

Community Schools: Proving That 'Collective Impact' Works

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There comes a time when many fine examples of how to improve learning and life conditions for our children and young people hits a ceiling. They cannot get to scale, because as exemplary as they may be, they have an "isolated impact" on the issues. While collaboration may be part of their strategy, they often fall short of achieving deep changes in prospects for young people, especially those who are poor.

That is why some funders and community leaders are retiring their search for a silver bullet with an approach called "collective impact." A recent article in the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) describes collective impact and how it works. The elements of collective impact are consistent with what those of us supporting the growth of community schools have been practicing for a long time. We agree with the article's authors that "fixing one point on the educational continuum -- such as better after-school programs -- wouldn't make much difference unless all parts of the continuum improved at the same time."

Indeed a comprehensive understanding of the problems we face in educating our children is at the collective impact strategy. At the [Coalition for Community Schools](#), we see the challenge of educating our children as a collective responsibility. School systems alone cannot deal with the myriad of factors that influence student learning.

Currently, some people engaged in the debate about what more it will take to educate our children often seem to push only one and at best two levers to improve education -- teacher effectiveness and testing. We argue that our children surely need strong teachers and principals and an engaging curriculum, but they also need a range of opportunities from prenatal care to college and career readiness; the sort of support that enables all children to succeed. To do this we must act collectively.

The five basic elements of collective impact go far beyond collaboration and do not call for additional funding, but rather, efficient use of what is available. [Cincinnati's community schools movement](#), which in fact began 8 years prior to the advent of Strive, as well as efforts in [Tulsa](#), [Evansville](#), [Multnomah County \(OR\)](#) and other communities, have put these elements into practice, and they are seeing [results](#). In their well-organized efforts, local community school leaders have:

- **Agreed on a common agenda.** Leaders from across sectors -- schools, health and social service agencies, youth organizations, higher education, faith-based and neighborhood groups and

business/civic groups -- let go of their individual agendas, and built a shared vision for improving achievement through community schools.

- **Used shared measurement systems.** For community schools, this means much more than academic achievement. Their metrics consider many factors that influence student success including: attendance/chronic absenteeism; health indicators such as asthma and obesity; student motivation and engagement; and parental involvement.
- **Organized mutually reinforcing activities.** Collective impact in community schools demands quality instruction in the schools, complemented by a set of opportunities from other sectors. These may include health and mental health services, after-school programs, mentoring, internships and apprenticeships. Families and neighborhood residents participate in adult education classes, ESL programs, job training, leadership development and cultural programs.
- **Emphasized continuous communications.** In community schools, the voices of those who have a stake in the outcomes -- students, parents, educators and the community -- are respected and given formal and informal means for being heard. These stakeholders, and the public, learn about the work and its results through newsletters, community meetings, websites and the media.
- **Organized backbone support organizations.** A collective impact initiative requires dedicated staff to coordinate the effort. Community school systems have an analogous approach, using intermediary organizations to drive their joint work. The intermediary could be a school system, or just as often local government, a United Way or another non-profit agency plays this role. A similar arrangement occurs at the school site where community partner organizations often hire community school coordinators to glue together the work of the school and its partners.

The fact that community school strategy involves work at both the school and at the community levels is particularly important. Collective impact in education does not happen just because community leaders and partners articulate a set of desired metrics. It happens when community leadership see schools as primary places for joint community action; when they empower educators and community partners to create the conditions for learning together; and, when they hold people accountable for results.

The Coalition's new guide, [*Scaling up School and Community Partnerships*](#), demonstrates how building a system of community schools can lead to collective impact. It makes clear that the place to begin marshaling communities behind schools is by setting a powerful shared vision, the first tenet of collective impact. It argues that collective trust among school and community partners is the fuel for a joint enterprise.

Cincinnati created a shared agenda in 2000 under the leadership of then school board member and former Governor John Gilligan. His idea for [community learning centers](#) (aka community schools) has led to a cross-boundary leadership team that includes educators and community partners who focus on many aspects of a young person's life at Cincinnati's schools. That vision is getting results and now aims to make every school a community learning center. That would be a collective impact worth replicating everywhere.