Defining Quality Collective Impact

By Jeff Edmondson & Ben Hecht

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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."[1] 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 Strive Partnership 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.[2] 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.[3] To counter this pitfall, community leaders from Albany, N.Y., to Anchorage, Alaska, are creating a culture that embraces data to generate ongoing improvement.[4] 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 represents 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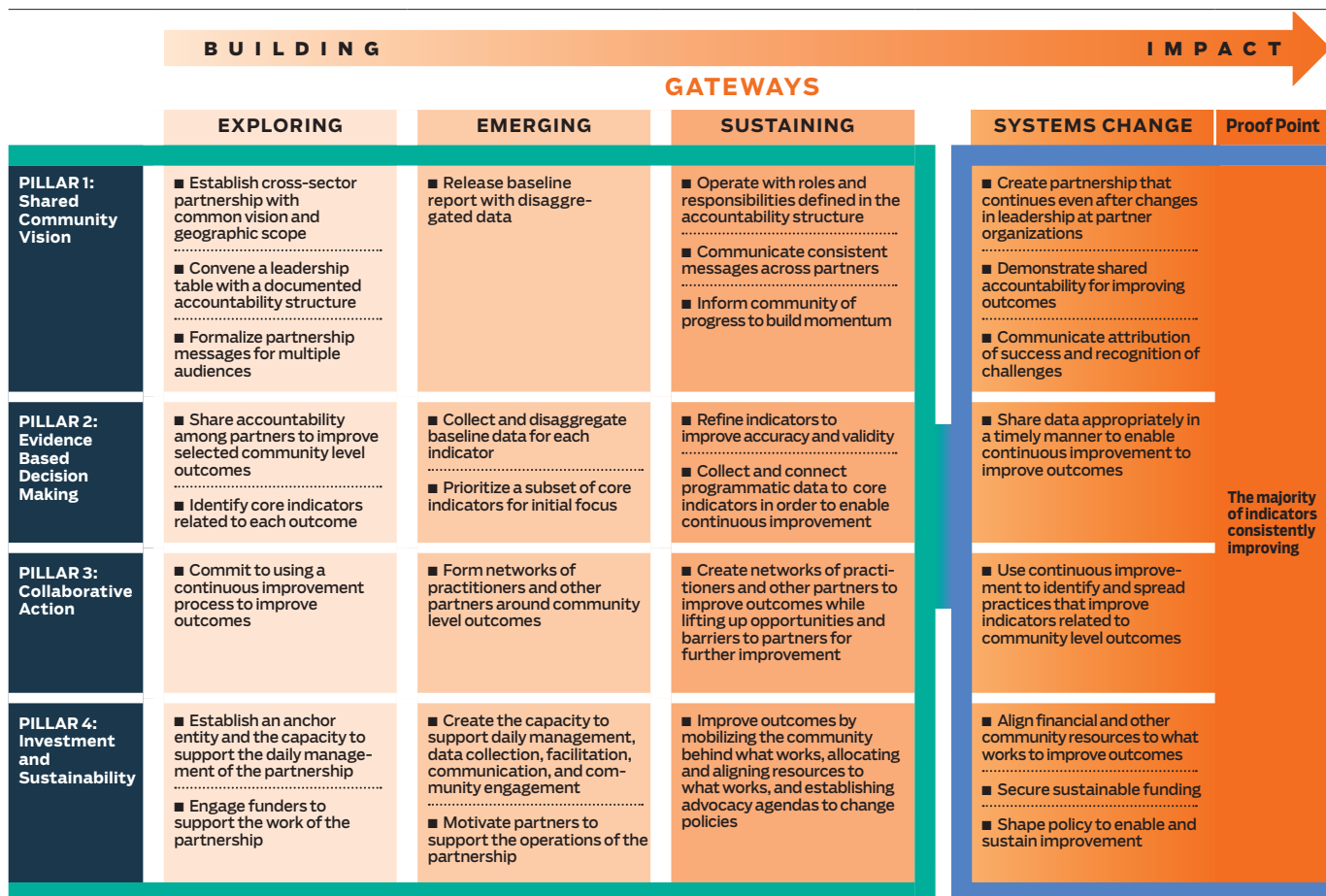 of those we serve, we must bring rigor to the practice by drawing on lessons from a diverse array of communities and defining in concrete terms what makes this work different. The StriveTogether Theory of Action represents a step in that direction, building on the momentum this concept has generated 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
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

BUILDING ➙ **IMPACT**

GATEWAYS

	EXPLORING	EMERGING	SUSTAINING	SYSTEMS CHANGE	Proof Point
PILLAR 1: Shared Community Vision	■ Establish cross-sector partnership with common vision and geographic scope ■ Convene a leadership table with a documented accountability structure ■ Formalize partnership messages for multiple audiences	■ Release baseline report with disaggregated data	■ Operate with roles and responsibilities defined in the accountability structure ■ Communicate consistent messages across partners ■ Inform community of progress to build momentum	■ Create partnership that continues even after changes in leadership at partner organizations ■ Demonstrate shared accountability for improving outcomes ■ Communicate attribution of success and recognition of challenges	**The majority of indicators consistently improving**
PILLAR 2: Evidence Based Decision Making	■ Share accountability among partners to improve selected community level outcomes ■ Identify core indicators related to each outcome	■ Collect and disaggregate baseline data for each indicator ■ Prioritize a subset of core indicators for initial focus	■ Refine indicators to improve accuracy and validity ■ Collect and connect programmatic data to core indicators in order to enable continuous improvement	■ Share data appropriately in a timely manner to enable continuous improvement to improve outcomes	
PILLAR 3: Collaborative Action	■ Commit to using a continuous improvement process to improve outcomes	■ Form networks of practitioners and other partners around community level outcomes	■ Create networks of practitioners and other partners to improve outcomes while lifting up opportunities and barriers to partners for further improvement	■ Use continuous improvement to identify and spread practices that improve indicators related to community level outcomes	
PILLAR 4: Investment and Sustainability	■ Establish an anchor entity and the capacity to support the daily management of the partnership ■ Engage funders to support the work of the partnership	■ Create the capacity to support daily management, data collection, facilitation, communication, and community engagement ■ Motivate partners to support the operations of the partnership	■ Improve outcomes by mobilizing the community behind what works, allocating and aligning resources to what works, and establishing advocacy agendas to change policies	■ Align financial and other community resources to what works to improve outcomes ■ Secure sustainable funding ■ Shape policy to enable and sustain improvement	

For a more complete version of this table visit www.strivetogether.org