

# Strive Together

Every child. Cradle to career.

## Funding for Backbone Functions in Collective Impact Efforts

The backbone of a partnership is not one single entity, but a set of functions that one or more entities can play a role in fulfilling. These functions are the essential on-going roles related to sustaining the infrastructure of a cradle to career partnership. Backbone functions are necessary to support the data-driven action of the partnership and continue to move the work forward. You can learn more about backbone functions from the [Building the Backbone Toolkit](#). We have also found that while many acknowledge the necessity of backbone functions, fundraising for this critical piece can often be a challenge.

The difficulty in raising funds is understandable: funding for core operations (e.g. backbone functions) is not likely one of the most attractive support options for investors when compared to investing in programs that directly serve children. As a result, effectively framing the importance of the role is critical to ensuring that collective impact efforts are sustained over time. The key messages we have found that can attract investors include:

- The reality that **investing in programs alone has not led to the desired population-level impact**. Investment in infrastructure is also needed.
- The **investment in the basic core staffing and related costs is remarkably small** compared to the amount of existing resources that can be influenced. (Example: In one community the partnership's operating costs are \$520,000, but the partnership directly influences over \$4.5 billion when considering the resources represented at the leadership table).
- The **efficiencies that will be realized by being more disciplined in using data across similar partners far outweigh the investment** in the backbone function.

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**All of these messages come back to a common and central tenet in collective impact: cross-sector leaders can have greater impact by using data in a more disciplined way to inform decisions from the boardroom to the classroom.**

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### Establishing the Value Proposition

In addition to identifying concrete messages that will resonate in your community to help build the case for backbone function support, it's equally important to work with cross-sector partners to begin to highlight the roles of the backbone. Cross-sector partners need to help pinpoint the specific ways the partnership could contribute to the success of their organization and their sector. The needs of investors and service providers in particular – including practitioners in education systems, social services, and non-profits – are critically important. Engaging these stakeholders early in the process specifically around backbone functions will help to both empower the partnership staff and build support for investment.

## Strategies for Fundraising for Backbone Functions

After establishing the key messages and functions of the backbone, it is important to be very transparent with investors about the fact that the work of collective impact will require two different types of investment. The first is simple: funding to support the basic staffing and convening costs related to building partnership infrastructure. The second includes repurposing existing and investing new resources in the action plans that emerge around specific outcomes. Those investors who do not have an interest in the first role need to understand they can still play a critical role in achieving collective impact by aligning resources behind what works.

For those interested in funding backbone functions, there are a few options to consider for generating a sustained funding stream to support the work over the long-term. These options are meant as a starting place to generate a conversation that can lead to creative local solutions.

## Potential Menu of Options for Funding Backbone Functions

Funding Opportunity	Example	Opportunities	Challenges
<b>Align with Partner(s) Strategic Direction</b>	United Ways and Community Foundations are strongly considering a shift in strategy to act as fiscal agents in addition to program investors.	Can ensure long-term sustainability by connecting backbone functions to the actual strategic plan of one or more key partners looking to test their ability to play this new role.	Need to be sure the organizations willing to play the fiscal agent role are willing to cede strategy authority to the cross-sector partnership table as opposed to drive all the direction individually.
<b>Segment funding to meet specific backbone functions:</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funding for data support.</li> </ul>	<i>Funding for data support:</i> Resources to support data collection, deeper analysis of data to enable continuous improvement, design and distribution of annual community wide report card, as well as development and implementation of a data management system.	Creates high visibility for investors with report card and related media.  Collecting data is critical component of achieving long-term outcomes.	Building data infrastructure and capacity is costly and needed for the long-term, so multi-year funding is often needed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funding for policy and advocacy change.</li> </ul>	<i>Funding for policy and advocacy change:</i> Salaries to support staff and consulting to translate programmatic work into policy recommendations and develop and implement an advocacy strategy.	Impact of policy change is long term.	Policy change is challenging to measure so outcomes may not be visible in the short term.  Could be sensitivity around policy and advocacy, depending on the specific issue.

Funding Opportunity	Example	Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funding for engaging partners and community.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Funding for engaging partners and community:</i> Several roles are needed here, including the Executive Director to ensure alignment across partners at all levels, facilitators to help guide the development of action plans around a given outcome, and more communities are considering community organizers and communications experts to mobilize community members around practices that get results.</p>	<p>Investors can be positioned as visionaries for making the most visible investments for bringing key stakeholders together that have worked in silos over time.</p>	<p>Impact of improving student achievement takes time and can drain patience.</p>
<p><b>Funding to Support Specific Outcomes</b></p>	<p>Identify investors that have specific interests around a given outcome – such as 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading or college access – and ask them to support the core functions needed to develop a cohesive action plan, including time for a data expert, facilitator, and the Executive Director to help champion the work.</p>	<p>Connects investors directly to the work of a network and enables investors to play a traditional funding role.</p>	<p>Investors would need to agree to let data drive the work of the Network rather than assume a pre-defined strategy is the answer.</p> <p>Can create the unrealistic impression that an investor will invest in the final action plan without a clear communications plan.</p>
<p><b>Traditional Campaigns</b></p>	<p>Non-profits transitioning into this role often have traditional development plans, including events to support the backbone functions.</p>	<p>Leverages history and investors are accustomed to this approach.</p>	<p>Can be perceived as competing with non-profits and other service providers needed to do collaborative action planning. This can be mitigated by marrying funding for backbone functions with proposed funds for action plans that emerge around outcomes.</p> <p>Can send a mixed message since you are promoting a different approach to investment.</p>

## Quantifying Impact of the Backbone Functions

Regardless of how you approach procuring funds for the backbone, it is important to begin to think very early on about how you can quantify the impact of these functions. As noted above, you can start by capturing how much funding the backbone functions has the *potential* to influence across all the partners engaged. But once you identify priority outcomes, it is critical to begin to capture how much time, talent, and treasure is actually being leveraged and aligned to get better results. For example, if a partnership selects Kindergarten readiness in literacy as a primary outcome, it should begin to immediately: capture the time of local experts and advocates working together to improve the outcome, realign any existing programmatic activity and resources behind what the data says actually gets results, and ensure that any new resources are more effectively targeted to what works. While it is important to develop a rigorous methodology for tracking this data it is fundamentally critical that the partnership ensure it is monitoring this data in some way as early as possible.

In addition, communities can use the StriveTogether Theory of Action as a way to demonstrate the role the backbone functions play in creating a sustainable civic infrastructure in the community. The Theory of Action outlines critical quality benchmarks related to each of the four pillars for creating civic infrastructure. Partnerships are already finding it helpful for highlighting and explaining how they are working deliberately to achieve collective impact. You can find the Theory of Action [here](#).