

# Collective Impact vs. Collaboration: Do You Know the Differences?

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Exponent Philanthropy thanks the Annie E. Casey Foundation for partnering to deliver a 3-part “Improving Outcomes for Children & Families” webinar series. This post is based on one part of the series: Collective Impact: B’More for Healthy Babies Case Study. Exponent Philanthropy members may access the 90-minute webinar recording >>

Collaboration is a common strategy to solve social problems, but collective impact-aligning diverse stakeholders around shared outcomes—may be less familiar. And the two are not one and the same.

“There are a lot of folks out there talking about collective impact, and it is somewhat getting watered down as a result...replacing the word collaboration,” according to Jeff Edmondson, founder and executive director of StriveTogether, which helps communities identify and scale what works in education.

What distinguishes collective impact from collaboration? Jeff draws these distinctions:

- **Programs vs. outcomes**—Rather than organizing around programs or initiatives, collective impact organizes stakeholders around shared outcomes—and ones that can be reported regularly.
- **Prove vs. improve**—Collaborators often use data to prove things; collective impact is focused on using data to make improvements in real time. It is critical that players disaggregate data to look for trends, identifying what works (or doesn’t) for different neighborhoods, races, classes, cultures, and so on.
- **Do more vs. work better**—Collaborators may be asked to take on additional tasks; collective impact involves using data to help you improve your current work, leveraging existing assets and building a culture of continual improvement.
- **Importing ideas vs. engaging community**—Collaborators often introduce ideas from other communities; collective impact involves identifying and advocating for what works in your community. Successful collective impact efforts engage community expertise and learn from it.

Why does this all matter? Because our country is program rich and system poor, says Jeff—not coordinated and not targeted at getting individual children the resources they need to thrive. He references the billions invested in K-12 education, which are still not resulting in consistently better results for students.

Dr. Gena O’Keefe of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a senior associate with the foundation’s Baltimore Civic Site, shared another example: In 2009, when Baltimore City recognized a spike in infant mortality and began a collective effort to reduce it, the city had in place many home visiting programs, which showed good results for their clients but not the city as a whole.

Collective impact was born from realizations like these: that it will take something different to achieve results at scale.

What roles do funders (large and small) play in collective impact efforts? Most public funding is limited to direct services, leaving many opportunities for private funders. Gena names these:

- **Strategic planning**—What already exists? What is working? Landscape scanning is a crucial step in collective impact.

- **Capacity building**—What skills or capabilities are needed by those coordinating the effort, or by community partners?
- **Executive on loan**—Gena was “on loan” from the Casey Foundation in the early years of Baltimore’s B’More for Healthy Babies effort; community-based entities may also need particular roles or skills for a period of time.
- **Convener**—Often as funders, we are program-oriented, not outcome-oriented. Jeff and Gena encourage funders to use the language of collective impact to bring people together.
- **Accountability measures**—Holding one another accountable is a tenet of collective impact.
- **Financing small programs/filling gaps**—Baltimore is home to a pooled fund to support reduction in the teen birth rate, e.g., one of B’More for Healthy Babies’ initiatives to reduce infant mortality.

## Difference between Collaboration and Collective impact

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Do you know the most critical differences between the historical definition of ‘collaboration’ and the emerging understanding of ‘collective impact’? No. Then you must go through this article.

In collaboration, we come together to implement a new program. This situation arises when we wanted to apply for or have been awarded a grant. On the other hand, in collective impact, leaders of community come together around their desire to improve results consistently over time. The end results serve as the true north and partners can uncover the right practices to move the outcome over time.

And this lead to the second big difference, i.e. use data to improve results, not to prove. In collaboration, data is used to pick a winner or prove something works. And in collective impact, the data is often used for the purpose of continuous improvement. We really want to find out what works, but the partners are focused instead on using the data to spread the practices across programs and systems not simply scale an individual program.

The next difference in collaboration and collective impact is that collaboration is often one more thing you do on top of everything else. Usually, people meet in coffee shops or church basements to figure out how to do a specific task together and in addition to their day job. On the other hand, Collective impact becomes part of what you do daily. Collective impact is one more thing because it is truly about using data on a daily basis to integrate practices that get results into your everyday contribution to the field.

Last but not the least, Collaboration is often about falling in love with an idea. For example: someone may have visited a program somewhere and seen something they liked so they advocated to bring it to their work. But, collective impact is about advocating what those practices you know get results in your own backyard. In collective impact, the voice of community partners is leveraged to protect and spread the best of what exists right here and now instead of what one hopes would get results down the line.

Well, it will be those communities that illustrates the rigor and realities of collective impact that can help us fully grasp the shift that needs to be made to achieve population level impact. Our company is on its way with the interest of so many and we are hopeful that we can collectively embrace this fundamentally new way of doing business.