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Filling the Gaps in Collective Impact

by Jennifer Blatz, Meg Long, Justin Piff & Bridget Jancarz, September 11, 2019

If you've been following trends in the social sector for the past 10 years, you've likely heard of collective impact, a model for changing systems and improving community outcomes guided by five conditions: a common vision, a shared agenda, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and "backbone" support. A [2011 Stanford Social Innovation Review article](#), which profiled the nonprofit StrivePartnership's work in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, amplified the notion that cross-sector partnerships are essential to advancing systems change, and improving outcomes for children and youth. Today, many communities have embraced collective impact as a model for improving community outcomes at scale. Yet, despite the prominence of collective impact, a lingering question persists: Does it work?

Communities have varied greatly in how they've operationalized, prioritized, sequenced, and sustained the five conditions of collective impact. In 2013, StriveTogether, an intermediary that emerged from StrivePartnership and supports nearly 70 US partnerships in implementing collective impact, launched a [theory of action](#) to: a) more rigorously codify a way of working, and b) outline a sequenced set of activities to guide communities through a systems-change process. Recognizing the need to evaluate its own approaches, StriveTogether engaged consultants from [Equal Measure](#) in 2015 to fill two knowledge voids in the field and inform future practice:

1. Does collective impact make things better for the people it intends to serve?
2. If so, is there an implementation sequence that can help communities more quickly advance these outcomes?

Since then, StriveTogether has fielded countless questions about how to implement collective impact consistently and at scale—indeed, whether it's even possible. Based on evidence from the evaluation—including surveys of more than 4,000 StriveTogether network members and local partners (2015-2017), data collected in 10 communities, and interviews with network members and community stakeholders to qualify the findings—the answer to both questions is yes.



Nine supporting activities that can help make collective impact approaches to social change more nuanced and rigorous.

Implementing Collective Impact Well

We believe communities must tend to nine components as they build what we call the “civic infrastructure” to implement collective impact in a nuanced, rigorous way. These include:

- **Shared vision:** Clarity and awareness of the partnership's long-term vision by partners and community members
- **Partner commitment:** Partner and partner organization commitment to advancing the partnership's work within the community and their own institutions
- **Data use:** Use of data and related infrastructure to set, refine, and assess partnership strategies and activities
- **Partnership action:** Actions taken by the partnership to advance and sustain its goals
- **Partnership capacity:** Resources and infrastructure to carry out and sustain the partnership's work
- **Partnership communication:** Communication and clarity about the partnership's work and ways of working
- **Partnership structure:** Structures and processes for making decisions and transferring knowledge among partners
- **Practice change:** Actions taken by partners and the organizations they represent to advance and embed the partnership's goals in day-to-day work
- **Community engagement:** Communication with and inclusion of community members in the partnership's decision-making and actions

To determine whether collective impact is making a difference, Equal Measure sought to understand the relationship between civic infrastructure and changes in what we call contributing indicators—short-term indicators, such as school attendance or FAFSA completion, that help us know whether we're on track to meet our goals. We can't emphasize enough the importance of contributing indicators; it takes incremental change to achieve big results. Ultimately, our findings boiled down to one big take-away: Building civic infrastructure can lead to improvements in contributing indicators. The connection between civic infrastructure and contributing indicators shows promise that the work in communities (guided by our theory of action) is making a difference.

Through the member and local partner surveys, we learned that remarkably consistent patterns emerged across communities over time. Here are five takeaways we believe are relevant for partnerships of all kinds, regardless of their stage of development:

1. **Develop a shared vision.** This is by no means a new concept, but we felt it was worth noting that it was the most prominent component across communities. A common agenda, we've learned, must set the tone for community-wide work. As one partner remarked, “Nothing else happens if you don't have a shared vision and a common language to move forward.” Partners in communities with a shared vision found common cause by looking beyond their day-to-day goals and seeing themselves as part of a broader, integrated effort to build the type of community they wanted.

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2. Use data to develop, support, and assess change strategies. It's important for collective impact efforts to collect and use data from the start. It enables partners to identify populations and outcomes for focus; find gaps in systems and across organizations; assess and improve program, organizational, and community progress; and keep each other accountable. In fact, data use increased across the 14 communities we studied during the evaluation period (second only to community engagement), with many sites integrating data into their larger visions and smaller decisions. For instance, in Racine County, Wisconsin, the organization leading efforts to improve education and employment outcomes in the county, [Higher Expectations](#), provides data to school districts and nonprofit partners. These data, along with national research, inspired the community to improve early-learning programs and increase access to full-day, four-year-old kindergarten in schools serving low-income students. Today, five percent more kindergartners are meeting or exceeding literacy development targets.

3. Spend time on community engagement. While community engagement was the lowest-rated component of infrastructure across the network, it also was the greatest area of improvement during the evaluation period. Many community members noted they were not aware of the partnership's vision, and few partnerships were able to get parents and students involved. However, several communities refocused strategies to better engage partners—not just tapping them for expertise, but creating space for them to lead change efforts. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for example, partners are looking to youth in the city's north side—an area with a large number of youth aged 16-24 who are neither working nor in school—to convene, design meetings, and set priorities for addressing residents' housing and wage needs. Their work has led to insights into how to meet their needs in ways that professionals in the community might not have considered, such as through peer mentoring.

4. Strive for equity of process and outcomes. The communities we surveyed saw evidence of equity in their data work and showed commitment to reducing disparities in outcomes, but they were less successful at engaging with demographically diverse partners, leaders, and community members. More efforts need to embrace a multi-faceted approach to equity in order to change deeply rooted power dynamics. [Generation Next](#) in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, is currently considering how to diversify the perspectives that inform its work, noting, "We need to acknowledge that our community's systems leaders, including our leadership council, are not as diverse as the communities that we serve. We are working to intentionally seek out and create spaces to hear diverse perspectives and voices from our communities of color." The organization is currently working with the [Education Partnerships Coalition \(EPC\)](#), through the Strategic Initiatives Fund from StriveTogether, to build parent-led advocacy and expand collective impact in communities across Minnesota. Parents will attend monthly sessions and trainings, and will begin working together on a local policy agenda in June 2020.

5. Remember that change can happen at all stages of collective impact. While organizing partners around a shared vision, interrogating data, and applying equity practices to engage community members are important, collective impact is about changing systems. For many, the rubber hits the road with practice change, or "mutually reinforcing activities." While changes to practice generally happen at a later-stage, partners can pilot, test, and even scale new ways of working as they go. In Winston-Salem, North Carolina, for example, an after-school program used data-sharing software to monitor its participants' academic outcomes, then

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worked with an evaluator to apply this data and adjust programming in real time. After seeing that academics were not improving as anticipated, it hired double the number of tutors.

Our experience and analysis show that collective impact efforts can indeed make things better for the people they intend to serve, and that a strong civic infrastructure can help partners and communities make more progress more quickly. Through this rigorous evaluation, we were able to expand on earlier understandings of collective impact by identifying a more nuanced approach to helping communities change systems.

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