Financiers, Engineers, and Entrepreneurs for Young Children

Comprehensive Birth-through-Age-8 Community Strategies

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January 2013

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By Kristie Kauerz

Spring 2013

"I'm not saying it can't be done; I'm saying it has to be done."

"We need to plan for bumps and adjustments."

"We need to build immediate wins."

"It's imperative to build diversified partnerships."

"At some point, people need to move from 'interested' to 'invested.'"

"We need a hub, both as a concept and as a place."

"Catalytic money to bring in both public and private funding is crucial."

"We need a little glue money, some R&D, and trust."

"If you want stakeholders, you have to also define what is the stake for each actor."

"We need to more fully utilize people's capacity to thing big, be creative, and look ahead."

Is this a behind-the-scenes glimpse into a meeting of corporate financiers? Snippets of conversation overheard between engineers planning to launch an untested new experiment? Quotes from a gathering of investors starting an entrepreneurial venture in Silicon Valley?

No, these people aren't financiers, engineers, or entrepreneurs. At least not in the traditional sense. The people behind these quotes work in local communities all around the country to ensure that every young child receives the health, education, and family support that will give him or her the strongest start possible in life. Gathered during a December 2011 meeting addressing comprehensive birth-through-age-8 (0-8) reform efforts, these quotes reflect how 0-8 approaches are akin to entrepreneurial endeavors. They are bigger than a single program, require establishing partnerships where none exist, and rely on creative vision and a healthy dose of stubborn grit.

Birth-through-age-8 reform efforts are based on an in-depth understanding of what young children need to develop the skills, knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions that will enable them to succeed in school and life. Birth-through-age-8 reform efforts embrace a multi-sector approach to establishing and linking services and systems to meet and nurture children's comprehensive needs.

A variety of these entrepreneurial approaches exist around the country and, recently, a number of them have been profiled in case studies (see Table 1). There is no "one-size-fits-all" model; there are substantive differences in how communities, school districts, and states organize and implement this work. What they share in common, however, is commitment to meeting the comprehensive needs of young children and their families and to building extensive organizational partnerships and system reform efforts to meet those needs.

BACKGROUND

Funders, policymakers, and community advocates seek to better understand the opportunities and barriers experienced by early implementers of comprehensive birth-through-age-8 approaches, hoping to discern lessons for how to expand these reform efforts within communities and across the country. It is for this purpose that the group of practitioner-experts who represent a variety of professional sectors and a range of reform efforts was convened in December 2011.

Participants are all engaged in their own local efforts to bridge and align programs, services, organizations, and systems in order to meet the comprehensive needs of young children. These people don't just think and talk about how to create a web of supports for children and their families: they work tirelessly to implement and sustain this work in their own communities. While all of the sites represented at the meeting address the birth-through-age-8 continuum, they have different priorities and strategies.[*] Some sites are implementing a comprehensive reform approach designed and supported by a national entity; others take a more home-grown approach to their work. Some are led by school districts, and others by cities

[*] Although this paper does not provide a detailed overview of any of the participating reform efforts, many can be found at the links listed in Table 1 below.

and municipalities. Some exist in large urban centers, and others in small rural communities. Some focus on a single school building, others on school districts, and still others on broad

Table 1: Initiatives and Sites Represented at the December 2011 Meeting

Initiative	Overview	Sites Studied
Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL)	*Focus:* How Community School Initiatives develop governing and operating structures to achieve ready schools and ready students. *See:* *www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/REVISED%20BB%20DOC-1-7-13.pdf*	Multnomah County, OR Tulsa, OK Cincinnati, OH Evansville, IN
Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University	*Focus:* State-to-local relationships and the policies and practices of early learning programs and K-12 schools that create an effective preschool to grade three continuum. *See: www.leadershiplinc.illinoisstate.edu/LincReport10-28-12%20pdf.pdf*	Hawaii Pennsylvania Ontario, Canada
University of Washington/ Harvard Graduate School of Education	*Focus:* School districts that are aligning early care and education with the early grades (K-3) and focused on creating high-quality instruction and coherent learning opportunities for children, preschool through 3rd grade.	Bremerton School District, WA Nooksack Valley School District, WA
National League of Cities	*Focus:* Cities and municipalities that have engaged in a rich array of activities that strengthen the healthy and successful development of young children, from birth to age 8. *See: http://www.nlc.org/find-city-solutions/institute-for-youth-education-and-families/early-childhood/new-case-studies-on-educational-alignment-for-young-children*	Boston, MA Hartford, CT San Antonio, TX San Jose, CA Seattle, WA
Birth through Age 8 Innovative Schools Project	*Focus:* Single-site schools that are enacting innovative birth-through-age 8 approaches to the early childhood/K-3 education continuum; health and nutrition; family economic supports; and early intervention for infants/toddlers. *See:* *depts.washington.edu/pthru3/BIRTH_THROUGH_AGE_EIGHT_CASE_STUDIES_FINAL_WINTER_2013.pdf*	Palm Beach, FL Petal, MS Los Angeles, CA Clinton, AR

communities. All of them situate public schools as key players in their work – to strengthen community connections to schools *and* to strengthen schools' connections to communities. Eleven different collaborative approaches were represented, with 24 leaders participating in the discussions.

Rather than host a traditional meeting at which participants tell their stories and report on their existing efforts, the leaders were asked to think big about what *could* and *should* be, not what is. They were asked to go beyond their own extant model and to stretch their thinking to the next level. They were asked to build on their most compelling strategies and to be constructively ambitious in their thinking. If they could collectively design a comprehensive 0-8 approach, what would it look like? What would it take to both launch and sustain such an effort? Based on their experiences, what are critical elements of comprehensive reform? The goal was to create a day-long think tank from which ideas could be formed, as one participant said, to push the field "to think outside of our own realities." In short, some of the early childhood field's best financiers, engineers, and entrepreneurs were convened to think, dream, and design together.

This paper summarizes and synthesizes the wisdom and perspectives shared during the meeting, with a primary goal of reflecting best-of-the-best thinking on comprehensive 0-8 reforms. It is not a meta-analysis or comparison of initiatives but an attempt to dig behind the oft-used words of "alignment," "shared leadership," "continuum of services," and others. The ideas, strategies, and quotes that comprise this paper are those of meeting participants, not of the author.

SITUATING THE WORK WITHIN THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT FRAME

Collective Impact, the idea that large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination, has recently captivated the early childhood world. Exemplified in an article that describes the work of Strive, a non-profit organization in Cincinnati, Ohio (Kania & Kramer, 2011), Collective Impact initiatives share five key traits: [1] a common agenda; [2] shared measurement; [3] mutually reinforcing activities [4] continuous communication; and [5] a

backbone support organization. The article was distributed in advance to meeting participants as a means to provide both a starting point and fodder for their discussions. The people who authored the Collective Impact article and who work for Strive did not contribute to the writing of this paper, nor did they attend the meeting on which this paper is based. Rather, the Collective Impact ideas are used as a springboard, and the five elements as a frame for this paper. The remainder of the paper highlights how practitioner-experts' local experiences building and sustaining 0-8 strategies provide a deeper and richer understanding of the Collective Impact ideas.

COMMON AGENDA

Collective Impact speaks of the importance of a common agenda and the need for involved stakeholders to share a vision for change, a common understanding of the problem, and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed-upon actions. Related to this, three key themes emerged during the December meeting. First, there exists a new demographic reality that schools, programs, and organizations must recognize, respond to, and stay ahead of when building comprehensive approaches. Second, beyond sharing a vision about the comprehensive needs of children and families, stakeholders in this work must share an acceptance of how partner organizations and systems themselves must change. Third, given the complexity of this work and the differences among communities, a common agenda requires a hub – whether literal or virtual – for families and children. Each of these is discussed next.

New Demographic Realities

Without exception, the practitioner-experts noted that the demographic diversity of their communities is changing and changing dramatically. In particular, there are increasing proportions of immigrants, bringing new complexity to community-based efforts. Not simply an issue of language, the influx of immigrants often requires different strategies for parents and their children (i.e., because children might be U.S. citizens, while their parents are not); it

creates challenges to meet the needs of undocumented immigrants; and it introduces values-based issues that both politicize the work and make clear-cut answers more difficult to identify.

In addition, given the economic recession, family economic well-being is more precarious. It is no longer an issue of communities helping families move out of poverty, but also helping some families transition *into* poverty as family circumstances change. Further, there are increased multi-generational stressors as, in some instances, grandparents raise children and, in other cases, families struggle to care not just for young children but also for aging and elderly parents. For all of these reasons, many of the meeting participants noted that they increasingly recognize family need in traditionally affluent areas and that these are critical variables as they think about and plan for change.

Because of these new realities, a comprehensive common agenda that reflects a community's current demographics, and can dynamically adjust to changes, is imperative. Community maps and needs assessments completed even five years ago are often out-of-date. It can be daunting to keep pace with rapid demographic shifts but, as one meeting participant noted, "I'm not saying it can't be done. I'm saying it has to be done."

Given the complex array of family living conditions, meeting the comprehensive needs of children and their families requires coordination and alignment[†] among multiple sectors and across a diverse set of partners. Some of the partner organizations themselves may not have even existed five years ago. Meeting participants noted the need to establish and sustain collaborative partnerships across and among K-12 education; early care and education (ECE); family support, health care, mental health, cultural, and religious organizations; neighborhood alliances; economic support agencies; and others.

Shared Acceptance of Organizational Change

When thinking about the importance of a shared vision for change, "there's the programmatic approach, but we also need to look at deeper infrastructure issues so systems can be more compatible," noted one meeting participant. Indeed, the practitioner-experts

[†] In this paper, *alignment* is used not to describe a singular endeavor or a discrete activity (e.g., aligning curriculum with standards), but as an embedded and ongoing way of thinking about linking, coordinating, simplifying, and making sense of traditionally disconnected and discrepant efforts.

emphasized that comprehensive approaches need a shared vision for children and their families, a shared vision for how programs and services coordinate, *and* a shared vision for the systems themselves.

At the child/family level, this shared vision might include statements such as an agreement that “all children are prepared to succeed in school” or “all children read on grade level by 4th grade.” While consensus on broad statements like these takes time to achieve, it was agreed that a shared vision at programmatic and system levels is much more difficult to define. As one participant lamented, “our biggest dilemma is getting people to let go and give up their piece of the pie.” Creating a shared vision for programs and systems requires each stakeholder to be deeply self-reflective and to embrace the possibility that this might require altering programmatic activities, sharing fiscal and human resources in innovative ways, recalibrating organizational missions, and/or establishing relationships with unfamiliar people and organizations.

To accomplish this, participants highlighted three key strategies. First, they emphasized the importance of having a strong facilitator during cross-sector and cross-organizational planning meetings -- someone who could be objective and “beholden to all partners and stakeholders.” Having a neutral party help organizations navigate and negotiate shared, albeit tricky and threatening, change strategies and partnerships will encourage and ensure even-handedness.

Second, participants acknowledged that discussions of funding and money should not be perceived or permitted to be barriers to change. As one practitioner-expert asserted, “sometimes we think it’s all about the money so we don’t start” and, as another added, “because of this, much low-hanging fruit is still hanging.” Underlying these statements is the recognition that money is often used – whether intentionally or unintentionally – as a reason to maintain the status quo. Meeting participants emphasized that collaborative thinking and planning across partners should proceed *in spite of* uncertainties about whether funding is available and who will provide it. Indeed, funding possibilities often emerge as a result of creative thinking; in other cases, funding becomes a moot point because it is discovered that

one partner already has resources to enact the change, no new funding sources are needed, or there is a collective will to seek new funds together.

Third, to solidify the shared vision, common agenda, and dedication to organizational change, meeting participants recommended creating shared protocols or Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between and among organizations. By putting in writing what the common goals, shared activities, and expected behaviors of all partners are, there is clearer accountability for participating people and organizations. At the most fundamental level, written agreements take collaborative efforts to the proverbial next level. While meetings that bring people together to discuss ideas are an important first step, one meeting participant noted that, "everyone needs an opportunity for input but, at some point, people need to move from 'interested' to 'invested.'" In order to create a sense of shared accountability around the collaborative work, the practitioner-experts suggested that organizational shared vision statements be published in newspapers, prominently displayed on office walls, and embedded into individual organizations' strategic plans.

A Common Agenda Requires Hubs

In all of the represented communities, a common comprehensive vision/agenda includes having a "hub" or a centralized place for families and children to access services and resources. The hub is meant to serve not only as a means for making families' access to services more streamlined, but also as a means to leverage the contributions of a variety of organizations. Hubs, at their core, are about service coordination. As one participant explained, "a family receiving home visits may not be able to focus on their parenting skills if they are in crisis, if food is not stable, or if they are in danger of being evicted."

How the hub is organized can vary, based on each community's demographics, resources/infrastructure, and other contextual factors. In some communities, the hub may be literal. It is a building or a physical space where staff and resources from multiple partners and services are housed. Literally, one could hang a sign out front that declares "Comprehensive Services Found Here." In order to meet the needs of families and children, these place-based

hubs consider variables such as the hours they are open, the provision of on-site child care, and the availability of adequate space to meet the needs of both children and adults.

Many of the participating 0-8 reform efforts have made schools the community hubs. As one participant noted, “schools exist in all communities and should be utilized.” What is most important to recognize, though, is that “while schools are and should be hubs. . .we need to be better at the connecting points” in order to not overwhelm school leaders. While schools can be a literal place for families and children to enter, the services and connections within are collaboratively supported and can be managed and delivered by other organizations that are co-located on school property. When schools serve as hubs for families’ access to comprehensive services, principals are key leaders. However, it is also essential to have a site-based intermediary or staff member devoted to the collaborative work so that the hub responsibilities do not get lost. When the hub is located in a school building, there must also be special consideration of ways to remain open year-round, even when school is out of session.

While meeting participants see schools as central to this work and as obvious places to create hubs, they were adamant that schools cannot be expected to do it all, be it all, or deliver it all. As one practitioner expressed, “this work can be very difficult for the education system because they are being asked to solve all of children’s issues, but we don’t ask pediatricians and mental health providers to also teach children to read.”

In contrast, in other communities, the hub is more conceptual than literal. There is not a single physical place but, rather, multiple doorways through which the network of organizations and supports can be accessed. In these communities, a family can walk into a school, pediatrician’s office, or child care center and receive guidance and support to access a full array of comprehensive services. These models require extensive cross-program and cross-site training for staff as well as common forms and processes. When conceptual, hubs rely on teams of staff who serve as intermediaries between organizations.

Whether a literal or conceptual hub, a common agenda wraps systems around children and their families rather than making families figure out how to tie together and connect various services or navigate through different systems with varying points of entry.

Key Take-Aways:

- **Stay ahead of your community's changing demographics.**
- **Recognize and accept that you and your organization will change by being part of collaborative work.**
- **Establish hubs that serve as air traffic controllers for families.**
- **Engage schools as key partners.**

SHARED MEASUREMENT

The second element in Collective Impact refers to the importance of coming to agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported, including which data will be collected and shared as part of the collaborative work. When discussing data and shared measurement, practitioner-experts discerned two specific issues – one conceptual and one more mechanical. First, at the conceptual level, meeting participants made clear that data are not merely the means for evaluating impact or summarizing the work accomplished. Data should be an integral, ongoing, and living part of collaborative work. Second, participants were careful to explain that shared measurement systems are both qualitatively and quantitatively different from merged measurement systems. Each of these points is discussed next.

Data as Storyteller

Practitioner-experts emphasized the importance of data systems: "Without them, we won't change behavior or broaden the collective vision." To do this, however, it is critical that the collected data reflect the needs and assets of a particular community and are meaningful to the overall goals of the Collective Impact effort. Many who work in the field lamented how much time and effort is spent measuring things that do not ultimately matter to families and children. For example, the number of parents and family members who attend back-to-school nights or other family-oriented education events is an oft-used metric by schools but does not

accurately reflect whether parents feel they are gaining the skills and supports they need to nurture their child's learning and development.

To understand which data markers are more important than others, collaborative reform efforts need to embed their long-term strategic plan with short-term benchmarks that can be measured, tied to participating organizations' actual contributions, linked to desired outcomes for families and children, and used as a means to keep partners and the public both engaged and accountable.

Data are tools of measurement, but they are also narrative tools. Data tell stories. And, as one participant noted, "we don't tell our story well. Data tell the story." Data should be used to tell stories of organizations' progress in working together more effectively and to tell stories of how families are thriving and having their needs met.

Shifting the use of data is a critical aspect of 0-8 reforms, not just to identify needs and to evaluate outcomes but also to guide decisions along the way. This approach uses data to identify gaps – or, as one participant named it, "the why we need to work differently" – but also to point to necessary changes – the what and how of change. Data are used at the beginning, the end, and all throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of collaborative work. This data use allows the partnering organizations to find success in interim progress and creates the opportunity for mid-course changes in activities.

Shared Isn't the Same as Merged

Some of the meeting participants recounted their initial attempts to share data across organizations. They remembered the overwhelming meetings at which each collaborating organization brought its list of specific measures and data markers to the table. Sooner rather than later, the table was piled high (both literally and figuratively) with cumbersome, repetitive, sometimes irrelevant, often outdated compilations of data. The data had little order or prioritization and, often, no direct relationship to the group's collaborative efforts or to the desired outcomes for children and families. The sum total of the organizations' measurement strategies was detached from, if not completely at odds with, the overall shared vision of a streamlined and elegant collaborative approach.

Recognizing the risk of drowning in data, the leaders quickly understood that their shared measurement system needed to focus less on *merging* multiple data efforts, and more on *discerning* a select few high-leverage data points that could be shared to inform multiple organizations' efforts. Of course, there are common data architecture issues that must be addressed, such as common child or family identifiers and databases that communicate easily with one another. Beyond that, collaborative 0-8 efforts work together to identify a small number of data points that will be shared as metrics for collective progress toward improving circumstances for children and families.

Key Take-Aways:

- **Be smarter about data – less can be more.**
- **Data should tell the story – beginning, middle, and end – of comprehensive 0-8 approaches. Use data to tell which community needs were identified, how the changes are being implemented, and what is changing for families and children.**

MUTUALLY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES

The third condition of success in Collective Impact is the coordination of differentiated activities, not by requiring that all participants do the same thing, but by requiring them to do those things at which they excel in a way that supports the actions of others. Practitioner-experts extended and reframed this concept to focus more on mutually reinforcing *resources* than activities. Driving this was their recognition that coordinating resources can actually be threatening to an organization's identity and its bottom line. Most organizations have built their reputation and their budget on doing certain things well (e.g., providing tutoring services, offering family support workshops, or offering mental health services).

As straightforward as identifying and using mutually reinforcing resources sounds, practitioner-experts emphasized how difficult it can be: "Shared outcomes can be the glue to reassess resources, but reassessing resources is a challenge. The control mechanisms of funding streams are invested in the status quo." Organizations are accountable to their funders, public

and private, and often do not have the flexibility to substantively or nimbly alter their workplan or organizational budget.

Inherent in this is recognition that identifying and implementing mutually reinforcing resources often require that some organizations share their limited resources which may, in turn, compel them to *stop* doing things they've been doing. It can also mean that collaborative efforts may need to identify organizations and, often, funding streams to *start* doing things that may not yet be in the collective skill set. Both of these scenarios can be a threat to the status quo because they require changed behavior by both individuals and organizations, and a reallocation of limited funds. When behaviors, activities, and funding remain unchanged, important "low-hanging fruit" – things that are easy wins and demonstrate clear progress toward shared outcomes – is left hanging.

More than Activities: Mutually Reinforcing Resources and Funding

Coming to collaborative tables to discuss a shared vision of what every young child needs to be successful can be challenging, but participants can usually leave those tables and go back to their respective offices and proceed as usual. Coming to collaborative tables to discuss resources, both human and fiscal, is more difficult. Coming to collaborative tables to discuss sharing resources vis-à-vis that common vision is even more difficult because, as one participant explained, collaborative work should compel us to "use resources differently. . .you put your resources in the pot and [collectively] figure out how to address children's and families' needs. Providers currently compete for dollars and families."

Colloquially, talking the talk of shared vision is easy; walking the walk of shared vision is hard because, to be successful, it should lead to changes in how resources are used and shared. In some cases, these conversations go easily and represent a straightforward matter of better aligning organizations' existing resources. However, when communities dig deeper and begin to identify unmet needs of children and their families, or recognize barriers that exist *within* organizations' own practices or policies, the collaborative effort faces harder conversations. To meet unmet needs, either new organizations need to be brought to the table or already-involved organizations must fill the gap by reallocating their own resources.

On the positive side, identifying mutually reinforcing resources encourages organizations to be more intentional about understanding and communicating how they use their existing funding streams: Are they fully maximizing the flexibilities allowed by the funder? Are they implementing activities that produce strong and desired outcomes? Are they partnering with other organizations to leverage their investments? Are they fully utilizing all of the funding streams to which they have access?

These are tough conversations. In some instances, people and organizations may be unwilling to admit their efforts are not as high-impact as they should be. In other instances, they may not be willing to concede any of their turf. And, perhaps most commonly, organizational leaders do not want to relinquish or reallocate any of their resources in order to protect the jobs and relationships they support through their work.

As one of the meeting participants declared, "talk should lead to action; there needs to be accountability for leaders." If leaders of organizations are going to come together to discuss shared vision, effective services, and more comprehensive attention to the needs of families and children, their organizational decisions should reflect those priorities. A thoughtfully crafted MOU between organizations can be used to address an organization that "goes rogue," as one participant called it, and breaks from collaboratively made decisions, either by inaction or deviation from agreed-upon actions. The MOU need not be punitive but should provide constructive incentives for organizations to stay at the collaborative table and to contribute their human and fiscal resources to the endeavor. Put succinctly by one meeting participant, "put a stake in it for each stakeholder."

Glue Money

While much collaborative work can be accomplished with like-minded leadership and volunteered time, it does not come without a price. Collaborative efforts rely on strong facilitators, meticulous organization and follow-through (e.g., good meeting notes with clear identification of who said they would do what after the meeting), strong coffee, and good chocolate. While these functions do not require multi-million dollar investments, they still come at a cost. Termed by some of the meeting participants as "glue money," dollars that do not

provide direct services and may not benefit a single organization are necessary to keep collaborative efforts running. This glue money may underwrite explicit functions such as the costs of collaborative meetings, including facilitation, general logistical support (e.g., scheduling, note-taking, and follow-up), and food to nourish participants. Glue money may also be used to fund less tangible functions such as "the staff that there isn't money for. . .planning and technical assistance and reflection. . .partnerships."

The use of organizational resources is often limited by funder guidelines or by unwritten assumptions that dollars cannot be used to fund activities that are shared among organizations. Because of this, practitioner-experts recognize the need to sell these "glue roles" better to funders. They also, though, recognize that these glue roles are not multi-million dollar expenses but smaller, more reasonable amounts of money that are essential to keeping the various parts of collaborative work in sync.

One thing that the practitioner-experts made clear is that using dollars in a more coordinated and aligned fashion can jump-start coordination and alignment in practice, even though it is often assumed that the reverse happens (e.g., coordinated practice comes first and leads to coordinated funding). While many collaborative efforts talk about aligning services, these forward-thinkers recognize that looking behind the services and finding ways to align funding resources is equally important. To go against the grain of many who assert that this work is underfunded and, to truly meet the comprehensive needs of all families and children, there need be vast new investments from both public and private sectors. One meeting participant boldly ventured that "there are enough resources; the key issue is how we use them across all of the systems of a community."

Key Take-Aways:

- **Organizations must honestly reflect on how effectively they are achieving desired outcomes with their resources and, based on that self-assessment, be willing to use and share resources differently.**
- **Don't over-rely on programmatic dollars to be the core of collaborative efforts. Seek a little bit of "glue money" to keep the various parts of collaborative work in sync.**

CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION

The fourth condition of success for Collective Impact centers on the need for collaborative partners to spend time building trust among one another, ensuring that each organization's own interests will be treated fairly. One manifestation of this trust is the need for regular, ongoing meetings among high-level leaders so that they build enough experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their efforts.

The practitioner-experts at the December meeting emphasized two key aspects of communication: the need for organizations and funders to take a long view and stay invested in the collaborative work for an extended period of time, and the need to sustain high-level leadership's involvement.

Taking the Long View

Deeply collaborative work requires creating a willingness among organizations to take time to better understand what each participating organization and funding stream does and contributes to the overall goals related to meeting the comprehensive needs of families and children. Naturally, each organization assumes that its role is essential and unique. Organizations need to take the time to understand one another's roles and contributions, and then test the inherent assumptions about how things overlap, relate, and could be better-connected.

This kind of reflective and constructively critical examination of organizational and system effectiveness requires an extraordinary amount of trust and good will between collaborating partners. This kind of trust takes time to develop. It requires continuity in relationships which, in turn, requires that organizations designate key point people who consistently participate in collaborative meetings and who are at a high enough level within organizations that they possess both the authority to make decisions and the accountability to follow through on those decisions. Over time, these people will develop not only a more robust understanding of how the various organizations and partners work together, but also a realistic understanding of each organization's – and each person's – motivations, values, and priorities.

One meeting participant called this “collective trust” and made clear that the work was not about building “just another initiative or project, but about building community.”

Similarly, the bold goals of improving the overall health, well-being, and success of families and children take time -- time to which many are not willing to commit. By way of example, today’s preschoolers will not graduate from high school for at least 13 years. Yet, many organizations and funders want to claim victory for their investments in early childhood education after a five-year investment – a timeframe in which the success of the early learning investment cannot be measured even by 3rd grade reading scores. For many funders and funding streams, a five-year investment is seen as long-term.

“Taking the long view” underlies both the need for collective trust and the need to sustain attention and investment in endeavors that will take years to produce desired outcomes. The practitioner-experts unanimously agreed that collaborative, deep 0-8 work requires holding in tension the need to create “little change” and to secure short-term wins *while also* striving toward the possibilities of “big change” and long-term commitments. Collaborating organizations, funders, business leaders, and federal, state, and local governments must commit to a long-term, intentional change agenda.

High and Deep Communication Needed

For comprehensive, collaborative 0-8 efforts’ success, participation and buy-in from high-level leaders within organizations is critical. The practitioner-experts acknowledged that this can be difficult because of the multiple time demands on high-level leaders and because this work can be “messy and complex” and, therefore, time-consuming and iterative.

In spite of this, the practitioner-experts emphasized that substantive efforts need to be in place “to keep the key players at the table. You can’t substitute in a deputy, a program coordinator, or an intern. Leadership is key.” Beyond bringing organizational authority to collaborative tables, the participation of high-level leaders also establishes an organizational expectation or tone that partnerships matter and that collaboration is valued.

These expectations are then reflected throughout individual organizations and across partner agencies where collaborative communication needs to occur both horizontally (e.g.,

among mid-level managers across different agencies/organizations) and vertically (e.g., between high-level leadership and mid-level managers within each agency/organization). Collaborative work cannot be simply assigned as the responsibility of one project manager within an organization. The shared vision and dedication to collaboration must permeate all levels.

Key Take-Aways:

- **Collaborative work is a long-term investment not just of money, but also of relationships and trust.**
- **Collaboration needs to be a priority at high levels within organizations.**

BACKBONE SUPPORT ORGANIZATION

The fifth condition of success of Collective Impact is the need for a separate organization and staff with a specific set of skills (project manager, data manager, or facilitator) to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative. It is on this point that the practitioner-experts who gathered in December diverged the most from the Collective Impact approach. Indeed, they focused more on the need for existing programs to adapt and reinvent themselves "rather than always looking to new structures." Some participants reflected on lessons they learned from past failed efforts in which they established a new non-profit coordinating entity and all of the partners walked away from the collaborative work, abdicating their roles to the new entity.

In lieu of establishing separate backbone organizations, the practitioner-experts focused on other issues of sustainability, including the need to build a "deep bench" of leaders and to firmly lay a foundation of trust among organizations within a community. Each of these is discussed next.

Create Leadership Sustainability

Strong leaders who can navigate and thrive in complex, collaborative system work can be hard to find, especially in the social services sector where front-line workers often work their way up the organizational ranks. Many of these people, while dedicated to children and families, were trained to think and behave within a single program or an independent organization. Acculturation to system work is not a common part of traditional degree programs and does not come naturally to many. As such, collaborative endeavors need to be explicit and intentional about cultivating and supporting strong system leaders. For system-oriented leaders, collaboration and partnership are integral parts of their day-to-day responsibilities, not special initiatives or side projects.

Beyond identifying and supporting system leaders in their current work, the practitioner-experts noted the importance of taking the long view on leadership sustainability. As one participant explained, organizational staffing strategies and professional development efforts need to nurture and "utilize people's capacity to think big, be creative, and look ahead." They spoke of the need to focus on establishing pipelines of leadership so that as founding members of collaborative endeavors retire or leave, a new crop of leaders is right behind them ready and able to continue to uphold the collaborative vision and work.

To achieve this pipeline of sustainable system leadership, meeting participants highlighted two key strategies. First, they asserted that high-level leaders have the responsibility to build leadership abilities in others and should make this one of their central tasks. For example, within some 0-8 approaches, there exists dedicated attention to mentorship programs wherein targeted and increasing responsibility is given to "younger" leaders in the system, with the guidance of a leadership mentor.

Second, they noted that leadership for collaborative work must be infused throughout an organization; it cannot be the responsibility or job of a single person. Infusing leadership across the levels of senior management, middle management, and front-line workers not only creates the requisite "bench strength," but also embeds the work more deeply into the culture of the organization. Put simply by one participant, "if you isolate the planning and collaboration functions, they will get cut."

Foundation of Trust

Many collaborative efforts often tend to focus on finding the right structure for their mutual work. For example, they strive to identify the "right" hub for the work, assign the "lead" convener, craft the "best" policy, and/or raise "enough" money. While these are certainly important factors in creating and sustaining collaborative work, the practitioner-experts we convened were more concerned with building and developing trust and relationships among people and organizations as a key sustainability strategy. They recognize that the "right" hub may shift over time, the "lead" convener may retire, the "best" policy often does not get implemented as intended, and there is rarely "enough" money.

To this group of people who have successfully led and sustained deeply collaborative work that focuses on the comprehensive needs of young children, birth through age 8, and their families, the real backbone of their work is trust. As noted in multiple places throughout this paper, these leaders focus on building diversified partnerships that rely on multiple leaders who represent different sectors – and they take the time, make the effort, and invest the resources to establish sturdy foundations of trust among the partners.

At the core of effective, comprehensive, sustainable, community-based 0-8 approaches – no matter the scale or scope of work – are fundamentally changing the way that people and organizations work with each other. As the practitioner-experts spent the day together in December 2011 discussing their successes, challenges, and dreams, there was a palpable openness and honesty in the room. Despite the fact that these people came from different parts of the country and (many) met each for the first time that morning, these leaders had clearly internalized the importance of trusting others in this work.

Key Take-Aways:

- **Think not only about who will lead collaborative work today, but also who will lead tomorrow. And the day after tomorrow. Build a pipeline of leadership.**
- **Collective trust leads to collective impact.**

CONCLUSION

Communities, school districts, and states that are engaged in building and sustaining comprehensive birth-through-age-8 reforms undertake complex and innovative work. Requiring broad cross-sector collaboration, these efforts clearly embody the tenets and characteristics of Collective Impact. Leaders of this work are more than managers and administrators: they are also financiers, engineers, and entrepreneurs.

This paper highlights many of the key strategies and core wisdom of some of this country's most promising and effective 0-8 approaches. Despite the categorical approach to describing how aspects of 0-8 work are situated within the notion of Collective Impact, it is important to emphasize that none of the strategies stand in isolation from one another. There is much overlap and many intersections among them. For example, a shared acceptance of organizational change cannot be distinguished from the need for a sturdy foundation of trust. Similarly, the need for common hubs cannot be separated from the notion of glue money. Indeed, it is these interconnections that matter most. Comprehensive 0-8 approaches are multi-dimensional both in what they require to make it happen *and* in what they provide to families and children.

This leads to a final important conclusion made by the practitioner-experts convened at the meeting: all of this hard work and long-term effort should lead to real changes for families and children. The meeting participants were adamant about keeping the most important outcomes front-and-center to their work. All of the represented initiatives are focused not just on academic child outcomes (e.g., improved 3rd grade reading scores), but also on "successful kid" child outcomes (e.g., ensuring overall health, well-being, family connection, and educational success). Collaboration, partnerships, and alignment are not the end games of this work; they are the means to the end. And the end goal is improving the overall well-being of children and their families.

REFERENCE

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