

RESOURCE REVIEW

Breakthroughs in Shared Measurement & Social Impact

It may surprise you, but here is another article on collective impact. Kania and Kramer's ground-breaking article in the 2011 *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, "Collective Impact," has created a significant and enduring buzz among community builders and champions of change.

Though written two years before that, *Breakthroughs in Shared Measurement and Social Impact* provides an in-depth exploration of one practice that is fundamental to collective impact initiatives.



The idea behind collective impact is simple. In order to create large scale and durable improvements in complex issues, such as high school graduation rates, crime or mental health, organizations have to abandon individual agendas and activities.

Instead, they have to take a collective approach that emphasizes orchestrated and concurrent action in all dimensions of the challenge. Kania and Kramer's research has led them to conclude that successful collective impact efforts have three preconditions that must be in place prior to launch (1) urgency for change, 2) adequate financial resources, 3) influential champions) and five basic conditions for supporting and sustaining such efforts once they are underway (1) a common agenda, 2) continuous communication, 3) shared measurement systems, 4) mutually reinforcing activities, and 5) a backbone organization). If you have not read these articles, it's high time you did.

Shared Measurement Systems

Getting the participants to gather data and measure results using a common set of community and program level indicators is important to the success of a collective impact initiative. The benefits of doing so

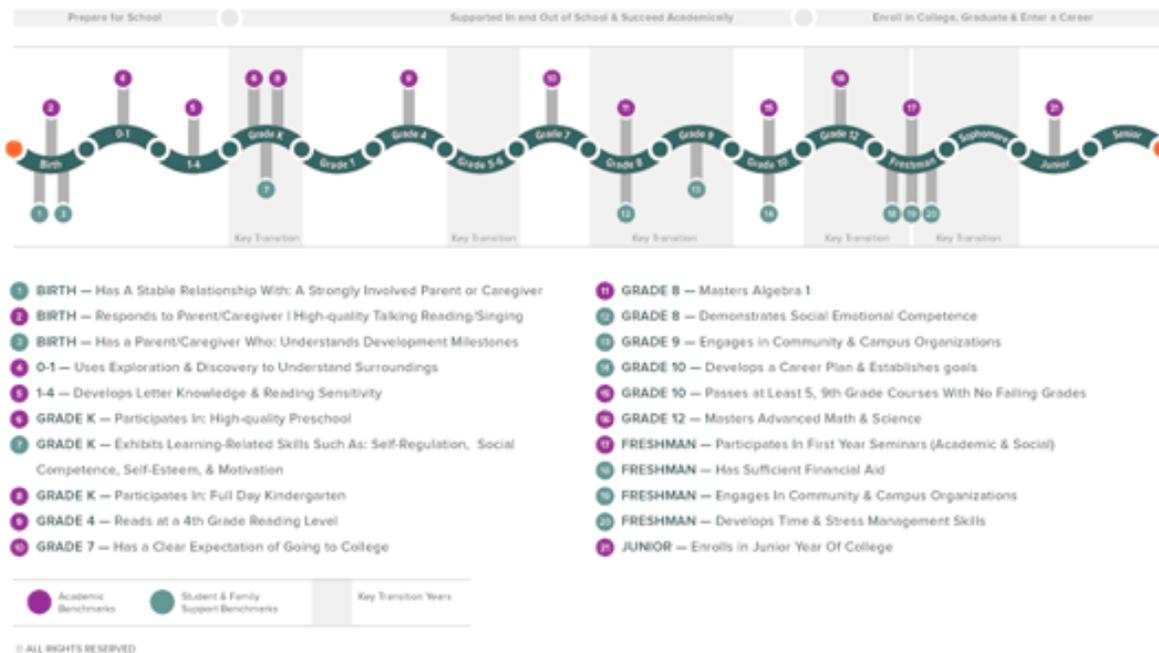
are simple. Shared measurement systems encourage local organizations to align their efforts on shared outcomes and enable them to track and evaluate their collective progress (or lack thereof). They also offer participating organizations opportunities to benchmark their results against – and to learn from – their peers. In some cases, the consistent use of shared measurement systems may even lead to improvements in the quality and credibility of the data. Eventually, it may even reduce the overall costs of collecting and reporting data.

Kania's and Kramer's favourite example of a shared measurement system is the one used by the members of Strive, an educational partnership of over 300 agencies, schools, philanthropies and business in Cincinnati. Strive organizations collectively track over fifty indicators that measure student progress over fifteen milestones. These are organized along a continuum beginning with birth and ending with the completion of post-secondary education. Strive partners call it a *Student Roadmap to Success*. This process is supported by skilled facilitators, a web-based data-system, and adequate financial resources. (See chart, next page.)

Strive is only one example. The grantees in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's **Jobs Initiative** have developed a sophisticated system to track and report on the types of employment, income and job retention achieved in their career development programs (Abt Associates). Many advocates of results-based accountability, an approach similar to the shared measurement systems popularized by Mark Friedman, focus on programs and services in the area of childhood development and protection (Friedman 2006). There are other examples of mechanisms for shared data and reporting in the areas of criminal justice, mental health and homelessness.

Local experimentation with shared measurement systems is sufficiently far along that distinct models

Shared measurement systems encourage local organizations to align their efforts on shared outcomes and enable them to track and evaluate their collective progress (or lack thereof). They also offer participating organizations opportunities to benchmark their results against – and to learn from – their peers.



are emerging. Kramer and his colleagues (2009) have identified at least three:

- **Shared Measurement Platforms** - allow local organizations to voluntarily choose from a set of shared measures, and use web-based tools to collect, analyze and report on their performance outcomes.
- **Comparative Performance Systems** - require all participants within a field to report on the same measures, using identical definitions and methodologies.
- **Adaptive Learning Systems** - complement shared measurement systems with a systematic and facilitated process of evaluation, learning and planning.

Each model has a unique set of strengths and weaknesses and each requires a particular set of enabling conditions in order to operate. Together, they provide communities with several options for creating a shared measurement system.

Tricky Business

Not surprisingly, establishing and using effective shared measurement systems is easier said than

done. Even the most committed and talented group run up against a host of challenges that thwart their best efforts to overcome a pattern of disjointed measurement systems.

Say you have four (or five, or six) organizations, each tackling complex issues, targeting slightly different groups and employing different strategies and activities. It's a challenge getting them to agree on a common set of indicators which adequately reflect the nuances of their work. This can be a lengthy process. I recently heard of a talented and hard-working network of planners, researchers, administrators and agencies in the metropolitan Toronto area that have been spinning their wheels on this very task for over two years now, with little to show for their efforts.

The struggle to arrive at common indicators is amplified by the silo nature of funder and policy organizations. Each typically demands that their grantees or contractors track and report on data according to their own narrowly-defined target groups and guidelines. My colleague, Paul Born, painfully recalls writing over 230 reports for a score of different funders when he was the Executive Director

Even the most committed and talented group run up against a host of challenges that thwart their best efforts to overcome a pattern of disjointed measurement systems. It's a challenge getting them to agree on a common set of indicators which adequately reflect the nuances of their work.

of a large employment and small business agency. This is inefficient and exhausting for agencies. Moreover, it is nearly impossible for them to align these fragmented systems at the point of service delivery. If funders of collective impact initiatives are serious about local organizations tracking and reporting shared data, they need to align their funding, administrative and data requirements with other funders.

Shared measurement systems can also be expensive. It takes time and energy to gather and submit data. Robust web-based systems that analyze data and offer sensible reports don't come cheap. Only quality technical assistance and facilitation can ensure that collective impact groups can make sense of and use the data they laboured to collect. The efforts of the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund to pioneer a mechanism for shared measurement and reporting of social purpose enterprises in San Francisco ran into the millions of dollars.

Finally, despite all the bravado about the rigor of quantifiable measures, the fact is that many activities and results of community change efforts cannot be quantified. As Einstein argued *not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that is counted really counts.*

The Jobs Initiative is a great example. With the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the participants sought to dramatically increase the number of vulnerable youth securing good paying and durable jobs by reshaping regional labour markets. Rather than develop individual programs, the participants worked collectively, using both types of feedback to help them plan, monitor and evaluate their efforts. How else would they capture collaboration between

public transportation planners and workforce development officials to expedite newly trained workers to jobs across the city? How else would they gauge the impact of the decision of a local trades college (after 75 years) to begin recruiting and training African-Americans? Serious participants of collective impact initiatives – and the researchers and evaluators that support them – require both hard and soft data to provide timely, rich and context-sensitive feedback about their work.

Believe it or not, these are but a few of the challenges of creating shared measurements systems. It's no wonder then that for every successful example out there, many more likely remain unfinished, are poorly used or simply not worth the investment.

But the benefits of developing workable shared measurement systems appear to outweigh – significantly – the costs and challenges. The contribution that such systems have made to such robust efforts as Cincinnati's Strive or Calgary's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness is evident. Similarly, many collective impact efforts stall, stagnate and even implode in part because their participants a) can't agree on which community-level activities and outcomes are important to target and track; b) fail to devise a way to measure and report them; and/or c) prove unwilling or unable to use the feedback to inform their thinking and planning.

It ain't easy work, but anyone serious about collective impact will be equally serious about experimenting with and developing shared measurement systems.

It's no wonder then that for every successful example out there, many more likely remain unfinished, are poorly used or simply not worth the investment. But the benefits of developing workable shared measurement systems appear to outweigh – significantly – the costs and challenges.



Mark Cabaj
Here to There
CONSULTING INC

Resource Reviews are a series of documents exploring new frameworks, tools and resources for building communities and solving tough challenges.

Here to There Consulting Inc. is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License.

Learn more:

Mark Kramer, Marcie Parkhurst, Lalitha Vaidyanathan. 2009. *Breakthroughs in Shared Measurement and Social Impact*. FSG Social Impact Advisors. Link: http://www.fsg.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/PDF/Breakthroughs_in_Shared_Measurement_complete.pdf

First published in *Engage*, Tamarack's Monthly On-Line E-Magazine, April 2012