

Collective Impact and Systems Change: Missing Links

by Greg Landsman and Erez Roimi

IN WINTER 2011, THE CONSULTING GROUP FSG WROTE an article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) introducing the idea of collective impact.¹ Citing the work of Cincinnati, Ohio's StrivePartnership as a prime example, the article argued that "large-scale social change comes from better cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated intervention of individual organizations."² FSG reviewed StrivePartnership's work, concluded that it represented collective impact in action, and developed five high-level conditions based on aspects of the work in Cincinnati that were deemed important

to StrivePartnership's success: a common agenda; shared measurement; mutually reinforcing activities; continuous communication; and backbone community support.

The article launched countless collective impact efforts, led some to rename their existing work *collective impact*, and even helped a few leaders from StrivePartnership to establish a national network of communities—called StriveTogether—to support others who were doing similar work to that of StrivePartnership. FSG's portrayal of StrivePartnership, however, provided an incomplete view of the kind of systems-change

GREG LANDSMAN is CEO of the 767 Group, which supports communities in the United States and overseas in achieving large-scale community and systemic change. Landsman is former executive director of StrivePartnership, and he spearheaded the Cincinnati Preschool Promise and created Every Child Capital, a philanthropic venture fund that invests in high-impact programs that are able to attract sustainable public funding. Landsman currently serves as strategic advisor to the fund, and also provides strategic support to the Rashi-Tauber Initiative. Follow him on Twitter @greglandsman1, or contact him directly at greglandsman1@gmail.com. **EREZ ROIMI** has been involved in social entrepreneurship and community development for seventeen years. He is the Rashi-Tauber Initiative's entrepreneurship manager, and the founder and former manager of the Benjamin de Rothschild Ambassadors program, whose mission is to train the future generation of social and business leadership in Israel. Roimi is also former deputy director of the ISEF Foundation. Follow him on Twitter @erezroimi, or contact him directly at erezroimi@gmail.com.

FSG was able to popularize the concept of collective impact—which is, arguably, a good thing: we do, of course, want people working together. But we believe that the systems-change approach, while more complicated and long term in nature, will produce more reliable improvements in outcomes, and do so in a sustainable way.

work being pursued: it left out key structural components of the initiative that enabled sustainable social change—such as the vital importance of changing the behaviors of those operating in a system, oftentimes through leadership training, coalition building, community organizing, and a long-term commitment to change.

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Our intention is not to criticize FSG or the article. We recognize the challenges of fully capturing such complex work, and without going into great detail here, StrivePartnership was working on—and continues to work on—changing systems. Collective impact is, perhaps, part of the more complicated work of systems change—but only a part.

With the success that Cincinnati was experiencing, especially in terms of the partnership's shared outcomes moving in the right direction, other cities began to call, and a small cohort of communities came together to begin to share best practices. It was clear that to help other communities and continue to make progress in Cincinnati, a new entity would need to be created, and StriveTogether was the result. While FSG's article on collective impact brought additional attention to this new national work and network, the StriveTogether approach was based then—as it is today—on changing systems and the complicated work it takes to do so. Rigorous evaluations of both the StriveTogether work and the ongoing work in Cincinnati by OMG Center for

Collaborative Learning (now Equal Measure) were pursued, both of which have been helpful in better understanding the elements that must be in play to change systems for improved results—most notably, whether people within the systems were changing their actions and decisions, and what has the most impact on those behavioral changes.

StriveTogether is now a national network of over seventy communities, and has provided ongoing support to most of those communities since 2010.³ The network goes beyond the FSG rubric to offer a more comprehensive guide for cities and regions to achieve impact at scale through systems change. It also emphasizes building results-based leadership and coalitions—key to the kind of behavioral shifts needed to achieve changes in a given system.

Because those leaders from StrivePartnership who established StriveTogether had been on the ground in Cincinnati doing the work every day, StriveTogether offered communities a more complete and rigorous approach to what StrivePartnership had always referred to as “systems-change work” than the handful of conditions offered by FSG. Again, by “systems change,” StrivePartnership meant that in order to get better results, we need to change systems—which requires, among other things, changing the way people behave, how they interact with one another, how they invest, and so forth.

Changing systems does include what FSG would call a “common agenda”—which, as described by FSG, “requires all participants to have a shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed-upon actions.”⁴ But systems change is far more complicated than that; it is also far more complicated than the other four conditions of collective impact offered by FSG.⁵

FSG would go on to provide consulting support to a countless number of projects around the globe and publish many more articles on the subject. FSG's conditions appear to help a community get started; indeed, many communities and projects leveraged FSG as they began their work. However, a year or so later, the five conditions of FSG run

out of answers to very complicated questions: How do you sustain a partnership? What are the best ways to authentically mobilize a community? What actually leads to meaningful policy change that delivers demonstrably better outcomes? Who is supposed to fund what, and how?

Cincinnati Preschool Promise and the Rashi-Tauber Initiative

In order to shed light on what could be the next generation of collective work (or, as we would say, systems-change work), and on what activities communities should pursue as they work toward meaningful and sustainable social change, below we describe two successfully developed high-impact community initiatives with which we have been deeply involved. Both address widening achievement gaps stemming from such issues as the growing number of low-income and often marginalized children and families in the United States and around the globe.

StrivePartnership spearheaded one of the most significant policy changes in the country with the Cincinnati Preschool Promise (CPP), a ballot initiative that was passed in November 2016. The same leadership that ran StrivePartnership for more than five years and led the Cincinnati Preschool Promise also began working with a similarly impressive effort in Israel—the Rashi-Tauber Initiative (RTI).⁶ Both are good examples of systems-change work.

It is interesting, and important, to note that FSG began working with RTI when the effort first launched. As was the case in many other communities, FSG was able to help RTI get its collective work off the ground. After a year or so, however, it was clear that RTI was going beyond FSG's five conditions, especially as they relate to coalition building and organizing the communities that would be most affected by the work. That is when we began to work together, recognizing that systems change was the right approach, and that together we could share and learn from one another to strengthen what was happening in both Cincinnati and Israel.

A brief overview of both efforts and what we can learn from them to advance collective work follows:

- **The Cincinnati Preschool Promise (CPP).**

CPP is a community-driven effort led by education and early learning advocates, preschool providers, faith and community leaders, and parents to expand high-quality preschool to more children in Cincinnati. The initial focus was on those children who need it the most—so that every child in the city shows up to school prepared to learn, and is much more likely to succeed academically and graduate prepared for college and a meaningful career. CPP was launched from StrivePartnership, which is Cincinnati's cradle-to-career education partnership.

- **The Rashi-Tauber Initiative (RTI).**

RTI is a city-based, collective impact initiative led by community, nonprofit, education, and government leaders in two cities in Israel: Ashkelon and Kiryat Malachi. Both cities have sizable immigrant communities and are supported by the Rashi Foundation and the Tauber Family Foundation to better integrate investments and services along a cradle-to-career continuum. The aim is to improve the social mobility of every citizen, particularly those young people who have historically struggled to succeed academically and economically.

Three common principles have emerged from our work in these two very different communities, all of which are in line with this systems-change approach to collective work. First, new centers of power must emerge, and they must emerge from those most adversely affected by our current systems and policies. Second, leaders must be committed to the work for the long haul, as real change often takes many years to achieve. And third, in true collective-work form, a new development approach—not necessarily new programs—is vital. This article focuses primarily on the first insight—the one that has received the least attention—although we do tackle the other two, as they are critically important as well.

An Evolution: A More Complete Formula for Collective Work

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the city-based social mobility initiative in Kiryat Malachi and Ashkelon in Israel, we offer the following supplemental elements as success factors from the field:

1. Both Community and Leaders

Contribute to Shared Vision

Leaders in a community cannot alone set a shared vision or establish shared results. The community and its leadership must develop the shared vision and agenda together. Early engagement of parents, students, and other interested citizens will effectively shape the shared work and establish greater accountability for the community's leadership.

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This work paid off. When we brought CPP to Cincinnati voters in November 2016, we had hundreds of people volunteering, including over four hundred people on Election Day. The measure passed 62 percent to 38 percent, the largest margin in the history of Cincinnati school levies.⁷ This victory represented the culmination of our updated collective impact process and a validation of our grassroots approach.

In Israel, RTI's collective impact effort began in September 2015 with a survey of a broad swathe of residents in both cities.⁸ The survey engaged hundreds of people, including residents who historically had been left out of any community decision-making processes. This level of engagement strengthened the shared vision, goals, and measures set by the steering committees, and kept the pressure on local government to remain committed. RTI has distinguished itself as unique in a country where top-down decision making at the city level is the norm.

Accustomed as they are to seeing single-issue projects come and go, there is now palpable faith among residents, funders, and local government officials that, with multiple-sector buy-in,

the work will be sustained, even through the inevitable leadership transitions. We believe that RTI's success in Israel, with both cities now fully engaged and investing in the shared agenda, is due to the combination of deep community engagement and a distinctive focus on the process.

2. Both Formal Data and Community Voices Drive Shared Plans

Formal data, collected at the outset and on an ongoing basis, must inform the shared work. Beyond that, less traditional sources of data—community voices and ideas—ensure that the resulting actions represent what those most affected believe is needed.

In addition to conducting a survey of residents, RTI hired students in its two cities to go door to door with a questionnaire to elicit opinions from individuals who might not otherwise have agreed to participate in the process. This fact-finding took six months, and the results generated important discussions at the steering-committee level about how to ensure that the work served residents.

In Cincinnati, the RAND Corporation was hired to provide independent data on and analysis of the efficacy of quality preschool. Its report helped shape CPP's plans, but so did the many parent and provider listening sessions, in which moving stories were told and the RAND research was validated.⁹ In the end, both formal research and community voices impacted the plan, but we would argue that the data collected from parents and providers was paramount in the eventual success of the CPP initiative.

3. Vision and Plans Address Inequity

When a plan or set of interventions tackles meaningful inequities, there is likely to be greater traction—both in terms of funding and community support.

The Preschool Promise offers tuition assistance to families who cannot otherwise afford high-quality preschool and provides quality-improvement grants to programs that need additional help to achieve quality. The grants are targeted toward those programs that are smaller and most likely resource poor, and in neighborhoods where it's harder to attract and keep qualified teachers.

The Preschool Promise gained widespread support because its diverse group of community leaders argued forcefully, with the backing of all that StrivePartnership had done, that these resource deficiencies were the root cause of inequities.

Israel's Kiryat Malachi and Ashkelon both have sizable immigrant communities (originating from Morocco, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Russia, and Uzbekistan) that have historically struggled both academically and economically. RTI went to great lengths to locate the informal leadership, meeting with youth leaders, working families, religious leaders, and parent associations, and engaging these stakeholders early in the decision-making process and development of the shared vision and goals. RTI organized leaders from opposing political groups and held community meetings with key community leaders, asking them each to bring as many residents as they could. The result is that individuals who had tired of hearing about the latest "magic bullet" that would improve results for their community have come to trust us and the process.

4. Broad-Based Coalitions Demand Systemic Change

Community leaders who typically dominate in collective work are beneficiaries of the existing system and, though sincere about wanting change, are often reluctant to upset the status quo. Both the Cincinnati and Israel initiatives have put significant energy and time into building broad-based coalitions that demand real systemic change. Incremental change is neither sufficient nor does it inspire a broad coalition.

One vehicle for achieving this degree of change in Kiryat Malachi and Ashkelon has been focus groups for residents. We are still at the beginning of our process but already have several nascent coalitions, including one focused on youth programming, which in Israel is a predictor of later success. Through the focus groups in Kiryat Malachi, we found that nearly 10 percent of the city's youth do not attend youth activities because they are embarrassed to come, and that 30 percent said they do not come because they simply did not know how to sign up. This information has

provided the foundation for a broad-based call to find ways to ease access to youth activities—which RTI is now attempting to facilitate by aligning resources and sharing enrollment data, among other things.

In Cincinnati, while most believed that the Preschool Promise was a good idea, funding it and actually realizing the program required enormous community pressure. Over the course of several years, nearly ten thousand people signed a pledge supporting new, sustainable funding for two years of quality preschool for Cincinnati's children. We gained the support of even the more reluctant leaders when community demand grew to a point where it was no longer viable not to put the Preschool Promise on the ballot.

5. Real Change Requires Long-Term Commitments

Those who want lasting change must be willing to stay committed to investing in their shared vision for many years. While any serious collective effort may produce strong results in the short run, systemic change takes time, and people on the ground will be more likely to stay engaged if they know that investors are in it for the long haul.

Within just a few years, the RTI efforts in Kiryat Malachi and Ashkelon have produced very solid initial results, but it will take years before RTI can really judge its success. RTI's two founding funders—the Rashi Foundation and the Tauber Family Foundation—have been vocal about their long-term commitment. In turn, local leaders have been encouraged to consider the big picture, which means moving away from the short-term fixes that have characterized past efforts. It also means major policy changes—such as significant shifts in public and private investments in the shared work and results of the partnership—and experiencing real growth in the shared measures over several years.

In Cincinnati, bringing CPP into being was the culmination of years of organizing and coalition-building work and over a decade of collective efforts to rally a community around early learning and development. There were many times when people could have given up, but CPP's

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investors never backed away and nor did those CPP organized on the ground. This determination and persistence are essential to successfully changing a system.

To further explore these five elements, below we provide details on our initiatives, reinforcing the need for this more complete formula for successful and sustainable collective work.

The Cincinnati Preschool Promise

CPP followed the supplemental elements offered above: both the community and the community's leaders shaped the vision and plan; formal and informal data and research were used; the effort addressed inequities both for children and for preschool providers; a broad coalition was established to bring about systemic change; and all involved had committed themselves to the vision for the long haul. In the end, as noted above, voters approved CPP—along with much-needed additional funding for local public schools—by an historic margin in November of 2016.

StrivePartnership had set community-level goals, including school readiness. For years, due in large part to the work of Greater Cincinnati's United Way Success By 6 program, Cincinnati had made progress, albeit incremental, in increasing the number of children showing up to school ready to learn. Part of this work included investments in quality preschool and a data system that allowed Cincinnati to demonstrate that children—particularly low-income children—who had quality preschool were more likely to enter kindergarten prepared and then to read on grade level by the end of third grade (a major indicator of future success).

But Cincinnati was stuck. The school readiness rates spent several years in the mid- to low-50 percent range, meaning that about half of the children in Cincinnati were showing up to school unprepared. Beginning in 2012, in response to this incremental progress in school readiness rates, StrivePartnership—alongside its many partners—launched the advocacy and organizing effort to provide two years of quality preschool it named CPP.

CPP partnered first with Leadership Cincinnati and Crossroads Community Church, and,

as described earlier, went on to host hundreds of house parties and community forums, and to attend hundreds of festivals and parades—collecting thousands of signatures from people who wanted to see CPP become a reality. CPP furthered its partnership with the AMOS Project to present to and engage with dozens of faith-based organizations throughout the city. Part of that work included the building of a “People’s Platform,” which outlined some key provisions of CPP and preschool expansion in general: respect every child; racial equity; only good jobs; and families at the center. This helped to strengthen CPP’s core values of high quality, access for all, and parent choice.

CPP also partnered with the business community and Cincinnati Public Schools to provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of preschool and how best to make it work in Cincinnati. This research, produced by the RAND Corporation, helped to guide CPP’s implementation work.¹⁰ In this second report, CPP underscored the importance of trained and supported professionals as part of achieving and sustaining quality, and was also successful in including wage supports in the financial modeling that will help to ensure that preschool professionals stay in the profession.

In addition to the ten thousand pledge signers and hundreds of engaged organizations and leaders, the CPP movement helped to secure the \$15 million annually through an historically successful ballot issue. CPP will expand access to quality preschool in Cincinnati, beginning with those families who could not otherwise afford it. Working with the school district and funders, CPP is now in a position to lead one of the most successful, inclusive, and meaningful preschool expansion efforts in the country.

The Rashi-Tauber Initiative

RTI is focusing initially on Kiryat Malachi and Ashkelon. In both cities, leaders and community have come together to establish a compelling shared vision and better align resources on behalf of tens of thousands of citizens—beginning with young children and students—to dramatically increase social mobility for all residents.

Hundreds of leaders are collaborating across all sectors, including the forty-some leaders who comprise steering committees in Ashkelon and Kiryat Malachi. Cities, funders, community representatives, and key partners from the education and business sectors are involved.

The initiative has also made community engagement and empowerment a priority. The survey mentioned earlier involved more than six hundred individuals (three hundred in each municipality), and community leaders are consistently being engaged in the initiative and its direction through individual and group meetings. The bottom-up work appears to be paying off as an increasing number of local groups and individuals continue to inquire about getting involved.

Any collective systems-change effort needs to be data driven, and leaders have been collecting data on the emerging shared outcomes, along with relevant programmatic and budget data. These data have been assembled from official sites and from participating organizations.

Using these data (including citizen-level input), the steering committees have defined long-term shared outcomes—that is, what they felt was possible and necessary for the city and its residents to sustain long-term gains (a list of shared outcomes for each city was provided upon request). Systems-change work also provides opportunities for city leadership to set goals and targets, and manage plans and resources, in an effective and efficient way, enabling a snowball effect for the initiative.

In line with identified shared outcomes in Kiryat Malachi, RTI is now investing in strengthening youth leadership and engagement. City leaders have established a working group with representation from all municipal youth programs that, with help from a new coordinator, will invest in youth leadership, increase enrollment in their programs, share data and best practices, and track organizational and youth progress.

Working together, the youth programs believe they can increase youth group participation by 50 percent, attract three times the current number

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of older student guides, send 90 percent of their alumni to meaningful national or army service, and see 80 percent of high school graduates pursuing academic degrees or vocational studies.

These and other benchmarks will be used to determine whether the investment is on track to impact the identified long-term shared outcomes.

The investment provides a very important win for the initiative. Real collective action is being pursued in a data-driven way, and community leaders are rallying around a concrete set of actions. It will also allow these communities to put the principles of collective systems-change work into practice and build meaningful data and leadership infrastructure for the next stages of work. The investment also establishes a clear model for successful city-level work on other issues.



Versions of collective work are being employed in many different settings across the United States and globally. Scholarly work by coalition-building expert Tom Wolff and colleagues, for instance, goes a long way toward updating the approach. This article, in turn, is intended to provide additional insight, drawing on our experiences in the field, to help highlight the missing links between what many call “collective impact” and the kind of systems-change work they hope to pursue.¹¹ To be sure, “collective impact” is a catchy way of describing a new approach to addressing social and educational challenges. But it can easily just become people working together, or some version of “collective work,” and not necessarily produce significant, lasting change. In order to achieve transformative results sustained over time, a more rigorous systems-change approach is needed.

We know that new centers of power must emerge, and our efforts must help facilitate this work to empower those most adversely affected by our current systems and policies. We are optimistic about the potential of rigorous collective work to make change even in the most difficult of situations, but we are also sure that collective impact must take a from-the-ground-up approach for material and lasting social change to occur. We also know that leaders must be in it for the long haul, because systemic change takes time—and,

ultimately, effective “collective impact” requires not just new programs or shared vision and work but rather a commitment to real, systemic change.

NOTES

1. John Kania and Mark Kramer, “Collective Impact,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 36–41.
2. Ibid. StrivePartnership was formerly Strive, which is how it is named in Kania and Kramer’s article.
3. *8 million Students, One Vision* (Cincinnati: Strive-Together, 2017), www.strivetogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/StriveTogether_Overview_Brochure_Oct2017.pdf.
4. Kania and Kramer, “Collective Impact.”
5. Ibid.
6. Rashi-Tauber Initiative is also known as Rise Together Israel.
7. Bob Driehaus, “Cincinnati Public Schools Superintendent Mary Ronan announces retirement in August 2017: School board launching search for successor Friday,” Scripps TV Station Group, Cincinnati, WCPO 9, November 17, 2016, www.wcpo.com/news/education/cincinnati-public-schools-superintendent-mary-ronan-announces-retirement-in-august-2017.
8. This was an informal survey of residents conducted by RTI staff and local students, the results of which were presented to the steering committees in both cities. The survey provided insight into what residents want from this collective work, and informed what the two steering committees would ultimately pursue in terms of a shared vision and agenda.
9. See Lynn A. Karoly and Anamarie Whitaker, *Informing Investments in Preschool Quality and Access in Cincinnati: Evidence of Impacts and Economic Returns from National, State, and Local Preschool Programs* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).
10. Lynn A. Karoly et al., *Options for Investing in Access to High-Quality Preschool in Cincinnati* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).
11. Tom Wolff et al., “Collaborating for Equity and Justice: Moving Beyond Collective Impact,” *Nonprofit Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 42–53.

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