



Subject: Review of Relevant Literature | The Collective Impact Framework  
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## Summary

In order to achieve its mission of a high quality public education for every child, as outlined in [Chicago Public School's 5 Year Vision](#), Chicago Public Schools (CPS) identified a number of commitments necessary to success. This includes a commitment to integrity, achieved through both transparency and collective impact. This document aims to review the current literature on collective impact; a framework used by governments, non-profits, and non-governmental organizations to facilitate meaningful collaboration and impact at scale.

Since it was formally codified in a 2011 Stanford Social Innovation Review article, the collective impact framework has been used to collaborate between organizations operating across sectors to achieve impact at scale (Kania and Kramer, 2011). As detailed below, this framework has both similarities to and distinctions from other collaboration frameworks; including coalitions, alliances and community organizing (Christens and Inzeo, 2015). Most notably, this framework should be considered as a tool for driving change within a system to achieve systems-level change.

We cover the preconditions and conditions of a collective impact strategy; emergent promising practices and potential gaps in thinking; how and why to apply an equity lens to the work; and recommended phases of strategy implementation to achieve impact. Where possible, this review will aim to position the framework as a tool for collaboration across departments *within CPS* (which can be thought of as siloed organizations working within a system). Where the research speaks more broadly, the framework will be positioned as a tool for collaboration between organizations and communities that work *with CPS*; including students, parents, researchers, program staff, and other city agencies.

This document should not be considered an exhaustive, systematic review of the literature on collective impact. In an effort to get a better understanding of the full landscape of collective impact strategies in the education sector, we review not only scholarly articles but also grey literature; including white papers, conference reports and non-commercial briefs by various organizations and individuals.

## Outline

<a href="#">What's In The Literature?</a>	<b>3</b>
Setting the Context	3
Conditions of a Collective Impact Strategy	3
Scope and Strategy	4
<a href="#">What Are Considered the Best Practices? What Potential Pitfalls Should I Anticipate?</a>	<b>5</b>
Promising Practices	5
Mind the Gap: Potential Pitfalls	6
<a href="#">Applying an Equity Lens</a>	<b>8</b>
<a href="#">How Do We Achieve Collective Impact? What Tools are Available?</a>	<b>9</b>
<a href="#">Additional Resources and Reading</a>	<b>11</b>
<a href="#">References</a>	<b>12</b>

# What's In The Literature?

## Setting the Context

Given expanded interest in the collective impact framework across sectors, it is important to position this framework as “more than a fancy buzz-word for collaboration” (Hanleybrown, et al. 2012). Following the Great Recession, a common need emerged among communities to effectively organize resources across a vast landscape in order to drastically improve outcomes at scale. This challenge of practice was due in part to the growth of the nonprofit sector and the decentralization of public resources and social services that has occurred over the last four decades (Hammond and Tosun, 2009). Governmental institutions traditionally tasked with providing services began outsourcing them to nonprofit organizations through grant funding, a visible ramification of which has been greater “fragmentation of local organizational systems, and the increased basis for competition between entities within these systems” (Christens and Inezo, 2015). It is within this environment that the collective impact framework was born, positioning itself as a more intentional, structured way to collaborate within existing systems.

According to Christens and Inezo (2015), “collective impact can best be understood as a synthesis of practice-based principles for those seeking to build alliances and coalitions to tackle complex problems in local communities.” For our purposes, we can think of this framework as a collection of practice-based tools to tackle complex problems in the CPS community.

## Conditions of a Collective Impact Strategy<sup>1</sup>

Kania and Kramer (2011) organize the necessary conditions of a collective impact strategy into five conditions: a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support.

### The Five Conditions of Collective Impact

<b>Common Agenda</b>	All participants share a vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed-upon actions.
<b>Shared Measurement</b>	All participating organizations agree on the ways success will be measured and reported, with a short list of common indicators identified and used for learning and improvement.
<b>Mutually Reinforcing Activities</b>	A diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinate a set of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
<b>Continuous Communication</b>	All players engage in frequent and structured open communication to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.
<b>Backbone Support</b>	An independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative provides ongoing support by guiding the initiative's vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing resources.

According to Christens and Inezo (2015), “the collective impact frame asserts that when these five conditions are present, collaborative initiatives can gain momentum and achieve large-scale systems change.”

<sup>1</sup> Chart adapted from Kania, Hanleybrown and Juster (The Collective Impact Forum)

## Scope and Strategy

The exact scope and size of collective impact partnerships can vary, and there is no one pathway to success across contexts. In a recent research brief by the Spark Policy Institute and ORS Impact, the authors found that across 25 separate collective impact efforts, there were multiple paths used to drive change, including “informal partnerships and experiments that lead to formal system changes across organizations; formal changes within a single organization that lead to formal changes across organizations; and changes within one system [e.g., education] that lead to changes in other systems [e.g., health]” (Lynn et al. 2018).

Expounding upon the work of Kania and Kramer (2011), leaders from the StriveTogether Partnership - a collective impact organization that funds community backbones - and Equal Measure identified what could be considered the preconditions, or infrastructure, to these conditions. Among findings from a survey of collective impact partnerships across the country, they specifically call out developing a shared vision on which the common agenda can build towards. They suggest that partners with a shared vision found common cause by “looking beyond their day-to-day goals and seeing themselves as part of a broader, integrated effort to build the type of community they wanted” (Blatz, et al. 2019). This is rather intuitive: a big picture reinforces the idea that complex challenges need interconnected solutions. This big picture “prevents the ‘edifice complex,’ which assumes that solutions revolve around [individual] institutions, such as schools.” (Irby and Boyle, 2014).

Similar preconditions are laid out by Weaver (2014): including influential leaders, a sense of urgency for the issue, and adequate resources. However, Blatz et al. (2019) highlight that in some contexts, “we need to acknowledge that our community’s systems leaders...are not as diverse as the communities that we serve.”

## What Are Considered the Best Practices? What Potential Pitfalls Should I Anticipate?

### Promising Practices

The foundational best practices of a collective impact model are detailed in two papers: the first published in 2011 by Kania and Kramer, and a follow-up published by Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer in 2012. Collective impact frameworks draw their strength from the highly structured nature of the model, and that structure's ability to bring together influential leaders in order to attack an issue from many angles at once. To that end, many of the best practices espoused by Kania, Kramer and Hanleybrown are focused on setting up the structure of any given strategy to achieve collective impact.

One of the most visible best practices is the development of a strategic action framework and an associated theory of action, both of which define the actions that different partners will use to guide them from the current status to the shared goal. The strategic action framework might take the form of a white paper and/or a slide deck, while a traditional theory of action would consist of a chart. The [StriveTogether Theory of Action](#) is an example of how this might work: columns represent progressive phases of action, while rows detail categories of work necessary to the common goal.

Less visible best practices can be just as important, however. One emphasized in both the 2011 and 2012 publications is the development of a centralized organization with a staff dedicated to the management of the process, data collection, and organizing partners toward the common goal. Some of the deliverables from this backbone group include the strategic action framework and theory of action (referred to by the authors as “a common agenda”), shared measurement standards, frequent and unified communication strategies, and mutually reinforcing activities among collaborative members.

While much of the output from the backbone organization is understood across sectors and various modes of collaboration, mutually reinforcing activities are unique to collective impact models. The way that these harness the power of the collective is “by encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others” (Kania & Kramer, 2011). By undertaking these mutually reinforcing activities, the work products of the group will be stronger and more impactful than the individual efforts, via a multiplier effect of interlacing interventions, supports, and knowledge-sharing.

A final caution from the authors, emphasized in their 2012 article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, is to allow the collaborative and its associated organizations time to build out structure, resources, and collaborative relationships. An important part of this can end up being funding, which the authors note is necessary for at least 2-3 years in order for a successful initiation of the collaborative. The authors also note that the initial phases of the project, Initiating Action and Organizing for Impact, can take between 6 months and 2 years to run their

course. During this time, there may not be a significant measurable impact yet, so patience will be necessary on the part of stakeholders within and external to the collaborative.

### **Mind the Gap: Potential Pitfalls**

Because collective impact frameworks are only recently recognized in the literature as a formal structure, there has not been much rigorous evaluation of the methods originally endorsed by Kania and Kramer. Most evaluations to date have focused on comparisons to other forms of collective action. As Christens and Inzeo (2015) note, there are a number of considerations and pitfalls surrounding collective impact as it relates to the larger history of “previous research on coalitions, interorganizational alliances, and other forms of organizational and cross sector collaboration.”

Collective impact models prioritize those who are most affected by issues differently than grassroots organizations. Grassroots organizing, also known as community organizing, focuses on developing “nonprofessional resident leaders” in order to increase the breadth and depth of local leadership, inherently involving a greater number of people in the process (ibid). By comparison, collective impact-guided organizations focus their efforts on a core group of established professional leaders. These leaders might be CEOs, nonprofit directors, or community leaders. Within the context of Chicago Public Schools, leaders targeted by a traditional collective impact framework might include members of the Chief Executive’s office, department directors, principals, network chiefs, and community leaders; including student leaders.

Another contrast between grassroots organizing and collective impact models is the method of handling power structures around the work. Community organizing engages with imbalances of power in a direct and constructive manner, with the aims of empowering all participants and stakeholders in the process. Christens and Inzeo (2015) identify one central way that grassroots leaders grapple with power in their organizations: power mapping; a process by which resident leaders answer questions about who holds power, how the power structure contributes to issues in the community, and what the relationships are among the powerful in their context. Collective impact models do not explicitly address or seek to change power structures, instead operating within existing structures to create change from within. This limits the capacity of collective impact initiatives to create transformative change in the communities they intend to serve.

A final comparison that Christen and Inzeo (2015) make between grassroots organizing and collective impact is the “capacity for conflict”. The authors identify the centrality of conflict to the community organizing process, via the prioritization of the needs of those most affected by current power structures and the resulting demands to deprioritize the goals of the elite. On the other hand, collective impact frameworks seek mutual agreement between those who already have a degree of power.

In her article entitled, “The Promises and Perils of Collective Impact”, Weaver outlines additional potential pitfalls of using the Collective Impact Framework (2014). The author identifies a necessary commitment to the collective impact approach from all participants, and agreement

that collective impact is the most appropriate approach, as an important starting point. Backbone organizations, while a critical component of a collective impact effort, can also be prone to several pitfalls. They must be built well and funded well enough to do the work of “moving the process forward, getting it unstuck, and holding the agreements of the engaged partners.” They must also be impartial arbiters of the process itself, and not have a private agenda they seek to push forward, lest other partners may “vacate the table”. Finally, Weaver (2014) cautions against neglecting the details that allow Collective Impact Frameworks to succeed. These include taking care in selecting collective impact as the framework for a given effort; gaining buy-in from partners; and building a strong, independently operating and well-funded backbone organization. Managing the details described by Weaver (2014) will allow the issues to take center stage while an effective collaborative works around them to enact transformative systemic change.

Collective impact frameworks that seek to balance power, include established leaders in addition to developing “resident leaders”, and engage in the conflict necessary for radical change can balance some of these pitfalls. Christen and Inzeo (2015) note that each of these components of grassroots organizing is validated by research and confirmed to be an effective strategy for enacting change. Utilizing these strategies will allow our collective impact framework to center the needs of the most vulnerable in our community; ultimately resulting in a more diverse collection of perspectives to provide robust context for the collective impact goals.

## Applying an Equity Lens

Thus far, we have discussed a variety of practice-based approaches to collective impact. We even went as far as to say some of these strategies are often intuitive. However, intuition is not the same as intentionality. An intentional collective impact strategy is undergirded by a focus on equity throughout the process. Many of the pitfalls and gaps in thinking we explored above act as serious barriers to both equity of process and outcomes if not properly addressed (Blatz, et al. 2018). Moving beyond cooperation to intentional collaboration requires a disruption of traditional power structures. For many, impact comes from practice change, or mutually reinforcing activities, in which the output of multiple organizations is multiplicative, rather than summative. While changes to practice generally happen at a later stage, partners can pilot, test, and even scale new ways of working as they go. (ibid.)

In a follow-up to their seminal 2011 article, Kania and Kramer offer reflections in “The Equity Imperative in Collective Impact.” The authors provide an anecdotal case study of one initiative focused on equity throughout the process, taking time to coalesce around common language (e.g. “What does equity mean to you?”) and shared measurement indicators disaggregated by racial and ethnic groups (Kania and Kramer, 2015).

Similarly, Lynn et al (2018) identify actions that prioritize an equity focused agenda when collective impact-guided organizations (1) assessed locally relevant and disaggregated data to identify priorities and areas for intervention; (2) prioritized strategies focused on addressing disparities; (3) prioritized solutions that build on the beneficiary community’s assets and resources (See [Asset-Based Community Development](#)); and (4) developed interventions, made key decisions, and set policies using an analysis of structural inequities that drive disparities (identifying the root causes of inequity.)

Additionally, across 25 organizational site visits, Lynn et al (2018) found that impact initiatives were identified as having high capacity to engage in an equity-focused agenda when (1) they articulated an explicit equity lens; (2) the backbone built capacity and readiness to engage communities, develop leaders, and shift power; (3) The initiative partners have a shared definition and approach to equity; and (4) initiative leaders and backbone have credibility with and are trusted by local communities.



## How Do We Achieve Collective Impact? What Tools are Available?

Hanleybrown, et al (2012) recommend using the phased approach detailed in the chart below to guide the progress of a collective impact plan.

<i>Phases of Collective Impact<sup>2</sup></i>			
<b>Components for Success</b>	<b>Phase I: Initiate Action</b>	<b>Phase II: Organize for Impact</b>	<b>Phase III: Sustain Impact</b>
<b>Governance &amp; Infrastructure</b>	Identify champions and form cross-sector group	Create infrastructure (backbone and processes)	Facilitate and refine
<b>Strategic Planning</b>	Map the landscape and use data to make case	Create common agenda (goals and strategy)	Support implementation (alignment to goals and strategies)
<b>Community Involvement</b>	Facilitate community outreach	Engage community and build public will	Continue engagement and conduct advocacy
<b>Evaluation and Improvement</b>	Analyze baseline data to identify key issues and gaps	Establish shared metrics (indicators, measurement, and approach)	Collect, track, and report progress (process to learn and improve)

It is important to note that the authors outline Phase I and II taking months, even years, to adequately build, pilot and scale what works for any given CI initiative. They also warn of duplicity, stating, “honor current efforts and engage established organizations, rather than creating an entirely new solution from scratch” (2012).

With patience, fulfilling the goals at each phase will develop a robust collective impact practice. The goals at each phase are centered on one of the four components for success:

1. **Governance and Infrastructure:** The main purpose of shared governance and infrastructure is to serve the following functions in a consistent, coordinated manner: provide overall strategic direction, facilitate dialogue between partners, manage data collection and analysis, handle communications, coordinate community outreach, and mobilize funding.
2. **Strategic Planning:** One of the main products of strategic planning should be the strategic framework, which Hanleybrown, et al caution should be simple enough to be

<sup>2</sup> Chart adapted from Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer (2012).

understandable yet detailed enough to create a comprehensive understanding of the theories of action among stakeholders. The purpose of this process is to get all stakeholders on the same page in terms of the current landscape, theories of action, and outcome goals.

3. **Community Involvement:** This component can be a vital resource for developing goals that are actionable and successful in the physical and geographic locality particular to the collective action. Additionally, as noted in Kania and Kramer (2011), community buy-in to theories of action can motivate and improve performance among participants in the program.
4. **Evaluation and Improvement:** The primary aim of the Evaluation and Improvement component is to develop a “small but comprehensive” set of indicators that will be used to measure progress, assess performance, and identify strengths and weaknesses. Unlike traditional program evaluations, the goal of this component is not to isolate the impact of individual organizations, but rather to measure the collective progress towards the shared goals of the collaborative.

## Additional Resources and Reading

### [Moving Beyond Collective Impact](#)

This article, originally published in NonProfit Quarterly's Winter 2016 edition, details six principles to move coalitions and collaborations toward engaging with communities in a way that leads to transformative changes in power, equity, and justice. In order to bolster their argument for implementation of these principles, the authors also include additional critiques of CI by nonprofit sector leader Vu Le, who stresses the fallacy of the model's '[Trickle-Down Community Engagement](#)' approach and '[Illusion of Inclusion](#)'; PolicyLink leaders Michael McAfee, Angela Glover Blackwell, and Judith Bell, who stress [equity as the missing 'soul' of Community Impact](#); Tom Wolff, in '[10 Places Where Collective Impact Gets It Wrong](#)'; and Peter Boumgarden and John Branch, whose article '[Collective Impact or Coordinated Blindness?](#)' appeared in the same publication where the Collective impact framework took off.

### [Collaborating for Equity and Justice Toolkit](#)

This site was created to supplement the NonProfit Quarterly publication, "Collaborating for Equity and Justice: Moving Beyond Collective Impact". It contains links to archival pages with case studies, resources, and tools related to each of the principles of collective impact.

### [Collective Insights on Collective Impact](#)

We drew many individual sources from this extensive collection of articles from across the field, included in the 2014 edition of the Stanford Social Innovation Review.

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