BUILDING IMPACT

A Closer Look at Local Cross-Sector Collaborations for Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Carolyn J. Riehl | Jeffrey R. Henig | Jessica R. Wolff | Michael A. Rebell

TEACHERS COLLEGE
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Collective Impact and the Renewed Interest in Cross-Sector Collaboration for Education

In the fall of 2011, John Kania and Mark Kramer published an article in *Stanford Social Innovation Review* that laid out a vision for what they referred to as "collective impact," an approach for addressing a wide range of challenges in local contexts through cross-sector partnerships. Both the idea and the practice spread rapidly; many local initiatives were begun, and organizations such as StriveTogether were formed to provide affiliation and support.

These developments are not completely new; some forms of local cross-sector collaboration have been around for over a hundred years. But aspects of the contemporary context may set the new wave of collaborations apart from past efforts. These include fiscal constraints brought on by the Great Recession, declining confidence in top-down reform, an acknowledgment that both in-school and out-of-school factors are consequential for student success, and frustrations with the fragility of reform efforts. In addition, contemporary approaches to cross-sector collaboration incorporate some new elements and strategies that could improve impact and sustainability. These include the use of a dedicated organizational structure, an emphasis on data, and the emergence of national network organizations supporting local efforts.

Study Rationale, Components, and Methods

In spite of all the attention to cross-sector collaboration, little research has been conducted to explore these new phenomena. To fill this knowledge gap, The Wallace Foundation commissioned our team of researchers at Teachers College, Columbia University, to carry out a three-pronged study. In the first report from the study, we summarized the historical development of cross-sector collaborations to improve education and address other social issues, and we synthesized the research literature, drawn largely from sociology, management studies, and politics and public policy, to highlight prior knowledge that could be relevant for understanding current efforts (Henig, Riehl, Rebell, & Wolff, 2015).

In a second report, we presented findings from the publicly available websites of a nationwide sample of 182 contemporary cross-sector collaborations for education that were operating across the United States in 2015 (Henig, Riehl, Houston, Rebell, & Wolff, 2016). Based on our sample, we learned that more than half (58) of the nation's 100 largest cities had cross-sector collaborations for education. In numerous locals, more than one was operating. Many pre-date the current wave of interest in "collective impact," and many, but not all, were linked to national networks for guidance and support. There was variation in geographic scope, in the breadth and depth of their membership, and in their governance and operational structures. Many of the collaborations expressed a focus on equity.

The third component of our charge from The Wallace Foundation was to conduct detailed comparative case studies of collective impact initiatives. This is the focus of this report. To gather data, our research teams visited each site one or more times between 2015 and 2017, observed program meetings and other activities, and interviewed participants and stakeholders. In all, we conducted over 290 interviews and observations and gathered extensive documentation on the initiatives.

We studied three collaborations in depth:

- *Say Yes Buffalo*, the second full-city implementation of the Say Yes to Education national organization's framework for supporting student success through wraparound services and a college scholarship promise, in Buffalo, NY;
- *Milwaukee Succeeds*, a "cradle to career" initiative serving the city of Milwaukee, WI, and an early member of the StriveTogether network of collaborations; and
- *All Hands Raised*, another Strive initiative, partnering with six school districts, including Portland Public Schools, in Multnomah County, OR.

We studied five additional collaborations in a more limited fashion:

- *Alignment Nashville*, a locally developed, business-supported cross-sector collaboration working closely with the metropolitan school district in Nashville, TN;
- *Chatham-Savannah Youth Futures Authority* in Savannah, GA, the one collaboration in our set that has experienced a full life cycle and has now ended;
- *Northside Achievement Zone* in Minneapolis, MN, a neighborhood-based collaboration, initially funded through the federal government's Promise Neighborhoods program;
- *Oakland Community Schools* in Oakland, CA, a city-wide community schools initiative based in the Oakland Unified School District; and
- *Providence Children and Youth Cabinet* in Providence, RI, an effort at cross-sector collaboration and community change that was briefly affiliated with the Strive network and later became part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Evidence2Success initiative.

All Hands Raised - Photo credit: Beth Conyers Photography

Collaboration Up Close: Key Findings from the Case Studies

Getting Started

Collaboration needs a credible and compelling rationale as well as committed advocates to initiate and then shepherd the process. In our cases, early champions included local business executives, philanthropic foundation leaders, elected officials, educators, and community activists. These leaders expressed a sense of frustration over low and inequitable patterns of student achievement as a motivating force for initiating collaboration. Another vital impetus, however, was a sense of optimism that collaboration might provide a solution that had not existed before.

The collaborations took pains to involve local individuals who were deemed essential for obtaining resources, breaking down barriers to partnership, providing high-level legitimacy and visibility, and ensuring ongoing governance and oversight. Several collaborations explicitly decided to invite persons who had often stood at odds with one another to participate; this was risky but seemed important for cutting through long-standing political conflicts that were not helping children and youth.

Two collaborations we studied quickly developed plans for how they would work together. Others took much longer to develop an operational plan, using formal or informal strategies for building consensus around vision, goals, and strategies. This often required extensive discussions and explorations with many partners. While the collaborations sometimes took advice from external sources such as national networks, each fashioned a plan that took into account local history, conditions, and needs. The length of time it took for initial plans to be developed, coupled with equally lengthy stages of implementation, resulted in much slower start-up phases than many anticipated.

All but one of the collaborations in our case study sample adopted some version of a "cradle to career" orientation. This orientation represented an attempt to consolidate and align resources and services typically spread across multiple education systems (early childhood, K-12, and higher education) as well as multiple service sectors (health, education, and social services) and multiple funders (general purpose government at the city and county level, school systems, social service agencies, and philanthropies).

Many collaborations also used a "developmental pathways" framework, incorporating the idea that, in order to achieve an end goal such as college or career success, young people need to progress steadily from early childhood through their school years and beyond. If children and youth do not successfully achieve particular developmental milestones, they may have trouble at later stages of the pathway.

Even with these shared orientations, specific theories of action took on a much more local character, as collaborations adjusted to local context and capacity in identifying what was impeding students' progress and deciding on the tangible services and interventions they could put in place.

Implementing Interventions for Children, Youth, Schools, and Systems

The range of services and activities in place at the time of our fieldwork was generally narrower than the programs' aspirations. Often this reflected simply the realities of staging a comprehensive effort on a large scale; some things get implemented early on and others have to wait. Also, it reflected local capacity issues: despite the common mantras of cradle-to-career services and developmental pathways, collaborations had varying levels of interest and resources for tackling a full range of interventions.

Say Yes Buffalo

Despite gaps in implementation, the collaborations have provided venues where this kind of comprehensive approach can be discussed, developed, and monitored. It could be argued the collaborations are providing an important service to their communities merely by introducing and offering support for the ideas of cradle-to-career orientations, wraparound support services, and student developmental pathways. By intervening where they can, they signal the urgency of these concerns.

Managing Collaboration

Most of the collaborations we studied assigned core governance leadership to local elites and used a variety of venues, such as a leadership council, for keeping community members informed and engaged. This approach may make it easier to build high-level consensus around goals and strategies and find the resources for implementing them. But it may be less effective at building grassroots support and less responsive to how community members being served by the collaboration perceive their needs.

Coordination, communication, and leadership. Collaborations generally created a specific organizational entity, which some refer to as a "backbone organization," to coordinate and manage the partnership. These appeared to be useful and uncontroversial, but the long-term sustainability of these entities will depend on having stable revenue sources. A backbone can give a collaboration a recognizable identity and help build legitimacy and support, but its public identity must be managed, requiring attention to how the backbone describes itself and its accomplishments while sharing credit with others, including collaborative partner organizations. Another consideration over time may be whether backbones are able to sustain rich, multidimensional linkages among partners or devolve into a less collaborative, more formal "hub to spokes" model of coordination. Ironically, well-run backbone organizations might be especially susceptible to this kind of evolution.

The collaborations depended heavily on the contributions their executive directors made to the overall effort. In turn, leadership effectiveness depended on relationships of reciprocity and trust. Leaders were described as bringing optimism, ability to inspire confidence, and willingness to listen and downplay one's own role; they were seen as trustworthy, creative problem solvers, good at building relationships, well-organized, working effectively across divisions, knowing everybody, and perceiving opportunities more than barriers. How to anticipate and prepare for leadership transitions will be an ongoing challenge for collaborations over time. As collaborations mature, some of the connective tissue provided by robust leadership can be transferred to strong collaborative norms or routine operational processes as participants habituate to what it takes to collaborate. This is more likely to happen when a collaboration is perceived as successful; a vision that has been realized in practice can serve as a powerful magnet to keep collaboration going.

We observed a strong consistency in how cross-sector collaborations configured their operations to manage important functions. Most established moderately sized groups, with names such as the operations committee or board of directors, to make high-level strategic planning decisions and monitor program progress. In several cases, we observed a fairly loose distinction between governance and administration in these groups. That is, participants were involved in operational decisions as well as strategic planning and oversight.

At the programmatic level, the collaborations typically created work groups, task forces, or project teams for planning and coordinating their core service work. These working groups sometimes make heavy time demands on volunteers, so maintaining the steady involvement of many partners can be a challenge.

To provide for public awareness and engagement, some collaborations held large gatherings, open to the public, while others held meetings for smaller, more focused audiences. Most also used a variety of other means to reach out to their local constituents, such as scheduling informational sessions at school or neighborhood sites, sponsoring special events, maintaining a website, sending email newsletters, posting on social media, and publishing annual reports.

Funding

The collaborations relied on foundation or government grants or on special initiative funding from a public governmental source. For the most part, they were not burdened by financial stress during the time of our research, but they also were not assured of sustained resource availability. To try to get on firm financial footing, the initiatives have used three strategies. First, some have lobbied and worked with city, county, and school district public administrators to establish stable, local, line-item budget allocations for some of their work. Second, some have acknowledged "soft money" will probably always be needed, and they have developed their capacities for raising it from foundations, individuals, and governmental grant programs. Third, some have begun to advocate for state-level funding, often in concert with other collaborations in a region or state.

Funding was used in different ways across the collaborations. Supporting the backbone operation was a primary expense. For the collaborations that raised monies for other purposes as well, they did not serve as general grantmakers, dispersing funds for the ongoing work of collaborative partners, for example to support a community agency's regular after-school programming. Rather, the collaborations used fiscal resources to support major efforts agreed upon by the partnership.

Each of the cross-sector collaborations we studied existed, at least to some degree, because the local school system has not met basic educational goals. This may be partly because the school system is not adequately funded and resourced. In this case, the additional supports, initiatives, and wraparound services the collaborations provide, while helpful, may never be sufficient to ensure the school system meets its goals.

Data Use

Using data to drive program effectiveness is touted as one of the essential design features of the collective impact model of collaboration. Despite its appeal, effective use of data is not simple to achieve in collaborations. Several collaborations had trouble obtaining data from nonresponsive or inefficient sources, such as state offices that maintained databases of health status and educational performance information. There were also challenges with setting up effective data management systems, overcoming concerns about privacy, and training end users to trust and use these systems. Finally, some collaboration partners were unclear how to use data in sophisticated ways to understand complex challenges and develop solutions; they could not easily decide on the best indicators and metrics to use or how to employ them to understand causal relationships among the interventions and outcomes they were monitoring.

Despite problems, we found data were being used across the case study sites for continuous learning and feedback, coordination of services, and public reporting and accountability. Data were sometimes disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, income level, disability, or language status, and they were sometimes reported to show changes over time.

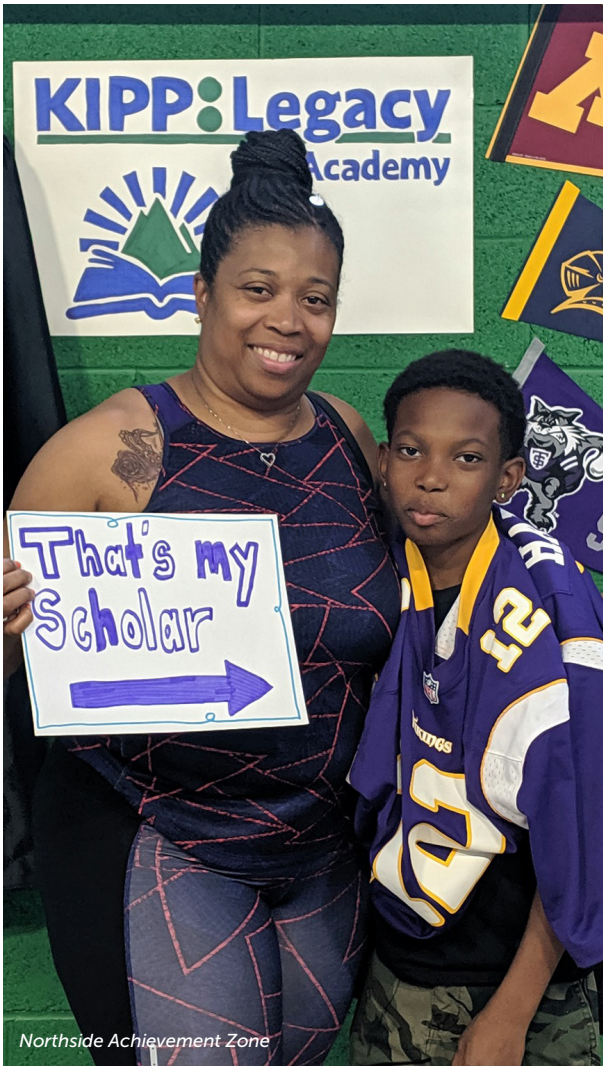
Collaborations made efforts to monitor program implementation and take-up of services. In fledgling ways, some collaborations tried to link programmatic interventions and service participation with outcomes, for example by tracking attendance improvement or growth on math and language arts assessments for students receiving support services.

As new collaborations got started, especially those inspired by the collective impact model, they were encouraged to identify key outcome indicators, set targets and timeframes, and regularly report results to community constituents and stakeholders. We expected these very public measurement systems to be constant reference points for the collaborations and to be sources of concern if progress wasn't happening on schedule. What we observed was somewhat different. The collaborations seem to have become more concerned with making steady progress than with hitting specific performance targets and dates. Overall, the cross-sector collaborations seem to be helped, not hindered, by their efforts to obtain and use data.

Strategic Relationships

Two kinds of relationships were especially salient to the local collaborations we studied—relationships with local school governance systems and relationships with national support networks.

Cross-sector collaborations of the type we studied often originate because of local educational underperformance, and they are intended to help stimulate and support change. A key concern for



Northside Achievement Zone

some collaborations is how to involve elementary/secondary systems as partners without undercutting their autonomy and their need to become, and be seen as, successful in their own right. Another concern is how to avoid getting caught in political battles among unions, boards, system administrators, and the public, even when those battles have been destructive for children and need to be resolved so the progress the collaborations seek can be made. A third concern is how to achieve stability and continuity when school leadership turnovers have been disruptive and could threaten the viability of the cross-sector collaborations.

Several collaborations sought to work closely with their local school systems. They explicitly wanted to support educators' improvement ideas and help them try to do even more, but they steered clear of overstepping boundaries. Sometimes the school district openly welcomed and acknowledged these forms of assistance; other times relationships were more tentative, especially if the district felt a lack of trust in the collaboration and/or felt a need to prove something on its own.

While all of the locales we studied had at least some charter and private schools, the acrimony that has sometimes surrounded the issue of privatization and school choice was not a major issue or focus for most collaborations during the period of our study, with the exception of Milwaukee, where relationships among the private/voucher, charter, and traditional public school sectors have been contentious for decades. In several cities, including Milwaukee, the cross-sector initiatives offered some assistance to charter and private schools and their students.

Milwaukee Succeeds

National connections. In the past, local collaborative initiatives for social reform sometimes had opportunities to make connections and share strategies with other collaborations through foundations or funding agencies, technical assistance organizations, conferences, research associations, and other formal and informal means. Currently a growing number of organizations are emerging that are specifically designed to promote and support expanding networks of collaborations. These include StriveTogether, Alignment USA, Say Yes to Education, the Coalition for Community Schools, and the Collective Impact Forum. The outreach efforts and reputations of these national network organizations have both created greater interest in the collective impact concept and have provided substantial organizational support that goes beyond what most foundations or other umbrella organizations have done in the past. It is difficult to measure precisely the impact these national networks and connections have on local initiatives, but, in our study, they appear to have made a significant difference. Overall, for our cases, the national affiliations they maintained gave them access to strategic ideas and specific programmatic guidelines about collaboration, and they served as venues for professional networking, ongoing technical support and learning, and some funding support. Somewhat ironically, the one collaboration in our study that eschewed linkages with a national network has formed one of its own.

A Look at Early Outcomes

Our research was explicitly framed as a study of the initiation and development of cross-sector collaborations for education, not an evaluation of their outcomes and effectiveness. However, we were interested in knowing how the collaborations seemed to be doing with the goals they had set for themselves and often promoted very publicly. For example, in Buffalo, the evidence suggests that as wraparound services are made available to more students, during their K-12 years and in the transition to college, their use is steadily increasing. This initiative appears to be the most successful in implementing a full menu of intended support services, perhaps because they secured many important commitments for support before the partnership was launched. High school graduation and post-secondary enrollment rates have risen fairly steadily and many students are taking advantage of the college scholarship benefit. There is some evidence participation in Say Yes interventions has a positive effect on student persistence and success in college. Like many other initiatives, however, Say Yes has found it difficult to effect change on some fundamental indicators of K-12 educational performance. This seems unsurprising when one considers that the initiative's theory of action does not focus on core instructional improvement. It leaves open the question of whether support services, which may be necessary in readying students for learning, can be sufficient for helping them improve their academic performance.

In Wisconsin, the reporting of results for Milwaukee Succeeds has become more streamlined and focused over the years. While the collaboration has developed numerous interventions along the cradle-to-career pathway for students, most are limited in scope and will require time for scaling up and full impact, and educational indicators in Milwaukee continue to show persistent low levels of achievement and attainment and dramatic disparities by race/ethnicity and poverty status. But evaluations of the most substantial programmatic component of Milwaukee Succeeds, the early reading initiative which combines intensive professional development and coaching for early elementary grade teachers with high quality literacy tutoring for students and parent engagement and support, show that students in the program have better literacy outcomes than students who don't. Evidence suggests the reading initiative is effective, but it is not yet implemented at a scale to impact citywide early literacy achievement.

In Portland/Multnomah County, given the collaboration's central focus on racial equity, All Hands Raised presents much information and data specifically related to reducing racial disparities. The initiative identified

three-year targets for each outcome goal that were intended to be sustained (showing steady growth), incremental (realistic and achievable), and equitable (showing accelerated improvement for students of color so that achievement gaps could be eliminated). Racial gaps persist on many indicators, but one exception is the rate of student disciplinary actions, which shows a dramatic reduction in discipline for African American students and a subsequent narrowing of the equity gap in this indicator.

These collaborations are young and rapidly evolving, and new reports about implementation and goal accomplishments are released regularly, so we caution against inferring that their patterns of progress and outcomes are static. Our case studies suggest that achieving impact has, for many good reasons, been a slow but often steady process. Measuring and reporting impact is much easier said than done, and the collaborations have adopted individualized ways of doing so. It will take time and effort to assess whether these collaborations are achieving outcomes that would not have happened otherwise, and whether they are doing so in a cost-effective way.

How Cross-Sector Collaborations Address Racial, Ethnic, and Class Inequities

All eight initiatives we studied openly acknowledged the inequities of educational opportunity and achievement by race, ethnicity, and social class in their contexts. But they addressed the problem in different ways. Many adopted "colorblind" strategies—efforts to unite diverse communities around policies and practices that can benefit everyone. This approach, framed in universal terms, directs services to students who need them but does not explicitly call out particular groups for special treatment, identify structural sources of privilege or inequality, or identify problems, strategies, or outcomes as explicitly racial in nature. Several initiatives have gradually moved toward more targeted attention to racial inequities, and one partnership was explicitly organized to address racial disparities from its beginning. In cities with deep and long-standing cleavages around race and social class, explicit attention appeared to be risky, with the potential of inflaming old wounds, and less direct approaches were adopted. In the cities with larger White populations and more overall affluence, the collaborations seemed to be able to be more forthright, perhaps because the situation was not as dire and the needs not as dramatic.

But over time, equity has become a more explicit focus across multiple collaborations. This appears to be driven locally and externally by more attention being placed on race and class disparities in the national networks, by related local initiatives, and by more public awareness and attention via increased advocacy by people of color and an expansion of progressive politics.

There is clearly no easy formula for doing the work to achieve equity in education. The cross-sector collaborations we studied make, at the least, an important symbolic contribution to addressing equity by the very fact of their existence. Symbolic efforts can, of course, be for show only, deflecting criticism, tamping down conflict and resentment, and substituting for real action. We think something more is going on in these cases. The real application of dollars, the willingness to report disaggregated results, the uptick in targeted solutions rather than universal ones in some cities, all signal that these initiatives and their host locales are learning to admit to systemic problems and find ways to tackle them.

Taking Stock: Implications for Policy and Practice

The recent iterations of cross-sector collaboration for education are still relatively new. The collaborations we studied have tried to achieve coherence and alignment in their goals and activities. However, sometimes the goals are expansive compared with what they aspire to implement or are able to accomplish. Tangible activities are constrained by available resources, personnel, and interests. Overall, our findings suggest the collective impact idea retains appeal, but it appears to function more effectively as a broad framework than as an explicit formula or prescriptive model for how to achieve and make an impact through collaboration.

Nonetheless, we come away impressed by much of what we have encountered. The local collaborations we have studied are actively wrestling with ongoing challenges, trying to find the right balance between high expectations and realistic ones, adjusting initial decisions about collaboration, governance, measurement, funding, and service emphases as they learn from experience what works and what is problematic. As they have been implemented, current collaborations show promise for creating a new kind of venue to bring local partners together who often have not cooperated in the past and have even been in conflict. Importantly, most of the collaborations we studied seem to have helped calm often-contentious urban education politics and establish enough stability for partners to move forward.

For a number of reasons, we consider it wise to give the recent surge in cross-sector collaboration more time to mature. First, the collaborations we have studied are constantly evolving. This is true at the local level and at the national network level as well. Second, all of the collaborations and networks assume a long and multi-stepped journey before anticipated outcomes will become manifest. Third, both the motivating rhetoric of the collective impact movement and the national education reform movement's focus on standardized test scores may have created unrealistic expectations. Fourth, local collaborations are operating in contexts that experience unpredictable and powerful shocks, and it may be unrealistic to expect collaboration efforts to make sharp, near-term, and clearly defined impacts on the tough problems they are addressing. Finally, and most directly against the grain of conventional thinking about how to assess cross-sector collaborations, we speculate that the more certain pay-off for this type of collaboration may lie in moderating the downside and reversals that continually have haunted local efforts at school reform. This may not be the triumphant narrative that excites advocates of such collaboration, and it may not meet the expectations of national funders and reformers who feel urgency for dramatic upside gains. But it could be an important accomplishment.

While we have observed and reported some positive signs and while we have cautioned about the risk of premature conclusions, we have also seen reasons to worry that progress to date will prove fragile and local and funder patience run out. If they are to earn long-term credibility and leverage genuine change, existing efforts will need to make progress on several formidable fronts: moving beyond supporting the school system to strengthening the school system; broadening outreach and inclusion of stakeholders beyond the elites; reducing the reliance on philanthropic support; and adjusting to the national political environment.

Final Reflection: Can Patience Be Fused with a Legitimate Sense of Urgency?

The United States has tended to rush from one education reform to another, motivated by a sense of urgency combined with an adamant faith a new approach exists somewhere that can generate rapid and dramatic gains. The excitement collective impact has sparked in many communities is reminiscent of that which has energized numerous past reform efforts. If held to the standard of quick, sharp, and systemic change, we suspect this latest enthusiasm will fizzle out, like many others. But we have been impressed by what we have seen, in our research, of seriousness of purpose and recognition of the challenges and stakes. While it is still early in the game, we think there are enough indicators of good things happening that the waning of the movement would represent a loss.

Among the core values highlighted by proponents of cross-sector collaboration are a balanced assessment of what schools can and cannot do on their own, a preference for having government agencies pulling together rather than protecting their own spheres of influence, a recognition that communities that work together to expand opportunity and investment will make more headway than those that expend their energies competing, and a commitment to evidence as a tool for improvement and measurement as a means to determine what is getting done. Translating these values into practices that yield results will not be easy, and there are no guarantees of success, but we conclude at this time that the effort should continue.

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