

How early should we begin career development in a child's life? It's earlier than you might think. Heidi shares how Strive Together is helping communities nationwide align around seven key educational milestones— from kindergarten readiness to career entry. Discover how data becomes a flashlight, not a hammer, and why systems thinking, equity, and authentic collaboration are essential for sustainable change.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 59



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Links and Resources

- [Episode 59 of the Podcast](#)
- [StriveTogether](#)
- [The Training Hub from StriveTogether](#)
- [ACT Work Ready Communities](#)
- [ACT Workforce Solutions](#)

Transcript of Episode 59

[Opening Jingle and Music]

Heidi: We learned a lot about what are the skills that leaders and communities need. And when I say leaders, I'm talking again from grassroots to grass tops. We have data that shows us when kids show up ready for kindergarten, they're more likely to read proficiently by the end of their grade. That actually predicts their ability and their likelihood of graduating from high school and moving into a career pathway.

Jasen: From Cradle to Career, discover the Data-Driven Path to Community Transformation.

[Podcast Open] Ready for Work is a podcast from A-C-T! spotlighting excellence and innovation, throughout the workforce ecosystem! Jason Jones hosts this journey, with trends and ideas to help your region's workforce reach its highest potential.

[Jingle] Now, let's get Ready for Work!

Jasen: This is Jasen Jones, glad to be back with you for episode 59 featuring Heidi Black from Strive Together. As we plot skill development from Cradle to Career, Heidi shares how Strive Together is helping communities nationwide align around seven key educational milestones. We'll also spend time on systems thinking and authentic collaboration, which are both essential for sustainable change. Welcome to Ready for Work, Heidi.

Heidi: Thank you for having me. I'm excited to speak with you.

Jasen: What are some of the first hurdles communities encounter when aligning around a shared vision for early learning success?

Heidi: Some of the biggest challenges that we have faced. We really take a community wide lens to improving education outcomes for children. And so the biggest challenges that kind of come with that larger lens is we deeply believe that everybody in the community can help support children to achieve the education that they need to be successful in life. And so a lot that comes with that is making sure that people are in agreement around what those goals are.

You know, what are those big milestones in a child's life? How do we know who's achieving them? Who's struggling? And how do we help those folks who are struggling? How do we agree and move forward collectively? How do we collaborate? How do we make sure that what we're doing is working in alignment and working on behalf of children and supporting them to be successful?

Jasen: How can data be used not just to evaluate, but to illuminate the path forward?

Heidi: Yeah. So, evidence decision making is a critical component to our work in education. As you and many others know, data is often used for assessment, for evaluation, for reporting and accountability. And what we really believe is that data should be used as a flashlight to understand what is working and what is not. And if it's not working, to go deeper to understand, okay, what's creating that?

That is making it harder for kids to learn and to be successful digging into that data, using kind of a mix of both quantitative and qualitative data to understand those causes, and then creates strategies that will impact what is creating those barriers and those challenges so that kids so that we remove them and so that kids can be more successful.

It's a really critical component that's really important to our work and really how we measure success.

Jasen: What are the critical checkpoints from early childhood to career that communities should focus on?

Heidi: When we were launching orchestrated together, and we knew evidence-based decision making was going to be so incredibly important to the work that we were doing. We thought really deeply around what are those kind of key milestones in, child's life that are really critically important to follow? We identified seven critical milestones in someone's education pathway that is absolutely needed for success.

And so, all of our communities focus on kindergarten readiness, early grade reading, which is really third grade reading, middle grade math, which is really algebra one by I think ninth grade. High school graduation, post-secondary enrollment, post-secondary completion and entry into

the workforce in a career pathway. And what we've seen is we have data that shows us when kids show up ready for kindergarten, they're more likely to read proficiently by the end of their grade.

That actually predicts their ability and their likelihood of graduating from high school and moving into a career pathway.

So we really think when it comes to evidence based and data driven decision making, we think really deeply about what's the data telling us and are kind of the signs that we need to know our success. And then how do we help more children get onto that pathway?

Jasen: What are the biggest threats to sustaining systems change, and how can communities overcome them?

Heidi: Yeah. Well. And where we see like when partnerships don't get to systems transformation, oftentimes it's financial. You know they've exhausted their funding because in a funders mind they have been able to demonstrate the funding how it's impacted and improve things. Again, most of this work takes several years, not just one grant cycle. Absolutely. But the other piece is that I think is often overlooked with sustainability.

Is that relationship piece, because this is so cross-sector and so interconnected. If you aren't keeping people, keeping people in the loop so that they know what's happening, people lean out and they disengage. And again, it's because of the long-term nature of the work to shift systems.

Jasen: What does it take to build the skills and mindset needed for systems transformation this cradle to career space?

Heidi: We learned a lot about what are the skills that leaders and communities need. And when I say leaders, I'm talking again from grassroots to grass tops. And how do we help them take these proven approaches, these skills that we've seen when we build this skill across the community, we see outcomes improve and we see systems change to better support children and families in communities.

And so, what we did was we took all of that learning, learning that we had shared just with our network for years. And we had a big conversation around, well, what does it take to really scale this? We had a big realization that we can't, you know, I say this all the time in our communities. We can't train systems alone.

We have to work with others. And so, we're really and should be either practicing what we preach. We deeply believe that to change and transform the education system, as well as the other kind of social sector, public sector systems and communities, that we all have to be speaking the same language. We should be using common and proven tools and techniques for doing that work.

And that's how this Drive Together training hub came to be. The Training Hub offers virtual training and courses for people who are interested in creating change in their communities. The hub is designed specifically for place-based work, specifically for adults in the community who are wanting to do that work so that they can learn, and we really focus on the six core competencies that we know when you can build that skill and competency in communities.

We see acceleration and outcome improvement and systems transformation. So those competencies are being a systems thinker. So really thinking through the idea that systems are very invisible in our community. But they are often what is creating the outcomes that we're

currently seeing. And so if we want to change outcomes for every child, we have to look at the system to understand that.

And so we do a lot of work to help people see the system and make that visible so that they can understand what's working, what's not. We do a lot around data driven decision making. So how are we using data to understand what's working and what's not and get those insights? This work takes a ton of collaboration across organizations, across different parts of a community, and so we do a lot of work to support people in how to authentically collaborate, how to engage communities so that they are taking part in creating the solution together.

We do a lot around individual leadership. So as people lead this work in communities, it's really important to understand who you are as a leader, what your kind of individual superpowers are and how you can harness those in order to lead change in your community. We do a lot around kind of building place-based partnerships, so we know it's tied together, that there is a way to build really effective, sustainable, high-quality partnerships.

And so, we have a lot of offerings that help people to think about why those are important and how they can build them. And then the last competency is centering equity. So, at the end of the day, different groups are more successful than others because of the way systems have been designed. And so, at the end of the day, this work is really about making sure that every child can be successful.

And so we do a lot to help people think about all the different groups in a community, and how do we center those who are the most impacted. So that we can then position them to be just as successful or more successful than others?

Jasen: Where can people go to explore these resources and start making a difference in their own communities?

Heidi: If folks are interested in learning more about kind of the things that I've been covering and talking through today, always going to our website. [Sorry together.org](https://www.sorrytogether.org) is a great place. We have incredible stories, case studies, stories of impact, you know, really highlighting the work of striving others. Nearly 70 communities across the country. Another place to kind of go and engage that's open to everybody. You do not have to be a Strive Together network member is by checking out Strive Together as Training Hub.

Jasen: Heidi, thanks again for sharing your insights and tips to use data, collaboration, and equity to guide communities from cradle to career success.

Heidi: Well, I appreciate it. I appreciate the conversation.

Jasen: With seven key milestones and a powerful Training Hub, real learning change is possible. You'll find a link to Strive Together and more in our show notes for episode 59.

[Podcast Closing and Jingle] Thanks for listening to Ready for Work, from A C T, your partner in Workforce Solutions and Work Ready Communities. [Subscribe in your favorite app, or learn more at A C T dot org, slash, ready for work podcast.](#)