USING METRICS TO SUSTAIN COLLABORATIVE ACTION INITIATIVES FOR CHILDREN

Action Guide

The Challenge

Collaborative action[1] initiatives (CAIs) represent a promising approach for improving a broad array of youth outcomes and other challenges in cities and municipalities. In a seminal 2011 article, Kania and Kramer outlined five key features of successful collaborations: a common agenda; shared metrics; mutually reinforcing activities; continuous communication, and a backbone support organization.[2] Since then, dozens of communities have undertaken collaborative action efforts. In fact, a recent series of studies by researchers at Columbia University identified 182 cross-sector initiatives focused on education and children.[3]

The ultimate goal of any collaborative action initiative designed to improve children's lives is for children and youth to develop into thriving, well-educated, self-sufficient adults. For that reason, almost all CAIs frame their work as encompassing a "cradle-to-career" trajectory and define their long-term objectives in terms of postsecondary attainment (such as "to and through college") or even beyond ("middle class by middle age").[4]

Achieving these long-term goals is challenging, generational work that can take many years to show clear results. Success requires mayors and other collaboration leaders and implementers to address a number of challenges, including differing priorities among collaboration members, lack of information about the impact of interventions, and challenges sustaining momentum for change, to name just a few.

The long time horizon to see impact makes it important to identify other measures of interim progress. Using metrics as a central feature of collaborative action can help drive and sustain the work in a number of ways:

1. *Coordination and cohesion around complex goals*
   Metrics can create a common understanding of goals and help people in different organizations identifying their role in furthering these goals. The metrics embody the understanding of the goals and how to achieve them.

2. *Identifying which efforts are and are not working at different stages*
   A key function of metrics is providing information about the effectiveness of the initiatives as a mechanism for accountability and identifying any needed changes. The metrics help the collaboration determine what progress is being made and what interventions are not showing impact. The metrics support accountability by comparing actual and desired results at each stage of the theory of change.

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[1] We use "collaborative action" rather than "collective impact" throughout to include a broad range of cross-sector approaches.

[2] Kania, & Kramer. (2011). Collective Impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review.* Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

[3] Riehl, C. J., Henig, J. R., Wolff, J. R., & Rebell, M. A. (2019). *Building impact: A closer look at local cross-sector collaborations for education.* New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, Department of Education Policy and Social Analysis.
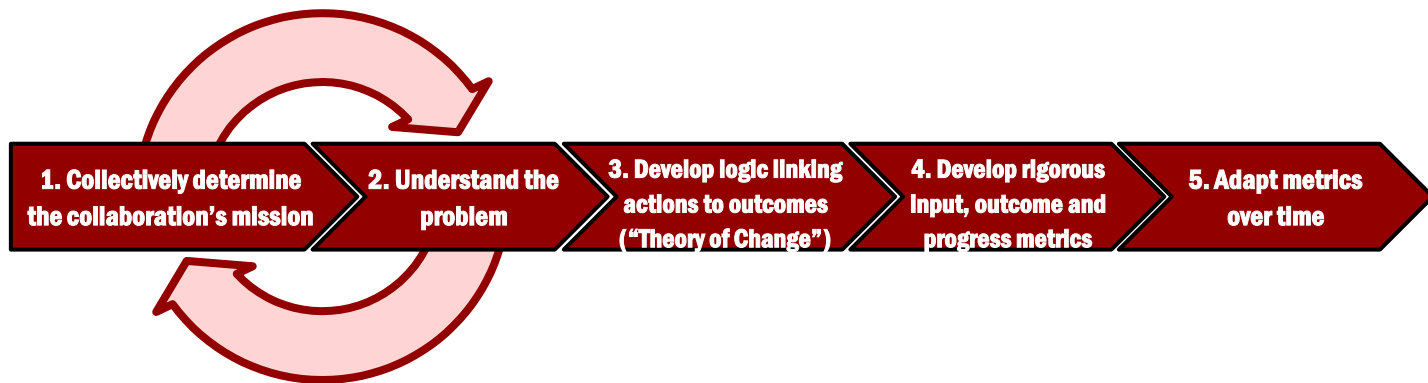
[4] Sawhill, I. V., Winship, S., & Grannis, K. S. (2012). Pathways to the Middle Class: *Brookings Institution Report*, 24.

3. *Building public will for change and new expectations for community norms*
   New systems will only take hold when whole communities understand the importance of children's success to the whole community and change their expectations for the way communities meet children's needs. The metrics allow the collaboration to communicate the intermediate progress on the goals to the public.

4. *Sustaining attention on this work over many years*
   After the initial enthusiasm has faded, collaborations will naturally face upheavals that can divert focus elsewhere: turnover of staff, mayoral elections, competing priorities, or political challenges, particularly if the public does not see clear signs of progress. The metrics help sustain action over the long term by keeping collaboration members engaged, and showing the progress of the work.

Improving shared systems of metrics

A shared system of metrics, developed through a process such as the one below, is an important strategy to generate greater impact and improve the sustainability of collaborative action efforts.

1. Collectively determine the collaboration's mission
2. Understand the problem
3. Develop logic linking actions to outcomes ("Theory of Change")
4. Develop rigorous input, outcome and progress metrics
5. Adapt metrics over time

Collaborative action initiatives need a common understanding of the goals their efforts are trying to achieve and the challenges to achieving these goals in both the short and long term. This process is not easy. Members may disagree on what the goals should be as well as the means of measuring progress towards them. The process is also iterative, with collaborations moving repeatedly between goals and problem definitions. A better understanding of the problems in the community often reveals new goals, sharpens existing goals, or forces collaborative action initiatives to discuss difficult trade-offs between competing goals.

Once CAIs have developed their understanding of problems and goals, they should explicitly state the theory of change that links actions to goals. This logic represents the CAI's current best thinking of what each member of the collaboration should be doing and how these actions contribute to their goals.

Collaborative action initiatives can then develop a meaningful set of metrics by asking, "How do we know?" at each link in the logic chain. The logic articulated in these intermediary steps can be assessed through metrics that measure interim goals along the way to the long-term ones. Rather than waiting 15 years between an early childhood intervention and graduation to see the effect of the collaborative action, interim metrics allow for more rapid adjustment by reviewing and monitoring the intermediary steps. This also allows CAIs to adapt over time, either by revising their theory of change or changing the interventions they undertake.

Guidance on Metrics Selection

Drawing from research and our experience working with collaborative action initiatives, we identify five key criteria for CAI leaders to use when choosing metrics that can meet the range of purposes described above: public resonance, evidence base, purposeful link to goals, feasibility, and achievable impact. These criteria synthesize elements of other frameworks for identifying goals and metrics, notably those of the Results-Based Accountability approach and the widely known SMART
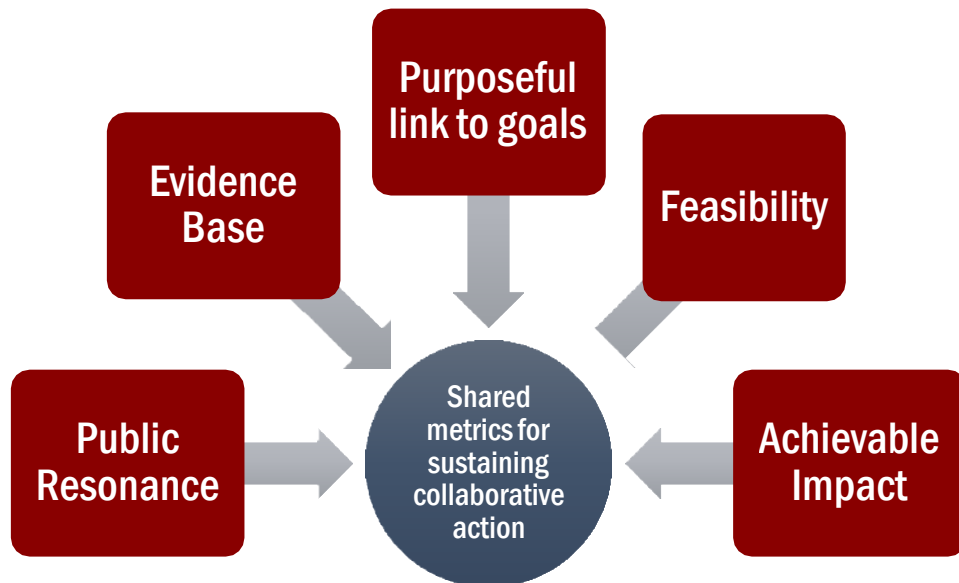
(specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely) goals. Our criteria focus on elements that will support the effort's sustainability as well as those that evidence suggests will have a meaningful impact on long-term goals for children. Each of these represents an important element for ensuring the usefulness of measures as a tool for driving and communicating progress on cross-sector efforts to improve outcomes for children. For all five categories, local context matters and should be an important factor for consideration.

Evidence base reflects the strength of the research base supporting the value of a given metric for indicating progress towards high-leverage, long-term goals for children. In some cases, though, a CAI may find there is promising but inconclusive evidence or none at all for an innovative initiative. When possible, CAIs should build evaluation into their work

Public resonance addresses the importance of using metrics that are relevant to the public and can enable mayors and other leaders to communicate progress. While this is in one sense a political imperative – mayors and other elected officials need to run for re-election on their records of achievement – it also reflects a need to engage with the public on a shared understanding of what matters. Choosing metrics with public resonance helps galvanize and sustain community interest in shared goals.

Feasibility represents how easily data can be collected. Feasibility may vary based on whether the measure requires new data collection efforts or relies on existing data, the resources and infrastructure needed for any new data collection, and whether additional data collection would prompt privacy or political concerns.

Achievable impact identifies metrics that can be meaningfully changed within a two- to five-year timeline. This report is focused on goals that cities can target, either as end-goals or as meaningful indicators of progress toward those longer-term goals.

Purposeful link to goals means that each metric should be purposefully chosen and linked to one or more of the shared collaboration goals through a clear chain of logic. Thus, all CAI members can make meaning of changes in this metric, and how it can explain or be explained by changes in other metrics. Ideally, this logic is made explicit in a theory of change. Without this criterion, collaborative action initiatives risk choosing easy-to-measure metrics that ultimately do not help the collaboration achieve its shared goals.

Areas of Focus

To identify the range of metrics currently in use, we conducted a scan of national organizations focused on providing comprehensive supports to children – such as *Strive Together, Communities in Schools, Say Yes, and Promise Neighborhoods* – as well as major cities with cross-sector initiatives that focus exclusively on or include children. Unsurprisingly, academic metrics such as kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading, and high school graduation were the most common measures. Some cities also included a range of health measures, including healthy birth-weight, childhood obesity and asthma, teen pregnancy, and prevalence of drug use. A few identified community-level metrics, such as the availability of outdoor recreation opportunities or primary-care doctors.

Most of the national organizations using place-based, comprehensive approaches to improving children's outcomes have identified a "cradle-to-career" set of categories that span children's lives, starting with early childhood, moving through the school levels, and ending with the transition to or completion of post-secondary degrees or credentials. This framing recognizes the importance of supporting children through every stage of development rather than taking a single-focus approach that leaves holes in supporting children during key developmental stages.

Even cities that take a broad, comprehensive lens, though, define their metrics in a range of ways that often include both point-in-time measures (kindergarten readiness, high school graduation) and measures that cross ages (chronic absenteeism, social-emotional wellbeing). Some of these goals fall along this age-based trajectory, such as kindergarten readiness or successfully transitioning to college or career training, while some reflect specific problems or areas of focus that span children's lives.

The most common categories include:

- Kindergarten readiness
- College and career readiness
- Chronic absenteeism
- Social-emotional wellbeing
- Physical health and wellbeing
- Community engagement

Timeline for Seeing Change

Broadly speaking, there are three types of metrics that are useful for collaborative action: input metrics, intermediate outcome metrics, and long-term outcome metrics. In most collaborative action, the inputs (e.g., increased access to programs) and long-term outcomes (e.g., graduation rates) are better defined than the intermediate metrics. Recognizing the importance of intermediate metrics for the goals discussed above, this guide focuses primarily on these intermediate metrics.

We expect to see different types of effects at different timeframes after implementing an intervention or policy. Given the time needed to decide on goals and specific actions as well as to put them in place, we expect to be able to detect meaningful changes in organizational behavior or availability in programming within a two- to three-year timeframe. For example, an intervention to increase kindergarten readiness by providing increased high-quality child-care will involve efforts to increase attendance, remove barriers to entry, and baseline measurements. Perhaps two years after a policy is in place, we might see meaningful changes in attendance. However, the top-level increases in aggregate kindergarten readiness levels likely will not appear until several years later.

Communicating Metrics with the Public

Metrics are an important public communication tool that can promote community engagement and generate support for the initiative. The metrics must resonate with the community as meaningful and provide readily accessible information to document the progress of the collective action initiative.
The following table provides some examples of specific indicators that can inform a dialogue with the public. This is not an exhaustive list but is intended to provide some guidance on developing effective communication about metrics.

Indicator	Sample usage
Number/percentage of students ready for kindergarten	*...in our city, twice as many students from low-income neighborhoods are ready for kindergarten this year than four years ago*
Percentage of children enrolled in high quality pre-K	*...we've expanded access to high quality childcare and increased the percent of children attending a high-quality pre-K from 50% to 75%*
Physical health	*...we found that 10% of elementary had some kind of chronic health condition. Over four years, we've cut that number in half.*

Families with access to prenatal and primary health care	*… now 80% of expecting mothers have at least two prenatal visits during their third trimester, and 60% have access to a primary care doctor for their children*
Chronic absenteeism	*The rates of students missing more than 10 days of school at middle and high schools have improved by an average of 20% since last year.*
Suspension rates	*The high school reduced suspensions by 20% after two year of SEL program implementation.*
Course failures in 9th grade	*The percent of 9th graders who failed one or more core classes was 20% lower last year than two years ago, which matters because failing classes is a strong predictor of dropping out*
High school graduation	*We have increased our high school graduation rate from 80% to 87% over the past three years, with gains in all subgroups of students.*
College persistence	*… four in five students from our city who enroll in college successfully complete their critical first year.*

Conclusion

Metrics, when used well, can serve as a key factor in motivating, sustaining, and improving cross-sector collaboration, but relatively few currently take advantage of this potential. In an upcoming study, we intend to illustrate examples of CAIs that are using metrics effectively as an integral part of their work.