



## NLAPH brings partners together to improve educational outcomes in Spokane, Washington

The National Leadership Academy for the Public's Health (NLAPH) is a one-year applied leadership training program for cross-sector teams located throughout the United States. Teams engage in action learning projects to improve community health and realize health equity. In 2013, an NLAPH team in Spokane, Washington made progress on an educational attainment initiative by broadening their vision of how to support students and their families.

The team and community partners were able to address systemic and personal barriers that students faced by developing individualized interventions and creating the conditions to support educational success. This story illustrates how public health departments, in partnership with schools, nonprofits, and business, can address issues upstream of a community priority and collectively play a role in achieving systems change, improving lives, and strengthening communities.

### Background

Between 2006 and 2009, community leaders in Spokane, WA realized they had a problem. The high school graduation rate for Spokane County was 69% in 2006, significantly lower than in comparable communities. The graduation rate for Spokane Public Schools (SPS) was even lower, at just under 60%. Adults without a high school diploma are more likely to live in poverty, experience poor health, and have higher risk factors for chronic illness. In 2009, Priority Spokane—a collaboration of Greater Spokane Incorporated (GSI), United Way of Spokane County (UWSC), Spokane Regional Health District (SRHD), and other partners—surveyed community members about potential priorities for investment of shared resources, and learned that the low graduation rate was what people wanted to focus on.

Priority Spokane took the lead in coordinating numerous disparate efforts to leverage community assets and resources to address the problem. Priority Spokane commissioned a study that found that having more than four unexcused absences during a year of middle school increases the likelihood that a student will not graduate from high school. In addition, SRHD released a report, *Odds Against Tomorrow*, to raise community awareness and understanding about how differences in education between population groups produce differences in health outcomes.

The Health District's health equity report was the most powerful thing they've ever done. It completely changed the conversation for us at United Way.

— NLAPH team member

## Forming the NLAPH team

Late in 2012, an SRHD executive reached out to his counterparts in Priority Spokane because he saw NLAPH as a way to increase the collaborative's capacity to provide community leadership implementing data-driven solutions. Four members of Priority Spokane were selected to participate in the one-year NLAPH training program. Their goal was to work with schools to improve graduation rates. One team member said, "The four of us knew (or knew of) each other because we crossed paths at many meetings where we increasingly talked about issues related to educational attainment. The NLAPH program seemed like a great opportunity to advance this process."

The team's original project goals were to reduce middle school truancy because it is a predictor of dropping out of high school. During the NLAPH program year, with encouragement from their coach, the team shifted its focus from school-based interventions toward a systems approach to take advantage of the community's collective capacity. They decided to coordinate a wraparound suite of monitoring and support services for at-risk students and their families.

## Initial strategy: truancy reduction

Once the Priority Spokane coalition adopted increased educational attainment as its top priority, it began a partnership with SPS, which had the lowest graduation rates in the county. They funded the district's development of an Early Warning System, which tracked indicators that could identify, as early as the 3rd grade, students who were at risk of dropping out. The Early Warning System was implemented during the 2012-2013 school year. By observing student attendance, behavior issues, and course completion, the district was able to confidently identify the students who needed additional support. The Spokane school district also began to provide additional training for staff members to recognize students who may have had adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which can interfere with cognitive development, impact health and wellness, and impair children's abilities to attend to schoolwork.

Through data collection and staff training, the Priority Spokane coalition began to understand the "epidemiology of educational challenges" and began designing "treatments" that targeted causes rather than symptoms.

We're trying to do a lot of work on prevention, and getting ahead, and going upstream. So we're not just meeting immediate needs or solving an immediate problem. It's a completely different mindset. We began to realize that leadership is all about systems change and relationships and operating at a higher level, and that's where we finally moved ourselves.

— NLAPH team member

## Identification is not enough: looking upstream to address root causes

Knowing which students are at risk is an important first step, but the team realized that more support was needed to help students overcome the challenges and barriers they faced. During the NLAPH program year, the team members began to more fully understand the interconnectedness of graduation rates, workforce development, social and health equity, and access to resources. They used their training program time to explore and investigate the community efforts that were focused in these areas, connecting the agencies to leverage their resources.

With a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, SPS and Priority Spokane developed Community Attendance Support Teams (CASTs) to work with students who have more than four unexcused absences. These teams facilitate a “restorative practice” that brings together students, parents, educators, and representatives from the nonprofit and business sectors to investigate why the students are missing school. They then develop a plan to support consistent attendance and help the students and their families take advantage of educational opportunities.

As noted in a related brief on cross sector collaboration, addressing complex community health issues requires the participation and contributions of multiple sectors. The Spokane team worked across sectors to rally organizations to recognize and tackle upstream factors related to student achievement. This innovative approach led them to seek investment in infrastructure and human resources to address those barriers.

I think more about the fact that real inequities exist, that they are often the result of social situations that can be changed, and that it takes multiple groups to come together to change them. I didn't come into NLAPH having given any thought to those things. The different lessons we learned together has brought it to the forefront of my mind. These inequities exist here in my county, and I can and should make a difference.

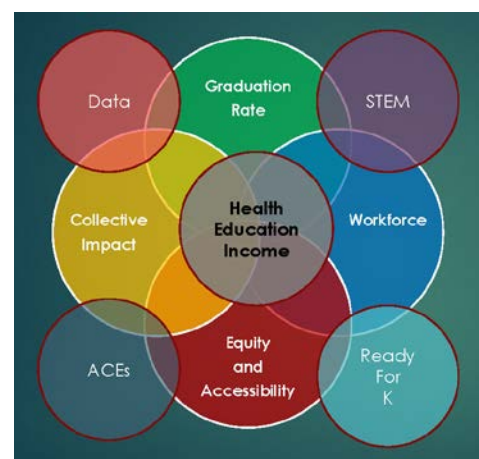
— NLAPH team member

## From looking upstream to getting there: putting resources in place

The NLAPH team assembled and connected multiple initiatives designed to address the challenges that were preventing students and their families from making the most of educational opportunities:

**Participation on CASTs.** Representatives from multiple sectors met with students and families to understand the causes of absenteeism and find ways to overcome barriers. For example, if transportation was an issue, community partners provided bus passes. CAST members also directed students to mentors, tutors, and after-school programs.

**Health needs.** Some students struggled with health issues that interfered with their education, so the SRHD began to send public health nurses into the schools to work with them. They made plans for chronic disease self-management, including eating healthier foods and increasing physical activity.



**Education practices.** Sharing available data and study results with Spokane Public Schools has led to changes in education practices. The district has hired additional instructional aides and intervention specialists whose job is to support struggling and at-risk students and help guide them toward graduation. The district also realigned administration staff to work with community partners that wanted to provide student support services. Priority Spokane obtained and allocated over \$800,000 to improve graduation rates. Community partners have provided in-kind resources to address the early warning indicators for dropping out of school.

**Community support.** One of the NLAPH team members is UWSC's Vice President for Community Impact. While the team was participating in NLAPH, UWSC began serving as the backbone for [Excelerate Success](#), a county-wide, collective impact partnership focused on improving education outcomes from cradle to career.

**Workforce development.** Part of the initiative to raise graduation rates was to connect to workforce development initiatives. GSI played a large role in connecting the business sector to schools. Spokane Valley Tech is the collaboration of four county schools and a local energy company. It is a technical training school whose curriculum is based on matching skills that regional companies need with the interests of local students. The program focuses on science, technology, engineering, and math skills to promote workforce readiness and interrupt patterns of intergenerational poverty.

The Academic Health Science Center, a partnership of Washington State University, Eastern Washington University, and the University of Washington, provides both education and significant employment in the health care and health research fields.

**College preparedness.** Low-income students in the county are eligible to sign up for a program that provides college scholarships if they maintain good grades. Priority Spokane worked with SPS on publishing their schools' program data online to monitor improvement. SPS, confronting public-facing data showing only 40% of eligible students signed up for the college-bound program, raised its sign-up rate to 78% within one school year. One model school in the district shared their process with other schools to improve district-wide sign-ups.

**Heightened awareness.** In 2014, Spokane was one of six communities (out of 253 that applied) to receive a Robert Wood Johnson Culture of Health award. It was the only community to win by focusing on the upstream root causes of poor health. This recognition, paired with ongoing community outreach and public relations, has increased awareness of the county's educational

attainment efforts and has attracted additional resources from community partners.

**Replicating the model.** After initial success improving educational attainment in Spokane County, Priority Spokane and its partners have begun a new initiative focused on children and families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, using the same principles of collective impact for community change. This new initiative continues to move the community toward the collaboration's vision of a healthy population able to fully engage in productive and rewarding lives.

*The Odds Against Tomorrow report is just a game changer. When I have the opportunity to talk with people in the business community and make those points from the Health District report, it gives them a completely different perspective on our community when I can say, "I've got this data right here. I've got this graph that shows that this is what's going on in our community."*

*They're just astounded at what they see there. It gives them a different perspective than just seeing people hanging out in front of [a community resource center]. I've got this data that shows this is what's happening to the health of the community. These are the links back to that triangle of health, education, and income. It's powerful.*

— NLAPH team member

## NLAPH contributions

The NLAPH team benefitted from several aspects of participating in the leadership program:

**Program focus on health equity and social determinants of health.**

Team members said that their NLAPH participation increased their awareness of how social factors influence health and education outcomes for community members.

**Dedicated time.** The team reported that having time apart from other responsibilities to focus on the educational attainment initiative was crucial to their project success. The NLAPH retreat, monthly meetings, and time spent with the NLAPH curriculum provided opportunities to refine their vision, expand their leadership skills, and move the project forward.

**Coaching.** The team's coach helped them expand the scope of their project from school-based interventions addressing absenteeism to a whole-person support system that reduces upstream barriers to students' educational success.

**NLAPH tools and online resources.** The team used NLAPH's Big Picture™ tool to plan and track their work and they continue to access the NLAPH library of articles, webinars, and presentations.

## Summary

SRHD saw NLAPH participation as an opportunity to increase Priority Spokane's leadership capacity. The NLAPH team coordinated the efforts of myriad community partners and stakeholders, facilitated a shared community vision for improving educational attainment, and used data to effectively advocate for upstream interventions.

The team's efforts have helped Spokane County to better serve its students. By 2014, graduation rates had risen from the 2006 rate of 69% to 83%. Given the demonstrated links between educational attainment, health, workforce readiness, and income, this NLAPH team and its collaborators have made an important contribution to their community.

### For more information about the Spokane team, please contact:

Lyndia C. Wilson, MS  
Division Director; Disease Prevention and Response  
Spokane Regional Health District  
509-324-1508  
[lwilson@srhd.org](mailto:lwilson@srhd.org)

They recognize the importance of data and are effective in messaging. They have reflected on those two areas a lot. They talk about stakeholders a lot and have access to most sectors. They could make a significant effect on the emerging field of collective impact.

— NLAPH coach

This brief is one of a suite of reports on results of an evaluation commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to assess the longer-term impact of NLAPH on development of critical leadership capacities and the impact on community health, available on the web at [tinyurl.com/NLAPHevaluation](http://tinyurl.com/NLAPHevaluation).