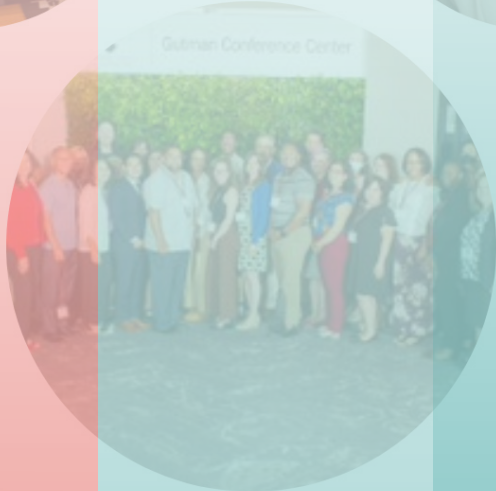# BUILDING STRONG, SUSTAINABLE BACKBONE LEADERSHIP

A Field Study of Cross-Sector Collaborative Organizations

APRIL 2023

OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL
EDREDESIGN

HARVARD
GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF EDUCATION

EdRedesign at the Harvard Graduate School of Education provides catalytic support to the cradle-to-career, place-based field to drive systems-level change and open personalized pathways to opportunity.

In 2014, Paul Reville, Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and former Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, launched The EdRedesign Lab (EdRedesign). EdRedesign serves as a catalyst to advance the cradle-to-career place-based field by promoting cross-sector systems of support and opportunity for all children and youth. Socioeconomic status is a leading determinant of educational, social, and economic outcomes; so we need strategies that go beyond schools to ensure that all children and youth thrive.

We believe strategies to expand opportunities for children and youth have two critical components: place-based, cross-sector collaboration to remove structural barriers and open pathways to opportunity; and personalized, relationship-based roadmaps, what we call Success Plans, for children and youth to reach their full potential.

Cradle-to-career place-based partnerships between and among governmental agencies serving children, youth, and families, school systems, health care systems and providers, community-based organizations, philanthropies, and for-profit and not-for-profit businesses are gaining momentum across the country.

To support this growing field to effect transformational change that serves the needs and talents of individual children and youth, our work focuses on talent development, actionable research, our Institute for Success Planning, and our By All Means network.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Touzin began her career as a third-grade teacher in the Harlem section of New York City in 2003 and later became the founding principal of an elementary school in East New York, Brooklyn. Most recently, she served as the Managing Director of Principal Preparation for a rapidly scaling Texas-based charter network. In that role, she helped set the vision and strategy for leadership development and prepared over 75 aspiring principals for the principalship. In August 2016, she self-published her first book, *ExceptionAL: Black Men Leading, Living, and Loving,* to amplify the beauty, brilliance, and humanity of Black men and boys across the country. In February 2017, Judy launched The ExceptionAL Project, an extension of that book. Judy's unwavering passion for education is rooted in her commitment to ensuring that all young people live in communities and attend schools where they can learn and thrive. Her experience as a principal taught her that schools alone will not be able to achieve systemic change. She believes it will take sustained collaborative effort from all stakeholders to radically transform school and life outcomes for our kids, especially those who continue to be marginalized. Judy holds a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood and Elementary Education from New York University, a Master's in Curriculum and Teaching from Fordham University, and a Ph.D. in Urban Education from CUNY Graduate Center. Judy is a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the Ed.L.D. program and former EdRedesign Linda G. Hammett Ory Fellow.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH TEAM AT EDREDESIGN

Lynne Sacks is the Director of Research at EdRedesign and leads all research activities. Lynne has over 20 years of research, nonprofit, and policy experience. Lynne worked at the Center for Equity and Excellence in Education at George Washington University and the National Center on Education and the Economy. She has conducted research for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the American Institutes for Research; she has also served as a consultant to New Profit, the Annenberg Center for School Reform, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, and the Commonwealth Corporation. Lynne earned her M.Ed. and Ed.D. degrees at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and her undergraduate degree at Cornell University.

Michelle Sedaca is a Senior Research Manager at EdRedesign where she is helping to build a knowledge base of best practices and approaches to creating comprehensive, integrated systems of support for children and youth. She most recently served as a Communications Manager for the Pathways to Prosperity initiative at Jobs for the Future, overseeing its communications and marketing strategy to amplify state and regional college and career pathways efforts. Michelle also managed a variety of research and writing projects for America's Promise Alliance and Jumpstart for Young Children. Michelle holds a joint master's degree in urban policy and child development from Tufts University and an undergraduate degree in politics from Oberlin College.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Suggested citation: Judy Touzin. Building Strong, Sustainable Backbone Leadership: A Field Study of Cross-Sector Collaborative Organizations. Cambridge, MA: The EdRedesign Lab, 2023.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PURPOSE

In the past 10 years, place-based collaborative action initiatives have multiplied across the country, bringing together the people, organizations, and sectors needed to improve the lived experiences and outcomes of young people and families in historically underserved neighborhoods, communities, cities, and counties. Backbone organizations and staff play an indispensable role in supporting place-based collaborative action work. Given that, there is a growing need to better understand the competencies required to ensure strong, sustainable backbone leadership. Developing the capacities of current and aspiring backbone leaders is critical to the work of effectively sustaining collective impact efforts and realizing the systems-level transformations they seek. Through extensive interviews with leaders in the field about their experiences and reflections on the demands of their positions, this study fills a gap in information about, and understanding of, what backbone leaders need—in terms of competencies and skills as well as supports—to effectively carry out these pivotal roles.

Place-based collaborative action initiatives seek to bring together the people, organizations, and sectors needed to improve the lived experiences and outcomes of young people and families across the country in historically underserved neighborhoods, communities, cities, and counties.

STUDY QUESTIONS

In keeping with the purpose stated above, this study sought to address the following key research questions:

- What key competencies are most critical for backbone leaders?

- What resources (e.g., information, trainings, networks) already exist to support backbone organizations and backbone leaders?

- What additional supports might be helpful to the field and what might these learning and development opportunities look like?

RESEARCH PROCESS

EdRedesign conducted over 30 interviews with practitioners across the country in 2022 to gather insights from those most closely engaged in the work.

The EdRedesign Lab (EdRedesign) conducted over 30 interviews with practitioners across the country in 2022 to gather insights from those most closely engaged in the work. We started with leaders at national organizations who support the work of the backbone staff who lead place-based partnerships. We then spoke with backbone staff members themselves to get a firsthand perspective of what it takes to effectively lead these cross-sector partnerships. Study participants represent communities that are diverse in size, geography, and demography (see Appendix A for a complete list of interviewees from both national organizations and local partnerships; see Appendix B for sample interview questions).

In addition to conducting interviews, we reviewed open-source materials from network organizations that support this work (i.e., Collective Impact Forum, StriveTogether, and Tamarack Institute) and considered practice-based articles concerning collective impact and backbone organizations featured in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (SSIR), among other sources.

OVERVIEW

What follows is an overview of the competencies that leaders considered of greatest importance for ensuring strong, sustainable backbone structures. Next, we discuss the supports that already exist for backbone leaders in developing these capacities and present recommendations for what additional learning and development opportunities are needed. Then, we highlight several additional strategic considerations raised by practitioners across the country.

COMPETENCIES

Several core competencies emerged as crucial for establishing strong, sustainable backbones.

Throughout our conversations with local and national place-based leaders, several core competencies emerged as crucial for establishing strong, sustainable backbone organizations. These ranged from more technical skills like project management (i.e., facilitate effective meetings, ensure follow up and follow through) to more adaptive qualities like demonstrating a learning orientation and resilience (see the table below for a complete list of the competencies and their descriptions as well as quotes taken from interviews with practitioners).

Notes: Competencies marked with an asterisk (*) below might be more accurately categorized as traits, which are not as readily trainable as the other listed competencies. Words appearing in italics are quotes taken from interviews with practitioners.

COMPETENCY	DESCRIPTION	RELATED IDEAS
Advocate for Policy Change	Often, laws and policies must be changed to achieve transformational outcomes at the population level. Leaders who understand this consistently ask, "what existing policies are inhibiting our ability to move this work forward?" and then work with allies to change those policies. *"We can't program our way out of this. Yes, we do need excellent, accountable programs and we need better systems and policy." –Sondra Samuels, NAZ*[1]	
Coalition Building	The capacity and ability to bring together and invest in a distinct group of actors from the grasstops to the grassroots to take common action to advance a shared interest or agenda. This requires the ability to understand the motivations of individual members and use that to move the group forward. *"There are dozens of orgs across our state working towards many of the same means, so a role of the backbone leader should be to seek them out, get to know their missions, and have an open line of collaborative communication with them. There is power in numbers and sometimes, if organizations from across the state can all speak to their local representative about the same need, you're more likely to make change." – Jennifer Andrews, Chattanooga 2.0*	Network building

---

[1]   Note that some interviewees have transitioned from the organizations with which they were affiliated (listed in Appendix A) at the time of the interviews.

COMPETENCY	DESCRIPTION	RELATED IDEAS
Community Centered*	Deep-seated belief in the inherent value and dignity of the community. This belief is reflected in how leaders talk about and work alongside the community. Others seldom if ever question their commitment to the place, the people, and the work. *"Backbone leaders must have deep compassion for the community you are going to be serving. If not, they will know it and will call you on it." – Anonymous*	Community engagement
Data Driven	Leaders are clear about what impact they are working toward. They determine aligned metrics and deliberately gather, disaggregate, analyze, and communicate about the data. Data is consistently used to drive decisions and refine strategy.	Goal oriented Results focused Impact driven
Equity Driven	The work is anchored in an explicit commitment to realizing racial, ethnic, and economic equity. This commitment is reflected in whose voices are engaged and centered, who leads, how data is disaggregated and disseminated, and how resources are allocated.	
Fund Development & Management	The ability to consistently generate and align financial resources to support staff, sustain the work, and drive toward the vision and goals of the collective.	
Humility*	To acknowledge that you do not have all the answers, apologize when necessary, and own up to missteps. Humility also looks like honoring that the community is best positioned to identify solutions to their challenges. *"Leading collaborative change is to balance the dance between being disruptive and having the humility to own that I don't know." –Michelle Matthews, Purpose Built Communities* *"This work requires you to have no ego. If you are here for your credit, this is not the work for you." –Dr. Charles C. Davis, Jr., Evolve502*	No ego Servant leadership
Learning Orientation*	A belief that solving complex social problems requires continuous learning and improvement. Sees failure and setbacks as learning opportunities to inform future action. *"I'm always reading and always thinking…I grew in this work because I kept listening, learning, and being in the room." –Anonymous*	Continuous improvement Growth mindset Adaptive

COMPETENCY	DESCRIPTION	RELATED IDEAS
Project Management	Organizing and driving the work of the collective to achieve its goals and objectives. This includes the ability to set clear goals, clarify roles, set agendas, facilitate meetings, integrate data, and create a sense of shared accountability. *"The role of the backbone leader is not to build an organization but to facilitate, coordinate, manage commitments, build capacity, and celebrate members to advance the common agenda." (Schmitz, 2021)*	
Relational Intelligence	Backbone leaders must be able to establish and leverage strong trusting relationships to move the work forward. This requires the ability to see the world through others' eyes and ensure that key partners and stakeholders feel seen, heard, and valued. *"You have to be able to access the mind and be keenly aware of what you and others are thinking and feeling."* *–Ryan Lugalia-Hollon, UP Partnership*	
Resilience*	To recover from setbacks, disappointments, and failures while holding onto the vision for what's possible.	Perseverance Tenacity
Strategic Thinking	Awareness of strategy options and the capacity to select appropriate, effective strategies. Thinking through which stakeholders to engage at various points in the process and knowing which levers to pull when. Can be deliberately planned and yet pivot appropriately when context and conditions call for a more emergent approach.	
Systems Thinker	The ability to see the conditions/factors at play that have a direct or indirect impact on the challenge the collective is working to solve. This includes understanding enablers and inhibitors from the community level to the policy level. *"Ecosystem leaders wake up thinking about the system… they hold the system in their minds at all times." –Tauheedah Jackson, Coalition for Community Schools*	
Visionary	The ability to craft (or cocreate) and compellingly share a bold vision for what's possible. Visionary leaders help others to see, believe in, and then collectively work toward the future they are imagining.	

Organizational leaders perceive that some competencies can be learned or developed through training, coaching, and on-the-job experience while others are akin to traits and are not necessarily trainable. The latter include the beliefs and convictions that inform how leaders show up to and engage in the work (i.e., demonstrating humility and having a heart for the community). Organizations like The Broad Center have previously made such distinctions in thinking about the Dimensions of Leadership for school transformation.[2] Clarifying which aspects are trainable competencies and which are traits and dispositions can help inform how we recruit, select, and develop future leaders of place-based partnerships.

It is important to note that all competencies mentioned in the table above are critical for ensuring the success of a place-based collaboration. That said, it is not likely that any one "rock star" leader exists who embodies all of them, so it is imperative to ensure the competencies are accounted for across the backbone team. Knowing which competencies the leader brings to the work can help with building out a team with complementary (versus redundant) capacities.

---

[2] The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. Source: https://broadfoundation.org/grantees/the-broad-center/.

WHAT SUPPORTS CURRENTLY EXIST?

Throughout our conversations, four key types of support surfaced as the most prevalent and impactful in assisting backbone leaders in their work. These include networked communities, communities of practice, open-source materials, and webinars and convenings.

Networked Communities: Several national organizations provide coaching and support for a network of communities across the country. These organizations work with place-based partnerships that have demonstrated a prescribed level of readiness. To work with StriveTogether or Purpose Built Communities, for example, interested communities must reach out to the national organization and meet minimum benchmarks for entry. This includes key elements like clarity of vision, proof of local investment, and an established community of stakeholders. Nationally, beyond open-source materials and publicly available trainings, there has not been as much support explicitly available to those who are at the beginning stages of exploring and launching a place-based partnership. This level of support has typically only been offered on a fee-for-service basis. But that is beginning to change. For example, StriveTogether recently launched a new training hub, which is available free of charge and is not limited to their current affiliates.

Communities of Practice: Many of the network-based organizations offer communities of practice for their leaders. Almost all backbone leaders expressed that these communities have been the lifeline that has helped them to sustain themselves in the work. These peer-learning spaces allow leaders to share struggles and successes with others engaged in similar work. Further, listening to lessons learned by peers provides insights for how they might navigate similar experiences in their own context.

Open-Source Materials: Organizations like the Collective Impact Forum and StriveTogether offer publicly available toolkits. The practice-based journal Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) offers a wealth of articles related to exploring the role of backbone leaders in collective impact. (See Appendix C for examples of these open-source materials.)

Webinars and Convenings: Most national organizations offer webinars and large-scale convenings specifically for partners in their networks (e.g., Communities In Schools, EdRedesign, Opportunity Youth Forum, Purpose Built Communities, StriveTogether, William Julius Wilson Institute at Harlem Children's Zone). Much of the Collective Impact Forum's material is open to anyone who registers to receive their newsletter and invitations to webinars and other events, although some events are fee-based. Several other organizations and national programs require an application or vetting process for membership (e.g., Opportunity Youth Forum, Purpose Built Communities, Promise Neighborhoods , StriveTogether, William Julius Wilson Institute at the Harlem Children's Zone).

The cost of participation in the various offerings named above ranges from free to what some organizations named as a "nominal annual membership fee." Nearly all of the Collective Impact Forums webinars are free and open to the public and they charge approximately $500 for their annual conference. Purpose Built Communities provides all their services pro bono to their network members. Bloomberg Associates also provides technical assistance to any My Brother's Keeper (MBK) community free of charge. StriveTogether and Tamarack Institute have an annual membership fee that grants network members access to resources, coaching, and training. Tamarack also offers a wide range of free webinars as well as online training and technical assistance for a fee.

WHAT ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS MIGHT BE HELPFUL?

Providing ongoing coaching and mentorship, developing the pipeline, tailoring learning opportunities, and helping new backbones get started

In addition to discussing existing supports, we asked practitioners to share what they saw as gaps and opportunities in the field. Further, we asked them to offer suggestions on what additional training and/or development offerings might help to close these gaps. Their insights inform the following four recommendations: *provide ongoing coaching and mentorship, develop the pipeline, tailor learning opportunities, and help new backbones and partnerships get started.*

Provide Ongoing Coaching and Mentorship: Place-based work in service of driving systems-level transformation is complex, context specific, and messy. National and local leaders alike stressed that there is no master class or playbook that can adequately prepare leaders to launch and lead this work well. While there is a critical place for trainings and workshops, there simply is no substitute for learning by doing. Backbone leaders who are charged with coordinating placed-based efforts need ongoing coaching and mentorship while in the seat that focuses on the work and the leader, targeting the competencies discussed above alongside the intrapersonal development required for systems-level leadership.

Develop the Pipeline: While there is growing investment and support in developing backbone leaders, some practitioners suggest that the field would benefit from a concerted effort to develop middle managers and/or functional leads (i.e., youth development, early childhood, housing stability, juvenile justice, and others). This can take the form of stretch assignments under the guidance of a more senior team member, learning labs that allow rising leaders to practice leading aspects of the work with which they are less familiar, and shadow weeks where middle managers and functional leads walk alongside senior leaders as they model the work and offer additional insights about what it takes to effectively lead the broader collective. Time and funding were named as potential barriers to implementing learning opportunities.

"Current leaders should be asking, 'How am I supporting the next generation? As a field, how can we help current leaders identify rising leaders and offer them coaching and development supports?'"
*– **Dr. Karen Stout**,*
Achieving the Dream

Tailor Learning Opportunities: As noted above, training, while not sufficient on its own, is an important element for developing backbone leaders. National and local leaders shared that large group webinars sometimes lack the focus and alignment to the work they are leading in the moment. Sessions also sometime occur as a one off, which limits the likelihood that leaders will work toward implementing the learning and mastering the skill. Some leaders suggested offering learning tracks or certificate programs that offer focused and sustained engagement over the course of several months. This would allow leaders to identify the learning opportunity best aligned to their current area of need (e.g., fund development and management for sustainability, emotional literacy, the political frame, and coalition building).

Help New Backbones and Partnerships Get Started: Given that several national organizations include a vetting process for membership, the field may benefit from additional coaching and support designed to help communities at the very earliest stages of coming together and planning.

"It helps to figure out ways to get close to other parts of the work even if you are not leading it…volunteering, building relationships, some experience with city government. All of it helps."

*– **Katie Delp**,*

Purpose Built Communities

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

"We are always looking for a secret sauce and we want to codify and replicate, but context matters. Quite frankly, context is everything!"
– Tauheedah Jackson,
Coalition for Community Schools

Beyond the competencies, supports, and opportunities already discussed, conversations with practitioners surfaced several additional strategic considerations that are worth naming here. The takeaways that follow were echoed in different ways by various leaders and speak to the additional elements that must be considered when seeking to establish strong, sustainable backbone organizations.

Context Matters: No two communities or collaborative efforts are identical. While many of the skills required may be the same, each partnership may take them up and apply them in a different way. The key to success and impact is to be crystal clear about the context and work to adapt the principles and resources to that reality.

Representation and Proximity Matter: Communities can benefit from having leaders who represent their backgrounds and interests and who can relate to their lived experiences. Given that, those invested in supporting collective impact efforts and backbones specifically should work to attract and retain racially diverse, proximate leaders. Being proximate can show up as:
- lived experience as it relates to the problem to solve,
- being from and/or deeply committed to the community, or
- having deep professional experience working with the community.

Passion Must be Personal: To step into a backbone role, leaders must come to this work with a fire in their belly. It is this personal passion—their why—that will compel leaders to lean in and persist in the work when it gets hard. The work will not give backbone leaders the fire but rather is dependent on the fire they bring. While this idea of having personal passion did not emerge as a core trait or competency, it was repeatedly mentioned when leaders spoke about what drew them to the work in the first place and what enables them to keep going when times get tough.

Clarify Standards and Pathways: As more and more national organizations emerge to support this work, it will be important for them to think about how their efforts are additive and complementary and not redundant. In addition, local leaders need to be able to look up and see a more clearly defined field, which will require national organizations to partner around how language is used to describe the skills, competencies, and principles of place-based work. This will help local leaders better assess where they are in their own journey and access the resources that are best aligned to their needs.

The Table Must Reflect the Work: Some collaborative initiatives start out by bringing people together first and then trying to decide what to tackle based on who they have versus identifying the challenge to take on and then building the table accordingly. The table should be seen as adaptive and fluid. This does not mean the table composition should be frenetic and constantly shapeshifting, but it should emerge as the intention and direction become clearer. Leaders need to ask themselves, "What problem are we trying to solve?" Once stakeholders and the deciders answer that question, they should ask, "Who are the people who are best positioned to help drive toward that change?" Convene that table.

Embrace Rest, Healing, and Care as a Sustainability Strategy: Leaders at different levels of the work voiced the importance of rest, healing, and care in different ways. Backbone leaders need to be able to take care of themselves to persist and avoid burnout. They also need time and space to be in community witheach other. The work is hard and can be all consuming, leaving little time to process and work through some of the traumas that they come with and the traumas they sustain while trying to create systems change. True transformation will require healing.

Succession Planning and Sustaining the Work: Sometimes leaders—especially founders—start to view themselves as the keepers of the work as opposed to stewards for a season. For the work to survive leadership transitions, those at the helm must be intentional about identifying rising talent who may be able to assume the leading role. Aspiring leaders should be identified and given opportunities to stretch and grow so that when transition comes (whether thoughtfully planned or unexpected), someone can step into the role and keep the effort moving forward. In addition, the work cannot be too closely tied to an individual mayor, superintendent, leader, or other key stakeholder. If so, the effort will often end or unravel when that person transitions. Place-based work needs to be deeply owned and championed by the community. Only then will it be able to endure leadership transitions.

The Ecosystem Around the Backbone: Developing the capacities of backbone leaders is critically important and insufficient by itself. Backbone leaders must also have a supportive and aligned ecosystem that enables collaborative efforts and backbone leaders to thrive.

"Backbone leadership requires you to have the 3,000 ft view, the 360-degree view, and the granular view all at the same time. You must understand the context."
*– **Chris Thompson**, Tamarack Institute Video*

"We need to also be really thoughtful about community-grown leadership…I am not going to say you have to live in the community, but the ethic has to be 'I care about this community, and I am a part of it.' The community cannot be othered."

*– **Tauheedah Jackson**,*

Coalition for Community Schools

"Our work is comprised of both technical and adaptive challenges. However, addressing these challenges comes with an emotional weight. Therefore, coming together to heal is critical to our collective work. Our network—the Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum—holds space and time to focus on healing."

*– **Monique Miles**,*

Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum

"As a leader of a backbone organization…people don't come to this role unless they are here to serve and to give. It can take over. This is often not just a role. It's a lifestyle and people burn out."

*– **Michelle Matthews**,*

Purpose Built Communities

"One major condition that stands in the way of transformational change is trauma. So many people in our communities have been traumatized, and it's not being dealt with either at an individual level or a systemic level. Systems are made up of people, so if people are traumatized, our systems are traumatized—and traumatizing. This makes healing, and healing collectively, a significant priority for systems change."

*– **John Kania**,*

Collective Change Lab

Authentic Community Engagement: Efforts to enlist community members or engage resident voices cannot be performative. It's not enough to hold town halls to check off a box. Rather, those with lived experience reflective of the problem to solve should play a key role in defining the problem and crafting the solutions. Transformation is achieved *with* the community, not done *to* it.

Staying Aware of Policy: True transformation will often require change at the policy level. While everyone may not possess policy-related experience or know how to advocate for policy change, every initiative should be aware of the policies that will enable or hinder its efforts and make an effort to partner with policy advocates if they do not have that capacity in-house.

Diversity of Prior Experience: Several leaders mentioned the importance of having expertise in one area while also having some level of experience working in other areas such as government, policy, education, philanthropy, housing, business, and healthcare. This diversity of experience helped them to better see the system and develop more thoughtful strategies to move their agenda forward.

"I am hungry for a sabbatical at this point in my work. We do this year after year after year…we haven't stepped away enough to come back. I think board education could help facilitate a shift to sabbatical as a strategy for retention and sustainability."

*– **Anonymous***

"At a minimum this work requires ensuring alignment between staff, board, partners, and funders…everyone working towards that (shared) vision."

*– **Ryan Lugalia-Hollon**,*

UP Partnership

"Trust is critical. Backbone leaders must have the ability to build/ create trust, and the ability to hold space for the repairing of the trust that may have been broken in the community."

*– **Hayling Price**,*

William Julius Wilson Institute

at Harlem Children's Zone

Communication and Relationship Building as Uber Competencies: Communication, in all its forms, undergirds many of the other competencies. At a minimum, leaders must be able to:

- compellingly communicate a vision
- clearly articulate a strategic direction
- tailor communication to different stakeholder audiences
- communicate a return on investment that compels donors and other funders
- implement and maintain clear and consistent communication structures that keep the project moving forward
- be clear, direct, and firm when holding stakeholders accountable to their shared work

Relationships are the bedrock of collective efforts. The work cannot start or move in the absence of trusting, committed relationships. Even leaders who possess sound technical capacities will struggle to convene and move a table forward if they lack the social capital and trust to convene the table in the first place. Strong relationship-building skills allow leaders to:

- understand the needs, values, and interests of their stakeholders
- build buy-in when seeding ideas
- curry favor and advocacy in different spaces (government, business, funders, etc.)
- receive grace for mistakes because stakeholders trust their intentions
- get folks to show up when called upon
- build coalition across lines of difference to move the agenda forward
- promote a sense of accountability and follow through

While communication skills can be learned and developed, relationship skills rely on a degree of emotional intelligence, which can at times seem less malleable. Those who are naturally more self-aware and empathetic may be more adept at cultivating and sustaining the types of relationships necessary for facilitating cross-sector collaborations. To be sure, most anyone can improve in both areas. Trainings that focus on developing intra- and inter-personal competence (e.g., Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence or Practicing Leadership Inside and Out) can help people practice and improve the skills that help them to build trust and rapport with others.

Centering Equity: Driving toward systems-level change with and for communities that have been historically underserved and underrepresented requires an unapologetic and explicit commitment to equity. In a recent article, John Kania and colleagues leveraged the Urban Councils definition for equity: "Equity is fairness and justice achieved through systematically assessing disparities in opportunities, outcomes, and representation and redressing [those] disparities through targeted actions" (Kania et al, 2021).

> *"In the early days of collective impact, we talked about the backbone being neutral. As we have uplifted the importance of centering equity, we no longer say neutral. The backbone is the champion for equity and the co-creation is around identifying how to get there."*
>
> – **Jennifer Splansky Juster**,
>
> Collective Impact Forum

"We have to see everything through an equity lens. We must ask ourselves, who benefits and who is burdened by this policy, practice, or procedure. Our work is about undoing some of the long-term sustained effects of certain policies that were not made from an equity lens and contributed to marginalizing specific communities."

*– **Garrett Richardson**,*

Bloomberg Associates supporting

My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Alliance

"You don't need to be a master in all. It's helpful to feel like you have expertise in one and can develop general understanding of others and hire to your weaker points."

*– **Josh Klaris**,*

North 10 Philly

"All of the leaders I am speaking of have come up in the nonprofit world and have touched the elephant from different vantage points."

*– **Monique Miles**,*

Opportunity Youth Forum

"I think also working in government for a decade showed me what I didn't want to do and what was not working…BUT I know how to speak to them. I also spent a few years working with PolicyLink and that really honed my abilities."

*– **Richard Raya**,*

Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA)

"When working in systems change, there is only so far you can go to make social change without changing the policy/ law/ procedures that are holding the barriers to progress in place. In Tennessee, along this legislative session, there are 30+ bills related to education that would directly impact our coalition's goals, but I would have no idea about them if I didn't Intentionally try to stay informed about the changing landscape of Ed policy."

*– **Jennifer Andrews**,*

Chattanooga 2.0

CONCLUSION

The past 10 years have demonstrated the potential for place-based, cross-sector collaborations to help radically improve the lived experiences and outcomes of young people and families across the country. Realizing this level of transformation calls for strong, sustainable backbone leadership. By synthesizing the accumulated expertise of a wide array of leaders, this report lays a foundation for understanding the competencies, dispositions, supports, and strategies backbone leaders need to successfully support collaborative action. The next step is to build the pipeline of leaders to carry this work forward.

Appendix A: Interviewees

Note that some interviewees have transitioned from the organizations with which they were affiliated (listed below) at the time of the interviews.

National Organizations

ORGANIZATION	INTERVIEWEE	TITLE
Achieving the Dream	Dr. Karen Stout	President & CEO
Children's Funding Project	Elizabeth Gaines	CEO
Coalition for Community Schools	Tauheedah Jackson	Formerly Director of Place Based Strategy & Community School Initiatives at the Coalition of Community Schools, now Director of EdRedesign's Institute for Success Planning
Collective Change Lab	John Kania	Founder, Executive Director
Collective Impact Forum	Jennifer Splansky Juster	Executive Director
Communities in Schools	Rey Saldana	President & CEO
EC-LINC (Center for the Study of Social Policy)	Cailin O'Connor	Senior Associate
Forum for Youth Investment	Mary Ellen Wiggins	Director of Policy & Research
My Brother's Keeper (Bloomberg Associates)	Garrett Richardson	Associate, Social Service Practices
Opportunity Youth Forum	Monique Miles	Director (& VP of OY Investment Fund)
Promise Neighborhoods Institute (PolicyLink)	Jessica Pizarek	Senior Associate
Promise Neighborhoods Federal Program (Urban Institute)	Megan Gallagher	Principal Research Associate
Purpose Built Communities	Michelle Matthews	Sr. Vice President
StriveTogether	Parvathi Santhosh-Kumar	VP of Equitable Results
Tamarack Institute	Sylvia Cheuy	Consulting Director
William Julius Wilson Institute at Harlem Children's Zone	Hayling Price	Sr. Managing Director

APPENDICES

Local Backbone/Place-Based Organizations

ORGANIZATION	INTERVIEWEE	TITLE
Amplify Grand Rapids	Jon Ippel	Executive Director
Partners for Rural Impact (formerly Berea Community College-Partners for Education)	Dreama Gentry	Executive Director
Chattanooga 2.0	Jennifer Andrews	Chief Operating Officer
Evolve502	Dr. Charles C. Davis, Jr.	Chief Comprehensive Services and Data Officer
Cambridge Family Policy Council	Nancy Tauber	Executive Director
Focused Community Solutions in Atlanta (FCS)	Katie Delp	Executive Director
Las Vegas My Brother's Keeper	John "Jack" Martin	Director of Clark County Department of Juvenile Justice Services
Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA)	Richard Raya	Chief Strategy Officer
North 10 Philly	Dr. Josh Klaris	Executive Director
Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ)	Sondra Samuels	President & CEO
Oakland Thrives	Melanie Moore, Ph.D.	CEO
Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet	Rob Watson	Cofounder; Director of Partnerships and Community Engagement at EdRedesign
Say Yes Buffalo	David Rust	Executive Director
South Bay Community Services	Mauricio Torre	Vice President of Program Operations
Thrive Chicago	Dr. Sonya Anderson	President
Up Partnership	Ryan Lugalia-Hollon, Ph.D.	Executive Director
Woodlawn United	Mashonda Taylor	Executive Director
Yonkers My Brother's Keeper	Dr. Jim Bostic	Executive Director of Nepperhan Community Center

Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions

National Organizations

Interviewee Background
- Tell us a little about yourself and what brought you to this role? (Probe for prior roles/experiences.)
- How long have you been in your role? With the organization?

Effective Backbones
- Can you identify some of the most effective/impactful backbone organizations across the country?
- Why do you consider them effective?
- To what do you attribute their success and impact? (Probe for internal & external conditions, leader traits, etc.)

Backbone Leadership
- What is the role of a backbone leader?
- What skills or competencies are required for effective backbone leadership (top 3-5)?
- What prior or on the job experiences are most helpful in cultivating those skills?

Training & Development for Backbone Leadership
- What training/development does your organization currently provide to backbone leaders/ organizations?
- Who do your trainings target/best support? (New leaders/backbones or established? Geographies? Sizes? Focus areas? etc.)
- Who provides the trainings? Do you partner with any other organizations to lead this work?
- What are the associated costs? Who pays?
- What if any of your materials are made publicly available? Available for a fee? Available if part of your network?

Gaps in the Field
- Based on your work, what might you say are some of the unmet development needs of backbone organizations/leaders? Why does this gap exist?
- What might support look like to fill this gap/these gaps?

Local Backbone/Place-Based Organizations

Leader & Organization Background
- Tell us a little about yourself and what brought you to this role?
- Are you a native of (city)? If not, how long have you been there?
- How long have you been in your role? With the organization?

Organization Background
- Focus Area(s)
- Year Founded
- Urban/Rural/Suburban?
- Size of population served
- Community Demographics
- Staff at backbone/# Partners
- Network Affiliations (BAM, Purpose Built, Promise Neighborhoods, WJWI, Strive Together, MBK, etc.).

Backbone Structure
- What is the current structure of your backbone organization (i.e., # of employees, roles, reporting relationships)?
- Who are the key community and/or citywide stakeholders you engage as a part of your work?
- What if any role does the local mayor and/or superintendent play in your efforts?

Backbone Leadership
- In your view, what is the role of a backbone leader?
- What skills or competencies are required for effective backbone leadership (top 3-5)?
- What prior or on the job experiences have been most helpful in cultivating those skills?
- What is the hardest part about your role as the backbone leader? Most rewarding?
- Walk us through a typical day. How do you spend your time? Is this aligned to the most important activities you need to do as a backbone leader? If not, why not?

Training & Development for Backbone Leadership
- What training/development would help prepare rising leaders to step into the backbone leader role?
- Does this training already exist?
- If so, what is effective about it? What would increase its effectiveness?
- If not, what might such a training look like?
- What have been the associated costs of such trainings?

Appendix C: Examples of Open-Source Materials

RESOURCE	PUBLISHED BY (YEAR)	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
Collaborative Action for Equity and Opportunity: A Practical Guide for School and Community Leaders	Havard Education Press (April 2021)	The book provides a how-to guide for education, government, and community leaders interested in creating cross-sector systems of support for students.
Collective Impact, Ten Years Later	Stanfor Social Innovation Review (SSIR) (2021-2022)	An online series that highlights key learnings over the past 10 years and offers recommendations as the collective impact field continues to develop.
Collective Impact 3.0 An Evolving Framework for Community Change	Tamarack Institute (2016)	Article by Tamarack offering an evolved way to conceive of collective impact and the role of backbone supports in driving that work.
Backbone Starter Guide: A Summary of Major Resources about the Backbone Tools for Backbones	Collective Impact Forum (2017, 2014)	Older resource that provides a few templates (meetings, job descriptions) for place-based efforts in their early stages of development.
Place-Based Partnership Toolkit	StriveTogether (2021)	Resource offered by Strive to help place-based partnerships get off the ground and move their initiative forward.
The Essential Mindset and Skillsets of Backbone Leaders	Tamarack Institute (2022)	Video featuring staff and partners of Tamarack discussing the skills and mindsets essential for backbone leadership.
Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 1; Part 2; Part 3; Part 4	Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) (2012)	An online series that highlights key features of backbone organizations and the role they play in driving collective impact efforts.