

CONNECTIONS

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Experiments in **ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION**



The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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Collective Impact from the Inside Out

By Byron P. White

I recall standing a few years ago at the corner of Rockdale and Burnet Avenues in Cincinnati, a few doors down from Rockdale Elementary School, where I met one of the neighborhood's education champions. He wasn't a teacher at the school or a professional from the nearby hospital. He was Vince Morton, the longtime owner of a little carryout bearing his name that once stood at the busy intersection. Having been told of his reputation by a resident, I asked Morton how he had contributed to children's education. He pulled from a shelf inside his sparsely stocked store a small trophy he had received from teachers at Rockdale. It recognized him for having attended and pro-

vided refreshments for school events for many years. Moreover, when grade cards came out, every student knew they could stop by the store to get a piece of candy for each top grade they produced.

The teachers who honored Morton as a partner realized something that I have come to understand after years as an urban affairs journalist, community organizer, and education professional. Schools alone don't educate children. Urban youth learn within a network of influences that include family members and friends, schools and other education providers, neighborhood organizations from churches to recreation centers, and comprehensive systems, such as criminal justice and health. This education ecosystem conspires to influence their decision-making and actions—sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. Communities educate children.

That is the conviction that is driving me as I return to Cincinnati to begin my tenure as the new executive director of StrivePartnership. StrivePartnership's core mission is to understand all aspects of this complex ecosystem and to galvanize it so that it effectively nurtures every child, from cradle to career. Our success in fulfilling this goal will require a renewed recognition of education as a community enterprise.



We've been working on this for a decade. In the early days, StrivePartnership paved the way in convening the leaders of regional institutions devoted to education—school districts, universities, education nonprofits, foundations, and businesses. More recently, the work has moved to providing technical assistance, such as data support, to help drive those institutions toward improving shared outcomes.

Today, so-called “collective impact” organizations, such as StrivePartnership, have come under scrutiny for failing to be inclusive of community members in their coalitions. Collective impact organizations by design have not always sought to be deeply inclusive of citizen participation. Though local residents and grassroots representatives often are consulted to provide input to and endorsement of



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collective impact strategies, they have not been recognized as peers among traditional, institutional stakeholders. In many ways, collective impact organizations' methodical emphasis on

using data-driven analysis to identify precise strategies that can produce scalable change runs counter to the organic nature of community decision-making and problem-solving processes.

As Rich Harwood, founder of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, noted in a memo to the Kettering Foundation: "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,



In every neighborhood there are committed parents and caregivers, devoted mentors, community volunteers, passionate teachers—and children eager to learn.

keeping things moving, and being ‘professional.’”

Urban communities are often disparaged for their deficiencies when it comes to educating young people. The narrative of indifferent children, apathetic parents, and underperforming schools is familiar to many. However, in every neighborhood there are committed parents and caregivers, devoted mentors, community volunteers, passionate teachers—and children eager to learn. Neighborhood churches house tutoring programs in basements, celebrate graduations, and raise thousands of dollars for scholarships. Grandmothers, uncles, coaches, beauticians, and peers provide encouragement and counsel to youth.

These activities often are overlooked by those outside the community or overwhelmed by negative forces around them. I remember asking Morton if he thought he was having a positive impact on young people. He was doubtful that his contributions made much difference compared to the many challenges that Avondale youth face. Morton also was not aware that the barbers at Stag’s Barbershop next door were pushing the same message about the importance of school with their young customers, as were the coaches of the youth football team that played up the street.



StrivePartnership intends to refashion its work in a manner that more deeply and authentically recognizes community talent and expertise as essential to achieving transformational education outcomes for youth.

Had their efforts been connected, magnified, and expanded, perhaps the impact of these nonexperts could have been multiplied. And if they had been invited to bring their knowledge and passion to the table alongside the resources and technical expertise that is possessed by institutions devoted to improving education, maybe they could have been part of producing a truly transformational education strategy.

That is the brand of collective impact StrivePartnership is dedicated to activating. Going forward, StrivePartnership will be even more deliberate about engaging the entire ecosystem. StrivePartnership intends

to refashion its work in a manner that more deeply and authentically recognizes community talent and expertise as essential to achieving transformational education outcomes for youth. It intends to incorporate those assets into its work in a manner that promotes rather than hinders community authority.

Drawing upon premises of asset-based community development,

democratic practices of community politics, and other citizen-centered frameworks, and inspired by efforts of other progressive collective impact organizations nationally, StrivePartnership is exploring ways to be informed by the expertise and authority of local residents, to be more inclusive of these participants as coproducers of solutions, and to integrate such leadership into the organization's decision-making structure. The commitment is to go beyond simply enlisting community representation in order to tap into community assets as essential components of StrivePartnership's work.

As it incorporates authentic community engagement as a core component of its collective impact agenda, StrivePartnership has begun an exploration into the community's capacity to educate youth by partnering with a citizen-led organization to conduct a deep asset inventory in urban neighborhoods. The initiative supports community residents through an exercise to discover, connect, and mobilize various informal assets that exist within their neighborhoods and are used on behalf of youth to achieve community goals.

In advancing these strategies, StrivePartnership will work closely with other practitioners who are interested in pursuing more effective engagement between institutions and communities, particularly related to



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education and youth development. These partnerships include other Greater Cincinnati collective impact organizations, such as the Child Poverty Collaborative, Partners for a Competitive Workforce, All Children Thrive, and Place Matters. It also involves StriveTogether, a national coalition of more than 70 education-focused collective impact organizations focused on education, as it seeks to share best practices among its membership.

In our work with these partners, StrivePartnership is guided by three fundamental challenges:

1. How can the efforts of StrivePartnership provide citizens with greater capacity to design, lead, and enhance the work that they determine to be most critical to their communities?
2. How can the efforts of StrivePartnership create a legitimate vehicle for citizens who are working collectively in their communities to collaborate with institutions in a manner that does not diminish citizen authority?
3. How can these experiences lead to fundamental, sustainable changes in the operational practices and organizational culture at StrivePartnership—and other institutions that might model us—that make them more beneficial to citizen work?



In the end, our intention is not to dismantle collective impact. As part of a network of more than 70 organizations nationally conducting work around educational achievement through the StriveTogether cradle-to-career network, I have seen tremendous work in cities across the country using this approach. However, a decade of results has made it clear that the work will never be truly transformative and sustainable until it is tethered to citizen action. ■

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