



PROJECT
LEARN 
OF SUMMIT COUNTY

PROJECT LEARN OF SUMMIT COUNTY
2021-2025 Strategic Plan

Executive Summary



Project Learn provides hope and opportunities for adults who are in need of adult education and English language instructional services. The organization has provided free adult and family literacy programs and English language instruction to more than **27,000** Summit County residents in its **40** plus years of service.

Since its beginning in 1981, the organization has seen demographic and economic change in the county and has continuously evolved to meet the needs of county residents. Recent changes in the policy and funding landscape as well as ongoing demographic and economic changes prompted the organization to reassess its responsiveness to community needs.

The following strategic goals drive the plan:

A woman wearing a hijab is looking at a laptop screen. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text is arranged in two columns on either side of her.

Goal One

To directly, or in partnership with other organizations, offer adults a continuum of employer-driven education and training services, including GED and ESOL, leading to credentials, employment, job retention, and career advancement.

Goal Two

In partnership with other organizations, offer clients resources that help manage and/or overcome barriers to success.

Goal Three

Co-facilitate a collective impact process that brings together workforce development services, identifies gaps in services, supports provider funding needs, and results in new collaborations and collective performance benchmarks for service providers.

Goal Four

Develop the governance and leadership capacity of the Project Learn board to lead optimally, to govern, and to steward the organization.

Goal Five

In partnership with other organizations, build organizational capacity and grow the funding base to broaden the scope of services to clients.

Goal Six

Increase community awareness and support of Project Learn.

History & Background

Project Learn provides hope and opportunities for adults through its comprehensive adult education and English language instructional services. The organization has provided free adult and family literacy programs and English language instruction to more than 27,000 Summit County residents in its 40 years of service. Project Learn came about in response to the sizable population of adults in Akron and Summit County who lacked basic literacy skills.

Project Learn began in 1981 as a project of the Altrusa Club of Akron, the Akron-Summit County Public Library, and interested citizens. Since its inception, Project Learn has grown from tutoring students in a church basement, to now serving thousands of students in need of literacy, GED®, ESOL, post-secondary and career preparation services at dozens of community locations throughout Summit County. Project Learn is a funded program of the Ohio Department of Higher Education and is one of the

largest adult basic education program in Northeast Ohio. Project Learn is an official GED test center for Summit County.

Over the years, the organization has seen demographic and economic change in the county and has continuously evolved to meet the needs of county residents. Recent changes in the policy and funding landscape affecting Project Learn, in addition to ongoing demographic and economic changes, prompted the organization to reassess its responsiveness to the community's needs. As a result, a strategic plan was developed and is presented in this document.



PLANNING PROCESS

“The mission of Project Learn of Summit County is to provide literacy, GED, and English language services that help adults achieve their goals as family members, workers, community members and lifelong learners.”

Project Learn is the only adult basic education program in Summit County funded by the Ohio Department of Higher Education (formerly the Ohio Board of Regents). The organization offers an entire literacy and adult education continuum of services, including teaching adults to read, passing the GED exam, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or U.S. Citizenship Test, and preparing for college and the workforce.

Historically, the organization has sought to mitigate key social problems including, poverty, crime, poor parenting, welfare dependency, health and financial illiteracy. The vision is that through participation in Project Learn programs, adults become capable, committed, and able to participate in mainstream society. By engaging in Project Learn’s programs and services, committed students see marked differences in their quality of life, which positively impacts the lives of their family members.

The organization has placed great emphasis on providing high quality services that have meaningful impact. The organization has received an “exemplary” program rating from the Ohio Department of Education and has twice been selected by ProLiteracy America as a national model program in the areas of data accountability and communications.

Project Learn’s planning process reaffirmed the core services and mission of the organization, which have focused primarily on literacy, GED, and English language services. While these services remain the core of the organization, the strategic planning process substantially shifted the vision and expanded its model of service delivery to integrate partnerships with external agencies that enable clients access a broader array of services leading to improved social and employment outcomes. The driving motivation behind this shift is a gap in connectivity, access to barrier mitigation, and a demand for workforce development services.

Project Learn’s new vision is to be a catalyst and co-leader of a collective impact process that results in a countywide integrated continuum of employer-driven education and work readiness services for adults, leading to their attainment of credentials, employment, job retention, and career advancement.

During the planning process, a set of primary challenges and themes emerged that became priorities for inclusion in the plan.

Economic

1. The GED/High School diploma does not assure access to living wage employment in Summit County.
2. The amount of time required to earn a GED or credential is a barrier for many people.
3. Life barriers hinder educational and economic advancement.

Policy & Community

4. The landscape of workforce, education, and training service providers is disjointed; no single provider has enough capacity pull to affect systemic alignment.
5. Policy and funding are evolving to place more emphasis on employment and the transition to postsecondary education.

Organizational

6. Project Learn lacks certain capacities and expertise necessary to facilitate a broader range of services to clients.
7. The organization must possess the governance and leadership capacity to optimally steward, to lead, and to serve the organization.

Acknowledging that these challenges are complex in nature, there was recognition among the Board that Project Learn would need to consider strategies for developing a more comprehensive bundle of services to meet the needs of students. Given that the organization does not have resources or capacity to deliver many types of services¹, especially workforce development or barrier mitigation services², Board discussions contemplated strategies for enhancing the services available to students. Discussions centered around key tradeoffs in developing services in-house versus establishing strategic partnerships, with Board opinions favoring partnerships in nearly all scenarios. In this regard, three concepts became organizing influences in the plan: (1) career pathways, (2) collective impact, and (3) organizational capacity. These concepts are operationalized in the following pages.

¹ For example, career counseling, job readiness training, resume development, vocational training, job development, or job retention support.

² For example, support for transportation, childcare, health, housing, or legal issues.

career pathways



A career pathway is a stair-stepped series of education and training programs, linked with employment opportunities, enabling individuals to attain employment and advance incrementally over time. The theory is that career pathways solve problems of systems disjointedness by improving linkages between organizations providing adult education, certificate and training programs, and academic degree programs. A career pathways strategy is alignable with regional initiatives and funding priorities because it 1) addresses employers' occupational shortages by creating opportunities for low-skilled individuals to attain employment and advance above the entry level into high demand occupations; 2) establishes a framework for bringing together regional partners and employers.

Project Learn intends to organize and participate in career pathways partnerships **and integrated education and training opportunities**. The organizations will develop pathways maps depicting stair-stepped programs and services; establishing a common blue print for alignment among organizations **for the purpose of educational and career advancement**.

Braided resources is the weaving together of multiple federal, state, county, local and private organizations and business , each with its own regulated uses and performance metrics, for a unified purpose. The braiding of resources requires partnering organizations to apply resources to a collective goal, potentially subverting or re-aligning individual organizational goals. Organizations discussed as potential educational partners include: K-12 systems, community colleges, four-year universities, career and technical centers, public workforce agencies, proprietary schools, and community-based organizations that provide training and wrap around services.

Project Learn's key partners and funders that help support the agency's missions include: The Ohio Department of Higher Education, Akron Community Foundation, GAR Foundation, The LeBron James Family Foundation, Huntington National Bank, Akron-Summit County Public Library, Jobs for Ohio Graduates, ConxusNEO, The University of Akron - Adult Focus Program, Stark State College, Ohio Means Jobs Center, Oriana House, ASIA, Inc., Reach Opportunity Center, The City of Akron, and the County of Summit, Ohio.



collective impact

Collective Impact occurs when organizations with different missions agree to solve a specific social problem. During the interview process, several local philanthropic funders indicated during the interview process a strong preference to support initiatives that reflect the values of collective impact. These are:

- **Common Agenda:** A common understanding and shared vision of the problems and approach to the solution developed by participating organizations.
- **Shared Measurement System:** An operationalized mechanism for capturing and reporting metrics across the collaborating organizations.
- **Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** A system of collaboration in which organizations contribute their unique strengths rather than undertake a uniform set of activities. Examples may

include partnerships comprised of community-based organizations, support service providers, educational institutions at multiple levels, and employers.

- **Continuous Communication:** Frequent formal and informal communications that produce a common vocabulary and trust among partnering organizations.
- **Backbone Support Organizations:** Organizations dedicated to the task of leading and managing the collaboration effort. These individuals provide necessary leadership and staff capacity for projects.

Project Learn has had preliminary conversations with key partners around ways to deepen the working relationships and to develop many of these characteristics.

Project Learn is staffed leanly to provide its traditional core services. While the Board is guiding the organization to focus on partnerships rather than new in-house programs or services, the work of developing new partnerships, connecting students to a broader set of programs and services, and enhancing data systems presents challenges.

A set of organizational capacity priorities were identified by the Board of Directors that are flushed out in the plan:

- Workforce development
- Barrier mitigation
- Fundraising
- Operations
- Board governance, leadership and engagement, particularly in the context of a collective impact process and the evolution of new strategic partnerships
- Database development and management expertise



goals & objectives

GOAL 1: To directly, or in partnership with other organizations, offer adults a continuum of employer-driven education and training services, including GED and ESOL, leading to credentials, employment, job retention, and career advancement.

KEY OBJECTIVES:

Strive to reach the Ohio Department of Higher Education's grant benchmarks, objectives, and indicators of program quality

Expand services to include work readiness, job placement and post-employment follow-up services

Engage in co-instructional models that offer flexible learning environments, accommodate cohorts of students, provide online advising, accelerate the pace of learning and enable client acquisition of credentials

Create career pathways maps to be used as advising tools

Enable volunteers to support the work of the agency

Expand services to include in-person, virtual, and hybrid learning options

Continue to provide high quality adult education and English language instruction

GOAL 2 : In partnership with other organizations, offer clients resources that help manage and/or overcome barriers to success.

KEY OBJECTIVES:

Develop and offer academic, social and career assessment and advising processes that drive referrals and support services

Incorporate services that address life barriers and soft-skill-building

Increase staff knowledge and understanding of the agency's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts including trauma-informed care through trainings and implementation to better serve our diverse student population

Add transitions/workforce development coordinator to conduct post-GED transitions and career coaching activities

Identify and ensure best sites are used that offer easy access to services and resources for clients

Utilize the resources of board members and their business affiliations to enrich trainings and workshops

GOAL 3 : Co-facilitate a collective impact process that integrates a continuum of workforce development services, identifies gaps in services, supports provider funding needs, and results in new collaborations and collective performance benchmarks for service providers.

KEY OBJECTIVES:

Work with ConxusNEO to co-initiate and expand workforce development services to include industry specific courses and collaboration with local businesses and trades

Research best practice models of collective impact in workforce development; incorporate into professional development

Expand client data collection to assess short and long-term impact and return-on-investment of Project Learn's services

GOAL 4 : Develop the governance and leadership capacity of the Project Learn board to optimally lead, to govern, and to steward the organization.

KEY OBJECTIVES:

Redefine the governance roles, process, shared leadership expectations, term limits, and accountability of trustees

Initiate a board recruitment, orientation, and development process that is aligned with the strategic priorities of the organization

Restructure board committees to support the strategic plan

Identify opportunities and initiate action by trustees to advocate on changes in policy, facilitate relationships and partnerships, convene stakeholder meetings, promote Project Learn, and help to secure funding

GOAL 5 : In partnership with other organizations, build organizational capacity and grow the funding base to broaden the scope of services to clients.

KEY OBJECTIVES:

Restructure the performance expectations of the Executive Director to align with the strategic plan

Develop a succession plan for the Executive Director and other key positions

With partners, seek multi-year capacity building grants to support partnership development, a collective impact process, and any additional services that will benefit Project Learn as an organization as well as its students

Create and launch a five-year fund development plan that grows and diversifies the funding base of Project Learn



GOAL 6 : Increase community awareness and support of Project Learn.

KEY OBJECTIVES:

Secure services of a professional agency or in-kind corporate expertise to rebrand Project Learn and design communication tools for targeted stakeholders

Develop and implement a marketing and advocacy plan

Host events that engage business, education, faith-based, community, and other stakeholders

2021-2022

- Hire new staff, as needed to support the goals of the strategic plan (i.e. transitions/workforce development coordinator)
- Establish a partnership with at least one workforce development service provider enabling the provision of career coaching, job readiness, and job attainment support for Project Learn students
- Establish partnerships with service providers for transportation, childcare, and legal services for students
- Establish a partnership with at least one education or training provider for the delivery of a co-educational model that integrates adult and vocational education
- Establish a process for comprehensively assessing new Project Learn students during the intake process. At a minimum, the assessments should determine career interests, aptitudes, academic skills and deficiencies, as well as any specific or exceptional support service needs
- Assess whether our locations are effectively enabling individuals in under-served communities to access services
- Update staff professional development activities to include support of the agency's diversity, equity and inclusion goals, familiarity with best practices in workforce development, support service provision, career pathways, and collective impact

2022-2023

- Implement a new student database that tracks students' duration through the program to better identify student's needs, goal completion, advancement, and agency successes and deficiencies.
- Establish a five-year fundraising and development plan
- Establish a marketing advocacy plan for the organization
- Update the Executive Director's performance measures and expectations to include external relationship building
- Restructure the Board of Directors committees and establish new Board intake and development processes

2021 - 2025

- Engage in performance monitoring and continuous improvement activities

ANNUAL STRATEGIC PLAN REVIEW

The Board of Directors will conduct a thorough review of the strategic plan annually to assess the organizations progress against goals and consider course corrections, if needed.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS OF STRATEGIC GOALS

The 2021-2025 Strategic Plan has both transformative and operational implications for the organization. The plan establishes a continuum of services that lead to credentials, employment, job retention, and career advancement. When Project Learn consummates formal partnerships with other organizations, bringing together services, its clients and those served by other organizations will have an enriched scope of academic, social, career, ESOL, and workforce development services. The development of new partnerships will have a substantive impact on the culture, operations and functioning of each organization involved. The work of establishing partnerships is challenging; as such, partners will need to engage in a facilitated process that includes organizational assessments (culture, services, operations, governance), engagement of key stakeholders (executive and

board leaders, clients, funders), system design (integration of services, culture, staff functions, board governance, data collection, analysis and sharing), outcomes measurements and fund development planning.

Staff capacity is deepening and changing in the new plan. The role of the Executive Director is shifting from one that has been enmeshed in internal operations management, to one that is externally focused on partnership development, co-facilitation of a collective impact process, community relations, advocacy, and major gift acquisition.

Project Learn will expand its services to offer adults a continuum of education/training, workforce, and support services. The staffing of this expansion will be accomplished through restructuring of existing staff, contractual services provided by partnering organizations and others, and the addition of a **transitions workforce development coordinator**.

Project Learn will partner with **current and new** organizations to expand its continuum of services to clients. Board governance and leadership is being refocused in the plan to reflect the organization's new strategies. The future of Project Learn calls for active and strong leadership by the Board of Directors.

The Board will play an instrumental role in convening and engaging the boards of partnering organizations, reviewing finances, advocating for funding, and promoting the organization in the community. These dimensions of the Project Learn Board will require recruitment of future trustees who possess skills, experience, and knowledge to advance the strategic plan. As such, the board will review and further define its governance and leadership roles, policies, committee structure and leadership pathways, and board succession planning. Funding development and sustainability receive heightened focus in the plan. While there may well be some economic gains that result from the intersection of services with other organizations,

Project Learn will need more funds from a diverse portfolio of funders. Preliminary meetings have been held with some Summit County funders and there is receptivity to a request from Project Learn and partnering organizations to support a multi-year capacity building initiative that results in an integrated continuum of services and some operational functions among the agencies. Once formal partnerships are in place, Project Learn and its partners will have opportunities to jointly pursue grants from government, businesses and foundations that value collaboration and a regional approach to work readiness and employment. Dedicated grant writing and fundraising capacity will be needed to support this endeavor. The Executive Director and members of the Board will engage in major gift acquisition.

The cultivation of these activities requires active leadership. Thus, an annual Board review of the strategic plan is established.



PROJECT
LEARN 
OF SUMMIT COUNTY

PROJECT LEARN OF SUMMIT COUNTY

60 S. High Street • Akron, Ohio 44326

(330) 434-9461 • (866) 934-READ (7323) • (Fax (330) 643-9195

projectlearnsommit.org | info@projectlearnsommit.org