



Nelson Chair Roundtable on Examining Neighborhood-Based Change: Demonstrating Collective Impact in the Boston Promise Initiative

April 6-7, 2016

The Boston College 9th annual Nelson Chair Roundtable on Examining Neighborhood-Based Change focused on demonstrating *collective impact* in the Boston Promise Initiative (BPI), a project within their backbone organization the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. Collective impact was described by John Kania and Mark Kramer as “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.”¹ Collective impact recognizes the inherent limitations of organizations working in isolation to achieve a particular goal and instead encourages ongoing collaboration to maximize change.

The 2016 Nelson Chair Roundtable, under the directorship of Dr. Anderson J. Franklin, sought to understand how BPI and its collaborating organizations are achieving elements of collective impact, and how these achievements progress the goals of BPI. Speakers from multiple BPI partner organizations, utilizing diverse evidence, spoke about how their initiatives and current projects related to aspects of collective impact. This report discusses some of these achievements and organizes them by the five components of collective impact, with a specific focus on unique initiatives implemented by BPI. The five components of collective impact represented are: 1) backbone organization, 2) common agenda, 3) shared measurement system, 4) mutually reinforcing activities, and 5) continuous communication.

Backbone Organization

Backbone organization is the approach of using a specific agency to oversee a common goal and to help collaborating agencies to mutually achieve this goal. In the case of BPI, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), an over thirty year neighborhood community based organization active within the Dorchester/Roxbury neighborhoods, acts as the backbone organization to help coordinate activities within the community. Sheena Collier, Director of BPI, spoke at length about the role, responsibilities, and challenges of being a backbone organization for 48 partner organizations.

DSNI has a community-elected board that includes neighborhood members from different ethnic groups, ages, and types of organizations (e.g., religious institutions). Advising and guiding BPI is also a steering committee composed of assorted partner working groups and policy makers. The steering committee advises about the work of BPI, looks at progress, shared data, and guides implementations and social innovations. Meanwhile, the working groups are made up of resource people and representatives from partner organizations doing the implementation and are a way of organizing partners. Working within their backbone organization, BPI uses a cradle-to-career approach to address family needs within a targeted place-based neighborhood identified as

¹ Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9, 36-41.

the Dudley Village Campus (DVC) community. For example, certain working groups target different developmental periods such as early life (birth to age 5), K-8th grade, and high school to college and career. Regarding early life, the priority of BPI is to address how parents can have an active role in their children's early education as "first teachers". Within the K-8th grade period, the main objective is connecting neighborhood schools, parents, and administrators. Finally, as neighborhood youth enter high school and college, BPI focuses its efforts on youth leadership.

Sheena Collier spoke about how BPI together with DSNI achieves collective impact through their partnering organizations. Specifically, *Boston Plan for Excellence* uses place-based teaching that leads to quality learning, *Project Hope* focuses on systems problems requiring systemic solutions, *Fair Chance for Family Success* believes that peer-to-peer models build family assets and stronger neighborhoods, and the *School Readiness Roundtable* views that collaboration requires a gathering space for parents and other anchor institutions. Some of these specific initiatives and how they demonstrate elements of collective impact will be described below.

Common Agenda

Common agenda is the notion that community organizations have a shared vision. At the broadest level, common agenda most frequently refers to common agency visions. Although most of the organizations collaborating within BPI have a common vision, many of these organizations enact their work through a particular institutional lens. An example of this was highlighted by Sister Margaret Leonard, who spoke about the partnership between Project Hope—a family service agency in the Dudley neighborhood—and DSNI—the backbone organization. Sister Leonard brought up how Project Hope sees its mission through the lens of *family* and DSNI sees its mission through the lens of *community*. She believes the capacity for greater collective impact is possible when these two lenses converge. Despite these differences, both Project Hope and DSNI have been instrumental in what Sister Leonard calls "looking together in the same direction" to a shared vision.

Sister Leonard further elaborated that in 2015, there were over 4,000 families in shelters in the Boston area, a significant number coming from the DVC. A question they faced in conjunction with DSNI is how a place-based community initiative could decrease family homelessness. Project Hope answered this through connecting directly with families. Meanwhile, DSNI answered this through thinking about the systems within community and how they provide support for the families to move on their growth trajectory from crisis to stability. The BPI Promise Neighborhood federal program designation allowed both Project Hope and DSNI to merge initiatives because it gave them the bandwidth to combine the perspectives of family and community systems. This led to a new initiative called *No Child Goes Homeless*, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Another strong example of common agenda is the longstanding partnership between DSNI and Boston Plan for Excellence (BPE). BPE's mission to enhance outcomes for students by developing teachers and schools with an intimate knowledge of the unique strengths and needs of the local community perfectly aligns with the DSNI and BPI mission to bridge the gap between school and community. Because of their common mission, BPE and DSNI were able to collaborate first in 2003 with the inception of the Boston Teacher Residency (BTR) program, a

one year, full-time AmeriCorps program where graduate level students apprentice in a BPS school and earn their Master's degree. BPE and DSNI collaborate to ensure that teachers are oriented to the geography, history, families, needs, and resources in the neighborhood. The program creates an opportunity for local residents to enter the teaching field, and 75% of graduates continue on as BPS teachers. Currently 56 BTR graduates are teaching in DVC-area schools.

In 2012, BPE and DSNI partnered to launch the Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School (DSNCS), a school customized to the needs of the Dudley neighborhood community and which provides an embedded learning site for BTR teachers. Most recently in 2013, BPE collaborated with DSNI to launch the Dudley Promise Corps. This AmeriCorps program engages young adults in a year of service at DSNCS, Orchard Gardens, and the Dearborn STEM Academy, all DVC schools. Currently 50% of program members are from the community, and all members participate in community orientation with DSNI and BTR and have frequent opportunities to serve additional community partners.

Shared Measurement Systems

Shared measurement is the ongoing collection and sharing of data among community organizations, allowing for continued transparency. Andrew Seeder, Data Systems Manager for DSNI spoke about data collection and measuring outcomes. There are several aspects of data collection and analysis that are working for BPI including (1) using social networks to achieve outcomes, (2) finding traces of impact in data that already exist, (3) applying proven instruments in new ways, (4) forming partnerships around technology and research, and (5) designing alignment across community-based organizations.

Mr. Seeder provided more specific examples of shared measurement within BPI. Along with other nationwide Promise neighborhoods, BPI uses indicators called GPRAs (Government Performance Results Act) to assess outcomes across developmental periods. BPI has seen positive outcomes within several GPRAs such as increased exercise and access to Internet among Dudley neighborhood community members. BPI also uses Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade (<https://dibels.org/>), as additional standardized instruments to assess kindergarten children on aspects such as pronouncing words.

Beyond these standard indicators, DSNI is a community based organization that helps partners to recognize the intricate relationships between organizations and their efforts to meet strategic outcome indicators such as GPRAs and DIBELS. Social network analysis is one way to systematically represent these relationships and visually display the interactive work of DSNI-BPI partnerships. For example, social network analysis allows DSNI-BPI to examine which partner organizations are collaborating with each other, which organizations are not connected, and which organizations would like to be connected to the network. Understanding this can help recognize the gaps in community collaboration—an integral part of collective impact—and fill them.

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Mutually reinforcing activities are the frequent collaborations organizations have to achieve their common goal. Initiatives often overlap with each other and build upon their successes. Two unique initiatives of DSNI highlight how mutually reinforcing activities are helping local residents.

First, Project Hope and DSNI created No Child Goes homeless, an initiative that creates a network of neighborhood partnerships to provide crisis intervention and resources to ensure no child from the DVC has to experience homelessness. In order to make No Child Goes Homeless a success, DSNI and Project Hope contacted several partners from the city and state government, foundations, academic researchers, and housing organizations. They sought to engage these agencies to help tackle homelessness on a broader collaborative scale—something an individual agency would be unable to do alone. While Project Hope continued to access critical resources to help families and lift them out of homeless, DSNI simultaneously looked at the broader question of what to do in the community systems. DSNI identified three community solutions: the educational system, particularly the Boston Public Schools; the Boston Housing Corp; and the healthcare system. Their strategies included keeping homeless children in school and keeping families housed and healthy. They did this by targeting three schools starting in 2012-13: Orchard Gardens K-8 Pilot School, Dearborn STEM Academy, and the Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School.

Therefore, DSNI drew upon its decades of development and planning skills in the community and Project Hope used its expertise in working with families who are homeless. Schools are visited monthly to meet with administrative staff, guidance counselors, and teachers to develop a better means to identify and refer families who are in a housing crisis. They meet with the family the same day. The goal is to partner *with* families, understand their unique situation, and search for an affordable unit. In addition to working with families, No Child Goes Homeless provides trainings to school staff to increase knowledge and awareness of issues that families experiencing homelessness endure. In addition, they train people to identify the warning signs of housing crises in students (e.g., not coming to school despite a strong attendance record). No Child Goes Homeless also provides an annual training to Boston Teacher Residents and Dudley Promise Corp members, further demonstrating how their initiative can help reinforce the activities of other initiatives by partner organizations.

Another example of mutually reinforcing activities can be observed through the School Readiness Roundtable (SRR), a cross-sector group of early childhood partners, parents, and other stakeholders ensuring children are entering school ready to learn. Similar to Project Hope, the SRR plans *with* families instead of planning for families, highlighting how mutually reinforcing activities are developed alongside community members. Some of the SRR's goals are to jointly plan and implement activities and programs, connect parent leaders to resources such as libraries and museums, and coordinate child and family services.

Dr. Renée Boynton-Jarrett, a practicing primary care pediatrician at Boston Medical Center, spoke about *Vital Village*, a member of SSR and network of residents and agencies committed to maximizing child, family, and community social and emotional development. Vital Village developed a digital storytelling program for families to tell their stories about strategies they used

to address social isolation. Individuals participated in a three-day workshop to design their stories and share it with others. Another initiative was the Peer Advocacy Action Roundtable (PAR), which allowed residents to design and develop a forum to address legal problem solving. DSNI was a central partner in this work with Medical-Legal Partnership. After two years of developing, they are having train-the-trainer legal advocacy workshops in which community members train others about their knowledge. Finally, Vital Village worked with three schools in the Promise Neighborhood around trauma-sensitive classes. Students obtain knowledge on socio-emotional regulation due to trauma, Boston Public School teachers partner with other agencies to design trauma-informed curriculum, and administrators offer professional development on trauma-informed approaches. Overall, Vital Village, as a member of the SRR, designed their own interventions while also collaborating with other agencies to reinforce their initiatives.

Continuous Communication

Continuous communication is the open communication used across organizations, which allows for ongoing transparency to ensure a common vision. BPI often takes a unique approach to achieving collective impact—not only have they achieved continuous communication with partners, but also among families. An example of continuous communication among families is demonstrated through Fair Chance for Family Success, which was developed to focus on family economic sustainability and is a partnership between the Family Independence Initiative and BPI. Given the ongoing displacement experienced by community residents, Fair Chance for Family Success was determined to generate pathways for families to stay in their community.

When families move out of poverty, one emergency can often set them back into poverty, creating a cycle that Fair Chance was determined to end. To address this issue, families log into a database on a monthly basis and give the agency data about their goals, what initiatives they are taking, and whether they are achieving their goals. In this sense, communication occurs on a continuous basis and the agency can directly address families' needs. For example, if families are focused on needing support around healthcare and a certain health initiative does not meet their needs, the organization provides \$500 to these families to create new initiatives.

In addition, families are expected to communicate with each other. Families come together in cohorts and give each other data about their economic situation, meet with each other, and have access to shared resources. Luz Colon, the Fair Chance Coordinator at DSNI, spoke about how the purpose of Fair Chance for Family Success was to encourage families living in the Dudley neighborhood to connect with other families to create multiple support groups and networks and to provide families with different resources to achieve their goals. The organization has had tremendous success. For example, most families started with a savings account of \$15 and after a year had almost \$1,100 saved. Overall, Fair Chance for Family Success highlights how continuous communication can occur between the agency and families, as well as among families in the community.