



# Overcoming Barriers Through Collective Impact

## A Case Study

### José Mendez

With an increase in the number of enrichment options available in out-of-school time (OST), young people can explore topics generally passed over in a typical school day. Parent perception of afterschool programming is beginning to shift from a simple necessity of the work week to a conscious choice about the daily experiences of their children. Public school districts are leaning heavily on afterschool programs to complement the school day by incorporating academic components to help close the achievement gap.

In light of these shifts, limited resources and waning support for OST organizations require solutions that go beyond the traditional strategies of fundraising and networking. Although these components are still critical, many are finding that fundraising and networking are not enough to sustain high-quality enrichment experiences for young people whose families do not have the financial means to pay. With dwindling resources and myriad needs to be met, many providers feel compelled to go beyond their mission statements to meet the unique needs of their communities while being nimble enough to respond to crisis. The idea that any individual organization can meet community needs through its own isolated intervention is slowly becoming a perception of the

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past. Community organizations need to create deeper relationships with each other while leveraging and maintaining limited resources.

Collective impact is one model for bringing about systemic change. Collective impact is “a framework for achieving systems-level changes in communities through coordinated multi-sector collaborations” (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). The collective impact model enables community organizations to go beyond the small constituencies with whom they regularly work, reframe their efforts, and magnify their reach. Kania and Kramer (2011) write, “Collective impact is not merely a matter of encouraging more collaboration or public private partnerships. It requires a systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives.”

This case study investigates how collective impact can increase equitable access to high-quality OST programming by encouraging independent organizations to adopt a common agenda to solve systemic issues. In pilot programs in Somerville, Massachusetts, application of the collective impact model increased the number of OST slots available to serve local youth and is on track to transform the OST landscape.

## OST in Somerville

Somerville, Massachusetts, is the 17th densest city in the United States. At just over four square miles, it has 75,754 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), making it the most densely populated municipality in New England. White people make up nearly 70 percent of the population, Latinx people almost 11 percent, people of Asian descent 10 percent, and African-American people 7 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). These statistics stand in stark contrast to the demographics of children in the public schools. During the 2019–2020 school year, Latinx students made up 42 percent of the student population; White students were 39 percent, African-American students 9 percent, and Asian students 6 percent (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019).

Although population demographics are not necessarily a sign of gentrification, the median household income in Somerville has risen from

\$67,118 in 2013 (Data USA, 2017) to over \$91,000 in 2018 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In the past 10 years, the average home sale price has more than doubled, averaging over \$900,000 in 2019 (Tamela Roche, 2020).

As the cost of living has increased, so has the cost of doing business for OST providers. Skyrocketing rents and leasing agreements have forced many providers to increase their prices dramatically, essentially making their services unaffordable to people making less than the median income unless they receive financial assistance. Providers operating in public school facilities have the luxury of focusing revenue on higher salaries. Although higher salary ranges are an obvious benefit to staff in those programs, the inevitable consequence is a wage deficit. Recent job postings for frontline staff in Somerville showed a difference of as much as five dollars per hour for staff in the same roles depending on whether the providers were operating within or outside of the school district. In addition, organizations in facilities outside of school buildings contend with rising costs for property maintenance, utilities, and transportation from schools. All this is taking place while the professionalization of the OST field and the demands of high-income households have increased expectations of an academic focus.

Somerville’s density provides some unique challenges for OST organizations and families alike.

Issues include a general lack of publicly owned open space and limited public and private funds. These challenges are exacerbated in various ways if the organization is licensed to provide childcare. Many organizations focus on enrichment programming, which does not require state licensing but also does not allow them to access a number of state grants and funds from private foundations. Relatively few OST providers in Somerville are childcare programs, defined in this study as organizations that provide enrichment programming for school-aged youth, grades K–8, throughout the school year from the end of the school day until at least 5:30 pm. Only six entities in Somerville fall within that definition. They enroll approximately 1,300 participants out of the 3,800 children in grades K–8 in Somerville Public Schools. Only three of the six have more than one site; only one

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operates in all eight public schools. Each organization has its own unique mission, with metrics and pricing scales to match. None currently shares data with any of the others or cross-references participant outcomes with public school metrics.

Outside the confines of the childcare definition are more than 80 public and private organizations that provide a wide spectrum of enrichment opportunities, from reading clubs to physical education. Many have their own special niche and a dedicated neighborhood following that allows them to charge premium prices. The quality of these programs is generally high. However, they are limited in their capacity to offer equitable access through scholarships or to reach beyond high-income households to the youth who most need enrichment outlets.

### **Initiating Collective Impact**

As part of the city's effort to focus on the achievement gap and create equitable access for all, the Somerville Children's Cabinet was formed, consisting of city officials, school district leaders, and representatives from community organizations. With support from the Education Redesign Lab at Harvard Graduate School of Education, the cabinet shares the goal of Harvard's By All Means initiative to build "comprehensive child wellbeing and education systems that help eliminate the link between children's socioeconomic status and achievement" (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2016). The cabinet aims to "create a stable, cross-sector network that supports positive outcomes for children, youth, and families in Somerville" (City of Somerville, 2017).

As with many broad initiatives with lofty goals, Somerville Children's Cabinet needed to create understanding, starting in this case with the necessary conditions for collective impact, which were outlined by Kania and Kramer (2013). In addition to the aims of the By All Means initiative, the cabinet adopted a common agenda to concretize goals so that members would have tangible action steps toward which to work. Identifying positive outcomes would enable cabinet members to quantify progress and produce shared measurement. Shared metrics would then enable "evidence-driven approaches to the work" (City of Somerville, 2017).

Collective impact work is owned by a group of stakeholders, in this case, the school district, the city, and community organizations. However, the Somerville Children's Cabinet, in keeping with the

conditions of collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2013) also needed a "backbone" organization to organize and administer the work. The SomerPromise Division of the city's Health and Human Services Department fulfills that function, playing a significant role in maintaining the conditions for collective impact. With no formal authority to manage cabinet members, the backbone organization serves as liaison between member organizations and offers guidance on enacting "mutually reinforcing activities" to "optimize positive life outcomes for children and youth" (City of Somerville, 2017). The Somerville Children's Cabinet meets monthly; its meetings are informed by separate meetings of stakeholder groups, including the initiative's OST Task Force and ad hoc committees formed to support specific projects.

Stakeholders can adapt the collective impact model to local conditions. In keeping with this principle, the Somerville Children's Cabinet added an equity lens to guide its strategies and implementation (City of Somerville, 2017). By formalizing and adapting the conditions of collective impact, the cabinet leverages what Kania and Kramer (2013) call "the rules of interaction that govern collective impact." These rules "lead to changes in individual and organizational behavior that create an ongoing progression of alignment, discovery, learning, and emergence" (Kania & Kramer, 2013).

Choosing OST as one of its primary focus areas, the cabinet created a new position: OST coordinator. As the first person chosen to fill this position, I lead a cross-sector collective impact initiative that includes Somerville's OST program providers, the city's Department of Health and Human Services, Somerville Public Schools, Somerville families, and other stakeholders. We work closely together to develop and implement an accessible system connecting children and teens with high-quality OST programming that supports their learning and well-being and meets their families' childcare needs. Part of my role is to flesh out how the collective impact model can be implemented among the city's OST providers. I also help build systems to bridge the school day and afterschool, maximizing learning opportunities and continuity of services.

### **Case Studies in Collective Impact Modeling**

My initial efforts focused on identifying partnerships that reflected the conditions required for collective im-

pact: a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone organization (Kania & Kramer, 2013). One such partnership is being led by Somerville's Elizabeth Peabody House (EPH) afterschool program. EPH is a small community-based nonprofit whose family support services include a preschool and school-aged afterschool program. However, the organization was not able to operate a summer camp program for school-aged program participants. Rather than creating a program from scratch, the organization partnered with Everwood Day Camp, a for-profit day camp about 40 minutes away by bus in rural Sharon, Massachusetts. Everwood offers nine weeks of summer day camp for children from pre-K to Grade 12, along with family events throughout the year. The common agenda in this partnership was to expand summer programming to socioeconomically disadvantaged youth served by EPH.

Like many small nonprofits, EPH has a long history of supporting local residents. At a time of transition in executive leadership when new revenue streams were needed, the EPH board agreed to lease a parcel of land it owned in Sharon to Everwood Day Camp. In lieu of cash payments for the lease, Everwood agreed to make a certain number of weeks of camp available to children enrolled in EPH school-year programs. The rates EPH charges families are as much as 50 percent less than Everwood's full price.

In this partnership, the collective impact model:

- Enables EPH to provide high-quality summer enrichment programming to its constituency
- Enables Everwood, a for-profit entity, to act in part as a social service agency by providing clinical support and access to high-quality enrichment during the summer
- Allows both organizations to engage in restorative justice and reflect on unconscious bias

The relationship between EPH and Everwood prompted the development of multiple new programs. One of these, piloted in 2019, provided OST programming during the February school vacation week—a “gap period” when fewer childcare slots are available because many providers do not offer full-

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day programming. Conversations in the network of providers known as the OST Task Force brought together a number of providers and Somerville Public Schools to tackle the issue of access during this gap period. The Somerville Health and Human

Services department served as the coordinating entity. Under the collective impact model, the OST providers, each with its own distinct mission and philosophy, leveraged limited resources to increase the total number of childcare slots. The partnership developed 36 new full-week childcare slots, over half of which were subsidized by the city. Participants aged 6 to 13 engaged in a wide variety of activities.

The success and importance of the program was not in its size but in the paradigm shift it represented. By collaborating under the framework of the collective impact model, the pilot program demonstrated that:

- Contrary to common perception, youth-serving organizations do not have to compete for the same resources. A small subsidy from the city enabled several organizations to develop 36 childcare slots, many with sliding-scale fees.
- Youth-serving organizations that do not consider themselves to be childcare organizations can provide programming that fills the need for full-day coverage.
- Subsidized programming can include experiences that are beyond the scope of what programs could offer alone. For example, one program combines media production combined with Parkour and coding.
- Sliding-scale fees can facilitate equitable access to programming. Of the 36 participants, only nine paid full price. A hypothetical expansion to 100 participants could reduce the subsidy, as shown in Table 1.

A second pilot program, dubbed Somerstart, covered another gap period: the first two weeks of summer vacation. Some of the larger afterschool programs go offline during these two weeks because they need to transition staff, funds, and resources to prepare for summer camp. The Somerstart program aimed to address the well-being of children from low-income communities by connecting them with the

**Table 1. February Vacation Pilot Program and Hypothetical Expansion**

	Pilot Program	Hypothetical Expansion
Number of participants	36	100
Sliding-scale fees	\$400: 9 children (25%) \$250: 3 children (8%) \$200: 4 children (11%) \$125: 2 children (6%) \$0: 18 children (50%)	\$400: 25 children (25%) \$250: 8 children (8%) \$200: 11 children (11%) \$125: 6 children (6%) \$0: 50 children (50%)
Revenue from fees	\$5,400	\$14,950
Program cost	\$9,435	\$14,152*
Subsidy required	\$4,035	-\$798

\* 50% increase to accommodate the larger number of participants

natural world. In keeping with this purpose, a nearby outdoor youth development program with extensive grounds administered the program. Somerstart received a much higher subsidy from the city than the February program did. This subsidy artificially created short-term access—almost doubling the number of participants to serve 45 young people—while lowering the cost per participant.

The program’s objectives were to increase access to summer programming, connect youth with their environment, and take advantage of partnerships with specialty providers such as the Harvard Museum of Natural History and others. Participants learned through a specialized curriculum that was based in exploration of environmental science and that reinforced social and emotional competencies. Effects of collaboration under the collective impact model in this pilot program included the following:

- Collective outreach enabled the providers to recruit participants who would not normally have access to programming.
- Partners with disparate themes and goals coordinated their curricula to reflect a connection with the natural world.
- Program quality was maintained while the cost per child was reduced. For the February vacation pilot program, the cost per child for the week was \$455. For Somerstart, the cost per child per week was reduced to \$383; thus, the program more effectively supported disadvantaged families. Thanks to the city subsidy, more than half the children participated for free.

The outcomes produced by the pilot program indicate that the program could be scaled up to serve

more participants at lower cost to the city. Table 2 compares the original pilot program with a hypothetical expansion that serves 100 participants. The expanded program:

- Maintains sliding-scale fees
- Lowers the percentage of full-scholarship slots to 51 percent
- Offers free tuition to 19 more participants than the pilot program did
- Reduces the municipal subsidy by \$4,865

In addition, cost savings could be realized by centralizing transportation. In the pilot, busing was required to and from the primary program location each day. Establishing a single program site would dramatically reduce the cost of transportation. This reduction is not reflected in Table 2.

### **Adapting Collective Impact to Support OST in Crisis**

Two years into the role of the OST coordinator, the collective impact model in Somerville has brought forth new partnerships, a network of OST providers, major annual events, municipal funding specifically for OST providers, and the beginnings of a paradigm shift in the city. Local elected officials used afterschool as part of their campaign platform. OST providers and public schools have begun to share data. By developing a common agenda with the support of the city Department of Health and Human Services, Somerville Public Schools, and many other stakeholders, the collective impact model continues to prove itself by enabling the network to leverage limited resources.

In times of crisis or uncertainty, the collective

**Table 2. Somerstart Pilot Program and Hypothetical Expansion**

	Pilot Program	Hypothetical Expansion
Number of participants	45	100
Sliding-scale fees	\$500: 2 children (4%) \$250: 7 children (16%) \$175: 2 children (4%) \$100: 2 children (4%) \$0: 32 children (71%)	\$500: 9 children (9%) \$250: 22 children (22%) \$175: 9 children (9%) \$100: 9 children (9%) \$0: 51 children (51%)
Revenue from fees	\$3,300	\$12,475
Program cost	\$17,240	\$21,550*
Subsidy required	\$13,940	\$9,075

\* 25% increase to accommodate the larger number of participants

impact model proves its efficacy. As I write, the current crisis is the COVID-19 pandemic. As during any crisis, the collective impact model offers solutions through the development of a common agenda and the efforts of a backbone organization to use relationships with multiple organizations to direct resources. Although most OST programming in Somerville has been closed during the pandemic, this time has provided an opportunity to develop new strategies and leverage online platforms. Concerns over meeting payroll and making lease payments have given way to a focus on connecting with youth through online programs and on advocating intensely with local and state elected officials. Regular online access to enrichment for youth has become a weekly, if not daily, occurrence.

As part of Somerville’s continued effort to broaden access to enrichment opportunities, the collective impact model was employed again during the April 2020 vacation week. Over 70 hours of online programming from a variety of partners was made available online at no cost to more than 450 participants. Considering the short time we had for preparation, the program was a success. We learned some key lessons:

- Enrichment “by appointment” according to a fixed program schedule is a construct of face-to-face programming. To broaden accessibility, online programming must be recorded and archived.
- Lack of consolidation and difficulty of access are stumbling blocks to participation. Limiting the number of pages where resources are located is essential for success.
- Lengthy registration can be a barrier. Limiting the amount of information collected makes access more equitable.

- Not all families have internet access. Those that don’t have it are not likely to be able to pay for it.

Lack of language capacity and technical literacy have consistently hampered the well-intended efforts of many organizations to reach families who need the most assistance. The Somerville network used several outreach strategies to improve access during this crisis.

- Personal phone calls were a critical outreach tool.
- Live translation was available for 12 of the 70 hours of online programming provided during April vacation.
- Practice log-ins with translation support facilitated access for families with limited technical literacy.
- Somerville Public Schools partnered with an internet service provider to give free internet access to families in need.
- The OST network providers have been added to several city and school district mass mailing lists to streamline communication.
- OST providers have accessed and developed online tools to deliver content directly to families.

Some of the better-known software platforms, including Zoom, require expensive subscriptions to access full functionality, such as real-time translation. As speed and access have become more important, so has security. OST providers are giving input into development of new health and safety protocols for managing risk and liability related to online access. Using the collective impact model, we created a common agenda that is powering the development of pilot programs to solve these systemic issues. We will continue to employ the model as new systemic issues arise.

## The Future of Collective Impact and OST

In the likely event of continued financial instability and waning public support, the collective impact model will continue to be needed to galvanize the OST field. Adults will be able to maintain their current employment, seek out new employment, or acquire education to develop marketable skills only if OST programs are available to care for their children. Backbone organizations that are already providing support to widespread networks should be at the center of coordinating these efforts. Networks like the OST Task Force in Somerville will meet with local officials with the common agenda of creating a childcare affordability fund. Although local government funding may prove elusive, in-kind support may be a possibility if advocacy is consistent and unified. The collective impact model has successfully demonstrated its ability to create opportunities for providers and communities alike. This model could be easily adapted to serve the needs of communities in a variety of contexts for true systemic change.

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