

# Collaborating Across Sectors to Increase Opportunity for Youth and Young Adults

Stacy Holland 18 May 2012

Bringing key leaders together to address critical public policy issues is a strategy that communities have used for decades. In fact, special commissions, task forces and working groups have been working together for decades, producing reams of analyses, reports and recommendations on a wide array of topics.

Today, however, a new approach to cross-sector collaboration is emerging as a powerful tool for addressing complex social problems. Known as "collective impact," this concept is characterized by a disciplined, structured and outcomes-focused approach to collaboration. Writing in the Winter 2011 issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, John Kania and Mark Kramer define collective impact as "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem." Collective impact strategies differ from the work of most interagency and interdisciplinary coordinating bodies because they "involve a centralized infrastructure, a

dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants."

Although the concept is new to many communities, Philadelphia has employed elements of collective impact for almost two decades in our efforts to provide education and employment opportunities for youth and young adults. These approaches reach back to the mid-1990s, when powerful business leaders joined senior officials from the School District of Philadelphia and community-based youth organizations to oversee Philadelphia's nationally-recognized School-to-Career system and the City's youth workforce system through what is now the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN). Similarly, when the Philadelphia Youth Council was established in 1999, pursuant to requirements of the federal Workforce Investment Act, Council members were selected with the goal of building a collaborative group of high-level, strategically-focused leaders. These leaders would work not just to fund isolated programs and comply with minimum federal requirements, but also to marshal their collective influence and resources for the purpose of building a citywide system for youth workforce development and career preparation. Subsequently, when Mayor Nutter reconstituted the Youth Council as the Council for College and Career Success and elevated it to a position of formal citywide leadership of the City's

education and youth career preparation goals, his actions reflected the same commitment to assembling influential resource-bringers and decision-makers who could develop and drive a common agenda on behalf of the city's young people.

While these examples of high-level partnerships underscore the value of cross-sector collaboration, the key components of collective impact can be seen more clearly in two of the Council's initiatives: WorkReady Philadelphia and Project U-Turn.

Launched in 2003, WorkReady Philadelphia is a cross-sector partnership dedicated to improving the economic outcomes of the region's youth by attracting, aligning and investing resources in youth workforce-development strategies. Each year, WorkReady year-round and summer programs provide thousands of young people with career exposure and preparation opportunities designed to enhance youth's understanding and mastery of skills needed to be active and productive citizens in a twenty-first century global economy.

Over time, the WorkReady system has grown to include a significant set of partners and investors, without which the current success would not be possible. WorkReady programs are operated by dozens of high-quality, youth-serving organizations selected through competitive procurement processes undertaken by the Council and approved by Philadelphia Works, Inc.

As public funds diminish, employers are increasingly important partners in the WorkReady Philadelphia system. During summer 2012, 146 employers provided summer jobs for 1,104 youth, an investment of more than \$1.8 million. Moreover, since 2003, employers have supported nearly 8,000 youth internships, valued at more than \$12 million.

WorkReady partners with various organizations and stakeholders in employer recruitment efforts. These organizations include: The City of Philadelphia, the Greater Northeast Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, the Main Line Chamber of Commerce, Philadelphia Academies, Inc., the School District of Philadelphia and United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey.

These collaborations have had considerable results. WorkReady has provided opportunities for more than 75,000 young people and infused more than \$23 million into the local Philadelphia economy in the past four years alone.

Project U-Turn is the Council's campaign to bring attention to and attempt to resolve Philadelphia's dropout crisis. Led by a powerful steering committee comprised of leaders from the Mayor's Office, city public care agencies, philanthropies, youth program operators and advocacy organizations, Project U-Turn funds and analyzes in-depth research on the status and characteristics of Philadelphia's students and dropouts, processes that

information to develop program models and services and then measures and publicly reports on outcomes. Since Project U-Turn's launch in 2006, the School District's on-time graduation rate has increased from 52% to 64%. In 2010 the City of Philadelphia and PYN were invited to submit an application to Harvard's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation for recognition through the Innovations in American Government Awards program. As a result, in 2011 Project U-Turn was recognized by the Center as a "Bright Idea" for its groundbreaking and collaborative cross-sector approaches to dropout recovery and prevention.

Based on years of experience in designing, nurturing and sustaining cross-sector approaches like WorkReady Philadelphia and Project U-Turn, we offer the following recommendations and lessons learned for others interested in taking similar steps:

- Focus on visible and clearly-defined issues that have a high priority within your community.
- Engage decision-makers and resource-bringers in your collaborative (or their staff who have direct access to and can speak for these leaders).
- Choose a managing partner (sometimes referred to as a "backbone organization") for the collaborative which will convene and support the group, and serve as a neutral broker for its work.

- Take time to build trust within the collaborative. Effective partnerships will have a diverse set of stakeholders who might not be used to working with one another. Therefore, before taking on any major issues, it is important to the integrity of the group to create opportunities for trust-building and to build commitment among the members.
- Use data to build a common understanding of the issues. High-quality data and analyses not only get everyone on the same page regarding the size and scope of the problem, but also help each stakeholder in the collaborative to understand her/his specific interests in its solution.
- Avoid the “blame game,” where one or more members of the collaborative are seen as somehow more (or less) responsible for solving the problem. Instead, define the collaborative’s work in ways that speak to common solutions with roles for all parties – i.e., “the task is too great for any single organization alone to accomplish.”
- Adopt a consensus work plan that identifies key priorities, action steps and roles for each stakeholder. Try to include a blend of short-term deliverables which can help to demonstrate that the collaborative is making progress, as well as mid- and longer-term goals that look to broader, systemic change.

- Develop and publicly highlight specific measures for which the collaborative agrees to be publicly accountable.
- Distribute power and authority throughout the collaborative, so that responsibility – and credit for successes – are shared.
- Release annual reports on progress toward meeting accountability goals that honestly address the successes and/or shortcomings in meeting anticipated outcomes.

There are several useful resources that promote the effectiveness of high-functioning, cross-sector collaboratives. For example, in “Mobilizing a Cross-Sector Collaborative for Systemic Change,” (Jobs for the Future 2010), Lili Allen describes in detail the key elements of Project U-Turn’s organizational approaches. Referenced earlier, one of the most complete discussions of collective impact can be found in “Collective Impact,” by Kania and Kramer in the Winter 2011 issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. And FSG’s publication *Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth* (Hanleybrown et al. 2012) includes an in-depth discussion of the promise of collective impact in supporting meaningful interventions for older youth and young adults who are neither enrolled in school nor employed.

Collective impact approaches to cross-sector

collaboration require time, energy and a great deal of hard work. But when done well, the results can be impressive, helping to build a sense of common purpose and commitment to coordinated action among a wide variety of powerful and influential stakeholders. So at a time when youth unemployment rates are near all-time highs and federal investments are approaching historic lows, it makes sense to look to collective impact as a strategy that can help to develop home-grown solutions and leverage resources to support them. After all, being able to see young people find their rightful place as full and contributing members of a global economy makes the time, energy and hard work very much worthwhile.

**With nearly 20 years of experience, Stacy E. Holland is a tireless advocate who has played a vital role in ensuring that youth in the Philadelphia region have access to the academic, career and support services necessary to prepare them to successfully compete in the global economy. She co-founded Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) in 1999, taking it from a start-up organization with two employees to a nationally-recognized leader in youth workforce development charged with managing over \$28 million of government, foundation and employer investments in Philadelphia's youth career preparation and education efforts. Under her leadership, PYN is a citywide entity dedicated to integrating services and building systems that promote positive postsecondary and**

**economic outcomes for young people, serving over 17,000 youth annually.**

**Prior to her work with PYN, Ms. Holland served in leadership positions within workforce development and higher-education institutions, including Philadelphia Works (formerly known as the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation), Delaware Valley College, La Salle University and Marymount Manhattan College. Her accomplishments have been recognized through several awards, including the Philadelphia Business Journal 40 Under 40 Award in 2005 and the 2012 SmartCEO Brava Award. Ms. Holland holds an undergraduate degree from The College of New Jersey in marketing and a graduate degree in student development from Teachers College, Columbia University.**