Crosswalk of Frameworks for Understanding Systems Change

This resource is one item in a suite of materials produced for the P-16 Community Investment initiative, a three-year learning engagement funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation across five communities (Buffalo, New York; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Dallas, Texas; the Rio Grande Valley, Texas; and Tacoma, Washington). The initiative seeks to understand and support the development of coherent, high-functioning, equity-centered, place-based systems that span all education sectors from cradle to career. Funders, practitioners, and other stakeholders interested in place-based systems change can use this resource in their work. It was developed by a team from Mathematica and Equal Measure, in collaboration with the foundation and its partners in the participating communities. Mathematica and Equal Measure serve as learning and evaluation partners in this effort.

Key terms used in this resource

Community: the place that is the locus of a systems change effort and the population in that place, which a collective effort or initiative is seeking to serve

Partnership: a place-based, multi-stakeholder effort or initiative working to improve outcomes in a community

Partner: an individual, organization, or institution that is a member of a partnership

Place-based: geographically specific, as defined by the partnership; the unit may be a neighborhood, a city or town, or a state or region, depending on the partnership

Systems change: shifting the conditions—including structures, practices, policies, resource flows, power dynamics, and mindsets—that produce societal problems and hold them in place; typically involves cross-sector collaboration among stakeholders from public, nonprofit, philanthropic, or private institutions, as well as community constituents

Backbone organization: a coordinating body that facilitates and organizes the work of partners

What problem does this crosswalk address?

Interest in systems change is growing among philanthropic and community development stakeholders. At the same time, the field has seen a proliferation of frameworks for systems change success. For funders and practitioners, the number of resources can be overwhelming. This publication presents a crosswalk of place-based systems change frameworks to identify their most common elements. It can serve as a guide for funders, practitioners, and other stakeholders to inform their efforts to support, develop, or refine place-based systems change.

What is the systems change crosswalk?

The crosswalk distills common elements of systems change (Exhibit 1), which the review team identified through a literature review and an evaluation of community-led systems change initiatives.[1] It then maps these elements to 13 prominent systems change frameworks (Exhibit 2). Identified through a search of publicly available sources, the 13 frameworks draw from learning within philanthropic and nonprofit sectors and across multiple content areas, including early childhood, K–12, and postsecondary education; workforce and economic mobility; and diversity, equity, and inclusion. The crosswalk identifies the elements included in published frameworks and supporting documents, though these may differ from how frameworks are implemented in practice.

What does the crosswalk tell us about systems change?

The crosswalk offers lessons for those seeking to implement, fund, or better understand systems change efforts. In particular, the prevalence of certain elements across the reviewed frameworks suggests their importance for supporting systems change across different contexts. At the same time, other elements less commonly addressed may merit further exploration.

Exhibit 1. Elements of systems change

Principles are the underlying beliefs about systems changes, strategies, and practices that can lead to a system's chosen outcomes and goals.

- Equity in vision, mission, and action
- Community inclusion and buy-in
- Culture and narrative shift

Infrastructure refers to the structural aspects necessary for implementing the initiative.

- Ownership and trust among partners
- Backbone organization(s)
- Well-defined outcome and population
- Shared agenda and accountability
- Multi-sector collaboration
- Key leadership and stakeholders
- Sustainability
- Data infrastructure

Strategies refer to the actions taken to implement the initiative and achieve targeted outcomes.

- High-quality programs
- Aligned structures and processes
- Data-driven decision making
- Policy focus and shifts
- Recognition of external factors

Most frameworks consider multi-sector collaboration to be a critical element for supporting systems change.

Almost all the reviewed frameworks included this element or a similar element of the system's infrastructure. Many frameworks also identified **well-defined outcome and population, sustainability,** and **data-driven decision making** as important elements of systems change. This implies a consensus among frameworks that system implementers and funders should establish collaborative relationships with organizations from a range of sectors, prioritize defining the goals of the effort and who it intends

to serve, build an infrastructure that is sustainable beyond the initiative, and use data to guide decision making. Exemplary frameworks that provide detailed information about all four of these elements include Living Cities' Collective Impact Element Dashboard, Urban Institute's Changing Workforce Systems, StriveTogether's Theory of Action, and Lumina Foundation's Talent Hubs Self-Assessment Tool.

The role of backbone organizations is under-explored.

Among the frameworks reviewed, the elements least commonly addressed were backbone organizations and **culture and narrative shift.** The absence of these elements from most of the frameworks does not necessarily imply they are unimportant, but rather suggests that the role of backbones and shifting culture and narratives is relatively under-explored in systems change initiatives. The seminal text describing the role of backbone organizations in systems change efforts is FSG's Five Conditions of Collective Success. The Water of Systems Change, also from FSG, describes the role of implicit system conditions like culture, and the U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty's Strategies to Dramatically Increase Mobility from Poverty presents an example of shifting the narrative to improve economic mobility.

More attention to areas of convergence and divergence across frameworks could help communities involved in multiple change networks.

The Promise Neighborhoods Theory of Action, Say Yes to Education's Strategy, StriveTogether's Theory of Action, and Lumina Foundation's Talent Hubs Self-Assessment Tool describe the approach and requirements for participation in **peer networks.**[2] For communities that belong to one or more of these networks, the subtle variations in frameworks can create challenges. For example, although all four stress the importance of **multi-sector collaboration, data-driven decision making, sustainability,** and **well-defined outcome and population,** only two stipulate the use of **backbone organizations** in supporting material. Networks vary in the ways they prioritize a **shared agenda and accountability** and

include **key leadership and stakeholders** at the table. Only two of these frameworks explicitly call to include **equity principles in vision, mission, and action.** This crosswalk is a first step toward analyzing the commonalities and differences across peer network approaches, but additional steps could be taken to enhance clarity and alignment to ease implementation for communities with overlapping memberships.

How can the crosswalk help users identify relevant frameworks?

Specific frameworks reviewed in the crosswalk also provide information that may be well-suited to the needs of different users. Examples of such users include community partnerships at different stages of development in their respective shared efforts, or users with interest in specific elements of change or substantive areas of work. A few guidelines emerge from the crosswalk analysis that can aid partnerships in selecting a framework to guide their work.

Partnerships can use frameworks based on their community's stage in the ecocycle of place-based systems change.

- Many of the frameworks reviewed may be particularly informative for systems change efforts in the initial stages of **design or implementation,** including Michigan State University's ABLe Change Framework, the Build Initiative's Theory of Change Menu for Systems Initiatives, the Promise Neighborhoods Theory of Action, and Say Yes to Education's Strategy. These frameworks, which have been applied in a range of place-based initiatives working across the cradle-to-career continuum, can guide communities in designing a systems change effort.

For those seeking to **redesign** their efforts to center **equity,** the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide provides a clear framework for incorporating racial equity and inclusion. In addition, PolicyLink's GEAR: Build the Base for Equity Advocacy presents guiding questions and benchmarks which, though targeted at equity advocacy, could apply across a range of focus areas to operationalize equity considerations throughout the effort.

- For those overseeing and monitoring **mature** systems, Living Cities' Collective Impact Element Dashboard presents a reflection tool for practitioners looking to assess what is or isn't working in their systems change initiative. The tool covers three domains (collective impact, public sector innovation, and capital innovation components) viewed as central to collective impact initiatives for economic mobility, but it can be applied across a range of substantive area.

Partnerships can consider leveraging frameworks to strengthen their approach to specific elements of systems change.

- Partnerships or funders looking to focus on the foundational **infrastructure** for systems change may wish to examine StriveTogether's Theory of Action, which describes how operational-izing a shared agenda and accountability, multi-sector collaboration, sustainability, and data infrastructure can support place-based initiatives. Lumina Foundation's Talent Hubs Self-Assessment Tool can help partnerships assess their level of attention to elements as well.

- Partnerships or funders looking to strengthen the more **implicit principles** of systems change, including equity, community inclusion and buy-in, and culture and narrative shift, can look to FSG's The Water of Systems Change, which presents six conditions central to under-standing and changing entrenched systems.[3] Additionally, Michigan State University's ABLe Change Framework describes how these implicit elements intersect with infrastructure and implementation strategies to change systems.

- Partnerships or funders looking to examine **strategies** for change, including high-quality programs, aligned structures and processes, data-driven decision making, policy focus and shift, and recognition of external factors, can reference the Build Initiative's Theory of Change Menu for Systems Initiatives. This framework guides communities in selecting programmatic strategies by linking activities to their potential outcomes.

- Several frameworks include accompanying **self-assessments.** Self-assessments, such as those included in StriveTogether's Theory of Action, and PolicyLink's GEAR: Build the Base for Equity Advocacy, provide benchmarks to assess an initiative's stage of development. Alternatively, self-assessments may be used to assess whether an effort includes critical elements.[4] Living Cities' Collective Impact Element Dashboard includes an accompanying reflection tool for partnerships, while Lumina Foundation's Talent Hubs Self-Assessment Tool helps funders identify communities with promising place-based partnerships focused on postsecondary education.

The systems change crosswalk

The crosswalk (Exhibit 2) begins with a brief note on the source and the substantive area of focus of each framework. It then lists the elements, organized into three categories: principles, infrastructure, and strategies (see descriptions of the categories in Exhibit 1). Icons next to each element indicate that the framework explicitly identifies the element as a component of systems change efforts (✔), refers to a similar characteristic (~), or does not refer to it at all (✘).[5,6]

Exhibit 2. The systems change crosswalk

	ABLe Change Framework	Changing Workforce Systems	Collective Impact Element Dashboard	Five Conditions of Collective Success	GEAR: Build the Base for Equity Advocacy	Promise Neighborhoods Theory of Action	Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide	Say Yes Strategy	Strategies to Dramatically Increase Mobility from Poverty	StriveTogether Theory of Action	Talent Hubs Self-Assessment Tool	Theory of Change Menu for Systems Initiatives	The Water of Systems Change
Source	Michigan State University	Urban Institute	Living Cities	Stanford Social Innovation Review	PolicyLink	Promise Neighborhoods	Annie E. Casey Foundation	Say Yes to Education	U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty	Strive Together	Lumina Foundation	Build Initiative	FSG
Substantive area of focus	System of care, aimed at improving outcomes for youth with severe emotional disorders	Workforce	Economic mobility	General	Equity advocacy	Cradle to career; neighborhood revitalization	Racial equity and inclusion	Education; cradle to career	Economic mobility	Cradle to career	Post-secondary education	Early childhood education and development	General
Principles													
Equity in vision, mission, and action — Operationalize equity to eliminate local disparities	~	x	x	x	✓	x	✓	x	~	✓	✓	x	x
Community inclusion and buy-in — Representation and meaningful inclusion of community members	✓	x	x	x	✓	x	✓	✓	~	✓	✓	x	✓
Culture and narrative shift — Challenge entrenched mindsets and typical ways of working	✓	x	x	x	x	x	✓	✓	~	x	x	x	✓
Infrastructure													
Ownership and trust among partners	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	✓	x	✓
Backbone organization(s) — Presence of coordinating backbone organization	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x
Well-defined outcome and population	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	~	✓	~	✓	✓	x	x
Shared agenda and accountability — Partners work on a shared agenda and are held accountable to shared goals	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	~	x	✓	✓	~	~
Multi-sector collaboration — Align across sectors to support targeted outcomes and goals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	~	✓	✓
Key leadership and stakeholders — Involve strong, adaptive leadership and the right stakeholders and decision makers	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	~	✓	x	x	x	x	✓
Sustainability — Funding, well-trained staff, and policy maker support to sustain the initiative	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓
Data infrastructure — Data systems and processes to support decision making and program improvement	✓	x	✓	✓	x	x	x	~	✓	✓	x	x	~
Strategies													
High-quality programs — Effective, culturally-responsive, and well-implemented programs and improvement strategies tailored to community needs	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Aligned structures and processes — Shared measurement systems and continuous communication to foster collaboration among partners	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	~	x	x	x	✓	x	✓	x
Data-driven decision making — Use data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve, and to inform the broader community	x	✓	✓	x	✓	~	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓
Policy focus and shifts — Seek state and local policy change to support target outcomes	x	x	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	✓	x	x	✓	x
Recognition of external factors — Consider state and local policies, community and neighborhood contexts, population characteristics, and participating organization characteristics that influence the system	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	~	x	~	✓	~

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

[1] Because these sources primarily focused on cradle-to-career initiatives, the review team intentionally broadened the elements to be more inclusive of other substantive areas.

[2] In determining whether a network includes an element, we relied on the published framework and not on examples of the framework's implementation in participating communities.

[3] FSG has defined and described explicit and implicit dimensions of systems change. Explicit factors are concrete and readily observable, such as policies, practices, and resource flows. Implicit factors are less tangible and include relationships, connections, and mental models. Mathematica and Equal Measure have produced a tool for stakeholders considering how to address both types of factors.

[4] Mathematica and Equal Measure have developed a community-level self-assessment that focuses on elements of systems change that have historically been underdeveloped in the literature.

[5] The review team mapped the content of each framework to the elements and conducted checks for inter-coder reliability, including double coding all frameworks and holding interim discussions to confirm the coding.

[6] The various frameworks sometimes use different terms to refer to each of the elements, and they are not always explicit about the inclusion of a given element. This ambiguity may affect how the frameworks are coded in the crosswalk.

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