

Responding to a Crisis through Collaborative—and Swift—Action: A Profile of the Children’s Cabinet in Chattanooga-Hamilton County, TN

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Introduction

Early in the morning on March 13th, 2020, Molly Blankenship, executive director of Chattanooga 2.0, received a call from the head of a local foundation inviting her to a small community leaders’ meeting to discuss the impact of the Coronavirus. “It hadn’t occurred to us that Covid-19 would really change our lives,” Molly shared. “Then, all of a sudden, it did.” By late that afternoon, a meeting initially planned for eight people had ballooned to nearly sixty. Coordinating an emergency response to meet children’s needs would be the first challenge the executive director would encounter as she facilitated the local Children’s Cabinet’s efforts—sustaining the urgency would prove to be even more difficult.



Pictured, left to right: Paul Reville, EdRedesign; Jim Coppinger, Hamilton County mayor; Dr. Bryan Johnson, HCS superintendent; Molly Blankenship, executive director, Chattanooga 2.0

Building on a History of Collaboration

With a population of approximately 370,000 residents, Chattanooga-Hamilton County is the fourth largest county in Tennessee and is home to the state’s fourth-largest city, Chattanooga.¹ The community’s unique features positioned it well to meet the challenges posed by Covid-19. First, Chattanooga is known for having some of the fastest internet in the country because its fiber-optic infrastructure is municipally owned. Second, the community has a long history of collaboration. “Our history built those muscles,” Molly explained. “Because this community collaborates so much, some of our most valuable assets during crises are intangibles like how to work together. We knew how to work together.”

One of the clearest examples of this community’s collaboration is its Children’s Cabinet. “Too many of our children lack the support and opportunities they need to be successful in school and life,” stated Hamilton County Mayor Jim Coppinger when the Children’s Cabinet was formed in 2019. Hamilton County Schools serves approximately 45,000 students, about one-third of whom are socioeconomically disadvantaged.² Children and youth living in the county are struggling in several important areas, including kindergarten readiness, 3rd grade reading proficiency, and postsecondary attainment, among others.³

Launching a Children’s Cabinet was a logical next step in order to better coordinate services and resources to support children in the community. Co-chair of the Cabinet and Hamilton

County Schools Superintendent Dr. Bryan Johnson—who is stepping down from his position in August 2021—explained how this initiative got its start:

We had so many organizations and have so many organizations that want to do and are doing phenomenal work. But what you often see is no coherence amongst the organizations, no alignment, [and] redundancy regarding what's taken place. Our whole goal...was to really break down the silos and ensure that as we work together, that we really are thoughtful and intentional and set up systems, processes, and structures that outlive each of our tenures and our individual positions.

The Cabinet comprises leaders of county and city agencies who serve students and other key community organizations like United Way of Greater Chattanooga. The City of Chattanooga committed vital staff to serve on the Cabinet to support the city's students outside of the school day with the shared goal of aligning resources, services, and advocates for student success.

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Chattanooga 2.0 operates as the backbone for the Children's Cabinet that was formed. It facilitates all of the Cabinet's meetings, manages data-sharing, monitoring, and other functions. This model and connection to whole child systems and supports was a new step for the community. “For collective impact efforts, you have to find a balance between setting consistent, cross-sector goals for the community and providing room and deference to strong leaders,” explained Molly. “We have really strong leadership in Chattanooga. We're still trying to create a throughline of priorities that survives changes in leadership.”

Before Covid-19

Before Covid-19, the Cabinet focused on a Student Success Planning pilot and was beginning to see the Cabinet respond to the needs identified through that initiative. “For example, we realized children weren't getting vision care,” Molly shared. “There was work happening to get solutions to provide mobile vision care.” Additionally, the Cabinet had been working on getting the basic structure of the Cabinet, finalizing charter documents, values, and mission statements. “We had approved a family and community engagement framework,” explained Molly. “Family and community representatives would sit at the Cabinet at regular meetings. We want them to have the same level of authority and developed a community advisory council to build capacity.” As the Cabinet continued to solidify, additional questions arose. “People were asking, ‘How is this group different from other collaborative tables? What are our roles? What kind of decisions do you expect us to make? What do you want me to do? And do I really have as much power as you're acting like I do?’”

When Covid-19 Arrived

When Molly showed up to the “fateful Friday” meeting on March 13th, she saw the need for collaborative decision-making and a coordinated—not frantic—response focused on children's most acute needs. “I reached out to the county mayor and superintendent who co-chair the Cabinet,” recounted Molly. “We met that Thursday and have continued to meet weekly since. Covid-19 created that will and a sense of connection around the Cabinet. Operating together in a time of crisis is what sparked that fire.”

As school buildings shuttered for the remainder of the school year, the Cabinet quickly got to work to support continued learning. “We formed data-sharing agreements [with the school district] so the Cabinet could help track down students who had dropped off the radar,” explained Molly about the collaborative effort to find families in need. “There was a massive expansion of summer learning and delivering curriculum aligned to academic and social-emotional learning competencies that the Cabinet sparked.” The pandemic pushed the Cabinet to address an immediate barrier to learning: the digital divide. “We started by standing up free WiFi access points where you can drive in, sit in a car, and do homework,” recalled Molly. “We raised funds to purchase additional Chromebooks and devices.” Mayor Coppinger noted that the community was able to accomplish this through a collaborative effort with EPB (electricity utility), BlueCross BlueShield, the school system, philanthropists, and other nonprofit organizations.

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“It takes a lot of people working together and not looking for credit.” While the Cabinet initially planned on securing three months of internet access to low-income families, they realized they had a chance to deliver a long-term solution. “Our community will provide low-income students free broadband access for ten years,” shared Molly. “We got this window of opportunity opened and just inched it open further and further.”

Sustaining Urgency in a Prolonged Crisis

Regarding carrying out the Cabinet's efforts, Mayor Coppinger remarked that an essential resource was people's willingness to serve. “Not a single organization or individual turned us down when we put this together, even if we didn't know exactly what we were doing.” The pandemic's urgency seemed to make things once impossible, like working with out-of-school providers, securing ten years of internet for families and their students in need, and replacing ACT requirements with GPAs possible. “It's amazing what happens when urgency drives the work,” Molly reflected. As the pandemic moves past the one-year mark, sustaining that urgency is a consistent challenge. “We're talking about sustaining urgency a lot, trying to elevate what's happened, and asking leaders to maintain urgency to ensure the barriers that have been knocked down are not built back up.” This means getting specific on action steps that need to occur in the next 12 to 18 months to address the challenges of Covid-19 and the more profound and broader systemic issues that impede students and their families' success. Molly added, “We need to make sure we don't keep our eyes set on the future we saw before Covid-19.”

An Opportunity to Unlearn

Chattanooga-Hamilton County has numerous nonprofits including churches, the highest per capita rate of nonprofit organizations anywhere in the country. Though there are many generous, philanthropic organizations, a natural territorialism can easily crop up. “As a community, I think folks have had to unlearn the way they think about their work and their organizations,” Molly explained about this, at times, “crowded” community space. “Instead of assuming that what they’ve always done is the best thing, they’ve had to figure out how to adapt and change their operations.” For the Cabinet, this has included learning what it means to build an equity agenda, especially amid widespread racial and social justice protests. “We saw members of the Cabinet stepping up and issuing statements and committing to action in a way we hadn’t seen before, which was a big deal,” Molly shared. She explained that the pandemic helped people see and feel inequality and inequity in a way that used to be conceptual. “Now that people can see them with their own eyes, they believe them, and it’s hard to argue with.” She adds, “This is important for change work, and if we don’t capitalize on it to really solve systemic and structural issues, then it’s a missed opportunity.”

Lessons for Other Collaborative Initiatives

Molly offers three recommendations for other backbone organizations during this time:

1. **YOU NEED A QUARTERBACK.** Even in times of crisis, organizations you’re working with have a specific agenda, a geographic boundary, and limitations around their work. “It’s not their job to think about the broader landscape—that’s my job,” Molly explained. “I’m one of the only people in this community who can consistently transcend competing agendas and help partners ensure the needs of children are always placed at the center. That’s the virtue of being a backbone organization. It’s too much to ask anyone else to do that.”
2. **SUPPORT EACH OTHER THROUGH MISTAKES.** In challenging times like these, mistakes will be made, people will get defensive, and things won’t always go how you hoped. Build interpersonal connections between people and celebrate and lift up leaders to mitigate the impact of these challenges.
3. **BUILD PUBLIC DEMAND.** Children’s Cabinets have to figure out how to build public demand for their work so the public expects it and votes for it, ensuring that the work can withstand leadership transition and attracts the type of leaders you want in your community.

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About the Education Redesign Lab

Founded in 2014 by Paul Reville, former Massachusetts Secretary of Education and Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Education Redesign Lab (EdRedesign) is a university-based action research hub. In the pursuit of equity and social justice, we support the field in building cross-sector, community-wide systems of support and opportunity for children from birth to adulthood.

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Notes

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Quick Facts, Hamilton County, Tennessee,” <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/hamiltoncountytennessee/PST045219>; Tennessee Demographics, “Tennessee Counties by Population,” https://www.tennessee-demographics.com/counties_by_population; Tennessee Demographics, “Tennessee Cities by Population,” https://www.tennessee-demographics.com/cities_by_population.

² TN Department of Education, “Hamilton County,” <https://reportcard.tnedu.gov/districts/330/profile>.

³ Chattanooga 2.0., “Data,” <https://chatt2.org/data/>.