



America's Promise Alliance Evaluation

First Annual Evaluation Report Executive Summary

June 21, 2009

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Executive Summary

America's Promise Alliance believes that every child deserves the chance to succeed. The top priority of the Alliance, the nation's largest multi-sector youth-focused collaborative, is to ensure that all children graduate from high school ready for college, work, and life. The Alliance has identified Five Promises that support young people to lead happier, healthier, and more productive lives and build a stronger society. The Five Promises include:

- Caring adults
- Safe places
- A healthy start
- An effective education, and
- Opportunities to help others.

On January 1, 2008, the Alliance embarked on an ambitious goal of reaching 15 million children with more of the Five Promises in the next five years. At roughly the same time, the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University was contracted to assess the effectiveness of the Alliance's strategies as well as to provide feedback throughout the process so that program decisions would be informed through formative evaluation.

This first annual evaluation report focuses on progress to date on three major efforts, the Dropout Prevention Summit Initiative, the Featured Communities Initiative, and the continuous efforts to engage and expand the Alliance of National Partners. For each initiative, the report presents a theory of change that identifies key steps in the overall process of producing sustainable change in the lives of children. For these key steps, the evaluation team has designed a data collection scheme to monitor progress and to help identify gaps in the process of starting the initiative. The team has gathered data from a variety of sources to provide multiple perspectives on the progress and success of the initiatives. These include:

- **Interviews** with featured community conveners and national partners of the Alliance
- **Surveys** of Dropout Prevention Summit attendees, local partner participants of the featured communities, and national partners
- **Documentation** of the activities from the staff of America's Promise Alliance as well as conveners of the summits and featured communities
- **Media tracking** of print, online, and television sources regarding the coverage of the Dropout Prevention Summits in the featured communities.

The evaluation report also presents baseline information from a variety of public sources related to high school completion, college readiness, volunteering (a measure of civic engagement) and children's health insurance coverage. By monitoring trends in these indicators at the national, state,

and local (where available) levels, continued evaluation will provide insight into whether the nation is experiencing gains in key markers of children's success.

Finally, the report discusses the views of the national partners to provide important perspective on the activities of the Alliance. The partners' views on the value added by the Alliance in improving their organizations' ability to better serve youth and to reach more children is essential to understanding the success of the Alliance. Qualitative interviews with the 34 most highly engaged national partners and a survey of all national partner organizations provide critical and timely feedback and offer suggestions for how to enhance the effectiveness of the Alliance.

This summary focuses on the recommendations that emerged from the evaluation process. Details on the evaluation methods and measures – as well as a detailed presentation of the findings - can be found in the full report.

Highlights

Dropout Prevention Summits

On April 1, 2008, the Alliance officially launched the Dropout Prevention Initiative. This initiative aims to raise awareness of the high school dropout crisis and to bring together partners from multiple sectors, including education, state and local government, and business, to address the issue. The Alliance intends to sponsor summits in all 50 states and 55 local communities.

- As of June 1, 2009, the Alliance has sponsored 39 Dropout Prevention Summits that have attracted over 13,200 attendees and engaged over 880 organizations in summit planning and subsequent community action plan development.
- The Alliance has invested over \$2.8 million in developing the framework for hosting the summits and initiating a post-summit action plan in each state or community. It has also provided grants to communities and states to host the summits.
- Overwhelmingly, summit attendees rated the summits highly. For example:
 - 86% of attendees who responded to a post-summit survey stated that they learned something new and useful about the dropout problem in their community.
 - 77% stated that they learned of local dropout prevention-related efforts that they were previously unaware of.
 - 92% thought that the work they do around the dropout issue will be positively affected by the summit.
 - 83% thought that the summit would lead to change in their community.

The evaluation also showed that summit conveners had uneven success in garnering the commitment of the business community. While summit planning and post-summit action groups had strong representation from the education, government, and non-profit sectors, most of the summits had relatively weak representation from the business sector. It may be useful for America's

Promise Alliance to consider strategies for helping summits broaden the sectors represented on planning committees and workgroups.

Featured Communities

The Featured Communities Initiative grew out of the Dropout Prevention Summit Initiative as a means to work more intensely with a small number of communities. The goal of this initiative is to change the way organizations in these 12 communities do business to serve youth and to increase the supports young people receive. The initiative, officially launched with a grand Kickoff Action Forum in September 2008, began with an implementation team of 21 national partners that has grown to include over 40 national partners and their local affiliates. The featured communities are Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Indianapolis, Jackson, Miss., Louisville, Ky., Nashville, Tenn., New Orleans, New York, Oakland, Calif., and Washington, D.C. Twelve similar communities were selected for comparison.

To date, America's Promise Alliance has invested in the initiative through a number of mechanisms. One notable investment includes the Kickoff Action Forum which was attended by 21 national partners and their local affiliates in each of the 12 Featured Communities. At this convening national partners declared commitment to the initiative and local partners were introduced both to the activities of the America's Promise Alliance and potentially to new partners in their local communities with whom they may not have previously connected. Other major expenditures include the online collaboration tool called iCohere, community grants for Dropout Prevention Summits and the *All Kids Covered* health insurance initiative, as well as Alliance staff time for support of the communities. As of June 2009, 11 of the 12 featured communities had held meetings (the exception is New York City). The primary focus of the networks has been on high school completion and dropout prevention. Five of the featured communities have held Dropout Prevention Summits.

Interviews with key Alliance partners and a broader web-based survey of partners showed support for the concept of the Featured Communities Initiative. The initiative was seen as a good strategy for focusing efforts to bring more of the Five Promises to more children. Supporting communities in developing collaborative relationships among local leaders was seen as a positive step. Focusing on just 12 communities was described as a way to achieve measurable results on a manageable scale, as compared to trying to improve national trends.

Interviews with local and national partners also suggested areas that need to be addressed:

- **Clearly articulate the theory of change for the Featured Communities Initiative.** Partners have requested greater clarity and transparency about the expectations for the featured communities. Partners will better be able to work together and improve outcomes for children if they are working toward the same goal.
- **Support conveners in cross-sector collaboration.** Several local conveners described the challenges of securing the commitment and involvement of a diverse mix of partners.

Tailoring approaches to each community's unique situation might be the best solution. The types of support and recommendations to each community likely differ.

- **Offer additional technical assistance to the communities.** Some featured community conveners said they would like more technical assistance from America's Promise. For example, instruction on public relations, leadership training, ready-made outreach materials, best practices, and increased staff support may be areas where America's Promise can concentrate future efforts. The type and level of additional technical assistance would vary with the needs of the individual communities.

Child Indicators

As part of the evaluation, trends in several indicators of child well-being are being tracked. Presented in this report are:

- **High school promotion rates:** The Promoting Power Index is used as a proxy for high school completion for the nation as a whole and for each state. This index will also be used to track high school promotion rates in the 12 featured communities and the 12 communities to which they will be compared.
- **Student achievement and college readiness:** The most recently available national and statewide averages from three standardized achievement tests are presented to provide a window into high school students' achievement and college readiness. The measures are:
 - *The National Assessment of Education Progress*, a nationally representative tabulation of student achievement in math, reading, writing, science, and other subjects administered by the National Center for Education Statistics;
 - *The SAT*, the best-known college entrance exam in the United States; and
 - *The College Admissions Exam (ACT)*, another widely used college entrance exam.
- **Civic engagement:** Volunteerism is a measure of civic engagement as it assesses how individuals are willing to devote unpaid time to bettering their community. The 2008 Current Population Survey shows that 21.9% of individuals aged 16-24 volunteered during the previous 12 months.
- **Children's health insurance:** Health insurance is a key factor in whether a child has access to health care for preventive services. In 2007, approximately 12 percent of children in families below 200 percent of the federal poverty level lacked health insurance.

Over time, the evaluation will continue to track these measures nationally, in the states, and in the featured and comparison communities (where available).

National Partners' Perspective on the Alliance

Through interviews and surveys, the national partners indicated that America's Promise Alliance *adds significant value* to the youth development field by:

- **Focusing national attention on children and youth:** Most of the national leaders interviewed highlighted the important role America's Promise Alliance plays in focusing national attention on issues of children and youth.
- **Providing strong, credible leadership:** Several national partners noted that the leadership provided by Marguerite Kondracke, CEO and president of America's Promise Alliance, has been a critical added value.
- **Convening great thinkers across sectors:** National partners stated that America's Promise Alliance has the ability to bring together partners from diverse sectors, including health care, education, and business, to create a broad platform for child advocacy.
- **Advocating for policies to support children and youth:** The national partners who were interviewed saw the advocacy efforts of America's Promise, and more specifically First Focus, its bipartisan affiliate focused on advocacy, as an added value. Partners thought that First Focus has the resources to advance issues of importance to their organizations and that it produces quality work related to policy. Several partners recommended that America's Promise continue in this role.

Overall Recommendations

Throughout the course of this evaluation, several recommendations have emerged. These recommendations are derived primarily from the national and local partners themselves. These perspectives provide valuable insight into how the Alliance can strengthen the current initiatives and better leverage the combined strength of the partners.

Capitalize on the strengths of America's Promise Alliance. Strengths of America's Promise Alliance include focusing national attention on issues related to children and youth and serving as a strong voice for policies that benefit children. Additionally, the momentum created by the success of the Dropout Prevention Summits can be leveraged to create more in-depth, long-term community change.

Provide specific opportunities for partner engagement. Partners at the national and local levels would like increased clarity about the roles and expectations for partner engagement. Opportunities for partner engagement may need to be tailored to the type of organizational structure, their areas of expertise, and their leadership capacity. It may be appropriate for some partners to assume leadership roles for Alliance initiatives while others may prefer to serve in a supporting role. Clarifying specific opportunities may increase partner engagement and reduce frustration.

Clarify the theory of change for the initiatives of the Alliance. Articulating the core components of the model for increasing the high school graduation rate will help focus efforts to achieve the goals of the Alliance and aid in the evaluation of the initiatives. Developing a shared understanding of the underlying assumptions of the model will ensure coordinated national and local efforts.

Improve communications with the national and local leaders. Partners expressed the need for more specific, actionable information from America’s Promise to guide their interactions with the Alliance. The challenge will be to strike the right balance between fully informing partners of the activities of Alliance and not overwhelming them with non-essential information.

In conclusion, the evaluation of the initiatives of America’s Promise Alliance has identified clear areas of strength as well as some opportunities for improvements. The formative evaluation findings provide suggestions for mid-course adjustments in the activities of the Alliance. Future evaluation reports will examine outcomes related to Alliance activities including trends in child indicators and in public awareness through the media analysis.