Funding to Support the Backbone Organization:
An Important Step toward Investment and Sustainability

We have found that communities that are able to get the key staffing roles in place – an Executive Director and Data Manager – as soon as possible make significantly more progress. We have also found that while many acknowledge the necessity of having a backbone organization, fundraising for this critical function can often be a challenge.

Funding for core operations (e.g. backbone support) is not likely one of the most attractive support options for funders 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. Effective messages include:

- **Investing in programs alone has not led to the desired population-level impact.** Investment in civic 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 backbone operating costs are $520,000, but the backbone directly influences over $4.5 billion when considering the resources represented at the partnership 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.

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.

Establish the Value Proposition
In addition to identifying concrete messages that will resonate in your community to help build the case for the backbone, 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 a backbone could contribute to the success of their organization and their sector. The needs of funders 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 the backbone role will help to both empower the staff and build support for investment. You can learn more about one way to frame this role in our blog that defines the difference between backbone organizations and conveners here.

Strategies for Fundraising for a Backbone Organization

After establishing the key messages and roles of the backbone, be transparent with funders about the fact that the work of collective impact will require two different types of investment: funding to support the basic staffing and convening costs related to being a backbone organization AND repurposing existing and investing new resources in the action plans that emerge around specific outcomes. Funders who do not have an interest in the first role – funding the backbone organization – 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 the backbone, here 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 the Backbone

Funding Opportunity	Example	Opportunities	Challenges
Align with Partner(s) Strategic Direction	United Ways and Community Foundations are strongly considering a shift in strategy to act as lead conveners in addition to program funders.	Can ensure long-term sustainability by connecting the work of the backbone 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 role are willing to cede strategy authority to the cross-sector partnership table as opposed to drive all the direction individually.
Segment funding to meet specific needs of the backbone: • Funding to support data utilization • Funding for policy and advocacy • Funding for convening and engagement	*Funding to Support Data Utilization:* 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 funders 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.
	Funding for Policy and Advocacy: 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 issues.

	Funding to Support Convening and Engagement: 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.	Funders can be positioned as visionary for making the most visible investments for bringing key stakeholders together that have worked in silos over time.	Impact of improving student achievement takes time and can drain patience.
Funding to Support Backbone Staff around Specific Outcomes	Identify funders that have specific interests around a given outcome – such as third grade reading or college access – and ask them to support the core functions needed to develop a cohesive action plan, including part of the time for a data expert, facilitator, and the Executive Director to help champion the work.	Connects funders directly to the work of a network and enables funders to play a traditional funding role.	Funder would need to agree to let data drive the work of the Network rather than assume a specific strategy is the answer. Can create the unrealistic impression that a funder will invest in the final action plan without a clear communications plan.
Traditional Campaigns	Nonprofits transitioning into this role often have traditional development plans, including events to support the core staff functions.	Leverages history and funders are accustomed to this approach.	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 the backbone with proposed funds for action plans that emerge around outcomes. Can send a mixed message since you are promoting a different approach to investment.

Quantifying Impact of the Backbone

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 this role. You can start by capturing how much funding the backbone has the potential to influence across all engaged partners. Once you identify priority outcomes, 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 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. Partnerships should monitor 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 plays 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. Backbone staff find it helpful for highlighting and explaining how they are working deliberately to achieve collective impact.