

EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT IN EDUCATION NETWORKS

REPORT 2
Networks for Social Impact
in Education Series



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The Network for Nonprofit and Social Impact

The Network for Nonprofit and Social Impact at Northwestern University is a research lab. We are dedicated to discovering how organizations can better work together to move the needle on social issues. We thrive on projects that produce both rigorously studied results and practical applications for the social impact sector. Our work has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Army Research Office in the past eight years. Our research is featured in academic journals and venues like Stanford Social Innovation Review and Nonprofit Quarterly.

The Networks for Social Impact in Education Series

How do organizations across sectors work together to improve educational outcomes? During this three-year research project, the Network for Nonprofit and Social Impact at Northwestern University investigated how groups of organizations worked together to improve student achievement. Reporting the results of this mixed-method study, the Networks for Social Impact in Education Series reveals previously undiscovered insights into the secret sauce for network assembly, management, and evolution.

THE REPORTS IN THIS SERIES INCLUDE:

Report 1: Networks that create a social impact

Report 2: Equity and empowerment in education networks

Report 3: Effective data practices support learning and systems alignment

Report 4: Navigating network change

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INTRODUCTION

Do cross-sector networks make education inequity worse? This question has been the topic of significant debate in the sector, particularly around whether the collective impact model of cross-sector network interaction is redeemable.¹ In the years since this debate emerged, education coalitions across the United States sought to make equity practices central in their work.

Partnerships and coalitions are investigating how they can address systemic inequities through their operations and relationships. There are two approaches to addressing inequalities in coalitions: the involvement approach and the system-change approach. The involvement approach is a developmental process where underrepresented and underserved groups acquire critical resources and rights to achieve life goals.² It focuses on the involvement of the communities most affected in the network's decision-making. In contrast, the systems-change approach focuses on dismantling the inequity embedded in institutions. It recognizes that unfair treatment has led to systemic and structural disadvantages towards marginalized groups. This realization catalyzes a proactive response that deconstructs and reorganizes power to address inequity. This report investigates the strategies coalitions use to involve the community and how those practices are related to systems-change practices, if at all.

¹ John Kania and Mark Kramer, "The Equity Imperative in Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2015, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_equity_imperative_in_collective_impact; Brian D. Christens and Paula Tran Inzeo, "Widening the View: Situating Collective Impact among Frameworks for Community-Led Change," *Community Development* 46, no. 4 (August 8, 2015): 420–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2015.1061680>; Tom Wolff, "Ten Places Where Collective Impact Gets It Wrong," *Global Journal of Community Psychology and Practice* 7, no. 1 (2016), <https://www.gjcpp.org/en/resource.php?issue=21&resource=200>.

² Definition drawn from Marc A. Zimmerman, Julian Rappaport, and Edward Seidman, "Empowerment Theory," in *Handbook of Community Psychology* (Springer, 2000), 43–63.

NETWORKS IN THIS STUDY

This research examined 26 networks in different communities in the United States. All of the networks focused, at least in part, on education reform in their communities. We used a matched sample technique to select the networks. Half of the networks in the sample

adhered closely to the collective impact model. The other half were matched to these networks, based upon community similarity, and did not firmly adhere to collective impact tenets (see box).

COLLECTIVE IMPACT NETWORKS:

Thirteen networks adhered to the tenets of collective impact. They met the initial criteria established for collective impact. They had:

1. completed at least a baseline data report (demonstrating data sharing).
2. a central organization performing backbone functions
3. established a common agenda.
4. a systems-alignment framework of action, typically cradle to career, and
5. frequent meetings of high-level leaders.

In short, they resembled the initial collective impact model.

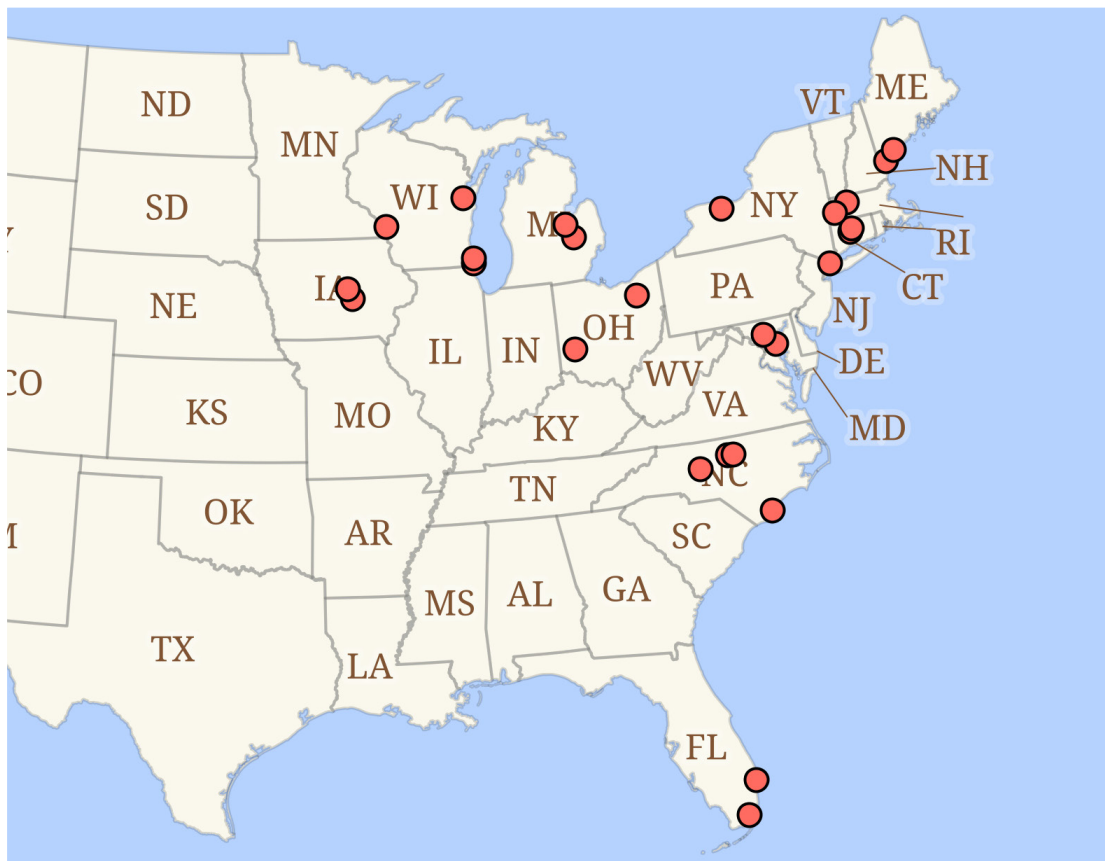
MATCHED SAMPLE:

Thirteen networks were in similar communities as collective impact networks. Each matched pair was from the same state, a similar-sized community, and had similar city demographics to ensure comparability. The matching process included geographic (e.g., population density, coverage area), demographic (e.g., race and poverty rate), and labor market factors (e.g., unemployment rate and median income). Matched sample networks were sometimes early collective impact networks or aspired to the collective impact model. However, they were missing elements of the model in comparison to their collective impact counterparts. Most commonly, these networks were missing a baseline data report and system-alignment framework of action. In one case (e.g., Ohio pair), both networks were advanced stage collective impact initiatives.

³ The collective impact framework continues to evolve. Notably, the *Collective Impact Principles of Practice* extend beyond these five criteria to embrace greater priorities on equity, community involvement, data use, coalition culture, and customizing to the local context (<https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/resources/collective-impact-principles-practice>)

The 26 networks are in 11 states. We chose networks that differed in various ways. They varied in size, ranging from 8 to 102 organizations, with the average network having 35 organizations participate. They serve *rural*, *suburban*, and *urban* communities; some networks spanned multiple types of areas. The average founding date is 2012 — all but four networks are at least three years old. In

20 of the networks, the founder went on to manage the network. Networks have different lead agency or “backbone” types: 12 have a philanthropic or federated organization, 6 have a government agency, 6 have a community-based nonprofit, and 2 have a post-secondary institution. The research reports data collected from 2017-2020.



Data Collection Measures and Analysis

We used a mixed-method design, incorporating qualitative interviews, archival data, organizational surveys, and community-level education outcomes. Networks received \$1500 as compensation for their participation.

We conducted two interviews with the network leads of all 26 communities, two years apart. Each interview lasted about an hour. During these interviews, we asked about:

- how the networks included community members and the role that community members could play in the coalitions,
- any initiatives that led the community to gain control of critical resources,

- the community's role in developing new goals during the 18 months,
- the perceived barriers to communities achieving their goals, and
- the network's community outreach efforts.

This study assessed networks' capacities to connect, work, and collaborate with their target communities. There are two primary strategies to achieve these two goals. Involvement practices describe community participation in decision-making and communication strategies. Systems-change practices focus on network goal-setting and framing the issue. We evaluated these practices based on their degree of impactfulness.⁴

⁴ All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. At least two independent researchers agreed on the categorization for each community based on these transcripts. Networks were placed in a specific position on the spectrum if researchers identified two or more practices that were least impactful, moderately impactful, or most impactful. Some networks had no evidence of involvement or systems change practices based on our empowerment model. Two networks did not meet the minimum criteria for the least effective involvement practices, and two networks did not meet the threshold for the least effective systems-change practices.

EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT MODEL

STRATEGY	CRITERIA	LEAST IMPACTFUL	MODERATELY IMPACTFUL	MOST IMPACTFUL
Involvement	Decision-making	No formal representation, but the network solicits feedback via town halls, surveys, focus groups, or market research. These are for action purposes, not just marketing or good community outreach.	Some representation but limited decision-making authority. Examples include participation in working groups, action teams but little representation on boards or operations teams.	Community members from marginalized and under-resourced groups have real decision-making power. The majority group community members are made aware of privilege and enact behaviors to mitigate privilege.
	Communication strategy	One-way communication: Network to community	Two-way communication: But mostly network to community	Two-way communication: Community to network as much as the network to the community
Systems Change	Goal setting and monitoring related to equity	Setting universal goals and releasing disaggregated outcome data to the community.	Setting goals about opportunity gaps, allocating appropriate resources, and monitoring progress.	Community determined goals and involvement in the evaluation process.
	The framing of the social problem (e.g., marketization, systemic)	Marketization -- providing better services	Advocacy -- group beginning to address underlying structures through political action	Systemic - changing power structures and community problem framing

Note. This model was inspired by Frances Bowen's Continuum of Community Engagement.

This model is a continuum - from least impactful to most impactful practices. The least impactful practices only focus on surface-level activities or issues. They do not take into account variation, inequities, or community characteristics. Instead, the network maintains most, if not all, of the control. Moderately impactful practices engage community members in more profound ways and increase community voice and participation through network-determined avenues. Although practices like these try to deepen the connection with communities, they often fall short in encapsulating and uplifting

community voice and participation. Networks that are deeply embedded in the community utilize the most impactful practices. These practices look to redistribute control of critical network resources to community members and place the community voice at the center of all network activities.

In this project, some networks only used involvement practices, others only used systems-change practices, and some used both. However, the two networks engaged in the most impactful practices for involvement and systems change.

INVOLVEMENT PRACTICES

Involvement practices assessed the methods networks used to engage and connect with the communities they serve. In particular, we examined their communication strategies and the modes of community participation. Methods ranged from informing the community about efforts to more intentional engagement methods, which deeply involve and embed community members within network decision-making.

LEAST IMPACTFUL PRACTICES

In our study, nine networks used the least impactful involvement practices. They did not have a formal representation of community members and often received feedback from non-interactive methods. For example, one network primarily used summits and town halls to communicate with its community about programs and services. This network solicited community feedback through these events and listening sessions to gain insight into the network's impact. Networks utilizing the least impactful involvement practices pushed out information and rarely received input from community members. They heavily relied on newsletters, social media posts, or focus groups.

MODERATELY IMPACTFUL PRACTICES

Thirteen networks had moderately impactful practices. In these networks, there was deeper community participation but limited decision-making authority. For example, ROC the Future creates avenues for parents to contribute to coalition work and objectives. Parents participated in working groups that identified

core focus areas, including trauma and racial inequity. Working group feedback informed network leadership's decision-making. Thus, parents offered their viewpoint but did not have a say in the network's decisions. Networks in this category solicited more feedback from the community. Other examples of moderately impactful practices included: using data to identify opportunity gaps across minoritized groups, advocacy campaigns used to raise community awareness, and communication channels that are partially bidirectional

MOST IMPACTFUL PRACTICES

Anne Arundel County Partnership for Children, Youth and Families, and Howard County Local Children's Board used the most impactful involvement practices. These networks sought to embed community members in decision-making processes. For example, Anne Arundel County Partnership for Children and Families in Maryland has community representation on all levels and various functions. Community members hold board seats, sit on all working groups, and work as paid staff to directly influence decision-making and network outcomes. The network compensated focus group participants with wages above the livable wage and hired homeless youth to be peer navigators. Community members have authority in leadership and governance decisions and can dictate how the network prioritizes resources. There was also an equal flow of communication between the community and the network. Community members oversaw and directed this flow of communication.

EMPOWERMENT SPOTLIGHT

HOWARD COUNTY LOCAL CHILDREN'S BOARD

What do they do?

This network's mission is to ensure that all children in Howard County have as many opportunities to succeed, with a particular focus on access and equity in child mental health services, attendance, and employment.

Why does it promote empowerment?

The Howard County Local Children's Board believes in creating an environment where community members are represented in network activities and have decision-making power over how they allocate resources and execute goals. Community members hold positions throughout the network. Specifically, Howard County Local Children's Board has a community engagement committee made up of community members from their target areas. That committee plans culturally responsive initiatives and two-way communication.

What have been the results?

Due to Howard County Local Children's Board's focus on empowerment, the network has seen an increase in community trust and engagement from diverse and marginalized populations. Greater community confidence has led to connecting students and their families to critical services. Some of these services are career and internships from local employers, expanded extracurricular learning opportunities for students and parents, and more participation and integration of wraparound services, such as mental health programs, offered by community-based organizations and the local school district. In addition, Howard County Local Children's Board was one of the eight successful networks identified in Report 1 because of their above-expected increases in high school graduation.



Centennial Park Playground in Howard County, MD

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Systems-change processes describe how networks set goals and frame the root causes of social problems. Goal-setting ranges from specifying universal goals (e.g., for all children) to community-determined goals. Moreover, networks can understand the social problem primarily as an issue of providing better services (i.e., marketization), ignoring the more considerable systems-caused inequity, or they can begin to address the power-structures that create inequity.

LEAST IMPACTFUL PRACTICES

Twelve networks used the least impactful systems-change practices - making these practices the most common group observed. Networks rarely identified systems or structural barriers as the problem for the issues they were trying to address. Instead, they sought to provide better programs and services, utilizing marketization as a motivating frame. For example, one network in this group primarily focused on delivering effective or complementary programs and services to local school districts to improve student outcomes. This network and others that fell in this category sought to improve services and programs rather than to address the structural barriers that may impede participant success in these programs. In setting goals, these networks establish universal goals (i.e., goals for all children) independent of community input. These goals rarely focus on underrepresented and underserved communities explicitly. Data analysis tracks progress on universal goals created by action committees and overseen by network leadership.

MODERATELY IMPACTFUL PRACTICES

Ten networks had transitional systems-change practices. Their goals focused on opportunity gaps. For example, Learn to

Earn Dayton data strategies fit firmly in this category. This network captured African-American boys' reading proficiency data to create interventions to move them towards proficiency. They set specific goals for African-American boys to address inequity in literacy outcomes (see more in Report 3 about data systems needed to support these practices). Additionally, this network lobbied and met with legislators regarding policy issues to raise awareness and direct more resources to their efforts. This network and others in this category frame the root causes of social problems as a lack of broader societal understanding of the issue itself. Networks increase societal awareness using political advocacy in hopes of changing outcomes for underrepresented or underserved groups.

MOST IMPACTFUL PRACTICES.

Anne Arundel County Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families and Howard County Local Children's Board were also the most impactful networks in systems-change practices. They framed the root causes of social issues as systemic. They understand systemic racism, gender oppression, or housing and food insecurity spawned by an unfair economic system as the root causes of inequitable educational outcomes. These networks ultimately sought to deconstruct and rebuild systems in more equitable ways. For example, the Howard County

Local Children’s Board in Maryland used a community advisory council to create goals and directives around mental health needs and address systemic barriers that impede access to mental health resources in their community. They also used local leadership teams, made up of community members,

to identify relevant community-based strategies. Community voice was front and center in discussions, and they often decided the metrics used to assess the network’s completion of community-created goals.

SYSTEMS-CHANGE SPOTLIGHT

ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES

What do they do?

Anne Arundel County Partnership is a network dedicated to leveraging local resources and people power to improve youth and the broader community’s outcomes.

Why does it promote systems change?

This network believes that issues that adversely affect their community are systematically sourced and structurally driven. This awareness has led to a commitment to community framing of issues, which ultimately seeks to reorganize community resources to those most affected. Community-centered framing is then translated into Anne Arundel’s goal-setting process. Community members drive this process entirely, and they decide the network’s goals and outcomes. Community members also determine which metrics to use to measure the network’s success.

What have been the results?

Anne Arundel County Partnership’s systems-change focus has led to all participating families having stable housing, and children who participated in the network saw a decrease in problem behavior issues. This focus has led to implementing a system of care approach to ensure sustained access to services and support. This system of care initiative is between all child-serving agencies to meet needs in a cross-system, collaborative manner. This approach provides individualized information and support to connect children, youth, and their families to critical resources in the community.



How is network design and context related to equity?

We investigated the network designs and contexts that were most commonly associated with involvement and systems change practices. Using qualitative comparative analysis, we examined several design features. These included:

- Community poverty – Was poverty in the community higher than the U.S. national average?
- Significant government agency involvement in the network – Were school districts and other government agencies well represented in network activities?
- Network age – Was the network at least three years old?
- Centralized network governance – Was there a backbone organization that directed the network, facilitated network decision-making, or shared governance?
- Coalition size – How large was the coalition?

We find that decentralized network governance, older coalitions, and low government representation were essential conditions most commonly associated with moderate and most impactful involvement practices. Although the complete analysis

is beyond this report's scope, we highlight decentralized network governance as critical. Decentralized governance creates more opportunities for authentic community involvement. As suggested by previous research on collective impact,⁵ we find that centralized governance of networks runs counter to the adoption of involvement practices.

Government representation and school district size were salient conditions associated with moderately and most impactful systems-change practices.

Government representation often gives networks access to the systems-level data and levers of change. Moreover, communities with large district sizes are more likely to use systems-change practices. Larger school districts are often more diverse and are more likely to serve minoritized and underrepresented students and their families. These practices require goal-setting and framing strategies based on disaggregated and targeted data approaches directed by community members' discernment of the impact those socio-political structures have on their lives.

⁵ Brian D. Christens and Paula Tran Inzeo, "Widening the View: Situating Collective Impact among Frameworks for Community-Led Change," *Community Development* 46, no. 4 (August 8, 2015): 420–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2015.1061680>.

REFLECTION ON EQUITY

Closing opportunity gaps and addressing inequity is a crucial issue for networks concerned with educational outcomes. Networks must reconcile and seek to remove systemic barriers that impede full access to civic, economic, and social participation. If this focus is not apparent and intentional, gaps of all kinds will persist. Networks can adopt involvement and systems-change practices that are most impactful, suggesting that cross-sector networks do not have to exacerbate inequity. However, the most impactful involvement and systems-change practices are rare among networks. Communities that aim to close opportunity gaps by creating or expanding collaborative network models should proceed with caution, knowing that their efforts are unique. The COVID-19 pandemic has widened these gaps and made the effects of institutional racism even more apparent. If networks are to address this inequity, they must do a more in-depth analysis of root causes. Market solutions and community town halls will not be enough to address injustice.

IMPLICATIONS

NETWORK LEADERS

- Intentionally embed your network into the community. Create space for community members to make decisions and act as equals in network conversations. Include community voices in determining network goals.
- Go beyond recognizing inequity and opportunity gaps in your community; intentionally act to remove systemic barriers. Identify structural barriers as root problems and adopt practices that aim to deconstruct and rebuild systems in more equitable ways.
- Consider whether your network's governance strategy creates barriers to equity and empowerment.

FUNDERS

- Support initiatives with authentic and equal inclusion of community members in determining network goals and decisions.
- Focus on funding and supporting initiatives that have identified social issues resulting from inequitable power structures and are working to break down these systemic and structural barriers to address injustice.