

# Collective Insights on Collective Impact



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# Essential Mindset Shifts for Collective Impact

To be effective, collective impact must consider who is engaged, how they work together, and how progress happens.

BY JOHN KANIA, FAY HANLEYBROWN, & JENNIFER SPLANSKY JUSTER

Since the initial publication of “Collective Impact” in *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2011), collective impact has gained tremendous momentum as a disciplined, cross-sector approach to solving social and environmental problems on a large scale. The idea of collective impact is not new—many collaborations pre-date the original article and embody the five conditions of collective impact<sup>1</sup>—but the original article created a framework and language that have resonated deeply with practitioners who were frustrated with existing approaches to change. Since 2011, hundreds of new collaborations have begun implementing the principles of collective impact in a variety of domains around the globe, from the United States and Canada to Australia, Israel, and South Korea. Collective impact ideas have also started to influence public policy. In the United States, for example, the concept has been written into grants from the Centers for Disease Control and the Social Innovation Fund, a White House initiative, and a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Our team at FSG has studied successful collective impact efforts around the world,

supported dozens of new collective impact efforts, and trained thousands of practitioners. We are inspired by their successes, from improving juvenile justice outcomes in New York State to reducing childhood asthma in Dallas to boosting educational attainment in Seattle.

People often ask whether we would refine the five conditions of collective impact that we articulated in the initial article: a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support. (See “The Five Conditions of Collective Impact” below.) Although our work has reinforced the importance of these five conditions and they continue to serve as the core for differentiating collective impact from other forms of collaboration (see “Maintaining the Integrity of a Collective Impact Approach” on page 4), we also realize that they are not always sufficient to achieve large-scale change. In addition, several *mindset shifts* are necessary for collective impact partners, and these are fundamentally at odds with traditional approaches to social change. These mindset shifts concern *who* is engaged, *how* they work together, and *how* progress happens. Although not necessarily counterin-

tuitive, they can be highly countercultural and therefore can create serious stumbling blocks for collective impact efforts.

## MINDSET SHIFT ONE: WHO IS INVOLVED

**Get all the right eyes on the problem** | As we said in our 2011 *SSIR* article: “Collective impact is the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.” By their very nature, these complex problems cannot be solved by any single organization or sector alone. Yet many collaborations that seek to solve complex social and environmental problems still omit critical partners in government and the non-profit, corporate, and philanthropic sectors, as well as people with lived experience of the issue. Including the often radically different perspectives of these diverse players can generate more meaningful dialogue.

Cross-sector perspectives can improve collective understanding of the problem and create a sense of mutual accountability. In New York, a group of cross-sector leaders came together in 2010 to reform the juvenile justice system, which was widely viewed as inefficient, ineffective, and unsafe, with high youth recidivism rates. The group included leaders from law enforcement, the governor’s office, large state and local agencies, community advocates, judges, and private philanthropic and nonprofit organizations. Many of those partners had never worked together before, and some had dramatically different views. Over several months this group grappled with their differing viewpoints and ultimately created a shared vision for reform: to promote youth success and improve public safety. This effort now has backbone staff embedded in the state’s Division of Criminal Justice Services to coordinate action among hundreds of participant organizations. After three years, the effort has built upon earlier successes and contributed to remarkable results: The number of youths in state custody has declined by a stunning 45 percent, and

## The Five Conditions of Collective Impact

<b>Common Agenda</b>	All participants share a vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed-upon actions.
<b>Shared Measurement</b>	All participating organizations agree on the ways success will be measured and reported, with a short list of common indicators identified and used for learning and improvement.
<b>Mutually Reinforcing Activities</b>	A diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinate a set of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
<b>Continuous Communication</b>	All players engage in frequent and structured open communication to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.
<b>Backbone Support</b>	An independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative provides ongoing support by guiding the initiative’s vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing resources.



juvenile arrests are down 24 percent, with no increase in crime or risk to public safety.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to engaging the formal sectors, we have learned the importance of working with people who have lived experience. Too often, the people who will ultimately benefit from program or policy changes are excluded from the process of understanding the problem and then identifying and implementing solutions. Authentic engagement with people who are experiencing the problem at first hand is critical to ensuring that strategies are effective. For example, young people play a critical role in Project U-Turn, a collective impact effort in Philadelphia that focuses on improving outcomes for disconnected youths by reconnecting them to school and work. Its Youth Voice working group focuses on ensuring that young people are integrated into all aspects of Project U-Turn, including participation at committee

meetings. Youths also participate in specific projects, such as developing a public awareness campaign about school attendance. And the approach has paid off: Project U-Turn has seen an increase of 12 percentage points in high school graduation rates in Philadelphia since the program's inception in 2005.<sup>3</sup>

#### **MINDSET SHIFT TWO: HOW PEOPLE WORK TOGETHER**

***The relational is as important as the rational***  
| In his “Slow Ideas” article in the July 29, 2013, issue of *The New Yorker*, systems theorist Atul Gawande asked why some powerful and well-documented innovations that help cure social ills spread quickly, whereas others do not. One of the answers to that question was found in the global problem of death in childbirth. Every year, 300,000 mothers and more than six million children die around the time of birth, largely in the poorest countries.

As Gawande points out, many—perhaps the majority—of these deaths are preventable. Simple lifesaving solutions to the causes of these deaths have been known for decades, but they just haven’t spread.

Why is this? Gawande quotes the late scholar Everett Rogers: “Diffusion is essentially a social process through which people talking to people spread an innovation.” Gawande illustrates this observation by describing a birth trainer in northern India who, after more than five visits, convinced a birth attendant in a rural hospital to include evidence-based childbirth practices. The attendant adopted the new practices because the trainer built a trusting relationship with her, not because of how convincing the evidence-based practices were. To quote Stephen M. R. Covey, and a common view in the community development world, change happens at “the speed of trust.”<sup>4</sup>



We have seen that data and evidence are critical inputs for collective impact efforts, but we must not underestimate the power of relationships. Lack of personal relationships, as well as the presence of strong egos and difficult historical interactions, can impede collective impact efforts. Collective impact practitioners must invest time in building strong interpersonal relationships and trust, which enable collective visioning and learning. Reflecting on the recent success of the juvenile justice reform effort in New York, one leader commented: “There is now a shared sense of why we’re doing things and where we want to drive the system to be. The process of having sat at the same table and gotten to know one another has really changed our work and the level of trust we have in each other.” Collective impact can succeed only when the process attends to *both* the use of evidence and the strengthening of relationships.

**Structure is as important as strategy** |

When beginning a collective impact initiative, stakeholders are often tempted to focus on creating a “strategy”—a specific, tangible set of activities that they believe will ensure progress toward their goal. Although it is important to have a sense of how partners will address a problem, the fact is that in many cases the

solutions are not known at the outset. We believe that a critical mindset shift is needed: Collective impact practitioners must recognize that the power of collective impact comes from enabling “collective seeing, learning, and doing,” rather than following a linear plan. The structures that collective impact efforts create enable people to come together regularly to look at data and learn from one another, to understand what is working and what is not. Such interaction leads partners to adjust their actions, “doubling down” on effective strategies and allowing new solutions to emerge.

Collective impact efforts coordinate the actions of dozens—sometimes hundreds—of organizations, and this coordination requires an intentional structure. As we wrote in the Jan. 26, 2012, *SSIR* article “Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work,” cascading levels of collaboration create multiple ways for people to participate, communicate lessons, and coordinate their effort. By structuring how stakeholders share information and engage with each other, initiatives enable collective insights that identify new strategies as the process develops.

**Sharing credit is as important as taking credit** | One of the biggest barriers to collective impact that we have seen is the desire by indi-

vidual organizations to seek and take credit for their work. This tendency is understandable, particularly in an environment where non-profit organizations are frequently asked to demonstrate evidence of their unique impact to receive scarce grant funding, boards hold foundation staff accountable for results, and companies look to strengthen their brands. Nevertheless, seeking to take direct credit is extremely difficult in large-scale collaborations, and it can inhibit participants from making decisions that are aligned with the broader system and common agenda and hamper their efforts to create mutually reinforcing activities. We do not imply that organizations should not rigorously evaluate their own work and how it contributes to shared outcomes, but rather that organizations should think about their decisions in the context of others. Doing so also requires a behavior change among public and private funders, who must recognize an organization’s contribution toward the common agenda rather than seeking evidence of attribution of a grantee’s work.

For collective impact efforts, sharing credit with others can be far more powerful than taking credit. Consider the Partnership for Youth in the Franklin County and North Quabbin region of Massachusetts, a coalition that over

## Maintaining the Integrity of a Collective Impact Approach

The pace at which the concept and language of collective impact have spread over the last three years is inspiring. We are encouraged to see that many organizations in the social and private sectors have embraced the concept as a new way to achieve large-scale systems change. Practitioners, funders, and policymakers have begun to recognize that solving complex social problems at a large scale can happen more effectively when actors work together, rather than through isolated programs and interventions—a tremendously important shift for the field.

Unfortunately, we have also observed that along with enthusiasm about this momentum, “collective impact” has become a buzzword that is often used to describe collaborations of all types. Many efforts using the term do not resemble the uniquely data-driven, cross-sector approach that employs the five conditions of collective impact. Nor are they intentional about building the structure and relationships that enable the emergent, continuous learning over time that is critical to collective impact. Many funders report frustration at receiving grant applications that claim to use collective impact but do not resemble the approach at all. Conversely, grantees have shared

their frustration that some funders are creating programs mandating participation in collective impact that force grantee cohorts to collaborate with each other in ways that are inconsistent with the cross-sector, emergent collective impact approach. Neither of these occurrences is useful to advancing efforts to achieve positive and consistent progress on a large scale.

Maintaining the integrity of the collective impact approach is important. For the field to continue to embrace collective impact as a path to large-scale change, efforts appropriately identifying themselves as collective impact must see results. In addition, to avoid movement away from collective impact as the preferred way the social sector does business, we must help efforts inaccurately calling themselves collective impact to better understand the important changes they need to make to increase their odds of success. The stakes are high. If, through misinterpretation and disappointment in collective impact, the current tide toward working collectively were to turn—and working in isolation were once again to become expected and accepted organizational behavior—society’s potential to achieve urgently needed progress will be severely diminished.

the past 10 years has made significant progress in reducing substance abuse and other risky behavior by young people.<sup>5</sup> The backbone team consistently puts the work of the coalition in the forefront, publicly giving awards to a select number of coalition members. Award plaques are given annually, and the same plaque is passed around each year with the recipient's names added so that partnership members can see how their work builds over time. The backbone staff also has held press conferences highlighting the work of the school districts and other partners to draw attention to their contributions. The ethos of the coalition is summarized by this statement from one of the coalition leaders: "We always think about who we can blame the good results on."

### **MINDSET SHIFT THREE: HOW PROGRESS HAPPENS**

**Pay attention to adaptive work, not just technical solutions** | Collective impact initiatives are designed to help solve complex social and environmental problems. As we described in the July 21, 2013, *SSIR* article "Embracing Emergence: How Collective Impact Addresses Complexity," complex problems are unpredictable and constantly changing, and no single person or organization has control. Such problems require *adaptive* problem solving.<sup>6</sup> Because the answer is often not known at the outset, participants must engage in continuous learning and adaptation. Collective impact allows for adaptive problem solving by pushing multiple organizations to look for resources and innovations to solve a common problem, enabling rapid learning through continuous feedback loops, and coordinating responses among participants.

In contrast, much of the social sector has historically focused on identifying technical solutions, which are predetermined and replicable. Indeed, technical solutions are often an important part of the overall solution, but adaptive work is required to enact them. In the juvenile justice reform work in New York, for example, many stakeholders knew that keeping incarcerated youths in or close to their home communities, where they receive services and support, would likely improve outcomes. Yet although this technical solution was clear, the question of how to enact the policy was not—it required an adaptive solution. By building trust and establishing shared aspirations among previously contentious stakeholders, the collective impact effort helped pave the way for implementation

of Close to Home legislation. The success of the initiative in bringing about much needed policy change—the new policy was signed into law by the governor in 2012—demonstrates the emphasis collective impact efforts must place on adaptive work that creates the processes, relationships, and structures within which real progress can unfold at an accelerated pace.

**Look for silver buckshot instead of the silver bullet** | Achieving population-level change, the ultimate goal for collective impact initiatives, requires all stakeholders to abandon the search for a single silver bullet solution. Instead, they must shift their mindset and recognize that success comes from the combination of many interventions.

This mindset shift—from seeking a silver bullet solution to creating silver buckshot solutions<sup>7</sup>—is important for initiative partners as well as public and private funders. For practitioners, this shift means thinking about their work as part of a larger context and considering how their contribution fits into the larger puzzle of activities. Funders and policymakers similarly must shift from investing in individual, single-point interventions toward investing in processes and relationships that enable multiple organizations to work together.

In the case of juvenile justice reform in New York, multiple efforts in concert dramatically and quickly reduced the number of incarcerated youths. Partners created linked data systems, which allowed agencies to coordinate more effectively. They also established a public database of evidence-based programs for young people in the court system, which enabled providers and families to understand and use the many programs available with greater transparency and access than previously possible. Furthermore, they assembled evidence about alternative sentencing outcomes, which allowed judges to avoid incarcerating young people for misdemeanor offenses only. Finally, they enhanced coordination among government agencies and nonprofit providers. They enacted many additional changes at the organizational, local, and state levels. None of these changes would have been sufficient for large-scale change on its own, but taken together they represented a shift in the system that benefits thousands of young people and communities across the state.<sup>8</sup>

The shift toward silver buckshot solutions does not minimize the importance of high quality individual programs, interventions,

and policies. Rather, it emphasizes that each of these programs and policies is necessary, but not sufficient, for success. Rather than isolating individual programs and trying to scale them up, collective impact works best when it focuses on the ways that strong individual interventions or policies fit together and reinforce each other to solve a complex problem. This mindset is highly countercultural for many public and private funders, and for practitioners who design and implement their work in isolation from others.

### **CONCLUSION**

The widespread momentum around collective impact is exciting. It demonstrates a vital shift for organizations, away from considering their work in isolation and toward seeing their work in the context of a broader system, paving the way for large-scale change. The five conditions, however, are not by themselves sufficient. Achieving collective impact requires the fundamental mindset shifts we have described here—around *who* is involved, *how* they work together, and *how* progress happens. These shifts have significant implications for how practitioners design and implement their work, how funders incentivize and engage with grantees, and how policymakers bring solutions to a large scale. Without these vital mindset shifts, collective impact initiatives are unlikely to make the progress they set out to accomplish. ●

### **NOTES**

- 1 Examples of collective impact that pre-date the Winter 2011 "Collective Impact" article include, but are not limited to, the Strive Partnership, the Elizabeth River Project, Shape Up Somerville, Living Cities' *Integration Initiative*, Communities that Care, Ready by 21, Vibrant Communities, and GAIN.
- 2 New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services: Uniform Crime Reporting and Incident-Based Reporting System, Probation Workload System, and DCJS-Office of Court Administration Family Court JD/DF Case Processing Database. NYS Office of Children and Family Services detention and placement databases. New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services Office of Justice Research and Performance: Juvenile Justice Annual Update for 2012, May 21, 2013.
- 3 Four-year Cohort Graduation Rate, School District of Philadelphia.
- 4 Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 2006.
- 5 The coalition has reduced binge drinking rates among young people by 50 percent, and alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use by 33, 33, and 39 percent respectively; 2003-2012 Annual Teen Health Survey for Franklin County and the North Quabbin Prevention Needs Assessment.
- 6 Ronald A. Heifetz coined the term "adaptive problems" in his seminal body of work on "adaptive leadership."
- 7 The notion of "silver buckshot" has been frequently used in the field of climate change by people such as Al Gore, Bill McKibben, and Jim Rogers.
- 8 New York State *Juvenile Justice, Progress Toward System Excellence*; New York Juvenile Justice Advisory Group, Tow Foundation, FSG; January 2014.



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# Defining Quality Collective Impact

To sustain collective impact, we must bring more rigor to the practice by drawing on lessons from a diverse array of communities to define what truly makes this work unique.

BY JEFF EDMONDSON & BEN HECHT

Collective impact is at a strategic inflection point. After almost three years of extraordinary hype, investors are wondering what this concept really means when they receive proposals that simply replace the term “collaboration” with “collective impact.”<sup>1</sup> Researchers are perplexed by so-called new ways of doing business that look eerily similar to what they have already studied. And most important, leaders and practitioners in communities are confused about what it really means to put collective impact into action.

As the founding managing director (Jeff Edmondson) and a national funder (Ben Hecht) of StriveTogether, we remain bullish on the concept of collective impact. For us, it is the only path forward to address complex social problems—there is no Plan B. Yet to realize its promise, we need to define in concrete terms what “quality collective impact” really means. For that reason, we have spent the last 18 months aggressively working on a coherent definition to increase the rigor of these efforts, so that this concept does not become watered down. We feel confident that if we agree on core characteristics, we can stop the unfortunate trend of “spray and pray”—haphazardly launching programs and initiatives and hoping that good things will happen. Instead, we can crystallize the meaning of collective impact and solve seemingly intractable problems.

First, some background on the organization. StriveTogether is an outgrowth of The StrivePartnership in Cincinnati, Ohio, which is based at KnowledgeWorks and was featured in the first article on collective impact, published in the Winter 2011 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. StriveTogether has pulled together more than 45 of the most committed communities around the country to form the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network. Its aim is not to start new programs—we have plenty. Instead, the network

is focused on articulating how cross-sector partners can best work together to identify and build on what already works—and innovate as necessary—to support the unique needs of every child.

Fortunately, the members of the network have been willing to “fail forward” by sharing not only their successes, but also their struggles, using the lessons they have learned to advance the field. Their experiences during the last three years have contributed to the creation of a vital tool called the StriveTogether Theory of Action (TOA), which provides a guide for communities to build a new civic infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> The TOA highlights a community’s natural evolution and provides the quality benchmarks that, taken together, differentiate this work from traditional collaboration. It uses what we call “gateways,” or developmental stages, to chart the path from early on (“exploring”), through intermediate and later stages (“emerging” and “sustaining”), and finally to “systems change,” where communities see improvement in educational outcomes. We define systems change as a community-wide transformation in which various partners a) proactively use data to improve their decision-making and b) constantly weigh the impact of their decisions on both their own institutions and the broader ecosystem that works to improve the lives of children. The ultimate result—which we are witnessing beyond Cincinnati in partnerships like The Roadmap Project in Seattle—are examples of communities where we see sustained improvement in a limited set of measurable outcomes that are critical for kids to succeed and for communities to thrive.

The TOA is not perfect: for example, we realize this work is not linear. Nonetheless, the framework captures the fundamental building blocks necessary for collective impact. As more

communities adopt it, it will help us identify the most important aspects of our work.

## FOUR PRINCIPLES

Four principles underlie our work across the Theory of Action and lead to long-term sustainability.

**Build a culture of continuous improvement** | Data can be intimidating in any field, but this is especially true in education, where numbers are most often used as a hammer instead of a flashlight.<sup>3</sup> To counter this pitfall, community leaders from Albany, N.Y., to Anchorage, Alaska, are creating a culture that embraces data to generate ongoing improvement.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of this process lie the “Three I’s”: identify, interpret, and improve. Community leaders work with experts to *identify* programmatic or service data to collect at the right time from a variety of partners, not simply with individual organizations. They then *interpret* the data and generate user-friendly reports. Last, they *improve* their efforts on the ground by training practitioners to adapt their work using the new information. Dallas’s Commit! partnership provides a good example. There, leaders identified schools that had achieved notable improvement in third grade literacy despite long odds. The backbone staff worked with practitioners to identify the most promising schools and interpret data to identify the practices that led to improvements. District leaders are now working to spread those practices across the region, using data as a tool for continuous improvement.

**Eliminate disparities** | Communities nationwide recognize that aggregated data can mask real disparities. Disaggregating data to understand what services best meet the needs of all students enables communities to make informed decisions. For the All Hands Raised partnership in Portland, Ore., closing the opportunity gap is priority number one. It disaggregates data to make disparities visible to all and partners with leaders of color to lead the critical conversations that are necessary to address historic inequities. The partnership engaged district leaders to change policies and spread effective practices. Over the last three years, the

graduation gap for students of color has closed from 14.3 percent to 9.5 percent. In several large high schools the gap is gone.

**Leverage existing assets** | The all-too-common affliction “project-itis” exerts a strong pull on the social sector, creating a powerful temptation to import a new program instead of understanding and improving the current system. At every level of collective impact work, practitioners have to devote time, talent, and treasure toward the most effective strategies. Making use of existing assets, but applying a new focus to them, is essential to demonstrating that collective impact work truly represents a new way of doing business, not just an excuse to add new overhead or create new programs. In Milwaukee, Wis., and Toledo, Ohio, for example, private businesses lend staff members with relevant expertise to help with data analytics so that communities can identify existing practices having an impact.

**Engage local expertise and community voice** | Effective data analysis provides a powerful tool for decision-making, but it repre-

sents only one vantage point. Local expertise and community voice add a layer of context that allows practitioners to better understand the data. Success comes when we engage partners who represent a broad cross-section of the community not only to shape the overall vision, but also to help practitioners use data to change the ways they serve children. In San Diego, the City Heights Partnership for Children actively engages parents in supporting their peers. Parents have helped design an early literacy toolkit based on local research and used it to help other families prepare children for kindergarten. As more families become involved, they are actively advocating early literacy as a priority for local schools.

### THE PROMISE OF QUALITY COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Collective impact efforts can represent a significant leap in the journey to address pervasive social challenges. But to ensure that this concept leads to real improvements in the lives of those we serve, we must bring rigor to the practice by

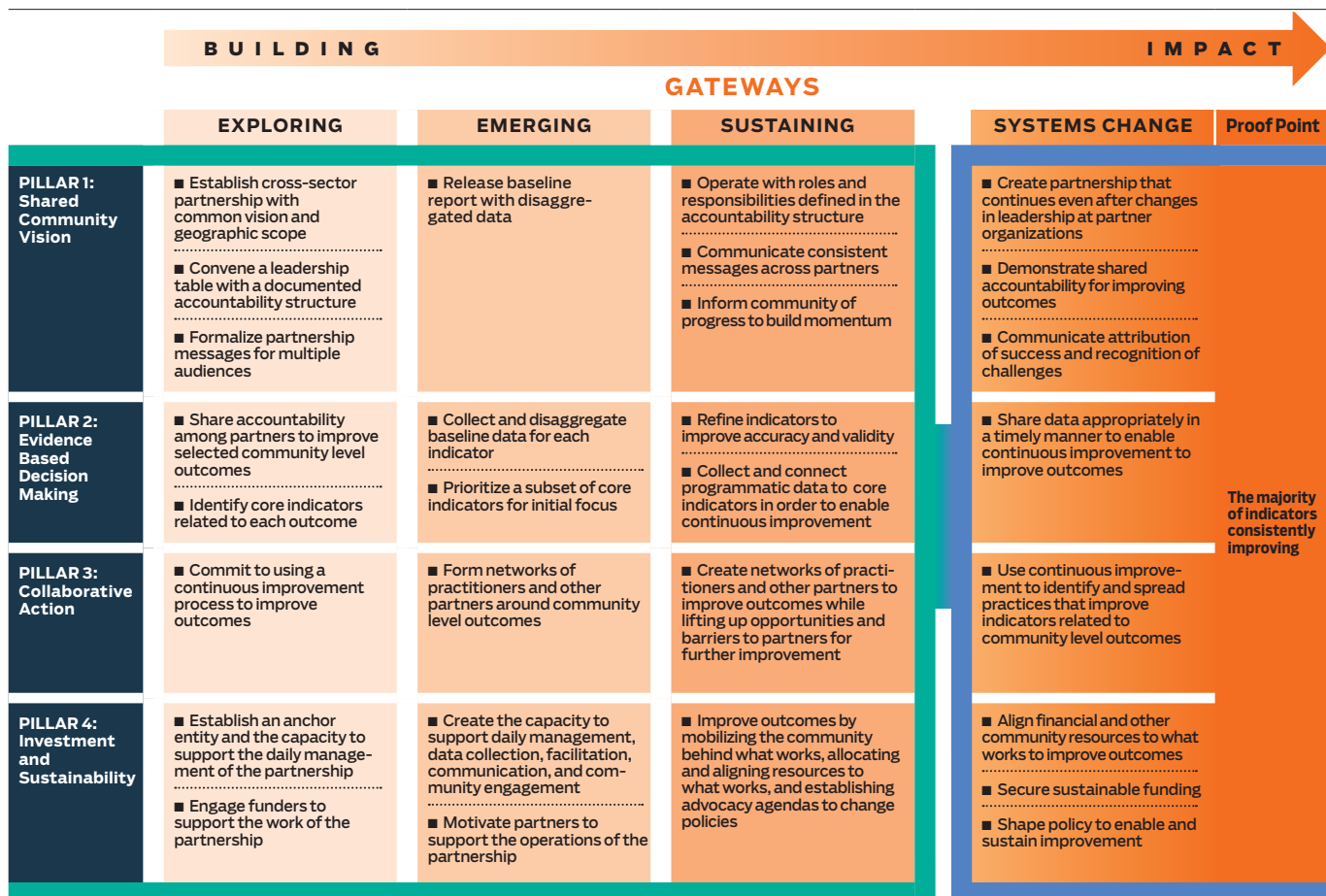
drawing on lessons from a diverse array of communities and defining in concrete terms what makes this work different. The StriveTogether Theory of Action represents a step in that direction, building on the momentum this concept has generated during the past three years.

As US Deputy Secretary of Education Jim Shelton has simply put it: “To sustain this movement around collective impact, we need ‘proof points.’” These come from raising the bar on what we mean by “quality” collective impact and challenging ourselves to meet higher standards. In so doing, not only will we prove the power of this concept, but we can change the lives of children and families in ways we could never have imagined. ●

#### NOTES

- 1 <http://www.strivetogether.org/blog/2012/11/the-difference-between-collaboration-and-collective-impact/>
- 2 [http://www.strivetogether.org/sites/default/files/images/StriveTogether%20Theory%20of%20Action\\_0.pdf](http://www.strivetogether.org/sites/default/files/images/StriveTogether%20Theory%20of%20Action_0.pdf)
- 3 Aimee Guidera from Data Quality Campaign
- 4 <http://www.albanypromise.org/>; <http://www.90by2020.org/>

## Theory of Action: Creating Cradle to Career Proof Points



For a more complete version of this table visit [www.strivetogether.org](http://www.strivetogether.org)





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# The Role of Grantmakers in Collective Impact

Grantmakers can catalyze connections and lay the groundwork for collective impact initiatives to take shape.

BY LORI BARTCZAK

At the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, program staff members have taken on a new title: network officer. This shift, although subtle, signals an important change in how foundation staff members see their role in supporting nonprofit and cross-sector networks such as the Central Appalachian Network (CAN), a collective impact initiative focused on community-based and sustainable economic development in the region.

To catalyze a collective impact initiative focused on education and youth development, staff members at the Kalamazoo Community Foundation in Michigan brought partners together and then left the room while nonprofit leaders and community members worked out the initiative's strategic plan.

These examples provide two ways that grantmakers are embracing the potential of collective impact efforts. Grantmakers rightly see themselves as critical partners—more than just funders—of programs to bring fields and communities together to tackle complex issues and bring about lasting change. They catalyze connections and lay the groundwork for initiatives to take shape. But because of their position and the power dynamics inherent in the relationship between grantmakers and grantees, they also perform a delicate balancing act.

The experiences of grantmakers like the Babcock Foundation, the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, and others provide three important lessons for all grantmakers involved in collective impact efforts: to understand and balance partners' varied needs; to catalyze connections with care; and to fund the costs of collaboration.

## UNDERSTAND AND BALANCE PARTNERS' VARIED NEEDS

Successful partnerships recognize that everyone involved expects both to contribute and to receive a benefit from participating. In collective impact initiatives, grantmakers

form partnerships with other grantmakers, grantees, and others, and they must understand their partners' needs and motivations. The cross-sector nature of collective impact efforts can often mean a steep learning curve.

When partnering with other grantmakers to determine a funding strategy, for example, partners have to negotiate the terms of each grantmaker's involvement. Partners must ask questions like What is each grantmaker's vision for the initiative? How does this work fit into the grantmaker's broader strategy? How can we accommodate these varying needs?

"Grantmakers have to be self-aware enough to know they have needs and confident enough to disclose their self-interest in such a way that it doesn't become 'these are my terms and conditions,'" says Carrie Pickett-Erway, president and CEO of the Kalamazoo Community Foundation. Her organization supports The Learning Network of Greater Kalamazoo, a collective impact initiative that aims to ensure that every child in the county is ready for school, college, and career.

Many funders are following Pickett-Erway's advice. One example is CAN, which began in 1993 as a loose network of grassroots organizations devoted to economic sustainability in the Appalachian regions of Kentucky, Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia. Since then, CAN has evolved into a collective impact initiative focused on advancing economic development strategies to increase the region's resilience and sustainability. The organization consists of six nonprofit organizations from five different states, whose activities are coordinated by a backbone support organization.

A variety of funders support CAN, including national and regional foundations and government agencies, all of which have unique priorities but increasingly work together to

align their investments. In fact, after bumping into one another at various meetings of their mutual grantees, several of CAN's funding partners decided to better understand one another's interests. "We recognized that we each had specific theories of change," says Sandra Mikush, deputy director of the Babcock Foundation. "We weren't trying to convince each other to adopt one theory of change; we were just trying to understand what was driving each funder's interest in this network. We looked at our collective interest and realized we wanted to align our funding to the network for better impact." These conversations led to the creation of a parallel group of grantmakers, the Appalachia Funders Network, which includes 30 official members and more than 50 non-member participants. The network rep-

***Being an effective partner in collective impact requires flexibility, long-term commitment, and a willingness to share power and decision-making with others.***

resents a broad spectrum of public and private funders that supports economic development in Central Appalachia, including all of CAN's past and present funders.

When it came to funding CAN's efforts, the Babcock Foundation paid attention to the types of support other grantmakers provided and then stepped in to fill gaps. For example, a national grantmaker was interested in replicating a specific strategy for economic development, but some local grantmakers faced geographic restrictions for their funding. The Babcock Foundation therefore decided to provide multi-year general operating support to individual organizations that were part of the network as well as to the network as a whole to help ensure its long-term success. That funding filled important gaps in support, such as network coordination functions, capacity building, and operational expenses such as meeting and travel costs.

"As a collective impact network, CAN has to attract a variety of funders, and that means we're satisfying multiple interests that aren't always aligned at the same time," says Andrew Crosson, CAN's network coordinator and a



program associate at Rural Support Partners, a backbone support organization. “It’s been valuable how connected CAN’s funders are. It helps them be aware of their differing priorities and how they can complement each other by supporting the different functions of the network that help it grow and work more effectively.”

*Questions for grantmakers to consider as they balance needs:*

- What is my vision for this work? What assumptions do I bring?
- What is my organization most interested in supporting? What needs won’t be met?
- How flexible am I willing to be?
- Where might my organization add unique value to the initiative?
- What do I know about my funding partners’ interests and needs?

### **CATALYZE CONNECTIONS WITH CARE**

Grantmakers have a unique big-picture view of what’s happening on issues and in communities that helps them to catalyze collective impact initiatives. Grantmakers can take advantage of this position by connecting nonprofits with each other to explore whether a partnership might emerge, using their connections to introduce grantees to decision-makers they may not meet otherwise. And they can use their convening power to bring diverse groups of stakeholders together for big-picture conversations.

There is, however, an important line that grantmakers must walk. They must realize that their role is to offer the connections and then step back to see what emerges, rather than force connections or mandate strategies. Nonprofits, community members, and other partners have hands-on knowledge and experiences that are just as important as grantmakers’ big-picture views. Shaping collective impact strategy requires both perspectives.

The Babcock Foundation, for example, has supported CAN by connecting members and other regional groups or partners, putting the idea of what they call a “network officer” to work. “Our vision of our role as network officers is to spend time in a place, understand where the momentum is, and where there’s good work going on and some potential partners,” says Mikush.

In collective impact initiatives, grantmakers must be one voice among many in shaping strategy and goals. Such a role reflects a significant shift from a traditional strategic philanthropy approach, where grantmak-

ing organizations execute their individual theories of change.

Consider the relationship between grantmakers at the Kalamazoo Community Foundation and the Learning Network. When Learning Network members were determining strategy, staff of the Kalamazoo Community Foundation decided that it was better for them to literally walk away so they would not unduly influence the strategy. “The foundation took the lead in bringing people together to talk about strategy, but as the conversation evolved, Pickett-Erway and her staff felt they were getting in the way of progress. “It felt like rather than being honest about what needs to happen, community leaders were looking at us and asking, “Well, what do you want to fund?” So we stepped back, which allowed them to step forward and drive the plan,” says Pickett-Erway. When the foundation staff left the room, the group moved in a different direction. The foundation accepted and supported the new plan, demonstrating their trust in their partners.

Establishing this level of trust is critical. For the Babcock Foundation and the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, trust was rooted in organizational culture and values. “A fundamental value that has been part of the Babcock Foundation since its founding 60 years ago is that people in communities know best how to address the problems,” says Mikush.

Trust, inclusion, and respect are important values at the Kalamazoo Community Foundation as well. Over the past few years, the foundation has worked on improving diversity, inclusion, and equity, and its work has been critical in generating meaningful contributions from the community to shape the Learning Network.

“You have to invite people to the table who look different and see the world differently in order for you to come up with better ideas,” says Pickett-Erway. “Once they’re at the table, you have to be able to create the right conversation so that they feel like they’re truly invited to share that perspective; they’re not just there as a token. A lot of that is, as a community leader, being self-aware enough to step back, to close your mouth, to let them start the conversation, to let them start the idea generation, and when they do, honor it, listen, and value it.”

*Questions for grantmakers to consider in catalyzing connections with care:*

- What knowledge or connections do I have that could be valuable to the initiative?

- How am I balancing the need to catalyze connections with the necessity not to force them?
- How do we bring diverse voices to the table in an authentic way?
- How open are we to the contributions and ideas of others?
- Do collective impact partners have the trust in each other required to work together?

### **FUND THE COSTS OF COLLABORATION**

When it comes to funding collective impact initiatives, a critical way for grantmakers to lend support is to help cover the costs of keeping a collaboration running. This support could take a variety of forms, such as funding the backbone function, supporting capacity-building for network participants or the network as a whole, covering the costs of evaluation, or supporting conventions, research, or other costs. In addition, unrestricted support allows organizations the flexibility to adapt their collective impact initiative to changing circumstances.

The Babcock Foundation’s multi-year general operating support funds some of the individual organizations that are part of CAN as well as the CAN network itself. CAN uses those funds to support the network’s backbone coordination role; cover the costs of meetings, research, and evaluation; and provide pass-through grants to build partner capacity.

“The network partners convinced us that in order to pursue this next level of work, they needed to be able to evaluate, assess, and measure their collective impact,” says Mikush. “They needed to develop that strategic framework collectively and then measure it.”

In addition to covering expenses that program grants don’t cover, flexible support from Babcock has allowed CAN to operate nimbly and adapt to new needs and opportunities. “If an organization has to wait for a grant cycle to adapt, or wait for a funder to learn about the change and consider whether to be willing to shift from one particular programmatic strategy to another, it severely limits the ability for an organization or a network to adapt,” says Mikush. “Providing general operating support based on essential outcomes gives the funder accountability but leaves much more flexibility to adapt strategy and partners in other ways to get to the outcomes. We stay in touch with grantees so we understand the rationale behind these adjustments.”

Long-term support is just as important as flexible dollars. Collective impact initiatives address systemic issues and have long timeframes for change, so grantmakers must be willing to stick with them for the long haul and maintain realistic expectations about the pace of change.

“We are putting in a \$5 million, five-year commitment to the Learning Network and recognize even that’s not sufficient. Funders have to go into this with their eyes wide open,” says Pickett-Erway.

Grantmakers can support collaboration in other ways as well. In addition to providing funding, the Kalamazoo Community Foundation supports collaboration by dedicating staff time to lead the communications work for the Learning Network.

“Without that dedicated staff capacity from our foundation staff, the Learning Network just wouldn’t be,” says Pickett-Erway. “But it requires us to do that in a way that downplays the community foundation identity as much as possible, so that all the other partners don’t feel like it’s just another community foundation initiative.”

*Questions for grantmakers to consider in funding the costs of collaboration:*

- How are we covering the time and expenses this collaboration requires?
- Are we giving appropriate resources and attention to evaluation for this initiative?
- What are we doing to ensure the long-term sustainability of this initiative?
- Does this initiative have the flexibility it needs to adapt to changing circumstances?

#### PROVIDING A STABLE PLATFORM FOR SUCCESS

To make the most effective contributions to collective impact initiatives, grantmakers must be mindful of the ways that they engage in these partnerships. They must balance the varied assets they bring with their own agendas and recognize the inherent power differential. Being an effective partner in collective impact requires flexibility, long-term commitment, and a willingness to share power and decision-making with others. For many grantmakers, this requires a fundamental change in approach. When grantmakers are able to strike the right balance, however, they are more likely to meet the needs of the initiative and provide a stable platform for success. ●

*Many thanks to Emily Wexler for her contributions to this article.*

# Power Dynamics in Collective Impact

Collective impact initiatives must build the power needed to accomplish their common agenda.

BY MARY JEAN RYAN

Collective impact initiatives are movements for social change, and they cannot succeed without achieving significant shifts in power and practice in their communities. Collective impact work requires the creation and activation of new forms of power as well as the use of powerful strategies, tools, and tactics to create large-scale systemic change. For these reasons, people involved in collective impact initiatives must understand and carefully consider power dynamics.

To achieve large-scale change, collective impact initiatives must disrupt the status quo. In each community, a particular array of power holds the present system structures in place and accounts for present-day outcomes. Generally, the status quo has been built over a long period of time by the actions of many. The central actors are often unaware of the full extent of their complicity in any negative outcomes, or of how their roles and actions reinforce those of others.

Over time, systems often become servants to themselves. The actions of many reinforce the system’s strong hold and its resistance to change. This change resistance can be seen in many education institutions, which, even in the face of enormous change in labor market requirements and student demographics, operate as they have for decades.

For the past four years, my organization, Community Center for Education Results (CCER), has helped support the development and implementation of the Road Map Project, a “cradle to college and career” collective impact effort in South Seattle and the South King County area of Washington State. CCER provides the backbone support for this effort.

The Road Map Project region is very diverse demographically, and poverty rates in the area have skyrocketed over the last two decades. The project’s geographic area includes seven school districts serving more than 120,000 students. Our goal is to double

the number of students in South King County and South Seattle who are on track to graduate from college or earn a career credential by 2020 and to close racial and ethnic opportunity gaps. Effectively managing and engaging power has been central to our ability to make progress in our work, as it is for many collective impact efforts. As the work evolves, we are constantly learning about the dynamics and use of power. I want to share a few of the lessons that we have learned so far.

**Know your context** | It is not a simple thing to develop power and use it effectively for change. Collective impact leaders need to know who holds the reins of power and how these actors are best influenced. They need to understand their allies as well as their foes. They need to know how to build powerful coalitions composed of a diverse group of actors, and they must accept conflict as a natural part of social change.

To understand the dynamics of power it is essential for collective impact leaders to understand the context within which they work and to stay vigilant because context shifts frequently. For example, when we started the Road Map Project, the economy was in a recession and governments were retrenching. Now, four years later, the context has shifted; money is beginning to flow again, and the opportunities are different.

**Test for favorable wind conditions** | About a year before the formal start of the Road Map Project, I did a lot of digging into our regional context to assess the appetite for change. I talked with a host of regional leaders including education advocates, neighborhood youth service providers, K-12 superintendents, community college presidents, foundation leaders, nonprofit executives, housing authority leaders, and city officials. To a person, they felt a strong discontent with the status quo





**Mary Jean Ryan** is the executive director of the Community Center for Education Results, which staffs the Road Map Project. She was previously director of the City of Seattle's Office of Policy and Management.

and expressed a willingness to work in new ways. Their frustrations and their commitment to work for change were essential ingredients for building a new counterforce. Conditions were looking favorable.

Even more important than widespread discontent, however, community hopes and aspirations were also pointing toward the need to dramatically improve educational attainment. One way we initially gauged community attitudes and priorities was by conducting a large public opinion poll of our region's parents. The poll found an overwhelming desire of parents of all races and income levels for their children to be able to go on to college. The community's hopes and dreams—as well as the widespread desire of many stakeholders to change the status quo—were like gathering winds that eventually join together to become a gale.

**Build collective power** | Collective impact initiatives develop their power by building large, diverse, multi-sector coalitions committed to a clear purpose and a common agenda. By working beyond individual agendas, one can create strength in numbers. When hundreds of organizations and community leaders band together in pursuit of common objectives, new power is generated.

**Develop alliances between “unusual bedfellows” by focusing on common goals** | The power of a collective approach to create social change often comes from creating alliances among constituencies who don't usually work together and may even have been traditional foes. Building these alliances can be effective in creating change because it brings pressure to bear on the status quo from multiple angles. For example, an alliance of unusual bedfellows was one of the driving factors behind the Washington State legislature's rather unexpected passing of “Dream Act” legislation, which makes undocumented immigrant students eligible for state-funded financial aid for college.

The coalition that worked to gain passage of the law was composed of the most unlikely allies. Leading immigrant-rights

groups joined with school district leaders and suburban Republicans, and all pushed the measure to victory. Just one year earlier, the measure was not even brought forward for a committee vote. Good timing played a role, but so did having the common goal of helping more students attend college. The common goal allowed people from a variety of political perspectives and social circumstances to defy stereotypical stances, move past partisan battling, and get something done for an important group of young people in Washington State.

**Apply pressure from the outside and inside** | Often, the best way to create change is to apply pressure simultaneously from both the outside *and* the inside of a system (or important institutions within the system) while engaging people from varied power positions. I have seen situations in which grassroots activists have enormous power, and where people in positions of formal power have far less actual power than others imagine. Strong alliances can emerge when people and organizations from the outside and the inside come together around a common goal. Savvy leaders of institutions see the ability of grassroots activists to push from the outside as a gift rather than a threat because it helps them lead for change. These leaders can use the outside pressure to fight the necessary internal battles.

An example of effective outside-inside power dynamics can be seen in the Road Map Project's parent engagement work. The project believes that strong parent engagement is fundamental to student success: it has tried a number of tactics to elevate the importance of parent engagement across the region. Along with many partners, the project hosted a successful regional parent forum in the spring of 2013. It then worked with University of Washington researchers, school districts, and community-based parent engagement practitioners to develop a set of common indicators to measure whether parent engagement improves over time.

By putting greater external focus on the need for more effective parent engagement strategies, the Road Map Project is now seeing growing evidence of institutional commitment. Districts are adopting the parent engagement indicators, hiring family partnership directors, and expanding innovative parent leadership approaches. Momentum around this work is accelerating rapidly.

**Use competition and data to accelerate progress** | In 2007, the state of Washington created the College Bound Scholarship. Low-income students can receive a full-tuition scholarship, but to become eligible, a student and her parents must sign up by the end of the eighth grade. When the state created the scholarship, it did not put many resources into marketing. With a few exceptions, the school districts did not see themselves as responsible for getting students and their families signed up.

Because of the lack of outreach only about 50 percent of low-income students signed up for the scholarship. To push the program forward, the Road Map Project created a large coalition from various sectors that has subsequently completed three sign-up campaigns. It included mayors recording robo-calls to families, community-based organization staff members and school counselors knocking on doors, and public housing authorities and libraries sending home information.

The project's approach to the sign-up campaigns has revealed that data, produced in the right way and delivered at the right time into the right hands, can be an incredibly useful tool. Every week during the sign-up campaigns, the Road Map Project sent the scholarship sign-up data to school district superintendents, mayors, local newspapers, and parent groups. The data spurred constructive competition among the seven school districts in the project's region. Best practices were shared and have now become systematized. In the last sign-up campaign, the coalition achieved a 94 percent sign-up rate in its targeted region, signing up 4,858 students in last year's eighth grade class.

The effect of the sign-up work has extended into the school system itself. In the past, many high schools tracked low-income students away from college readiness courses. The students placed in college prep classes were those believed to be “college material”—typically white and more affluent. Now almost 100 percent of the low-income students entering ninth grade know that they have a college scholarship waiting for them at the end of high school. The power dynamics and school cultures are shifting as students and their parents demand access to college prep classes as well.

Step by step, a positive counterforce is being built in South Seattle and South King County that, over time, will shift power toward low-income students and their families and will help support courageous leaders trying to do new things inside of old systems. ●

# Roundtable on Community Engagement and Collective Impact

## MODERATOR

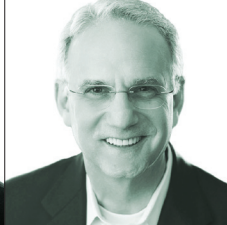


**Melody Barnes**, chair of the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions

## ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS



**Paul Born**, president and cofounder, Tamarack Institute



**Richard Harwood**, founder and president, The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation



**Steve Savner**, director of public policy, Center for Community Change



**Stacey Stewart**, US president, United Way Worldwide



**Martin Zanghi**, director of youth and community engagement, University of Southern Maine Muskie School of Public Service

Collective impact efforts are often discussed in terms of organizations or sectors, such as business, nonprofit, government, and philanthropy. What is often left out of the discussion is the community itself, even though it is a critical factor in the long-term success of collective impact initiatives. The community includes the individuals, families, networks, and organizations who will be affected by the initiative and who participate in it, but who are not usually considered to have active leadership roles in creating community solutions. It includes, for example, people directly affected by the problem, as well as social service organizations that may not be initially represented on steering committees or working groups.

To advance the conversation about how to engage the community in collective impact, the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions gathered scholars and practitioners for an honest discussion. In this roundtable, the participants discuss why it is important to involve the community actively, how it can be done within a collective impact initiative, and the challenges and pitfalls of engaging the community.

**Melody Barnes:** I want to start out by asking what community engagement is. It's one of those things you think you know when you see it, but let's get specific. How do you define community engagement?

**Steve Savner:** From our perspective, community engagement needs to include people in the community—the people who are trying to be helped by the various services. They should be involved in a very genuine way in identifying community needs, developing ideas about solutions, and then helping to oversee and continuously improve the program. It's all about the constituency having a real role and an actual seat at the table.

**Martin Zanghi:** It's a method, a strategy, a way of creating relationships for people who have been affected by poverty, social and economic

injustice, and racism. It's about providing people who haven't had a voice the opportunity to share leadership and develop their skills to get practitioners and policymakers to actually listen. The most powerful voices that I've experienced over the last 20 years are youths who have changed policy, changed practices, and changed our belief systems so that we're actually doing better by the people that we're trying to serve.

**Richard Harwood:** Community engagement is an orientation. It's about who you believe is part of the community and whom you're willing to see. It means engaging people who have things that only they know and only they can teach us. For instance, only community citizens can tell us their shared aspirations and the challenges to reaching those aspirations. Only they can tell us about their lived

experiences with certain challenges, and what kinds of tradeoffs they're willing to make in their lives. This helps us develop the public will to move forward.

**Stacey Stewart:** For United Way, it's a continuous process of listening, understanding, hearing, and acting on reaching those aspirations. I think the tendency is often to do engagement through town halls or meetings at the rec center and then say, "Well, we've engaged the community, so now we can go off and do our work for the next three years and never listen to anyone again." That's not the kind of engagement that will produce any kind of community-level change.

**Barnes:** How do you think community engagement fits inside the collective impact approach, which brings together so many different sectors across the community?

**Paul Born:** On a practical level, community engagement in collective impact is particularly relevant when putting together a common agenda. It starts by identifying the system that we want to engage. For example, if we're working on poverty issues, we may bring together government leaders, people from civil society organizations, and corporate leaders who care about the issue. In addition, there is a fourth sector—people who will most benefit from the success of our initiative. We bring them together for a series of experiences that



allow them to enter into the issue deeply.

In the process of working and talking across sectors, new ideas are shaped and old ideas are let go. The common agenda is not just a strategic plan. It's also a commitment to the work moving forward. Community engagement is the process of building a common vision that binds us together.

**Zanghi:** It's also about emergent learning—about providing the time and space for the relationships and the processes to develop. It allows learning to come from the people who aren't normally part of the conversation, by listening to people with rich life experiences. It's not an easy practice to let people have that space. People have practiced elements of collective impact over the years, but the piece that's not clear to everyone is the process—the time, the trust, and the relationships that go into creating the five conditions of collective impact.

**Savner:** One of the issues that we need to pay attention to is the difficulties that communities experience with the engagement process. It's important to think about what organizations are in the community that are run by low-income people and to be sure to have those organizations at the table. It is

### ***What is often left out of the discussion is the community itself, even though it is a critical factor in the long-term success of collective impact initiatives.***

important that there is an organization whose mission is to work with low-income folks and that really represents their views. It's also important because it helps empower low-income people and develop them into leaders.

**Stewart:** The nonprofit sector has always tried to solve challenges in a community by looking at the services that could be provided. When things don't seem to work, nonprofit leaders wonder what happened and realize that they don't have the perfect solution. Nonprofits have a lot of data and perspective, but other perspectives are just as valuable. We have found that, when we do the kind of listening and engaging with people that is required to drive systemic change, people step up to lead the change with us.

**Harwood:** Stacey raises an interesting point. What is the basic frame we're using to do

collective impact? Is it serving people or is it building something? What Americans want more than anything else right now is to return to being builders. It's part of our DNA, part of the founding of the country, and part of how we built communities over the years.

Many people feel that we've gotten away from that by being served all the time, by taking on a mindset that we're consumers and that we can make unlimited demands on limited resources. What I hear from folks in communities more than anything is: "Let's build something that has meaning and purpose, and let's demonstrate that we can come together and do things." We don't want to revert to the old paradigm that said: "What's your problem? I have a program for that and you don't have to do anything, even though you want to help create your own future."

**Stewart:** If you look back at history, things have changed at large scale in this country and around the world when some critical mass of organizations comes together and agrees that there is something important to work on. But this happens only when everyday people believe the issue is really important and are willing to change their own behavior. Not because someone tells them to, but because they want to.

They see it as a priority for themselves, their communities, and their lives.

Then there is the issue of creating real change in the community so that things actu-

ally get better. That's where this whole idea of engaging people and making them feel a part of the process comes in. Even if they didn't come to the community conversation to share their voice, they see their aspirations echoed by others around them and they feel a part of it. They feel like it's something they want to adopt in their whole life. This is an interesting cultural shift in the community that changes behavior.

**Barnes:** What are some of the biggest pitfalls when trying to take a collective impact approach that is in harmony with the community?

**Born:** I find our biggest pitfall is being able to listen to each other. We create environments where we are thinking about the solution we want to implement rather than listening to what is going on. Collective impact is very action oriented. But Peter Senge has this lovely saying: "Sometimes we have to go slow to go

fast." If we don't go slowly in this work, we can very quickly come to solutions that don't engage people.

**Harwood:** The biggest obstacle that I see is when we are overrun by the very process we created. Suddenly the goal is to implement timelines to meet deliverables and funding requirements. We lose sight of the community because the project is so heavy that we spend all our time feeding it. Despite our best intentions, we are oriented inward toward our own organization and process. We have to make a commitment to turn outward toward the community and shift our orientation, individually as well as collectively.

A danger with collective impact is that it becomes like a social erector set. We think that if we just put the right pieces together and get the right nuts and bolts in the correct order, then somehow this organic system we call community will go along our nice linear path. We need the humility to confront the actual conditions in communities and begin where the community is, not with our erector set. If we don't get this right, all the stuff that follows will not matter.

**Barnes:** I've heard from people around the country about perceived challenges when we engage communities and try to ensure that the community voice is a part of our work. But are there also real challenges that we need to address?

**Born:** I'm going to go to the one that is named almost 100 percent of the time by backbone leaders: There is not enough time. The perception of time is in an old frame. We have gotten so busy that it is a challenge to convince people to slow down. We somehow have to put the clutter away, which means that boards have to tell their leaders, "We need you to spend time on this."

So we're approaching people who don't necessarily want to lead a collective impact approach but want to be part of one, and we throw out the challenge: "You've got to set aside a minimum of 10 percent of your time to work in this process." That might mean four hours a week, but more important, it sets up a thinking pattern. We're in so many meetings and we move from thing to thing, so we've stopped looking at the larger reason we exist. I think that's by far the biggest challenge in collective impact work: to get people to rethink and slow down.

**Savner:** Whether it's collective impact or any other kind of work that requires building relationships and trust, the biggest barrier is frequently the risk to people in the organizations. And that's real: Your organization and your people have certain needs, and there is always a risk that the process will not come out to your greatest benefit.

People have legitimate concerns and interests. If you're running an agency, or if you're an elected official or a community resident, the thing you can do is build trust and relationships. But it seems to me that risks and a lack of trust in the process are the biggest barrier.

**Stewart:** Whenever there's a collective impact exercise, it's always in the context of what's happened before. There is baggage in communities. There are things that have happened that didn't work and relationships that are not going well. It takes patience and understanding to realize how to deal with that context.

From a backbone organization's perspective, it's important to understand that being the backbone doesn't mean you are in control. At some level, if you want to have the community engaged in a process, it has to be the community's process, not the backbone's. That is often difficult for people to accept because they might assume they can take control and move the process according to their timetable, and that's not the case.

Last, a piece of this engagement puzzle is both an opportunity and a challenge for some folks. There is a whole new world of engagement that we haven't fully adopted or seen the full potential of—digital and mobile space, and online engagement. So we may think about engagement in the classic, in-person sense, but in reality there are huge numbers of people in society right now for whom engaging online is perfectly comfortable. They feel completely engaged on an issue even if they haven't met everyone physically. There's an exciting opportunity to think about how virtual engagement can lead to collective change.

**Harwood:** We say we want to put community in collective impact, but we don't do it. That may be because we are afraid, we don't want to lose control, or we don't want to create certain risks, but there are two results. One is that we increase the likelihood that our collective impact will not succeed because there won't be true community ownership and we won't

be able to mobilize the energies and the public will of our large communities. The other is that we will miss an opportunity. People are looking to be part of something larger than themselves. They want to come back into public life to build something together. Collective impact initiatives are the golden opportunity for that to happen.

**Barnes:** Picking up on that idea, do you think that the fear that sometimes leads us not to include community creates a perception that collective impact is really for the grasstops and not for the grassroots?

**Stewart:** I think that's really what we're talking about. As we begin to understand collective impact, it feels very much like a grasstops effort. And I think that we all agree that it is both grasstops and grassroots. It involves everybody—everyday people, involved leaders. The more people you have engaged, the better. And the sooner we understand that collective action must include collective involvement, the sooner we will be able to solidify some real examples of moving the needle and involving people in something bigger than themselves.

**Zanghi:** My concern about the pitfall question is not related to any particular method, whether it's collective impact or another. It is that we still fall back on some of our old models of power, authority, and perceived expertise. That affects the ability to bring different people to the table and shapes the process and the outcomes for a likely change. It can get in the way of the kind of change that we are all fighting for.

**Harwood:** I think the danger of grasstop power is that, for a lot of folks, the efforts that come out of collective impact can look nice but not necessary. People see a group of professionals in their community who have dreamed something up, put a nice label on it, and created a four-color brochure and maybe a jingle. Then they promote it as though it's the new sliced bread.

This does not address the things that I'm concerned about and it doesn't give me the sense of possibility that we're building something together and changing the way our community operates. Instead, it feels like we're just creating another program.

**Born:** In the early days of a collective impact

approach, we often find that one of two mistakes is made. One is that we gather only the grasstops. That is, we think somehow it's about shifting power. So we bring the powerful players into the room. The other mistake, almost as common, is that we don't engage any of the power players because we're afraid that it will be perceived as a grasstops initiative.

So people are overcorrecting. They are either going grassroots or going grasstops. We're encouraging people to trust their instincts and bring the grasstops together with the grassroots. The actual process of bringing the power and the grassroots together is what changes the conversation.

**Barnes:** What is the one piece of advice that you would give to a person who comes to you and says, "I'm in community X and we are using a collective impact approach. We really want to work with the community. How should we go about doing our work?"

**Zanghi:** A theme I've heard in our conversation is the power of storytelling. Train and support people to tell their stories and to listen better.

**Savner:** Look for organizations that are actually led by the people in the community who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of whatever changes you're trying to achieve.

**Stewart:** I would say be patient, listen, and involve broadly.

**Born:** We often say that the change that is required is really change within ourselves. And so we're fond of saying First, it's very important to know your heart; second, open your heart; and third, trust your heart. Know, open, and trust. Because by becoming fully human together, we become deeply honest with one another. If we can bring the right people into the room and have that deep, honest conversation, we're going to find a new way.

**Harwood:** Get clear on your urge to do good, because you're going to need that as you face adversity. But in order to create change, you need to turn outward and make the community—not your conference room—your reference point. ●

To read an extended version of this conversation, visit [www.collectiveimpactforum.org](http://www.collectiveimpactforum.org).

*Special thanks to Sheri Brady for orchestrating the roundtable.*





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# Aligning Collective Impact Initiatives

Communities can suffer from too many initiatives, creating overlap, inefficiency, and frustration.

BY MERITA IRBY & PATRICK BOYLE

Northern Kentucky was a hotbed of collective impact initiatives long before anyone called them “collective impact.” For decades, the region’s government and civic leaders have tackled thorny social issues through partnerships to create a vision for the region’s future and to implement plans to fulfill that vision. “We were doing collective impact,” says the vice president of one such effort. “We just didn’t have those words.”

When it came to education initiatives, however, Northern Kentucky had too much of a good thing. Initiatives were created to foster collaboration among educators, among educators and businesses, and among educators, businesses, government, and civic organizations. Countless other organizations had a hand in education as part of their missions to help children and families. “You would sit in these meetings and hear lots of good ideas,” recalls Patricia Nagelkirk, director of community impact for education at the United Way of Greater Cincinnati. “But there was no coordinator or game plan to carry them out.”

As collective impact initiatives blossom around the country, Northern Kentucky provides a case study in handling a dilemma that can spring from that growth: When multiple

initiatives develop overlapping missions, members, and audiences, how can you reduce competition and increase impact?

Today, Northern Kentucky’s education initiatives are aligned through a backbone organization that aims to improve all youth supports, from birth to career. To achieve that goal, local leaders grappled with issues like: Which existing groups can deliver backbone supports? How is backbone support funded? What do the initiatives do about areas where their work overlaps? Do any existing initiatives need to fold? Finding the answers took two years and a lot of analysis, negotiation, and, as Northern Kentucky leaders note, some frank and “uncomfortable” conversations. (See “Keys to Successful Alignment” below.)

## MOTIVATION TO ALIGN

The dilemma was born of abundance. Through the 1990s and early 2000s, several partnerships and initiatives were launched to improve educational services in Northern Kentucky (an area defined as anywhere from four to nine counties south of the Ohio border). The Council of Partners in Education sought to improve collaboration among secondary and post-secondary institutions. The Northern Kentucky

Education Alliance, a venture of the Chamber of Commerce, worked to increase cooperation between schools and businesses. Vision 2015, which fostered cross-sector collaboration to improve economic and social conditions, had an Education Implementation Team. Some people were involved in all of these efforts and ran into each other at every meeting. “In any given week,” recalls educator Polly Lusk Page, “you could go to three meetings and hear the same report three times.”

The initiatives competed for resources and attention from the same audiences. Although they worked together to varying degrees, they had no overarching strategy, and efforts to collaborate were complicated by a challenge that’s typical in rural and suburban areas: the presence of dozens of jurisdictions covering a large region.

Lusk Page recalls the frustration expressed by Vision 2015’s leaders: “We have too much going on. We have a lot of duplication of effort, and the business community is saying, ‘Too many people are coming to us with too many asks.’” Vision 2015 posited an idea: “What would it look like if we realigned?”

Finding the answer took two years of research and discussions. Because several organizations felt qualified to lead the new structure, these processes were facilitated primarily by neutral organizations.

Two processes somewhat overlapped. In 2008, Vision 2015 launched a series of discussions with education stakeholders about aligning their efforts under one umbrella. (Vision 2015 harbored no desire to be the umbrella; its agenda extended beyond education.) Then in 2009, the United Way of Greater Cincinnati (which covers Northern Kentucky) signed on with our national nonprofit organization, the Forum for Youth Investment, to facilitate the implementation of Ready by 21—a set of collective impact strategies to help communities get young people “ready for college, work, and life” by strengthening partnerships, developing shared goals, and measuring progress.

Kara Williams, Vision 2015’s vice president of communication and strategic initia-

## Keys to Successful Alignment

GUIDELINE	WHY IT’S IMPORTANT
Start with a focus on the outcomes you want to achieve	Focusing on outcomes galvanizes people around goals that are harder or more complex than those they’ve tried to tackle alone, and it prevents getting stuck on existing strategies that might not be best for those outcomes.
Draw a picture big enough so that existing efforts see how they can connect and why	A big picture reinforces the idea that complex challenges need interconnected solutions and prevents the “edifice complex,” which assumes that solutions revolve around certain institutions, such as schools.
Identify where there is more efficiency and power in working together than alone	Analysis of synergies creates energy for leaders to take on issues that are too big to handle alone and to scale up solutions they didn’t know they were pursuing separately. It also prevents development of agendas that are too big or piecemeal to make a difference.
Clarify the lines of communication and accountability	Clarification focuses committed partners on the routinization of their relationships and prevents “task force syndrome,” in which partners sign on to recommendations without assuming responsibility to implement them.

tives, says that among the keys for success were “having the right people in the room” who could make decisions for their organizations, and having motivated leaders. “They felt the confusion, the pain” of unaligned work. “They felt that together they could be doing more than they were doing separately.”

### GIVE AND TAKE

The Council of Partners in Education emerged as a candidate for the backbone role because of its strong connections to school districts and education leaders. The Council set out to become “the overarching organization for the alignment of education initiatives” in the region; it renamed itself the Northern Kentucky Education Council (NKYEC).

But although everyone was grateful to Vision 2015 for launching the alignment project, enthusiasm for alignment was tempered by uncertainty over whether the NKYEC would intrude on ground staked out by others. “We were dealing with multiple organizations, and understandably, some leaders had turf issues,” said Lusk Page, now executive director of the NKYEC. “Everyone was invested” in their community change work and “some didn’t want to give up what they were doing.”

They didn’t have to. The NKYEC preferred to coordinate with existing initiatives rather than start new ones; it found ways for other organizations to align their work with its priorities. That alignment was eased by the NKYEC’s creation of six “action teams,” each focused on an objective (such as “college and career readiness” and “educator excellence”) and composed of representatives from organizations that belong to the NKYEC. The teams allow the organizations to both sync with and influence the NKYEC, because the teams help to steer and implement its mission.

Some initiatives did disappear, but their work did not. Members of the Education Alliance (the Chamber of Commerce initiative) ran the action team on Business Involvement and Service Learning. That rendered the Alliance moot; it dissolved. So too did Vision 2015’s Education Implementation Team, because the NKYEC crafted new bylaws to promote Vision 2015’s educational goals. “We funneled all of those resources [for the education team] into the Council,” Williams said. Integrating people and resources among organizations facilitated the alignment’s success.

### GETTING AMBITIOUS

Even while this process settled questions,

the renovations continued. The Ready by 21 staff, working through the United Way, led an examination of the region’s goals for young people, the available resources, and the steps needed to achieve the goals. That examination pushed stakeholders to expand their vision in two ways: to focus on specific youth outcomes and to extend beyond education.

One of Ready by 21’s fundamental concepts is the “Insulated Education Pipeline,” which says communities must ensure a full array of cradle-to-career supports beyond academics, in such areas as early childhood, health, safety, social connections, and job skills. “That pipeline,” says Lusk Page, “helped people understand in a way that we never understood before that we can work on the academic pipeline all we want, but until we broaden our scope and think about these wrap-around supports that our families and youth need, this isn’t going to work.”

Building an insulated pipeline of supports meant creating and strengthening partnerships between education organizations and others that provide everything from after-school activities to job training. The umbrella question arose again: Could one group coordinate these stakeholders? The NKYEC united local education efforts, but the United Way was the lead partner in Ready by 21, which brought funding and technical assistance. The NKYEC and United Way had not worked together much, and their geographic coverage in Northern Kentucky did not exactly match.

“There were some very candid conversations in our initial meetings” about what organization should lead the broader work, Lusk Page recalls. The United Way grew convinced that the NKYEC was up to the task, but each party needed assurances about responsibilities and resources. Those were laid out in a 2010 memorandum of understanding between the United Way, NKYEC, and Vision 2015. They agreed, for the purpose of the broader work, to adopt the NKYEC’s geographic footprint (6 counties, 37 municipalities, and 18 school districts), and that Vision 2015 would pay for a part-time staff member for the NKYEC to carry out the work.

Thus the NKYEC stretched further. Its desired outcomes now include not just academic achievement but the overall well-being of young people. It advocates birth-to-career supports, adding early childhood on the younger end, for example, and workforce development for older youths. And its bylaws mandate equal seats for education, business,

and community leaders (such as nonprofit service providers) on its board of directors.

### RESULTS

Leaders of the NKYEC effort are cautious about drawing connections just yet between the collective impact strategies and population-level outcomes. Nonetheless, Lusk Page says, “the needle’s starting to move” on some indicators, such as reading levels, graduation rates, and measures of college and career readiness. More visible are the on-the-ground changes in the services and supports that young people receive, thanks largely to the work of the action teams.

- Education and business groups launched initiatives to prepare more high school students for college and careers, such as increasing enrollments in dual-credit courses, mapping local career readiness resources, and training teachers to integrate 21st-century skills development in their classrooms.
- More than 80 schools administered an enhanced version of the Gallup Student Poll, which measures hope, engagement, and well-being. Schools combine the findings with data about grades and attendance, using the results to steer students to school supports (such as life skills courses) and to increase after-school opportunities (such as leadership development programs).
- The NKYEC, the United Way, and the Strive Partnership launched a literacy campaign with more than 70 partners.

Realignment resolved the problem that leaders set out to solve: Northern Kentucky has moved from having “no coordinator or game plan” and disparate collective impact initiatives to embracing a highly coordinated system.

The leaders of these efforts feel that they are poised to accomplish changes that they could not have imagined before. The NKYEC, for example, is working with the Forum for Youth Investment and SAS (a business analytics software and services company) to pilot a diagnostic system to link efforts to impact. The system will gather and display data from multiple sources and show how resource allocation and community supports affect outcomes for children and youths. “For the first time, we will have the power to see our impact and make adjustments,” says Lusk Page. “We’ll really know if we are making a difference.” ●





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# Learning in Action: Evaluating Collective Impact

Successful collective impact initiatives embed evaluation in their DNA and use it to make better decisions about the future.

BY MARCIE PARKHURST & HALLIE PRESKILL

As leaders across the social sector adopt the collective impact approach to problem solving, an important question looms in many people's minds: Given how complex and unpredictable the work is, what is the best way to evaluate a collective impact initiative's progress and success?

Traditionally, evaluations of specific interventions have focused on their results to determine whether or not (and how) they have "worked." But collective impact initiatives involve *multiple* activities, programs, and initiatives, all of which operate in mutually reinforcing ways. Moreover, they aim to change highly complex systems. As a result, merely taking a snapshot of a given intervention's effectiveness at one point does not tell

the whole story. To truly evaluate their effectiveness, collective impact leaders need to see the bigger picture—the initiative's many different parts and the ways they interact and evolve over time. For that, they need a new way to approach evaluation. We believe that effectively evaluating collective impact requires the following practices.

First, rather than attempting to isolate the effects and impact of a single intervention, collective impact partners should assess the progress and impact of the changemaking process as a whole. This process includes the initiative's context; the quality and effectiveness of the initiative's structure and operations; the ways in which systems that influence the targeted issue are changing; and the extent of progress

toward the initiative's ultimate goal(s). To be sure, the relative emphasis of evaluation will shift as the collective impact initiative matures. For example, an initial evaluation might assess the strength of the initiative itself, and a subsequent evaluation might focus on the initiative's influence on targeted systems.

Second, rather than use performance measurement and evaluation to determine success or failure, collective impact partners should use the information they provide to make decisions about adapting and improving their initiative. To that end, collective impact partners should embed evaluation and learning into their initiative's DNA, rather than treating it as an annual (or quarterly) exercise.

Embracing this comprehensive, adaptive approach to evaluating collective impact requires leaders to do three things differently. As we explain in the sections that follow, they should "ask what," "ask why," and "ask often."

## ASK WHAT

First, collective impact partners should assess the progress and effectiveness of the changemaking process *as a whole*. This exercise requires examining four levels of the initiative: the initiative's context, the initiative itself, the systems that the initiative targets, and the initiative's ultimate outcomes.

**The initiative's context** | Context refers to everything that influences an initiative's design, implementation, and effectiveness. It includes economic conditions, demographics, media focus, political will, funding availability, leadership, and culture, among other factors. Changes in context are inevitable and often are important in supporting or hindering an initiative's success. For example, just as Washington State's Road Map Project began to form in 2012, its leaders learned that they could apply for a federal Race to the Top district award. They successfully organized themselves and won a \$40 million award. The influx of financial support significantly boosted the initiative's capacity and accelerated the implementation of its priority strategies.<sup>1</sup>

To see how changes in context can influence an initiative's outcomes, consider the



## Assessing an Initiative's Design and Implementation

SAMPLE OUTCOMES	SAMPLE INDICATORS
The development of the common agenda has included a diverse set of voices and perspectives from multiple sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The initiative's steering committee (or other leadership structure) includes voices from all relevant sectors and constituencies.</li> <li>■ Members of the target population help shape the common agenda.</li> <li>■ Community members are aware of the collective impact initiative's goals and activities.</li> </ul>
An effective backbone function has been identified or established	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Backbone staff effectively manage complex relationships.</li> <li>■ Backbone staff demonstrate commitment to the collective impact's vision.</li> <li>■ Backbone staff are both neutral and inclusive.</li> </ul>
Quality data on a set of meaningful common indicators is available to partners in a timely manner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Partners commit to collecting the data as defined in the data plan.</li> <li>■ Partners have the capacity to collect and input quality data.</li> <li>■ Partners know how to use the shared measurement system.</li> <li>■ Partners contribute quality data on a common set of indicators in a timely and consistent manner.</li> </ul>

example of the final evaluation for Shape Up Somerville. This Massachusetts-based collective impact initiative focused on reducing citywide rates of obesity and included an analysis of the city's changing demographics. As its leaders noted: "If a community becomes more racially diverse over time, as is the case in Somerville, obesity rates would be expected to rise."<sup>2</sup> Without taking into account local demographic changes, the initiative's collaborators couldn't fully understand the effectiveness of its efforts.

**The initiative itself** | For any collective impact initiative, changing the way organizations and individuals interact with each other and approach complex problem-solving is an important, if often implicit, goal. The real power of the collective impact approach lies in the process—the ability to unite diverse groups around a common purpose, encourage open discussion and ongoing communication, support coordination and alignment of activities, and promote learning and continuous improvement. For example, an evaluation of Vibrant Communities, a pan-Canadian anti-poverty initiative, found that the "multi-sectoral nature of Vibrant Communities helps government move on [policy] change because proposals are already vetted from multiple interests in the community."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Shape Up Somerville attributes its success largely to its "multi-level approaches to promote active living and healthy eating."<sup>4</sup> The initiative engaged public schools, city government leaders, academic researchers, civic organizations, community groups, businesses (including restaurants), and residents in an integrated approach to problem solving that facilitated systems-level change. Ultimately, the initiative suc-

ceeded in decreasing childhood obesity rates throughout the city of Somerville.<sup>5</sup>

Assessing the progress and effectiveness of the collective impact changemaking process as a whole requires an explicit focus on the initiative's design and implementation. (See "Assessing an Initiative's Design and Implementation" above.) Although collective impact leaders may question the value of evaluating process, we urge them to pay careful attention to the quality and strength of their initiative itself, especially in its early years. This is a time when critically important decisions are made and learning is invaluable.

**The systems that the initiative targets** | Most collective impact initiatives have hugely ambitious goals: Not only do they seek to tackle complex problems, but they also try to create large-scale change. Achieving this level of impact, in a way that's sustainable over time, requires collective impact initiatives to make significant changes in systems (by influencing cultural norms, public policies, and funding flows) as well as patterns of behavior (including changes in professional practice or changes in individual behavior). These systems-level

changes create the conditions that allow collective impact initiatives to achieve their ultimate objectives. (See "Assessing Systems-Level Changes" below.) Shape Up Somerville, for example, attributes part of its success to a constellation of systems-level changes. These included increased funding for anti-obesity work; healthier menu offerings in public schools and at more than 40 local restaurants; new bicycle lanes and improvements to public park infrastructure; improved nutritional standards in schools and other public institutions; and improvements in physical education equipment, facilities, and activities in schools and after-school programs.

**The initiative's ultimate outcomes** | As the initiative matures, collective impact partners should keep a watchful eye on their ultimate goals. It is normal for initiatives to make slow or minimal progress toward their goals in the early years, but collective impact partners should expect to achieve meaningful, measurable change within three to four years. They should track this progress over time using the initiative's shared measurement system in addition to more robust evaluations.

### ASK WHY

Collective impact partners should use the results of their evaluative activities to make smart decisions about adapting and improving the initiative. To make such decisions, funders must complement performance measurement activities (which focus on determining *what* is happening) with other types of evaluation aimed at understanding *how* and *why* change is happening.

Collective impact partners can employ three different approaches to evaluation at different points in an initiative's lifetime: developmental evaluation, formative evaluation, and summative evaluation. As "Three Approaches to Evaluation" (to right) outlines,

## Assessing Systems-Level Changes

SAMPLE OUTCOMES	SAMPLE INDICATORS
The collective impact initiative is influencing changes in attitudes and beliefs toward the desired behavior change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Individuals view the issues and goals of the collective impact initiative with increased importance, relevance, and a sense of urgency.</li> <li>■ Individuals express attitudes or beliefs that support the desired behavior change.</li> </ul>
Philanthropic (or public) funding in the targeted issue area/system is increasingly aligned with the goals of the collective impact initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Overall funding for the targeted issue area or system has increased.</li> <li>■ Existing resources are directed toward evidence-based strategies in the targeted issue area or system.</li> <li>■ New resources are committed to evidence-based strategies in the targeted issue area or system.</li> <li>■ Funding is increasingly designed to allow for program innovation and experimentation in the targeted issue area or system.</li> </ul>

each approach can help answer different questions. (For more detail on the three approaches, see “Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact,” available at [www.fsg.org](http://www.fsg.org).)

These approaches to evaluation are not mutually exclusive. Collective impact partners can and should use a combination of approaches over time. For example, Vibrant Communities in Canada used developmental evaluation to explore changes in context and potential implications for the initiative, and simultaneously used formative evaluation to refine its existing efforts. Later, the initiative used summative evaluation to look back on its effectiveness and overall impact.

### ASK OFTEN

In the context of collective impact, the purpose of performance measurement and evaluation is to support learning, and the goal is to enable continuous improvement. We suggest that collective impact partners follow these steps to effective evaluation:

**Start early** | Even before an initiative’s shared measurement system becomes operational, collective impact partners can monitor a set of early performance indicators that focus on the quality of the initiative’s design and implementation. They can also use elements of developmental evaluation to provide insight into the effectiveness of the initiative’s early efforts. For example, an infant mortality initiative in rural Missouri uses developmental evaluation to better understand how contextual factors and cultural dynamics influence the development of the strategy. The partners are working with a team of evaluation coaches to ask such questions as “What does the problem of infant mortality look like from the perspective of different stakeholders in our region, and what are the implications for the design of our collective impact initiative?”<sup>6</sup>

**Embed learning into the initiative’s DNA** | To make learning a regular, active, and applied process, collective impact partners should establish clear learning structures and processes. For example, they can create space for group reflection at the start of meetings or periodically survey participants to identify pressing issues. These processes encourage the partners to exchange information, ideas, and questions and are thus critical to the initiative’s continuous improvement.

**Allocate resources appropriately** | Because learning is central to collective impact success, ongoing investment in performance measurement and evaluation is crucial. For many collec-

tive impact initiatives, ongoing measurement requires dedicating a part-time or full-time employee to organize, oversee, embed, and apply lessons learned across the initiative. For others, it means looking for external support in the form of a coach, technical assistance provider, or professional evaluator. The majority of collective impact initiatives will likely rely on a combination of internal and external evaluation resources at different times. Regardless of the composition of the evaluation team, we urge collective impact partners to plan carefully for the financial resources and personnel they will need to support a robust approach to performance measurement and evaluation. After all, as a recent report from Grantmakers for Effective Organizations put it, “When you look at evaluation as a means of learning for improvement, . . . investments in evaluation seem worthwhile because they can yield information needed for smarter and faster decisions about what works.”<sup>7</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Effective collective impact evaluation needs to be multi-faceted, flexible, and adaptive, but it does not need to be exhaustive or extremely expensive. Evaluation efforts come in all shapes and sizes—the scope and scale of any

individual evaluation will depend on the time, capacity, and resources available. Moreover, the focus of evaluation (including questions, outcomes, and indicators) will change as the initiative matures. The most effective collective impact initiatives will be those that seamlessly integrate learning and evaluation into their work from the beginning, allow those processes to evolve alongside their initiative, and use them as a guide for the future. ●

This article is based on FSG’s “Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact,” available at [www.fsg.org](http://www.fsg.org). We encourage interested readers to refer to the guide for additional information on how to focus, structure, and plan for collective impact evaluation.

### NOTES

- 1 Roap Map Region Race to the Top. <http://roadmapracetothetop.org/> Accessed June 16, 2014.
- 2 “A Decade of Shape Up Somerville: Assessing Child Obesity Measures 2002–2011.” White paper, Somerville, Mass.: City of Somerville Health Department, 2013: vii, 1.
- 3 “Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement. Evaluating Vibrant Communities 2002–2010.” White paper, Waterloo, Ontario: Tamarack, 2010: 58.
- 4 “A Decade of Shape Up Somerville.” 2013: 6.
- 5 “A Decade of Shape Up Somerville.” 2013: 7.
- 6 For more information on the Missouri Foundation for Health’s work on infant mortality, see “About MFH’s Work in Infant Mortality” <http://www.mfh.org/content/741/infant-mortality.aspx>.
- 7 Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. n.d. Four Essentials for Evaluation. Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.

## Three Approaches to Evaluation

	DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION	FORMATIVE EVALUATION	SUMMATIVE EVALUATION
Stage of collective impact development	Collective impact initiative is exploring and in development.	Collective impact initiative is evolving and being refined.	Collective impact initiative is stable and well-established.
What’s happening?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collective impact partners are assembling the core elements of their initiative, developing action plans, and exploring different strategies and activities.</li> <li>There is a degree of uncertainty about what will work and how.</li> <li>New questions, challenges, and opportunities are emerging.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The initiative’s core elements are in place and partners are implementing agreed upon strategies and activities.</li> <li>Outcomes are becoming more predictable.</li> <li>The initiative’s context is increasingly well-known and understood.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The initiative’s activities are well-established.</li> <li>Implementers have significant experience and increasing certainty about “what works.”</li> <li>The initiative is ready for a determination of impact, merit, value, or significance.</li> </ul>
Strategic question	What needs to happen?	How well is it working?	What difference did it make?
Sample evaluation questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How are relationships developing among collective impact partners?</li> <li>What seems to be working well and where is there early progress?</li> <li>How should the collective impact initiative adapt in response to changing circumstances?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can the initiative enhance what is working well and improve what is not?</li> <li>What effects or changes are beginning to show up in targeted systems?</li> <li>What factors are limiting progress and how can they be managed or addressed?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What difference(s) did the collective impact initiative make?</li> <li>What about the collective impact process has been most effective, for whom, and why?</li> <li>What ripple effects did the collective impact initiative have on other parts of the community or system?</li> </ul>





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# Achieving Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth

Emerging lessons on using data and resources to improve the prospects of young people.

BY LILI ALLEN, MONIQUE MILES, & ADRIA STEINBERG

As a member of the Leadership Council of the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, Jamiel Alexander sits beside leaders from national and regional philanthropies. He offers insights into the assets and challenges of young people who—like himself just a few years ago—find themselves outside any opportunity system in their community. As a young man growing up in Philadelphia, Alexander confronted a fragmented public education system, street violence, and the financial obstacles associated with a single-parent home. After dropping out of high school, he had a series of run-ins with the law and was remanded to the juvenile justice system, which required him to complete community service. This path led Alexander to the local Crispus Attucks YouthBuild program in York, Pa., which gave him the opportunity to earn a high school diploma while gaining transferrable employment skills. Today, in addition to his duties for the Aspen Institute, Alexander serves as president of the National Council of Young Leaders and holds a full-time job as an education program manager for YouthBuild USA.

Debates continue over the pace and strength of recovery of the American economy, but one fact remains clear: A large number of young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are being left behind. Whether they graduated from high school or left without diplomas, many low-income young people suffer from inadequate educations that leave them underprepared for postsecondary education or the workplace. Surveys tell us that these young people, like others their age, strongly desire good jobs and understand the need for skills and credentials. Yet unlike their more privileged and affluent peers, they see few obvious paths forward.

Young people such as Alexander have traditionally been labeled “disconnected youth,” but the reality is more complex.

Many of them *are* “connected”—to friends, neighborhoods, churches, families, and local community-based organizations. But the institutions, organizations, and public systems that could help them achieve higher levels of education, training, and jobs are themselves disconnected from one another. Recognizing this reality, many advocates have abandoned the term “disconnected youth.” Instead, we favor “opportunity youth,” a phrase that calls attention to the opportunities these young people seek and that should be opened up for them.

The Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF), a principal initiative of the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions, focuses on this group of young people. The OYIF, which emerged from the work of the White House Council for Community Solutions, seeks to demonstrate how a collective impact approach can improve the options and lifetime outcomes of opportunity youth. Bringing together a variety of sectors and systems is especially appropriate for opportunity youth, because, by definition, no one set of institutions currently takes responsibility for their progress and no publicly available database tracks that progress.

Through a collective impact approach, the OYIF helps communities harness local civic capacity to drive long-term sustainable change. The initiative has three goals: to reconnect opportunity youth to education and employment at higher rates; to catalyze the adoption of effective approaches in education and career attainment, leading to family-sustaining careers; and to promote local, state, and national policy changes to increase the replication and scaling up of these approaches.

Although the initiative remains in its early stages, important stories have already emerged about the strategies these communities are using to tackle two of the principal

challenges they face—gathering the data they need to inform their work and strengthen public will, and securing financial support to sustain the on-ramps and pathways to opportunity. We hope that these lessons will inspire similar collective impact efforts on behalf of opportunity youth and offer starting points to collective impact initiatives for other vulnerable populations, such as English language learners, who also suffer from systemic disconnects that influence their progress.

## BRING TOGETHER DATA FROM MULTIPLE SOURCES

Gathering data across multiple public systems is a key to achieving collective impact for opportunity youth. Because these young people are invisible in most data systems, one of the primary challenges is to understand who they are and how they progress toward adulthood according to such indicators as educational attainment and work readiness. Unlike in parts of Europe, where policymakers track 16- to 24-year-olds who are not engaged in education, employment, or training to assess their progress toward education credentials and careers, no single system in the United States keeps track of this population.

Rather than create new costly and labor-intensive data systems, OYIF sites seek to build on existing public data systems, a task that involves working with multiple sources. As these youths look to reconnect with education and employment, they often move in and out of public systems such as community colleges, adult education programs, and, if they face specific challenges, child welfare programs, homeless services, and the justice system. Through data agreements with these systems, collaborative sites can help partners and the community at large better understand the scope and dimensions of this population group.

For example, the Baltimore City Opportunity Youth Collaborative started with an analysis of US Census data of the opportunity youth population by sex, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, employment status, custodial parenting, and citizenship. The

partners complemented those data with a survey that asked programs serving opportunity youth to estimate how many fell into various subpopulations (such as court-involved, foster care, or homeless). The Baltimore project then used its partners' relationships to request data from the leaders of systems that serve relevant subpopulations, particularly the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services and the Baltimore City Department of Social Services. In addition, Baltimore has contracted with the US Census Bureau to conduct a custom tabulation of the number of opportunity youths per census tract.

### USE DATA TO DETERMINE AREAS OF FOCUS, TRACK PROGRESS, AND BUILD PUBLIC WILL

The OYIF communities understand the importance of data for helping partners understand the problem and measure progress toward solutions, as well as promoting solutions that work and building public will. The Boston collaborative, for example, has used its unusually rich set of data partners to gain a deeper understanding of the older population of opportunity youth (20 to 24 years old),

***Because these young people are invisible in most data systems, one of the primary challenges is to understand who they are and how they progress toward adulthood.***

including identifying their education and employment status and tracking how they move through programs and services.<sup>1</sup> Collaborative partners are following their progress through postsecondary education, compiling information on why they drop out, what helps them return to school, and what specific programs and supports could help them obtain credentials. This robust data partnership will potentially yield useful information about this older population for other efforts across the country.

Communities also use data to determine where to focus their initial pathway development efforts. For example, the San Diego Youth Opportunity Pathways collaborative wanted to understand which neighborhoods had high concentrations of opportunity youth. Using aligned US Census tract data and sources such as data from the San Diego Association of Governments and the Health and Human Services Agency, the collaborative has created a "heat map" to display the

concentration of various distress factors, including youth unemployment, teen births, probation, foster care, and dropout rates. These heat maps, as well as information about the assets of each neighborhood, such as the level of existing programming, help partners determine which neighborhoods should be focused on first.

### BRAID FUNDING ACROSS PUBLIC SYSTEMS

As collective impact initiatives in the United States have progressed, new ways of financing efforts to create better postsecondary and career outcomes for opportunity youth have emerged. A number of communities have developed new financing strategies by drawing on school district funding, workforce development funds, and city agencies such as health and human services, as well as county governments, state governments, and higher education.

As communities broaden their funding sources, they are also building on lessons about creating "reengagement centers" designed to recruit opportunity youths who have dropped out or fallen significantly off track and help them find ways to earn a high school credential. At the launch of the OYIF, communities such as Boston, Chicago, Denver, and Philadelphia had opened

centers using a range of funding streams. Often, advocates had secured anchor funding from a school district after successfully arguing that the district would receive state compensation for returning dropouts.

Los Angeles's YouthSource Centers illustrate how a collective impact effort can use a multi-funder approach to sustain reengagement centers. These centers are funded by the mayor and city council of Los Angeles through the Los Angeles Economic and Workforce Development Department (EWDD) and the City of Los Angeles Workforce Investment Board (WIB), as well as the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Over the course of two years, these three agencies joined forces to study dropout recovery efforts around the country and secure support for an ambitious and integrated approach for Los Angeles. Their efforts led to a competitive procurement process, starting in 2012, for a system of 13 YouthSource Centers that co-locate LAUSD Pupil Services and

attendance counselors and serve as the entry point for reengaged youths to secondary and postsecondary education. The centers also offer a variety of Workforce Investment Act programs, including academic enrichment, career exploration, and vocational training. A US Department of Labor Workforce Innovations Fund grant supports the addition of three more YouthSource sites.

### LEVERAGE PRIVATE INVESTMENT

Collective impact offers an opportunity to pilot a "dual customer" approach focused both on improving the life outcomes of opportunity youths and meeting workforce needs in the community. A number of the OYIF communities see this as an important financing strategy and have begun the hard work of bringing employers to the table.

In New Orleans, Tulane University's Cowen Institute—a core partner in the OYIF initiative—is spearheading two efforts to engage employers in providing work-based learning and employment opportunities for opportunity youth. The institute is piloting a partnership between Tulane and Delgado Community College; Tulane will offer campus-based employment in technical trades and technology to students in Delgado's Accelerating Opportunity pathways, which offer short-term certificates in high-growth career fields. For Tulane, this is a win/win solution. The university gets new employees who have already learned technical skills, and the Cowen Institute works with a broader set of employers to provide career coaching to students while they work at Tulane to ensure that they chart a smart career path. Tulane also plans to launch a "hub" to broker work-based learning and employment opportunities for opportunity youth more broadly.

### OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES MOVING FORWARD

Efforts to create solutions to help opportunity youth have long suffered from a shortage of resources. Programming efforts have been effective yet small and scattered, and community organizing has been strong but episodic. As a result, most communities have not been able to develop the system connections, or the financing that relies on such connections, to support pathways for opportunity youth. The OYIF, however, uses a collective impact approach to garner new public and private funding. Our potential reach has expanded

enormously through the recent competition for the next round of the Corporation for National and Community Service's Social Innovation Fund (SIF). This fund offers multi-year federal grants, with a one-to-one private match at both the national and local levels, to implement and evaluate new solutions to pressing social problems. Significantly, the current round of funding prioritizes applications that use a collective impact approach to build pathways for opportunity youth.

In addition, in January 2014 Congress authorized the establishment of up to ten Performance Partnership pilots. This action will provide unprecedented administrative flexibility to states, local communities, and Native American tribes to work together to remove the barriers that opportunity youths face. Participating localities will solicit proposals from community-based cross-system partnerships aimed at blending competitive and formula-grant funding from federal agencies, including the Corporation for National and Community Service, Department of Labor, Department of Education, and Department of Health and Human Services. Flexibility will be granted to high-performing localities that demonstrate innovative cross-sector solutions to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. These pilots demonstrate an unprecedented commitment by the federal government to support collective impact. Depending on the cross-agency data-driven outcomes the pilots seek, the model may be extended to other federal agencies, potentially extending the benefits of collective impact to other seemingly intractable issue areas.

Going forward, the OYIF will continue to deepen the learning community among sites as new strategic questions and new answers emerge. Disseminating these lessons is vitally important not just to these sites, but to any community trying to tackle the reconnection issues that face opportunity youth, and even more broadly, to any community adopting a collective impact approach to solve other pressing social problems. Ultimately, the OYIF seeks to share a host of lessons about implementing a collective impact framework to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable populations. ●

#### NOTE

1 Boston data partners include the Center for Labor Market Studies, the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, the Boston Private Industry Council, Success Boston, the Boston Public Schools, and the Boston Indicators Project.

# Making Public Policy Collective Impact Friendly

Government policies too often impede, rather than enhance, collaborative efforts.

BY THADDEUS FERBER & ERIN WHITE

Cross-sector partnerships across the country are working hard to achieve collective impact. Although public policymakers often share the goals of these partnerships, federal, state, and local policies too often impede rather than enhance the conditions necessary to operate collectively. Worse, some public policies explicitly prohibit the very things that collaborative partnerships need to succeed. Rigid funding models, a narrow focus on annual reporting, silos within and between agencies administering programs and funds, and inaccessible or unaligned data sets all create obstacles to achieving collective results.

One of the reasons this problem exists is that the structure of government often works against collective solutions. Policymakers typically operate within isolated sub-committees, departments, and agencies that result in loyalty to a specific issue and funding stream. But not all problems lend themselves to a narrow, targeted response. Many are better addressed through simultaneous action by more than one office. In these cases, siloed governmental structures and processes are counterproductive. Moreover, policymakers and partnerships often lack clear information about what types of collaborative actions are even allowed.

It comes as little surprise that when governmental culture and auditing practices inhibit risk-taking, public policies that promote collective impact are few and far between. Nonetheless, some current policies, governmental structures, and processes do help partnerships achieve collective impact. (See “What Do We Mean by “Public Policies”?” on right.)

#### A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Some public policies explicitly allow and incentivize partnerships to create each of the five conditions necessary to achieve collective impact. (See “Public Policies That Encourage

Collective Impact” on page 23.) These public policies are found in issues as diverse as youth development, economic revitalization, and health, as shown by the following three examples.

Performance Partnership Pilots, managed collaboratively by several federal departments, provide selected communities with needed flexibility to use existing federal funds to create a coordinated approach to disconnected youth (low-income young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school and not employed).<sup>1</sup> Providing the variety of services they need—including education, job training, health care, childcare, food assistance, and housing—through multiple independent programs proves inefficient and ineffective. The Performance Partnership Pilots will allow communities to bring these disparate programs together to create a more unified solution. In return, each partnership must use a rigorous accountability system to monitor their results and correct course as needed.

The Working Cities Challenge, funded by the US Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, incentivizes collaborative leadership to promote economic revitalization in small cities in Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> It grew from a shared vision of success among leaders from private, philanthropic, nonprofit, and government sectors to develop a new model for investment. Rather than finance single projects,

## What Do We Mean by “Public Policies”?

- A piece of legislation at any level
- Guidelines in procurement such as RFPs
- Program requirements
- Regulations that govern programs
- Cross-agency initiatives
- Mayoral or gubernatorial initiatives





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the Working Cities Challenge requires cities to assemble cross-sectoral teams to improve the lives of low-income residents. It provides funding, technical assistance, and peer learning opportunities among grantees.

The Essentials for Childhood program, funded by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, aims to create safe, stable, nurturing environments for children.<sup>3</sup> The program explicitly requires a backbone infrastructure, multi-sector partnerships, continuous improvement, and shared outcome measures. Grantees must emphasize their work with partners who may not have worked together in the past but whose work aligns with the overall goals and strategies of a common agenda.

These examples are nascent, so it is too soon to know if they will ultimately lead to positive population-level outcomes. But each example suggests a path forward for policymakers looking for ways to allow and incentivize partnerships to achieve collective impact.

### HOW TO ENHANCE PUBLIC POLICY

The three previous examples, although promising, remain the exception rather than the rule. Broader adoption of public policies that encourage collaboration will require changes to government structures, accountability mechanisms, and auditing and accounting practices. Below are three approaches that policymakers can take to make government more friendly to collective impact initiatives.

**Creating interagency structures focused on populations and issues** | The most direct solution to the problem of fragmentation among departments is to create structures that cut across silos. For example, a growing number of states and localities have created “Children’s Cabinets” through which the heads of related departments work toward shared goals on issues from early childhood education to disconnected youth programs.<sup>4</sup> These permanent structures are more efficient than ad-hoc interagency groups because policymakers can use their existing relationships and collaborative work processes to

confront new problems as they arise and to create a culture of working together that can permeate other parts of government.

**Flipping accountability from “services provided” to “outcomes achieved”** | Another way to cut across government silos is to hold grantees accountable for results instead of for specific services provided. Pay for Success initiatives, which guarantee funding for organizations that achieve specific outcomes for a population, are a prominent example of outcome-based policymaking.<sup>5</sup> By allowing communities to replace overlapping, underfunded sets of services with aligned, efficient, and effective ones, these initiatives are sparking innovative, collaborative projects, many of which may

## Some public policies explicitly allow and incentivize partnerships to create each of the five conditions necessary to achieve collective impact.

well achieve collective impact.

**Changing government auditing and accounting practices** | Fear of triggering a governmental audit is perhaps the primary reason that grantees often assume they are not allowed to align, blend, and braid siloed funding streams across agency lines. Fortunately, it is possible to make government more collective impact friendly by changing auditing and accounting rules. For example, the White House Office of Management and Budget recently released a new rule allowing private organizations that receive money from more than one agency to consolidate their reporting.<sup>6</sup> Such regulatory changes can permit governments to fund partnerships more successfully.

### CONCLUSION

Although our focus in this article was on public policies, it is important to note that policymakers can also support collective impact directly. In addition to creating and implementing public policies that make it easier to undertake collective impact initiatives, they can, for example, use their bully pulpit to call for effective collaboration, chair collective impact steering committees, share governmental data, and lend their expertise and credibility by participating in meetings or working groups.

All such roles are vital. If policymakers devote their time and energy to helping collective impact initiatives succeed, and if government policies, structures, and

mindsets shift to help partnerships create the five conditions necessary to achieve collective impact, we may finally be able to make progress on some of the most

important, persistent, and intractable issues facing society today. ●

### NOTES

- 1 Consultation Paper, *Changing the Odds for Disconnected Youth: Initial Design Considerations for Performance Partnership Pilots*, White House Office of Management and Budget, Washington, D.C., 2014.
- 2 <http://www.bostonfed.org/workingcities/>
- 3 <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/childmaltreatment/essentials/index.html>
- 4 Jenny Moreno, Elizabeth Gaines, and Danielle Evennou, *Ready by 21 State Policy Survey: Policy Coordinating Bodies in the U.S.*, Forum for Youth Investment, Washington, D.C., 2013.
- 5 Jeffrey Liebman, *Building on Recent Advances in Evidence-Based Policymaking, America Achieves Results for America and The Hamilton Project* at The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 2013.
- 6 *Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards*, White House Office of Management and Budget, Washington D.C., 2013.

## Public Policies That Encourage Collective Impact

CONDITION OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT	PUBLIC POLICIES THAT ALLOW OR INCENTIVIZE EACH CONDITION
<b>Common Agenda</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Planning grants in addition to implementation grants</li> <li>■ Requirements to engage partners from multiple sectors</li> </ul>
<b>Shared Measurement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Data sharing agreements</li> <li>■ Accountability for shared outcomes</li> </ul>
<b>Mutually Reinforcing Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Blended funding streams</li> <li>■ Allowances for tailoring to local conditions</li> </ul>
<b>Continuous Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Requirements for documenting the process of collaboration</li> <li>■ Allowing for adjustment in plans to support emergence</li> </ul>
<b>Backbone Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Funding for backbones</li> <li>■ Grant criteria that require defined backbone functions</li> </ul>



# COLLECTIVE IMPACT FORUM



## About the Collective Impact Forum

The Collective Impact Forum, an initiative of FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, is a resource for people and organizations using the collective impact approach to address large-scale social and environmental problems. We aim to increase the effectiveness and adoption of collective impact by providing practitioners with access to the tools, training opportunities, and peer networks they need to be successful in their work. The Collective Impact Forum includes communities of practice, in-person convenings, and an online community and resource center.

FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions are joined by co-catalysts—peer organizations whose expertise in collective impact and broad reach are helping to accelerate the spread of collective impact.

Thank you to our co-catalysts for their partnership.



Learn more and join the community at:  
[collectiveimpactforum.org](http://collectiveimpactforum.org)



FSG is a mission-driven nonprofit organization specializing in research, strategy consulting, and evaluation. Through its field-building activities, such as the Collective Impact Forum and the Shared Value Initiative, FSG works to advance knowledge and practice among a global community of partners dedicated to accelerating social progress. Learn more at [www.fsg.org](http://www.fsg.org)



The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions' mission is to support community collaboration—including collective impact—that enables communities to effectively address their most pressing challenges. Learn more at: [aspencommunitysolutions.org](http://aspencommunitysolutions.org)

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