



The New Civic Infrastructure: *The “How To” of Collective Impact and Getting a Better Social Return on Investment*

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Secretary Arne Duncan recently said, “Many people believe we have to first address poverty in order to improve education. I believe we have to first improve education in order to address poverty.”¹ If you agree with the secretary, it is easy to see that education is the single most important engine of individual opportunity and economic growth in our country. The question then becomes: In this challenging economy where new resources are scarce, how do we make critical improvements so that we get a better return on our current investment?

To answer this question, leaders from the education, business, nonprofit, civic, and philanthropic sectors in the urban core of the Greater Cincinnati region joined

together in 2006 to form The Strive Partnership. The Partnership focused on an ambitious vision—supporting the success of every child, every step of the way, from cradle to career—and a corresponding set of ambitious goals: working together to ensure every child is prepared for school, is supported inside and outside of school, succeeds academically, enrolls in some form of college, and graduates and enters a career.

But most importantly, the Partnership identified and set measurable targets for a core set of eight overarching outcomes that span the cradle to career continuum. Progress toward meeting these targets are tracked across the three cities that make up the urban core of the region for early childhood, the public and parochial schools, and the

local colleges and universities. In order to make progress toward the designated targets, relevant practitioners and funders formed networks related to each outcome to review local data on their performance and build cohesive action plans around what actually works in terms of helping students succeed. The result: of the 34 measures of student achievement on which the Partnership is focused, 81 percent are trending in a positive direction, up from 68 percent three years ago.²

This work overall, and the networks of practitioners and funders specifically, provides the community-development sector with a new way to engage with the education field and improve outcomes for children. By working arm-in-arm with education systems—early childhood, K-12, and higher education—and using data as a constructive tool to improve, as opposed to a tool to pick winners and losers, we can begin to leverage precious resources to get the improved results we all so desire. This article summarizes some of the lessons learned from The Strive Partnership’s experience in Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky, as well as the experience of other pioneers in this work, and identifies a framework for building the “New Civic Infrastructure” needed to support the success of every child from cradle to career and move the dial on critical social outcomes in general.

Defining How to Have “Collective Impact”

In their popular article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, John Kania and Mark Kramer define collective impact as, “The commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.”³ This simple definition has caught the imagination of communities across the country looking to address complex social issues in a struggling economy. In the end, this concept gives us a way to think differently about how to get a better social return on investment.

But as is often the case, a great idea can spread so quickly and be adapted in so many ways that its original or true meaning can become muddled or lost. Recently, one community reached out to us and claimed to have nine collective-impact initiatives underway related to education. When asked about what was common or collective across the efforts, there was no clear answer. That there were so many separate but similar initiatives operating simultaneously is antithetical to the entire point of collective impact.

In order to prevent the concept of collective impact from getting diluted, it is critical to establish some basic standards for what it takes to make this very challenging work happen on the ground. Fortunately, long before the “Collective Impact” article hit the press, a consortium of financial institutions and foundations known as

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Living Cities funded leaders of The Strive Partnership to gather lessons from their work and see how they could inform similar work in four other communities. Since this initial investment, the work of the Strive Partnership has spread beyond Cincinnati and a separate effort called the Strive Network was launched in 2011 to build a national network of cradle to career communities. To date, over 150 communities have reached out to learn about this work, and our staff has worked with over 20 communities to help them move from aspirations of collective impact to real action on the ground.

Our most important finding from all this work could not be less flashy. It turns out that the key to improving student outcomes at the population level is not a program, but a process. It is clear that no single program, no matter how effective, can be scaled to solve all our education challenges. Instead, we need to return to an age-old process that has itself been watered down over the years: employing disciplined team work to build civic infrastructure.

In the many definitions that can be found, there are two key themes regarding civic infrastructure that require us to think differently about this work as we move forward. First, civic infrastructure has historically been primarily focused on how myriad public sector resources are aligned for “building a shared sense of belonging and purpose, facilitating the setting of shared goals and coordinating action.”⁴ However, in this economy, we cannot rely on the public sector alone, regardless of how we coordinate our efforts. Instead, we need to shift our focus to how we align public and private resources in new ways so we can effectively deploy all resources at our disposal, regardless of the source, to improve outcomes for children.

Second, the historical definition of civic infrastructure can potentially be confused with the softest versions of collaboration—a loose affiliation or connection of programs and services focused on similar ends, but which continue to operate in silos. As one site we worked with expressed at the outset of their efforts, “I fear this will end up just becoming another ‘kumbaya circle’ where everyone talks about working together but keeps on doing the exact same thing.” We must take a more rigorous and focused approach to coordinating these disparate efforts if we want to avoid reverting to the status quo.

The New Civic Infrastructure: Putting Data to Work

The new civic infrastructure responds to both of these challenges by ensuring we bring together cross-sector leaders at several levels to focus their collective energy not on talking, but on actually developing and continuously improving concrete action plans for how to move common outcomes forward. And the key ingredient for making this focused action planning possible is pretty simple—it's data.

As Jim Collins highlights in *Good to Great for the Social Sector*, the disciplined use of data to drive where we focus our energy and what we do to have impact is our single greatest challenge to improving social outcomes at scale.⁵ Specifically, as it relates to education, the new civic infrastructure responds to this challenge by enabling community leaders across sectors and at all levels to use data in a more purposeful way to: (1) identify those practices that actually get results for children, (2) invest the community's precious resources differently to increase impact, and (3) hold themselves accountable for moving specific outcomes across the cradle to career continuum.

Whether an individual likes the federal No Child Left Behind legislation or not, it provides a concrete mechanism to have data on the educational outcomes of every single child. We no longer have an excuse for not using data to, at a minimum, help us focus on our greatest areas of need collectively and identify those practices that actually get results for children individually. And if we do not like the data we have at our disposal—and concerns about the standardized tests are justifiable—it is now incumbent upon us to improve these measures rather than simply complain about them.

Establishing Standards for Collective Impact: The Framework for Building Cradle to Career Civic Infrastructure

Strive has developed the Framework for Building Cradle to Career Civic Infrastructure by drawing upon lessons not just from the pioneering work in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky with The Strive Partnership, but from talking and working with more than 150 communities across the country that are considering undertaking this challenging work. Our most important lesson learned is that there is no single model for how to do this. One community can't simply do exactly what another did, as the local assets always vary.

Instead, the Framework acts as a guide to building civic infrastructure by helping communities identify their critical gaps as well as local assets, and knit together their investments in children in new and different ways. It is important to note that no community starts building civic

Framework for Building Cradle to Career Civic Infrastructure

Examples of key standards of practice related to each of the four pillars of the Framework for Building Cradle to Career Civic Infrastructure include:

Shared Community Vision:

There must be consistent engagement of top-level executives across at least five sectors – education, business, civic, non-profit, and philanthropic – around a common vision.

An “accountability structure” is developed and defined that enlists community partners at all levels who commit to specific operating principles for working together to improve student outcomes.

Evidence Based Decision Making:

A limited number of student outcomes is adopted and reported transparently on a regular basis to show population-level trends.

Comprehensive data-management systems are in place to monitor how individual students benefit from an array of support services and how this work collectively feeds up to population-level improvements.

Collaborative Action:

Networks of existing practitioners come together around priority outcomes, agree on a common set of measures to understand impact, and utilize a continuous-improvement process to use data to get better over time.

Cross-sector leaders define clearly how they will support networks of practitioners to develop and implement collaborative-action plans, such as facilitation, data analysis, and advocacy.

Investment & Sustainability

Core staffing is in place to shepherd the work forward, including a director to consistently “herd the cats,” keeping participants focused on the common vision and outcomes, and a data analyst to ensure information is made available in such a way to inform decision making.

Funders are actively engaged to repurpose existing investments over time behind collaborative-action plans developed by networks.

infrastructure from scratch: by following Strive's tested process, they should very intentionally walk through a rigorous process to build on existing strengths to fill in gaps.

The Framework consists of four pillars that highlight specific areas a community needs to consider when building civic infrastructure (see sidebar on previous page). Two of these pillars deal directly with how communities use data at different levels: at the community level to identify the most critical issues and the individual level to identify what practices are really having an impact on children. The other two pillars of the Framework ensure key leadership is in place to advocate for what works and other indispensable factors for sustaining the work, such as community voice, funder alignment, and critical staffing are in place to ensure improvements continue over the long term.

The evolving Strive National Network has developed a Progress Assessment Tool that offers significant detail around each of these pillars so that a community can better understand how this process of infrastructure building might unfold from start to finish.⁶ This tool provides a critical first attempt at establishing detailed standards of practice with regard to how we can best achieve collective impact. The specifics behind the Framework are constantly being updated as sites learn more about how to sustain the civic infrastructure. Indeed, it is this practical, real-world experience that must inform these standards if we are to ensure that collective impact is more than a passing fancy.

Implications for the Field: Getting a Better Social Return on Investment

The potential implications of creating uniform standards of practice for building civic infrastructure could have far-reaching effects on how we invest our resources to address social issues. The current method of tackling these problems is primarily through a Request for Proposals (RFP) process. Using the RFP, funders identify a practice they wish to test and scale, and practitioners hasten to develop proposals that align with a funder's given interest.

The problem with this approach is that it perpetuates a "spray and pray" mentality for addressing social problems: we spray new ideas and related resources all over the place and pray that good things will come of it. Rarely do the efforts that result align effectively with current work, and communities end up with one more "point of light" that may or may not target the most pressing issue and scale the most effective practice.

By building the civic infrastructure, public and private investors can identify communities that are already taking a more strategic approach to collectively improving an outcome they are interested in seeing move. They can engage with the community leadership to understand the

current plan and identify ways to complement the existing work of a network of practitioners, instead of dropping a new idea into the mix of work already underway.

Communities that build this kind of civic infrastructure could be ripe for the emerging "Pay for Success" concept being tested across federal agencies.⁷ In this concept, the federal government will "guarantee" an investment by a private donor if a proposed intervention actually leads to a specifically defined outcome—not the number of people served, but the measurable improvements felt by the people served. In the end, the government is able to target its dollars more effectively, and private funders can reinvest dollars they recover back into the emerging practices that are getting results.

In short, those communities that have built the civic infrastructure have: (1) the staffing to make sure an action plan is implemented over time, (2) the data in hand to constantly monitor progress toward the outcome, and (3) a process for leveraging and scaling what really gets results. Investments are more secure and the potential for widespread impact is increased.

The final result of this work, and the yardstick by which this new civic infrastructure will be measured, is social return on investment. Cradle to career civic infrastructure puts in place systems that assess whether the dollars being invested toward a given outcome are going further than they otherwise would, helping us answer the age-old question, "Are we getting more bang for our buck?" The investment is minimal—it does not have to be more than \$500,000 in overhead—but the impact can be utterly transformational.

Conclusion

In the "new normal" where resource limitations are a fact of life, it is more necessary than ever to ensure we are investing our time, talent, and treasure as efficiently and effectively as possible.⁸ The concept of collective impact gives us the conceptual underpinnings for how to make this change. But in order for us to prevent a powerful idea from becoming a watered-down version of what it was meant to be, we need a common set of standards for what it means to make this work happen. The new civic infrastructure, informed by practical experience on the ground, is a way to not only make this concept a reality and develop common standards, but completely rethink how we get a better social return on investment when tackling some of our most challenging issues.

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The Widening Academic Achievement Gap between the Rich and the Poor

1. This article is a condensed and updated version of: Reardon, Sean F. "The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations." In *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*, edited by Greg J. Duncan and Richard Murnane. © 2011 Russell Sage Foundation, 112 East 64th Street, New York, NY 10065. Reprinted with Permission. <https://www.russellsage.org/publications/whither-opportunity> Online appendix is available at: http://www.russellsage.org/duncan_murnane_online_appendix.pdf
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3. I use data from 19 nationally representative studies, including studies conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the Long-Term Trend and Main National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) studies, U.S. components of international studies, and other studies with information on both family background and standardized-test scores. Although these studies vary in a number of ways, each of them provides data on the math or reading skills, or both, of nationally representative samples of students, together with some data on students' family socioeconomic characteristics, such as family income, parental education, and parental occupation. Although the specific tests of reading and math skills used differ among the studies, they are similar enough to allow broad conclusions about the rough magnitude of achievement gaps.