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The Power of Partnerships

By DAVID BORNSTEIN

Fixes looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

Tags:

Children and Youth, Cincinnati (Ohio), Education, Education (K-12), New York State, Social Change, Social Conditions and Trends

Some problems are simply too complex to solve with any single approach. Consider the fact that in the United States, a million students drop out of high school each year. To begin to turn back that trend, we need to work on several fronts — assist vulnerable families when children are infants, improve classrooms from preschool through high school, provide after-school supports and college access assistance, tackle the issue of summer-learning loss and get much smarter about addressing students' social and emotional needs at every stage. In the words of Clay Shirky: "Nothing will work, but everything might."

But doing "everything" in piecemeal fashion won't work. We need not only to do all of these things better than we have in the past; we need to link them in smarter and more effective ways.

In Tuesday's column, I wrote about an effort in the social sector that is gaining momentum called "collective impact," a disciplined effort to bring together dozens or even hundreds of organizations in a city (or field) to establish a common vision, adopt a shared set of measurable goals and pursue evidence-based actions that reinforce one another's work and further those goals.

Collaboration isn't new by any means, but this kind of directed coordination across many groups, and spanning different sectors, is novel. In fact, one of the best examples of this approach, the Strive Together partnership in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, is only four years old.

I also pointed out on Tuesday that this approach is centered around the use of data to make improvements, but some readers were concerned that this focus on data was too much. For example, R. B. from Monroe, Conn. (5), made a valid critique about the limitations of data when it comes to making sense of how schools and students are performing: "The idea ... that with data we have objective evidence of what works" may be suitable for an "assembly line" but "schools do not provide such uniformity." And JC from Lincoln, Neb. (18), noted that any effort to address "the education gap" had to take into account research showing that much of the difference in academic achievement between children from low-income and affluent families

can be attributed to differences in their "out of school learning environments."

Readers also wanted to know more about the mechanics of the partnerships. Gail B, from Indiana, (21), inquired: "Who's paying for this wonderful effort? It sounds like in order to make this work, you need to get the private sector involved, in terms of both volunteering the C.E.O.'s' time and volunteering the personnel and resources necessary to do the research and crunch the numbers. This would be great if it could be done in every city in the country — but how do we make that happen?"

The answer: *By getting the right people together.* Strive is a subsidiary of KnowledgeWorks, an operating foundation that focuses on improving the education system and remains its core funder. But there are many others, as well. The United Way of Greater Cincinnati has supported its work on early childhood issues; Procter & Gamble, and others, have supported the data management and reporting; the Greater Cincinnati Foundation funds the college access piece; Living Cities finances efforts to spread the framework; and General Electric has provided Six Sigma "Black Belt" analysts to help partners work with data, develop action plans and learn how to improve their management processes.

Most of the examples of collective impact today are in the field of education. Strive has set a goal of helping to establish 20 such partnerships by 2015. It is currently involved in advancing this work in four cities, working with the P20 Cradle to Career Initiative in Portland (pdf), Oregon, the All Kids Alliance in Houston, Tex., Bridging Richmond, in Richmond, Va., and the California State University East Bay Promise Neighborhood program. Other examples include the E3 Alliance in Central Texas, Vision 2015 Delaware and Say Yes to Education, Syracuse.

Last year, one of the three initial conveners of the Strive partnership, Nancy Zimpher, formerly the president of the University of Cincinnati, took over as chancellor of the State University of New York. With 64 campuses and a presence in every one of the state's 62 counties, SUNY is the largest state university system in the country, and one of Zimpher's major goals is to bring the collective impact framework to New York in a big way.

Working with a wide range of civic leaders and groups, Zimpher and her colleagues have already helped catalyze partnerships in Albany, Buffalo and Rochester, as well as in Harlem and Brooklyn. Others are in the works.

This movement (if it can be called one) has been assisted by the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods program, modeled on the Harlem Children's Zone, which awarded planning grants this past fall in the range of $500,000 to 21 communities to develop "cradle-to-career" services that improve children's educational achievement and healthy development. In February, President Obama requested $150 million for the 2012 budget to implement these programs.

Collective impact is not only about education. As. Liz from Brooklyn (32) notes, Promise Neighborhoods "are also coming together to tackle the environmental and social factors that influence health. For example, Lutheran Family Health Centers — the grantee for the Brooklyn Promise Neighborhood in Sunset Park — is working with the community service and child welfare agency, the community board, providers of early childhood services, and academic

institutions to improve children's education and development."

This past December, I reported on the 100,000 Homes Campaign which coordinates efforts among civic organizations, local businesses and government service agencies to expedite the placement of the chronically homeless in permanent supportive housing. I now see this as another example of this approach. Another, very different, example is the Myelin Repair Foundation (which I plan to cover in a future column), which seeks to accelerate the development of new treatments for multiple sclerosis by getting academic scientists, commercial drug developers and government regulators to work in concert.

FSG, a nonprofit consulting firm that also helps communities develop collective impact efforts, has identified several other examples. In Somerville, Mass, a community-wide effort called Shape Up Somerville demonstrated success in reducing weight gain among children. The Elizabeth River Project, which began around a kitchen table in Portsmouth, Va., in the early 1990s, has linked together businesses, schools and homeowners to restore the river. Another initiative, the Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions connects 16 conservation organizations in the U.S. and Canada that are working together to build a sustainable seafood industry from fish harvesting to market. Researchers warn that, without major changes, large ocean fish could be gone by 2050.

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Michelle Parker, the director of sustainable practices at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, offered an example of how the whole can be more than the sum of the parts in the seafood alliance. One of their partners, the Ocean Conservancy, identified a fishery in the Gulf of Mexico that had actually seen its stocks of red snapper increase. (Red snapper is an extremely endangered fish — at 3 percent of its optimal global population.) "They were doing their darnedest to improve fish stocks but they needed market rewards," explained Parker. "Up in Chicago nobody had heard of them." So together, the Ocean Conservancy, the Environmental Defense Fund, and Shedd created a supply chain to make the fish available for sale in the Midwest — helping the fishery so it can continue its sustainable practices. (Click here for a wallet card listing environmentally-friendly seafood.)

None of this is easy to pull together. One difficulty is that most foundations and governments like to target their support to individual programs or organizations. They are used to thinking about impact through scale and replication, not integration of effort. Very few funders invest in the connective tissue that is necessary to foster meaningful collaborations.

Zimpher has found that the first step in this process is to identify a few credible leaders within a community — or in the case of fisheries, within an industry — who can serve as conveners and who genuinely "understand that every community needs a common table." Their job is to catalyze the process and set the right tone, helping people to understand that it's got to be a group effort, that nobody will be running the show. It will take time to build trust — not months, but years. "You cannot short circuit this process," Zimpher added. But it was necessary to build that common table. "Without it," she added, "we are like atoms bouncing off one another."

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