



Wake County, N.C.

# A Day to Embrace Change

Leaders gather to celebrate youth work & commit to collective impact



Pittman (right) & Weatherly discuss how communities can improve youth outcomes.

There was a spirited gathering of a small crowd in Raleigh, N.C., one day this month, inspired by questions that are increasingly common in communities working to improve the lives of young people through collective impact:

What does collective impact really mean? How do we carry out collective impact strategies well? What roles do our organizations play?

To help tackle those questions and more, a community collaboration, [Youth Thrive](#), led the creation of the Wake County's first profile about the well-being of its children and youth, then released the report during [Embracing Community Change Day](#): a series of events where leaders from multiple sectors focused on local youth and building an effective collective impact effort to serve them.



West (right) confers with Councilman Eugene Weeks of Raleigh.

“A great day!” said Michelle Zechmann, executive director of Haven House Services, a comprehensive service provider for youth and families. “There was inspiring conversation, opportunities to network, and it was amazing to see how many people are ready to work together towards making a positive impact on our youth.”

The challenge, as in many communities, is turning that spirit into coordinated action. In Wake County, leaders are taking several key steps:

**[The Wake County Youth Well-Being Profile](#)**, coordinated by Youth Thrive in partnership with community organizations and [the Forum for Youth Investment](#), uses data to analyze well-being across seven domains: academic, vocational, social, civic, physical, emotional and safety. The findings, which point out areas of strength and need, are intended to spur collaborative action.

“By asking big questions,” the report says, “community leaders can begin to understand what we need to know about the youth in Wake County in order to foster an environment where they receive the supports they need to become productive adults.”

**Embracing Community Change Day** drew a total of more than 200 people to three gatherings to celebrate the work of local youth-serving organizations, and to discuss effective collective impact strategies, conditions for youth in Wake



County, and next steps for local organizations and leaders. The sessions featured insightful, uplifting talks by:

- Dr. James West, chair of the Wake County Board of Commissioners and founder of Youth Thrive, who applauded Wake County for “choosing to be great” by working collectively for the benefit of its youth.
- Karen Pittman, co-founder and CEO of the Forum for Youth Investment, who solidified the theory of collective impact, explaining how partnerships must fundamentally change the way they work together in order to create lasting, meaningful change for all young people.
- Armistead Sapp, executive vice president and chief technology officer at **SAS**, who explained how the public yearns for data to help make better decisions, and vowed that SAS will continue to partner with Youth Thrive to use data more effectively to serve Wake County children and youth.



Sapp stresses the potential of strong data to fuel smart decisions.

**Photos by** Joe Lavender, United Way of the Greater Triangle

“It was a great mix of nonprofit, public and private expertise, because it will take that collective effort to make the collective impact we desire,” said Betsey McFarland, executive director of the Wade Edwards Foundation and Learning Lab, which provides afterschool programming. “Our community is ready to make the investment.”

Part of that investment involves joining action teams, “each of which will focus on specific issues affecting our young people,” said Shannon Weatherly, Youth Thrive’s executive director. During and after the day-long celebration, several organizations approached Youth Thrive about joining action teams. “These teams have unlimited capacity. There’s a seat for everyone,” Weatherly told those at Embracing Community Change Day.

The action teams will commence the development of the first **Wake County Youth Master Plan**. Zechmann, of Haven House Services, said Embracing Community Change Day served as “a wonderful beginning to create an action plan to address the needs of youth in our community.”

Stay tuned. The work in Wake County has just begun.

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