MAXIMIZING THE MIDDLE: REFLECTIONS ON UNITED WAY’S MIDDLE GRADES SUCCESS AND TRANSITION CHALLENGE
ABOUT UNITED WAY WORLDWIDE

United Way is the world’s largest privately funded non-profit; a global network operating in 1,800 communities in more than 40 countries and territories. United Way improves lives by mobilizing the caring power of communities around the world to advance the common good. This includes engaging 2.6 million volunteers and 9.6 million donors around the world. Together, we raise $5 billion every year to create community solutions that improve lives and impact up to 50 million people. Learn more at www.unitedway.org.
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I. INTRODUCTION

The middle grades are a time of dramatic growth for youth. This is a time period marked by significant physical and emotional changes, as adolescents experience the early stages of puberty and a late spurt in brain development. It is also a time marked by the increasing importance and influence of peers and increasing independence from parents and other family members.

In schools, the middle grades mark a unique period of transition. Students entering middle schools are exposed to a more fluid environment with changing classes, multiple teachers, rotating schedules, and significantly larger numbers of students at each grade level that come from different elementary schools. There are increased expectations for student academic performance and behavior/self-control. Middle grades students are also expected to assume greater responsibility for their learning and to develop and put to use critical work-study skills including task persistence, completing assignments and projects on time, time management, and organizational skills.

A growing body of research demonstrates that strengthening the middle grades experience is a critical leverage point for improving high school graduation rates and increasing the number of students who graduate prepared for higher education.
THE CHALLENGE

Despite the potential that exists to create high-quality learning environments in schools that meet the academic and developmental needs of middle graders, data suggests that we as a nation have not quite figured out how to make the middle grades an engaging and worthwhile experience for most adolescents.

- The middle grades are marked by a noticeable decline in academic performance. Eighth grade performance on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) shows improvement in reading and mathematics over the past two decades; however two-thirds of eighth graders in 2013 tested Basic or Below Basic in reading and, despite significant gains in achievement during this time, 64 percent of eighth graders tested Basic or Below Basic in Mathematics. This trend in national data is supported by local studies noting the same downward shift in student performance in the middle grades.

- Student engagement declines in the middle grades. As they progress each year in middle school, students report that they are less likely to feel safe in school, to have a best friend, to have the opportunity to do what they do best, and to receive recognition or praise for their work. This trend deepens over time and continues in high school. Data from the 2013 Gallup Student Poll showed a steady decline in student engagement in the U.S. across grade levels (5th – 12th graders).

- Many students experience poor transitions into high school. There are more students in ninth grade than any other year in high school. This is largely attributable to the significant number of students who enter high school unprepared and are forced to repeat the ninth grade. These trends are even more pronounced for students of color and/or those attending low-performing, high poverty schools.

- There is no consistent and widely accepted approach to strengthening the in-school experience for middle grades youth. Experts differ on the extent to which grade configuration matters and reform movements spanning two centuries in the U.S. have shifted back and forth between creating stand-alone middle schools or eliminating them in favor of kindergarten-8 or other grade configurations (e.g., 6-12).

- Roughly two thirds of states in the U.S. offer licensure specifically for middle grade education, and fewer actually require that teachers obtain this level of certification to teach in middle schools.

- The interest and emphasis on improving the middle grades has waxed and waned over the years as focus inevitably shifts to other compelling issues in education reform including: the Common Core (education standards), teacher effectiveness, post-secondary access and completion, and standardized testing.
EMERGING SOLUTIONS

Despite these persistent challenges, recent research and resulting innovations are paving the way to change this trajectory for students and for the schools they attend. At the individual student level, research by Johns Hopkins shows that attendance, grades, and behavior in the middle grades—particularly in the 6th grade—can help predict whether a student will persist to earn a high school diploma or drop out of school. Students who miss 10 percent or more of school, receive a failing grade in reading or mathematics, and have discipline referrals are more likely to drop out than their peers who do not. This research gives parents, education and community partners actionable information to provide early and effective interventions that can interrupt the path to dropout.

At the school and district levels, there are growing efforts by key organizations to advance comprehensive reforms in middle schools by working with networks of schools and districts to implement changes within agreed upon frameworks that outline a coherent set of practices. Most notable national examples include: Diplomas Now, a partnership between Johns Hopkins Talent Development, Communities in Schools and City Year; Southern Regional Education Board’s initiative, Making the Middle Grades Work; The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform’s Schools to Watch Program; and more recently, the Middle School Matters Institute, led by Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk. These efforts are laudable and will provide much needed information about how we can better apply expanding research about what works in real-world school contexts to determine what can and cannot be replicated across classrooms, schools and districts.

These efforts are beginning to show results. However, a majority of this work has focused on changing school-based practices primarily led by school leaders and in a limited number of schools and districts. Accelerating progress, especially in communities that have a significant number of students attending low-performing and/or high-poverty schools, requires a laser-like focus on strengthening and scaling reforms. It also requires greater investment, scale, and the involvement and engagement of all stakeholders—including parents, community partners, and the business sector.
THE ROLE OF UNITED WAY

United Ways are trusted community conveners who can play a critical role in bringing together community stakeholders to advance shared goals in education, including starting new and/or strengthening existing efforts so that more young people graduate high school on time, prepared for college and career. United Ways can also work with school and community partners to help leverage, align, and coordinate activities so that more students have the just in time supports that they need to be successful in school. Many United Ways, because of their relationships with employees at local businesses and individuals in the community, can help to leverage volunteers who are eager to lend their time and talent to be part of the solution. Finally, United Ways work with partners to develop agreed upon measures of success, to build public will and increase advocacy for investment in education, and to mobilize resources to advance the work.

In recognition of this, and as part of an effort to accelerate and deepen our work in education, in 2012 United Way Worldwide engaged national researchers, policymakers and practitioners and local United Ways to better understand the factors that contribute most to middle grades success and on-time high school graduation, and to identify high-level strategies that would help to eliminate barriers to success.

From this process, United Way Worldwide developed Charting the Course, which includes the following core strategies and high-impact approaches that focus on middle grades success and high school graduation:

■ **Support struggling students.** Organize systems of wrap-around supports to promote academic success and on-time high school graduation. Focus on high impact approaches including creating early warning and response systems to identify students at greatest risk of dropout and provide them effective school and community-based supports to get them back in track to graduation. Also increase focus on and expand student access to effective grade and school-level transition supports, like high-quality summer programs.

■ **Engage and empower parents to support student success and on-time high school graduation.** Focus on providing information to families on how best to support their children’s success in the middle grades and high school; organizing parents to advocate for reform; and strengthening communications between families and schools.

■ **Reform and improve schools and school districts to ensure student engagement, learning, and preparation for life success.** Focus efforts on working in partnership with districts to ensure that the conditions for student success are present in every school, with an emphasis on turning around the lowest-performing schools.

These high-level, research–based national strategies were shared widely within the United Way network and are the foundation for United Way Worldwide’s capacity building efforts in education.
II. ABOUT THE MIDDLE GRADES CHALLENGE

Beginning in January 2013, United Way Worldwide partnered with the Forum for Youth Investment and the School Superintendents Association, national partners in the Ready by 21 National Partnership, to create a Challenge opportunity designed to build the capacity of local United Ways to work with partners and strengthen the middle grades experience by adapting and implementing the high-level strategies initially outlined in Charting the Course.10

The specific goals of the challenge were to:

■ Increase United Way and community capacity to sustain a focus on the middle grades;
■ Increase community-wide awareness of the importance of middle grades success and a willingness to take action;
■ Increase student, family, and community engagement;
■ Foster the development and implementation of early warning and response systems to strengthen the delivery of effective supports for students; and
■ Ultimately, improve educational outcomes for middle grades and high school students.
Nine local United Ways received matching $50,000 grants, individual technical assistance, and participated in a learning community from January 2013 through June 2014. Challenge sites were competitively selected based on local need, school and district performance ratings, the local United Way’s commitment and demonstrated capacity to work on the issue, the merits of submitted proposals, and funder interest in focusing on the Southeast region of the United States. The following United Ways participated in the Middle Grades Success and Transition Challenge:

- Metro United Way (Louisville)
- United Way Suncoast (Tampa)
- United Way of Allegheny County (Pittsburgh)
- United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County
- United Way of Greater Atlanta
- United Way of Greenville County
- United Way of the National Capital Area (District of Columbia)
- Spokane County United Way
- Valley of the Sun United Way (Phoenix)

These United Ways were specifically asked to engage community residents, especially students and families; develop new or strengthen existing coalitions, including school and district partners; and develop data-based strategies and approaches to strengthen the middle grades. As grantees, participating United Ways were required to match grant funds and to create diverse leadership Challenge teams that included key community stakeholders, such as schools and district leaders, the business community, advocacy groups, and youth-service providers.
UNITED WAY WORLDWIDE’S ROLE

United Way Worldwide (UWW) led the challenge and in this role provided support to individual participating United Ways, either directly or by leveraging external expertise and resources. Most importantly, UWW facilitated a learning community as a primary vehicle for building individual United Way capacity by creating structured opportunities for participating sites to share expertise, promising practices, experiences, and resources. In addition to support provided specifically to Challenge participants, UWW worked to develop a suite of virtual learning opportunities and tools that could be used by the entire network of United Ways. This includes an archived webinar series and a forthcoming messaging guide. Finally, United Way planned and convened a Middle Grades Symposium on December 3, 2014 that brought together national organizations from diverse sectors to highlight the importance of focusing on middle grades success, share the work of participating Challenge communities with a wider audience, and reflect on progress to date.

THE CHALLENGE – BY THE NUMBERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More than $4,180,000 in revenue raised to support middle grades work</th>
<th>12 Vista Volunteers supporting efforts in 4 communities</th>
<th>4 data-sharing agreements reached</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over 1,132 students, families and volunteers engaged in conversation and focus groups</td>
<td>73 partners engaged in 9 participating communities</td>
<td>33 middle and high schools directly benefited from supports</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EARLY RESULTS

Viewed collectively, these communities achieved the following results related to resource development, individual engagement, partnership development, and supports for students:

- Participating United Ways leveraged more than $4,180,000 in additional revenue to support their middle grades work. Sources of funding included United Way donors, corporate partners, federal grants, and foundations.

- United Ways partnered with approximately 73 partners across the nine communities to deepen their strategic work in the middle grades; partners included 11 local school districts; youth-serving organizations (Boys and Girls Clubs, Higher Achievement, Communities in Schools); affinity groups (100 Black Men, Hispanic Alliance, Urban League); and the faith-based community.

- 12 VISTA Volunteers supported this effort across four communities. Several were leveraged through UWW’s ongoing national partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service.

- Students in 33 middle and high schools across these nine communities directly benefitted from supports and services provided through community partnerships leveraged by United Ways and their partners.
III. THE CHALLENGE – A DEEPER DIVE

Each United Way and their community partners approached the Challenge based on existing community and school contexts and needs; there was no prescribed, uniform approach. Some communities focused on deepening engagement and gathering input to better understand the issues and barriers to middle grades success as a necessary preliminary step to ultimately developing strategies. Others used this opportunity to expand and strengthen existing programmatic efforts focused on the middle grades. And still others used this opportunity to initiate system-building efforts with partners, most often the development of early warning and response systems, a priority focus of the Challenge.

In the following section, these approaches are discussed in greater detail. Although the work is described in terms of the three primary components of the Challenge, each United Way’s effort reflected an integrated set of complimentary and activities which served to reinforce each other.
DEEPENING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Although more is understood about the connection between specific performance indicators in the middle grades and dropout (i.e., the ABCs)—the underlying causes that result in poor school performance, declining attendance and troubling behavior can vary tremendously by individual student, family, school, and community. For this reason, engaging students and their families directly to understand specific barriers was a core part of the Challenge work in every participating community. Engagement also extended to schools, school staff, and community members, as they are critical stakeholders with a role to play to improve student performance and outcomes. In this way, publicly available quantitative data about students and schools, in most communities, was balanced by direct engagement to deepen understanding and create more informed decision-making about what strategies would best address the challenges.

ENGAGING YOUTH

The United Ways of Suncoast (UWS), Greater Atlanta (UWGA), and Allegheny County (UWAC) all convened community conversations with youth and/or youth focus groups. In Allegheny County, UWAC chose to use the Challenge grant opportunity to deepen engagement with youth already being served as part of its “Be A Middle School Mentor” initiative. Students were specifically asked, as part of a focus group conversation, about their elementary and middle school experiences and about additional support they needed to successfully transition into high school. Thirty-one mentees and mentors participated in this focus group conversation. From this engagement, UWAC and its school and community partners learned that mentees desired a “looping” of mentors who might persist with them throughout their entire middle school experience and that students desired more information and assistance with the high school application process. Mentors echoed the students and offered ideas for enhancing the program that included creating more pathways for continuing mentoring relationships into high school, greater opportunities for engaging families, and for career exploration. This feedback informed the strategic direction of the UWAC’s efforts; UWAC subsequently worked with district and community partners to identify ways to provide students with more assistance with the transition into high school.
Reflecting on the experience and the importance of engagement, UWS staff commented:

"Finding our niche in conversation around student achievement has been our most successful initiative thus far. We've discovered that many people, including parents, youth, and community members, are excited and desirous of 'complicated conversations' that engages real issues that affect people's lives. Creating safe space around a film has given us an opportunity to engage folks in new and unique ways, and has been very effective!"

The United Ways in Tampa and Atlanta chose to leverage the film, *American Promise*—which documents the efforts of two families struggling to successfully raise and educate their young African American sons in New York City—to engage African American male students in their communities.

In Atlanta, UWGA partnered with 100 Black Men of America, Americas Promise Alliance, the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation and their local Ready by 21 Leadership Council to plan and convene screenings of the film, followed by group community conversations. Conversation centered on understanding the challenges that families of students attending BEST Academy faced and the role community partnerships play in providing supports to mitigate or remove those barriers. In the first screenings and conversations, middle and high school students from BEST Academy were invited to attend separate, students-only sessions. In total, approximately 400 middle and high school students participated. A third convening included a broader group of stakeholders including teachers, school administrators, business leaders, and youth organizations. More than 150 community members participated.

In Tampa, United Way Suncoast (UWS) used the film to spark multiple conversations with over 500 youth and adults in their community focused on the intersection between race and student achievement. The film provided a platform to engage in what can sometimes be difficult conversations. Like UWGA, UWS partnered with community-based organizations to convene these events.

**ENGAGING FAMILIES**

Greenville, Greater Atlanta, and Metro United Ways all deepened their engagement with families in their communities, particularly the parents of students that were the focus of their middle grades Challenge efforts. The intensity and duration of the engagement activities varied by community, but all were focused on better understanding the barriers that these families faced related to ensuring their children's success in middle school, providing related supports, and creating opportunities for families to strengthen their parenting skills. In addition, all of the communities focused their family engagement efforts on families of the target population of concern. Some, like UWGA, focused on families at individual schools (like BEST Academy, in Atlanta), while others focused on families in school feeder patterns located within existing neighborhoods like Louisville's Olmstead North and South Academies, and Greenville's White Horse community.

In Greenville, the White Horse community—an economically depressed and racially segregated area that once held the community’s textile mills, some of which still stand empty today—was the focus of UWGC’s middle grades work. Staff at UWGC conducted ten community conversations that included parents, youth, and community leaders from this neighborhood. One particular parent community conversation was led by a UWGC staff person who grew up in that particular community and attended a local high school. UWGC partnered with the Hispanic Alliance to convene family members at a local church. Conversation centered on communicating with school staff, supports that families
Reflecting on their efforts to engage parents, MUW staff noted:

“[The Challenge] has given us the opportunity to specifically focus on the parents of older children. Our primary focus on parent engagement [to date] has been through early care and education, using specific tools like the Ages and Stages Questionnaire along with trusted neighborhood leaders and Parent Cafes. The Middle Grades Challenge allowed us the opportunity to pilot lessons learned and tools from this experience with parents of older children.”

need to help their students, and ways that UWGC and other community partners could provide assistance. Parents from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds attended the meeting and there was an evident language barrier as some families were non-English speaking. This was deftly addressed by having a translator present to support these families. Although conversations initially tended to fall along racial/ethnic lines, with families primarily engaging those from a similar background, by the end of the conversation parents from different backgrounds were making concerted efforts to directly engage each other and to proactively determine what they could do to be more supportive of one another.

UWGC combined its parent engagement community conversations with a broader community engagement strategy that included tours of the community. White Horse Crescent community tours were used strategically to help donors, UWGC staff, partners, and policymakers who were not familiar with the community understand the area’s historical significance, current economic challenges, and growing diversity.

In Atlanta, parents of students attending BEST Academy were invited to participate in a Family Leadership Institute that explicitly focused on helping families help their children smoothly transition into high school. To offer this training, UWGA engaged One World Link, an organization with experience in family engagement training that previously worked with them to develop their early childhood family engagement trainings. In total, 16 family members initially enrolled in the program; seven completed all four sessions and graduated from the program. Despite a significant drop in participation, those that attended received training on planning; understanding school curriculum and instruction, including Common Core State Standards; family support principles and techniques; and additional resources focused on student transition. Participants were partnered with mentors who worked with them in between sessions. They were asked to take on a final project and present their goals in the last session. The group planned to reconvene in the fall of 2014 to share the results of their work.

In Louisville, MUW parent engagement efforts were multi-faceted, and included an awareness campaign and community-based parent outreach. MUW’s neighborhood-based engagement strategy reflected its school context, in particular, a historical legacy of busing to desegregate Jefferson County’s Public Schools and a magnet school program that resulted in many students attending middle and high school outside of their immediate neighborhoods. MUW’s approach was to focus on families in zip codes that sent the greatest proportion of students to Olmstead North and Olmstead South middle schools.

The awareness campaign, undertaken in partnership with Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), was aimed at conveying the importance of learning and regular school attendance. The primary tactic used was the dissemination of collateral (e.g., yard signs, refrigerator magnets, report card envelopes) at school events, in report card mailings, in strategic
locations in the community (i.e., yards along a major traveled roadway in surrounding school neighborhoods). MUW also worked with JCPS to distribute parent surveys to determine how best to strengthen school-parent relationships.

A strong complement to the awareness campaign was MUW's more intensive efforts to directly engage parents in the neighborhood with the highest rates of absenteeism. This included neighborhood canvasses or “Stomps”, during which 12 volunteer students from the local high school, where many of the middle school students matriculate, partnered with adults to knock on doors and engage families about the importance of school attendance.

MUW's engagement efforts also included three community conversations at local churches or community centers to discuss the importance of school attendance and to inform residents about the attendance campaign. Information gathered during these community conversations was subsequently used to plan and convene eight Parent Cafes. Parent Cafes included district and school-level leadership and were designed to share pertinent information with families regarding out-of-school time and summer learning opportunities; post-high school planning (e.g., the FAFSA); youth development; and risk-taking behaviors. Twenty-four parents representing 50 children attended the Parent Cafes.
COLLECTIVE LESSONS LEARNED

1. Engage early and often. Rather than wait to have community and school-level data analyzed and formulate strategies, engage youth and families as part of the process of identifying barriers and articulating solutions. In Greenville, for instance, UWGC noted that, despite the success of their efforts, they waited too long to engage the community. In hindsight, staff would have reached out earlier during the planning phase. Resist the urge to “check the box” on community engagement. MUW, in Louisville, undertook a multi-faceted approach to engagement that likely aided their success because it increased the chances of having multiple contacts with parents and gave families more than one opportunity to engage.

2. Partner with trusted community organizations. Almost all of these United Ways leveraged relationships with partners to co-convene youth and family engagement activities. This was especially important when addressing sensitive issues (e.g., race) and language barriers, and for building trust. Often these partners were already trusted by the community, had existing relationships that could be leveraged, and were attuned to perspectives of community residents that had implications for planning.

3. Leverage and train staff. Staff who grew up in specific communities that a United Way is interested in engaging can be tremendous resources. They can serve as a bridge between the community and the United Way, especially if the organization doesn’t have existing relationships with community members. However, all staff members need training on engaging community stakeholders and engaging youth based on the principles of youth development. Investing in this kind of capacity can pay dividends in the long-term. As an example, staff at the UWGC attended a Harwood Community engagement training prior to their outreach to the community.

4. Maintain your principles. The downside of working with partners can be negotiating differing philosophies and approaches to shared work. In Greenville, UWGC found this out when one of their partners wanted to restrict the parent community conversations to Latino parents as part of creating a comfortable environment for them to engage. For UWGC, the principle of creating a cross-cultural and inclusive environment was more important. UWGC stuck to its decision to make the conversation open to all parents and the meeting was a success.

5. Remember that place matters. United Ways met parents and youth where they were. All of the outreach described above took place in homes, at schools, and in well-known community institutions—including churches and community centers—that were not only convenient for intended participants, but also familiar places frequented by community members. The willingness to come to people speaks volumes regarding an organization’s intent to meaningfully engage the community.

6. Engage youth directly. As part of this, provide a safe and separate space for youth to engage. Preferably, youth should be given roles in leading the conversation and synthesizing the information, as well as opportunities to engage their peers directly. In Louisville, MUW’s use of youth to canvass neighborhoods provided an important leadership opportunity and a chance for community residents to see young people in a positive light.

7. Leverage past efforts. In Atlanta, UWGA had previously partnered with One World Link to engage families of young children as part of their early childhood initiatives. Based on the success of that earlier work, UWGA re-engaged them to help design and co-implement their Family Leadership Institute for parents of students in the middle grades at BEST Academy.

8. Follow-up! This is where many well-intentioned efforts fail. Develop an engagement plan that builds connecting with families, school leaders, and youth into the ongoing work in education. Summarize and share key finding from your conversations with participants and other relevant stakeholders. In your communications, be clear about how this engagement has informed and helped to refine your efforts.
BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING COALITIONS

A second core requirement of the Challenge was to develop new or strengthen existing coalitions’ focus on the middle grades as a key section of the education pipeline. This engagement was intended to align and overlap with grassroots community engagement efforts discussed previously. As much as possible, communities were asked to leverage existing coalitions that focus on education and youth development and to expand those efforts to include a focus on the middle grades rather than create entirely new coalitions. All sites were asked to engage school and district leaders as part of their coalitions. They were also asked to ensure that their coalitions were diverse and representative, which included non-profits, the corporate sector, youth service providers, and faith and community-based organizations.

Communities ranged in the breadth of their stakeholder engagement. Some sites—including the United Ways in Greenville, Spokane and Asheville—focused on the creation of broad multi-sector coalitions and working with these groups to establish shared goals, priorities, and activities. Other communities focused more narrowly on deepening their engagement with schools and school districts and/or existing relationships with community partners.

In Asheville, UWABC focused its efforts on strategically engaging potential coalition members to put aside their traditional siloed efforts and instead focus on the overall shared goal of improving middle grades success. Core partners in their newly created Asheville Buncombe County Middle Grades Network included two local school districts (Asheville City and Buncombe County Schools); the Asheville City Schools Foundation, and youth-serving organizations (YMCA of WNC, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Girls on the Run, Open Doors of Asheville, and Addiction, Recovery, Prevention). This group developed shared goals and priorities that included planning to pilot an early warning and response system in partner school districts for the 2015-16 school year, drafting a data-sharing MOU to facilitate proactive responses to students’ needs, and working to identify a data-sharing platform for this purpose. Keys to the group’s success included dividing themselves into smaller subgroups focused on specific priorities, setting clear expectations around expected time commitment, and careful initial cultivation and seeding a leadership group that could subsequently carry forward the work.

In Greenville, UWGC took a similar approach. Core members of the Challenge Team included the local out-of-school time network (housed at the United Way), staff from the local school district (Greenville County Schools) and two local high schools, the Hispanic Alliance, and Communities in School. Greenville’s strategy for coalition building was to individually interview potential members to gauge their interest in participating and to ascertain their overall perspective on education and understanding of the community.

This approach to coalition building was best encapsulated by UWGC staff:

How do you really use the people in a room to build a coalition? What are the things that have to happen when you’re all together to really strengthen a coalition of people? It’s the difference of putting a group of people in together in a room and saying “oh you’re a coalition” and having them walk and work towards the building of that coalition together.
UWGC also had to change the way it traditionally engaged community partners: rather than report out on activities, akin to how most board meetings were previously structured, UWGC used the time to engage coalition members in discussion.

UWGC took a two-pronged approach to coalition building. The Challenge Team consisted of high-level school district, corporate, foundation and community leaders. This group was instrumental in setting strategic priorities during the early stages of the work, including the decision to prioritize the development of an early warning and response system. Once the work shifted to planning and implementation, UWGC created a “ground-level” taskforce, composed of teachers, parents and principals equipped with knowledge gained from experiences working with students directly. This group began to drive actual implementation. Greenville struggled under the weight of its own initial success. Having successfully engaged a diverse group of high-level local leaders to populate their Challenge Team, UWGC was unsure how best to sustain their engagement beyond the initial phases of the work. To address this issue, they created a new
volunteer structure to guide their work going forward. In the new structure, the strategic work is guided by members of the UWGC board and investors (corporate, foundation, individual donors); leading daily implementation efforts are newly created workgroups that are charged with steering specific aspects of the work (i.e., Community Awareness, Turn Outward, and Research/Evaluation Teams); and undergirding the work is a Community Council, composed of school leaders, parents, and community members, whose role is to provide “on the ground” input and feedback on the middle grades work (see Figure 1).

In Spokane, SCUW was able to leverage its previous experience with community engagement to deepen its work in the middle grades. Specifically, SCUW used the community conversation approach developed by the Harwood Institute to engage the school district. Rather than approach the district with a predetermined agenda, SCUW invited school district leaders, school board members and representatives from the local school foundation to engage in an open conversation about the role that community partners could play to address education needs and challenges. This willingness to engage openly helped to reshape the education leaders’ perceptions about the role that SCUW could play to support education change in the community. SCUW also sought to embed their middle grades efforts within an existing structure, the School Community Partnership Committee.

To broaden this coalition, SCUW also leveraged their existing relationships with community-based organizations to identify new organizations that might be brought to the table, rather than recruit the usual suspects. Over the course of the grant period, SCUW convened this group of 25-40 participants monthly to share data on student attendance, behavior and course performance (i.e., ABCs) in the five middle schools in Spokane Public Schools and to discuss specific school and community-based strategies to address related challenges. According to staff at SCUW, these meetings provided an important touch point for networking, building relationships, and addressing other timely topics that impact student engagement, well-being and academic performance (e.g., working with LGBTQ youth).

An ongoing challenge for SCUW was to figure out how best to position its middle grades work with multiple overlapping initiatives occurring at the same time, focused on similar issues, but serving different geographies. These efforts involved some of the same community leaders but used different community engagement and resource development strategies. SCUW staff worked to ensure that its initiatives were complementary, rather than competitive, and that communications were open and productive. Initially SCUW focused on two middle schools in SPS, which were selected based on an analysis of school performance data. SCUW hopes to expand its work to surrounding school systems and embed this effort as a Collaborative Action Network within Excelerate Success, the new cradle-to-career collective impact partnership.

In Washington, D.C., UWNCA experienced significant internal staff turnover, which impeded its ability to participate and help lead existing coalitions within the D.C. metro area. However, with new staff additions providing leadership mid-way through the Challenge, UWNCA was able to refocus its efforts on revitalizing the Mentoring Matters Coalition (MMC), a collaborative consisting of regional mentoring nonprofits that had lost momentum and partners due to staff changes and competing interests. The decision to prioritize this coalition was based on the strong alignment between the overarching goals of the MMC and UWNCA’s priority focus on mentoring and work with City Year in Kelly Miller Middle School in Ward 7.

**COLLECTIVE LESSONS LEARNED**

1. **Be discerning and take time to cultivate new partners.** The tendency of all United Ways was
to create an inclusive environment and open door policy to build their coalitions. The United Ways in Asheville, Spokane and Pittsburgh initially sought to expand their groups by identifying, or asking partners already at the table to identify, additional members for inclusion based on a similar interest in the middle grades. However, this approach usually yielded limited results. As a lesson learned, the United Ways in Pittsburgh and Spokane both mentioned the importance of gauging the capacity and interest of potential partners work on the middle grades at the very beginning. In Greenville, UWGC took the time to meet with potential volunteers individually to gauge their general understanding of education issues in the community and their interest in participating in the Coalition. The payoff is the ability to let those not focused on this issue off the hook early and the increase the chances that your remaining coalition partners will go the distance.

2. Plan for transitions. Almost every community experienced changes in coalition membership as people left positions in the United Way and in partner organizations. In most cases, this slowed the pace of the work as new leaders in partner organizations had to be identified and oriented, and new United Way staff had to get up to speed. Since change in staff and turnover is constant, relationship building efforts must also be constant. One tactical approach this is to have at least two people at each partnering organization fully knowledgeable and immersed in the work, so that the departure of one staff member does not impede progress and there is someone that can keep implementation going even as new staff members are hired.

3. Maintain constant communication. In building and maintaining coalitions, absence does not make the heart grow fonder! Keeping stakeholders abreast of current developments, changes in strategic direction, and coalition successes is fundamental to maintaining their interest and commitment.

4. Prioritize key relationships. As with any education effort, building and strengthening relationships with school and district leaders is vital to success. It is no surprise that the United Ways that had the greatest success in their middle grades efforts were those that used this opportunity to create or deepen a sense of collaboration with school districts on shared goals and with mutual accountabilities. This attitude helps the schools and districts view United Ways and coalition members as part of their extended team and is critical to opening doors that might otherwise remain closed.

5. Use time and talent wisely. Figuring out how to best tap into the talents, expertise, and passion that coalition members bring to the table is instrumental to long-term engagement. In Greenville, UWGC figured this out, and now has a structure going forward that should effectively make the most of the coalition that it worked hard to build. In Spokane, SCUW focused coalition time on sharing existing efforts to help build a solid foundation for expanding its work. In Asheville, UWABC organized its coalition into smaller workgroups with specific responsibilities and a regular meeting schedule. These and other United Ways also learned to use coalition members’ time well, so partners who volunteer their time to attend meetings are more likely to feel that it is time well spent on important issues and decisions.

6. Focus on creating a shared agenda. In Phoenix, VSUW worked on ensuring that all stakeholders had “full buy-in and ownership of the work.” VSUW enabled this by having stakeholders lead conversations, with VSUW assuming the role of facilitator. VSUW credits its middle grades experience with preparing it to assume the backbone role in a larger Strive cradle-to-career effort in the community.
USING DATA TO DEEPEN AND REFINE STRATEGIES

All communities were asked to be data-driven in their efforts, especially as it related to identifying specific populations of students and families to work with, determining barriers to academic success, identifying existing school and community-based supports to address needs, and sharing results. All participating communities initially used school feeder pattern data to drive their strategic planning and to identify specific middle and high schools to focus their work.

EARLY WARNING AND RESPONSE SYSTEMS

A priority approach in the Middle Grades Challenge was to develop or expand the use of early warning and response systems to identify students at risk of dropping out and to match them with timely and effective supports. About half of the communities worked with district, school and community partners to develop or expand this capability in schools. In some communities the timing or environment was not conducive to early warning systems development. In these cases, United Ways instead focused their efforts on mapping existing school and community resources, identifying gaps and/or using data to drive continuous improvement in programs that directly served students.

Both the SCUW in Spokane and VSUW in Phoenix had existing foundations on which to build. VSUW was three years into a major education effort, “Destination Graduation,” in partnership with Phoenix Union High School and Phoenix Union Elementary School Districts. Beginning in 2010, they partnered with community-based providers to pair them with specific schools (“campuses”) for the purpose of providing student supports. Because VSUW did not initially have access to individual student data, it used aggregate data available to make decisions about which schools to focus on in Destination Graduation. The subsequent work primarily focused on providing supports and interventions to students in these specific schools. Although these previous efforts laid solid ground on which to expand and strengthen the work, there were also constraints. VSUW operates within a non-unified school system (there are approximately 33 school districts in the Phoenix metropolitan area) and experienced challenges related to identifying software vendors that could effectively work with them to analyze and deliver ABC data to partners.
VSUW’s primary goal in the Challenge was to build on the work of Destination Graduation and completely integrate early warning systems in the four elementary (K-8) and high schools with whom VSUW already partnered. This included implementing a data platform with the capability of analyzing student ABC data; gaining access to individual student data and strengthening the capacity of school and provider staff to use the data to make real-time decisions about student supports. VSUW also wanted to create more effective middle to high school transitions by establishing and facilitating vertical teams of teachers from these participating high schools and the middle and elementary schools that feed into them. At the state level, VSUW hoped to reengage the Arizona Department of Education in conversations about creating a statewide early warning system.

In the course of the Challenge, VSUW and their partners made considerable progress. One participating school district implemented a student information management system and a dashboard for sharing individual student data, and VSUW strengthened student transition supports by negotiating an agreement between middle and high schools in one feeder pattern to allow rising 8th graders to attend summer school on the high school campus, rather than their middle school. VSUW also expanded its work to include an additional middle school that feeds into a partner high school.

Despite this progress, VSUW continues to work to broaden access to real-time student data beyond the schools participating in Destination Graduation; to sustain engagement of school leaders, particularly as they are involved in multiple educational initiatives; and to deepen school and support staff conversations informed by individual student ABC data.

In Spokane, SCUW was able to build upon an existing early warning and response system created by Spokane Public Schools (SPS). In 2010 partners in Priority Spokane (a multi-sector coalition that includes SCUW and works collectively to improve K-12 education) commissioned a longitudinal study of student ABC data in Spokane Public Schools to examine the relationship between high school graduation rates in the district and attendance, behavior, and course performance. The report findings validated similar earlier research by Johns Hopkins University and were critical to creating local buy-in for the development of a district-wide early warning and response system. SCUW also benefitted from both previous experiences engaging the surrounding community in conversations focused on how to improve youth
outcomes as well as a strong history of community collaboration. SCUW’s primary Challenge goals were to leverage this existing early warning system to identify students, schools, and neighborhoods in which to strategically focus their efforts and invest additional resources; link school district student data with provider service data; implement specific strategies to improve middle school attendance; and to improve the overall quality of programs serving middle school students. SCUW focused its attendance efforts on all six middle schools in Spokane Public Schools.

By the conclusion of the Challenge, SCUW and its school and community partners could point to solid progress. Perhaps most notably was the creation of a staff position in the district office—a position co-funded by SCUW using Challenge funds—specifically charged with reviewing data and identifying school and community resources to support students in the targeted middle schools. This School Community Partnership Specialist position was not only sustained for the 2014-15 school year with school district support, but the district added additional team members to increase its in-house capacity to meet student needs. Creating and institutionalizing this type of infrastructure is critical to managing the provision of student supports, especially where there is high need, without unduly overloading school staff, whose primary role is instruction and learning. Locating the position at the district office also conveys the importance of using data to drive decision-making throughout the school system.

To address middle grades attendance, SCUW and the school district successfully implemented Community Attendance Support Teams (CAST) in the six middle schools that were the focus of their Challenge. To accomplish this, they leveraged a number of resources, including a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. CAST uses ABC data to identify students with four or more unexcused absences and then invites the student and her family to participate in a conversation with community partners and school staff (including school counselors) to identify barriers to regular school attendance and resources available to alleviate the issues. School counselors facilitate these meetings and at their conclusion students and their families sign a contract establishing individual student attendance goals. Although SCUW successfully instituted this system in the five schools, actual execution was uneven. Consequently, SCUW worked with partners to identify successes and challenges ahead of the 2014-15 school year.

Additional successes included the creation of a data dashboard to link school and community partner data—which was piloted in the 2014-15 school year with select partners including Gonzaga University Mentoring Programs, Boys and Girls Club and Communities in Schools—and the implementation of a quality improvement process with out-of-school time providers serving middle grades youth.

The Greenville and Asheville/Buncombe County United Ways both initiated the development of early warning and response systems as part of their Challenge efforts. In these communities, this constituted new work and deepening existing relationships with local school districts to gain agreement and buy-in essential to moving forward.

In Asheville, UWABC, working as part of the Asheville Buncombe County Middle Grades Network, sought to facilitate data sharing and pilot an early warning and response system in three middle schools. UWABC successfully drafted a memorandum of understanding to facilitate sharing of student data between the between Asheville City Schools, Buncombe County Schools, and each of their out-of-school time providers. This data sharing agreement was implemented in the 2014-15 school year. Similar to developments in Phoenix, this coalition had to make real-time adjustments to align its efforts with broader state developments—in this case the adoption of
a particular student information platform that all local school systems in the state were required to use. The coalition incorporated this into its plans by working in the 2013-14 school year to integrate the desired early warning systems data into the required platform; they also conducted research to understand best practices related to early warning systems implementation. UWABC, like VSUW in Phoenix, also worked with more than one school system. Early on, staff at UWABC effectively convened school leaders to get buy-in on taking a shared approach to the work rather than working with each school system in isolation. The coalition recognized the importance of working across school systems, especially considering its highly mobile student population whose families frequently moved between these two districts.

In Greenville, UWGC also pulled together a diverse coalition, which included school and district leaders, to develop and pilot their early warning and response system. But first, as was necessary in other communities, the UWGC had to gain a better understanding of which specific neighborhoods and schools would be best served by their efforts. The school district had already identified two high schools with low graduation and high poverty rates to focus on; with the district's help, UWGC identified the three middle and 11 elementary Title I schools that “feed” into these high schools. UWGC learned as much as it could about these communities, accessing publicly available Census data and using school report card data from the South Carolina Department of Education to learn more about each school. Simultaneously, UWGC researched early warning and response systems and learned from other United Ways that had implemented them in their local school districts.

Armed with the increased understanding of neighborhood and school challenges and needs, as well as an increased understanding of early warning and response systems, UWGC approached the school district to discuss the creation of an early warning and response system. This relationship-building took time—it was a major culture shift for everyone involved, and collaboratively building a data system and sharing student information required a higher level of trust between UWGC and Greenville County Schools. UWGC also had to ascertain what data was important to request from the district to ensure that UWGC was not asking for information solely for the sake of having it. Given this careful and deliberate approach to building trust, it is not surprising that UWGC was able to forge a data sharing agreement with Greenville County Schools and initiate planning for the implementation of district-wide early warning dashboard for the 2015-16 academic year.
As part of its Challenge, MUW in Louisville prioritized increasing the number of students and their families in two middle schools, Olmstead Academies North and South, using an existing in-house early warning and response system developed by Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), called “Louisville Linked.” Louisville Linked is the resource and referral database that school-based counselors access for the purpose of matching students and their families to needed community-based supports. Like their counterparts in Greenville, MUW took a deliberative approach to initially identify these two middle schools. Given the extensive busing of and open enrollment of students throughout JCPS, accomplishing this was a considerable challenge. MUW first cross-referenced the lowest performing middle schools that feed into the lowest performing high schools in the county with the number of students from each zip code. MUW then plotted the number of low-performing middle school students by zip code to identify neighborhoods that had the greatest concentration of these students and the specific communities with concentrated high rates of absenteeism (see Figure 2, above). Based on this work MUW identified Olmstead Academy North and South (all male and female respectively) as two schools
Youth Services Coordinators at both schools were trained on how to use the Louisville Linked System. During the 2013-14 school year, a total of 2,814 referrals were made for 861 students; this represented 90 percent of Olmstead South’s student body and 32 percent of Olmstead North’s.

Pittsburgh Public Schools also developed their own early warning and response system. Given that student data on attendance, behavior and course completion already existed, UWAC worked with its coalition partners to obtain access to this ABC data for the students participating in their Be A Middle School Mentor Initiative. Lead staff at UWAC noted that access to this specific student data has significantly improved their ability to tell a story of the impact of their work.

ASSET MAPPING

Several United Ways in the Challenge also worked to identify existing resources in their communities through asset mapping. This was a significant value add as it enabled these United Ways to offer their partners a perspective on what resources currently were available to students and their families, and to identify gaps in opportunities, services, and supports.

In Greenville, UWGC initially took a broad approach and worked mapped broad asset categories (i.e., public institutions and services, private and non-profit organizations, physical resources, etc.). UWGC subsequently worked with the director of counseling in Greenville County Schools and 30 school-based counselors to add assets to the map and to use this information to create density maps to show where these assets were located in the greater Greenville area. UWGC plans to continue this mapping effort to better understand what resources are specifically available to residents within the White Horse community and to develop school-specific resource maps for the two middle schools in the neighborhood.

In Tampa, SUW benefitted from its long-term leadership role in an existing out-of-school time coalition. SUW came to the Middle Grades Challenge with an established body of work related to improving out-of-school time quality and access in the region. As part of the Challenge, SUW commissioned a report to map the availability of out-of-school time opportunities specifically available to middle school youth in Pinellas County.

The report identified program fees, lack of transportation, and safety concerns as widespread challenges to participation. It identified a gap in perception regarding the availability of school and community-based supports between schools and providers, and parents and other stakeholders. It also highlighted the need to increase certain types of programming of interest to middle school students and their families, including tutoring, career exploration, sports and arts enrichment. This mapping study guided SUW’s targeted focus on one particular neighborhood, North Greenwood, to meet the academic needs of students who could not take advantage of existing supports because of costs and/or transportation challenges.
INCREASING PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Matching students to the right supports at the right time is necessary step, but is not sufficient, in and of itself, for effectively working with middle school students. It is also essential that supports and services provided are high-quality and have the intended impact on student success. A particular strength of United Ways is their ability to leverage their roles as funders to prioritize quality, engaging programming. This is particularly important for attracting and sustaining the participation of older youth. About half of the Challenge United Ways leveraged this initiative to advance their quality improvement efforts:

- Using Challenge funds, UWGA furthered its existing efforts by making individual coaching available to participants in the Quality Matters program. Staff at youth-serving programs funded by UWGA completed trainings, submitted improvement plans and received 12 hours of customized coaching. In addition UWGA provided staff with training to strengthen their interactions with middle and high school youth. This training included active listening, supporting youth voice, helping with homework, resolving conflicts, and community building.

- With grant support from the Raikes Foundation, SCUW in Spokane also used the Youth Program Quality Assessment Tool, as well as additional coaching and trainings, to improve the overall quality of programs serving middle school students. Nine programs, including one school-based program, participated in this quality improvement process. SCUW staff noted that the middle school that leveraged this training for its school counseling staff had the greatest success implementing the CAST model designed to improve school day attendance (see above). As a result, the coalition is considering making this training available to all school counselors where CAST is being implemented.

- In Louisville, MUW, United Way with a long history of leadership in advancing out-of-school time, piloted the Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (SAYO), an online survey tool that captures youths’ experience in the out-of-school programs, self-efficacy, and their opinions about whether the programs are supporting their growth and development. MUW plans to use this aggregate information to make resource and programming decisions in the future.

COLLECTIVE LESSONS LEARNED

1. Be judicious with requests for student-level data. Avoid requesting access to student data for the sake of having it. Take the time to figure out what data is needed and what it will be used for before making an ask. These requests are typically added to an existing staff person’s workload and limiting requests to data that will actually be used shows consideration for staff time and effort. Go a step further by first developing an understanding of what resources are available, and what challenges might exist related to the district or school’s ability to accommodate a request to share student data. Schools and districts also struggle with the issue of “big data” (i.e., having more data than is meaningful or useful) so United Ways can add value by focusing conversations with coalition partners on data that research shows is strongly correlated or predictive of student outcomes.

2. Fully leverage public data. There is a lot of data that is already available and can be used to initially develop strategies and approaches. Key sources for education and general population data include the U.S. Census, the National Center for Education Statistics, state education agency websites, and local school district sites. Additional reports produced annually by national non-profits or philanthropic organizations (e.g., Annie E. Casey’s KIDS Count; Lumina’s Stronger Nation through Higher Education) are also good sources of state-level data on child and youth outcomes. Partners can also be excellent sources of data. In Washington, D.C., for example, UWNCA leveraged data from City Year to help guide investment decisions, broader education goals, strategies, and focus areas. Participating United Ways all leveraged these kinds of data sources to understand their community context and narrow their focus.
3. **Leverage the United Way’s role as a strategic funder.** Participating United Ways worked with their coalitions to develop cohesive sets of data-driven strategies to strengthen the middle grades. Rather than look at this as a discrete initiative, many United Ways looked for ways to have this strategic direction drive other aspects of their work. One critical place for alignment is the allocations process, including aligning funded programs with agreed upon outcomes for middle grades students (where this doesn’t already exist), building provider capacity to deliver quality programming, and measuring agreed upon outcomes. For SCUW in Spokane, this experience will inform the allocations process. Specifically, SCUW will now require funded programs to submit pre- and post-program data to provide evidence of effectiveness.

4. **Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.** Data-sharing MOUs are unquestionably essential to gaining regular access to individual student performance data. This is the highest level of data-sharing, and is contingent on trust, strong visionary leadership, and longstanding relationships. Some participating United Ways were successful in getting MOUs drafted or signed. For others, this is still a work in progress. Depending on the current state of a United Way’s relationships with local schools and districts, it might be more feasible to take small steps that serve to gradually increase access to data as trust deepens. Asking for aggregate data for specific schools of focus, or for students served by the programs a United Way funds, might be good starting points.

5. **Go deep in getting buy-in for sharing data.** Some Challenge United Ways learned that it is often not sufficient to have district superintendents, senior staff, or school principals on board with data-sharing agreements. There needs to be buy-in at many levels, especially front-line program staff and teachers, to facilitate data-sharing and data-driven decision-making. The ongoing use of different types of data is a culture change for most partners, so patience and understanding are required to help make this shift.

6. **Create and use your own data.** Most participating United Ways created new quantitative or qualitative data to help inform their work. This included asset mapping, survey data collected from middle school students, parents and teachers; summaries of community conversations; interviews; and programs. This data was helpful in that it often complimented school and district data, and it provided more insight regarding underlying barriers and challenges than might have otherwise been available. Gaining access to the perspective of parents, youth, teachers and community residents is also a value-add for school leaders who don’t always have access to this type of information.

7. **Invest in your United Way’s capacity to analyze and use data.** For some United Ways, this meant adding new capacity and recruiting staff with this specific skill; for others this meant partnering with those could provide this expertise. For example, UWNCA hired a full-time data collection specialist to facilitate data sharing and UWNCA’s internal capacity to manage data. United Ways have recognized the importance of having this capacity in order to be true strategic partners and drive the middle grades work. This includes having the capacity to analyze various types of data, using the data to make decisions, and understanding key policies related to sharing student data (e.g., FERPA and HIPPA).
IV. GROWING UNITED WAY CAPACITY

IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

When asked to reflect on how their participation in the Middle Grades Success and Transition Challenge has changed their approach to education impact work, United Ways shared the following:

Through the Middle Grades Challenge we founded the Asheville Buncombe County Middle Grades Network and are now seen as the community leader in middle grades work. As an organization, we are engaged in cross-functional efforts to integrate Hands On Asheville-Buncombe, our volunteer center, and 2-1-1, our community help line, into the working groups of the ABMGN.

Laura Elliot
United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County

Our Board has been much more engaged in the [middle grades] work than they have been in education work in the past. Four of our Board members were on the MGST Challenge Team, and, since the midterm report, half of the Board meetings have been devoted to information about middle grades success, our focus schools, and our developing strategies...the Middle Grades Challenge helped to create some cross functional work, but it was not until UWGC created a position specifically for helping to create a more cross-functional and innovative environment that this was accelerated and has started to become part of our organization’s culture. One example of how UWGC has started to work differently was when the entire staff went through product development training with a focus on our middle grades initiative.

Teresa Ware
United Way of Greenville County
Through relationships built and strengthened with both the school district and other community partners, as well as a focus of staff time and attention to the needs of students in these years of attention, our United Way has positioned itself as an organization working collaboratively to help students get to graduation before many others traditionally think to focus attention on this outcome. Through opportunities presented by the MGST grant, we are now positioned with experts in our community talking about parent engagement, youth voice, and problem-solving with regards to graduation challenges, rather than simply identifying challenges without solutions.

Kate Bauer  
Formerly of United Way Suncoast

As a result of our MGST work, our United Way has taken a holistic approach to serving children and families by trying to identify the pipeline of opportunities and supports for children and families of all ages...additional through our work we have... employed the United Way engagement model to engage 35+ community and business leaders to assist in driving our middle grades work.

Damon Bethea  
United Way of Allegheny County

The grant helped Valley of the Sun United Way increase both our capacity and credibility in doing this work by bringing together our learning community and introducing both local and national best practices and resources. We have also increased our messaging about this work in the community and include Destination Graduation in key marketing and engagement opportunities. Funding received through the UWW Ready by 21 Middle Grades Success and Transition Challenge Grants helped us to leverage funding from corporate and Tocqueville donors to increase the capacity of the Destination Graduation program.

Julia Estrada  
Valley of the Sun United Way
Our work in the middle grades space has helped us develop new internal capacities and confidences, as well as significantly enhanced our relationships with community partners. Relationships developed through the middle grades work were the springboard for [SCUW] being asked to serve as the backbone organization for cradle-to-career education work in Spokane County. We are in the process of redesigning our allocations/investment process for 2015, based in part on what we have learned through our focused work on middle grades. There is also a sharpened focus on improving population level outcomes, which resulted in the adoption by our board of directors of a strategic goal to cut education achievement gaps in half by 2020.

Sally Pritchard
Spokane County United Way

The grant definitely increased Metro United Way’s capacity to convene the community around education initiatives. The easy answer is the addition of the VISTA position to spend time in the neighborhoods making connections to residents, local community organizations and businesses. But Metro United Way also brought partners like the PAL Drug-Free Community Coalition, community churches and neighborhood organizations, the Louisville Free Public Library, Neighborhood Place social services center, as well as Leadership Louisville’s “Off and Learning!” initiative into this school-community collaboration. This gave us valuable experience building relationships with individual schools, to engage parents at the school and in the community without adding undue responsibilities to school personnel.

Karen Napier
Formerly of Metro United Way (Louisville)

Working intentionally with partners in the Atlanta Promise Neighborhood has enabled us to think more strategically as we align programs and initiatives that address middle grade challenges. For example, efforts were made to engage the parents of students in the “Mentoring in the Middle” program to participate in the “Parenting in the Middle” program. In this way, both students and their families could receive the support needed to ensure success.

Angelle Cooper
United Way of Greater Atlanta
United Ways that participated in the Middle Grades Challenge were chosen, in part, because of established goals, a publicly stated commitment, or a body of work related to strengthening the middle grades. All of them used their Challenge grant to deepen, expand, and accelerate those efforts. Therefore, it is not surprising that the work continues beyond the end of the formal grant phase. Below are select highlights of this ongoing work:

- The **United Way of Greenville County** received a three-year, $3 million Social Innovation Fund grant, which it is using to sustain its coalition’s efforts to develop and implement an early warning and response system. The grant requires a 1:1 match, so the UWGC board designated $600,000 for the 2014-15 fiscal year to meet the match requirement.

- **United Way of Allegheny County**’s “Be A Middle School Mentor” (BAMSM) program was approved to receive Educational Improvement Tax Credits in the state of Pennsylvania (EITC), enabling companies that invest in the program to receive tax credits. In addition, they received a $50,000 grant from Shell Oil. Some of UWAC’s specific next steps include: inviting companies to support BAMSM through EITC, and implementing an “adopt-a-school” pilot to create more holistic supports (beyond mentoring) for students in participating middle schools and strengthen business engagement.
The United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County received a $15,000 grant from America's Promise Alliance to plan and convene a Grad Nation Summit, in March 2015, focused on successful strategies to strengthen graduation rates including community schools, early warning and response systems, and family and community engagement. UWABC also finalized a data-sharing agreement with its partner school districts. UWABC's next steps include securing funding for its early warning systems data dashboard, continuing to engage women leaders in their community as key advocate and supporters of the middle grades focus, engaging board members to advocate for supportive state legislation and launching a campaign, “Who Got You Through?,” to recruit mentors and tutors to volunteer with middle grades youth.

In Spokane, a coalition of community funders pledged a new three-year $400,000 commitment of resources to support youth success in two middle schools. Grant recipients include members of the School Community Partnership Committee. Spokane County United Way also planned to leverage volunteer (VISTA) capacity to increase its engagement of middle school students and their families.

United Way of Greater Atlanta received $24,000 from Deloitte to continue work at BEST Academy. UWGA received an additional $750,000 from donors to provide summer programming to combat “summer slide” over the next three years. UWGA planned to continue student mentoring and parent engagement programs initiated at BEST Academy and to continue to engage individual and corporate donors to increase their support for middle grades work.

United Way of the National Capital Area’s Board approved an investment of $200,000 to support its middle grades efforts. UWNCA planned to expand its focus to the elementary and high schools in the feeder pattern where Kelly Miller Middle School is located. This expanded focus will include identifying students off-track prior to middle school, providing mentoring supports, and integrating UWNCA’s investments so that students participating in their mentoring efforts can also benefit from obesity prevention programming and their families from financial stability supports.

Metro United Way planned to focus on orienting new staff at partner middle schools to their middle grades work and specifically the resources available through Louisville Linked. MUW also planned to extend their community attendance awareness campaign.

United Way Suncoast planned to bring Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties together for a joint Legislative Priorities Summit focused on the needs of youth. In July 2014, UWS launched a new strategic plan that created two separate focus areas: Early Literacy (serving children from birth through elementary school) and Youth Success (serving youth in middle and high school). UWS considers this change to be a direct result of the attention that national partners and researchers have placed on these issues and their participation with the Middle Grade Success and Transitions co-hort. UWS planned and convened a Grad Nation Summit held in March 2015.

Valley of the Sun United Way secured continued major donor support for Destination Graduation. VSUW planned to better align all support services available for students and families within the target communities where Destination Graduation is focused, and to expand the early warning and response system to additional elementary schools within this feeder pattern.

United Way Worldwide has learned a lot from these local United Ways, including the lessons shared in this report. These United Ways also learned to leverage each other’s respective strengths rather than reinvent the wheel. As research has clarified what matters most to increase student success and high school graduation rates, the experiences of these United Ways demonstrates that our network is well poised to put research into action by bringing people together to scale and accelerate effective programs and practices. We will continue our efforts to build our network’s capacity to work with partners and strengthen the middle grades so that more young people are successful in high school and graduate prepared for college, work, and life.
MAXIMIZING THE MIDDLE: REFLECTIONS ON UNITED WAY’S MIDDLE GRADES SUCCESS AND TRANSITION CHALLENGE
SYNOPSIS

Spokane County United Way’s (SCUW) long-term goals were to improve student attendance, behavior and course performance in the middle grades as part of an overall effort to increase high school graduation rates. A related goal was to enhance SCUW’s capacity to serve as a community convener and position its coalition’s work on the middle grades in the broader School Community Partnership Committee. Within the same timeframe of the United Way Worldwide Rb21 middle grades grant, SCUW also was awarded a Strive Grant as part of UWW partnership supported by Target. Thus, a major underpinning of SCUW’s middle grades effort was to align multiple, simultaneous collaborative efforts with different geographic footprints, while maintaining a focus on this part of the age continuum.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- $400,000 commitment in funding from a coalition of community funders to support efforts to strengthen outcomes for youth attending Shaw and Garry Middle Schools.
- Leveraged additional resources from Social Venture Partners Fund ($25,000); Priority Spokane ($250,000); alignment of an additional $400,000 in Spokane County United Way funding for youth development programs to serve students identified by the early warning indicators in high need schools.
- Developed an early warning system with Spokane Public Schools, with support from the regional education service district to make the data platform available at no cost to all schools in the region.
- Developed a data-sharing agreement with Spokane Public Schools.
SPOKANE’S MIDDLE GRADES CHALLENGE GOALS

■ Engage youth as part of an attendance awareness campaign
■ Use early warning indicators data (e.g., attendance, behavior, course grades) to improve school and community capacity to provide appropriate in and out-of-school supports to individual students, especially student populations with the greatest gaps in academic achievement, and to schools serving significant numbers of at-risk youth
■ Enhance data-sharing capacity between schools and community partners, and use this data to develop strategies
■ Deepen relationships with individuals and institutions, including increasing volunteer engagement in strategies focused on middle grades youth

KEY PARTNERS
Spokane Public Schools, Boys and Girls Clubs of Spokane County, Empire Health Foundation, Communities in Schools, Gonzaga University, Spokane County United Way

SELECTED ACTIVITIES
■ Co-created and co-funded a Community Partnership Specialist position in Spokane Public Schools to increase the district’s capacity to access and use early warning indicator data and to align and coordinate resources at four middle schools in the county.
■ Leveraged resources through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson to develop (2012-13 school year) and implement (2013-14 school year) Community Attendance Support Teams (CAST) in five middle schools; CAST identifies students with four unexcused absences and then provides interventions to students and their families to address barriers to consistent school attendance.
■ Convened 8 community conversations involving 105 participants; 2 conversations included parents of middle school youth and the remaining 6 included participants from Leadership Spokane.15

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES
■ Ambitious and numerous grant goals in retrospect were “ambitious” and did not match the actual capacity at the United Way. As a result, efforts to engage youth and families were not prioritized and comparatively less in this area was accomplished during the grant period.

SUCCESS FACTORS
■ In embarking on its middle grades work, SCUW was able to take advantage of an existing highly cooperative culture with a history of multi-sector collaboration.
■ SCUW participated in United Way Worldwide’s previous Education Mobilization Effort; SCUW credited this experience as being critical to changing how it thought about and approached its work as SCUW learned how to engage and listen to the community and to develop relationships that extended beyond historically funded agencies.
■ A strong relationship with Spokane Public Schools based on mutual trust, respect, and a willingness to learn and improve their collective capacity to support youth success.
■ Spokane Public Schools took the initiative to develop their own early warning and response system and to facilitate community access to the data. This made it possible to focus Challenge Team conversations on using the data to identify strategies to better support youth success, rather than on developing the data platform itself.

FUTURE PRIORITIES
■ Leverage capacity through two new VISTA volunteers to address other Challenge Goals not met during the grant period. This includes engaging parents and middle school youth in community conversations and developing volunteer engagement project to support education work.

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SYNOPSIS

United Way of Allegheny County’s long-term goals, as part of the Challenge, were to build on years of success developing and delivering quality mentoring program supports to students in target schools. UWAC planned to accomplish this by leveraging the relationships and credibility gained by delivering results in its Be A Middle School Mentor program to strengthen engagement with program participants’ families. Efforts included increasing awareness regarding the importance of daily attendance, identifying and creating vertical transition supports to help smooth the transition in and out of middle school for program participants, and expanding their strategic partnerships to leverage additional complimentary supports for students beyond mentoring.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Secured additional funding in the amount of $50,000 from the Shell Oil Corporation, $40,000 from the Alcoa Foundation, and a renewed commitment of $125,000 from First Niagara Bank

- UWAC established a data-sharing agreement with Pittsburgh Public Schools that enabled UWAC to receive attendance, grades, standardized test scores, and behavior data on Be A Middle School Mentor (BAMSM) program participants; UWAC’s BAMSM received distinction as one of two district-approved mentoring initiatives

- Enhanced and diversified opportunities (beyond mentoring) for corporate engagement in Be A Middle School Mentor, including informing the strategic direction of the initiative through committee participation and participation in school events

- BAMSM program granted approval to receive Pennsylvania Educational Improvement Tax Credits (EITC)
### PITTSBURGH’S MIDDLE GRADES CHALLENGE GOALS

- Engage Be A Middle School Mentor program participants to identify their transition concerns and understand how best to support their transition to high school
- Work with mentors to ensure that they have the knowledge and resources to support their mentees as they transition to high school
- Create stronger engagement opportunities for parents/families of mentees
- Increase school awareness of the Be There Attendance Awareness Campaign
- Expand volunteer engagement opportunities for new and future volunteer mentors

### KEY PARTNERS

Pittsburgh Public Schools, Mount Aarat Community Activity Center, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Pittsburgh, Communities In Schools Pittsburgh/Allegheny County, the Mentoring Partnership of Southwestern Pennsylvania, and Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh

### SELECTED ACTIVITIES

- Developed an Advisory Committee of stakeholders (including community and business leaders) to provide strategic guidance to BAMSM
- Engaged middle grades youth in the BAMSM program in focus group conversations to better understand their needs related to transitioning to high school
- Created a family engagement pilot to engage families to understand their needs and develop appropriate responses
- Deepened the relationship with Pittsburgh Public Schools and increased UWAC staff participation in school-sponsored Parent School Community Council meetings
- Developed and submitted proposals for federal funding to expand BAMSM regionally

### IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

- Creating effective messages to convey the importance of focusing on the middle grades to UWAC staff and community partners.

### SUCCESS FACTORS

- Strong program development
- Existing relationships with the local school district and at individual schools
- Significant corporate investment and employee volunteer engagement

### FUTURE PRIORITIES

- Implement an “adopt a school” pilot that supports middle grades students in a comprehensive manner, and which provides expanded opportunities for community and corporate engagement
- Leverage new status as an EITC designee to garner additional corporate support

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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SYNOPSIS

United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County’s ongoing awareness campaign, “You Need the Middle,” had already helped to increase community understanding of the importance of the middle grades. Through the Challenge, they hoped to transform this awareness into action by creating community schools to serve the middle grades and by increasing the number and quality of wrap-around supports available to youth. Although initially focused on expanding quality out-of-school programming for middle school youth, UWABC’s work expanded in the challenge to working with schools, and youth development and community-based organizations, to develop an early warning and response system as a way to systemically ensure that students receive just-in-time supports.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Secured $30,000+ in additional grants and donations to support the middle grades effort
- Increased volunteer engagement and hours, from 199 to 250 between 2012-2014
- Secured a data-sharing agreement between UWABC and local school systems in January 2015
- Convened a Grad Nation Summit in March 2015 that featured the superintendents of Asheville City and Buncombe County school districts that focused on strategies to strengthen middle schools
ASHEVILLE’S MIDDLE GRADES CHALLENGE GOALS

■ Increase the number of students attending summer and transition programs
■ Increase the number of students at Enka Middle School receiving additional supports via the community school approach
■ Engage new community and corporate partners in the work of supporting middle grades students
■ Engage and train community members, especially women leaders, to be advocates for middle school youth

KEY PARTNERS

United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County; Asheville City Schools; YMCA of Western North Carolina; Asheville City Schools Foundation; Buncombe County Schools; Big Brothers, Big Sisters of WNC; Girls on the Run of WNC; Addiction, Recovery, Prevention (ARC); Open Doors of Asheville; Asheville City Schools; Asheville Middle School

SELECTED ACTIVITIES

■ Enlisted and engaged the Women's Leadership Council (WLC) as a key supporter of the middle grades initiative and advocate for youth – WLC members served as afterschool mentors, donated gifts for middle school youth, and participated in campus improvement projects
■ Created an Asheville Buncombe Middle Grades Network (ABMGN) with diverse, multi-sector leadership from local school districts, youth service providers, 2-1-1, and the United Way. This group further organized itself into sub-groups focused on key issues in the middle grades including, engaging parents and families, supporting student transitions, and developing early warning and response systems
■ At Enka Middle School 250 volunteers contributed 1,000+ hours of service to support students, families, and residents in the Enka Middle School community
■ Created a draft data-sharing MOU to be piloted to school systems and partner agencies in the fall 2014; conducted a survey to identify best practices related to the use of early warning and response systems

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

■ Ensuring that all students who need them receive quality supports. The summer programs that serve students in Asheville City and Buncombe County schools both reached capacity in the summer of 2014 and had waitlists. The coalition planned to spend the 2015-16 academic year figuring out how to meet the additional need.

SUCCESS FACTORS

■ Effective staff transitions. In the first six months of the Challenge, a new staff person assumed leadership of the Challenge effort. But her predecessor had well-established relationships and credibility that the new staff person was able to build on and deepen through her strong leadership skills.
■ Access to a learning community focused on shared resources and knowledge
■ Ability to share UWABC’s work at a national scale which led to increased visibility and support for local efforts

FUTURE PRIORITIES

■ Launching a “Who Got You Through Campaign” to recruit additional mentors and tutors for partner schools
■ Piloting the early warning and response system in three middle schools and securing funding to support the development of a data early warning data dashboard

CONTACT INFORMATION

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As part of its Challenge goals, United Way Suncoast initially sought to work with Pinellas Public Schools to develop an early warning and response system that would enable UWS and other community partners to better identify students in need of additional supports. However, these shared goals were established with a district leadership that changed soon after UWS received the Challenge Grant. As a result, UWS invested time re-engaging new district leaders, and expanded engagement efforts to include neighboring Hillsborough County Public Schools, where the leadership expressed interest in partnering with United Way. UWS also modified its approach - rather than prioritize the development of an early warning and response system, UWS focused on mapping community assets to identify gaps in supports for middle school youth and deepening community engagement efforts to better understand what parents and youth viewed as barriers to success and gaps in opportunities available to them.

### MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Created a draft process for community-based agencies to access and use school district data
- Developed and published a comprehensive report on the availability of out-of-school programming and unmet needs for middle school youth in Pinellas County
- Used assets map data to develop a resource guide that was shared with local providers and parents in the North Greenwood Community
- Launched a new strategic plan in July 2014 prioritizing a focus on the middle grades and high school as a core strategy for improving graduation rates.
- In March 2015, convened a Grad Nation Summit, in partnership with Americas Promise Alliance and the Alliance for Public Schools, that was attended by over 300 people including students, local superintendents, and community-based organizations.
SUNCOAST’S MIDDLE GRADES CHALLENGE GOALS

■ Form a diverse coalition in Pinellas County focused on middle school success and transitions
■ Analyze student data to identify priority areas of concern
■ Develop and pilot an early warning and response system in local middle schools
■ Map current programs that serve middle school youth in priority areas and identify gaps
■ Leverage work and successes with the middle school coalition to develop a broader focus on education strategies that span cradle-to-career

KEY PARTNERS

United Way Suncoast, Pinellas County School District, Coordinated Care of Pinellas County, Boys and Girls Club of the Suncoast, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Juvenile Welfare Board, Dunedin Highlands Middle School, and R’ Club

SELECTED ACTIVITIES

■ Partnered with the University of South Florida (St. Petersburg Campus), the Alliance for Public Schools, and the Pinellas County School District to plan and convene an “African American Male Summit” that brought together young people to discuss their visions of personal success
■ Produced a comprehensive asset map of existing services and gaps for middle school youth in Pinellas County
■ Worked with the school district to map school feeder patterns which led to an agreement for UWS and its partners to provide supports to two additional schools
■ Convened 9 youth community conversations at schools and community locations; in all 377 youth were engaged
■ Utilized the film American Promise to convene 10 youth-led community conversations about education and race. Students from Pinellas and Broward Counties helped lead the conversations and one of the young men featured in the film also joined the event via Google Hangout
■ Expanded access to out-of-school time programs based in the North Greenwood Community to help meet identified unmet needs of students in the community access programs at their specific schools

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

■ Significant administrative turnover in the Pinellas County School District required the United Way to establish new relationships, identify new ways to engage new district leadership, and re-evaluate their original ambitious Challenge goals
■ Getting a better understanding the availability of existing out-of-school time programming for middle school youth and gauging the unmet need throughout the community

SUCCESS FACTORS

■ A willingness to listen. The Challenge grant provided the United Way an opportunity to spend more time deeply listening to students while also engaging local leadership and community partners. As a result, community stakeholders – students, the teacher’s union, providers, and county leaders all felt more engaged than they had been previously.
■ Addressing the elephant in the room. Suncoast United Way and their partners created a safe space for youth, parents, education leaders and others to share their views on race and academic achievement.
■ Flexibility. When confronted with changes in local leadership and differing levels of engagement, the United Way modified its original Challenge goals to better reflect current realities on the ground.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

■ Convene a series of parent engagement events in Hillsborough County
■ Continue youth engagement by working with youth at specific schools on leadership and advocacy
■ Plan and convene a Grad Nation Summit (see accomplishments in sidebar)
■ Plan and convene a Legislative Priorities Summit to bring Pinellas and Hillsborough Counties together to develop and advocate for a shared agenda for middle school youth

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SYNOPSIS

The United Way of the National Capital Area sought to deepen its place-based education work in Wards 7 and 8 in the District of Columbia. They planned to accomplish this by focusing on a Woodson High School feeder pattern and vertically aligning student supports to ensure that more middle grades students matriculated to the high school ready for success, a necessary ingredient for addressing the school's low graduation rates. UWNCA also planned to leverage and expand its leadership role in key city coalitions—focused on accessing and sharing data, and aligning goals and strategies—to increase focus on the middle grades. Unfortunately, the start of the Challenge Grant coincided with significant turnover at every level of the UWNCA, including staff originally charged with leading this effort. This forced the UWNCA to prioritize rebuilding itself as an organization. Despite this considerable challenge, UWNCA was able to maintain its programmatic work at Kelly Miller Middle School (in the Woodson feeder pattern) by leveraging its relationships with City Year and Deloitte. UWNCA emerged, under new leadership towards the end of the Challenge, in a better position to once again focus on expanding its work.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Commitment of $200,000 from UWNCA’s Board to support middle grades work
- Transformation of Kelly Miller Middle School from a low-performing to a high achieving school in the District of Columbia Public Schools, in part because of resources and student supports made available through United Way and its corporate and community partners
- Reinvigorated and streamlined mentoring coalition, “Mentoring Matters,” focused in increasing access to mentoring services for youth in D.C.
- Expansion of efforts at Kelly Miller Middle School to include the elementary and high schools in that feeder pattern
NATIONAL CAPITAL AREA’S MIDDLE GRADES CHALLENGE GOALS
- Advocate for the implementation of an early warning and response system in the District of Columbia Public Schools
- Build the capacity of programs serving middle grades students
- Promote the importance of the middle grades with existing local and regional coalitions (e.g. Raise DC, DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative)
- Develop a 9th grade transition program, including mentoring, parent engagement, and the alignment of student support services - to help students make a successful transition from Kelly Miller Middle School to H.G. Woodson High School

KEY PARTNERS
United Way of the National Capital Area, City Year, Higher Achievement, Kelly Miller Middle School

SELECTED ACTIVITIES
- Conducted a series of community conversations to confirm community agreement with a priority focus on investments in middle grades success
- Initiated an environmental scan to identify potential nonprofit partners for a regional expansion of UWNCA’s middle grades success focus
- Provided technical assistance to DC area mentoring nonprofits who matching students with caring adult mentors
- Supported and participated in Kelly Miller Middle School’s school-based engagement activities (Spring Science Fair, Math Night activities, etc.)

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES
- Complete turnover at UWNCA—all of the staff members initially identified to work on the middle grades effort at UWNCA left the organization during the grant period, most within the first 12 months.

SUCCESS FACTORS
- Despite turnover at UWNCA, the stability of leadership and existing relationships with a key partner organization (City Year) and corporate supporter (Deloitte) helped the UWNCA sustain its efforts at Kelly Miller, while prioritizing rebuilding an internal staff capable of expanding the work and shoring up their leadership role.

FUTURE PRIORITIES
- Deepen efforts in the Woodson High School feeder pattern by identifying students off track in Thomas Elementary School and matching them with mentors before they matriculate to middle school (Kelly Miller), with the long term goal of increasing Woodson’s graduation rate to 80 percent (currently at 53 percent).
- Layer in existing investments in health by expanding UWNCA’s Fun, Fly, and Fit curriculum—which focuses on reducing childhood obesity—to serve middle school students at Kelly Miller.
- Continue to raise awareness regarding the need to recruit additional mentors through leadership of the Mentoring Matters coalition.

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SYNOPSIS

Since 2010, Valley of the Sun has partnered with local school districts, schools, and community-based providers to implement Destination Graduation, an initiative focused on providing middle grades and high school students in 6th through 9th grades with the wrap-around supports and services they need to effectively transition into high school and graduate on time. This earlier effort focused primarily on matching schools ("campuses") with community-based organizations to provide student supports; partnering with additional “feeder” elementary schools; and increasing community awareness of the importance of middle school. Of particular importance was working with schools in Maricopa’s County non-unified school system to facilitate effective data sharing and communications so that students simultaneously transitioning between grades levels and districts could make more effective transitions.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- The development of marketing materials related to Destination Graduation has increased VSUW’s ability to tell a story of success to potential donors, funders, volunteers, and partners. For an example, please see: http://ow.ly/S0uSY
- Continued commitment to the partnership from partner school districts despite implementation challenges
- A partner elementary school facilitated early enrollment for its rising 9th graders, thereby ensuring that receiving schools had all the information they need to help the students transition successfully into high school
- Partner districts have agreed to dedicate class time for students to receive more intensive support from Destination Graduation coaches focused on academic engagement and resiliency

MARICOPA COUNTY STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

- White: 78.9%
- African American: 9.4%
- Hispanic: 5.6%
- Asian: 2.8%
- Native American: 2.4%

Phoenix Union High School District (16 high schools)
VALLEY OF THE SUN’S MIDDLE GRADES

CHALLENGE GOALS

- Expand existing high school graduation partnership “Destination Graduation” to include K-8 schools that feed into Central and Camelback High Schools
- Integrate early warning systems data (ABC) capacity at all Destination Graduation sites
- Increase community awareness of the importance of the middle grades to support successful transitions into high school and increase graduation rates
- Refine and improve Destination Graduation model, including management and evaluation of student supports, based on previous years’ experience

KEY PARTNERS

Valley of the Sun United Way, Jobs for Arizona’s Graduates, Phoenix Union High School District, Phoenix Union Elementary School District

SELECTED ACTIVITIES

- Expanded the Destination Graduation partnership to include a feeder K-8 school into Central High School
- Phoenix Union Elementary School district, a partner in Destination Graduation initiative, implemented a student data management system and data dashboard (to analyze student attendance, behavior, and course performance data)
- Strengthened data sharing between feeder K-8 schools and high schools participating in Destination Graduation
- Worked in a feeder pattern with Balsz Elementary and Camelback High Schools to support student transitions by establishing an agreement that rising 9th graders could attend summer school at their new high school rather than remain on Balsz’s elementary school campus
- Partnered with Big Brothers Big Sisters to develop a pilot mentor program for 6th graders, modeled on United Way of Allegheny County’s Be A Middle School Mentor program, to engage volunteers on the importance of the middle grades

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

- Managing turnover—VSUW replaced their early warning systems vendor and their community partner the first year of the Challenge. Identifying and forging agreements with new partners slowed the work, but the care taken to make sure that the right partners were on board also served to strengthen relationships, especially with participating school districts, in the long-term.
- Working within a county that has a non-unified school system. Maricopa County has 58 school districts which serve more than 700,000 students. Most of these school districts serve a specific school level (i.e. elementary, high), while about a third are unified (i.e. serve K-12). Thus, a specific challenge was fostering data sharing agreements and aligning supports across districts, as well as school levels.
- Maintaining ongoing engagement of school partners who were often engaged with VSUW in a variety of initiatives and did not have the capacity to support all activities.
- Insufficient capacity to access and effectively analyze student data.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Leveraging state relationships—VSUW had previously engaged the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) focused on strengthening out-of-school time in Maricopa County. As part of the Challenge, VSUW worked to re-establish communication around the state’s intent to create a statewide early warning data system. This dialogue and sharing of experiences helped to deepen trust and foster a hospitable climate at the state-level for real-time data use and sharing. It was also useful for VSUW’s work to expand its efforts to additional local school systems. A testament to the relationship was ADE and the county education agency’s willingness to intervene on VSUW’s behalf with the data vendor to ensure that expectations were met.
- VSUW credited the technical support provided through the Challenge with helping it engage and onboard new district partners.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

- Continuing to support early warning systems implementation at the school district and individual school levels, including installing student data dashboards at more schools to identify at-risk students based on ABC data and to track their participation in student supports
- Maintaining communications with ADE, including possibly hosting a summit focused on using real-time data
- Onboarding a new elementary school district (Osborn Elementary School District) into the Destination Graduation partnership
- Ensuring sufficient capacity exists to staff the partnership at participating Destination Graduation schools
SYNOPSIS

As part of the Middle Grades Challenge, United Way of Greenville County sought to engage diverse stakeholders to develop a coalition that could focus much needed attention on shoring up the middle grades. In addition to developing a coalition, a central theme of UWGC’s efforts was to use student, school and community data to identify community needs and assets, and to ultimately develop strategies to strengthen specific middle schools within a particular high-need community. This included using feeder pattern data and to identify specific middle schools that feed into high schools with low graduation rates; gathering community level data by engaging with youth and parents to gain a deeper understanding of specific needs and challenges; and mapping gaps in supports for services for middle grades students and their families, and, in this way, providing community leaders with actionable information that could be used to address unmet needs. Finally, a major goal was to work with Greenville County School to pilot an early warning and response system that better equip schools, teachers, and service providers with data needed to identify academically at-risk students and to match them with timely supports.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- United Way of Greenville County was awarded a 3-year, $3 million Social Innovation Fund Grant to work with Greenville County Schools and community providers to develop and implement an early warning and response system. The grant requires a 2:1 match. UWGC secured the match through board designated funds, corporate and philanthropic contributions totaling over $2 million for the 2015-16 school year; this includes UWGC’s required match and matching funds required for local providers.
- Greenville County Schools agreed to build an early warning indicator dashboard (to show student ABC data) for the entire school district.
- A data-sharing agreement was established between Greenville County Schools and United Way of Greenville County.
- UWGC convened 10 community conversations.
- UWGC published an asset map detailing resources available in the White Horse community.
GREENVILLE’S MIDDLE GRADES CHALLENGE GOALS

- Increase community awareness of barriers to success in the middle grades and increase engagement between students, families, schools, and the community
- Pilot an early warning and response system at schools within a specific feeder pattern and create a plan for district-wide implementation
- Identify gaps in student supports for middle and high school students and gain a deeper understanding of the school characteristics related to student success and failure
- Increase UWGC’s capacity to engage with the community’s issues of concern

KEY PARTNERS

United Way of Greenville County (UWGC), Greenville County Schools, Carolina High School, Berea High School, Communities in Schools Greenville, Hispanic Alliance, Building Opportunities for Out-of-School Time (BOOST)

SELECTED ACTIVITIES

- Recruited and engaged a Middle Grades Challenge Team—a representative coalition of school district, corporate, foundation and community leaders—to identify priorities and guide overall strategy development focused on middle grades student success. Also identified a smaller taskforce made up of teachers, parents, and principals to drive ongoing implementation and execution.
- UWGC partnered with community-based organizations to conduct community conversations with parents, youth, and community leaders in the White Horse community. Parent conversations focused on understanding their needs and challenges supporting their child’s success in middle school.
- UWGC worked closely with the Middle Grades Challenge Team and the Taskforce to map community-based supports for students and their families including out-of-school time programming (afterschool and summers); emergency services (e.g., food assistance, homeless/transitional housing support), health services (e.g., free clinics, substance abuse programming, hospitals), and public sector resources (e.g., parks, libraries, community centers)
- Used the asset mapping and information gleaned during community conversations to identify gaps in quality supports and services for students and their families in multiple areas: basic needs, out-of-school time programming, and in schools.
- Analyzed existing school feeder patterns to better understand trends in student achievement.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

- Gaining access to school and student level data.
- Building widespread understanding that early warning and response systems is not a “program” in the traditional sense, but an approach to the work to connect students with supports that will need to be built over time.
- Getting clarity about the roles of the Challenge leadership team brought together to engage in this effort. It took time and trial and error to crystallize the best way to leverage this group.
- Making sure that efforts to strengthen the middle grades reflect research-based best practices (which often can be implemented by a few key individuals), and understanding of community needs and concerns identified by engaging with students, families, teachers, and other stakeholders (which is time consuming and ongoing).

SUCCESS FACTORS

- UWGC’s willingness to invest in its own capacity to engage the community, to understand data and to effectively frame their work for potential investment. These essential skills were cultivated by staff participating in specific professional development opportunities and trainings during the Challenge (e.g., product development), and hiring new staff with these qualities.
- Openness of Greenville County Schools to implementing an evidence-based solution to strengthening the middle grades.
- UWGC and Greenville County Schools shared willingness to initially focus their efforts on a particular geography (i.e. White Horse community)
- UWGC’s concurrent participation in the United Way Partnering Program which gave them the ability to leverage the experiences of other United Ways working to develop and implement early warning and response systems in their communities.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

- Implement the $3 million Social Innovation Fund grant received from the Corporation for Community and National Service to develop and expand an early warning and response system in Greenville County Schools. As part of this:
  - Support Greenville County School’s efforts to select a data platform to create student data dashboards to identify at-risk students based on ABC data and track their participation in student supports
  - Identify direct service organizations that can provide supports to identified students in pilot sites
  - Build relationships with school sites that will be part of the for the early warning and response systems pilot.
- Continue to engage the White Horse community to understand shared aspirations, needs and challenges.

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SYNOPSIS

As part of its Middle Grades Challenge, United Way of Greater Atlanta sought to deepen youth, parent and community engagement as part of better understanding the underlying challenges to middle grades success and how to deepen strategies focused on removing barriers. In addition, UWGA desired to build on its history of investment in out-of-school time program quality, by deepening and expanding professional development opportunities for staff working with middle and high school youth. Despite persistent leadership turnover, UWGA and school and community partners made progress, buoyed by longstanding place-based work in the Atlanta Promise Neighborhood and consistent relationships with respected community-based organizations.

ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

- White: 77%
- African American: 14%
- Hispanic: 6.5%
- Asian/Native American/Alaskan: 1.9%

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Received a $500,000 Opportunity Youth Implementation Grant from the Aspen Institute. The purpose of the grant is to implement strategies to ensure that youth effectively transition from middle school through post-secondary and entry into the workforce.
- Recruited 80 additional mentors from local colleges and universities for the Mentoring in the Middle program.
- New partnership created between United Way of Greater Atlanta and Gwinnett County Schools Mentoring Program to expand a middle to high school transition program for male students of color.
- $17,000 donated from the Weikart Center/Forum for Youth Investment to train out-of-school time program staff on how to work effectively with middle and high school youth.
ATLANTA’S MIDDLE GRADES CHALLENGE GOALS

- Engage youth in community conversations to understand their levels of hope, engagement, and well-being based on the Gallop Student Poll
- Engage community residents in the Atlanta Promise Neighborhood in conversations about student readiness as a catalyst to increase the number of readers, tutors, and mentors
- Develop an engagement strategy for the business, philanthropic and higher education communities to gauge their interests and willingness to engage on the issue of the middle grades
- Develop community strategies to improve academic and social outcomes for students in the middle grades

KEY PARTNERS
United Way of Greater Atlanta (UWGA), One World Link, BEST Academy, Communities in Schools Atlanta

SELECTED ACTIVITIES

- UWGA partnered with ONE World Link and BEST Academy (all-male middle and high schools in Atlanta Public Schools) to implement a family leadership institute, “Parenting in the Middle,” designed to engage families of middle grades students and further equip them with the information, capacity, and skills needed to support their children’s success. Parents met with trained facilitators and parent mentors over a four-week period. Sessions focused on strategic planning, leadership training, understanding family support principles and strategies and providing family members with pertinent information and resources focused on school success. In the final session, parents presented final group projects that ranged in focus from school safety, fostering effective parent-teacher communication, and increasing parent involvement. Seven parents attended all sessions and graduated from the program.

- UWGA partnered with America’s Promise Alliance, the Ready by 21 Leadership Council, and the 100 Black Men of Atlanta to convene a public screening of the documentary, American Promise for 400 middle and high school students at BEST Academy. The film was also used as a part of a subsequent community forum planned by UWGA and their partners that included over 150 participants and was designed to spark conversation on the role of partnerships in strengthening school, family and community-based supports for middle grades students. Forum participants included school administrators and teachers, policymakers, business leaders, and youth development organizations.

- UWGA partnered with the David P. Weikart Center for Program Quality to host a Youth Work Methods workshop to train youth development trainers on effective methods for working with middle and high school youth. The training addressed core issues related to taking a developmentally appropriate approach with youth including: active learning, reframing conflict, youth voice, homework help, and building community. Participants who completed the Youth Work Methods training then served as workshop facilitators in a subsequent Summit for staff from community-based organizations serving youth including: Communities in Schools, Families First, Future Foundation, and Year Up.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

- Significant staff turnover at UWGA presented a challenge to consistent leadership and stewardship of the work. Although new staff hired also evinced a clear commitment to sustaining their focus on the middle grades, they joined the organization at various points in implementation, which created a persistent learning curve.

- Turnover in key leadership positions within Atlanta Public School District. In addition to addressing their own internal capacity issues, UWGA had to establish relationships with new leadership in the district in positions that mattered for the success of the work.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Leveraging existing relationships with key partners. UWGA’s longstanding partnership with the Weikart Center for Program Quality enabled them to build on previous efforts to build the capacity of youth development organizations to work effectively with middle and high school students. Similarly, the UWGA’s had previously worked with Parent Services Project to deliver Family Leadership Institutes for parents of pre-school aged children in 13 metro counties in the region. Rather than seek out a new partner to work with middle school parents, UWGA asked them to modify their training to meet the needs of parents of older youth.

- Stable community-based organizations. The Family Leadership Institute and ONE World Link had established relationships based on a history of successful work in the Atlanta Promise Neighborhood, where BEST Academy is based, and were instrumental in delivering youth mentoring and parent leadership training.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

- Continue to implement and strategically connect programs for students and families (mentoring, parent training) so that programs and services are aligned and work in tandem

- Engage individual donors and corporations who are interested in supporting efforts focused on the middle grades

CONTACT INFORMATION
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Acooper@unitedwayatlanta.org
SYNOPSIS

Building on a tradition of close collaboration with Jefferson County Public Schools and longstanding work with community partners to expand access to high quality out-of-school time opportunities for children and youth, Metro United Way was well poised to increase focus on the middle grades. Given the lack of traditional feeder patterns in Jefferson County Public Schools, they sought to work closely with the district leaders to identify neighborhoods with high rates of student absenteeism, the specific middle schools students from these areas primarily attended, and to adopt a place-based approach to working with families in these communities. A defining characteristic of their work was the use of data to identify community issues, pinpoint specific student/family needs, and to track and provide supports leveraging MUW’s own 2-1-1 system.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Metro United Way’s 2-1-1 system fully integrated into Louisville Linked, the early warning and response system used by Jefferson County Public Schools
- Successful attendance awareness messaging campaign that resulted in a decrease in absenteeism at participating middle schools, and an increase in signed, returned report cards
- Stronger relationship with participating middle schools and new understanding that external partners “outsiders” can strengthen family-school relationships without creating additional work for school staff
LOUISVILLE’S MIDDLE GRADES CHALLENGE GOALS

- Strengthen Louisville’s existing out-of-school time coalition, including increasing focus on the middle grades
- Implement data-driven strategies to increase middle grades success
- Increase MUW’s capacity to convene the community around education issues
- Ultimately increase the number of students who successfully transition to and graduate from high school

KEY PARTNERS

Jefferson County Public Schools, Olmstead South Middle School, Olmstead North Middle School, PAL Drug-Free Community Coalition, Neighborhood Place Social Services Center, and Louisville Free Public Library

SELECTED ACTIVITIES

- Worked with Jefferson County Public Schools to distribute parent surveys to get parents’ input on how the schools can best communicate with them. 136 surveys were completed, a return rate of approximately 30 percent.
- Developed a community messaging campaign using a community partner’s slogan, “Off & Learning,” to highlight the importance of regular school day attendance. This included developing branded collateral that was sent home with students (report cards, incentives, refrigerator magnets) and distributed strategically throughout the community (e.g., yard signs).
- MUW used data from JCPS to map student attendance areas for Olmstead North and South Middle Schools to canvass these neighborhoods, focusing on areas with the highest rates of absenteeism. Students from the PAL coalition youth group at the local high school partnered with adults to conduct the canvasses, referred to as “Stomps.”
- Engaged parents through Parent Cafes and a series of community conversations. Community conversations were held at local churches and the community service center and, similar to the Stomps, focused on neighborhoods with high rates of student absenteeism. Forty-nine community members participated in the three community conversations, which also helped to generate grassroots support for the messaging campaign. A total of 24 parents (representing 50 children) participated in eight Parent Cafes planned and convened by MUW and its school and community partners. Youth from the PAL coalition group provided childcare, and presenters included school principals and administrative staff from Olmstead North and South Academies, a parent trainer from the school district’s PTA, and experts in out-of-school time and youth development. Local businesses also donated $1,700 in incentives for parent participation in the Parent Cafes and other school-based events.
- Trained youth service coordinators at both middle schools on how to use Louisville Link, an online referral system developed by JCPS to connect students to needed supports. Louisville Linked uses MUW’s 2-1-1 system to vet providers, track referrals, and serve as the overall database. During the 2013-15 school year Olmstead North and South Middle Schools combined made a total of 2,814 referrals. Ultimately, 654 students from Olmstead South received services, representing 90 percent of their total student body, and 209 students in Olmstead North received services, representing 32 percent of their student population.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

- Working with JCPS, a school system without traditional feeder patterns that includes open enrollment and magnet schools. Middle schools, for example, can receive students from the entire county. This reality required MUW to work very closely with the school system to identify specific schools to work with.
- Constant school closures due to inclement weather (one of the coldest and snowiest winters recorded in Louisville) interrupted planned events.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Strong, well-established relationships with the school district. This includes experiences working together in the work of the Out-of-School Time Coordinating Council, which made requests for data and integrating United Way’s 2-1-1 system into Louisville Linked an easier lift.
- A unified school system. This helped to mitigate some of the challenges MUW faced related to student matriculation patterns.
- Longstanding, well-respected work in out-of-school time positioned MUW well to expand its focus on the middle grades.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

- Work with the site-based decision-making team at Olmstead North Middle School to develop a relationship with the new incoming school principal and youth services coordinator
- Work with the youth services coordinator to determine back to school events
- Work with the PAL Coalitions and other partners to determine how to extend the community campaign

CONTACT INFORMATION

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### APPENDIX A

#### MIDDLE GRADES CHALLENGE GRANTEES SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY DATA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Spokane County</th>
<th>Pinellas County</th>
<th>District of Columbia</th>
<th>Jefferson County</th>
<th>Allegheny County</th>
<th>Buncombe County</th>
<th>Maricopa County</th>
<th>Greenville County</th>
<th>Atlanta (city)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Population
 | 318,857,056   | 484,318        | 938,098         | 658,893            | 760,026            | 1,231,255       | 250,539         | 4,087,191       | 482,752          | 447,841         |
| Persons living below the poverty level | 15.4%         | 15.4%          | 14.1%            | 18.6%               | 16.7%            | 12.9%           | 17.1%           | 16.7%           | 15.8%           | 25%             |
| Name of School District(s) | n/a           | Spokane Public Schools | Pinellas County School District | District of Columbia Public Schools | Jefferson County Public Schools | Pittsburgh Public Schools | Asheville City Schools | Phoenix Union High School District | Greenville County Schools | Atlanta Public Schools |
| Number of Students | 49,800,000    | 29,275         | 104,104          | 46,500              | 95,794           | 25,504          | 4,000           | 27,031          | 74,550*          | 47,000          |
| HS Grad Rate | 80%           | 83%            | 76.2             | 58.3%               | 87.5%            | 77.4%           | 86.5%           | 83.2%           | 81.7%            | 81.7%           |
| Total Number of Schools | 93,328        | 46             | 150              | 111                 | 172              | 54              | 9               | 16              | 100*            | 105             |
| Students Eligible for Free and Reduced Meals | 49.6%         | 58.7%          | ?                | 76%                 | 63%              | 75%             | 54.8%           | 81.8%           | 50.24%           | 74.76%          |
A strategy map is a visual representation of the interrelated activities that a United Way and its community partners are implementing to advance a goal.

Good strategy maps typically include:

- A high level community goal (e.g., “ensure that children are graduating from high school with the skills necessary to pursue post-secondary education or vocational training”)

- Focus areas – these are high level categories that correspond to the bodies of work that are necessary to achieve the goal. In education, they typically fall along the cradle-to-career continuum and (e.g., early childhood success, 3rd grade reading, middle grades success and transitions, high school graduation, post-secondary success)

- A highlighted focus area—this is the highlighted or shaded area of work that is the focus of the rest of the strategy map (e.g., middle grades success); everything else that follows will relate specifically to that work

- Research-based elements of the work—these are the elements that research tells us matter most for addressing the focus area (e.g., middle grades success is possible when students are academically successful, regularly attend school, and are well-behaved)

- A focus population strategy maps include a specific group that community level data shows is a population to be concerned about, primarily because there are significant barriers that prevent members of that group from achieving the stated goal

- A target outcome the specific intended results for the focus population as a result of implementing the strategies and approaches included in the map

- Strategies and approaches articulate the high-level strategies (e.g., increase parent engagement, support student transition) and related approaches directly underneath each strategy that a United Way is implementing with school and community partners to achieve the desired change.

Strategy maps are a great way to map your work to see how the strategies complement and support one another and to potentially identify gaps.

On the subsequent page is a strategy map from the Spokane County United Way, submitted with its final report for the Middle Grades Success and Transitions Challenge.
Priority Community Issue: Education – Helping Children & Youth Succeed

Broad Community Goal: Cut achievement gaps in half by 2020

Your Areas of Focus in Education

- Ready for Kindergarten
- 3rd Grade Reading
- Middle Grades Success
- High School Graduation
- Post-secondary degree or credential

* 2010 rate: 66.6%

Framework for Focusing on Middle School Success

Broad Community Goal: Cut achievement gaps in half by 2020.

Areas of Focus

- Ready for Kindergarten
- 3rd Grade Reading
- Middle Grades Success
- High School Graduation
- Post-secondary degree or credential

Research-based components of middle school success:

- Academic success
- Regular attendance
- Positive behavior

Populations of special concern in our community:

- 6th-9th grade students in SPS
- Students in Garry and Shaw Middle Schools that feed into Rogers High School
**TARGET OUTCOME**

Improve attendance, behavior and course completion of students in Spokane Public Schools’ five middle schools, with a particular focus on Shaw and Garry Middle Schools

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**STRATEGY 1: ESTABLISH EARLY WARNING & RESPONSE SYSTEM**

- Conduct EWI study using local student data to validate early warning indicators.
- Develop district-wide EWS system.
- Provide training on the features of the system and possible uses to district staff. Learn from early adopters.
- Increase capacity of district to share and review summary data with community partners.
- Develop data sharing agreement form and procedures so that student-level data can be shared with community partners working with individual students.
- Develop Learning Partner Dashboard with the goal of integrating student-level data from community partners with student-level data in the EWS.
- Use EWS to assess internal policies and procedures (e.g., discipline policies) and improve practices.

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**STRATEGY 2: INTERVENE EARLY WITH MIDDLE GRADE YOUTH WITH ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS**

- Learn about local best practice with high school truancy boards.
- Refine the truancy board model to meet middle school needs (new Community Attendance Support Teams).
- Secure funding to create .5 FTE position in SPS to implement CAST model (grant from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to Priority Spokane).
- Establish individual (principal, counselor) at each of the five middle schools who will lead school-based CAST process.
- Recruit diverse group of community partners for each school who will participate on CAST.
- Develop policies and procedures to guide operation of CAST.
- Implement CAST model focused on students identified by the EWS who have 4 unexcused absences.
- Provide for weekly check-in by counselor with students who have been the focus of CAST.
- Note: Specific outcomes of the 2013-2014 CAST program have not yet been released. SPS has an external evaluator that will produce a report.

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**STRATEGY 3: IMPROVE ACCESS TO SERVICES AND SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS IDENTIFIED BY EWS**

- School district and community partner (SPS and SCUW) co-convene new School Community Partnership Committee as a learning community.
- Ensure participation by key partners who have role to play in improving access (e.g., youth development and social services agencies, juvenile justice system, local funders).
- Use monthly meetings to review EWS data for 5 middle schools and feeder elementary schools.
- Use monthly meetings to learn about best practices related to attendance, behavior and course completion.
- Encourage formation of work groups focused on shared interests (e.g., mentoring programs).
- Identify potential strategies and seek funding to implement (e.g., CAST).
- Funders (e.g., United Way and Empire Health Foundation) reshape investment strategies to support services for students identified by EWS.
- Support formation of new Northeast Children’s Zone in the Garry/Shaw/Rogers neighborhood.
BFFS, BULLIES, FRENEMIES, ACADEMIC PRESSURE, PUBERTY

SURVIVING MIDDLE SCHOOL IS TOUGH

COACH, TEACHER, MENTOR, FAMILY, PASTOR, COUNSELOR, FRIEND
COMMUNITY SUPPORT SYSTEM

WHO GOT YOU THROUGH?

Whether you play a lead or supporting role, it takes all of us to help them get through middle school.

Middle schoolers with a supporting community are more engaged in class, get better grades, make attendance a priority and enjoy learning about all kinds of new things. They’re also more likely to be prepared for high school and go on to graduate. We all have something to contribute, join tutors, mentors, and others who care.

HANDSONASHEVILLE.ORG/MIDDLESCHOOL
Why?
Because under-educated children in poverty are nearly three times more likely to drop out of school and repeat the cycle of poverty than their middle-income peers.

Early Literacy
Ages 0-12
Goals
Ensure that children are surpassing key readiness and early grade reading benchmarks.

Financial Stability
Ages 18+
Goals
Ensure adults achieve long-term financial stability by developing the skills and opportunities to obtain and sustain employment.

Youth Success
Ages 13-18
Goals
Ensure that children are graduating from high school with the skills necessary to pursue post-secondary education or vocational training.
Some great kids are looking for some great mentors!

Mentoring is one of the best ways to support your community. By helping a young person succeed, you create a brighter future for all of us. You’ll discover and rediscover parts of yourself that you didn’t know existed, learn how much you have to give, and have the satisfaction of knowing you are making a difference.

United Way of the National Capital Area, Mentors Inc., and City Year are working together to bring more mentors to 8th grade students at Kelly Miller Middle School in Ward 7. These students are preparing to enter to high school—a sometimes tricky transition, academically, socially and emotionally. A caring mentor can make all the difference in helping these young people find their footing and thrive in school and life.

This is a great opportunity for corporate groups to get involved in the community with some great kids and some great non-profits.

Volunteer Requirements:
- At least 21 years old and have completed high school or the equivalent;
- Employed, retired or in school at an accredited institution;
- Ready to submit an application and two letters of reference;
- Willing to participate in a short interview and mentor training;
- Able to pass a criminal background check;
- Willing to make a one-year commitment to mentoring a protégé;
- Have the desire to make a difference in the life of a DC student.

Please contact Susannah Harris at sharris@uwnca.org for more information or to volunteer for the program.
Off and Learning!
EVERYDAY PARENT PARTICIPATION

DID YOU KNOW?
- Missing 10 percent, or about 18 days, of the school year can drastically affect a student’s academic success.
- By 6th grade, absenteeism is one of three signs that a student may drop out of high school.
- By 9th grade, regular and high attendance is a better predictor of graduation rates than 8th grade test scores.

A Community Conversation about Education!
Are children in OUR neighborhoods going to make it?  
What’s it going to take to get them all the way through school?  
and READY for jobs and life?  
What do Parents want for kids? What helps?

Wednesday, March 12th  
11:30a.m. – 1:30p.m.  
So Central Neighborhood Place  
4255 Hazelwood Ave, 40215

Childcare available! LUNCH SERVED Door prizes!!

ATTENDANCE MATTERS
SCHOOL ATTENDANCE is basic to academic success from kindergarten all the way through high school. GRADUATION is basic to getting a good job and secure life.

OLMSTED NORTH & SOUTH ACADEMIES work with Metro United Way, the PAL Coalition (the Drug Free Communities Coalition supported by Family & Children’s Place) and The Bingham Fellows to bring parents together about the importance of school, daily school attendance, and HELP FOR KIDS to succeed! Interested? Want information? CALL Metro United Way 292-6127
Did you know that students transitioning into middle school often have concerns about not being able to find their classes or the bathroom, forgetting their locker combination, being the youngest student in the school, failing a big test or a presentation and bullying?

You can make a difference!

When children see their parents or other family members getting involved in their school, it:

- Shows them that you are interested in what they are doing in school.
- Lets them see that you value what they are learning.
- Gives them a sense of security.
- Helps them learn about good citizenship from your example.

Before school begins:
1. Attend your child’s Back to School Night.
2. Have your child meet his or her teachers.
3. Try to have your child meet other students.
4. Let your child practice using a combination lock.
5. Review your child’s route to school or to the bus stop.
6. Help your child learn his or her schedule.

By middle school, if your child has regularly missed more than 18 days of excused or unexcused school each year, he/she is at higher risk for dropping out than his/her peers who have missed fewer than nine days.

Need help? Call the Parent Hotline at 412-622-7920
or email parenthotline@pghboe.net.


5 Gallup Student Poll


7 For more information on these respective efforts, see: http://dipomasnow.org/; http://www.sreb.org/page/1176/about_mmgw.html (Making the Middle Grades Work - SREB); http://www.middlegradesforum.org/ (Schools to Watch – Forum); http://www.meadowscenter.org/institutes/middle-school-matters (Middle School Matters Institute – Meadows Center);

8 One notable exception to this is the work of Diplomas Now, which leverages Americorps volunteers to provide school-based mentoring, and Communities in Schools, who work to leverage community-based supports for students and their families.

9 Charting the Course for Change: Advancing Education, Income and Health through Collective Impact https://s3.amazonaws.com/unway.3cdn.net/8199da40c4fa8be4e2_hzm6bu7o3.pdf

10 For additional information on the Ready by 21 and the national partnership, please see: http://www.readyby21.org/.

11 This work was made possible with financial support from Altria who has an expressed interest in fostering positive youth development and helping youth avoid risk-taking behaviors, especially in communities where their company and subsidiaries are located.

12 An additional four United Ways did not receive grants, but were invited to participate in the middle grades learning community: United Way of King County (Seattle), United Way of Coastal Georgia, Heart of Florida United Way (Orlando), and United Way of Greater Chattanooga.

13 The Hispanic Alliance is a non-profit, community-based organization in Greenville, SC that works to foster collaboration and coordination among providers that serve Hispanic community members.
An early warning and response system uses specific student data – attendance, behavior and course performance (collectively referred to as the “ABCs”) to identify students at risk of dropout and to match them to just in time supports. It is based on the work of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and is a systemic, collaborative approach to providing the right supports, to the right students, at the right time.

The film, American Promise, chronicles the struggles of two African American families in New York City as they raise and educate their sons.


Source: www.communityindicators.ewu.edu.

Source: School district and state education agency websites, exceptions noted with an *asterisk


Total number of PreK-12 schools: http://www.pcsb.org/Page/650.


Source: www.k12.wa.us.


Source: http://dcps.dc.gov/page/dcps-glance-enrollment


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

United Ways from across the network participated in our Middle Grades Success and Transitions Challenge on which this report is based. United Way Worldwide wishes to thank each of the following leaders for their thoughtful review of this report:

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- **Angelle Cooper**, Director, Education, United Way of Greater Atlanta
- **TJ Delahanty**, Manager, Out-of-School Time Initiatives, Metro United Way (Louisville)
- **Laura Elliot**, Middle School Success Director, United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County
- **Julia Estrada**, Community Impact Director, Education and Youth, Valley of the Sun United Way
- **Timothy Johnson**, Vice President, Community Impact, United Way of the National Capital Area
- **Sally Pritchard**, Vice President of Community Impact, Spokane County United Way
- **Jamie Toennies**, Senior Director, Education Strategies, United Way Suncoast
- **Teresa Ware**, MGST Program Coordinator, United Way of Greenville County

This report was principally written by Ayeola Fortune, Director of Youth Success in Education at United Way Worldwide.