

# BUILDING CITY-WIDE SYSTEMS OF OPPORTUNITY FOR CHILDREN:



## INITIAL LESSONS FROM THE BY ALL MEANS CONSORTIUM

### Creating The Consortium

Recognizing the need for a new children’s opportunity agenda, Paul Reville founded the Education Redesign Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 2014. The Lab’s goal is to create systemic, silo-breaking approaches to addressing the comprehensive needs of children, especially those living in poverty, by developing personalized systems of support and opportunity both within and outside of school. The core ideas underpinning the Lab’s work are that schools alone cannot address all the challenges that impede children’s success, and that it will take a coordinated, system-wide approach to make real change.

In February of 2016, the Lab launched the [By All Means Initiative](#) (BAM) to test and refine its theory that meeting the complex array of children’s needs and developing their interests and talents requires a system-wide

approach. Six small- to mid-sized cities joined the initiative to work in partnership with the Lab over a two-and-a-half-year period: Louisville, Kentucky; Oakland, California; Providence, Rhode Island; and Salem, Somerville, and Newton in Massachusetts. The goal was for the cities to begin designing and implementing new, personalized systems for serving children while the Lab supported and documented this process in order to identify enablers of and barriers to progress that could help other cities take on this work.

The Lab chose to work with cities as the unit of change because they are increasingly emerging as sites of innovation and leadership on issues that are struggling to gain traction nationally. Cities also represent relatively discrete systems that already provide a number of direct services to children.

### Core Commitments and Supports

Each city agreed to participate in the following required elements of BAM’s model:

#### CITY-WIDE CHILDREN’S CABINET

Children’s Cabinets are the governance structure for each city’s BAM work. These cabinets create a high-level mechanism to coordinate services for children across city and non-governmental organizations. Each city in the consortium has formed a cabinet that is chaired by the mayor, is co-chaired by the superintendent or another city leader, and includes representation from health and social services and other government and community organizations.

#### CONSULTANT

To ensure the work of the cabinet moves forward

between cabinet meetings and has a designated facilitator, the Lab supports a part-time consultant in each city.

#### TWICE-YEARLY CONVENINGS

To further support the cities’ work, the Lab sponsors a semi-annual series of convenings at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Starting with the first convening in May 2016, city teams have come together with the Lab staff and outside experts as a way to deepen and accelerate the work and to build opportunities for cross-city sharing of information and resources. Each convening has included a mix of presentations and panels by top education and policy experts, “team time” for city teams to work together, and opportunities for cross-city sharing of progress.

## DOCUMENTATION AND EVALUATION

Cities agreed to participate in an ongoing documentation and evaluation process, which serves multiple purposes: to share lessons with a broader audience; to assist cities in tracking their progress on a range of process, opportunity, and outcome measures; and to inform the Lab's iterative approach to supporting the cities in this work.

## Initial Findings

The following are initial findings of the enabling factors that have been important in determining how the work has unfolded and some of the challenges cities have faced in their efforts to create new systems. The overview and city-specific summaries that accompany this summary provide greater detail on how BAM has evolved in each city.

### MAYORAL LEADERSHIP ENABLES HIGH-LEVEL COLLABORATIVE ACTION

Putting mayors at the forefront of BAM marked a notable change from many collective impact efforts. The Lab's goal was to ensure that this would be a collaborative, city-wide effort with the political clout that comes from mayoral involvement. The experiences of the BAM cities confirm the value of leading with mayors: cabinet members pointed to the mayors as the most crucial factor signaling BAM's high priority and a key draw in bringing cabinet members and executives to the table. Mayors also have a unique platform to shine a spotlight on the joint moral and economic imperatives of ensuring the success of the children in their cities.

There are also risks to linking collective action efforts so closely to mayors. If a mayor leaves, it may be difficult to sustain momentum under the new leadership. For this reason, it is important for the entire cabinet to be deeply engaged in and committed to the effort.

### CABINET MEMBERS NEED THE DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY TO ENACT CHANGE

Setting up a Children's Cabinet and calling it to meet is—with mayoral leadership—relatively straightforward; creating a cabinet with the right members and a clear plan that enables cross-agency work is much harder. An important feature of successful cabinets is the decision-making authority necessary to enact real change. In all but one city, the mayor and superintendent attended nearly every meeting, which signaled to their staff and other cabinet members that the work was

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

The Lab has provided a range of additional supports tailored to the needs of each city that has included Reville and others' participation in key city events, helping cities identify and connect with program partners and potential funders, and assistance with data use and outcome measures.

a priority and catalyzed action; their absence affected the level of discussion at the meetings.

Successful cabinets also saw serendipitous funding opportunities arise when representatives from local businesses or foundations participated as cabinet members. Additionally, cabinets with the most productive meetings established clearly defined, action-oriented agendas, as well as processes for capturing and sharing updates and action items from each meeting.

### CITIES MUST CREATE DEDICATED INTERNAL CAPACITY

The part-time consultants hired by the Lab are tasked with moving the work forward and providing process support to the city teams, but this logistical and motivational work cannot depend on them alone. Since cabinets rely heavily on executive leadership, it is important for supporting staff to be deeply embedded in the work as well. Otherwise, these high-level leaders would not have the capacity to coordinate the logistics of day-to-day systems change.

In addition to having key support staff participate in the logistics and moving the work forward, broader staff involvement is beneficial to generating a truly collective approach. This involvement fosters relationships between agencies and creates a network of activity that is harder to disrupt when there is a leadership change or an unexpected obstacle.

## SEVERAL FACTORS HELP SUSTAIN MOMENTUM THROUGH LEADERSHIP TURNOVER

Given the high rates of turnover among urban superintendents and mayors, changes in leadership are inevitable. There is no denying that this can pose serious challenges to the momentum and sustainability of a leadership-initiated collective impact model, and By All Means has not been immune to this phenomenon. Within 15 months of the launch of BAM, three key leaders left or announced plans to leave their positions.

While it is too early to assess the long-term persistence of BAM in any city, the factors interviewees identified as most central to its continuation through leadership changes at the district are the continued support of the mayor, the continuity of key staff, the cross-agency relationships developed among staff, the existence of tangible plans to carry out the work, and the strength of broad-based support in the cabinet and the community.

## STRONG CITY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS ARE A PRIMARY PREDICTOR OF PROGRESS

Cities with strong partnerships between the mayor and superintendent were, not surprisingly, able to move forward more quickly to implement child-facing initiatives. There is a complex array of governance relationships between mayors, school superintendents, and school boards across the country, and the cities in the consortium reflect this range. In a number of the cities, the mayor has a role in selecting the superintendent. In one city, for example, the mayor chairs the school committee, which then selects the superintendent. In another city, the mayor appoints all members of the school committee. At the other end of the spectrum, two of the cohort's mayors have no direct influence over the selection of the superintendent.

## CHILDREN'S CABINETS FACILITATE NEW WORKING PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships and relationships with other city agencies and outside organizations are also crucial to this work. As cabinet members developed relationships with each other, unanticipated partnerships emerged. Partnerships have also emerged with organizations not present on the cabinet. From fully-developed interventions that come with institutional infrastructure to funding support to thought partnership, ongoing connections with outside

organizations expand the scope of what cities are able to accomplish. Several cities, for example, partnered with nonprofit organizations that provide out-of-school programming or in-school integrated student supports that allowed them to expand the services available to children without having to build the capacity internally.

## EXTERNAL CONSULTANTS SERVE A KEY ROLE AS "HONEST BROKERS" AND FACILITATORS

The role of the BAM-sponsored consultants in each city is to facilitate the work of the cabinets, both during and between meetings, and to ensure that the work continues to move forward. Consultants are also the primary point of contact between the cities and the Lab, facilitating a range of tasks that includes overseeing the adoption of [Measures of Success](#) indicators, developing city presentations for the convenings, and reviewing city-specific materials produced by the Lab.

## THE CONVENINGS PROVIDE SUPPORT AND PLANNING TIME

The convenings have proven essential to the work of the consortium: all cities have highlighted the value of having focused, extended team time away from their cities as an important contributor to their progress. Of the many benefits articulated by participants, the most common related to the power of bringing everybody together in a neutral location, which facilitated a high level of focus on the work and relationship-building among the cabinet members; the value of opportunities to learn from other cities and from national experts on topics relevant to their cabinet work; and the importance of the friendly "pressure" and natural accountability that emerges when convening with other cities, since cabinets are eager to demonstrate progress and, simultaneously, do not want to feel as if they've fallen behind their peers.

## PROGRESS SHOULD BE MEASURED FOR PROCESSES AS WELL AS OUTCOMES

The Lab developed a Measures of Success framework through an iterative process that acknowledged the three phases of the work in each city:

1. Creating cross-agency governance structures through the cabinets;

2. Providing increased programming and services to children; and
3. Improving outcomes for children.

The [framework](#), derived from collective action approaches, serves several functions: it tells a story about the systems-level work to better serve children and youth across multiple initiatives, it provides accessible information that can be used to inform cabinet-level conversations and discussions with potential partners and funders, and it can trigger conversations and collaborative action to improve capacity to use data for effective decision-making.

It contains three process-focused categories that can be measured qualitatively through evidence, and two outcome-focused categories that can be measured quantitatively through data.

## Conclusion

The first 18 months of the By All Means initiative have demonstrated both the power of a comprehensive agenda to support children and the challenges in implementing new systems to further this agenda. Leadership is essential for the work to be sustainable long term, but so are structural supports, staffing capacity, and broad stakeholder buy-in. As much as anything else, persistence matters: our strongest cities proceeded with the work amidst changes in leadership, cabinet membership, focus areas, structures, and processes. They forged innovative new relationships and connections while overcoming complex political histories and gaps in data.

As the Lab anticipated, By All Means has progressed at different rates in different cities for a variety of reasons. For example, the size of the larger cities presented challenges—more complex governance structures, greater needs for funding, more children to serve—but also advantages, such as more robust staffing and more community partners. In these larger cities, the cabinets needed to strategically align BAM with the complex landscape of existing initiatives, in a way that generated coherence and broad buy-in, to ensure the sustainability and success of the work.

### CITIES TAKE MULTIPLE APPROACHES TO FUNDING

All of BAM's cities have made investments in developing a comprehensive opportunity agenda for children, and the cabinets have influenced those investments in a number of locales. In many cases, city funding has been met with matching funds from the school district. Several of the cohort's cabinets have found surprising success in receiving funding from cabinet member's organizations, which is likely a result of the collective buy-in of the group: there is no need for a pitch or grant proposal when the funder is equally invested in seeing the work come to fruition.

Several of the cohort's cities have been particularly effective in obtaining outside funding from grant-making organizations to finance aspects of their work.

The accompanying [Keys to Success](#) are distilled from the Lab's observations of the first 18 months of this initiative. To learn more about the experiences of each city, visit the individual case studies. As the work continues to unfold and cities forge ahead on implementing new and innovative ways of working across traditional sectors, the Lab will be looking for the barriers to and enablers for sustaining the work on behalf of children after this initial startup phase.

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