

The New York Times

A Really Good Thing Happening in America

A strategy for community problem-solving does an extraordinary job at restoring our social fabric.



By David Brooks
Opinion Columnist

Oct. 8, 2018

Not long ago, in Spartanburg, S.C., I visited the offices of something called the Spartanburg Academic Movement (SAM). The walls were lined with charts measuring things like kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading scores and postsecondary enrollment.

Around the table was just about anybody in town who might touch a child's life. There were school superintendents and principals, but there were also the heads of the Chamber of Commerce and the local United Way, the police chief, a former mayor and the newspaper editor.

The people at SAM track everything they can measure about Spartanburg's young people from cradle to career. They gather everybody who might have any influence upon this data — parents, religious leaders, doctors, nutrition experts, etc.

And then together, as a communitywide system, they ask questions: Where are children falling off track? Why? What assets do we have in our system that can be applied to this problem? How can we work together to apply those assets?

There are a lot of things I love about this approach.

First, it understands that life is longitudinal. Sometimes social policies are distorted by the tyranny of randomized controlled experiments. Everybody is looking for the one magic intervention that will have a measurable effect.

But life isn't like that. Our actual lives are influenced by millions of events that interact in mysterious ways. And when life is going well it's because dozens of influences are flowing together and reinforcing one another. SAM tries to harness those dozens of influences.

Second, SAM treats the whole person. “The disease of modern character is specialization,” Wendell Berry once wrote. Sometimes schools treat students as brains on a stick who come to be filled with skills and information.

But children don’t leave behind their emotions, their diet, their traumas, their safety fears, their dental problems and so on when they get to school. If you’re going to help kids, you have to help the whole kid all at once.

Third, and maybe most important, SAM embodies a new civic architecture, which has become known as the “collective impact” approach. Americans feel alienated from and distrustful toward most structures of authority these days, but this is one they can have faith in.

SAM organizes the community of Spartanburg around a common project. Then it creates an informal authority structure that transcends public-sector/private-sector lines, that rallies cops and churches, the grass roots and the grass tops. Members put data in the center and use it as a tool not for competition but for collaboration. Like the best social service organizations, it is high on empathy and high on engineering. It is local, participatory and comprehensive.

SAM is not a lone case. Spartanburg is one of 70 communities around the country that use what is called the StriveTogether method. StriveTogether began in Cincinnati just over a decade ago. A few leaders were trying to improve education in the city and thinking of starting another program. But a Procter & Gamble executive observed, “We’re program-rich, but system-poor.” In other words, Cincinnati had plenty of programs. What it lacked was an effective system to coordinate them.

A methodology was born: organize around the data, focus on the assets of the community, not the deficits; realize there is no one silver-bullet solution; create a “backbone organization” (like SAM) that can bring all the players together; coordinate decision-making and action; share accountability.

At one point the folks in Cincinnati noticed that their students were not coming prepared for kindergarten. The data suggested that the private pre-K programs were performing better than the public ones. So the public school system allocated some of its money to support other, private programs, making Cincinnati one of the first American cities to offer near-universal preschool. That’s a community working as one.

Collective impact structures got their name in 2011, when John Kania and Mark Kramer wrote an influential essay for the Stanford Social Innovation Review in which they cited StriveTogether and provided the philosophical and theoretical basis for this kind of approach.

Such structures are now being used to address homelessness, hunger, river cleanup and many other social ills. Collective impact approaches have had their critics over the years, in part for putting too much emphasis on local elites and not enough on regular parents (which is fair).

But a recent study of 25 collective impact initiatives by Sarah Stachowiak and Lauren Gase found that these approaches do work, at least most of the time. StriveTogether, which is now led by Jennifer Blatz, is thriving. It's just received a significant financial infusion from Connie and Steve Ballmer, of the Balmer Group.

Frankly, I don't need studies about outcomes to believe that these collective impact approaches are exciting and potentially revolutionary. Trust is built and the social fabric is repaired when people form local relationships around shared tasks.

Building working relationships across a community is an intrinsically good thing. You do enough intrinsically good things and lives will be improved in ways you can never plan or predict. This is where our national renewal will come from.

Related in Opinion

Opinion | Margaret Renkl
More Trees, Happier People Oct. 7, 2018



Opinion | Darnell Epps
The Prison 'Old-Timers' Who Gave Me Life Oct. 6, 2018



Follow *The New York Times* Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the *Opinion Today* newsletter.

David Brooks has been a columnist with *The Times* since 2003. He is the author of "The Road to Character" and the forthcoming book "The Committed Life: When You Give Yourself Away."

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 9, 2018, on Page A25 of the New York edition with the headline: A Good Thing Happening In America

READ 229 COMMENTS