

Collective Impact: What Does It Mean for Educational Leaders?

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Abstract

Due to local, state, and national accountability measures, school reform efforts have become critical of many legislative agendas. Local community members are getting off the sidelines and becoming part of the game to support local schools districts to become part of the solution. Across the United States, Collective Impact models, which propose bringing stakeholders together in pursuit of a common goal, have rapidly gained momentum across the United States as a major element in school reform efforts. This commentary explores how the concept of Collective Impact is leading to increased student outcomes and making a cultural change on local communities.

Key Words

school reform, school culture, collective impact

Over the past decades, community leaders interested in driving and supporting social change have sought approaches that bring stakeholders together in pursuit of a common goal. In response to persistent social problems, achievement gaps, and a disconnect between action and data, there has been an explosion of interest in one specific model—Collective Impact—that proposes to address all of these concerns.

Kania and Kramer (2011) have defined Collective Impact as “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem” (p. 36). Because it brings together leaders across several sectors, including education, health, business, and nonprofit organizations, Collective Impact has been proposed as a comprehensive solution to complex problems. In relation to education reform, this model has been suggested as a way to “move the needle” on a wide array of outcomes, from kindergarten readiness to third-grade reading proficiency to college graduation rates.

Rodney Thompson, one of this article’s authors, had the pleasure of meeting Jamie Vollmer as he discussed his book, *Schools Cannot Do It Alone: Building Public Support for America’s Public Schools*. In that book, Vollmer passionately described the multitude of social responsibilities with which legislators and bureaucrats have burdened school systems—often without proper funding or adequate support. At the same time, federal and state governments continue to invent new accountability measures to determine the “success” of our schools and students, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, which was passed in 2015.

School boards and educational leaders working with limited revenue streams often

face difficult decisions—choosing between hiring a literacy coach or a school resource officer, for example. We have been witnesses to the frustration of these leaders as they attempt to implement mandatory reforms and provide access to an expanded curriculum that is much more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic. For instance, school budgets must be stretched to meet requirements such as providing healthcare services and swimming lessons, while school and district leaders simultaneously face punitive damages for students who cannot master the skills required to succeed on standardized tests. As the title of Vollmer’s book (2010) proclaimed, “Schools Cannot Do It Alone!”

In this article, we address how Collective Impact models can change the status quo for our schools—and what educational leaders can do to enact meaningful social and educational change. First, we provide an overview of current research. Then, in order to illustrate how the model functions in various stages of implementation, we present a discussion of three different communities (Cincinnati, Nashville, and Charleston), which are at various stages of the Collective Impact implementation process. Finally, we discuss the challenges and opportunities that these models provide—and how they might be able to address the growing needs of our communities, schools, and students.

Review of the Literature

Kania and Kramer (2011), who first proposed the term Collective Impact, lay out five conditions for the success of community-based change efforts: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations (p. 39). Although all five conditions are important, at the heart of Collective Impact is the idea that in order to create meaningful change, partners

need to establish continuous communication—as well as trust, respect, and shared goals—in relation to the most critical needs in a given community. Weaver (2014) argued that there is a more fundamental condition: “The issue being tackled has to be perceived as either urgent or important to the community. This can be challenging, as there is so much ‘noise’ and so many important issues out there in communities” (p. 12).

There is an abundance of evidence that leaders from various fields have embraced Collective Impact as a framework for bringing together diverse stakeholders in support of a common goal. Kania and Kramer’s introduction to Collective Impact, published in the Winter 2011 edition of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, has received more than 300,000 page views, more than any other piece in the magazine’s history (Gemmel, 2014, p. 3). Further, Collective Impact conferences, online discussion boards, and other data sharing initiatives have allowed thousands of organizations to share strategies, information, possibilities, and pitfalls.

Community organizations concerned with broad-based educational reform were among the first to adopt this model, and its popularity has grown from there. For example, Strive Together, a national Collective Impact network that has a goal of improving student outcomes, counts more than 9,400 organizations among its partners. Strive Together takes a “cradle to career” approach in which children and adolescents are tracked based on six indicators—kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading, middle grades math, high school graduation, post-secondary enrollment, and post-secondary attainment (StriveTogether, “Cradle to career student roadmap,” n.d.).

In order to continually evaluate the effectiveness of its Collective Impact network, Strive Together encourages all partners to provide data relating to student outcome indicators. Although many of the Cradle to Career Network partners are in the early stages of implementation, the data from more established partners has established a promising profile that supports the partnership’s desired outcomes. For example, the Strive Partnership, located in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky and deemed the “flagship partnership” of Strive Together, reported that 91% of student outcome indicators are improving for students, kindergarten readiness is up 13 points to 75%, and fourth grade reading achievement for Cincinnati Public School students is up 21 points to 76% (StriveTogether, “Results,” n.d.).

Other programs that have centered on community engagement, such as the Harlem Children’s Zone (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011), have also sought to involve a variety of stakeholders in order to address a comprehensive set of indicators. However, what sets Collective Impact apart from previous frameworks is a focus on shared measurement—partners must agree upon how to continuously collect, analyze, and share data so that they can provide the most meaningful information about progress. As Rose (2014) pointed out, “The challenge here is on agreeing which indicators to adopt, how to generate and monitor this data in a timely way, and, perhaps more importantly, understanding how each partner’s actions and interventions will impact those indicators” (p. 80). So, as the number of Collective Impact communities continues to grow, school and community partners will need to make a concerted effort to develop common forums and methods for sharing and mining data on outcomes.

Collective Impact Communities

In this section, we present a discussion of three communities—Cincinnati, Nashville, and Charleston—which have adopted Collective Impact models, but are in very different stages of implementation. Cincinnati has been operating a comprehensive community partnership program for decades. In this community, Collective Impact partners built on the existing framework to establish a set of indicators, create collaborative programs to address targeted community issues, and regularly and consistently inform and mobilize the community in order to keep the momentum going (Rospert, 2013). Nashville, which established a community partnership in 2005 and adopted several components of the Collective Impact model in 2012, is currently working to operationalize and build capacity for data collection and analysis.

Finally, Charleston is in the process of developing its own version of Collective Impact; while frameworks are in place for Charleston area partners to work together to make progress on indicators, there is extensive work to be done on developing and organizing structures that will support collaborative community efforts. It is our hope that these examples will illuminate how Collective Impact models develop over time—and underline the need for educators and educational leaders to take an active role in these partnerships.

Greater Cincinnati Strive Partnership

Although there are several communities that have introduced elements of Collective Impact, Liebman (2013) suggested that the “Greater Cincinnati Strive Partnership is perhaps the best example of an effort to define a target population and coordinate services in a strategic way to make sure everyone receives the services they need to succeed” (“Making purposeful efforts” section, para. 2). According to StrivePartnerships (2015), a group of

community leaders united to improve educational outcomes in the Greater Cincinnati area, the goal was not to launch another educational program, but to form partnerships, establish desired outcomes, and work collectively to positively impact school reform in the Cincinnati metropolitan area (“About the partnership,” n.d.). Today, the leadership committee is comprised of school superintendents, college presidents, bank presidents, and CEOs of major corporations and non-profits.

Bornstein (2011) attributed the successes of the Greater Cincinnati Strive Partnership to powerful communication and collaboration within the data-sharing system. Partners have established common goals and concentrated their analysis efforts on the data linked to the agreed-upon goals. The emphasis on a variety of data, covering outcomes from early childhood to adulthood, allows for organizers to reasonably apply secured resources to keep the initiative on track.

Kania and Kramer (2011) stated that while there were many obstacles and deeply rooted institutional barriers faced by the urban areas of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, even the initial efforts and strategies were successful. The 2014-15 Strive Cincinnati Partnership Report identified six community level outcomes (kindergarten readiness, early grade reading, middle grade math, high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, and postsecondary completion) that the organization members have determined to be key indicators of educational success.

Since the Collective Impact model was first implemented in 2006, there have been significant gains across all six indicators, including a 9% increase in kindergarten readiness, an 11% increase in high school graduation rates, and a 10% increase in

postsecondary enrollment (StrivePartnerships, 2015). Currently, the partnership effort is focused on channeling resources to areas identified by key data indicators as most promising as a means for assuring sustainability.

Alignment Nashville

In 2012, the “Music City” launched its own version of Collective Impact. Alignment Nashville, which is currently spearheaded by a Board of Directors including Nashville’s mayor, the CEO of Nashville Public Television, industry leaders, university presidents, and parents, has brought leaders from middle Tennessee together to engage in conversations about how to improve educational outcomes for communities, districts, and schools. Today, Nashville is gaining national attention for its efforts to spark community engagement and development. Nossett (2014) listed several recent accolades for the city of Nashville: ranked as one of the top five regions for job growth, one of the best places for a technology start-ups, and referred to by GQ as “Nowville.”

In 2011, the Ford Motor Company Fund and Community Services named Nashville as a Ford Next Generation Learning Hub (Ford Partnership for Advanced Studies, 2011). As only one of seven distinguished communities in the country to receive this recognition, Nashville has begun to offer professional development for other communities planning educational reform efforts through the collaboration of community, business and educational leaders. According to the Ford Partnership for Advanced Studies (2011), “Alignment Nashville was established in 2005 as a nonprofit organization that seeks to align the services, programs and resources of community organizations to positively impact the Nashville community by helping our public schools succeed and our youth live healthier lives” (para 7).

Like Cincinnati, Alignment Nashville has developed a distinctive model of Collective Impact that brings together community leaders, non-profits, and the Nashville school system to classify and address the city’s most persistent educational and health-related needs. Educators have played key roles in developing the Nashville-specific model. As a result of the alliance and in an effort to make progress towards college readiness outcomes, the Nashville school district (MNPS) developed the Academies of Nashville, a concept that is now recognized by educators across the country as a model program to promote college and career readiness (Alignment Nashville Annual Report, 2014, p. 4).

Since Nashville’s Collective Impact model was first established in 2012, there has been substantial movement on several key indicators. For example, high school graduation rates have increased from 76.6% to 81.3% in just three years, a gain of nearly 5% (Alignment Nashville Annual Report, 2015, p. 18). High school attendance rates have increased from 89% to 93%, and there were 11,000 fewer disciplinary incidents in 2014-2014, as compared to 2011-2012 (p. 18). As a result, 77% of Metro Nashville Public School employees report an atmosphere of trust and respect within their schools, an 11% increase from 2012.

Alignment Nashville also tracks progress and reports on short-term, mid-term, and long-term outcomes. The Nashville Alignment teams, which are groups of leaders from education, non-profits, industry, and academia, provide a structure for collaborative work on common goals and determine key indicators and timelines. For example, the Learning Technology Alignment Team has met the short-term outcomes (e.g., “At least 75% of participants in community awareness campaign sessions report increased understanding of

digital literacy,”) as well as the mid-term outcomes (i.e., a 25% increase in number of MNPS students that are digitally literate)” (Alignment Nashville Annual Report, 2014, p. 37). Currently, in conjunction with other alignment teams, members of the Learning Technology Alignment Team are working towards several long-term goals: increasing high school graduation rates, increasing college readiness rates, and increasing career readiness rates.

This organizational structure is typical of Collective Impact communities which have moved into the “sustaining” stage (Edmondson & Hecht, 2014)—after tackling issues of how to structure the Collective Impact teams, stakeholders begin working on developing outcome indicators and ways of tracking and measuring progress. Then, in a recursive process of data collection, evaluation, and program development, teams assess and adjust their progress. This dynamic model allows for constant collaboration and movement towards an ambitious reform agenda. The main goal for the Alignment Nashville teams at this point in their development is to build and sustain community support as stakeholders work towards achieving the long-term outcomes.

Charleston’s Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative

A more recent Collective Impact effort has been initiated in the Charleston, South Carolina region. The Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative (TCCC) serves not only Charleston County, but also the neighboring counties of Berkeley and Dorchester. In a recent press release, TCCC proclaimed to be a community-wide movement focused on improving the quality of life of its citizens and its workforce through education by collectively aligning resources and working toward common goals (Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative, 2015, p. 1).

Like Cincinnati and Nashville, TCCC uses data and focused community collaboration across a continuum from “cradle-to-career” to build and implement strategies that will facilitate widespread systemic change. The overarching goals are increased student success and economic prosperity for the region. As *Anita Zucker, Chair and CEO of The InterTech Group*, stated, “for the first time leaders from our region’s top businesses, school systems, colleges and universities, foundations, not-for-profits and governments have agreed to align our efforts to ensure every child in the tri-county region will graduate from high school prepared for either further education or employment in the modern workforce” (Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative, 2015, p. 2).

Just as successful Collective Impact models in Cincinnati and Nashville have utilized major players in the community to gain credibility, Charleston has followed suit. For example, based upon their ongoing commitment to early childhood development and their engagement with many organizations currently working in that sphere, Trident United Way was selected to serve as the convening partner for the Kindergarten Readiness network. Likewise, the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce, which has experience in working with workforce readiness and experiential learning opportunities in high school, was selected as the convening partner for the High School Graduation network.

A key focus for communities beginning to implement a Collective Impact model is figuring out who needs a seat at the table. For the TCCC, prominent local executives working in or retired from industry sit on the board and help to structure committee efforts within the organization. For example, Geoffrey L. Schuler, the Chairman of the World Trade Council and a retired Boeing Executive, serves as the

convener for the “math pathways” initiative, which aims to connect high school and college initiatives to prepare students for the modern workforce. Educators and senior administrators from five universities and four public school districts serving the Charleston area play a critical role on this collaborative team.

As is the case with other Collective Impact communities that are in the early stages of sustainability, the Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative (TCCC) began by determining its initial focus—kindergarten readiness and high school graduation rates—from a review of several data sources. The need for focused efforts around these two milestones was based upon the 2015 Regional Education Report, which indicated that 24% of local kindergarteners are not proficient in vocabulary and 40% are not proficient in social and emotional development. Although high school graduation rates have improved in recent years, the report also showed sharp contrasts in rates between racial/ethnic and socio-economic groups (Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative, 2015). TCCC has set ambitious long-term goals: to increase overall kindergarten readiness from 40% to 85% and to increase on-time high school graduation rates from 84% to 95% by 2025.

In order to achieve these goals, TCCC plans to align networks of support from educators, administrators and leaders from business, non-profit, civic, health, government, faith-based, and philanthropic organizations to analyze what’s working well in and out of the classroom. Then, teams will begin to identify unmet needs and recommend strategies to grow or adapt existing programs or to develop new programs. As John Read, CEO of Tri-County Cradle to Career (TCCC) in Charleston, SC has stated, “TCCC is not a program, but a disciplined and data-based process of facilitation, supporting organizations that have

common interest and a need to work together if results are to be achieved” (personal communication, September 1, 2015).

What Does Collective Impact Mean for Superintendents?

As the initial reports from the Greater Cincinnati Strive Partnership and Alignment Nashville demonstrate, Collective Impact models have led to significant progress on a wide array of outcome measures. As a result of the growing interest in these reform efforts, superintendents in communities without functioning Collective Impact models may become interested in spearheading a large-scale community reform effort. However, after processing the mass synchronizations of numerous organizations, outcome measures, data sharing initiatives, and resources, questions start to emerge: Does my community have the resources to sustain a Collective Impact model? Who will organize or manage Collective Impact models in my community? Will my community members choose to participate? At this point, the path of least resistance for district and school leaders is to say, “This sounds great, but Collective Impact will never work in my environment.”

The reality is that many school districts are already utilizing some of the strategies that make Collective Impact models so powerful. Although not all communities will have the resources to sustain a partnership that mirrors the efforts of Greater Cincinnati or Nashville, what they can do is involve all stakeholders to determine key outcome indicators. Just as successful Collective Impact partnerships have done, superintendents can work with partners to select a set of short-term (e.g., a 25% increase in college and career coaching programs) and long-term indicators (e.g., increasing high school graduation rates from 85% to 95%, ensuring that 90% of 3rd graders are on grade level). Then, partners can work together to

create a system for measuring, sharing, and tracking benchmark data.

We realize that we are not describing new concepts—most school districts have already established short- and long-term goals through strategic planning or the school renewal process. However, the key contribution of Collective Impact models is asking community members and leaders to play a key role in shaping goals and outcome measures. Prior to school leaders developing strategies to achieve these goals, the community must first agree on the desired results and plans.

After the indicators have been established, organizations or groups can align their resources to support school improvement efforts. For example, if a local church wants to have a hunger drive, the food could be distributed during the week of standardized testing to increase third-grade reading scores. Likewise, leaders of industry interested in recruiting and maintaining a 21st century workforce could coordinate with school leaders to track and monitor postsecondary attainment and retention rates. District leaders, with the help of coordinated volunteers, can manage these activities without an official Collective Impact label. The critical component of these efforts to build and sustain systemic change is to establish and monitor progress towards common goals.

Moving Forward

As with any burgeoning social improvement agenda, there are many questions left unanswered: What is the long-term prognosis for Collective Impact? How can we utilize existing resources and data sources to track the effectiveness of Collective Impact models? Which partners should (and can) take the lead role on particular initiatives, such as improving high school graduation rates? What is the role of individual families and community members? How do partners keep the momentum rolling on Collective Impact—ten, fifteen, and even fifty years after implementation?

Despite the barriers to implementation and sustained progress, the initial data from established Collective Impact partners present impressive evidence of the model's potential for moving the needle on a variety of indicators. Further, it is clear that in a world of increasing accountability and diminished resources, our children and our schools need every bit of support that they can get. For too long, schools have been both isolated and isolators. Collective Impact proposes a vision (and an organizational structure) that includes all stakeholders as essential components of social change. We believe that this represents a key step towards making schools and communities places in which all students can thrive.

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