

Collective Impact in Education

Research Brief

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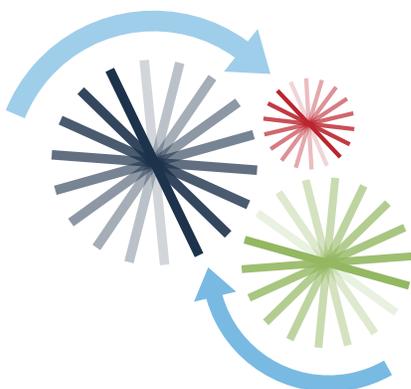
At a time when district leaders' "new normal" is doing more with less, devising innovative solutions aimed at tackling the most pressing educational issues is of increasing importance. Suppose there was a way for school districts to pool resources with other districts, civic organizations, and businesses to achieve a common goal: improving student achievement. A recently developed strategy known as collective impact provides a framework for how like-minded organizations can effectively join forces to bring about positive changes for students. This brief explores how collective impact could work in the education context and suggests ways to adapt the approach for success in rural settings.

What is collective impact?

As social problems become increasingly more complex, the efforts of individual organizations in achieving large-scale change are proving less effective.ⁱ What would happen if several organizations working toward the same goals were to combine their energy and resources to have a greater impact on those problems? According to a recent report published in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, what would happen is known as collective impact, an emerging trend in large-scale, social change efforts that aligns resources and unifies the agendas of multiple organizations to solve a particular social problem.ⁱⁱ Though relatively new, this approach offers a timely strategy to address society's greatest challenges and is proving effective in numerous contexts, including education.ⁱⁱⁱ The Strive Partnership, discussed later in this brief, is touted as one of the most successful examples of a collective impact that targets an educational issue.^{iv}

Currently, funding in the nonprofit sector flows toward those organizations most capable of articulating unique solutions to complex social problems. The same can be said for school districts that demonstrate a more compelling need for state and federal funding under various grant programs. Due to the competitive nature of securing funding and the necessity of distinguishing themselves from one another, most of these organizations work in isolation and therefore are unable to leverage any overlap in aims and purposes they may share with other organizations focused on the same issues. What sets collective impact apart from more traditional cooperative approaches like public-private partnerships is a well-crafted process driven by five key conditions that are the foundational elements of this unique approach:^v

1. **Common Agenda** – having a shared vision and definition of the problem across all involved organizations and using a joint approach to address a common critical issue.
2. **Shared Measurement** – using the same measures across all involved organizations to assess the effectiveness of the partnership.
3. **Mutually Reinforcing Activities** – coordinating the differentiated activities of each organization to support a joint plan.
4. **Continuous Communication** – creating a common vocabulary and maintaining ongoing communication among involved organizations.
5. **Backbone Organization** – relying on a separate organization to coordinate participating organizations' efforts.^{vi}



How has collective impact been applied in the education context?

Within the realm of education, the collective impact strategy has shown persuasive promise. The Strive Partnership, for example, has been spearheading a successful collective impact initiative designed to improve the academic achievement and life opportunities of students living in the metropolitan areas of Cincinnati and northern Kentucky. Focusing on children's development from "cradle to career," Strive aims to serve "as a catalyst for working together, across sectors, and along the educational continuum, to drive better results in education, so that every child is Prepared for school, is Supported inside and outside of school, Succeeds in school, and Enrolls in some form of postsecondary education."^{vii} Given Strive's strong focus on P-16 education issues in the Greater Cincinnati area, it made sense that its founding partners included presidents of three regional universities as well as school superintendents from Cincinnati, Ohio; Covington, Kentucky; and Newport, Kentucky.^{viii} This cross section of education leaders then worked together with a broad range of business, philanthropic, and community leaders to get the initiative off the ground.

Before setting out to tackle the work of strengthening the education pipeline in Greater Cincinnati, partner organizations understood the importance of co-developing a common vision for what Strive could achieve, then focused on how to evaluate the overall effectiveness of its efforts. What does this mean in practice? According to Geoff Zimmerman, Strive's Director of Continuous Improvement, "Data is a key part to this work and coming up with your shared goals and outcomes and developing a baseline report that demonstrates how you are doing on these big goals is a critical first step" in creating a culture of results and accountability.^{ix}

Strive has seen an upward trend in student performance since its inception in 2006. Most recently, the partnership reported in its *2011 Report Card* that in Cincinnati Public Schools, for example, kindergarten readiness had increased by 9 percentage points, fourth grade reading scores had increased by upwards of 15 percentage points, and high school graduation rates had increased by upwards of 10 percentage points.^x Strive's success is indicative of the type of impact like-minded social organizations can have when they approach large-scale educational problems through collective impact.^{xi} [Read more about Strive's results here.](#)

In the midst of a national economic crisis, this collective impact has helped district leaders create conditions for improved student outcomes. It should be noted that the backbone organization that supports Strive by providing critical technical assistance, among other things, operates on an annual budget of over \$40K. Such an expense may seem impractical to many district leaders whose current fiscal reality includes furloughing personnel and eliminating programs in order to make ends meet.^{xii} This is further complicated for district leaders in rural communities where weak local economies limit opportunities to leverage much-needed financial support from the business sector. However, while Strive represents what can be accomplished in a large metropolitan area with backing from Fortune 500 companies such as Proctor and Gamble, there are golden nuggets of learning that can be gleaned from this collective impact and adapted for successful implementation in other settings as well.

What are some ways to adapt collective impact for success in rural settings?

Although collective impact has become a valuable strategy for mobilizing large, sophisticated networks of social agents and organizations, it has tremendous value for organizations, like rural school districts, that operate on a much smaller scale. Indeed, many of the principles of collective impact are familiar to rural school districts that have effectively pooled resources with other organizations for years. However, collective impact is about more than just pooling resources. For small rural districts exploring how to launch a collective impact initiative, leaders may consider the following strategies:

- Enlist the support of a champion organization whose primary role is to secure funding that will sustain the partnership over the long haul.
- Consider a multi-district collective impact initiative if neighboring districts share common educational challenges and would benefit from a partnership.

- Maximize the community’s strengths by focusing on the quality and potential contribution of participating organizations and leveraging pre-existing relationships among various stakeholders (i.e. faith-based organizations, youth-serving organizations, regional colleges and universities, educational service agencies).
- If human resources are limited, create an administrative cooperative that allows several organizations to share the responsibilities of the backbone organization.
- Invest in a technological infrastructure – video conferencing and other web-based tools – to ensure open and ongoing dialogue among the initiative’s partners as well as access to common information, especially in geographically remote locations where physical distance limits opportunities for face-to-face meetings.^{xiii}

Adaptation in Action

The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) recently embarked upon a joint venture with two other organizations and Paulding County School District (PCSD) to build a pipeline of effective leaders in PCSD. As a winner under Georgia’s Round 3 Race to the Top Innovation Fund Grant, this unique partnership combines a community engagement process led by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, using transparent goal monitoring and communication facilitated by Thinkgate, with high quality performance-based professional learning for promising future secondary leaders provided by GLISI.

This partnership offers an illustration of how the five key conditions of collective impact can be adapted to address resource constraints common in rural districts, while still realizing the benefits of the overall collective impact concept. Given the relatively small size of the partnership, it was necessary for GLISI to take on the role of serving as the backbone organization in addition to collaborating with its two partner organizations to act as a service provider to PCSD. Leading the project management work of the partnership includes coordinating meetings, ensuring frequent communication, managing the budget, defining scopes of work for each partner organization, as well as measuring, monitoring, and reporting project goals and milestones to all partners.

While GLISI’s dual role as both a participating partner and the backbone organization is a departure from Kania and Kramer’s originally proposed framework for collective impact, ***it is one of the adaptations that had to be made on the ground for this smaller scale partnership.*** Still, the essential spirit of the collective impact approach is at the core of the partnership’s work.



What are Common Pitfalls to Avoid?

- Establishing a separate collective impact to target an issue that is already the focus of an existing partnership in the same community. Particularly in rural settings, this has the potential to dilute the power of the initiatives because already scarce resources would be split among various partnerships when they could be streamlined to grow and support a single effort.
- Overlooking the importance of each partner making a long-term investment in and commitment to the initiative.
- Neglecting the “softer” aspects of collaboration: building relationships and trust among stakeholders, identifying and developing leaders, and fostering an environment of learning.^{xiv}

- Failing to secure early wins to build momentum.
- Relying too heavily on the backbone organization to manage each organization involved in the collective impact initiative.

Key Questions for District Office Leaders

- Are we prepared and willing to commit the time and resources necessary to launch and sustain a collective impact initiative?
- What data do we need in order to demonstrate a compelling case for why this educational issue would benefit from a collective approach?
- Are there other organizations and businesses in our surrounding area that share our concerns about this issue and that would demonstrate the same level of commitment to a partnership that values collaboration and transparency?
- Can we attract the support of a highly visible and reputable champion organization – either at the local, state, or national level – to secure funding that will be vital to the success of a partnership?
- Can we identify an individual with the charisma, vision, and convening power to lead the important work of building strong, trusting relationships with potential partners?

Collective impact requires a shift in how organizations and funders approach large-scale change efforts such as reforming public education. It means entering into a long-term partnership that privileges effective collaboration over competition. And it means working in concert with like-minded organizations to align visions and resources toward a common agenda. But this approach holds great promise to make inroads on those thorny dilemmas which have been most resistant to change through the efforts of isolated organizations here and there. By using a collective impact strategy, multiple stakeholders from across various sectors can partner to achieve lasting improvements in student and community outcomes.

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ⁱKania, J. & Kramer, M. (2011, Winter). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 38. Retrieved from http://www.ssireview.org/images/articles/2011_WI_Feature_Kania.pdf

ⁱⁱIbid.

ⁱⁱⁱLarge-scale organizations like The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) have found collective impact to be an effective strategy for addressing issues of global nutrition and chronic homelessness, respectively. Smaller organizations like Communities That Care have also experienced the value of a collective impact approach as it galvanized support from local elected officials, parents, youth, media, and faith-based organizations to reduce cigarette, marijuana, and alcohol use among local teens.

^{iv}For more information on FSG, visit <http://www.fsg.org/>

^vKania, J. & Kramer, M. (2011, Winter). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 38. Retrieved from: http://www.ssireview.org/images/articles/2011_WI_Feature_Kania.pdf

^{vi}Ibid.

^{vii}The Strive Partnership. (2011). *2011 Partnership report: every child, every step of the way, cradle to career*. Retrieved from http://www.strivetogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/StrivePartnershipReport_2011.pdf, 5.

^{viii}Strive Story. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://strivenetwork.org/vision-roadmap/strive-story>

^{ix}Zimmerman, G. (2012, December 7). Telephone Interview.

^xThe Strive Partnership. (2011). *2011 Partnership report: every child, every step of the way, cradle to career*. Retrieved from http://www.strivetogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/StrivePartnershipReport_2011.pdf, 7.

^{xi}Ibid.

^{xii}Ellerson, N. M. (2012, March). *Weathering the storm: How the economic recession continues to impact school districts*. Alexandria, VA: American Association of School Administrators.

^{xiii}Iyer, L. (2012, November 5). How do rural communities in the U.S. implement collective impact? *Collective Impact Blog*. Retrieved from <http://www.fsg.org/KnowledgeExchange/Blogs/CollectiveImpact/PostID/378.aspx>

^{xiv}Hanleybrown, F., Kania, J. & Kramer, M. (2012, March). *Channeling change: Making collective impact work: An in depth look at how organizations of all types, acting in diverse settings, are implementing a collective impact approach to solve large-scale social problems*. Retrieved from http://www.ssireview.org/pdf/Channeling_Change_PDF.pdf; Kania, J. & Kramer, M. (2011, Winter). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 38. Retrieved from: http://www.ssireview.org/images/articles/2011_WI_Feature_Kania.pdf

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