Features
Elevating Community Authority in Collective Impact
By Byron P. White, Jennifer Blatz & Mark L. Joseph

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➡️ To achieve greater equity, we must yield to the decision-making authority of the communities we seek to help. StrivePartnership and other partnerships in the StriveTogether national network are enhancing collective impact to integrate and elevate the expertise and authority of those closest to the problems we're trying to solve.

Elevating Community Authority in Collective Impact

BY BYRON P. WHITE,
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O n a sunny August day in 2006, an extraordinary assemblage of civic and corporate leaders convened at the apex of the Newport Southbank Bridge, which spans the Ohio River between Cincinnati, Ohio, and northern Kentucky. The event kicked off what was then called Strive—Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky, a newly formed cross-sector partnership with a regional agenda to provide high-quality education to every child in urban neighborhoods, from cradle to career. School district leaders, college presidents, foundation executive directors, corporate CEOs, elected officials, and nonprofit leaders from Cincinnati strode south along the lilac-hued, half-mile pedestrian walkway known locally as the Purple People Bridge. Their counterparts from Covington, Newport, and other urban communities who had walked north from Kentucky met them at the middle.

This broad array of institutional leaders across two states came together to declare their shared allegiance to a common framework. The arrangement would become known as "collective impact," a strategy that secures long-term commitments by a group of key actors from different sectors to pursue a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.[1] The impact of the endeavor reverberates today: This publication alone has referenced Strive—Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky, now known as StrivePartnership, in at least 38 articles, starting with a seminal piece by John Kania and Mark Kramer in 2011.[2] StriveTogether, a national nonprofit launched by several of the original leaders of Strive—Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky, now supports 70 communities nationally that have formed cross-sector partnerships working to ensure that 10.5 million children succeed.

Two of us—Byron White, executive director of StrivePartnership, and Jennifer Blatz, president and CEO of StriveTogether—were on the bridge in 2006, albeit playing different roles. White was associate vice president of community engagement at Xavier University, and Blatz was director of operations at Strive—Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky. From our present-day vantage points, we both marvel at how much the work has evolved.

As Blatz recalls, the early focus was on the unprecedented partnership among institutional leaders. The voices from the microphone that day were theirs, making a public pledge to work together to achieve better outcomes for children across three urban communities. A number of students, parents, and neighborhood leaders were also present on the bridge, listening and

wondering how they could contribute to this newly formed partnership. Forums in each of the three communities followed the announcement and sought to bring "community voice" into the work.

These forums were well intentioned, Blatz recalls, and we knew that community input was important to the work of the partnership. But we didn't fully embrace the importance of community authority in those early days, nor did we have the tools or expertise to tap into it fully. While we looked to community members to help identify problems, they were not equal peers with institutional leaders in framing those problems or prescribing solutions, let alone leading implementation. We considered their insights but afforded them little direct power in determining how they spent funds, deployed personnel, and assigned tasks.

When White returned to lead StrivePartnership in 2017, he saw that, despite impressive results, the regional work had shown some fragility for not having wholeheartedly embraced community authority and ingenuity in those early days. While staff members had cultivated working relationships with grassroots leaders to achieve specific programmatic goals, those connections often dissipated when employees departed. StrivePartnership as an organization lacked a reputation for having a deep understanding of or commitment to community-level leadership, and our capacity to manage such relationships had not penetrated our organizational structure and practices. The grassroots community saw itself as outside the power structure that determined our priorities and decisions. Reflecting on the growth and proliferation of this work more broadly over the past 12 years, Blatz found that other cities were struggling with these issues as well.

Some scholars, consultants, and practitioners who seek collaborative solutions to improve communities have argued that this weakness is irreparable and a reason to dismiss collective impact. We think that conclusion is an overreach. We see the exposure of this deficiency as evidence that what we have been practicing has not been collective impact in its most durable and effective form. We believe the underlying premise of collective impact is sound. However, the field's notion of what constitutes the "collective" has been shortsighted.

Arriving at this understanding is more a matter of collective impact's growing pains than evidence of its ultimate failure. It is as much a by-product of its foundational intention to promote institutional collaboration than a rejection of community. But our experience in applying collective impact has shown us that community participation must become a much more integral part of any such collaborative effort. Institutional leaders must empower residents and grassroots leaders as peers with shared authority, shared responsibility, and shared accountability. Doing so requires cultivating a broader, more diverse, deeper collective of actors who can ensure even greater impact than collaborations where institutional leaders dominate. StrivePartnership has taken responsibility for advancing this model, and StriveTogether has supported and encouraged the efforts of other community partnerships in its national network to do likewise.

THE HEADWINDS OF THE EQUITY MOVEMENT

This enlightened approach to collective impact does not call for remaking it into a grassroots-organizing enterprise. There are organizations and efforts better equipped to mobilize citizen power. Collective impact has always been an *institutional* device, and unabashedly so. It seeks to build strategic connection across

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sectoral boundaries. For StrivePartnership, that initially required reaching out to institutional sectors that previously, at least when it came to education, had not aligned.

Perhaps in part because of its institutional orientation, collective impact is known for the methodical use of data-driven analysis to identify precise strategies that can produce scalable change. Such a characterization, sometimes unfairly cast as the sole feature of collective impact, has elicited criticism from those observers who see a significant democratic role for citizen action and favor the organic nature of community decision making and problem solving. For example, in 2013, when the Kettering Foundation asked researcher Richard Harwood to investigate collective impact's prospects for supporting citizen action, he offered this analysis in a memo:

> "As collective impact has risen in prominence, connections to more informal community groups have fallen as a priority. Their potential for producing impact and scale is considered to be limited. Engaging communities also seems to be less important. Both of these practices suffer from a perceived 'messiness': they appear to be disorderly detours in a process that prides itself on efficiency, keeping things moving, and being 'professional.'"[3]

More recently, the Cincinnati-based human-design-thinking firm Design Impact published a report in January 2017 that sounded a wake-up call. Many different efforts using collective-impact approaches, inspired by StrivePartnership, had been launched to address a range of issues, from child poverty to physical development. Design Impact had worked with many of these organizations to elicit community voice and input. But in their report, the authors warned that such appeals were insufficient to produce equitable results. "When we only ask for feedback and don't invite community as codesigners (with equal decision-making power), we can make the same situations we are solving for even worse," they concluded. "In short, community voice without community leadership is significantly less effective."[4]

Perhaps the harshest critique of collective impact's institutional focus can be found in "Collaborating for Equity and Justice: Moving Beyond Collective Impact," an article written by Tom Wolff and nine of his colleagues in the January 9, 2017, edition of *Nonprofit Quarterly*.[5] Though the piece is arguably too critical of collective impact and dismisses it as unsalvageable, it makes some important points. "We believe that efforts that do not start with treating community leaders and residents as equal partners cannot later be reengineered to meaningfully share power," Wolff and his coauthors write. "In short, coalitions and collaborations need a new way of engaging with communities that leads to transformative changes in power, equity, and justice."

The article identifies 10 perceived shortcomings in the "flawed model" of collective impact. First among them is that "collective impact does not address the essential requirement for meaningfully engaging those in the community most affected by the issues."[6] The

authors introduce six collaborative-practice principles that promote equity and justice.

The Wolff critique suggests that a collaborative education model that is mature in its ability to mobilize institutional resources cannot simultaneously accommodate community authority. But there is no reason to accept this implication. A deeper notion of collective impact insists that this goal is achievable. Neither an institutional solution that shuts out community authority nor a community organizing model that does not effectively deploy institutional assets can realistically effect transformational change that produces equity and justice. At its core, collective impact has always sought a third way.

A COMMUNITY-ENHANCED MODEL

Summoning the collaborative spirit that launched Strive—Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky, and inspired by the work of our sister organizations across the country, StrivePartnership's most recent iteration builds upon recent lessons to more authentically integrate community authority into our work. The driver of StrivePartnership's work is a model of the urban education ecosystem, derived from the organization's more recent efforts, that goes beyond the more institution-centric positioning that framed the terms of engagement on the Purple People Bridge. It builds on this foundation by recognizing the primacy of intimate influencers' and community assets' effect on students' learning.

The model, represented by spheres of influence, acknowledges that the student is surrounded first by the relationships of individuals whom the student trusts and interacts intimately with. (See "The Urban Education Ecosystem" on this page.) Those in this "influencer sphere" include parents and caregivers, peers, and ministers. Surrounding this sphere is the "community sphere," which reflects the community organizations and informal associations aligned with place. Among these are places of worship, recreation centers, barbershops, and volunteer community councils.

Beyond this sphere is the "institutional sphere," which includes many of the organizations and agencies that typically drive collective impact for urban youth: K-12 schools, colleges and universities, social services, the business community, philanthropy, and education nonprofits. At the outer edge is the "systems sphere," which includes large, mostly governmental agencies that drive policies in health, criminal justice, housing, and other areas.
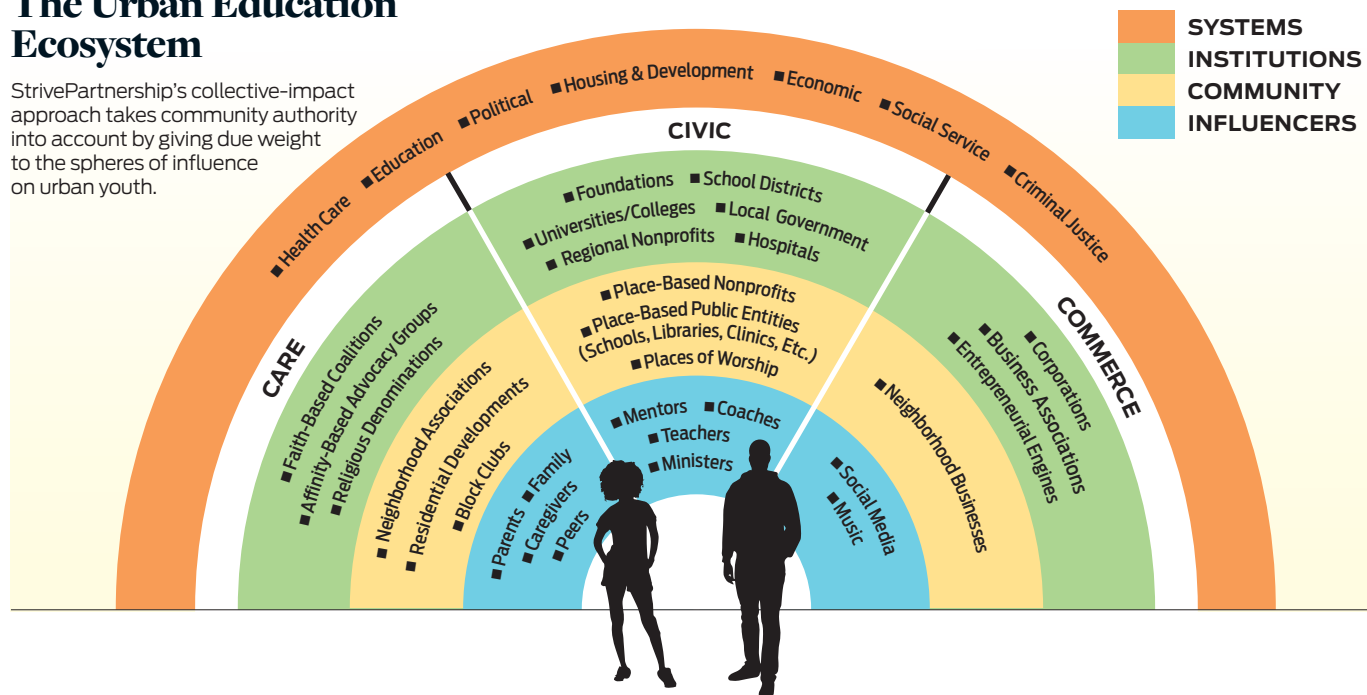
Cutting across each sphere of the ecosystem model are three channels of motivation: care, civic, and commerce. Those in the care channel are committed to the students' whole being. Those in the civic channel are focused on some particular aspect of the students' development, such as health or education. Those in the commerce channel engage the student primarily as a consumer.

Although we have developed this model to improve the educational outcomes of urban youth, it is easily adaptable, and has been applied successfully, to other work in the social sector. For example, coauthor Mark Joseph works with federally funded housing authorities that seek to facilitate the creation of mixed-income housing communities. He finds that the central premise of elevating community authority of low-income residents may foster more productive interaction among individuals across economic lines. Joseph and his colleagues Robert Chaskin and Amy Khare have identified low-income residents' lack of influence on decision making and governance—the absence of community authority—as hampering inclusive and more equitable redevelopment.[7] By contrast, the HOPE SF mixed-income public housing transformation initiative in San Francisco uses a collective-impact approach, has prioritized resident voices and leadership since its inception in 2007, and is the country's most promising effort at achieving equitable mixed-income development.[8]

Joseph and Miyoung Yoon, a doctoral student at Case Western Reserve University's Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, note in their consideration of the experiences of youth in mixed-income communities that all of the spheres of influence in our model have the potential to affect children both positively and negatively. The two draw on youth developmental assets theory and strain theory. Youth developmental assets theory

The Urban Education Ecosystem

StrivePartnership's collective-impact approach takes community authority into account by giving due weight to the spheres of influence on urban youth.

Legend:
- SYSTEMS
- INSTITUTIONS
- COMMUNITY
- INFLUENCERS

CIVIC

- Health Care
- Education
- Political
- Housing & Development
- Economic
- Social Service
- Criminal Justice

- Foundations
- School Districts
- Universities/Colleges
- Local Government
- Regional Nonprofits
- Hospitals

CARE

- Faith-Based Coalitions
- Affinity-Based Advocacy Groups
- Religious Denominations
- Neighborhood Associations
- Residential Developments
- Block Clubs

- Place-Based Nonprofits
- Place-Based Public Entities (Schools, Libraries, Clinics, Etc.)
- Places of Worship

- Mentors
- Coaches
- Teachers
- Ministers

- Parents
- Family
- Caregivers
- Peers

COMMERCE

- Corporations
- Business Associations
- Entrepreneurial Engines
- Neighborhood Businesses

- Social Media
- Music

enumerates the key factors that promote healthy development for young people. Strain theory elucidates the various forms of stress that a young person's environment generates, and considers more and less constructive means of dealing with that stress. Joseph and Yoon argue that, to help youth successfully navigate a mixed-income environment, community initiatives must be designed to use the assets in each sphere while being attentive to, and minimizing the impact of, factors that cause strain.[9]

However, while institutional and civic leaders have paid a great deal of attention to the deficiencies of the community and influencer spheres, they have largely overlooked or undervalued assets that exist within them. For instance, they typically don't enlist low-income parents whose children perform at an academically high level to design and manage successful parent involvement. They don't call upon inner-city churches that sponsor vacation bible schools in the summer to lead summer literacy programs. They don't recruit as mentors neighborhood barbers who consistently charge their young customers to work hard in school. Campus officials generally do not reach out to the personal champions of first-generation college students after the student enrolls, but eagerly replace them with newly assigned campus mentors.

It is not just that actors within these spheres have been ignored; they have been pushed out of the way as harmful to students. This negligence is what critics of collective impact emphasize, and rightfully so. Those of us who defend the practice, therefore, must address this oversight if we are to restore credibility to the work and advance it on behalf of children and communities.

StriveTogether has done just that in pursuit of its vision to ensure that every child, regardless of race, income, or zip code, succeeds from infancy through adulthood. Members of StriveTogether's national Cradle to Career Network agree to follow its Theory of Action, a framework for building the civic infrastructure for achieving the organization's objective. Communities also commit to track and work across seven areas: kindergarten readiness, early-grade reading, middle-grade math, high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, postsecondary completion, and employment.

To help communities achieve more equitable outcomes and accelerate progress, StriveTogether advises, shares knowledge, and provides financial incentives. Its approach uses an equity lens and combines continuous improvement, design thinking, and leadership development according to the Results Count program developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Many communities working with StriveTogether have achieved impressive results. Ten network members, including StrivePartnership, have shown progress on at least 60 percent of indicators across the seven cradle-to-career areas.

To better understand how cradle-to-career civic support develops within and across communities, StriveTogether began a five-year evaluation by Philadelphia-based firm Equal Measure, which has tracked the progress of 16 cradle-to-career partnerships. The data validate StriveTogether's approach in helping communities get better results for children and families. The evaluation, now in its final year, has also helped to uncover where communities have made the least progress, and has done so partly by inviting these very communities to participate in the work.

Through these insights, StriveTogether has evolved its framework to reflect the evolution of its vision of quality collective impact.[10]

In StriveTogether's Theory of Action, which was launched in 2013 to guide the work of the national network, the foundational principle reads:

> "The work of the partnership must be grounded in the context of the community. Partnerships engage a broad array of community voices through building awareness and information sharing; involving and mobilizing the community toward improvement; and co-developing solutions and strategies with community members."

In 2018, StriveTogether launched a comprehensive strategic planning process. The refined approach that has emerged requires organizations to define the community's authority in the earliest stages of partnership development. In this way, they better understand the root causes of disparities and can identify and implement strategies that promote more equitable outcomes for children and families.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

StrivePartnership's breakthrough insight into the value of community authority came as a result of the Cincinnati Preschool Promise campaign, a community-driven effort led by education and early-learning advocates, preschool providers, and faith and community leaders, and facilitated by StrivePartnership. As a result of its success, Cincinnati voters passed a ballot initiative in November 2016 that extended quality preschool access to more children in the city. The effort informed StrivePartnership's understanding that to advance equitable, systemic solutions, "new centers of power must emerge" from "those most adversely affected by our current systems and policies," according to Greg Landsman, who was executive director of StrivePartnership during the campaign.[11]

StrivePartnership spent years building this plan by hosting hundreds of house parties, community forums, town-hall meetings, and parent and preschool-provider listening sessions across the city. At the same time, we enlisted business and labor leaders, elected officials, and our faith communities. In the end, hundreds of people volunteered, including more than 400 on Election Day, and the school levy passed with the highest margin of victory for any Cincinnati Public Schools levy in history: 62 percent to 38 percent.

However, not only did grassroots participation help drive passage, it also fundamentally altered the parameters of the endeavor by defining what "quality" looked like. For institutional leaders, quality preschool was defined by Ohio's Step Up to Quality five-star credentialing system, which assesses curriculum, screenings and assessments of students, teacher education and ongoing training, and how much interaction and feedback centers have with families. Three or more stars indicate a quality program, which means parents enrolled in Preschool Promise could send their children there. But as community representatives weighed in, they made it clear that another essential factor was trust. For a parent, especially a single mother, a quality provider might be the older woman from the house down the street who—regardless of how many stars her operation possesses—has demonstrated that she truly loves the mother's baby girl. This insight and demand led the campaign to seek not only to raise money to subsidize the cost of quality daycare for low-income parents and caregivers, but also to aid neighborhood centers that

were unrated or had not achieved three stars to upgrade their ratings, but that the community already trusted.

The lesson illustrates that sharing authority with community representatives is essential to the future success of collective-impact work—both because it is the just and publicly popular thing to do and because it is strategically superior. For instance, when Wisconsin's Higher Expectations for Racine County engaged with partners to invite community members and institutional leaders to address racial inequities in the county, not all participants were enthusiastic about receiving community guidance. Community representatives had not been included in the past, and some institutional leaders were wary of their engagement. Nevertheless, community members joined "action teams" alongside leaders from Racine Unified School District, United Way of Racine County, the Racine Police Department, Racine County, and other institutions at the Racine-based Johnson Foundation at Wingspread. These teams focused on outcomes in kindergarten readiness, early literacy, school climate, and employment.

The process was not quick or easy, but ultimately community representatives helped identify the root causes of disparities and partnered with institutional leaders to create unique, and potentially groundbreaking, initiatives. Among other efforts, they developed an employment-pathway initiative that has helped youth in the region's highest-need zip codes to build capabilities, develop skills in information technology, earn high school diplomas and college credits, receive driver's licenses, successfully complete paid internships, and, in some cases, earn permanent employment in the IT field. Participants and volunteer mentors have described their new relationships and experience as transformative. Institutional leaders are exploring how to use this new model across other large sectors of the local economy in a way that will support employers and boost community members who have historically been unemployed or underemployed.

This determination does not make the work easy. Elevating community authority fundamentally shifts the power dynamic between communities and institutions and inevitably brings underlying tensions into play. What happens, for instance, when the community's notion of "success" diverges from the outcomes the partnering institution wants to pursue? Who defines what "expertise" looks like— professional training or life experience—and how it gets deployed? And if the institution brings its abundant assets—financial, technological, data—to bear on the partnership, can it ever achieve true parity with the community?

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY AUTHORITY

Such challenges are ever present, and the evidence of long-term results deriving from these efforts is preliminary. Nevertheless, a number of recent theories about community development and systemic change support the quest to embrace community authority as a way of making the most of institutional and community assets.

John McKnight, cofounder of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute, asserts that community and institutional assets intermingled in a local context provide the best support for children. "The educational resources of the village include the knowledge of neighborhood residents, the clubs, groups, and associations that are citizen-based learning environments, and the local institutions (businesses, not for profits, and government bodies)," he writes. "Each provides incredible learning opportunities. It is these neighborhood educational assets that are activated in a village that raises its children."[12]

Dan Duncan, a member of the ABCD Institute's national faculty and chair of its board, insists through his work at Clear Impact that institutions can support community authority without overriding it. "For true community engagement, professionals need to step back to create space for citizens to discuss their own hopes and dreams and the roles they can play to achieve their dreams," he writes. "True support is when professionals allow citizens to be in charge of their own destinies and then step in when their help is requested."[13]

Furthermore, models such as Stewart Brand's Pace Layers suggest that community authority, in conjunction with institutional advocacy, is essential to generating and then sustaining the level of rapid innovation needed to address seemingly intractable problems that affect marginalized communities. The founder and president of the Long Now Foundation, Brand argues that civilization evolves along six differently paced but interdependent "layers" within the social ecosystem. From slowest and innermost to fastest and outermost, the layers are nature, culture, governance, infrastructure, commerce, and fashion. It is easy to see how the whims of fashion and art change much more quickly than do the slow revolutions of nature and culture. Brand describes their interplay this way: "Fast learns, slow remembers. Fast proposes, slow disposes. Fast is discontinuous, slow is continuous. Fast and small instructs slow and big by accrued innovation and by occasional revolution. Slow and big controls small and fast by constraint and constancy. ... All durable dynamic systems have this sort of structure. It is what makes them adaptable and robust."

Although Brand's model visually inverts the StrivePartnership urban education ecosystem, the latter's institutions and systems spheres align with the slower, inner layers of Brand's ecosystem. Compare the inertia and resistance to change of nearly all mature bureaucracies with the lives of community residents, who move at a faster pace. Consider a tragic community event, such as a police shooting of an unarmed man in an urban community. Before any officials arrive, the community gathers, shares information informally, and starts to mobilize—at a speed similar to that of Brand's fast-moving, expressive fashion layer. Later, as with Brand's commerce and infrastructure layers, community leaders, such as pastors, arrive on the scene to offer a semblance of order to the spontaneous response by organizing a protest or scheduling a press conference. Later still, the police chief and mayor—the governance and culture layers—arrive and announce official policies and protocols. The pace of action accelerates the closer one gets to the community level. And while it is more chaotic, it is also more responsive, often dictating the urgency with which other spheres will react.

Or think of a different example and consider social media—which sits at the "influencer" level of our model in the commerce channel. Has society known a more rapidly evolving and deeply influential medium, particularly among our youth? It is quite possible that more black children now imagine themselves as scientists as a result of the social media outpouring over the technology-enthused movie *Black Panther* during spring 2018—along with the spontaneous vanloads of children transported to screenings by neighbors and church groups—than through the comparatively glacial pace of countless formal STEM programs. To what extent have our collective-impact

strategies incorporated tactics that leverage the speed and reach of these ubiquitous and ever-changing cultural phenomena?

The point is that collective impact, with its emphasis on institutional processes, has been biased toward the slower layers of Brand's ecosystem and has failed to recognize the outer, faster layers as equally essential. As a result, we may have shortchanged ourselves in terms of the learning and innovation that these layers can bring and perpetuated within the ecosystem an imbalance that, arguably, has thwarted continuous learning.

The importance of community-level voice and influence is a theme that also emerges in the work of Joseph and his colleagues at the National Initiative on Mixed-Income Communities. Their applied research has focused on the challenges of promoting more equity and inclusion in historically segregated communities that have become more racially and economically diverse through mixed-income development and gentrification. Joseph notes that the barriers to embracing participation from marginalized populations frequently come from the more affluent and the social structures over which they have power.

In their 2015 book, *Integrating the Inner City*, Joseph and coauthor Robert Chaskin quote one public-housing resident as he describes his unsuccessful attempts to meaningfully engage his wealthier neighbors: "You're trying to interact, but it's just like you're invisible. Nobody wants to recognize you. I know what the problem is. It's them. It ain't me. I can interact with anybody." The factors that contribute to these tensions, according to Chaskin and Joseph, include differences in lifestyle, lack of daily interaction, and different perceptions based on class and race. These circumstances are reinforced, they write, by "the enduring power of an urban underclass narrative in which institutionalized assumptions regarding a culture of poverty—a pattern of values, beliefs, and behaviors presumably embraced by the underclass in opposition to mainstream values of work and self-sufficiency—remains salient."

THE QUEST FOR A DEEPER COLLECTIVE

StrivePartnership and other collective-impact organizations within the StriveTogether network have been refashioning their work to recognize more deeply and authentically community assets for achieving equitable educational outcomes for youth. Accomplishing this goal demands substantive shifts in core organizational structure, operational practices, and foundational knowledge. These changes are ambitious but achievable. Our experience and observation suggest that enacting them requires three strategic endeavors:

Pursue new learning. | The first challenge is to resist the temptation to believe we already know what to do. Despite having a staff with long-standing experience working in urban neighborhoods as community organizers and partnering with communities through their universities, White recognized that his team was susceptible to institutional biases. To mitigate this tendency, the team embarked upon a Community Deep Dive initiative to identify, mobilize, and enhance community assets as a means of elevating agency. In collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, whose work focuses on democratic practices at the local level, StrivePartnership has facilitated resident-led surveys in Cincinnati's Roselawn neighborhood that highlight its existing potential to support children and learning.

Through a community-organizing activity called the Dream Game, Roselawn residents have led the discussion to define problems and create solutions that draw primarily upon assets they control and also to indicate the external assets that they need. The exercise is helping StrivePartnership to learn and disseminate new practices that redefine the power dynamic between urban core communities and institutions and in turn improve youth outcomes.

Broaden capacity and expertise. | Many organizations in the StriveTogether network have brought on more staff and leadership positions dedicated to community engagement that goes beyond creating goodwill to drive efforts that recognize community authority and expertise. StrivePartnership's job description for its manager for community strategies states that it "leads in the design and implementation of efforts to identify, mobilize, and magnify community assets, expertise, and authority—including the contributions of residents and small-scale neighborhood efforts—and to integrate them into StrivePartnership's broader institutional practices to advance racial equity and social justice."

The Road Map Project, a StriveTogether network member focused on South Seattle and South King County, reconstituted its leadership structure after its 2016 strategic planning, which focused on advancing racial equity. Road Map Project participants recognized that the members of its founding advisory board, which was made up mostly of institutional, civic, and philanthropic leaders, did not adequately represent the students and parents from communities it sought to serve. Rather than simply expand membership of the original Project Sponsors Group to include more community representatives, the body dismantled itself and established a new Community Leadership Team to guide the work.

The new team, about 12 people, includes youth, faith, and community leaders who more closely represent the racial and geographic composition of the seven school district service areas in which the Road Map Project works. A diverse panel, which included members of the old Project Sponsors Group and other community leaders who engaged in the planning process, selected its members. Institutional leaders from school districts, colleges, foundations, and other civic institutions from the original group remain active in the project.

Modify organizational policies and goals. | The ultimate measure of organizational priorities is whether the organization has concrete goals for which it is held responsible. StriveTogether has signaled its priorities by emphasizing equity and community voice in its evolving Theory of Action and by making funding dependent on these goals through its recently launched Cradle to Career Community Challenge grant program. StrivePartnership tracks not only the number of "place-based participants" engaged in its projects, but also the degree to which they take appropriate steps. For example, StriveTogether member Seeding Success in Memphis has shifted its data support efforts from reporting findings to the community to equipping grassroots organizations with the data collection and analysis tools they need to make decisions on the ground. For instance, volunteers and staff in the network of grassroots reading programs supported by Literacy Mid-South can now track both the attendance of the 2,500 children and adults they reach collectively and the actual time of instruction for each participant. They report those data to the relevant community organizations (such as Memphis Athletic Ministries), enabling the recipients to better

target their efforts. The result has led to an improvement in reading skills and reading comprehension.

None of these efforts is perfect, and we need to do much more to reclaim lost time. As we progress, we are discovering that, in fact, we can reengineer collective impact without abandoning its core principles.

LESSONS FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT

As StrivePartnership builds momentum to refashion its work in a manner that elevates community expertise and authority, we are discovering lessons that may be useful to the broader field. The following three are chief among these:

Resist the deficit narrative. | Consider all the terms, expressions, and code words we use to describe the failings of urban communities and the people who live there: marginalized, low-income, at-risk, crime-ridden, minority, poor, disadvantaged. Now, try to find an affirming adjective to counter each one of those terms that regularly appear in our presentations and grant proposals. It is not so easy to do. We have created an entire lexicon to reinforce the paradigm that urban communities are deficient. This language shapes our mental models. It takes intentional effort to change this default position. Consider the shift that some communities have made by beginning to use the term "returning citizens" to describe those who have served time in prison, rather than referring to them as felons or ex-cons. In her now-famous TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, "Show a people as one thing, only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." If we are going to shift our behavior, we must deliberately shift the narrative.

Do not settle for community voice. | Collective-impact organizations have done a fairly good job in recent years of consulting with local residents and grassroots representatives to provide input in and secure endorsement of institutionally driven strategies. Focus groups, town-hall meetings, and community surveys are all devices that capture community needs and wishes. However, these exercises fall far short of recognizing a community as a legitimate peer in the design, production, and implementation of those strategies. Our efforts to solicit community voice may very well lead to decisions that are more reflective of community desires. But it is wrong to take from residents their insight—the one asset they hold exclusively—and then deny them the authority to contribute directly to making those decisions, let alone define what information is gathered and why. Enlisting community voice is not a substitute for community power.

Along with our commitment to promote community authority, we also must enable community representatives to participate effectively in sophisticated, multisector initiatives and institutional representatives to partner and engage effectively with community representatives. The ABCD Institute has a basic tool kit for practitioners that assigns three questions to community and institutional partners as they embark upon their collaborative work, to ensure that residents have authority over the appropriate decisions: First, as neighbors, what can we achieve just by using our own assets? Second, what can we achieve with our own assets if we get some outside help? Third, what can't we do with our assets that outsiders must do?

Pursue equity with humility. | The recent focus on racial equity and inclusion by mainstream institutions is a powerful development. These companies are revising mission statements, rewriting funding guidelines, and creating new positions. Most of us whose organizations have failed over the years to fully appreciate inequities are feeling good about this enlightenment. But our limited progress should elicit sober reflection. We should recognize that while mainstream organizations were operating in ignorance, groups close to the ground—many of them less prominent and with smaller budgets—were relentlessly devoted for decades to the work of eradicating racial, economic, and social injustice. It is easy to push past these organizations as larger, well-funded enterprises like StrivePartnership step up to join the equity movement. It would be more appropriate to step aside and give these community enterprises the credit they deserve for having stood in the gap when others were looking the other way, and to hear from them the lessons they learned in the struggle.

The next iteration of collective-impact work must recognize the primacy of those whom students themselves (or whomever we seek to help) value most—their families, teachers, churches, and others in the influencer and community spheres. This requires more than a simple revision of our rhetoric or the collection of new data. We must overhaul our assessment of the urban education ecosystem, rigorously pursue new knowledge to confront our biases, restructure how our organizations operate, and install new practices and policies to sustain change.

These efforts have begun in earnest at StrivePartnership and beyond through StriveTogether and its network of related partnerships across the country. We fully accept the challenge that critics of collective impact present. However, rather than abandoning the practice, as some have suggested, we are doubling down on it, by evolving the very notion of what "collective" means to address inequity and injustice. ∎

NOTES

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