

*Collective Impact & Shared Measurement
Tough But Necessary*

By Mark Cabaj

It may surprise you, but here is another article on collective impact. Since Kania and Kramer's articles (2011, 2012) on these topic in the Stanford Social Innovation Review have created a significant and enduring buzz among community builders and champions of change.

While the concept and practice of collective impact are not new – groups such as the Aspen Institute, Tamarack Institute, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Jay Conner's Community Collaboratory have watched and reported these grassroots efforts for some time – these authors' skillful research and communication of the approach has made a significant contribution to the field.

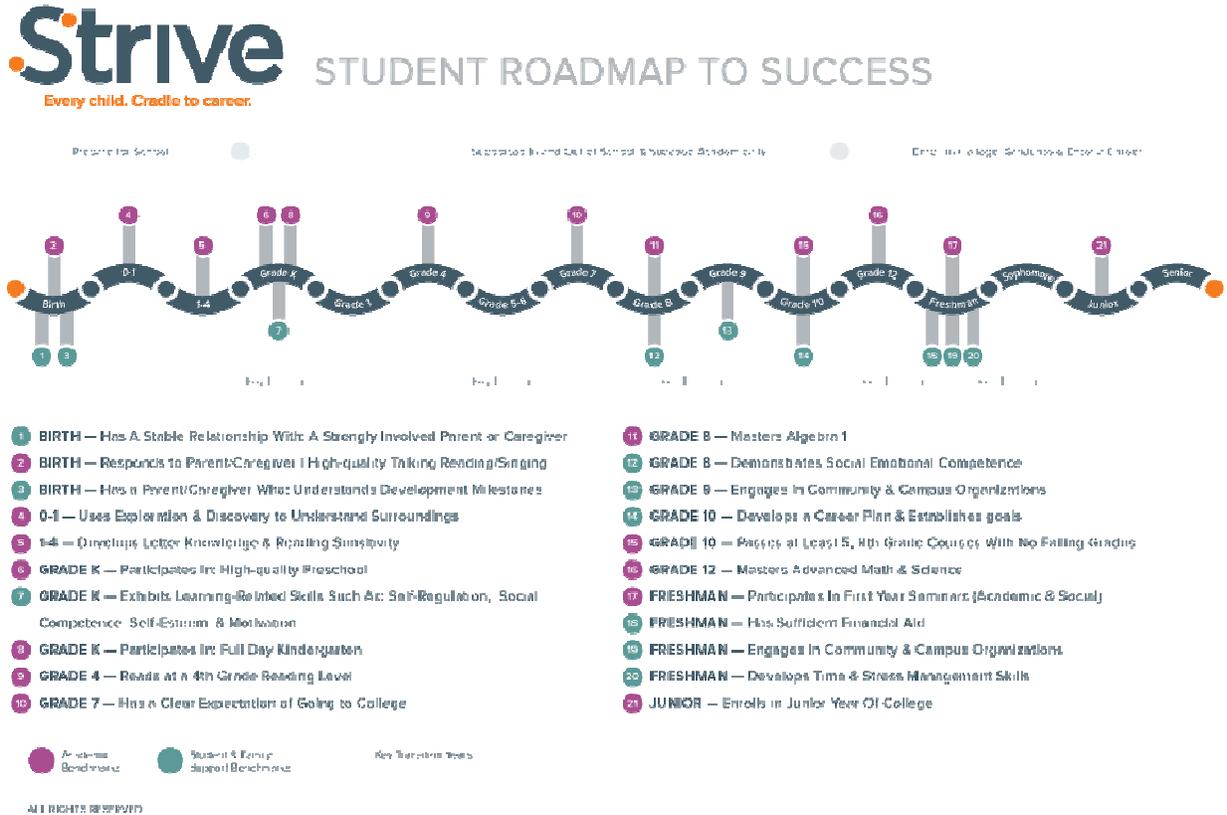
The idea behind collective impact is simple. In order to create large scale and durable improvements on complex issues, such as high school graduation rates, crime or mental health, organizations have to abandon individual agendas and activities in favour of collective approach that emphasizes orchestrated and concurrent action on 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 their launch (e.g. urgency for change, adequate financial resources, influential champions) and five basic conditions for supporting and sustaining such efforts once they are underway (e.g. a common agenda, continuous communication, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, and a backbone organization). If you have not read these articles, it's high time you did.

The Importance of Shared Measurement Systems

Getting the participants of a collective impact initiative to collect data and measure results using a common set of community and program level indicators is an important condition for collective impact. The benefits of doing so are simple. Shared measurement systems encourage local organizations to align their efforts on shared outcomes, enable them to collectively track and evaluate their collective progress (or lack of) and offer organizations opportunities to benchmark their results against – and 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 and – eventually – 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 progress student over fifteen milestones. These are organized around a continuum that begins with birth to the completion of post-secondary education, which Strive partners calls a *Student Roadmap to Success*. This process is supported by skilled facilitators, a web-based data-system, and adequate financial resources.

Exhibit A: Student Roadmap to Success



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 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 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 using 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 of the models has a unique set of strengths and weaknesses and each of them requires a particular set of enabling conditions in order to operate. Together, they provide communities with several options about what kind of shared measurement system they want to create.

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.

One is getting diverse organizations tackling complex issues, targeting slightly different groups and employing different strategies and activities to agree on a set of indicators that are shared and adequately reflect the important nuances of their work. This can be a lengthy process. I recently heard of a talented and hardworking 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 agree on common indicators is amplified by the silo nature of funder and policy organizations which typically demand 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 recollects writing over 230 reports for a score of different funders when he was the Executive Director of a large employment and small business agency. This is not only inefficient and exhausting for agencies, but 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. Making sure that collective impact groups spend the time required to make sense of and use the data they laboured to collect requires quality technical assistance and facilitation. The pioneering efforts of the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund to create a mechanism for shared measurement and reporting of social purpose enterprises in San Francisco ran into the many millions of dollars.

Finally, despite the continued 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 participants of the Jobs Initiative used both types of feedback to help them plan, monitor and evaluate their efforts to dramatically improve the number of vulnerable youth securing good paying and durable jobs by reshaping regional labour markets, rather than developing individual programs. How else would they capture shifts in how public transportation planners and workforce development officials worked together to ensure that newly trained workers could easily get to their jobs across the city or the quiet (but transformational) decision by a local trades college to change a 75 year old practice and 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 on their work.

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

But – and it’s a big but - the benefits for developing workable shared measurements systems appear to significantly outweigh the costs and challenges of doing so. The contribution that such systems make to robust efforts such 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, (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.