TRUCKEE MEADOWS
HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

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Collective Impact

Reading Packet

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Collective Impact

LARGE-SCALE SOCIAL CHANGE REQUIRES BROAD CROSS-SECTOR COORDINATION, YET THE SOCIAL SECTOR REMAINS FOCUSED ON THE ISOLATED INTERVENTION OF INDIVIDUAL ORGANIZATIONS.

By John Kania & Mark Kramer

Illustration by Martin Jarrie

The scale and complexity of the U.S. public education system has thwarted attempted reforms for decades. Major funders, such as the Annenberg Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Pew Charitable Trusts have abandoned many of their efforts in frustration after acknowledging their lack of progress. Once the global leader—after World War II the United States had the highest high school graduation rate in the world—the country now ranks 18th among the top 24 industrialized nations, with more than 1 million secondary school students dropping out every year. The heroic efforts of countless teachers, administrators, and nonprofits, together with billions of dollars in charitable contributions, may have led to important improvements in individual schools and classrooms, yet system-wide progress has seemed virtually unobtainable.

Against these daunting odds, a remarkable exception seems to be emerging in Cincinnati. Strive, a nonprofit subsidiary of KnowledgeWorks, has brought together local leaders to tackle the student achievement crisis and improve education throughout greater Cincinnati and northern Kentucky. In the four years since the group was launched, Strive partners have improved student success in dozens of key areas across three large public school districts. Despite the recession and budget cuts, 34 of the 53 success indicators that Strive tracks have shown positive trends, including high school graduation rates, fourth-grade reading and math scores, and the number of preschool children prepared for kindergarten.

Why has Strive made progress when so many other efforts have failed? It is because a core group of community leaders decided to abandon their individual agendas in favor of a collective approach to improving student achievement. More than 300 leaders of local organizations agreed to participate, including the heads of influential private and corporate foundations, city government officials, school district representatives, the presidents of eight universities and community colleges, and the executive directors of hundreds of education-related nonprofit and advocacy groups.

These leaders realized that fixing one point on the educational continuum—such as better after-school programs—wouldn't make much difference unless all parts of the continuum improved at the same time. No single organization, however innovative or powerful, could accomplish this alone. Instead, their ambitious mission became to coordinate improvements at *every* stage of a young person's life, from "cradle to career."

Strive didn't try to create a new educational program or attempt to convince donors to spend more money. Instead, through a carefully structured process, Strive focused the entire educational community on a single set of goals, measured in the same way. Participating organizations are grouped into 15 different Student Success Networks (SSNs) by type of activity, such as early childhood education or tutoring. Each SSN has been meeting with coaches and facilitators for two hours every two weeks for the past three years, developing shared performance indicators, discussing their progress, and most important, learning from each other and aligning their efforts to support each other.

Strive, both the organization and the process it helps facilitate, is an example of *collective impact*, the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Collaboration is nothing new. The social sector is filled with examples of partnerships, networks, and other types of joint efforts. But collective impact initiatives are distinctly different. Unlike most

collaborations, collective impact initiatives involve a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants. (See "Types of Collaborations" on page 39.)

Although rare, other successful examples of collective impact are addressing social issues that, like education, require many different players to change their behavior in order to solve a complex problem. In 1993, Marjorie Mayfield Jackson helped found the Elizabeth River Project with a mission of cleaning up the Elizabeth River in southeastern Virginia, which for decades had been a dumping ground for industrial waste. They engaged more than 100 stakeholders, including the city governments of Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Virginia Beach, Va., the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Navy, and dozens of local businesses, schools, community groups, environmental organizations, and universities, in developing an 18-point plan to restore the watershed. Fifteen years later, more than 1,000 acres of watershed land have been conserved or restored, pollution has been reduced by more than 215 million pounds, concentrations of the most severe carcinogen have been cut sixfold, and water quality has significantly improved. Much remains to be done before the river is fully restored, but already 27 species of fish and oysters are thriving in the restored wetlands, and bald eagles have returned to nest on the shores.

Or consider Shape up Somerville, a citywide effort to reduce and prevent childhood obesity in elementary school children in Somerville, Mass. Led by Christina Economos, an associate professor at Tufts University's Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, and funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, and United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, the program engaged government officials, educators, businesses, nonprofits, and citizens in collectively defining wellness and weight gain prevention practices. Schools agreed to offer healthier foods, teach nutrition, and promote physical activity. Local restaurants received a certification if they served low-fat, high nutritional food. The city organized a farmers' market and provided healthy lifestyle incentives such as reduced-price gym memberships for city employees. Even sidewalks were modified and crosswalks repainted to encourage more children to walk to school. The result was a statistically significant decrease in body mass index among the community's young children between 2002 and 2005.

Even companies are beginning to explore collective impact to tackle social problems. Mars, a manufacturer of chocolate brands such as M&M's, Snickers, and Dove, is working with NGOs, local governments, and even direct competitors to improve the lives of more than 500,000 impoverished cocoa farmers in Cote d'Ivoire, where Mars sources a large portion of its cocoa. Research suggests that better farming practices and improved plant stocks could triple the yield per hectare, dramatically increasing farmer incomes and improving the sustainability of Mars's supply chain. To accomplish this, Mars must enlist the coordinated efforts of multiple organizations: the Cote d'Ivoire government needs to provide more agricultural extension workers, the World Bank needs to finance new roads, and bilateral donors need to support NGOs in improving health care, nutrition, and education in cocoa growing communities. And Mars must find ways to work with its direct competitors on pre-competitive issues to reach farmers outside its supply chain.

These varied examples all have a common theme: that large-scale social change comes from better cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated intervention of individual organizations. Evidence of the effectiveness of this approach is still limited, but these examples suggest that substantially greater progress could be made in alleviating many of our most serious and complex social problems if nonprofits, governments, businesses, and the public were brought together around a common agenda to create collective impact. It doesn't happen often, not because it is impossible, but because it is so rarely attempted. Funders and nonprofits alike overlook the potential for collective impact because they are used to focusing on independent action as the primary vehicle for social change.

ISOLATED IMPACT

Most funders, faced with the task of choosing a few grantees from many applicants, try to ascertain which organizations make the greatest contribution toward solving a social problem. Grantees, in turn, compete to be chosen by emphasizing how their individual activities produce the greatest effect. Each organization is judged on its own potential to achieve impact, independent of the numerous other organizations that may also influence the issue. And when a grantee is asked to evaluate the impact of its work, every attempt is made to isolate that grantee's individual influence from all other variables.

In short, the nonprofit sector most frequently operates using an approach that we call *isolated impact*. It is an approach oriented toward finding and funding a solution embodied within a single organization, combined with the hope that the most effective organizations will grow or replicate to extend their impact more widely. Funders search for more effective interventions as if there were a cure for failing schools that only needs to be discovered, in the way that medical cures are discovered in laboratories. As a result of this process, nearly 1.4 million nonprofits try to invent independent solutions to major social problems, often working at odds with each other and exponentially increasing the perceived resources required to make meaningful progress. Recent trends have only reinforced this perspective. The growing interest in venture philanthropy and social entrepreneurship, for example, has greatly benefited the social sector by identifying and accelerating the growth of many high-performing nonprofits, yet it has also accentuated an emphasis on scaling up a few select organizations as the key to social progress.

Despite the dominance of this approach, there is scant evidence that isolated initiatives are the best way to solve many social problems in today's complex and interdependent world. No single organization is responsible for any major social problem, nor can any single

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TYPES OF COLLABORATIONS

Organizations have attempted to solve social problems by collaboration for decades without producing many results. The vast majority of these efforts lack the elements of success that enable collective impact initiatives to achieve a sustained alignment of efforts.

Funder Collaboratives are groups of funders interested in supporting the same issue who pool their resources. Generally, participants do not adopt an overarching evidence-based plan of action or a shared measurement system, nor do they engage in differentiated activities beyond check writing or engage stakeholders from other sectors.

Public-Private Partnerships are partnerships formed between government and private sector organizations to deliver specific services or benefits. They are often targeted narrowly, such as developing a particular drug to fight a single disease, and usually don't engage the full set of stakeholders that affect the issue, such as the potential drug's distribution system.

Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives are voluntary activities by stakeholders from different sectors around a common theme. Typically, these initiatives lack any shared measurement of impact and the supporting infrastructure to forge any true alignment of efforts or accountability for results.

Social Sector Networks are groups of individuals or organizations fluidly connected through purposeful relationships, whether formal or informal. Collaboration is generally ad hoc, and most often the emphasis is placed on information sharing and targeted short-term actions, rather than a sustained and structured initiative.

Collective Impact Initiatives are long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Their actions are supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization.

organization cure it. In the field of education, even the most highly respected nonprofits—such as the Harlem Children's Zone, Teach for America, and the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP)—have taken decades to reach tens of thousands of children, a remarkable achievement that deserves praise, but one that is three orders of magnitude short of the tens of millions of U.S. children that need help.

The problem with relying on the isolated impact of individual organizations is further compounded by the isolation of the nonprofit sector. Social problems arise from the interplay of governmental and commercial activities, not only from the behavior of social sector organizations. As a result, complex problems can be solved only by cross-sector coalitions that engage those outside the nonprofit sector.

We don't want to imply that all social problems require collective impact. In fact, some problems are best solved by individual organizations. In "Leading Boldly," an article we wrote with Ron Heifetz for the winter 2004 issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, we described the difference between *technical problems* and *adaptive problems*. Some social problems are technical in that the problem is well defined, the answer is known in advance, and one or a few organizations have the ability to implement the solution. Examples include funding college scholarships, building a hospital, or installing inventory controls in a food bank. Adaptive problems, by contrast, are complex, the answer is not known, and even if it were, no single entity has the resources or authority to bring about the necessary change. Reforming public education, restoring wetland environments, and improving community health are all adaptive problems. In these cases, reaching an effective solution requires learning by the stakeholders involved in the problem, who must then change their own behavior in order to create a solution.

Shifting from isolated impact to collective impact is not merely a matter of encouraging more collaboration or public-private partnerships. It requires a systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives. And it requires the creation of a new set of nonprofit management organizations that have the skills and resources to assemble and coordinate the specific elements necessary for collective action to succeed.

THE FIVE CONDITIONS OF COLLECTIVE SUCCESS

Our research shows that successful collective impact initiatives typically have five conditions that together produce true alignment and lead to powerful results: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations.

Common Agenda | Collective impact requires all participants to have a shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions. Take a close look at any group of funders and nonprofits that believe they are working on the same social issue, and you quickly find that it is often not the same issue at all. Each organization often has a slightly different definition of the problem and the ultimate goal. These differences are easily ignored when organizations work independently on isolated initiatives, yet these differences splinter the efforts and undermine the impact of the field as a whole. Collective impact requires that these differences be discussed and resolved. Every participant need not agree with every other participant on all dimensions of the problem. In fact, disagreements continue to divide participants in all of our examples of collective impact. All participants must agree, however, on the primary goals for the collective impact initiative as a whole. The Elizabeth River Project, for example, had to find common ground among the different objectives of corporations, governments, community groups, and local citizens in order to establish workable cross-sector initiatives.

Funders can play an important role in getting organizations to act in concert. In the case of Strive, rather than fueling hundreds of strategies and nonprofits, many funders have aligned to support Strive's central goals. The Greater Cincinnati Foundation realigned its education goals to be more compatible with Strive, adopting Strive's annual report card as the foundation's own measures for progress in education. Every time an organization applied to Duke Energy for a grant, Duke asked, "Are you part of the [Strive] network?" And when a new funder, the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation, expressed interest in education, they were encouraged by virtually every major education leader in Cincinnati to join Strive if they wanted to have an impact in local education.[1]

Shared Measurement Systems | Developing a shared measurement system is essential to collective impact. Agreement on a common agenda is illusory without agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported. Collecting data and measuring results consistently on a short list of indicators at the community level and across all participating organizations not only ensures that all efforts remain aligned, it also enables the participants to hold each other accountable and learn from each other's successes and failures.

It may seem impossible to evaluate hundreds of different organizations on the same set of measures. Yet recent advances in Web-based technologies have enabled common systems for reporting performance and measuring outcomes. These systems increase efficiency and reduce cost. They can also improve the quality and credibility of the data collected, increase effectiveness by enabling grantees to learn from each other's performance, and document the progress of the field as a whole.[2]

All of the preschool programs in Strive, for example, have agreed to measure their results on the same criteria and use only evidence-based decision making. Each type of activity requires a different set of measures, but all organizations engaged in the same type of activity report on the same measures. Looking at results across multiple organizations enables the participants to spot patterns, find solutions, and implement them rapidly. The preschool programs discovered that children regress during the summer break before kindergarten. By launching an innovative "summer bridge" session, a technique more often used in middle school, and implementing it simultaneously in all preschool programs, they increased the average kindergarten readiness scores throughout the region by an average of 10 percent in a single year.[3]

Mutually Reinforcing Activities | Collective impact initiatives depend on a diverse group of stakeholders working together, not by requiring that all participants do the same thing, but by encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others.

The power of collective action comes not from the sheer number of participants or the uniformity of their efforts, but from the coordination of their differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action. Each stakeholder's efforts must fit into an overarching plan if their combined efforts are to succeed. The multiple causes of social problems, and the components of their solutions, are interdependent. They cannot be addressed by uncoordinated actions among isolated organizations.

All participants in the Elizabeth River Project, for example, agreed on the 18-point watershed restoration plan, but each is playing a different role based on its particular capabilities. One group of organizations works on creating grassroots support and engagement among citizens, a second provides peer review and recruitment for industrial participants who voluntarily reduce pollution, and a third coordinates and reviews scientific research.

The 15 SSNs in Strive each undertake different types of activities at different stages of the educational continuum. Strive does not prescribe what practices each of the 300 participating organizations should pursue. Each organization and network is free to chart its own course consistent with the common agenda, and informed by the shared measurement of results.

Continuous Communication | Developing trust among nonprofits, corporations, and government agencies is a monumental challenge. Participants need several years of regular meetings to build up enough experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their different efforts. They need time to see that their own interests will be treated fairly, and that decisions will be made on the basis of objective evidence and the best possible solution to the problem, not to favor the priorities of one organization over another.

Even the process of creating a common vocabulary takes time, and it is an essential prerequisite to developing shared measurement systems. All the collective impact initiatives we have studied held monthly or even biweekly in-person meetings among the organizations' CEO-level leaders. Skipping meetings or sending lower-level delegates was not acceptable. Most of the meetings were supported by external facilitators and followed a structured agenda.

The Strive networks, for example, have been meeting regularly for more than three years. Communication happens between meetings too: Strive uses Web-based tools, such as Google Groups, to keep communication flowing among and within the networks. At first, many of the leaders showed up because they hoped that their participation would bring their organizations additional funding, but they soon learned that was not the meetings' purpose. What they discovered instead were the rewards of learning and solving problems together with others who shared their same deep knowledge and passion about the issue.

Backbone Support Organizations | Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization and staff with a very specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative. Coordination takes time, and none of the participating organizations has any to spare. The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails.

The backbone organization requires a dedicated staff separate from the participating organizations who can plan, manage, and support the initiative through ongoing facilitation, technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the initiative to function smoothly. Strive has simplified the initial staffing requirements for a backbone organization to three roles: project manager, data manager, and facilitator.

Collective impact also requires a highly structured process that leads to effective decision making. In the case of Strive, staff worked with General Electric (GE) to adapt for the social sector the Six Sigma process that GE uses for its own continuous quality improvement. The Strive Six Sigma process includes training, tools, and resources that each SSN uses to define its common agenda, shared measures, and plan of action, supported by Strive facilitators to guide the process.

In the best of circumstances, these backbone organizations embody the principles of adaptive leadership: the ability to focus people's attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders.

FUNDING COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Creating a successful collective impact initiative requires a significant financial investment: the time participating organizations must dedicate to the work, the development and monitoring of shared measurement systems, and the staff of the backbone organization needed to lead and support the initiative's ongoing work.

As successful as Strive has been, it has struggled to raise money, confronting funders' reluctance to pay for infrastructure and preference for short-term solutions. Collective impact requires instead that funders support a long-term process of social change without identifying any particular solution in advance. They must be willing to let grantees steer the work and have the patience to stay with an initiative for years, recognizing that social change can come from the gradual improvement of an entire system over time, not just from a single breakthrough by an individual organization.

This requires a fundamental change in how funders see their role, from funding organizations to leading a long-term process of social change. It is no longer enough to fund an innovative solution created by a single nonprofit or to build that organization's capacity. Instead, funders must help create and sustain the collective processes, measurement reporting systems, and community leadership that enable cross-sector coalitions to arise and thrive.

This is a shift that we foreshadowed in both "Leading Boldly" and our more recent article, "Catalytic Philanthropy," in the fall 2009 issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. In the former, we suggested that the most powerful role for funders to play in addressing adaptive problems is to focus attention on the issue and help to create a process that mobilizes the organizations involved to find a solution themselves. In "Catalytic Philanthropy," we wrote: "Mobilizing and coordinating stakeholders is far messier and slower work than funding a compelling grant request from a single organization. Systemic change, however, ultimately depends on a sustained campaign to increase the capacity and coordination of an entire field." We recommended that funders who want to create large-scale change follow four practices: take responsibility for assembling the elements of a solution; create a movement for change; include solutions from outside the nonprofit sector; and use actionable knowledge to influence behavior and improve performance.

These same four principles are embodied in collective impact initiatives. The organizers of Strive abandoned the conventional approach of funding specific programs at education nonprofits and took responsibility for advancing education reform themselves. They built a movement, engaging hundreds of organizations in a drive toward shared goals. They used tools outside the nonprofit sector, adapting GE's Six Sigma planning process for the social sector. And through the community report card and the biweekly meetings of the SSNs they created actionable knowledge that motivated the community and improved performance among the participants.

Funding collective impact initiatives costs money, but it can be a highly leveraged investment. A backbone organization with a modest annual budget can support a collective impact initiative of several hundred organizations, magnifying the impact of millions or even billions of dollars in existing funding. Strive, for example, has a $1.5 million annual budget but is coordinating the efforts and increasing the effectiveness of organizations with combined budgets of $7 billion. The social sector, however, has not yet changed its funding practices to enable the shift to collective impact. Until funders are willing to embrace this new approach and invest sufficient resources in the necessary facilitation, coordination, and measurement that enable organizations to work in concert, the requisite infrastructure will not evolve.

FUTURE SHOCK

What might social change look like if funders, nonprofits, government officials, civic leaders, and business executives embraced collective impact? Recent events at Strive provide an exciting indication of what might be possible.

Strive has begun to codify what it has learned so that other communities can achieve collective impact more rapidly. The organization is working with nine other communities to establish similar cradle to career initiatives.[4] Importantly, although Strive is broadening its impact to a national level, the organization is not scaling up its own operations by opening branches in other cities. Instead, Strive is promulgating a flexible process for change, offering each community a set of tools for collective impact, drawn from Strive's experience but adaptable to the community's own needs and resources. As a result, the new communities take true ownership of their own collective impact initiatives, but they don't need to start the process from scratch. Activities such as developing a collective educational reform mission and vision or creating specific community-level educational indicators are expedited through the use of Strive materials and assistance from Strive staff. Processes that took Strive several years to develop are being adapted and modified by other communities in significantly less time.

These nine communities plus Cincinnati have formed a community of practice in which representatives from each effort connect regularly to share what they are learning. Because of the number and diversity of the communities, Strive and its partners can quickly determine what processes are universal and which require adaptation to a local context. As learning accumulates, Strive staff will incorporate new findings into an Internet-based knowledge portal that will be available to any community wishing to create a collective impact initiative based on Strive's model.

This exciting evolution of the Strive collective impact initiative is far removed from the isolated impact approach that now dominates the social sector and that inhibits any major effort at comprehensive, large-scale change. If successful, it presages the spread of a new approach that will enable us to solve today's most serious social problems with the resources we already have at our disposal. It would be a shock to the system. But it's a form of shock therapy that's badly needed. ∎

Notes

1   Interview with Kathy Merchant, CEO of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, April 10, 2010.

2   See Mark Kramer, Marcie Parkhurst, and Lalitha Vaidyanathan, *Breakthroughs in Shared Measurement and Social Impact*, FSG Social Impact Advisors, 2009.

3   "Successful Starts," United Way of Greater Cincinnati, second edition, fall 2009.

4   Indianapolis, Houston, Richmond, Va., and Hayward, Calif., are the first four communities to implement Strive's process for educational reform. Portland, Ore., Fresno, Calif., Mesa, Ariz., Albuquerque, and Memphis are just beginning their efforts.

Principles for Collective Impact

Common Agenda
- **Common understanding** of the problem
- **Shared vision** for change

Shared Measurement
- **Collecting data** and **measuring results**
- Focus on **performance management**
- **Shared accountability**

Mutually Reinforcing Activities
- **Differentiated approaches**
- Willingness to **adapt individual activities**
- **Coordination** through joint plan of action

Continuous Communication
- **Consistent** and **open communication**
- Focus on **building trust**

Backbone Support
- Separate organization(s) with **staff**
- Resources and skills to **convene** and **coordinate** participating organizations

Source: FSG – www.fsg.org

Collective Impact Theory of Change

Time and Impact »

Early Years **Middle Years** **Late Years**

1 Social-Political-Economic Context

4

Impact

Outcomes and Indicators

CI Goals

3

Intermediate Outcomes

Outcomes and Indicators

Behavioral Changes
(professional practices, individual behavior)

Systems Changes
(funding flows, cultural norms, public policy)

2

CI Design and Implementation

CI Process Outcomes and Indicators

COMMON AGENDA

SHARED MEASUREMENT

CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION

CI Capacity

MUTUALLY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES

BACKBONE INFRASTRUCTURE

CI Learning Culture

Key

● Potential evaluation focus

— Continuous learning

The Difference between Collaboration and Collective Impact

by [Jeff Edmondson](#) on November 12, 2012

We recently hit the benchmarks of having over 150 communities reach out to us and 80 communities having completed the Site Readiness Assessment to join the Strive Network. As we start our discussions with each community on the work of collective impact through building civic infrastructure, I would estimate at least half have declared "we are already doing that!"

Based on these conversations, we have been able to identify the most critical differences between the historical definition of "collaboration" and the emerging understanding of "collective impact". The diagram below outlines the differences as simply as possible.

The first is that in collaboration, we have historically come together to implement a new program or initiative. This is most often the case when we wanted to apply for or have been awarded a grant. When it comes to collective impact, community leaders and practitioners come together around their desire to improve outcomes consistently over time. The outcome serves as the true north and the partners can uncover the right practices to move the outcome over time.

This brings us to the second difference: using data to improve, not just prove. In collaboration, data is often used to pick a winner or prove something works. In collective impact, data is used for the purpose of continuous improvement. We certainly want to find what works, but the partners are focused instead on using the data to spread the practices across programs and systems not simply scale an individual program.

Third, collaboration is often one more thing you do on top of everything else. People meet in coffee shops or church basements to figure out how to do a specific task together and in addition to their day job. Collective impact becomes part of what you do every day. It is not one more thing because it is truly about using data on a daily basis – in an organization and across community partners – to integrate practices that get results into your everyday contribution to the field.

And last, collaboration is often about falling in love with an idea. Somebody may have visited a program somewhere and seen something they liked so they advocated to bring it to town. The core assumption in their efforts is that success elsewhere will be consistent with success right here. Collective impact is about advocating what those practices you know get results in your own backyard. The voice of community partners is leveraged to protect and spread the best of what exists right here and now instead of what one hopes would get results down the line.

It will be those communities that exemplify the rigor and realities of collective impact that can help us fully grasp the shift that needs to be made to achieve population level impact. We are on our way with the interest of so many and we are hopeful that we can collectively embrace this fundamentally new way of doing business.

About Jeff Edmondson
Jeff Edmondson is the Managing Director of StriveTogether, a subsidiary of KnowledgeWorks. StriveTogether is a national cradle-to-career initiative that brings together leaders in Pre-K-12 schools, higher education, business and industry, community organizations, government leaders, parents and other stakeholders who are committed to helping children succeed from birth through careers.

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

Jeff Edmondson is managing director of StriveTogether, a subsidiary of KnowledgeWorks. He was previously executive director of The Strive Partnership.

Ben Hecht is president and CEO of Living Cities. He was previously co-founder and president of One Economy Corporation.

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 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.[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 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 part-ners 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 support-ing 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 sig-nificant leap in the journey to address pervasive social challenges. But to ensure that this concept leads to real improvements in the lives of 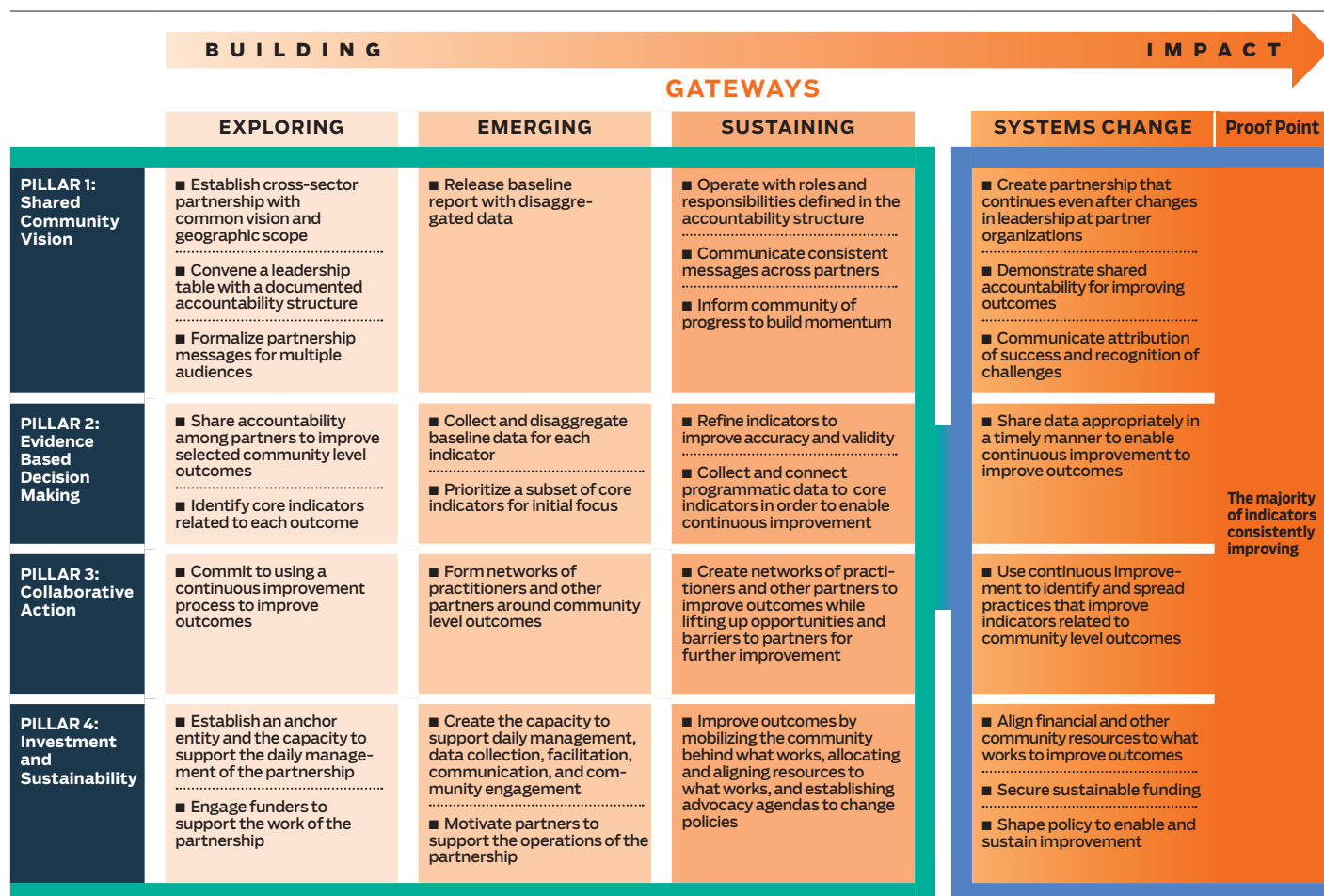those we serve, we must bring rigor to the practice by drawing on lessons from a diverse array of com-munities and defining in concrete terms what makes this work different. The StriveTogether Theory of Action represents a step in that direc-tion, building on the momentum this concept has generated during 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 disaggre-gated 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 practi-tioners and other partners to improve outcomes while lifting up opportunities and barriers to partners for further improvement	■ Use continuous improve-ment 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 manage-ment of the partnership ■ Engage funders to support the work of the partnership	■ Create the capacity to support daily management, data collection, facilitation, communication, and com-munity 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

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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[1]—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 nonprofit, 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

Common Agenda	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.
Shared Measurement	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.
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	A diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinate a set of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
Continuous Communication	All players engage in frequent and structured open communication to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.
Backbone Support	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.[2]

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.[3]

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."[4]

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 individual organizations to seek and take credit for their work. This tendency is understandable, particularly in an environment where nonprofit 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.[5] 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.[6] 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[7]—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.[8]

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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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." ●

Collective Impact Case Study:
Memphis Fast Forward

FSG

Discovering better ways
to solve social problems

This case study accompanies a [video interview with Blair Taylor](#), the backbone leader of Memphis Fast Forward.

Summary

Launched by a coalition of business and government leaders, Memphis Fast Forward (MFF) is a multi-layered collective impact initiative designed to increase economic prosperity and quality of life in Greater Memphis, Tenn.

<div>

Key Facts

Initiative / backbone name: Memphis Fast Forward / Memphis Tomorrow

Year initiative formed: 2005

Mission: Accelerate economic growth and improve the quality of life of the Memphis region

Geography: Greater Memphis, TN

Impact area(s): Education and Youth, Community Development, Health, Employment / Workforce Development, Economic Development

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Problem

The region of Greater Memphis faced significant challenges in workforce quality, economic competitiveness, crime, and education. By 2005:

- Regional crime rates were among the five worst of all US cities, with violent crime rates in Memphis up to 3.9 times higher than the national average.
- The graduation rate in Memphis was only 66%, below both the statewide rate of 78% and state goal of 90%.
- Government expenditure growth was exceeding revenue growth.

Key stakeholders across the region were aware of these problems, but there was no aligned strategy to resolve them.
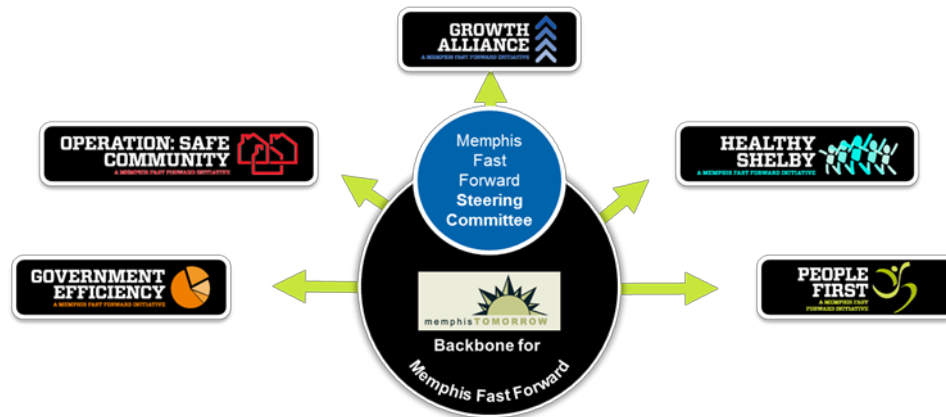
Collective Impact Beginnings

Two mayors from the Greater Memphis area approached Memphis Tomorrow, an existing association of chief executive officers of Memphis' largest businesses, to discuss their concern about the lack of a strategic plan for addressing the community's issues.

Together, the mayors and business leaders decided to use what ultimately became a collective impact approach to solve the city's critical challenges. Memphis Tomorrow's leader began bringing a range of cross-sectoral community partners to the table and building the infrastructure of what is now Memphis Fast Forward.

Structure

Memphis Tomorrow serves as the backbone for the broad collective impact effort, Memphis Fast Forward. In turn, Memphis Fast Forward provides an organizing structure and support for five separate issue-specific collective impact initiatives: Operation Safe Community (crime), PeopleFirst (education), Growth Alliance (the economy), Government Fiscal Strength (the government), and Healthy Shelby (health and wellness). Memphis Fast Forward is overseen by a 20-person steering committee consisting of key elected and business leaders. This steering committee monitors data, makes decisions, endorses and advocates the initiative's work, and provides some funding for initiative partners. The below image illustrates the organizational structure of Memphis Fast Forward:

Organizational Structure of Memphis Fast Forward

Each issue-specific initiative has a distinct backbone organization, strategic plan, scorecard, program chair, and leadership team. Each initiative also has a team of partners (government agencies, businesses, and non-profits) that collaborate to implement the initiative's plan, and the leader of each initiative sits on the steering committee for Memphis Fast Forward. This layered structure gives the broad effort a decentralized management model, but ensures connections for shared impact and learning.

Results

Memphis Fast Forward has achieved impressive early results across all initiatives:

- **PeopleFirst** supported significant public school reform efforts which have resulted in a 50% increase in the number of students in pre-k, changes to the teacher evaluation system to include

student outcomes data, and an expanded number of high-potential teacher candidates, (one year saw an increase from 21 to 1,800).[1]

- **Growth Alliance** is the successor initiative to MemphisED (a regional economic development plan), launched as the global economic recession began to cripple cities across the US. Despite this additional challenge, the initiative was able to spur the creation of more than 17,000 new jobs. Additionally, they were able to generate new capital investments of $4.2 billion.[2]

- **Operation Safe Community** reduced major violent crimes and property crimes by more than 23% each in the first five years after the initiative launched. Additionally, bank, business, and car robberies decreased over 60%, and a family safety center was established for victims of domestic abuse.[3]

- **Government Fiscal Strength** worked with three mayors to improve government impact and efficiency. Their joint activities saved the city more than $75 million.[4]

- **Healthy Shelby** was formed in 2012 and has been focused on building infrastructure to improve health, care, and the cost of care in the community. To date the initiative has a backbone, common agenda, and core group of committed funders.[5]

Five Conditions of Collective Impact

Common Agenda
Memphis Fast Forward's common agenda focuses on "creating good jobs, a better-educated workforce, a safer community, a healthier citizenry, and a fiscally strong and efficient government in Greater Memphis."[6]

Each initiative also has a common agenda developed by a range of stakeholders and multipronged strategy for achieving those goals.

Shared Measurement
Each initiative of Memphis Fast Forward has separate goals and metrics that are tracked, monitored, and shared with the community through public reports. Progress towards each initiative's goals is captured in

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[1] Memphis Fast Forward: The Power of Collective Impact Results from 2007-2011. Accessed May, 2013. http://memphisfastforward.com/assets/1705/mff_report_2007-2011_final.pdf

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4] Memphis Fast Forward: The Power of Collective Impact Results from 2007-2011. Accessed May, 2013. http://memphisfastforward.com/assets/1705/mff_report_2007-2011_final.pdf

[5]"Healthy Shelby," Memphis Fast Forward. Accessed May, 2013. http://memphisfastforward.com/healthyshelby

[6]"About Us," Memphis Fast Forward. Accessed May, 2013. http://memphisfastforward.com/overview

an individual dashboard, and the data is then aggregated into a publicly available "macro-dashboard" that tracks the overall progress of Memphis Fast Forward.

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Each of the five initiatives of Memphis Fast Forward ties back to the vision articulated in the overall common agenda and links with the work of the other initiatives. For example, economic development relies on a well-educated workforce of graduating students, who also require a vibrant economy to provide employment.

Activities within initiatives are mutually reinforcing of that initiative's goals as well as of the broader effort.

Continuous Communication

Continuous communication happens both within and between initiatives. Within initiatives, regular meetings are complemented by initiative-specific websites that communicate progress and clearly lay out strategies, dashboards, and success stories.

Mimicking the broader organizational structure, the website of each initiative is connected through Memphis Fast Forward's website. Additionally, the leaders from the five initiatives meet monthly to discuss progress, share common challenges, develop strategies, and learn from one another's successes and mistakes.

Backbone Support

Memphis Tomorrow, registered as a 501(c)(3) S30 economic development organization, serves as the administrative infrastructure for Memphis Fast Forward, providing staff and support for the broad collective impact effort. In the early days of Memphis Fast Forward, much of Memphis Tomorrow's role was focused on identifying backbones for each of the initiatives. That role evolved into playing coordinator and primary funder for the initiatives' backbones and championing the design of shared measures. Additionally, Memphis Tomorrow has coordinated pooled funding efforts for specific programs and strategies of the five initiatives, relying on board involvement to raise the funds. In one such effort, $35 million was raised over a five-year period. Memphis Tomorrow has two staff dedicated to supporting both Memphis Fast Forward and Memphis Tomorrow's work beyond the collective impact initiative.

As mentioned above, each initiative also has its own backbone organization. Each of the initiative backbone organizations has its own name, website, two to three staff dedicated to the initiative, and a public-private leadership team. Of the initiative backbones, four were existing organizations, and one new organization was formed (to support PeopleFirst). Additionally, four are registered as 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations, and the Government Fiscal Strength Backbone is led by the mayors of the Greater Memphis area. The four non-profit backbone efforts each have an average annual administrative budget of approximately $300,000. Programs and strategies of each initiative are funded by an array of public and private sector sources.

Lessons Learned

Gain and maintain political support: According to Blair Taylor, President of Memphis Tomorrow, "having sustained mayoral leadership in Memphis Fast Forward was essential." It was through a meeting with the mayors that the collective impact effort was incubated, and their support proved critical long after incubation. "We depend on them to [mobilize] resources, to support advocacy work, to build political will, and to use their pulpits to say this work and these priorities are important." Regular conversations and communication of impact, and genuine alignment around the Memphis Fast Forward priorities, has enabled Memphis Fast Forward to sustain political support despite shifting political tides.

Celebrate successes: Memphis Fast Forward realized that celebrating successes and sharing credit were critical motivating factors to keep partners engaged and active. Blair Taylor noted, "Really make time to celebrate the progress of an activity. Do it loudly, and give people the credit they deserve." Memphis Fast Forward's newsletter is one space where they do this exceptionally well. The newsletter celebrates successes with data and discusses the contributions of deserving stakeholders across the initiative. Memphis Fast Forward has also been very proactive about communicating and celebrating results through their local media, as well as through regular community convenings that have ranged in size from 150 to 800 people.

Seize opportunities as they emerge: Adapting their work to changes in context has allowed Memphis Fast Forward and its partners to take advantage of new opportunities. For example, in 2012, the backbone leader of PeopleFirst discovered that qualifications for a state scholarship had changed, opening the scholarship to low-income partial-completers of college, but there were a number of challenges that would make it difficult for prospective students to utilize this funding. How would the coalition recruit eligible partial-completers? Could the coalition fund the first hours of college credit to move low-income adults who had not started college into partial-completer status? At this point in its evolution, Memphis Fast Forward had developed a habit of systematically looking across partners for existing resources that could be leveraged to overcome challenges. They surveyed existing partners, including public universities, state government, businesses, and local nonprofits, and discovered existing outreach mechanisms and funding that could be used to recruit partial-completers and to fund the first credit hours for eligible low-income adults who had not yet started college. Memphis Fast Forward attributes their ability to seize this resource to the existing collective impact structure, culture, and intentionality around embracing emergent opportunities.

Collective Impact Case Study:
Vibrant Communities

This case study accompanies a [video interview with Paul Born and Liz Weaver](#), president and vice president of the Tamarack Institute.

Summary

Vibrant Communities is a multi-tier collective impact effort that unleashes the potential of communities across Canada to substantially reduce poverty and to ensure a good quality of life for all citizens.

Problem

By the early 2000s, efforts to reduce poverty in Canada had stalled:

- National poverty fell from 29% to 13% between 1961 and 1977, but lost momentum in the late 1900s and remained in 14-19% range through 2000s.

- Human service agencies struggled to meet community need as they simultaneously faced increased demand and decreased funding.

Innovation and collaboration were needed to regain momentum in Canadian poverty reduction.

> ### Key Facts
>
> **Initiative / backbone name:** Vibrant Communities / Tamarack
>
> **Year initiative formed:** 2002
>
> **Mission:** Create and grow a movement of diverse leaders and communities from across Canada who are committed to exploring, challenging, and testing ways to unleash the potential of communities to substantially reduce poverty and ensure a good quality of life for all citizens
>
> **Geography:** 50 communities across Canada
>
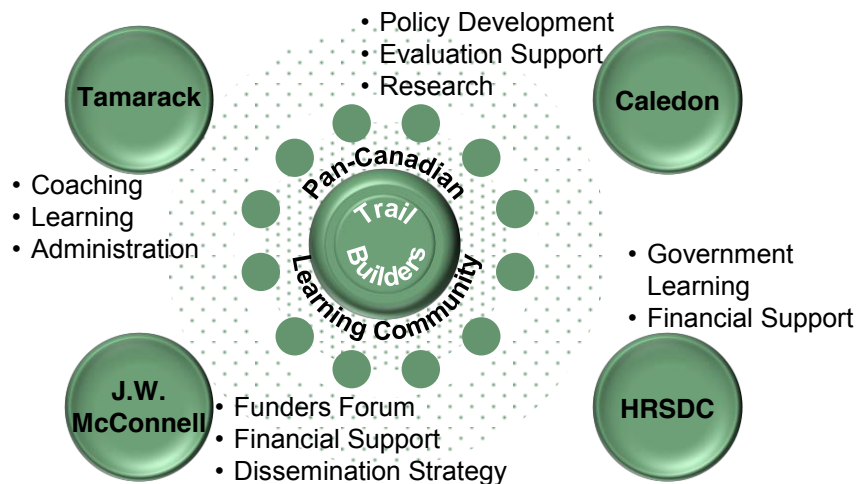> **Impact area:** Community Development - Poverty Reduction

Collective Impact Beginnings

In the early 2000s, a community group called Opportunities 2000 realized that it had reached a plateau in its ability to reduce poverty and needed innovative solutions. The group engaged over 80 different organizations to design and implement nearly 50 poverty reduction initiatives in the Waterloo region. Over the following two years, leaders of Opportunities 2000 reflected on lessons learned from this collective effort and engaged representatives from poverty reduction initiatives across the country to discuss replication. After a 2002 summit, the group decided to launch pilot collaboratives in six communities across Canada. Opportunities 2000 became Opportunities Waterloo Region, but the leaders of Opportunities 2000 left to form and lead a new organization – bringing with them the on-the-ground experience they had earned leading Opportunities 2000. This new organization was called Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement. It would serve as the backbone for the set of six collaboratives that has since grown into a national multi-tier collective impact effort known today as Vibrant Communities.

Structure

Vibrant Communities is overseen by a steering committee composed of four national sponsors: Tamarack serves as a national level backbone; the Caledon Institute of Social Policy is a think tank that creates awareness of policy implications; the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation provides funding and develops a national strategy to promote the work; and a national government department, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), provides funding and serves as a link between the initiative and the government.[1] The below image illustrates the distinct activities of each national sponsor and how they connect with the overall structure of the multi-tier collective impact initiative.[2]

Organizational Structure of Vibrant Communities

Since its founding in 2002, Vibrant Communities has grown to include 13 linked regional collective impact initiatives. More recently, this effort has scaled to more than 50 communities across Canada. Participating communities have locally designed initiatives, each with a multi-sector leadership team.[3] Community leaders, policy makers, and funders from each regional initiative participate in a membership-based learning community called the Pan-Canadian Leaning Community (PCLC) to share experiences and offer mutual support and guidance.[4]

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[1] Leviten-Reid, Eric; Tamarack, *Inspired Learning: An Evaluation of Vibrant Communities' National Supports (2002-2012)*. Published 2012. Accessed June, 2013. Page 24.

[2] Image adapted from "Partners and Friends," Tamarack. Accessed June, 2013.

[3] Tamarack, *Inspired Learning*. Page12.

[4] Tamarack, *Cities Reducing Poverty*. Accessed June, 2013.
http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/index/CRP_Brochure.pdf

A subset of these regional collective impact initiatives receives extra financial and technical support from the national initiative to pilot ideas. This group of initiatives, called "Trail Builders," closely tracks lessons and outcomes that are shared across the learning community and used to improve practices nationally.

Initially, Vibrant Communities was funded by foundations, government funds, and corporate sponsors.[5] The regional initiatives receive grants and matching funds from Vibrant Communities. As the initiative scales up to include more communities, the funding relationship shifts. Local community efforts are funded by a wide variety of local partners including local foundations, United Ways, and municipal governments. Nationally, each community pays an annual membership fee to sustain the learning community efforts.[6]

Results

As of 2013, the work of Vibrant Communities has:

- influenced the lives of 203,000 Canadians who are now better off due to increases in income, access to food, shelter and transportation, and increased skills and knowledge[7];
- changed over 53 policies and systems to better support poverty reduction efforts including: adjusting policy processes to increase participation of low-income residents in shaping the delivery of programs meant to assist them, and changing the way poverty reduction initiatives are funded[8];
- engaged about 4,000 partners in the national collective impact effort including businesses, government, voices of experience, non-profits and others[9];
- mobilized about $23,000,000 for poverty reduction.[10]

As an element of its work, Vibrant Communities has generated tools, publications, and other process-improvement resources. For example, by 2010 Vibrant Communities had disseminated 223 reports, attracted over 2,500 media stories, and hosted 264 learning events.[11]

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[5] "Partners and Friends," Tamarack. Accessed June 2013. http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2_Partners.html

[6] Weaver, Liz. Interview with FSG, July, 2013.

[7] Weaver, Liz. Interview with FSG, March 2013; "Vibrant Communities," McConnell Family Foundation. Accessed, June, 2013. http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/en/programs/vibrant-communities

[8] Tamarack, "Vibrant Communities by the Numbers: Cumulative Results as of May 2010." Accessed June, 2013. http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/VC_by_the_Numbers.pdf ; "Vibrant Communities," McConnell Family Foundation.

[9] Vibrant Communities," McConnell Family Foundation.

[10] Tamarack, *Inspired Learning.* Page 68.

[11] Tamarack, "Vibrant Communities by the Numbers."

Five Conditions of Collective Impact

Common Agenda

Vibrant Communities shares an overarching goal of connecting 100 cities and communities to reduce poverty for one million Canadians.

Vibrant Communities is organized around the common mission "to create and grow a movement of diverse leaders and communities committed to exploring, challenging, and testing ways to unleash the potential of communities to substantially reduce poverty and ensure a good quality of life for all citizens."[12] The common agenda outlines five core principles to guide the implementation of this mission across regional collective impact initiatives: poverty reduction, comprehensive thinking and action, multi-sectoral collaboration, community asset building, and community learning and change[13]

Each regional initiative develops its own theory of change (TOC) and two-page strategy to apply Vibrant Communities' shared mission to the local context[14]

Shared Measurement

Each regional collective impact initiative has a localized evaluation plan and standardized outcome-tracking template that contributes to a national evaluation system.[15] The partners focus on tracking four levels of poverty reduction: individual and household, community capacity, community innovation, and policy and systems change.[16] Vibrant Communities aggregates, analyzes, summarizes, and shares regularly updated community data to elicit learnings that can "inspire new ideas and strategies across Canada."[17]

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy explains that the complex nature of poverty means "its successful reduction requires a set of linked interventions."[18] In Vibrant Communities, each regional TOC is determined by local context, but linked to Vibrant Communities' national goal through the five core principles in the overall common agenda.[19] For example, Vibrant Surrey focuses on the four areas most relevant to local poverty, transportation, housing, income and support, while Vibrant

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[12] Leviten-Reid, Eric. Page 3.

[13] Tamarack, *Inspired Learning.*

[14] Leviten-Reid, Eric. Page 12

[15] Tamarack, *Inspired Learning.* Page 8.; Tamarack, "Vibrant Communities by the Numbers."

[16] Innoweave Collective Impact Cast Studies

[17] "Evaluating Vibrant Communities," Tamarack. Accessed June, 2013.
http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2_VC_Evaluation.html

[18] "Vibrant Communities," McConnell Family Foundation.

[19] "Vibrant Communities," McConnell Family Foundation.

Abbotsford focuses instead on financial literacy, food security, and living wage.[20] Regional initiatives' activities contribute to both the local TOC and Vibrant Communities' national poverty reduction strategy.

Continuous Communication

Vibrant Communities relies on strong and continuous communication to share lessons learned and refine strategies. Tamarack hosts monthly convener conference calls and an annual summit to update participants on local developments, share lessons, and strategize.[21] To support learning between the live events, Tamarack hosts a virtual interactive learning website that is updated by a rotating group of thought leaders. Additionally, the initiative distributes a weekly electronic newspaper with stories of inspiration, innovative ideas, and new resources for subscribers.

Backbone Support

Tamarack's role as a backbone organization focuses on administering Vibrant Communities and supporting the regional collective impact initiatives. Nationally, Tamarack facilitates meetings, administers evaluations, and manages the McConnell Foundation grants. Regionally, Tamarack provides customized coaching to help collective impact initiatives understand poverty in the local context, improve core fundraising skills, and develop and implement local strategies. [22] Serving as a link between the local and national, Tamarack creates momentum around the common mission and convenes different multi-regional learning communities where participants can exchange ideas and learn from their peers. Tamarack has annual revenue of over $1.5 million and five staff supporting Vibrant Communities.

Each regional initiative has its own backbone with one to four staff and revenues ranging up to $500,000 Regional backbones help to create strategies to meet the local context, administer the work, convene meetings, manage data, and serve as liaisons to Vibrant Communities nationally.

Lessons Learned

Navigate power dynamics to incorporate perspectives of people with lived experience: Tamarack has been deliberate about inviting people with lived experience to join leadership roundtables, but has found that power dynamics often stifle the impact of their contributions. In one instance, Tamarack amplified the voices of those with lived experience by recruiting 50 low-income community members to form a separate focus group where issues could be discussed in a safer space. Focus group leaders were themselves low income, and participated in both the focus group and the leadership roundtable. The ability to bring the voice of the group to the leadership roundtable provided the low income participants

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[20] "Framework for Change," Vibrant Surrey, Published 2010. Accessed June, 2013. http://www.vibrantsurrey.ca/press-room/vibrant-surreys-framework-for-change/; "About Us," Vibrant Abbotsford, Accessed June, 2013. http://www.vibrantabbotsford.ca/about-us/

[21] Tamarack, *Cities Reducing Poverty.*

[22] Tamarack, *Inspired Learning.* Page 24, 34, 41.

authority and power to strengthen emerging ideas. Through such structures, people with lived experience have the opportunity and agency to help shape the initiatives intended to benefit them.

Incentivize funder involvement in the initiative: Tamarack maintains a practice of involving funders in the initiative beyond their direct financial contribution by encouraging participation in initiative convenings and organizing a community of practice where funders can share knowledge and develop expertise.[23] The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation models funder participation by directly engaging in Vibrant Communities' learning activities.[24] Tamarack has seen great success with expanding this practice. One funder was persuaded by Tamarack to learn more about the initiative and, impressed with his learnings, increased his financial contribution by ten.[25] Tamarack has found that funder participation increases knowledge and trust, which in turn leads to greater commitment through challenges. It also opens the door for funders to recognize and offer relevant additional resources both financial and via connections to new groups of community people, including other funders, politicians, and community leaders. [26]

Experiment with Developmental Evaluation: Finding that traditional forms of evaluation do not suffice to measure and improve complex community change, Tamarack has embraced experiments with Developmental Evaluation, "a tool for evaluating complex problems and adaptive solutions."[27] Referring to complex community change as a mystery, not a puzzle, Mark Cabaj explains, "In a puzzle, if you do your homework and get more data, you will solve the puzzle. . . . In a mystery, it's not so much data as sense-making that's really critical."[28] It is the real-time processing of information and "sense-making" of the feedback that distinguishes developmental evaluation from other forms of evaluation and has made it a particularly successful tool for Vibrant Communities to learn about and improve their approach to poverty reduction.[29]

[23] "Communities of Practice," Vibrant Communities. Accessed June 2013. http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2_CofP.html

[24] Tamarack, *Inspired Learning.* Page 27.

[25] Born, Paul. Community Conversations. Page 43.

[26] Born, Paul. "Community Engagement," Presentation at Channeling Change. March 2013

[27] Tamarack, *Evaluating Vibrant Communities: 2002-2010 Summary.* Published 2010. Accessed June, 2013. http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/VC_Evaluation_Overview.pdf

[28] Preskill, Hallie and Tanya Beer, *Evaluating Social Innovation.* Published 2012.

[29] Cabaj, Mark, "Developmental Evaluation in Practice – Webinar Questions Answered." Posted May, 2013. Accessed June, 2013. http://www.fsg.org/KnowledgeEchange/Blogs/CollectiveImpact/PostID/444.aspx

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All statements and conclusions, unless specifically attributed to another source, are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the other organizations or references notes in this report.

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How to Explain Collective Impact to Your Mom

Posted by:Katherine Errecart on 3/28/2013

FSG, the Strive Network, Tamarack, and the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions recently hosted a three-day workshop for leaders from backbone organizations of mature collective impact initiatives. This blog is part of a series sharing learning and reflection from the workshop.

Questions like "How do we explain what we do?" and "What's the elevator speech?" came up over and over again at the Champions for Change Backbone Workshop earlier this month. Faced with these questions, Jeff Edmondson of The Strive Partnership joked that he has always had a hard time explaining to his mom what he does for a living. Perhaps this is no surprise since much of the work of Collective Impact (and of the backbone, in particular) involves less-than-sexy tasks like convening stakeholders, mobilizing resources, and analyzing data.

Nevertheless, Jeff had a great nugget of advice when it comes to creating a powerful and concise message about Collective Impact: **focus on the ultimate goal you seek to achieve**. He says that in the early days of The Strive Partnership, they explained their work by talking about the adults – i.e. the multi-sector actors who had to work together in order to improve educational outcomes in Cincinnati. But as the effort evolved, Strive made an intentional shift – they starting talking about the kids. In its simplest messaging, Strive now talks about getting better results in education for "every child, every step of the way, cradle to career." Jeff says that this shift has been effective in helping all types of stakeholders to understand and get excited about what the partnership aims to achieve.

Kevin Starr makes a similar point in his *Stanford Social Innovation Review* post, The Eight-Word Mission Statement, arguing that a good mission statement (which is the key vehicle through which any of us explain what we do) is about the what, not the how. In the case of Collective Impact, this means talking first about the ultimate goal – eradicating homelessness, preventing childhood obesity, restoring a local tributary – before discussing the journey of planning, data, aligned activity, and other work that it takes to get there.

Now let's be clear: explaining Collective Impact by focusing on the end goal is not sufficient, especially for those you'd like to engage more deeply in the work. But think about it – isn't this where we should begin any conversation about Collective Impact? If we ground every conversation and every meeting in the change that we seek to achieve, we're reminding each other of why this work is so important; why we need to act together even when the climb is steep; and why the effort is worth it.