



Introduction

Spartanburg, South Carolina is one of the most compelling examples of the power of cradle-to-career place-based partnerships to transform the lives of children and families. Following a period of economic and civic decline driven by the collapse of the textile manufacturing industry, local leaders have assembled a potent mix of major philanthropic investment, school partnerships, deep community engagement, local government support, and affiliation with multiple national networks to transform neighborhoods that have faced disinvestment for decades.

As a result of these partnerships, Spartanburg has made major strides, including catalyzing large-scale philanthropic investments, including \$50M from Blue Meridian Partners and an additional \$180M from local and regional foundations and other private donors.

Spartanburg's collective efforts have driven the following outcomes, impacting children and families, particularly in the Northside neighborhood, one of the neighborhoods of particular focus:

- In the Northside, [\\$150 million total capital](#) was invested in the development or renovation of 568 housing units, the creation of a retail Hub City, and other initiatives.
- [Crime](#) in the Northside decreased 70 percent between 2011 and 2021.

- The Cleveland Academy of Leadership – a Leader in Me Lighthouse School, which is located in the Northside and had been one of South Carolina’s lowest-achieving public elementary schools, earned a [state rating of “excellent”](#) in 2023 and again in 2024. Between 2018 and 2023, the percentage of Cleveland Academy’s students proficient in math increased from 21 percent to 54 percent and in reading increased from 12 percent to 47 percent, and in science increased from 7 percent to 55 percent.
- A new state-of-the-art community center (The Dr. T. K. Gregg Community Center) opened in the Northside in 2020, next to Cleveland Academy.
- The Franklin School, across the street from Cleveland Academy and the Community Center, is a model early childhood development center.
- The percentage of third-grade students [proficient in reading](#) in four high-poverty schools more than doubled from 15 percent in 2017 to 37 percent in 2024.
- FAFSA completion at Broome High School increased from 49 percent in 2020 to 67 percent in 2023.
- In 2023, Spartanburg earned StriveTogether’s “System Transformation” designation, awarded to cradle to career network members with multiple organizations, sectors, and community members demonstrating commitment and ongoing accountability to the vision and the community, and institutional and public policies, practices, and resources that advance improved outcomes that are spread and sustained.

BY THE NUMBERS

- Nearly 40,000 residents, live in the city of Spartanburg, with about a quarter under age 18.
- Spartanburg is the #10 fastest growing metro area in the U.S.
- Spartanburg is home to seven colleges and universities.
- Only 33% of residents have obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher.
- Spartanburg’s economic mobility sits in the bottom 10 percent of counties nationwide.
- 44 percent of residents are Black and 44 percent are White.
- Approximately 24 percent of residents live below the federal poverty level.



The Dr. T.K Gregg Community Center is a new state-of-the-art community center that opened in the Northside in 2020, next to Cleveland Academy.

This type of progress requires local place-based partnerships to layer multiple strategies, supports, models, and initiatives, which enables communities to both deepen their impact along the cradle-to-career continuum *and* scale their impact – reaching more children, youth, and families by expanding their programmatic focus and, often, their geographic reach. It also enables communities to leverage public and private resources from multiple sources, including local, state, and federal government, business, and philanthropy to address persistent disparities and to bring about broader policy change.

The national strategies and approaches coalescing in Spartanburg include:

- [Purpose Built Communities](#), which brings together mixed-income housing, cradle-to-college education pathways, community wellness initiatives, and economic vitality within a defined neighborhood—led in Spartanburg by the [Northside Development Group](#) (NDG), the community quarterback for the Northside neighborhood.
- [StriveTogether](#)’s Cradle to Career Network, through which place-based partnerships use a collective impact approach to bring together youth, families, nonprofits, businesses, schools, and more to drive economic mobility—represented by the [Spartanburg Academic Movement](#) (SAM), which serves as the backbone organization for the city.
- [EdRedesign](#)’s [Institute for Success Planning](#), through which cross-sector local leaders and community teams design, implement, and scale systems of personalized, relationship-based opportunity and support for children and youth—manifested in the Family Academy initiative in Spartanburg’s Northside neighborhood.
- [Blue Meridian Partners](#), a philanthropic organization that makes significant investments to scale promising strategies that address economic and social mobility along the cradle-to-career continuum—BMP invested \$50M in Movement 2030, a comprehensive, investable plan coordinated by SAM.
- Federal initiatives, including a [Promise Neighborhoods](#) grant to SAM of nearly \$1M awarded in 2024; a Department of Housing and Urban Development [Choice Neighborhoods](#) planning grant of \$300,000 to NDG in 2012; and a \$15M [Full-Service Community Schools](#) award to SAM in 2024 from the Department of Education.
- Support from [William Julius Wilson Institute at Harlem Children’s Zone](#) on using its six principles of neighborhood-based cradle-to-career development to build high-

impact local strategies and engaging a local superintendent in the [Place-Based Education Leaders Design Fellowship](#), developed in partnership with EdRedesign and Chiefs for Change.

- Partners for Rural Impact is supporting the development of a comprehensive plan in neighboring Union County – a community that is adjacent and closely aligned with the work in neighboring Metropolitan Spartanburg.

In pursuing a holistic approach to creating upward mobility, Spartanburg serves as an example of how to bring together multiple strategies in the field. Keisha Gray, SAM Chief Strategy Officer explains, “SAM uses the StriveTogether Theory of Action and Blue Meridian Partners’ framework as its anchoring frameworks to explain how we approach the work and what our work is focused on. Through our collaboration with NDG, we also lean into their Purpose Built framework to gain greater specificity related to place-based built environment efforts, while utilizing EdRedesign’s Success Planning framework to guide our student and family engagement efforts supporting improved student-level academic outcomes.”

Spartanburg’s place-based strategies also reflect nested geographic footprints, with SAM taking a county-wide approach while NDG operates at the neighborhood level. The city government works closely with both partnerships to secure funding and provide systemic buy-in.

This practice brief focuses on the collaboration in Spartanburg between two backbone organizations—NDG and SAM—that are affiliated with national networks. The brief describes the development of each of the two organizations and the nature of their collaboration. It addresses how they have developed their collaboration to foster stronger alignment and outcomes and includes key takeaways for other communities looking to ignite transformational change.

The Northside Development Group

Textile mills were the economic lifeblood of a vibrant Spartanburg in the 20th century. The end of the textile era in Spartanburg in the 1980s, marked by the closing of multi-generational employers such as Spartan Mills, created harsh economic conditions in the city, particularly in communities like the Northside. A primarily Black neighborhood, the Northside spans approximately 400 acres. By the early 2000s, a community of 5,500 families had dwindled to 1,500. The mill village houses surrounding the once lively Spartan Mills, 60 percent of which had been abandoned, bred violence and drug activity. The mill

village stores were gone. The economic and social fabric of the community had been torn. Still, there was a strong current of civic activism and pride in the neighborhood's rich history.

Still, there was a strong current of civic activism and pride in the neighborhood's rich history. Spartanburg's residents knew they needed to restore opportunity and hope to their community. Former Mayor Bill Barnet, a respected business and community leader, was challenged by his successor to leverage an economic opportunity in the early 2000s—a \$30 million investment by an osteopathic medical school building a new campus in the Northside (what is now VCOM) — to address the conditions of poverty that had distressed the Northside community for decades. During his tenure as mayor, Barnet had become acquainted with the Purpose Built Communities model and Carol Naughton, then CEO of Purpose Built Communities Foundation and now CEO of Purpose Built, which informed his approach to revitalization.



A statue commemorating the contributions of the Northside Voyagers, community members who led in identifying strategic priorities and are valued as sources of neighborhood wisdom and expertise.

NDG was officially formed in 2011 to revitalize the Northside neighborhood, and specifically to serve as a land bank that would acquire blighted, abandoned Northside real estate that showed promise for future development. Barnet served as the founding chair of the Board of Directors. After receiving a Choice Neighborhoods planning grant in 2013 from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), NDG hired Tammie Hoy-Hawkins, a real estate development expert specializing in affordable housing.

From the beginning, NDG's leaders wanted to ensure deep community engagement and ownership of the redevelopment effort. Barnet called upon neighborhood leaders Curt McPhail, then working with the Mary Black Foundation and previously with Stop the Violence, and Tony Thomas, a community resident and advocate, to leverage their trusting relationships with residents to establish a community leadership team that guides NDG's work to transform the Northside. The first step was investing in the leadership of the neighborhood residents, which led to the formation of the Northside Voyagers. The [Northside Voyagers](#) comprised of long-time neighborhood residents with a vested interest in the revitalization effort. The Voyagers led a public design workshop to identify the community's needs and priorities, and they remain the community voice at the decision-making table in the planning decisions neighborhood. According to Barnet, "If you came to

Northside and wanted to build something, the first thing we'd tell you is you should do is go to the Voyagers and make sure they understand what you're trying to accomplish."

NDG became the seventh affiliate of Purpose Built Communities in 2013, reflecting their aligned visions of mixed-income housing, economic revitalization, and high-quality education.

In 2023, NDG in partnership with SAM joined a cross-sector team participating in EdRedesign's Institute for Success Planning Community of Practice. The Success Planning team developed their Family Academy strategy. The Family Academy utilizes a two-generation approach, connecting children and families in the Northside with personalized, relationship-based supports and opportunities to help students in Northside schools thrive. Family Navigators support parents of students in four critical areas: financial literacy, connection to resources, homeownership readiness, and education reentry.



The Spartanburg Academic Movement

In 2008, community organizations like [Spartanburg Community Indicators Project](#), [Metropolitan Studies Institute at USC Upstate](#), and [Spartanburg Area Chamber of Commerce](#) began highlighting data illustrating Spartanburg's inability to compete with other thriving cities in the region, principally due to low levels of post-secondary achievement compared to those other cities (19.2% compared to over 40%). These organizations convened

advisories, task forces, and strategic planning sessions with overlapping participation of community leaders from various sectors. Dr. Russell Booker, then Superintendent of Education at Spartanburg District 7 (the school district encompassing the Northside) and Dr. John Stockwell, then Chancellor of the University of South Carolina Upstate, were two key participants in those conversations.

One strategy born out of the community efforts was the College Hub, a nonprofit formed in 2010 charged with increasing the post-secondary credentialing of Spartanburg residents. Booker and Stockwell both served as board members of College Hub, and Stockwell, newly retired from USC Upstate, agreed to serve as its inaugural chair. After two years of stops and starts, the difficult decision was made to reimagine the work of the College Hub. After a lengthy search for a new executive director, the board ultimately asked Dr. Stockwell if he would take the reins of this organization. Among his first organizational moves in 2012 was to

merge College Hub with the Children’s Services Alliance, a local nonprofit also formed in 2008 focused on prenatal to kindergarten strategies. In 2013, College Hub rebranded to become The Spartanburg Academic Movement to better align its messaging with its cradle-to-career strategy. Stockwell recalled, “My first revelation after retirement from a career in university life was that the real action was from birth to early childhood development. At SAM, we were recognizing the work we could do with cradle-to-career strategies. We lost a few board members in the transition, but we gained a lot with regard to the pattern of thinking that we were pursuing.”

Inspired by his reading of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*’s 2011 [article on Collective Impact](#), Stockwell began building a relationship with StriveTogether. In 2013, SAM became a member of the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network. In 2020, Booker became the Executive Director of SAM, after engaging for years with both NDG and SAM in his role as Superintendent of Spartanburg’s District 7. Today, Booker also serves as Chair of the Board of Directors of StriveTogether (a role he took while superintendent) and is a member of the Board of Directors of Purpose Built Communities.

Collaboration in the Northside: The Role of Cleveland Academy in Bringing Models Together to Support Children

“Getting the school districts onboard is critical. My relationship with SAM and NDG began when I was a Superintendent in the Northside. They worked closely with District 7 and brought us into the conversation from the beginning. Whenever they wanted to pilot something, we were engaged and open. The common thread for organizations working in the same place should be your school system.”

—Dr. Russell Booker

Cleveland Academy is a public elementary school in Spartanburg's District 7. In 2011, Cleveland Academy was one of the worst performing elementary schools in the state, and the community had become accustomed to its failure. Booker, as Superintendent of Spartanburg District 7, was engaging with both NDG and SAM to tackle the significant challenges within the school district.



The Cleveland Academy of Leadership

Through President Obama's federal *Race to the Top* education reform initiative, Cleveland Academy embarked on a full school transformation strategy that included extending the academic calendar from 180 to 205 days and teacher contracts from 190 to 225 days and providing every student with a computer, becoming a national leader in digital learning. Simultaneously, Booker entered into a significant agreement with SAM for data-sharing and to utilize SAM's capacity for district and community-wide strategic planning, targeted community programs and initiatives, school-based interventions, and professional development.

SAM provided professional development to Cleveland Academy teachers and access to StriveTogether's accelerated leadership program to Cleveland Academy's Principal, Dr. Marquice Clark, through which he visited sites around the country and learned about the continuous improvement process and the value of using data. The support from SAM and StriveTogether was critical, according to Clark. "I don't think Cleveland would ever have been able to gain traction without SAM," he explained. A strong focus on continuous improvement would become central to both NDG's and SAM's approach to their work. Dr. Clark would later earn his doctorate degree in continuous improvement science from Clemson University.

In 2015, NDG established its case management support services for Northside residents and students. Operating as cross-sector community partners, NDG, SAM, School District 7, and Cleveland Academy began to hold regular meetings to discuss strategy, data, finances, and processes, modeling what collective impact looks like in practice.

In 2023, Cleveland Academy achieved an "[excellent](#)" state designation and was also chosen as one of the schools receiving a federal Full-Service Community Schools grant.

Between 2018 and 2023, the percentage of Cleveland Academy’s students who are proficient in math increased from 21 percent to 54 percent, in reading from 12 percent to 47 percent, and in science from 7 percent to 55 percent.

Fostering Further Alignment and Collaboration: Movement 2030

“Dr. John Stockwell, who was then followed by [Dr. Russell Booker], was in the StriveTogether network and [NDG] was in the Purpose Built network — which is probably why Spartanburg got attention from Blue Meridian and these other people because we had those two national interactions where we had drawn attention to what was going on at SAM and what we were doing in the Northside.”

— Bill Barnett

By 2023, the community revitalization and academic achievements of NDG and SAM fueled interest from philanthropic leaders looking to invest in place-based partnerships. Blue Meridian Partners selected Spartanburg as a Place Matters investee, leading to an aggregate \$230 million investment in Spartanburg County by Blue Meridian Partners, The Duke Endowment, the Blue Cross Blue Field of SC, the Mary Black Foundation, a host of corporate partners and numerous local community members, and others. This investment spurred a new level of collaboration across the two backbone organizations, leading to the creation of Movement 2030.

Movement 2030 is a coordinated community plan to improve cradle-to-career outcomes, economic mobility, and educational attainment across Spartanburg County. Movement 2030 is supported by local, regional, and national partners. The plan is built on the work and strategies that many [different organizations](#) already had in place, helping build buy-in, alignment, collaboration, and trust among the different actors.

Movement 2030 focuses on four key areas, each of which is coordinated through a collaborative working group: [early care and education](#), [post-secondary degree attainment](#), and the transformation of the Northside and Highland neighborhoods. SAM and NDG play key roles in coordinating these efforts and engaging other institutions in Spartanburg:

- SAM coordinates the full [Movement 2030](#) plan, including managing the funding and maintaining four working groups aligned to each of the four focus areas. SAM leads the working group on early care and education post-secondary degree attainment and sits on each of the other three working groups. NDG leads the working group for the Northside neighborhood and the Bethlehem Center serves as the lead convenor for the cradle-to-career efforts in Highland.
- NDG's initiatives under the strategic plan include small and minority-owned businesses, homeownership programming with down payment assistance, and personalized supports for students and families featuring individualized plans, coaching, and family support services.
- The working groups meet regularly and produce data reports twice yearly to display and discuss milestone progress toward Movement 2030's goals.
- SAM's Board of Directors has established a committee on collective impact that gathers the data reports of the four working groups and a Strategic Advisory Group to make decisions on adjustments to the Movement 2030 strategic plan based on that data. The Strategic Advisory Group includes leadership representation from post-secondary institutions, local government officials, neighborhood associations, and other social sector leaders.

Movement 2030 is expected to reach over 60,000 young people and residents of Spartanburg by 2030, while putting an additional 7,000 children on a path toward economic mobility, creating a more equitable and prosperous future for all residents of Spartanburg County.

Looking ahead, in 2025, Spartanburg began exploring establishing a Children's Cabinet, a formal structure to bring together local government agencies and other community organizations and stakeholders to coordinate services for children and families.

Spartanburg Academic Movement has also partnered with [Partners for Rural Impact](#) and EdRedesign's Institute for Success Planning to engage neighboring Union County, South Carolina in supporting its emerging cradle-to-career place-based efforts.

Key Enablers of Collaboration

The collaborative work in Spartanburg provides several key insights and lessons for leaders seeking to align multiple strategies, models, and frameworks.

1. **Proximate leaders, who have firsthand lived experience in the community they serve, are a critical component in effective place-based collaboration.**

People in key roles who (1) have strong social and political capital, (2) are trusted by different stakeholders at all levels from grassroots to grasstops—including community members, school systems, community-based organizations, and government, and (3) are in relationship with each other can foster alignment and drive collaboration. Across Spartanburg, there were key actors at the table with different types of social and political capital when decisions were made; these leaders had strong relationships, trust, and a willingness to use their influence in support of the work. They were also able to engage and bring others into the work, including the faith-based community.

2. **Strong trusting relationships and community organizing lay the groundwork for and precede investments and broad, multi-stakeholder collaboration.**

Before the large-scale investments made in Spartanburg and the formation of Movement 2030, people were already working together both formally and informally across organizations. There was also early progress that fueled funder interest and led to the current Movement 2030 strategy. Investing time, energy, and capacity into relationships, collaborations, and engaging with other actors can't wait until there is funding to do so.

3. **Community voice and engagement must go beyond simply a seat at the table to leadership in decision-making.** Through the Northside Voyagers, community members have led in identifying strategic priorities and are valued as sources of neighborhood wisdom and expertise. This helps to ensure that, regardless of which approach, model, or initiative is at play, community members have a say in what happens and how.

4. **Leaders who deeply understand all the needs and opportunities that are present and can envision how the pieces fit together to support coherence and alignment.** In Spartanburg, Booker's engagement with the community, the school system, SAM, NDG, StriveTogether and Purpose Built enables him to see all the potential moves of the cradle-to-career place-based partnerships. He brings that understanding of coherence and alignment to his leadership, enabling SAM as an organization and Movement 2030 to make sense of the different approaches, models, and frameworks in play as well as new opportunities as they arise.

5. **In layering multiple place-based strategies, finding the right entry points is critical to establishing a value proposition for forming partnerships, getting buy-in, building momentum, and laying the groundwork for ongoing collaboration.** One entry point for strong partnership across models is collaborating on programming for children and families. For example, Booker was

able to bring resources from the school district and later SAM into the Northside through Cleveland Academy, which enabled greater collaboration with NDG.

6. **Crafting the right narrative about the place, people, and the goals and impact of their work *and* having multiple actors leveraging that narrative as ambassadors and champions is critical.** Many of the leaders involved in this work, whether through SAM, NDG, or other organizations, have had the opportunity to speak about Spartanburg on local, regional, and national stages—and they have been able to use those opportunities to speak in a shared language and narrative that has garnered further interest and compelled others to engage and invest in Spartanburg.
7. **Having common metrics and a joint understanding of the key role of data for continuous improvement can inform decision-making, align actions, and accelerate progress.** Formal training in and incorporation of continuous improvement strategies and mindsets has given both NDG, SAM, and the Northside Voyagers a common framework for using data. By centering data, both NDG and SAM can make more effective and efficient use of resources and identify and tackle disparities. Movement 2030 has created shared data reporting systems, goals, and metrics to which NDG, SAM, and other partners contribute.

