

**Achieving Collective Impact for Opportunity
Youth**

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Achieving Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth

Emerging lessons on using data and resources to improve the prospects of young people.

BY LILI ALLEN, MONIQUE MILES, & ADRIA STEINBERG

As a member of the Leadership Council of the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, Jamiel Alexander sits beside leaders from national and regional philanthropies. He offers insights into the assets and challenges of young people who—like himself just a few years ago—find themselves outside any opportunity system in their community. As a young man growing up in Philadelphia, Alexander confronted a fragmented public education system, street violence, and the financial obstacles associated with a single-parent home. After dropping out of high school, he had a series of run-ins with the law and was remanded to the juvenile justice system, which required him to complete community service. This path led Alexander to the local Crispus Attucks YouthBuild program in York, Pa., which gave him the opportunity to earn a high school diploma while gaining transferrable employment skills. Today, in addition to his duties for the Aspen Institute, Alexander serves as president of the National Council of Young Leaders and holds a full-time job as an education program manager for YouthBuild USA.

Debates continue over the pace and strength of recovery of the American economy, but one fact remains clear: A large number of young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are being left behind. Whether they graduated from high school or left without diplomas, many low-income young people suffer from inadequate educations that leave them underprepared for postsecondary education or the workplace. Surveys tell us that these young people, like others their age, strongly desire good jobs and understand the need for skills and credentials. Yet unlike their more privileged and affluent peers, they see few obvious paths forward.

Young people such as Alexander have traditionally been labeled “disconnected youth,” but the reality is more complex.

Many of them *are* “connected”—to friends, neighborhoods, churches, families, and local community-based organizations. But the institutions, organizations, and public systems that could help them achieve higher levels of education, training, and jobs are themselves disconnected from one another. Recognizing this reality, many advocates have abandoned the term “disconnected youth.” Instead, we favor “opportunity youth,” a phrase that calls attention to the opportunities these young people seek and that should be opened up for them.

The Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF), a principal initiative of the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions, focuses on this group of young people. The OYIF, which emerged from the work of the White House Council for Community Solutions, seeks to demonstrate how a collective impact approach can improve the options and lifetime outcomes of opportunity youth. Bringing together a variety of sectors and systems is especially appropriate for opportunity youth, because, by definition, no one set of institutions currently takes responsibility for their progress and no publicly available database tracks that progress.

Through a collective impact approach, the OYIF helps communities harness local civic capacity to drive long-term sustainable change. The initiative has three goals: to reconnect opportunity youth to education and employment at higher rates; to catalyze the adoption of effective approaches in education and career attainment, leading to family-sustaining careers; and to promote local, state, and national policy changes to increase the replication and scaling up of these approaches.

Although the initiative remains in its early stages, important stories have already emerged about the strategies these communities are using to tackle two of the principal

challenges they face—gathering the data they need to inform their work and strengthen public will, and securing financial support to sustain the on-ramps and pathways to opportunity. We hope that these lessons will inspire similar collective impact efforts on behalf of opportunity youth and offer starting points to collective impact initiatives for other vulnerable populations, such as English language learners, who also suffer from systemic disconnects that influence their progress.

BRING TOGETHER DATA FROM MULTIPLE SOURCES

Gathering data across multiple public systems is a key to achieving collective impact for opportunity youth. Because these young people are invisible in most data systems, one of the primary challenges is to understand who they are and how they progress toward adulthood according to such indicators as educational attainment and work readiness. Unlike in parts of Europe, where policymakers track 16- to 24-year-olds who are not engaged in education, employment, or training to assess their progress toward education credentials and careers, no single system in the United States keeps track of this population.

Rather than create new costly and labor-intensive data systems, OYIF sites seek to build on existing public data systems, a task that involves working with multiple sources. As these youths look to reconnect with education and employment, they often move in and out of public systems such as community colleges, adult education programs, and, if they face specific challenges, child welfare programs, homeless services, and the justice system. Through data agreements with these systems, collaborative sites can help partners and the community at large better understand the scope and dimensions of this population group.

For example, the Baltimore City Opportunity Youth Collaborative started with an analysis of US Census data of the opportunity youth population by sex, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, employment status, custodial parenting, and citizenship. The

partners complemented those data with a survey that asked programs serving opportunity youth to estimate how many fell into various subpopulations (such as court-involved, foster care, or homeless). The Baltimore project then used its partners' relationships to request data from the leaders of systems that serve relevant subpopulations, particularly the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services and the Baltimore City Department of Social Services. In addition, Baltimore has contracted with the US Census Bureau to conduct a custom tabulation of the number of opportunity youths per census tract.

USE DATA TO DETERMINE AREAS OF FOCUS, TRACK PROGRESS, AND BUILD PUBLIC WILL

The OYIF communities understand the importance of data for helping partners understand the problem and measure progress toward solutions, as well as promoting solutions that work and building public will. The Boston collaborative, for example, has used its unusually rich set of data partners to gain a deeper understanding of the older population of opportunity youth (20 to 24 years old),

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including identifying their education and employment status and tracking how they move through programs and services.¹ Collaborative partners are following their progress through postsecondary education, compiling information on why they drop out, what helps them return to school, and what specific programs and supports could help them obtain credentials. This robust data partnership will potentially yield useful information about this older population for other efforts across the country.

Communities also use data to determine where to focus their initial pathway development efforts. For example, the San Diego Youth Opportunity Pathways collaborative wanted to understand which neighborhoods had high concentrations of opportunity youth. Using aligned US Census tract data and sources such as data from the San Diego Association of Governments and the Health and Human Services Agency, the collaborative has created a "heat map" to display the

concentration of various distress factors, including youth unemployment, teen births, probation, foster care, and dropout rates. These heat maps, as well as information about the assets of each neighborhood, such as the level of existing programming, help partners determine which neighborhoods should be focused on first.

BRAID FUNDING ACROSS PUBLIC SYSTEMS

As collective impact initiatives in the United States have progressed, new ways of financing efforts to create better postsecondary and career outcomes for opportunity youth have emerged. A number of communities have developed new financing strategies by drawing on school district funding, workforce development funds, and city agencies such as health and human services, as well as county governments, state governments, and higher education.

As communities broaden their funding sources, they are also building on lessons about creating "reengagement centers" designed to recruit opportunity youths who have dropped out or fallen significantly off track and help them find ways to earn a high school credential. At the launch of the OYIF, communities such as Boston, Chicago, Denver, and Philadelphia had opened

centers using a range of funding streams. Often, advocates had secured anchor funding from a school district after successfully arguing that the district would receive state compensation for returning dropouts.

Los Angeles's YouthSource Centers illustrate how a collective impact effort can use a multi-funder approach to sustain reengagement centers. These centers are funded by the mayor and city council of Los Angeles through the Los Angeles Economic and Workforce Development Department (EWDD) and the City of Los Angeles Workforce Investment Board (WIB), as well as the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Over the course of two years, these three agencies joined forces to study dropout recovery efforts around the country and secure support for an ambitious and integrated approach for Los Angeles. Their efforts led to a competitive procurement process, starting in 2012, for a system of 13 YouthSource Centers that co-locate LAUSD Pupil Services and

attendance counselors and serve as the entry point for reengaged youths to secondary and postsecondary education. The centers also offer a variety of Workforce Investment Act programs, including academic enrichment, career exploration, and vocational training. A US Department of Labor Workforce Innovations Fund grant supports the addition of three more YouthSource sites.

LEVERAGE PRIVATE INVESTMENT

Collective impact offers an opportunity to pilot a "dual customer" approach focused both on improving the life outcomes of opportunity youths and meeting workforce needs in the community. A number of the OYIF communities see this as an important financing strategy and have begun the hard work of bringing employers to the table.

In New Orleans, Tulane University's Cowen Institute—a core partner in the OYIF initiative—is spearheading two efforts to engage employers in providing work-based learning and employment opportunities for opportunity youth. The institute is piloting a partnership between Tulane and Delgado Community College; Tulane will offer campus-based employment in technical trades and technology to students in Delgado's Accelerating Opportunity pathways, which offer short-term certificates in high-growth career fields. For Tulane, this is a win/win solution. The university gets new employees who have already learned technical skills, and the Cowen Institute works with a broader set of employers to provide career coaching to students while they work at Tulane to ensure that they chart a smart career path. Tulane also plans to launch a "hub" to broker work-based learning and employment opportunities for opportunity youth more broadly.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES MOVING FORWARD

Efforts to create solutions to help opportunity youth have long suffered from a shortage of resources. Programming efforts have been effective yet small and scattered, and community organizing has been strong but episodic. As a result, most communities have not been able to develop the system connections, or the financing that relies on such connections, to support pathways for opportunity youth. The OYIF, however, uses a collective impact approach to garner new public and private funding. Our potential reach has expanded

enormously through the recent competition for the next round of the Corporation for National and Community Service's Social Innovation Fund (SIF). This fund offers multi-year federal grants, with a one-to-one private match at both the national and local levels, to implement and evaluate new solutions to pressing social problems. Significantly, the current round of funding prioritizes applications that use a collective impact approach to build pathways for opportunity youth.

In addition, in January 2014 Congress authorized the establishment of up to ten Performance Partnership pilots. This action will provide unprecedented administrative flexibility to states, local communities, and Native American tribes to work together to remove the barriers that opportunity youths face. Participating localities will solicit proposals from community-based cross-system partnerships aimed at blending competitive and formula-grant funding from federal agencies, including the Corporation for National and Community Service, Department of Labor, Department of Education, and Department of Health and Human Services. Flexibility will be granted to high-performing localities that demonstrate innovative cross-sector solutions to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. These pilots demonstrate an unprecedented commitment by the federal government to support collective impact. Depending on the cross-agency data-driven outcomes the pilots seek, the model may be extended to other federal agencies, potentially extending the benefits of collective impact to other seemingly intractable issue areas.

Going forward, the OYIF will continue to deepen the learning community among sites as new strategic questions and new answers emerge. Disseminating these lessons is vitally important not just to these sites, but to any community trying to tackle the reconnection issues that face opportunity youth, and even more broadly, to any community adopting a collective impact approach to solve other pressing social problems. Ultimately, the OYIF seeks to share a host of lessons about implementing a collective impact framework to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable populations. ●

NOTE

1 Boston data partners include the Center for Labor Market Studies, the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, the Boston Private Industry Council, Success Boston, the Boston Public Schools, and the Boston Indicators Project.

Making Public Policy Collective Impact Friendly

Government policies too often impede, rather than enhance, collaborative efforts.

BY THADDEUS FERBER & ERIN WHITE

Cross-sector partnerships across the country are working hard to achieve collective impact. Although public policymakers often share the goals of these partnerships, federal, state, and local policies too often impede rather than enhance the conditions necessary to operate collectively. Worse, some public policies explicitly prohibit the very things that collaborative partnerships need to succeed. Rigid funding models, a narrow focus on annual reporting, silos within and between agencies administering programs and funds, and inaccessible or unaligned data sets all create obstacles to achieving collective results.

One of the reasons this problem exists is that the structure of government often works against collective solutions. Policymakers typically operate within isolated sub-committees, departments, and agencies that result in loyalty to a specific issue and funding stream. But not all problems lend themselves to a narrow, targeted response. Many are better addressed through simultaneous action by more than one office. In these cases, siloed governmental structures and processes are counterproductive. Moreover, policymakers and partnerships often lack clear information about what types of collaborative actions are even allowed.

It comes as little surprise that when governmental culture and auditing practices inhibit risk-taking, public policies that promote collective impact are few and far between. Nonetheless, some current policies, governmental structures, and processes do help partnerships achieve collective impact. (See “What Do We Mean by “Public Policies”?” on right.)

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Some public policies explicitly allow and incentivize partnerships to create each of the five conditions necessary to achieve collective impact. (See “Public Policies That Encourage

Collective Impact” on page 23.) These public policies are found in issues as diverse as youth development, economic revitalization, and health, as shown by the following three examples.

Performance Partnership Pilots, managed collaboratively by several federal departments, provide selected communities with needed flexibility to use existing federal funds to create a coordinated approach to disconnected youth (low-income young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school and not employed).¹ Providing the variety of services they need—including education, job training, health care, childcare, food assistance, and housing—through multiple independent programs proves inefficient and ineffective. The Performance Partnership Pilots will allow communities to bring these disparate programs together to create a more unified solution. In return, each partnership must use a rigorous accountability system to monitor their results and correct course as needed.

The Working Cities Challenge, funded by the US Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, incentivizes collaborative leadership to promote economic revitalization in small cities in Massachusetts.² It grew from a shared vision of success among leaders from private, philanthropic, nonprofit, and government sectors to develop a new model for investment. Rather than finance single projects,

What Do We Mean by “Public Policies”?

- A piece of legislation at any level
- Guidelines in procurement such as RFPs
- Program requirements
- Regulations that govern programs
- Cross-agency initiatives
- Mayoral or gubernatorial initiatives