We only have to consider some of the nation’s greatest achievements to appreciate what’s possible when we coordinate efforts rationally. At its peak, for example, the Apollo program, which put a man on the moon, involved 400,000 people and 20,000 companies and academic organizations. The Manhattan Project, which produced the first atomic bomb, coordinated the work of 130,000 scientists, engineers and others. The Los Angeles Olympic Games were successful because of unprecedented cooperation among civic groups, government agencies and businesses.

This week, I’m focusing on a new strategy for addressing large-scale social problems that has been dubbed “collective impact.” The idea is to create a network that links numerous organizations — including those in government, civil society and the business sector — and helps them to systematically align and coordinate their efforts around a clearly defined goal, like improving education, combating childhood obesity, or cleaning up a river. It may strike some readers as obvious, but it represents a departure from business as usual — and it strikes me as one of the most important experiments occurring in the social sector today.

One of the leading examples of collective impact is the Strive Together partnership, which focuses on helping young people in Cincinnati and two neighboring cities in Kentucky achieve success from “cradle to career.” The partners include early childhood educators, school superintendents, college presidents, business leaders, foundation directors and a range of civil society executives. They came together in 2006 after a report noted that Ohio and Kentucky were lagging behind other states in college attainment rates. Community leaders were concerned about remaining competitive in a global economy.

The first meetings focused on boosting college readiness, but the focus soon expanded. Robert Reifsnyder, the president of the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, recalled: “Someone said, ‘We’re focusing on the ninth grade, but these problems really start in middle school. Someone else said, ‘Truth be told, it starts in grade school.’ Someone else said, ‘Listen folks if we don’t get started by kindergarten, the battle’s half over.’ And finally we said, ‘This is a pre-school issue — it’s about kindergarten readiness.’ ” That set the tone for an effort that focused on the full education continuum.

Since the launch of the network, the partners have reported gains in several areas on Strive’s annual “report cards” (pdf). Among students in the Cincinnati Public Schools, for
example, over the past three years, kindergarten readiness has jumped 9 percent; fourth grade reading and math have increased 7 percent and 14 percent, respectively; and the high school graduation rate is up 11 percent. At the University of Cincinnati graduation rates for students from local urban high schools jumped by 7 percent; at Northern Kentucky University, by 10 percent.

What distinguishes collective impact from run-of-the-mill collaboration is the quality of the partnership and the nature of the problem being addressed. Mark Kramer and John Kania, managing directors of a nonprofit consulting organization called FSG, which coined the term “collective impact,” identified five conditions for “collective success” in a recent essay in the Stanford Social Innovation Review. Above all, they say, partners must come together and agree not just on common goals, but shared ways to measure success towards those goals. They must communicate on a regular basis. And there must be a “backbone” organization that is focused full-time on managing the partnership.

In Strive’s case, high levels of interaction and data-sharing among network partners at the chief executive level, as well as common agreement on goals, have contributed to the results. Once people come together and share information, they can pull back and look at how the system functions at a whole — and they can allocate their efforts rationally and effectively. Strive has used this focus on data to help its partners bring educational improvements in every level of education, from early childhood, onward.

Strive partners noticed things like the fact that in some high schools there were multiple college access programs, while others had none. Looking at the data, they saw patterns. For example, two key factors in boosting college enrollment rates are making sure that students receive one-on-one counseling and complete financial aid forms. College campus tours are less important. Arts programs are most effective at boosting reading and math proficiency when trained instructors carefully align their lessons with regular classroom content. Often, these simple linkages fail to happen.

But it wasn’t just gathering data that worked for the Strive network. The difference has been the ability of partners to use that information to address individual student needs in a timely fashion.

The Cincinnati Public Schools, which has made gains with an ambitious turnaround program among its 16 lowest performing elementary schools, established “data war rooms” in each school. Teachers have meetings every two weeks, where they closely monitor students’ progress — looking at academic performance, behavioral issues, absenteeism and lateness as well as special services each child is receiving. Through the network, they can easily connect high-risk students with external resources like mentoring or tutoring. Moreover, they can track which programs make a difference — and why — and then share that information with everybody else. The result is that the network can engage in continuous learning based on evidence.
This is a powerful cultural shift, notes Jeff Edmondson, who led the Strive partnership for years and now is spreading the framework nationally. “In education, data has traditionally been used for punitive purposes, not for improvement,” he explained. In fact, he says it is the relentless focus on data that, more than anything, has been the key to the partnership’s success.

“The key to making a partnership work is setting a common vision and finding a common language. You can’t let people get focused on ideological or political issues,” says Edmondson. “You need a common language to bring people together and that language is the data.”

The social sector has 1.4 million nonprofit organizations, most of which work independently, and tens of thousands of government agencies which are notoriously inward-looking. When it comes to solving social problems, society often behaves like a drowning man whose arms and legs thrash about wildly in the water. We expend a great deal of energy, but because we don’t work together efficiently, we don’t necessarily move forward. That’s why it’s encouraging today that in spite of the difficulties, collective impact efforts are underway in several U.S. cities — and some are showing real promise.

On Friday, I’ll talk about some other examples, as well as the implications for funders and governments and others interested in pursuing this idea. In the meantime, if you have your own example of collective impact to share, please write in.

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David Bornstein is the author of “*How to Change the World,*” which has been published in 20 languages, and “*The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank,*” and is co-author of “*Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know.*” He is the founder of dowser.org, a media site that reports on social innovation.