Viewpoint

The Importance of Place

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Through place-based work, we have learned new ways to partner, collect data, and invest to bring systemic change and eliminate structural inequalities in our communities.

BY JENNIFER BLATZ & GEOFFREY CANADA

Communities that have been traditionally marginalized are no strangers to the devastation of misguided policies. From the failures of the War on Poverty to the disastrous and racially divisive war on drugs, too often ambitious policies are not rooted in community, data, or equity.

But place-based partnerships have arisen to address and eliminate these persistent structural inequities. Such collaborations bring together local organizations, businesses, public departments, and community members to address entrenched social problems. Taking lessons from past failures, they use data to focus their work, measure impact, and strive for continuous improvement. They also realize that the most effective solutions are found within the community and hold themselves accountable to the community for sustained, generational progress.

As longtime practitioners of place-based work, we know the power of community-based organizations working together to resolve the systemic issues that lock problems in place and limit opportunity. This practice began with Harlem Children's Zone in 1970, then called the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families. It brought community members together to tackle intergenerational poverty in Central Harlem. Community leaders in Cincinnati, Ohio, further refined the place-based partnership model 15 years ago when they formed the StrivePartnership to drive systemic change for improved educational outcomes for youth living in the city's urban core.

Across the country, community leaders have grappled with similar challenges by working together in a new way. Collective impact, a model of place-based work, started in underresourced communities and continues to evolve to meet the challenges of the moment. Today, StriveTogether and Harlem Children's Zone, through its newly established William Julius Wilson Institute, are partnering to support place-based partnerships that systemically root out poverty and close opportunity gaps in regions and neighborhoods across America. Together, we can scale success and ensure that resources flowing to our communities result in equitable outcomes for children and families.

Three Crucial Lessons

In "Collective Impact," their groundbreaking 2011 essay in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, John Kania and Mark Kramer of the consultancy FSG identified five components of the collective impact model: a common agenda that all participants embrace as the vision for change; shared measurement systems at the community level to understand progress and hold each other accountable for results; mutually reinforcing activities that support coordinated action; continuous communication to build trust and strengthen relationships; and backbone support organizations that facilitate the collaboration across community partners.

While different communities across the country have different levels of readiness for this work, we've learned three crucial lessons that consistently help us meet today's challenges in reviving communities through place-based efforts. These lessons, when paired with the essentials of collective impact, have helped us make progress as many other organizations have struggled.

First, *follow a proven, flexible framework for change.* Over the years, StriveTogether codified learning from across its network of place-based partnerships and created the Theory of Action. Its core builds on the five components of collective impact and helps communities create the civic infrastructure that yields better results for youth and families. Civic infrastructure refers to how people in a community come together to hold each other collectively accountable to transform the systems that impact opportunities for young people and their families.

The Theory of Action framework is ever evolving and does not rely on a fixed prescription for change. Instead, it uses progressive milestones. In the early stages of work, partnerships identify core indicators for improvement in cradle-to-career outcomes such as kindergarten readiness, high school graduation, and college enrollment. To track their progress, they disaggregate the relevant data by race, gender, income, and other priority demographics and share them publicly. They then use the data to inform their work across multiple sectors. This strategy enables partners to shift policies, practices, resources, and power structures to get better outcomes.
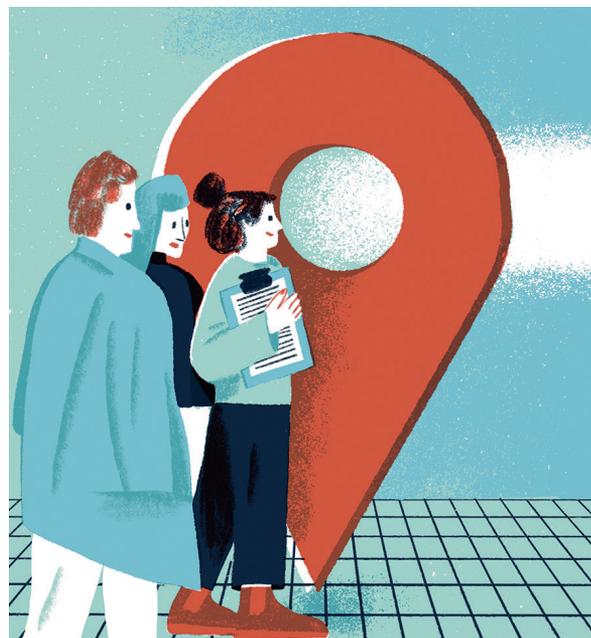
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Second, *use deep data to test small-scale initiatives and see what works*. Deep data is both quantitative and qualitative. It is disaggregated to help shift practices, resources, policy, and power in ways that are equitably targeted and to dig deeper into the roots of inequitable systems. By using deep data and deploying appropriate tactics to transform these systems, we can sustain solutions.

For example, in Memphis, Tennessee, Seeding Success has been using historical eviction data to tackle structural housing issues. The partnership, which seeks to improve the life trajectories of children from cradle to career, devised this study with a local housing authority as part of a broader education strategy. Stable housing has always been critical for student success and health, and the COVID-19 pandemic quickly turned housing into a health issue. Seeding Success is capitalizing on this moment to retool systems in a constructive, long-term way. They prepared a policy proposal that supports critical, interconnected issues such as student learning, housing, childcare, and keeping students on track for postsecondary education. They helped support legislation that launched a statewide childcare task force to retool how Tennessee manages the quality and access to those critical resources, developed a housing and education strategy to support families with children in three Memphis communities facing destabilizing housing factors, and identified community schools as a key system for expansion to fight against a rise in youth violence.

Third, *build community muscle to lead work in communities*. When we talk about community, we're really talking about a network of place-based partnerships that feed and challenge each other and grow together. Building the capacities of community members helps place-based partnerships ensure that strategies to address systemic issues are grounded in the community and that resources are flowing where they're needed most and will have a long-term impact. These capacities include leadership and talent; data and information; sustainable resources; policy and advocacy; communications and engagement; practice improvement and acceleration; and equity. At StriveTogether, we convene and coach communities to help them build this muscle. We also codify learning from across the network and invest in communities to accelerate progress.

Four Priorities for a Better Future

Place-based work succeeds because it is grounded in the community it seeks to benefit. If programming implemented without assessing the real needs or context of the community actually solved problems, we wouldn't be facing the same challenges from generation to generation. Such efforts are not just ineffective and unsustainable; they are also inequitable. We must look beyond quick-fix programs and have the courage to address root causes. We're as responsible for those suffering from these issues today as we are for those who suffer from them tomorrow.

We've been able to make progress by applying a flexible framework that is adaptable to context, but more must be done. Specifically, the field must pursue four priorities. First, it must aim to *equitably transform systems*. It must make fundamental and institutional shifts in policies, practices, resource allocation, and power structures to advance equitable outcomes, by centering the most vulnerable populations.

True systems transformation requires collaboration from all sectors of the community—health, education, public safety, and more. Such cross-sector collaborative infrastructure creates the foundation for systems change that must then be led by the people that make up the community, particularly people of color and those experiencing poverty. Policy work is most effective when it is developed as part of an overall community plan for systems transformation.

Second, the field should *focus on systems indicators*. When we focus on individual outcomes alone, we don't always get the full picture. We don't see the norms, policies, and practices embedded within systems—institutions and organizations—where young people live, learn, and grow. We miss the role that complex systems play in creating racialized disparities in education, health, wealth, and social mobility. Organizations need to measure systems indicators tied to meaningful individual outcomes, such as per pupil funding, when working to transform education.

Third, the field must *think and bet big*. To transform systems, funders need to recognize their own role in perpetuating problems by failing to invest in effective, scalable programs and long-term approaches that can generate population-level change. Increasingly, investors are taking "big bets," making multiyear million-dollar commitments, on those who have the courage to undertake systemic and comprehensive solutions starting at the community level. Those working in the field are seeking nothing less than to end generational poverty and to save the country. This goal is not hyperbole—anything less than a vision of serving children from cradle to career simply isn't ambitious enough.

Fourth, the field must *codify its lessons*. Harlem Children's Zone demonstrates how codifying and scaling learning enables impact to spread more quickly and efficiently. Last year, through the Wilson Institute, we successfully partnered with three national organizations—NAACP, StriveTogether, and PolicyLink—and six respected community partners to scale a COVID-19 emergency response and recovery plan in Harlem. Focused on protecting the most vulnerable, bridging the digital divide, preventing learning loss, mitigating the mental health crisis, and providing economic relief and recovery, partners worked together to capture and share best practices in communities across the country.

While crises can reveal new opportunities to address challenges, we should not wait for the next pandemic or economic recession to examine how we're addressing social issues. We've experienced the power of collective impact in place-based partnerships to drive large-scale social change. We've seen how a flexible framework, deep data, and community muscle have prepared us to meet one of the greatest threats facing our country. But we also know that there is a long road ahead, and leaders need to understand that the future of this work is about transforming systems in service of equitable and lasting results. With this in mind—and no matter what comes—we will be ready. ∎