



## **Collective Impact: An Introduction**

Network for Nonprofit and Social Impact, Northwestern University  
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### **Introduction to Collective Impact**

The term “collective impact” first appeared in a *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article in 2011. This article, by John Kania and Mark Kramer of FSG Consulting, has become one of the highest-cited articles in *SSIR*’s history and prompted numerous follow-up articles; additionally, collective impact networks number at least in the hundreds within the United States.

**Collective impact** is defined as *the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem*. Specifically, collective impact is distinct from other forms of collaboration by its inclusion of the following:

- *Common agenda*. All partners share a vision for change that includes a shared understanding of and approach to the problem.
- *Shared measurement system*. Partners commit to collect data and evaluate results using the same criteria.
- *Mutually reinforcing activities*. Rather than create new programs, partners coordinate and align activities so that they support one another and fit into an overall plan.
- *Continuous communication*. Collective impact calls for trust and a common vocabulary, which are built in part through frequent meetings and Web-based tools.
- *Backbone organization*. Because coordinating collective impact efforts is time-intensive, a backbone organization is required to coordinate partners and efforts.

Before beginning a collective impact project, experts suggest that a community needs an influential champion to bring leaders together, financial resources to sustain the first 2-3 years of operations, and urgency for change around a particular issue. Having established these preconditions, there are three phases of collective impact organizing: initiating action (in which key players and projects are identified and baseline data is collected), organizing for impact (in which partners determine shared goals and measures, create a backbone infrastructure and begin to align organizational activities), and sustaining action and impact (which includes further collection of data, coordination, and active learning as partners evaluate their progress on their shared goals).

## **Partners in Collective Impact**

Collective impact efforts are cross-sector partnerships and thus encourage nonprofit, government, and corporate collaboration. In addition, collective impact often emphasizes the role of funders or philanthropists in initiating and sustaining the partnership. Though scholars have pointed out that collective impact differs from grassroots organizing, collective impact encourages community engagement, and some initiatives specifically encourage youth involvement.

Under the umbrella of improving educational outcomes, several national networks have emerged. These include StriveTogether's Cradle to Career Network, the Forum for Youth Investment's Ready by 21 initiative, and America's Promise GradNation communities, along with various initiatives from United Way and the Aspen Institute. Although these groups differ somewhat in their approach to collective impact, as well as the indicators used to measure success, all are focused on collective approaches to improving education. In addition to these groups, other initiatives adhere to the principles of collective impact but are not affiliated with a national network. Other entities that support and provide resources to collective impact initiatives include the Collective Impact Forum (a partnership of FSG and the Aspen Institute), and the Tamarack Institute.

## **Collective Impact in Education**

Although collective impact has been applied to environmental concerns, poverty, housing, and other large-scale community problems, collective impact is a particularly popular strategy to improve educational outcomes. Because of collective impact's emphasis on complex social problems, most of these initiatives include efforts to improve both educational outcomes and physical/social-emotional factors that may affect a child's ability to learn.

Some projects work towards a singular goal (e.g., reducing the high school dropout rate by a certain percentage) by addressing related and peripheral factors. However, others address a more comprehensive goal of improving educational outcomes across different stages of development. "Cradle to career," an expression used by StriveTogether and commonly used across other collective impact efforts, refers to the use of specific indicators to improve educational outcomes from early childhood through college completion and career preparation. Both of these approaches are consistent with collective impact frameworks.

Additionally, collective impact occurs in a variety of communities. Collective efforts are underway in urban, rural, and suburban areas; collective impact efforts have been contained to single cities or extended across multiple counties or entire regions.

## **Successful Case Studies in Collective Impact**

Although many collective impact initiatives are in their early stages, several successful cases have emerged (see additional case study resources at the end of this report). Perhaps the best known example is the Strive partnership in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. Recognizing that the community was "program rich, but system poor," local leaders joined forces to collect data,

identify shared goals, and work across various organizations to align efforts and ultimately improve educational attainment. Within five years of the initial partnership, Strive leaders recorded numerous improvements, including increases in kindergarten readiness, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment. The partnership continues these efforts with the support of local foundations, an organizational structure built to support collective efforts, and a detailed roadmap of indicators of the partnership's desired outcomes.

Collective impact initiatives are typically long-term projects working towards ambitious goals; however, partners typically rely upon indicators to show progress. For example, the Road Map Project in Seattle began in 2010 and set the year 2020 as its prime year for performance targets. However, partners also set goals for 2014 and 2017 that serve as indicators that the project is on track – and thus far, data suggests that students in participating districts are attaining post-secondary degrees or credentials at a rate higher than area students in non-participating districts. Additionally, the Road Map's efforts were boosted by the receipt of \$40 million in federal funding through a Race to the Top district grant, suggesting increased interest in funding collective efforts.

Successful collective impact also relies on cross-sector partnership and community engagement. In Nashville, data revealed gaps in high school graduation rates and adult mentorship. To combat this problem, the mayor's office convened a cross-sector task force that worked on health, safety, out of school time, education, and mobility and stability as they pertain to youth. Additionally, the task force involved area youth through a series of surveys and focus groups and a partnership with the Mayor's Youth Council. The task force produced a Children and Youth Master Plan that relies upon Ready by 21 strategies to achieve various outcomes. The plan also includes community and youth perspectives and relies on youth involvement to achieve its goals.

### **Is Collective Impact Really a New Approach?**

Questions persist as to how collective impact differs from other forms of collaboration. Observers find differentiating collective impact from other approaches difficult because the term has become so popular that many collaborative endeavors use it without adhering to the five conditions. Others have questioned whether collective impact is truly a new approach at all.

Champions of collective impact acknowledge that collaboration in response to social problems is a common approach; additionally, they acknowledge that some may not distinguish collective impact from other forms of collaboration. Yet advocates claim that the five conditions of collective impact make it distinct from other forms and suggest that collective impact may be successful where other forms of collaboration have failed.

Researchers have suggested that proponents of collective impact have ignored existing research on collaboration, networks, coalitions, and data-based education reform efforts. Although collective impact may be a new approach, researchers claim that collective efforts would be informed by greater consideration of this knowledge. They argue that, by ignoring prior work, practitioners are spending time and resources on identifying and solving problems addressed in previously studied initiatives.

## Collective Impact's Scale-up Challenge

Collective impact networks are attempting what many successful innovations based in a few communities have tried: to scale up their success by implementing the model across the country and around the world. They face a classic implementation science problem, determining what elements of the collective impact model are at the core of its success and what elements can and should be adapted to local circumstances.

Implementation science research has long recognized that as successful practices are scaled across organizations, they are adapted in a variety of ways. These adaptations include reordering of elements, delaying the implementation of certain components, emphasizing or giving less priority to certain elements, augmentation (i.e., adding elements), and cultural adaptations. Each of these adaptations may make the implementation easier and meet contextual needs better, or it may morph the practice so that it is no longer effective. Implementation fidelity ensures enough of the innovation is transplanted so that it provides the same benefit in the new context(s) as it did where it was developed and tested. **Implementation fidelity** is *the degree to which a program is comprehensively implemented with the appropriate intensity*. However, previous research suggests that, on average, participants only implement between 20 to 40 percent of the core of the intervention (see Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Klimes-Dougan et al., 2009). In contrast, high implementation fidelity is indicated when participants implement between 60 and 80% of the intended intervention as outlined and they are doing so with the appropriate level of skill. Some adaptation to local context is necessary, but drift, or the “misapplication or mistaken application of the model, often involving either technical error, abandonment of core and requisite components or the introduction of counterproductive elements” (Aarons et al., 2012, p. 2), usually diminishes the effects of the intervention. Research suggests that many scale-up efforts achieve mixed results across organizations not because of the efficacy of their innovation, but because of differences in implementation fidelity across organizations. Some research finds that programs would be 12 times more effective if they were implemented with fidelity (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

One of the key challenges for the national collective impact movement is determining what elements of the collective impact model are core and what can be adapted. In short, when does the local community context require adaptation of the collective impact model and when does adapting the collective impact model suggest significant drift and reduced effectiveness?

## The Collective Impact Summit

The Collective Impact Summit will bring together leaders in the field – practitioners with experience in creating, sustaining, and evaluating collective impact projects – with researchers from a range of academic disciplines (i.e., management, communication, community psychology, public administration, social work, and education) who have studied concepts related to collective impact. We hope to catalyze a learning dialogue between top-tier academic researchers and leaders of national collective impact networks.

The Summit comes at an opportune moment. Several scholars have begun to work with collective impact sites across the country to better understand their dynamics. They have begun to grapple with questions about how collective impact networks fit into an interdisciplinary

literature on cross-sector collaboration to respond to social problems and education policy. National networks have begun to grapple with several classic implementation science problems including: what elements of the collective impact model are core and what elements can and should be adapted? What are the impediments to scaling-up collective impact models with fidelity?

The Collective Impact Summit's objectives are three-fold:

1. To encourage mutual knowledge and understanding among scholars and practitioners whose work informs collective impact initiatives in education. We hope to both identify what we collectively know and what questions collectively remain.
2. To identify core elements of successful collective impact initiatives, based upon both academic research and field experience. These core elements are processes and practices that could not be adapted or removed without reducing the effectiveness of the approach.
3. To identify opportunities for future collaboration between national collective impact networks and academic researchers.

The Summit is divided into four major areas: 1) cross-sector networks, 2) the collaboration process, 3) community engagement, and 4) decision-making using educational data. We have chosen these four areas because they represent key disciplinary research areas that inform collective impact initiatives. Cross-sector network research focuses on key questions about the composition, structure, and outcomes of interorganizational networks that include government, business, and nonprofit actors. Collaboration research focuses on the processes that enable effective coalition action. Community engagement research identifies essential processes and structures that effectively activate and involve stakeholders in solutions to the problems that most affect them. Finally, research on education policy reform focuses on the value and challenges associated with making decisions based upon available education metrics.

We have designed the summit to be a relatively intimate gathering of about 25 participants from across the country. The interactive format is designed to both share knowledge and generate new approaches to collective impact initiatives in education. The summit is divided into panels representing each of the four topics. In each panel, we'll hear from a presenter who will introduce the topic and summarize the academic research in the area. They will then highlight several questions or themes about that research informs our understanding of collective impact. This presentation will be followed by a robust discussion among a panel of experts, both academic researchers and leaders of national collective impact networks, who will respond to these themes and questions.

## Confirmed Participants

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### **About The Network for Nonprofit and Social Impact at Northwestern University**

The Network for Nonprofit and Social Impact is dedicated to answering the question: *How can nonprofit networks be rewired for maximum social impact?*

Located at Northwestern University, the research team includes undergraduates, graduate students, post-doctoral research fellows, and faculty. Started in September 2012, NNSI uniquely focuses on research that emphasizes collaborative efforts and network structures that include nonprofit organizations and their many organizational and community partners. Current NNSI research projects investigate the linkages between nonprofit networks and capacity, nonprofit-corporate partnerships, nonprofit use of technology in interorganizational collaboration, and the implementation of collective impact models.

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## Organizations and Networks

- America's Promise Alliance <http://americaspromise.org/>
- The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions <http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/>
- Collective Impact Forum <http://collectiveimpactforum.org/what-collective-impact>
- FSG <http://www.fsg.org/approach-areas/collective-impact>
- Network for Nonprofit and Social Impact <http://nnsi.northwestern.edu>
- Ready by 21 <http://www.readyby21.org/>
- StriveTogether <http://www.strivetgether.org/>

## **Case Studies and Additional Reading**

America's Promise: Building a Grad Nation

[http://gradnation.org/sites/default/files/17548\\_BGN\\_Report\\_FinalFULL\\_5.2.14.pdf](http://gradnation.org/sites/default/files/17548_BGN_Report_FinalFULL_5.2.14.pdf)

FSG: 8 Case Studies

<http://www.fsg.org/blog/help-us-build-collective-impact-community-and-8-new-case-studies>

Improving Student Outcomes Through Collective Impact

<http://www.knowledgeworks.org/sites/default/files/Improving-Student-Outcomes-Through-Collective-Impact.pdf>

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

<http://www.bridgespan.org/getmedia/a01ac9cc-935e-4bdb-9401-fbb998512e44/Community-Collaboratives-CaseStudy-Cincinnati.aspx>

Nashville, TN: Building a Big-Picture Action Plan

<http://www.readyby21.org/case-studies/nashville-tennessee>

<http://www.readyby21.org/case-studies/nashville-tn-building-big-picture-action-plan>

StriveTogether: Reinventing the Local Education Ecosystem

<https://cb.hbsp.harvard.edu/resources/marketing/docs/314031p2.pdf>

Washington State Road Map Project

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/What-We-Do/US-Program/Washington-State/Road-Map-Project>

<http://www.roadmapproject.org/>