KEYS TO SUCCESS:

EARLY LESSONS

Lead with the mayors.

The shift from putting the responsibility for children's success and wellbeing solely on the schools to making it a community-wide effort must start from the top leadership. No one in a city has more ability than the mayor to signal a city-wide commitment to children, and the mayor also has a unique ability to bring executives and key partners to the table, to raise or redirect funds, and to coordinate across disparate groups.

Define the need locally.

The first step to solving a problem is understanding it. Naming the problem and illustrating its urgency in concrete, data-based, locally meaningful terms are important prerequisites to building the public and institutional will to change practices.

Build a city-wide movement.

City-wide efforts will only be sustainable with broad stakeholder and community buy-in. The cabinet must create a public demand for change by making a case to the community through a concise, engaging messaging campaign. This effort should engage the whole community, including parents, taxpayers, and voters, to make the case for a new, comprehensive approach to serving children and to ensure community voices and needs are fully reflected in the cabinet.

Form a children's cabinet to coordinate across sectors.

The cabinet needs to consist of the right people—those with the authority to make change and who represent the full community, create a shared vision, identify goals, and define individual responsibilities for moving the work forward.

Develop a shared vision for the whole system, but also create tangible interim successes.

The Lab asked cities to accomplish two different things at the same time: to build toward a comprehensive, cradle-to-career system of education and support for children, while also taking on more tangible, programmatic work. To accomplish this, cities need to articulate a shared vision of what the fully realized system looks like so everyone understands the goal and how the programmatic changes—expanding access to summer learning, for example, or introducing personalized learning into the schools—helps move the city closer to that vision.

Create backbone and internal capacity to start and sustain the work.

Even with the best intentions in the world, meaningful collaboration will not move forward without people who are committed to doing the time-consuming and often difficult day-to-day connective work. The cabinet needs a facilitator to coordinate meetings and move the work forward, with support from staff in cabinet member organizations.

By All Means

Use data strategically and share data across different parts of the system.

Data is an important tool at every step of the process. It is important for identifying community needs and building a case for change, and an essential element of personalization: without data on individual children, there is no way to know their strengths or needs. Shared data on access to services and programs as well as on child outcomes provide important metric evidence of the effect of collective action.

Build true partnerships between the city and schools, across city organizations, and with funders.

While mayoral leadership is central to spurring new approaches for cities to address the needs of children, a strong partnership between the mayor and superintendent is essential. Schools are the place where children spend much of their time, and they can serve an important role as a connector to other services. Partnerships with funders and with other city organizations that can provide services ranging from health supports to afterschool programming are also key to the success of this work.

Anticipate turnover.

Turnover in key roles is inevitable, even in a short timeframe. Ensuring the initiative will be sustained through these changes depends on the strong commitment of multiple actors, both conceptually and through tangible effort, to ensure its survival. Having a formal, funded backbone structure, a broad-based movement, and codified practices can mitigate the effects of leadership change or key staff departures.

Create time and space for deep collaboration. Build relationships.

Cabinet meetings are important for carrying out the ongoing work, but making time for deeper collaboration through convenings or retreats builds relationships and nurtures common understanding of and commitment to goals and strategies for achieving them. While it can be challenging to create the time for this, it has proven immensely valuable to participants.

By All Means