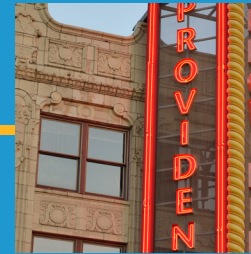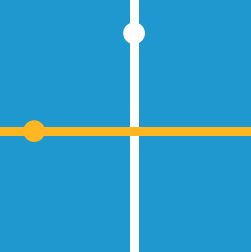# BUILDING IMPACT

A Closer Look at Local Cross-Sector Collaborations for Education

OVERVIEW AND KEY FINDINGS

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

TEACHERS COLLEGE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Teachers College, Columbia University, is the oldest and largest graduate and professional school of education in the United States and is perennially ranked among the nation's best. Founded in 1887, the College has been home to many of the defining figures in American education, including John Dewey, James Earl Russell and Edward Lee Thorndike. Through its three main emphases – education, health, and psychology – Teachers College conducts research and prepares educators, psychologists, policymakers and planners for the challenges they will face in their careers.

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The Wallace Foundation is an independent, national foundation dedicated to supporting and sharing effective ideas and practices that expand learning and enrichment opportunities for disadvantaged children. The Foundation maintains an online library of lessons featuring evidence-based knowledge from its current efforts aimed at: strengthening educational leadership to improve student achievement; helping disadvantaged students gain more time for learning through summer learning and through the effective use of additional learning time during the school day and year; enhancing out-of-school time opportunities; and building appreciation and demand for the arts. All Wallace research studies and related resources are available for download free of charge at the Wallace Knowledge Center: www.wallacefoundation.org.

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This is a summary of a full report by the same name, published by Teachers College, Columbia University, and also available from The Wallace Foundation.

Cite as:
Riehl, C. J., Henig, J. R., Wolff, J. R., & Rebell, M. A. (2019). *Building impact: A closer look at local cross-sector collaborations for education. Overview and key findings.* New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, Department of Education Policy and Social Analysis. https://doi.org/10.59656/YD-CS5301.003

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Department of Education Policy & Social Analysis

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December 2019

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. Collective impact for education received special emphasis through the authors' use of the Strive Partnership, an education-focused effort, to illustrate their key ideas. This example demonstrated, they argued, that community-level education outcomes could be improved by establishing collaborations that spanned traditional divisions such as those separating K-12 education from both early childhood education and higher education; those separating school-focused changes from initiatives oriented around social services and youth development; and those separating formal government—elected officials and public agencies—from civil society, including business, philanthropy, and community-based organizations. In a break with many contemporary approaches to education reform, collective impact purportedly would not need a massive new investment of resources or a new program strategy. Instead it would rest upon a reorganization of local decision-making to reduce fragmented and duplicated efforts and foster alignment and coordination.

Both the idea and the practice spread rapidly. The Strive Partnership, begun in 2006 and serving Cincinnati and northern Kentucky, garnered such attention that other cities wanted to launch similar efforts. To assist them, the Strive leaders formed StriveTogether, a nonprofit network that now has more than 70 member organizations working on collective impact for education in 32 states and the District of Columbia. Several other national networks supporting local initiatives have developed, and stand-alone efforts exist in additional locales. Many, though not all, have adopted the "collective impact" descriptor for their work, but they all share an emphasis on cross-sector collaboration.

An Idea with a Past and Enduring Appeal

These developments are not completely new. Some forms of local cross-sector collaboration have been around for over a hundred years, harkening back to urban settlement houses at the turn of the 20th century. Other earlier iterations include the government efforts to create a system of supports for poor children and families that began during the Progressive Era and ballooned with the New Deal initiatives and the War on Poverty programs; subsequent efforts like the Model Cities and Empowerment Zone programs; and the bubble of interest in cross-sector collaboration that arose in the 1990s and first years of this century.

Two core notions link cross-sector collaborations across time and place. First is the idea that, because the most vexing social problems are complex and multidimensional, efforts to address those problems will need to be multidimensional as well. Second is the belief that although individuals, neighborhoods, and government already devote considerable time and resources to solving social problems, even more could be accomplished by finding ways to avoid disjointed, inconsistent, duplicative, and competitive efforts.

The historical precedents of contemporary efforts to apply local cross-sector collaboration to challenges of education show that the approach has enduring appeal. But the ebb and flow of enthusiasm for cross-sector collaboration also raises questions. Many past efforts burned brightly but briefly and left little evidence of permanent gains, as stakeholders were unable to come up with successful approaches or lost the time, will, or other resources to keep trying. Is there something different about the current round of efforts that holds out the prospect of greater stability and success?

New Context and New Approaches May Set Current Efforts Apart

Despite similarities to earlier iterations, some aspects of the contemporary context and current strategies may set the new wave of cross-sector collaborations apart from past efforts. The following contextual factors may be particularly important:

- *Fiscal constraints brought on by the Great Recession.* The recession that ran from December 2007 to June 2009 was unusually long lasting and severe. The fiscal impact on states and localities generally and on education specifically was serious. Both the real and the anticipated squeeze on education funding created an environment in which communities were desperate for lower-cost strategies to improve education, and one selling point for cross-sector collaboration was the prospect of getting more "bang for the buck" by reducing duplicative efforts.

- *Declining confidence in top-down reform following NCLB.* The 2002 No Child Left Behind legislation established a stronger federal role in education reform. Over time, however, many grew disenchanted with both the top-down focus and the emphasis on test scores, the combination of which they believed was narrowing curriculum, placing undue stress on teachers and students, and stifling innovation. Declining confidence in centralized reform may have contributed to a sense that local communities can and should reassert themselves as the drivers of educational improvement.

- *Embrace of the role of both school and non-school factors in student success.* Education policy debates in recent years have pitted those who argue that focused changes in school organization, instructional content, pedagogy, and accountability can improve achievement and reduce performance gaps against those who argue that it is more important to address non-school factors that create barriers to learning for students in poverty, such as public health disparities, inadequate social and mental health services, disparities in access to quality early childhood education, and the like. By 2010, it was becoming clear that the high stakes, school-centered approach represented by NCLB was generating at best incremental progress. At the same time, a range of studies supported the view that using a broader range of policy targets and tools might make the jobs of teachers less demanding and schools more likely to succeed. Many seemed ready for a less polarizing, "both/and" approach combining improving instruction with increased supports for students.

- *Frustration with the vulnerability of reform efforts to changes in formal leadership.* The history of superficial and evanescent local reform efforts has been attributed in part to frequent turnover in school district leadership. The contemporary movement for cross-sector collaboration represents an alternative approach by embedding the reform impulse in a broader coalition of civic and community leaders and their organizations—ones that will stay in place even if elected leadership turns over or superintendents leave.

In this context, contemporary approaches to cross-sector collaboration incorporate some new elements and strategies that could improve impact and sustainability. Two of these include the use of a dedicated organizational structure and an emphasis on data. As Kania and Kramer (2011) argued, establishing a specific structural entity, which they termed a backbone organization, may ensure that the management of a collaboration is not overlooked and that managers have adequate time, funding, and expertise to lead a complex operation. This aspect of collaboration was often neglected or underestimated in past efforts. Similarly, Kania and Kramer also emphasized the use of data to keep collaborations on track and accountable, to help them decide where to apply resources and to assess how their efforts were working. Using data to steer social interventions is a strategy once associated more with large-scale government and business entities than with

local efforts. But foundations have recently become much more deliberate in their efforts to use performance indicators in evaluating themselves and the projects they fund. And the expanding array of education-related data available, along with easier and less expensive ways to access and analyze data, increase the prospects for data to be put to good use as an organizing and focusing tool.

A third feature in the current landscape of cross-sector collaborations that we believe is important and new is the rapid growth of national networks supporting local efforts. This may well be the element that most distinguishes the contemporary cross-sector collaboration movement from its precursors. These networks provide potential advantages for local partnerships that include specific structural and organizational models and frameworks to follow, guidance about how to address common challenges, and an infrastructure for ongoing communication and shared learning across sites in different locales and with national facilitators who are knowledgeable about many local iterations.

Study Rationale, Components, and Methods

As interest in the collective impact approach grew, communities began turning to it as the solution for social change. However, what exactly those communities were adopting and how the work was actually proceeding were hazy. In spite of all the attention to cross-sector collaboration, little research existed on the breadth and patterns of its adoption, and the actual mechanics involved remained ill defined.

To help fill these knowledge gaps, in February 2014, The Wallace Foundation commissioned our team of researchers at Teachers College, Columbia University, to carry out a three-pronged study. The research would include (1) a broad synthesis of the relevant literature on collaboration for education, (2) an effort to assess the nature and extent of collaborative initiatives across the United States, and (3) intense fieldwork in a small set of locations to understand how the idea of cross-sector collaboration takes shape and evolves as communities wrestle with day-to-day challenges on the ground.

In the first report from the study, we drew on historical accounts and summarized the development over time of cross-sector collaborations to improve education and address other social issues. We also synthesized the research literature, drawn largely from sociology, management studies, and politics and public policy, to highlight prior knowledge about the structural options, political dynamics, and implementation challenges of different kinds of collaborations and joint ventures (Henig, Riehl, Rebell, & Wolff, 2015).

In the second report from the study, we presented findings about the nature of contemporary cross-sector collaborations for education across the United States (Henig, Riehl, Houston, Rebell, & Wolff, 2016). This was based on a nationwide scan we conducted of large-scale, place-based initiatives, including those that do and those that do not embrace the collective impact label. For this scan, we searched for publicly available websites of programs that were currently in operation and had a presence on the internet as of January 2015.[1] We restricted our search to collaborations that were anchored in goals related to education, involved the local K-12 school system and at least one additional sector (for example, local government, business, charitable foundations, or nonprofits), and operated (or were at least originated) at the level of a city, school district, or region.[2] We identified 182 collaborations in total and analyzed information presented on their websites,

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[1] Our earlier publication, *Collective Impact and the New Generation of Cross-Sector Collaborations for Education: A Nationwide Scan* (Henig et al., 2016), provides a detailed description of the scan methodology and the full range of our initial findings.

[2] Neighborhood-focused collaborations were included only if city, district, or regional authorities played a leadership role in initiating the effort.

including published reports and other sources like annual reports when those were included or hyperlinked on the website.

The third component of our initial charge from The Wallace Foundation was to conduct detailed comparative case studies of three collective impact initiatives. These were to include Say Yes Buffalo, an initiative to which Wallace had provided financial support, and two additional initiatives that we would identify as potentially offering useful complements to the Buffalo case. After considering about a dozen options, we selected two local initiatives that were part of the StriveTogether network, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Portland, Oregon.

As we began researching the three main cases, we quickly realized that they would not provide enough variation on a number of dimensions that began to seem important, such as longevity, network affiliation, or geographic scale. The Wallace Foundation agreed to an expansion of the case study component of the research and we added five collaborations to study in somewhat less depth, located in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Oakland, California; Providence, Rhode Island; Savannah, Georgia; and Nashville, Tennessee. We call these our mini-cases.

To gather data, research teams visited each site, observed program meetings and other activities, and interviewed participants and stakeholders. For each of the three major case studies, this involved three- or four-person teams making at least one visit to the city in the fall of 2015 and one in the spring of 2016. For the five mini-case studies, two-person teams made one field visit to each site between September 2016 and March 2017. In all, we conducted over 290 interviews and observations and gathered extensive documentation on the initiatives. Since the time of the site visits, we have occasionally continued to communicate with and follow the progress in these cities, but it is important to note that this study focuses most intently on describing the programs as they presented themselves during the time period of our field work. Our efforts to update information

on more recent developments are meant to identify significant changes that have occurred, but we certainly have not fully captured everything that has happened since our last site visits and interviews.

The initiatives we studied varied in the scale of their target area, with one covering a specific neighborhood, six targeting an entire city, and one extending to the surrounding county. This distribution of geographic scale is different from that of the collaborations in our nationwide scan, with more city-based collaborations (75%) than in the national sample (22%). Nonetheless, our set of cases allowed us to observe the dynamics, benefits, and tradeoffs of smaller scale versus larger scale efforts.

Northside Achievement Zone
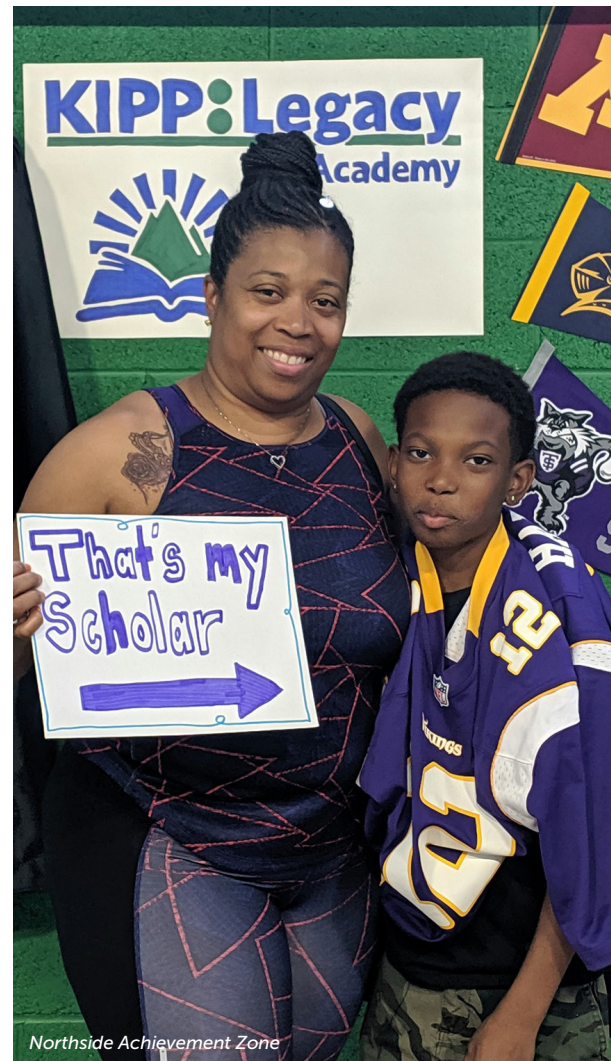
Collaborating Across the Country: Key Findings from Our Nationwide Scan

Our nationwide scan of initiatives provided an array of new insights into the broad pattern of cross-sector collaboration across the country. For example:

- *More than half (58) of the nation's 100 largest cities have cross-sector collaborations for education.* These collaborations are located throughout all regions of the nation, in numbers roughly proportionate to the distribution of the population.

- *Many pre-date the current wave of interest.* While the term "collective impact" has a reasonably well-defined date of first use stemming from the publication of the Kania and Kramer article in 2011[3], many local collaborations for education began much earlier. Nearly 60% of the cross-sector collaborations we located were launched before 2011 and nearly 20% before 2000.

- *There is variation in geographic scope.* Most collaborations (55%) identified their target jurisdiction at the county or metropolitan level. Fourteen percent appeared to focus on a sub-city level such as a particular neighborhood; these were included in our scan only if they had involvement from leaders at a broader level.

- *Collaborations vary in the breadth and depth of their membership and in their governance and operational structures.* Business leaders were most commonly represented on high-level leadership boards or committees, with 91% of collaborations in the national scan having at least one business leader on their board. School district representatives were included on 91% of the boards. Higher education (87%) and social service agencies (79%) were the next most common organizations represented. Only 12% of collaborations had a member of a teachers' union on their governing board.

- *While many initiatives had mounted efforts to collect and track shared measurements of need, services, and outcomes, most relied on readily available indicators and few offered sophisticated forms of analysis and presentation.* Seventy-two (40%) of the initiatives in our sample had a portion of their website dedicated to data, statistics, and outcomes. The most common indicators on initiatives' websites were student performance on standardized tests and high school graduation rates (43%). A quarter of the websites tracked data over time; 17% presented data disaggregated by race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status, and 14% included data on comparison groups of students.

- *Links to national networks are apparent.* Slightly fewer than half of the collaborations in 2015 had some national network association; either they were initiated with the support of a national network or sought out such support at some point in their development. StriveTogether is the largest network; others include the Say Yes to Education national organization, Alignment USA, the federal Promise Neighborhood program, and the Coalition of Community Schools.

- *Many collaborations expressed a focus on equity, which is striking given the tension in prior efforts between pursuing economic development versus equity.* Almost half of local initiatives used equity language on their websites to describe their mission or day-to-day work. Roughly one in three used language related to economic development. Roughly one in five incorporated both types of language.

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[3] To add a bit of confusion, however, the article first began circulating on the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* website in 2010.

■ *We found numerous places where more than one education-focused collaboration was operating.* Although cross-sector collaboration is considered a strategy for reducing competitive and duplicative efforts within local communities, over half of the 182 collaborations in the national scan were operating in places with at least one other cross-sector education collaboration, and 12% were in places with four or more.

Our national scan has provided new and valuable information about the scope, distribution, and variety of local education-focused collaborations, but it has two shortcomings that can only be remedied by deeper analysis of cross-sector collaboration as it is being played out in the field. First, our scan is based on how collaborations depict themselves on their websites rather than objective observation of their work. Second, the scan presents a snapshot of cross-sector collaboration at one particular point in time, and thus provides no direct information about how collaborations develop and mature, adapt to changing environments, or fail to do so.

To learn more about the origins of cross-sector collaborations, how they evolve from and adapt to their local history and context, how they manage internal challenges, how they balance the demands of the moment against steps that might be needed to ensure sustainability, and to fill other knowledge gaps, we studied eight local efforts in detail. A synthesis of the findings from across the eight case studies comprises the bulk of this report.

All Hands Raised - Photo credit: Darlyn Chester Photography

Collaboration Up Close: Key Findings from Our Case Studies

Introducing the Cases

In our case study research, 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 and civic economic development through wraparound social, health, and educational services, high school to college transition, and a college scholarship promise, in Buffalo, NY;

- *Milwaukee Succeeds*, a "cradle to career" initiative serving the city of Milwaukee, WI, affiliated with the StriveTogether network of collaborations and focused most closely on reading improvement, kindergarten readiness, postsecondary opportunity, and social-emotional well-being; and

- *All Hands Raised*, another Strive initiative, partnering with six school districts, including Portland Public Schools, in Multnomah County, OR, to advance racial educational equity, drive collaboration, and help school community sites improve student-support practices for better education and career outcomes countywide.

We studied five additional collaborations in a more limited fashion; these include:

- *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, a long-standing collaboration, originally funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's New Futures Initiative. This is 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 has gone through multiple shifts of identity, from briefly being affiliated with the Strive network to becoming the first demonstration site for a relatively new Annie E. Casey Foundation initiative, Evidence2Success.

These eight cases are not necessarily representative of all other cross-sector collaborations for education, but they offer a view of on-the-ground dynamics that are often not apparent when observing collaboration from a distance, and they raise themes, issues, and observations that can orient future research into other collaborations as well.

Our presentation of findings in the full report follows a roughly chronological sequence, exploring what happens as programs move from early initiation to implementation and beyond. There we provide substantial discussion of competing ideas presented in the relevant literature, and the structures of the different collaboratives, and we go deeply into specific challenges and the ways different communities addressed them initially and over time. Here we limit ourselves to broader themes that were especially salient across our cases.

Getting Started

Initiating Collaboration. Since collaboration is not the default position for most organizations, it needs a credible and compelling rationale as well as committed champions and advocates to initiate and then to shepherd the process.

In all but two of our cases, participants expressed a sense of community failure — a longstanding inability to solve pressing local problems — as a motivating force for initiating collaboration. In multiple cities, there was a tangible sense of defeat and frustration over low and inequitable patterns of student achievement: students not ready to enter kindergarten, embarrassingly low graduation rates, not enough students making a successful transition to college, poor outcomes especially for children of color and those living in poverty. There was not a sense of hopelessness so much as a pervasive disappointment, frustration, and worry about educational outcomes for children and youth that took on added urgency when paired with worries that a workforce was not being prepared to contribute to local economic development.

Another vital impetus, however, was a sense of optimism that collaboration might provide a solution that had not existed before. In this sense, it was important that the idea of a new type of cross-sector collaboration had started to spread around the country. Many partnership representatives we spoke with had heard of the Harlem Children's Zone, StriveTogether, and community schools. Individuals and groups were inspired by claims made about collective impact, just as they had been excited in earlier cycles about full-service community schools and other collaborative approaches.

But getting efforts off the ground also required committed champions. Respondents consistently named organizations and individuals they considered to have been instrumental in forming the partnership. Depending on the locale, these were specific business executives, philanthropic foundation leaders, institutions of higher education, the office of the mayor and/or another local elected official, existing education leadership groups, the school superintendent, or well-regarded neighborhood improvement organizations.

Building the Participant Network and Base. After making the decision to start an initiative, a nascent collaboration must decide what participants to involve and how to invite them. This decision involves trade-offs between breadth and diversity of participants, on the one hand, and focus and manageability on the other.

The collaborations we studied took pains to involve select groups of local leaders who were deemed essential for obtaining resources, breaking down barriers to partnership, providing high-level legitimacy and visibility, and ensuring ongoing governance and oversight. These invitations sometimes maintained continuity with prior or existing local leadership bodies such as mayor's advisory groups. Several collaborations explicitly decided to invite local leaders who had often stood at odds with one another to participate in their core leadership groups. Involving these local decision makers was risky but seemed important for cutting through long-standing political conflicts that were not helping children and youth. In some cases, trust developed steadily over time; in others, cooperation was more elusive. No single factor seemed to make a difference, but sometimes uneasy partners came together to help a collaboration address an external threat, and other times resistance dissipated as individuals found concrete benefits in working together.

In seeking partners for programmatic work, some collaborations began with a fairly firm sense of what they wanted to accomplish and offered targeted invitations to local service providers and stakeholders to become involved. Other collaborations had a much more open-ended strategy and started by seeking very broad community participation in goal-setting and then soliciting potential partners for service provision. Eventually, several became more selective in choosing partners, to ensure high quality services and consistent approaches.

Even with more targeted strategies, the collaborations were generally interested in making sure there was widespread community awareness of their efforts, so they offered opportunities such as public forums for broad communication and at least symbolic input. Several collaborations listed literally dozens and even hundreds of individuals and groups who were "partners" in their efforts. Even if some of the participants are involved in name only, this seemed an impressive accomplishment. The challenge for most collaborations has been to convert this early and enthusiastic involvement into long-term commitment.

Operational Planning for Collaboration. Several of the collaborations we studied quickly developed plans for how they would work together; this was common when the national organization or funding agency supporting the collaboration required a firm plan up front. But even then, some elements changed quite a bit over time. Other collaborations took much longer to develop an operational plan, using formal or informal strategies for building consensus around vision, goals, and strategies. This often necessitated extensive discussions and explorations with many partners.

While the collaborations sometimes took advice from external sources, such as the national networks to which some belonged, 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 initial implementation (as we describe below), have resulted in much slower start-up phases than many anticipated. In some sites, the process frustrated some participants who felt it was unwieldy and not well suited for civic enterprises with multiple partners, but others appreciated how it made the working groups think systematically about their challenges. This long start-up phase was so pervasive it seems reasonable to anticipate this will almost always be the case and, therefore, creating appropriate expectations about the timeframe for initiating collaboration and developing an initial plan of action is vital.

Adopting Programmatic Theories of Action: The Cradle-to-Career Continuum and Developmental Pathways. All but one of the collaborations in our case study sample adopted some version of a "cradle to career" orientation. That is, they espoused the value of providing coordinated supports for young people from their early childhood through early adulthood and entry into the workforce. This orientation provided a strong and persuasive rationale for the collaborations, because it 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). It also signaled to funders, potential participants, and other stakeholders that this was an effort not undertaken previously.

Consistent with this cradle-to-career orientation, many collaborations also used a "developmental pathways" framework. This framework incorporates 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.

The general orientation to the cradle-to-career continuum and developmental pathway milestones was common enough among our set of collaborations to seem like a shared characteristic. It frequently originated in templates and guidance from national support networks. Nonetheless, 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.

Early Childhood Interventions. Most of our cross-sector collaborations include population-level improvements in early childhood learning and preparation for kindergarten in their cradle-to-career visions. Fewer actually established services for this developmental stage. The early childhood sector is more fragmented and less systematized than elementary and secondary schooling, with many centers and programs operating independently. This appears to have made it more challenging to plan comprehensive interventions across multiple independent early childhood sites.

Elementary and Secondary Education Interventions. Milestones occurring within the K-12 portion of a cradle-to-career developmental framework were, not surprisingly, very common focal points for our collaborations, but the actual interventions diverged across locales. Only a few collaborations adopted strategies intended to alter curriculum, teacher quality, or other aspects of schools' instructional programs. Most collaborations addressed educational disparities by offering a menu of support services — often known as wraparound services — that help remove barriers to success in school and beyond.

Access to Post-Secondary Education and Careers. The collaborations wanted students in their communities to move toward college and career, and they wanted to eliminate race and class disparities in post-secondary educational attainment. They diverged in the extent to which they were able to implement services for this developmental stage. A common intervention was helping students apply for federal financial aid. Say Yes Buffalo had the most ambitious approach in providing a last-dollar college scholarship incentive, transition programs for new college students, and other services to encourage student retention.

The cradle-to-career orientation of many collaborations signals an intention to provide interventions across three stages of education. This is an ambitious effort, and no collaboration has yet instituted programmatic services at scale across the full spectrum. 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 that 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

Tough as it may be to get collaborations started, it can be even more difficult to manage them so they can adapt, grow, and thrive over different phases of their life cycles. Productive collaborations seem to benefit from "just enough togetherness" to facilitate relationships of trust and accommodate the needs of different participants while ensuring progress toward shared goals. Key elements are: the strategic collaborative core, the coordinating entity or backbone, leadership, collaborative structures and processes, financing, and the use of data.

Strategic Collaborative Core. Among our cases, we observed three fairly distinct patterns in how the cross-sector collaborations developed a strategic collaborative core level of leadership for their efforts. The first is an elite-centered approach in which collaborations assign core leadership to those with access to resources and

influence at elite leadership levels in the community. This approach, the most common pattern we observed, 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 responsive to perceived needs at the points where individuals interact with the system, and there is a risk that such efforts might eventually prove vulnerable to resentment and counter-mobilization from grassroots advocates at some future time.

A second, much less common, pattern was grassroots-led. In this, collaborations deliberately pursued bottom-up capacity building within a neighborhood or community, while also aiming to speak upward to the larger system, hoping to stimulate a more responsive infrastructure that could support and empower locally embedded efforts. The third pattern we observed reflects a hybrid option, with centralized leadership and involvement but also with a clear grassroots base of operations as well as the involvement of grasstop agency leaders.

These options for the core level of leadership ultimately have consequences for what can be accomplished by a collaboration, how permanent the changes will be, how responsive they are to actual community needs, and how much they affect the overall civic infrastructure. Cross-sector collaborations eventually may secure the participation of all three types of partners, and the partners will support and inform each other. Pragmatically, however, collaborations often seem more comfortable working with one or two levels of community leadership, and the patterns they establish initially tend to become fixed over time.

Coordinating Entity or Backbone. In 2011, Kania and Kramer used the term "backbone organization" to capture the importance of establishing a specific entity to coordinate the work of a cross-sector initiative. The collaborations we studied generally adopted the backbone model, either creating a new entity to manage the partnership or, in several cases, repurposing an existing one. To date, the backbone organizations appear to be seen as necessary, valuable, and mostly uncontroversial within their local settings. As examples and lessons for other collaborations, they raise several issues that are worth noting.

First, these coordinating operations have substantial budgets, as much as one million dollars annually in several cases. The return on investment for them seems to be appropriate, as they provide essential functions for sustaining the collaborations' activities. But the long-term sustainability of these entities — and indeed of the collaborations themselves — will depend on having stable revenue sources.

All Hands Raised - Photo credit: Brian Christopher Photography

Second, the backbones serve as the public face of collaboration. This can be useful in giving a collaboration a recognizable identity and for building legitimacy and support for the initiative, but it also means the backbone's public identity must be managed as one of many partners in need of visibility. Some of the accomplishments of cross-sector partnerships are indeed the product of the joint work enabled by the collaboration, but others may be due more to the work of partner organizations than to the collaboration itself. How a collaboration describes itself and its accomplishments while sharing credit with others warrants further attention.

Third, the independence of the coordinating entity is a matter to be considered. Freestanding organizations tend to be vulnerable to goal displacement over time, substituting concerns about their own survival for their original organizational missions. The backbone organizations of cross-sector collaborations should last as long as the collaborations are viable and productive, but not longer.

A fourth issue to watch is the degree to which these entities are able to sustain rich, multidimensional linkages among partners or devolve into a less collaborative, more formal "hub to spokes" model of coordination, where partners scale back their voluntary involvement and cede responsibility for communication and coordination to the backbone, and the enterprise begins to resemble a traditional bureaucratic form. Because collaboration can be costly, especially in terms of participants' time, it can be tempting to let someone else, like the backbone operation, carry the burden of collaboration. Ironically, well-run backbone organizations might be especially sensitive to this kind of subtle cooptation.

Executive Leadership. The collaborations we studied depended heavily on the contributions their leaders made to the overall effort. In turn, leadership effectiveness depended on relationships of reciprocity and trust. This kind of leadership is more entrepreneurial than bureaucratic, more interpersonal than structural. What might look like a soft leadership skill of providing visionary, charismatic inspiration is really the hard skill of managing relationships and efforts that are not bound by rules, rewards, or accountability.

Our case study evidence is consistent with prior research on collaborative leadership. Many persons we spoke with expressed strong praise for their collaboration's chief executive. While people often recounted what they saw as the unique histories, personalities, and qualifications of the leaders they spoke about, we were struck by the commonalities in their descriptions — optimism, ability to inspire confidence, willingness to listen and downplay one's own role, trustworthiness, creative problem solver, good at building relationships, well-organized, works effectively across divisions, knows everybody, sees opportunities.

Several initiatives experienced a leadership transition, during or prior to the timeframe of our study and in some cases, the transition worked out well because the new leader maintained an overall consistency in the work but also was able to introduce useful and welcome changes. In several cases, leadership transitions were more difficult and tended to mirror other problems the collaborations were having. A new leader is not a quick fix for a rocky collaboration.

How to anticipate and prepare for leadership transitions will be an ongoing challenge for collaborations over time. To this end, it may be useful to have transparency in performance reviews of current leaders, to watch carefully for any leadership issues that begin to emerge, and to articulate what is valuable in a current leader's approach and skill set, as well as what new skills might be needed, so partners know what to look for in a successor. 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 collaboration is perceived as successful; a vision that has been realized in practice can serve as a powerful magnet to keep collaboration going.

Collaborative Structures and Processes. In our research, we observed that cross-sector collaborations configure their operations to manage several important functions. We found fairly strong consistency among the eight collaborations in how they established structures and processes for these functions.

Structures for Public Information and Engagement. Some collaborations hold large gatherings that are open to the public and aim to inform a broad and diverse group of community members. Other collaborations hold meetings for smaller, more focused audiences. Most also use a variety of other means to reach out to their local constituents, such as holding informational sessions at school or neighborhood sites, sponsoring special events, maintaining a website, sending email newsletters, posting on social media, and publishing annual reports.

Structures for Strategic Decision Making and Oversight. The collaborations are even more consistent in forming governance structures to oversee the collaboration itself. Most have established moderately sized groups, with names such as the Operations Committee or Board of Directors, that meet periodically. These bodies work with executive directors of the backbone organizations to execute fiscal responsibilities for the collaborations, 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.

Structures for Operational Planning and Support. At the programmatic level, the collaborations typically have constituted work groups, task forces, or project teams for planning and coordinating their core service work. Again, while there is variation in how these groups are named and formed, they are easily identifiable across collaborations as the bodies that advise, plan, undertake, and monitor the programmatic interventions of the collaboration. These working groups sometimes make heavy time demands on volunteers, so maintaining the steady involvement of many partners can be a challenge.

Managing these collaborative structures typically falls to the backbone organization's staff, especially the executive director, so this is a competency that needs to be well covered. One strategy we observed for maintaining an effective collaborative structure was to build in a degree of intentional overlap, so that, for example, governance leaders have a clear sense of the work of the task forces because they have participated in it.

Financing Collaboration. The collaborations we studied relied on foundation or government grants or on special initiative funding from a public governmental source but were, for the most part, not burdened by financial stress during the time of our research. This may have been an artifact of timing: we began our research during a period of high enthusiasm for cross-sector approaches among foundations and government grantmakers. But while the collaborations had resources, 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 collaborations 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 collaborations 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 collaborations have begun to advocate for state-level funding. We did not perceive that fundraising consumed excessive amounts of the time and attention of most collaborative leaders. Nonetheless, this may become more crucial over time, and adopting strategies like state-level advocacy may require even more from them in the future.

Funding is used in different ways across the eight collaborations we explored. In all locales the collaboration's funding is at least partly used to support the backbone operation; it is the primary expense for several collaborations. Core operational support can be a very large expense. Some constituents believe this saps resources from programmatic services, but others are quick to defend the need to support the core operation, in part because it is the means by which other funds are leveraged and through which efficiencies in service delivery are gained.

The collaborations generally do not disperse funds for the ongoing work of collaborative partners, for example to support an agency's regular after-school programming. In this sense, partners who aligned with their local cross-sector collaborations in the hopes of finding a new source of funding for their own operations may have been disappointed. Rather, the collaborations use the funds they have raised to support major initiatives agreed upon by the collaborative partners.

It should be noted that all of the cross-sector collaborations we studied exist, at least to some degree, because local school systems have not met basic educational goals in their communities. This may be partly because the systems themselves are not adequately funded and resourced. In this case, the additional supports, initiatives, and wraparound services the collaborations provide may never be sufficient to ensure school systems meet their goals. The challenge then becomes not just to resource the ancillary enterprises of the cross-sector collaboration sufficiently, but to press more aggressively for more adequate funding for education overall.

Using Data. Using data to drive program effectiveness is touted as one of the essential design features of the collective impact model of collaboration, and many foundations and national organizations supporting collaborative ventures also stress the value of monitoring and analyzing information. Most recommend data be used in one or more of three ways:

- For continuous learning and feedback for the collaboration. This can involve the analysis of local conditions and indicators to identify core challenges and their root causes in order to develop a theory of action, and then monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of interventions;

- For the identification of needs and the management and coordination of service delivery at the level of individual clients (children and youth); and

- For public communication and accountability, by tracking an agreed upon set of core measurement indicators for the initiative.

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 managing databases of health status and educational performance information. There were also problems setting up effective data processing systems, overcoming concerns about privacy, and training end users to trust and use these systems; these especially impeded the direct coordination of services at the individual student level. 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 with the interventions and outcomes they were monitoring.

Despite problems, we found data were being used across the case study sites for the three purposes of continuous learning and feedback, coordination of services, and public reporting and accountability. For example, several collaborations made sporadic efforts to gather and report data on local conditions affecting children's development and performance. These data included health indicators, measures of family and

neighborhood poverty, and educational performance. 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 also made efforts to monitor program implementation and take-up of services. Mostly, this was an in-house effort, for example collecting information on how many families visited a legal clinic or attended a parent seminar, or how many students continued to attended a summer program for its full duration. In fledgling ways, some collaborations tried to link programmatic interventions and service participation with outcomes, for example tracking attendance improvement or growth on math and language arts assessments for students receiving support services. Several collaborations have focused some of their data activities around student case management and coordination of student services, but with mixed success so far.

All Hands Raised – Photo credit: Fred Joe

As new collaborations got started, especially those associated with Strive and inspired by the collective impact model, enthusiasm ran high for the "shared measurement systems" that supposedly would galvanize community attention and effort. Under this approach, collaborations were encouraged to identify key outcome indicators, set targets and timeframes, and regularly report results to community constituents and stakeholders. These practices were evident in the annual reports and on the websites of several collaborations we studied. Simple graphics such as up or down arrows, and red, yellow, and green dots made it easy to see how a program was doing.

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 not quite so straightforward. Not all collaborations report system-wide measurements, and those that do are apparently not overly preoccupied by them. The collaborations seem to have become more concerned with making steady progress than with hitting specific performance targets and dates.

Although we occasionally heard a funder seemed to be restless about results, for the most part funders seemed to be giving the collaborations more leeway in meeting targets than originally planned. This might not last, of course, and eventually stakeholders and funders may either withdraw their support or reset their expectations.

Overall, the cross-sector collaborations seem to be helped, not hindered, by their efforts to obtain and use data. Technical challenges were not insignificant. Whether due to limitations in data availability or analytic techniques, data analyses were not always comprehensive enough to measure accurately how well programs were being implemented, the connection between inputs, interventions, and outcomes, or change over time. But the efforts to use data to facilitate continuous feedback and improvement were meaningful to many stakeholders and did facilitate learning. The selection and presentation of metrics for tracking ambitious, system-level outcomes did seem to have useful

signaling effects for initiatives; they kept the participants focused and likely informed broader audiences as well. As accountability tools, they gave the collaborations opportunities to celebrate when things went well and did not seem to have negative repercussions, at least not yet, when targets were not met.

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.

Partnering with Local School Systems. 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 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 up 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. Our cases show that while no collaboration appeared to be trying to blame or shame its local educators, their relationships with local education systems took on different characters, depending on circumstances, histories, and personalities.

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 bounds and taking control from the school district. This approach led to efforts where the cross-sector collaboration partnered with the district to develop high school academies, summer camps, after-school activities, attendance-monitoring programs, college advising services, and other initiatives consistent with local district priorities and strategic plans. It also led to initiatives in which collaborations provided wraparound social, health, and educational services, often on school premises, that could help students be motivated and ready to learn.

How ambitious and how well ingrained these initiatives have become varies rather dramatically across the eight cases. 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. In several cases, detailed in the full report, collaborative leaders made exceptional efforts to nurture interpersonal relationships and provide material assistance to district leaders, to promote more trust and cooperation; similar efforts in the other direction, from the district to the cross-sector collaboration, were less apparent.

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. In several cities, the cross-sector initiatives offered some services to charter and private schools and their students. Charter and private school leaders were invited to participate in the various forums that were part of the collaborations' governance and operational structures in several cities, but their participation was minimal. The most commonly offered explanation was that schools that are independent of the traditional school district and not part of any other multi-school structure simply do not have the administrative time and resources for this kind of commitment. However, the complexity of relationships among private/voucher schools, public charter schools, and the traditional public school system in Milwaukee was a major force affecting the collaboration in that city.

Working with National Support Networks. 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. But these kinds of connections were sporadic and ad hoc and they have not been well documented or analyzed. Currently a growing number of organizations are emerging that are specifically designed to promote and support expanding networks of collaborations. 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 ended up forming one of its own.

A Look at Early Outcomes

Early Evidence for Implementation and Impact

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, like many others, were interested in knowing how the collaborations seemed to be doing with the goals they had set for themselves and often promoted very publicly. In the section on data use above, we discussed *how* the initiatives gathered and reported data on local conditions, interventions, and progress toward goals. In this section, we take a look at *what* these data showed as evidence of implementation, outcomes and impact. Many of the collaborations gathered such information themselves, although not always in rigorous ways that would support strong conclusions. Several have also commissioned external evaluations to help them obtain a more objective look.

For example, in Buffalo, the evidence suggests that, as wraparound services are made available to more students and schools, their use is steadily increasing. 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, for example the summer transition programs, 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 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. A reduced set of indicators are discussed, and they are framed and contextualized through narratives that explain the interventions being developed to address them and that explicitly draw attention to equity concerns. 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 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 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 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.

Finally, the Northside Achievement Zone in Minneapolis tracks and reports its progress in several ways, including annual reports, evaluation reports, and public forums. The most recent reports, drawing from administrative data and the collaboration's own information system, indicate NAZ students are beginning to outperform other students in the neighborhood on math and language arts assessments, with particular gains for African American students. All components of the NAZ approach appear to be making a positive difference. Not all of the collaboration's original outcome goals are yet within reach, including population-level goals. Nonetheless, many signs point in positive directions for this collaboration. NAZ is unique in also monitoring the progress and health of the collaboration itself. A study based on surveys of collaborative partners found participants had largely positive perceptions of their experience with the collaboration and identified continuing challenges in implementing collaboration, including the implementation and use of the student-level data system – a challenge for other initiatives as well.

These collaborations are young and rapidly evolving, and new reports about implementation and goal accomplishments are released regularly, so we caution against inferring their patterns of progress and outcomes are static. Our case studies suggest 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 Educational Inequity

In the locales we have studied, disparities in educational and economic outcomes by race, ethnicity, and social class are glaring. These disturbing patterns are undoubtedly related to systematic structural inequalities and longstanding patterns of racism and exclusion in housing, employment, criminal justice, social services, and governance, as well as education. The policies and practices that have sustained inequality were obscured from broad civic awareness for a long time, but in recent years they have been documented with growing urgency. Indeed, it is these circumstances and the enduring inequities they have produced that have led many local leaders and citizens to initiate cross-sector collaborations, in the hope of reversing seemingly intractable patterns and ensuring the fortunes of all citizens can be improved.

All eight initiatives we studied openly acknowledged the inequities of educational opportunity and achievement 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.

Nonetheless, several of the initiatives have gradually moved toward more targeted and explicit attention to racial inequities. Some have established special forums or initiatives for male students of color. Many discuss inequities openly and offer data on their websites and reports that are disaggregated to show disparities by race/ethnicity and social class. In cities with deep and long-standing cleavages around race and social class, explicit attention seemed riskier, with the potential of inflaming old wounds, and less direct approaches were used. In the cities with more White population and more overall affluence, the collaborations could be more forthright, perhaps because the situation was not as dire and the needs not as dramatic.

There is clearly no easy formula for doing the work to achieve equity in education. The questions of whether to pursue specific race- and class-based disparities versus taking a more inclusive, color-blind approach, or how far to let a root cause analysis of disparate educational outcomes lead to the tangled and tenacious problems of segregation, deprivation, and structural racism, are enormous dilemmas for collaborations that find it challenging to implement even the most basic intervention at the scale of an entire city. The cross-sector collaborations we studied make, at the least, an important symbolic contribution to addressing equity by the very fact of their existence. Virtually all were established to improve educational and economic outcomes for residents of their locales, which automatically meant minoritized, low-income communities. Symbolic efforts can, of course, be for show only, deflecting criticism and tamping down conflict and resentment. 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 these initiatives and their host locales are learning to admit to systemic problems and find ways to tackle them. It's a long road ahead, however.

Oakland Full Service Community Schools - Photo credit: © Hasain Rasheed Photography

Taking Stock: Implications for Policy and Practice

Cross-sector collaborations for education are not new and have experienced periodic spurts of attention and investment. They arise from and sometimes resemble other types of initiatives for revitalizing and providing services to neighborhoods, families, and students. The current cyclical resurgence has been spurred in part by social impact advocates' embrace of the collective impact concept, and also by other political and social conditions. This resurgence has brought new elements into play that make this cycle different and potentially fruitful. None is a silver bullet, but the mix of new data, national networks, structural innovations and increasing awareness of students' need for a quality education *and* a comprehensive model of wraparound services seems to be providing forward momentum that goes beyond prior efforts.

The recent iterations of cross-sector collaboration for education are still relatively new and "in development." Rather than a summative evaluation, our research efforts are an attempt to lay the groundwork for a broad enterprise of additional research, still to come. We offer some preliminary conclusions and implications for those engaged in the work themselves or in position to support—or choose not to support—efforts like these in the future. Our general message combines cautious optimism, a call for patience, and one or two pinches of skeptical realism.

The collaborations we studied have tried to achieve coherence and alignment in their goals and activities. However, sometimes the goals are quite expansive compared with what they aspire to implement or actually are able to accomplish. Tangible activities are constrained by available resources, personnel, and interests. Some collaborations have sought to implement a comprehensive approach, while others articulated that vision but have been more circumspect with their activities.

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. The implicit idea that the collective impact initiative will gather and align all of the relevant elements in a locale has clearly not happened; each of our collaborations exists in a city or region where other collaborations with similar goals are also operating. Demonstrating dramatic impact on major outcomes remains an elusive aspiration.

What Is Impressive About What We Have Seen

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. Although the tendency seems to be to focus on near-term and achievable targets of opportunity, the movement overall retains its orientation to the long run, and, in the world of cradle-to-career education reform, cycles of improvement may need to be measured in decades.

While it is too early to judge how well cross-sector collaboration "works" when assessed using defined measures of educational achievement and evidence of eliminating disparities in opportunity among subgroups of students, our research suggests some reasons state and national actors might be wise to support such local efforts, at least for enough time to allow them the opportunity to show what they can and cannot do:

- As they have been implemented, current collaborations show some 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. The collaborations we studied have had to overcome difficulties to accomplish their work, but they have managed to go beyond talking together to achieve actual working together.

- 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. In at least some of our cities some long-time local leaders initially feared competition from the new collaborations for attention, energy, and resources. Ironically, one factor helping to alleviate these concerns was that the collaborations did not prove as large and dominating as their own rhetoric led some people to expect, but the collaborations also worked to anticipate and avoid some potential resentment.

- Our cases reveal different ways of dealing with longstanding political and social challenges, but the collaborations seem to share an aversion to tackling them head on and a preference, instead, for quiet outreach, keeping a low profile when hot battles have raged around them.

- In some cases, efforts to bring grassroots advocates and service providers into the fold have enriched the range of values and ideas the collaboration takes into account, but the payoff at his point may come more in the form of preempting destructive clashes than erasing structural inequalities.

In past efforts at urban school reform, much energy and many resources have been frittered away in intramural clashes and maneuvering for personal and organizational advantages. Calming the political waters may not guarantee policy successes, but it may be an important facilitator. Small steps can be valuable when they are in the right direction. These groups' efforts to promote quality schooling and the delivery of comprehensive services as a tool for addressing opportunity gaps, and their focus on expanding these from school-specific efforts to a large scale, represent a substantive advance from most previous efforts.

Managing Expectations at the Local Level and Beyond

Managing expectations is an ongoing challenge for all of the collaborations we have studied. High expectations often are necessary to get stakeholders sufficiently enthused to take the steps incur the costs collaboration requires. They also galvanize media enthusiasm, political support, funding, acceptance by the general public, and an anticipation of forward movement that at times can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. But high expectations have a down side too. When expectations are high, failure to make clear and demonstrable progress can puncture enthusiasm. Even worse, it can fuel a fatalism that infects other efforts to mobilize civic capacity in order to pursue shared goals.

Many of the local cross-sector collaborations demonstrated capacity to manage this tricky balancing act: developing a pragmatic, incremental, and selectively focused strategy while sustaining enough sense of purpose and long-term hopefulness to keep most people on board. Even when early efforts are impressive, sustainability is no sure thing. Collaboration can falter due to normal leadership turnover, the withdrawal of philanthropic or government support, or simple competition with other priorities. Our case studies have highlighted the important role of relationships that are established in face-to-face interaction and then well nourished. Our cases also point to the importance of carefully adapted organizational structures for sustaining those relationships.

Milwaukee Succeeds

Why Patience and Support Are in Order

As difficult as it is to manage expectations at the local level, it is even more difficult to do so at the level of state or national commitment and strategy. The power and reliability of relationship-based efforts can be hard to grasp for those looking for policy levers that can operate from a distance and at larger scale. Yet, for a number of reasons, we consider it wise to give the recent surge in cross-sector collaboration more time to mature before deciding it is time to move on to the next reform idea.

First, the collaborations we have studied are *constantly evolving*. This is true at the local level and at the national network level as well. As people have tried to put models into effect, there have been adaptations, reinterpretations, and course corrections, including a feedback loop between these local efforts and the national networks that guide and support them. This learning and adjustment may be especially fortuitous for cross-sector collaborations because, by design, they disrupt the organizational norms and habits that had been hard-wired into local institutions and sector silos.

Secondly, all of the collaborations or networks assume *a long and multi-stepped journey before anticipated outcomes will become manifest*. Our fieldwork suggests building relationships and unraveling mutual suspicion and mistrust are major pieces of the work that is being done thus far. It may be more important to assess and credit these outcomes at this early stage than to demand measurable outcomes in learning and achievement.

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*. The pressure to focus on data has been something of a double-edged sword. The immediately available outcome indicators, because of federal and state accountability policies, tend to center on standardized math and reading scores along with graduation rates. We see signs, though, that local communities are prioritizing establishing relationships, treasuring demonstrated successes, even if initially small, measuring and valuing efforts and activities even when these may not yet have produced desired outcomes, and exploring the possibility for adopting more locally meaningful indicators.

Fourth, local collaborations are operating in contexts that experience *unpredictable and powerful shocks*. This includes unexpected turnover in positions of local leadership, sharp reductions in state revenues to support families and schools, and sharp shifts in federal funding and philosophy. It is not making excuses for local collaboration efforts to observe that such forces are both beyond their control and have much greater potential to affect long-term student and family outcomes, whether for better or worse. Swimming as they do in such turbulent waters, 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. Local efforts, no matter how sincere and even heroic, are subject to a wide array of destabilizing threats. By embedding the commitment to reform in a broader array of stakeholders, these initiatives may make improvement efforts less vulnerable to leadership changes. By nurturing relationships and establishing channels of communication among previously fragmented and often competitive stakeholders, they may decrease the likelihood that externally induced stresses will set off internal skirmishes. 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 considered in the context in which localized reform efforts have expended tremendous energy on short-term enthusiasms and internal skirmishes, it could be an important accomplishment.

Looking Ahead

None of this is to say cross-sector collaboration should be immune from skeptical assessment. 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 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: (a) moving beyond supporting the school system to strengthening the school system; (b) broadening outreach and inclusion of stakeholders beyond the elites; (c) reducing the reliance on philanthropic support; and (d) adjusting to the national political environment.

Moving Beyond Supporting School Systems to Strengthening Them. The contemporary resurgence of interest in cross-sector collaboration in part reflects a desire to move away from the polarized either/or debate between schools versus non-school approaches to a "both/and" formulation that gets schools and broader community resources working together. The cases we explored bring school system leaders into regular conversations with nonprofits, civic leaders, and agencies that provide services that can help children thrive and learn. And many have adopted outcome goals that go beyond the narrow math and reading scores that have dominated K-12 reform mandates. But this does not deter from the need to improve students' academic

performance. And improving academic performance is a high hurdle unless strategies also include improving what happens in classrooms.

School systems that take instructional reform seriously are already stretched and stressed, and it can be tempting for them to see collaboration as a distraction. Most collaborations we studied have tried to help by adding support services for students, but they have only begun to address the absent "donut hole" of instructional improvement within the K-12 sector. And their pragmatic efforts to find initial projects that are doable and low-conflict, collaborations may leave unaddressed some tough impediments to change inside districts, schools, and classrooms. Moreover, because they seem to emerge more from the social service sector than from education, day-to-day leaders of collaborations may lack the expertise and inclination to work on core instructional improvement.

Broadening Outreach and Inclusion of Diverse Stakeholders. Our nationwide scan found business, higher education, and social services were most likely to be represented on formal governing boards, with representation of minority group organizations, teacher unions, charter schools, private schools, and neighborhood or community organizations less frequent and less consistent across sites. Some critics have expressed frustration with what they consider the dominance of business leaders who attempt to impose business models or practices that are not really responsive to the educational context and educational needs, while others are concerned about superficial efforts to involve more marginalized groups in collaborations in high visibility ways that do not translate into real power. Our fieldwork showed collaborations leaders are simultaneously aware of the challenge and aware they have not yet met that challenge. To their credit, national leaders of the collective impact movement also have acknowledged diversity and breath of participation have been weak spots in early efforts. But simple acknowledgment may not suffice. Broader engagement of diverse stakeholders requires working through what can be difficult discussions about race, ethnicity, culture, and privilege. Collaborations must begin this process, but even well-intentioned efforts may face skepticism or resistance from both elites and non-elites based on their distinct interpretations of why such efforts frequently fail.

Reducing the Reliance on Philanthropic Support. Third, the sustainability of long-term funding remains uncertain. Philanthropic support has been important for all the collaborations we studied, especially during start-up phases, but the spigots of foundation support can close. To guard against this risk, collaborations may need to develop substantial alternative sources of funding that draw from the deeper wells of local education or civic government budgets, or, as one collaboration has done, by developing a dedicated local endowment that cannot be diverted to other purposes.

Adjusting to the National Political Environment. Finally, there is the question of whether and how sharp changes in the political and policy environment at the national level will trickle down to the local level, and how cross-sector collaborations for education will adjust. In late 2015, Congress approved the Every Student Succeeds Act, ending No Child Left Behind and signaling a shift to a less assertive national government involvement, more deference to states, and some de-emphasis on strict accountability based on standardized tests in reading and math. In 2017, Donald Trump succeeded Barack Obama as president and appointed Betsy DeVos, a proponent of vouchers and school choice, as Secretary of Education. While the national landscape is still rumbling and shifting as we write, it is possible to identify some looming challenges and perhaps some opportunities.

The Trump administration initially signaled its wish for sharp cuts in education expenditures; specifically targeting for elimination a number of programs that provide support for health and mental health services,

before- and after-school learning opportunities, and full-service community schools. In addition, proposed cuts and regulatory changes in other areas, such as Medicaid, have the potential to affect school systems and school children directly.

In addition to reducing federal spending, the Trump administration seems inclined to reorient federal involvement in ways that may run counter to the vision of cross-sector collaboration. "If we really want to help students," DeVos has said, "then we need to focus everything about education on individual students – funding, supporting and investing in them. Not in buildings; not in systems" (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The contemporary movement toward collective impact and cross-sector collaboration, in contrast, has advocated changing systems to leverage widespread, systemic change in student outcomes. The Trump administration's emphasis on expanding charter schools and voucher and tuition assistance programs for private education risks promoting disinvestment in the traditional urban school districts with which the collective impact movement has partnered, and federal disdain for investing in systems does not bode well for building bridges between K-12 and higher education or between school and non-school institutions.

To date Congress has served as a counterweight to the White House; for 2019, for example, Congress appropriated more for the U.S. Department of Education than what was proposed in the President's budget. And initiatives to radically shift support to charters and vouchers have been kept in check. But the rapidly growing federal deficit combined with partisan stand-offs in Congress make it unlikely the national government will ramp up education, health, and social service spending, at least in the near-term. And while we have suggested previous cuts in state and federal support may have helped motivate local communities to pursue cross-sector collaboration as a strategy for doing more with less, our field research also found numerous cases in which local collaborations depended on federal funding streams to augment their initiatives.

Not all scenarios for the future are threatening to local cross-sector efforts, however. The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015 marked a shift away from an era of top down accountability linked almost exclusively to standardized test scores. While not giving up on the idea that communities should monitor school outcomes, ESSA carved out new room for states and local districts to experiment with other ways to define and measure outcomes, including those relating to social and emotional learning. Many collaborations we studied included conventional test scores in their own data systems, in part because these were readily available, but we also found evidence they are trying to be thoughtful and creative and to move beyond off-the-shelf standardized measures. This suggests a possible complementarity between local efforts and the new ESSA environment, which could be supportive of the expansion of cross-sector collaboration.

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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