outside the partnership**

During the course of the collaboration it is important to be able to manage transitions in leadership. Project U-Turn had to focus its efforts on getting the support of the newly elected

mayor and superintendent as well as others in leadership positions. It found that leadership changes can dramatically change how partner organizations see themselves connected or not connected to work; therefore, it is important to make contingency plans for all shifts in leadership. To do this they found it is important to:

- **Have consistent partners.** Partner with members that are committed to the work, are not politically appointed, and are able to weather the transitions.
- **Educate leadership.** Meet with new leadership before they are elected, participate in the hiring process if possible, or meet with them early in their tenure to educate them about your work. Be aware of their agenda and understand how you might need to reframe your work to fit within their agenda.
- **Embed your work in systems' workplans.** Find a way to embed your work in systems' workplans and make the collaboration's goals something that is also their goal. For example, Project U-Turn was able to work with the juvenile justice system to illustrate the importance of education for youth involved in the system. Over time it has been able to see education issues take hold within the juvenile justice system.

## Be flexible

One of the overarching lessons that the Project U-Turn collaboration has recognized is that while the goal of the collaboration never changes, the strategy used to reach the goal has to be fluid. It recognizes the need to be able to take advantage of new opportunities and adapt when it faces challenges. Project U-Turn found this need to adapt approaches throughout the process is one reason that having a strict MOU structure would not work.

## Accomplishments

---

As of 2011, Project U-Turn had:

- Created nearly 5,000 new slots to allow more students to participate in alternative education programs.
- Created the first re-engagement centers in the U.S. The centers provide young people and adults with “one stop” access to information and services leading to re-enrollment in a high school diploma or GED program. The centers also focus on connecting youth to resources such as childcare and employment, and providing support as the youth transition back to an educational setting.
- Leveraged over \$100 million through partnerships and grant funding.
- The mayor and superintendent have adopted the goals of the collaboration as key priorities within their administration.
- Established an education support center within the Department of Human Services.

