

# Reflections

The SoL Journal  
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



## FEATURE ARTICLES

### **The Philanthropic Learning Organization**

Marilyn J. Darling

### **It Takes a School to Raise a Village**

Carol Gorelick

### **A Systems Approach to Increasing the Impact of Grantmaking**

David Peter Stroh and  
Kathleen Zurcher

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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE 11.3

**C. Sherry Immediato**

**T**he evolution of my work has led me to consider the unique value foundations can provide in addressing complex issues that may vastly exceed their financial investments. I'm currently serving as the Chief Learning Officer for the ReThink Health initiative

of the Fannie E. Rippel Foundation, where our goal is to seed innovations in health. My interest in this role was fueled in different ways by conversations with each of the authors featured in this issue of *Reflections*.

When I read Marilyn Darling's research report, "A Compass in the Woods - Learning Through Grantmaking to Improve Impact," I could see why so many foundations are well positioned to be learning catalysts. Marilyn and her colleagues engaged a number of leading foundations in a shared conversation (convened by yet another foundation!) about their assumptions, strategies, and practices. A serial contributor to *Reflections*, Marilyn shares an elegantly simple framework for understanding the connections between work process and learning practice, with practical tips to bring the latter to life. While derived from a deep dive into the foundation world, the concepts seem generally applicable for any enterprise with a desire to facilitate innovation.

ABC Connects is an example of a grantee employing a learning process on multiple levels. In 2002, former principal Al Witten joined the SoL community and shared his work on creating school-based centers of community learning in South Africa that benefited both the students and their families. Intrigued with the way Al's experiment dovetailed with her own interests, Carol Gorelick obtained a grant from the Kellogg Foundation and created ABC Connects to operationalize the community school concepts he pioneered. We asked Carol to tell the story of the action research project she led that emerged from a vision of developing a cross-cultural learning community among emerging community

schools in South Africa and the U.S. Her narrative helps us appreciate the challenge of conducting a small and innovative experiment with schools under stress in the hopes of producing scalable insights.

Finally, some problems seem to absorb philanthropic contributions, producing temporary relief of suffering but little lasting impact. In the extreme cases, the fix backfires and makes the problem worse. How can a group acknowledge its well-intentioned efforts while also developing a better appreciation for the complexity that favors maintaining things as they are? David Stroh and Kathleen Zurcher illustrate a five-step process for thinking systemically. They share examples from a community that applied this framework to revamp its approach to ending homelessness and a foundation that used it to design a comprehensive process for dealing with the rise in childhood obesity. In their description, they provide generic questions that improve thinking at each stage of the process.

I'm grateful to all the authors for keeping me in their learning loops and happily invite you in! I remain intrigued by the possibility that a foundation can incubate multi-stakeholder dialogues and seed cross-sector collaboration as a distinct contribution. When most system participants are preoccupied with their narrow view and immediate needs, the invitation to help the system see itself creates a space for true system stewardship to emerge that can transcend specific issues. Perhaps there's a new version of the old adage: If you give a group a grant, you've aligned their focus with your agenda. If you invite a group into conversation and reflection, you've strengthened their focus on their own goals and values. If philanthropy lives into its linguistic roots of "loving humanity," the latter would seem the more appropriate path, and organizational learning has a great deal to contribute.■

C. Sherry Immediato  
Publisher

## EXECUTIVE DIGEST 11.3

**The Philanthropic Learning Organization***Marilyn J. Darling*

In the wake of the world economic crisis, philanthropic organizations – like organizations in other sectors – have been forced to scrutinize the return on their grantmaking investments more carefully than ever before. Because many traditional grantmaking practices are too slow to help foundations manage risk through the ability to adapt and innovate, some foundations are seeking to better integrate real-time evaluation and learning into their operations. In this research project, Marilyn Darling and her colleagues found that the more skilled a foundation gets at closing the learning loop, the more innovative it can be in accommodating new thinking. A clear learning agenda thus helps a foundation mitigate the risks involved in placing its full heft behind new, more strategic approaches to social change, so that foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences do not torpedo an otherwise worthy collective effort. And when learning is in service of the real work at the heart of the foundation's mission, the ultimate outcome should be stronger networks and greater impact.

**It Takes a School to Raise a Village***Carol Gorelick*

Today, most of us recognize that the educational system doesn't terminate at the boundary of school property. The concept of community schools has developed from a preference for teaching children in neighborhood schools to a movement that sees the school as a hub that brings together many partners to offer a range of support and opportunities for children, youth, families, and the larger community. From 2007–2010, the ABC Connects program applied a systems

approach and organizational learning tools to the challenge of transforming two schools in South Africa and two schools in Detroit, Michigan, into vibrant centers of community life. These schools engaged with parents and other education stakeholders to address the challenges of poverty, improve teaching and learning, and support students' well-being and development. At the same time, students and teachers benefited from taking part in cross-cultural learning opportunities with their counterparts on the other side of the globe. ABC Connects continues to build on the lessons learned from this pilot program.

**A Systems Approach to Increasing the Impact of Grantmaking***David Peter Stroh and Kathleen Zurcher*

Why do many foundations fall short in their efforts to improve the quality of people's lives over the long run? The reason lies in part in our tendency to apply linear thinking to complex, nonlinear problems. Through research and case studies, this article shows the benefits of combining conventional processes that facilitate acting systemically with tools to help stakeholders transcend their immediate self-interests by thinking systemically as well. Using this approach, a project to end homelessness and a comprehensive initiative to improve food and fitness and reduce childhood obesity managed to achieve lasting systems improvement by making a few key coordinated changes over time. Authors David Peter Stroh and Kathleen Zurcher illustrate how the application of a five-step systems thinking process can help foundations make better decisions about how to use their limited grantmaking resources for highest sustainable impact.



## FEATURE 11.3

# The Philanthropic Learning Organization

MARILYN J. DARLING

In the wake of the world economic crisis, philanthropic organizations – like organizations in other sectors – have been forced to scrutinize the return on their grantmaking investments more carefully than ever before. Because many traditional grantmaking practices are too slow to help foundations manage risk through the ability to adapt and innovate, some foundations are seeking to better integrate real-time evaluation and learning into their operations. In this research project, Marilyn Darling and her colleagues found that the more skilled a foundation gets at closing the learning loop, the more innovative it can be in accommodating new thinking. A clear learning agenda thus helps a foundation mitigate the risks involved in placing its full heft behind new, more strategic approaches to social change, so that foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences do not torpedo an otherwise worthy collective effort. And when learning is in service of the real work at the heart of the foundation's mission, the ultimate outcome should be stronger networks and greater impact.



**Marilyn J. Darling**

progress, adjusting action and learning – throughout the life of a program, so that foreseeable and unforeseeable changes do not torpedo an otherwise worthy collective effort.

**T**he field of philanthropy is under increasing pressure to produce greater impact for its investments. A growing number of foundations are moving away from the traditional responsive banker model to become more thoughtful and engaged partners with their grantees in the business of producing outcomes. In the process, they are placing bigger bets on larger, more strategic programs and initiatives. The larger the investment, the more skilled foundations must become at managing risk – making informed decisions, tracking

progress, adjusting action and learning – throughout the life of a program, so that foreseeable and unforeseeable changes do not torpedo an otherwise worthy collective effort.

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**Some foundations are seeking to better integrate real-time evaluation and learning into their operations to become more adaptive, innovative, and impactful.**

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The traditional grant-to-evaluation-to-adjustment cycle is long. Because many traditional grantmaking practices are proving to be too slow to help foundations manage risk through the ability to adapt, some foundations are seeking to better integrate real-time evaluation and learning into their operations to become more adaptive, innovative, and impactful. To that end, the field is striving to ensure that this evolution is based on validated theory, not wishful thinking or shots in the dark.

My colleagues and I<sup>1</sup> conducted interviews with nine foundations of different size (annual grantmaking ranging from approximately \$10 million to \$250 million), scope, and focus (place-based foundations to global change agents) to build understanding in three key areas:

- How foundations and their communities articulate the thinking behind their strategies and how that thinking frames, and is adapted through, their learning
- What practices and tools foundations and their communities use to learn together through the grant cycle
- What specific adaptations to existing practices and tools would enable foundations and their communities to integrate learning more deliberately into their work and correct course throughout implementation to increase their impact

## Research Participants

The following grantmaking organizations participated in this research:

- Barr Foundation
- Colorado Trust
- David and Lucile Packard Foundation
- Deaconess Foundation
- Lumina Foundation for Education
- Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
- Ontario Trillium Foundation
- Rockefeller Brothers Fund
- William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) conducted a peer learning session in January 2009 hosted by the Packard Foundation on integrating learning into grantmaking practice. Foundations that participated in that session were invited to participate in the research project. Most of the foundations in this research study participated in that session. Three additional foundations were invited to participate.

For the research itself, my colleagues and I interviewed the CEO, at least one program officer, and a member of the evaluation or learning staff of each foundation. After all interviews were completed, we produced an individual assessment report for each foundation and conducted a follow-up interview, normally with the evaluation or learning staff.

While each foundation in this study is different, they all share a commitment to make learning not just an aspiration but a reality. All are seriously committed to doing grantmaking in a more “learningful” way. This research gave us the opportunity to hear firsthand the stories of foundations traveling along the road as they experience the excitement of exploring new pathways, the frustration of encountering big potholes along the way, and the early indications of success.

## The Grantmaking Learning Cycle

All foundations engage in these activities in some form or another:

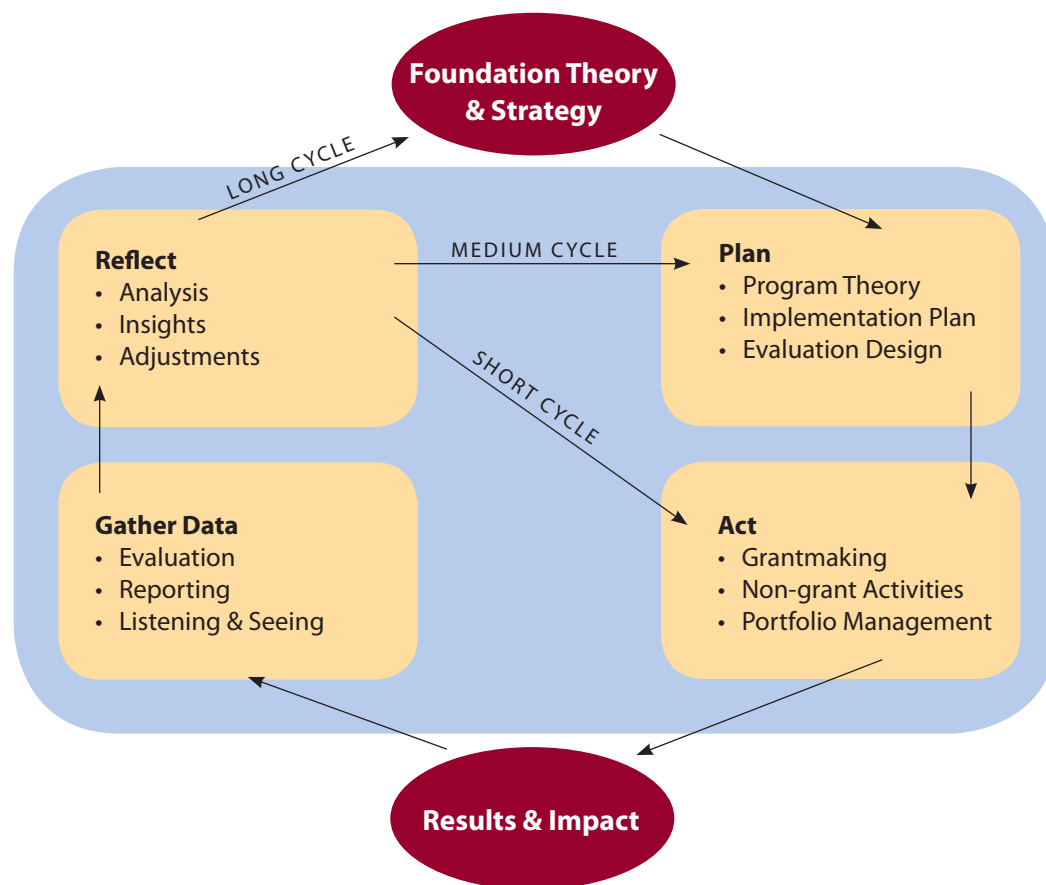
- **Plan** – define intended outcomes and articulate what actions and resources they think it will take to achieve those outcomes, and why
- **Act** – engage in various combinations of grantmaking and complementary non-grant activities, such as grantee meetings, capacity building, technical assistance, or advocacy
- **Gather Data** – gather evidence related to actual results compared to intended results, successful practices, and innovations
- **Reflect** – make meaning of evidence concerning strategy and program effectiveness and adjust strategy, planning, and/or implementation based on that meaning

A grantmaking cycle that is infused with learning has certain characteristics that go beyond conventional practice (Figure 1). The following sections describe what that looks like and what the implications might be for future practice.

### A. Planning: Making Thinking Visible

Most foundations engage in some form of strategic, annual, and program planning. Traditional planning works on the assumption that informed decision making will produce a “right” answer that simply needs to be implemented correctly to succeed. Learningful foundations recognize that, in a complex world rife with changing conditions, the first solution is not likely to be completely “right,” or to stay right as conditions evolve.



FIGURE 1 **The Grantmaking Learning Cycle**

In the social sector, because the efforts of many partners must come together for them to achieve their shared outcomes, the more clearly foundations and their partners articulate their thinking, the easier it becomes to discover how their thinking is aligned or in conflict, and to identify useful performance indicators. As goals and situations change, this clarity positions the independent but interconnected partners to predict challenges and choose the best approach to achieve their shared goals.

### Who Defines the Theory?

For purposes of this article, we will use the term “theory” to refer to all of the tools used to articulate thinking about how to get to outcomes, such as the organization’s Theory of Change, Theory of Action, Outcome Models, and Logic Models. We heard that who defines the theory and at what level (foundation, program, grantee) impacts how

**Learningful foundations recognize that, in a complex world rife with changing conditions, the first solution is not likely to be completely “right.”**

complex it is, how accessible it is to people doing the work of the grant, and how often it is referred to and refreshed as thinking changes. Ultimately, who defines the theory has an effect on how well it reflects the thinking of the whole network and how broadly it is embraced by the people who are responsible for transforming theory into reality (Figure 2, p.4).

People tend to think that theory has to be complex to reflect the complex environments in which





officers to put theory to paper with the intent to track and learn from results may feel like the foundation is micromanaging the grant.

But if for any of these reasons foundations fail to commit to an outcome and a theory – by not articulating it or letting thinking go stale – the quality of reflective learning suffers. Foundation staff members can learn just about any lesson they want from a particular grant or event if they are not honest with themselves about whether they achieved the result they expected, or if “success” can be rationalized from any result.

### ***B. Action: Turning Action into Learning Experiments***

In a truly learningful organization, learning cycles happen at several scales – from long-term strategy to short, fast cycles of learning in action (Figure 3).

For purposes of this study, “action” comprises the core business of a grantmaking organization – e.g., launching initiatives, making grant decisions, contracting with grantees, managing portfolios, convening stakeholders, building capacity, providing technical assistance, enlisting partners, and other interventions to make change happen. This is the real work of the foundation. It is also “the classroom” – the primary source from which insights emerge and the place where insights can be applied to improve impact.

Learningful foundations are deliberate in their goal to learn from their action, making mid-course adjustments to their actions or even their theory rather than waiting until the end of a grant period or an annual planning cycle to recognize and adapt to changing conditions. Building learning practices into action fundamentally changes the rate at which a foundation can improve its outcomes. Learning in small “fit-for-purpose” cycles in the course of work not only reduces risk; it also makes changing course a less traumatic process.

### **Time to Learn?**

The number one challenge to learning expressed across all of the foundations in our study was time.

Many foundations have built rich dialogue into their decision-making process. But in the face of too many other priorities, attention and dialogue tend to fall away immediately thereafter.

As workloads expand, foundation staff members miss key opportunities to learn through their actions. Program officers are torn between focusing on grantees and focusing on foundation business. Despite attempts to build more dialogue and

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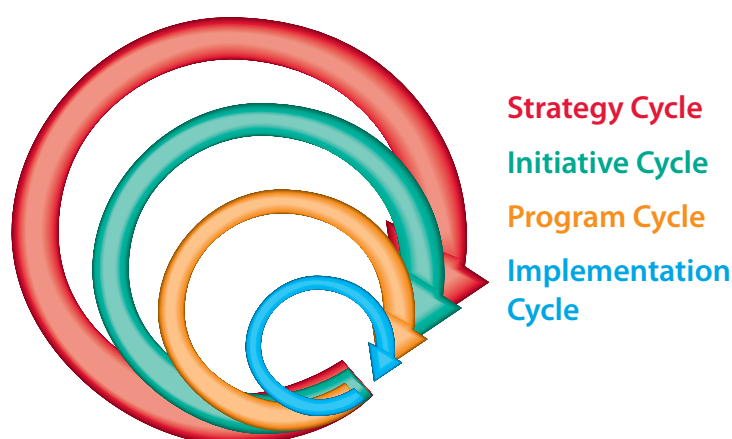
## **Building learning practices into action fundamentally changes the rate at which a foundation can improve its outcomes.**

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experiments into the grant cycle – both within the organization and with grantees – lack of time and no deliberate plan to learn often leave insights that would improve future practice on the table.

We heard that the stronger the connection and more frequent the interaction between program staff and grantees, the more quickly both are able to see problems and make course corrections. Unfortunately, the flip side of this strength is that program officers are less likely to have either the time or the patience to articulate the insight that produced the course correction and share it with their peers inside the foundation. As a result,

FIGURE 3 **Strategy Cycle**



course correction mostly happens quietly. While these corrections in themselves are a good thing, the real learning nuggets remain hidden and larger “lessons learned” may not be applied more broadly. The result? A tendency to “learn the same lesson” over and over again.

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**We define a lesson as being “learned” when (1) behavior changes and (2) a group achieves results that are consistent with what past lessons predicted.**

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We define a lesson as being “learned” when (1) behavior changes and (2) a group achieves results that are consistent with what past lessons predicted. To succeed in learning from action, foundations need a combination of lots of action experiments, good information flow between grantees and program staff, and time to reflect across programs on what the results of these experiments mean to future practice. The goal is to learn to recognize situations and to know how to respond: “We’ve seen this before and here is what works and why.”

***C. Gathering Data: Using Evaluation to Support Learning***

Evaluation is also undergoing a significant transformation. Learningful foundations are recognizing that the purpose of data gathering is to improve decision making and gain a rich understanding of what it takes to create impact. Traditional evaluation is not only slow; it can shift the burden for learning away from overcommitted staff and onto the shoulders of external evaluators. This slows down the learning cycle drastically. Most important of all: The lessons that might improve performance next time risk staying hidden in evaluation reports and not being fully understood and acted on by overwhelmed program staff.

For evaluation to lead to learning and improved long-term results, it must also gauge critical short- and intermediate-term results, as well as the activities that are expected to produce them. As a result, many foundations are moving away from depending entirely on end-of-project summative evaluations designed primarily for external accountability to a complement of evaluation tools, including real-time approaches that support learning in action.

**Can We Learn to Create Impact?**

Foundations want to find ways to increase impact, but they have learned that you can’t get at impact directly. There are no linear cause-effect models. In complex grant programs, data about impact will not be available until long after an interconnected web of actions on the part of a number of independent actors and external events come together to produce some downstream result.

The fundamental challenge of learning in a changing environment is that nothing stands still long enough to finally learn it. If tomorrow will not look exactly like yesterday, no one “best practice” solution can simply be replicated and get the same result. There are no “right” answers to be discovered. How and what can a grantmaker or a grantee learn in that kind of environment?

Consider an analogy: In the past century, meteorologists have discovered some powerful building blocks and ways to combine them that have greatly improved their ability to predict local weather in a wickedly complex system.<sup>2</sup> Over the years, real-time data gathering has improved meteorologists’ ability to see patterns like ocean temperatures, upper-air pressure centers, wind patterns, and solar radiation. They have studied how they interact to understand more complex phenomena like jet streams and el Niño, which allows them to see larger trends and make more powerful, longer-range weather predictions.

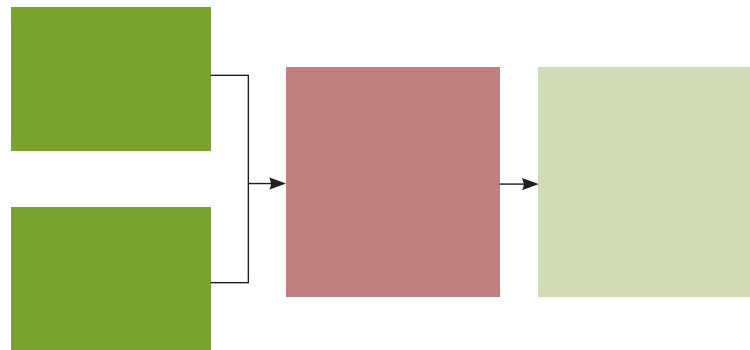
There may be some “unmeasurables” in grant-making, and foundations do not get daily feedback about the accuracy of their predictions. But we believe that there is still something to learn from the example. Each new building block that meteorologists discovered strengthened their ability to predict local weather. In the same way, foundations need to find things that repeat themselves, even if the situations are constantly shifting. The process of learning is one of discovering these repeating elements – grant structures, capacity-building approaches, stakeholder engagement practices, etc. – and the underlying principles about how they work in different kinds of grant programs in different geographies, in service of different outcomes. With that knowledge, they can formulate a series of hypotheses about how to combine them to get better at achieving intermediate outcomes in particular kinds of situations.

Let us say, for example, that the ability of communities across the U.S. to generate innovative partnerships between nonprofit, public, and private-sector organizations is a critical intermediate outcome for a large initiative. If a foundation and its partners were to experiment with a wide variety of methods and track and learn from their collected successes and failures, over time they would improve their understanding about which approaches work in which kinds of communities to produce the most innovative partnerships. Eventually, they would learn which approaches work best in large urban versus small rural communities; cohesive versus fragmented communities; communities that have a wealth of resources versus those that don’t. With that know-how, the foundation and its partners can turn their attention to other parts of the theory, confident that they understand how to help communities generate the partnerships needed to enact better community solutions.

### The “Little Arrows”

Focusing on learning how to produce intermediate outcomes offers a vehicle to break through some of the complexity of learning through grant-

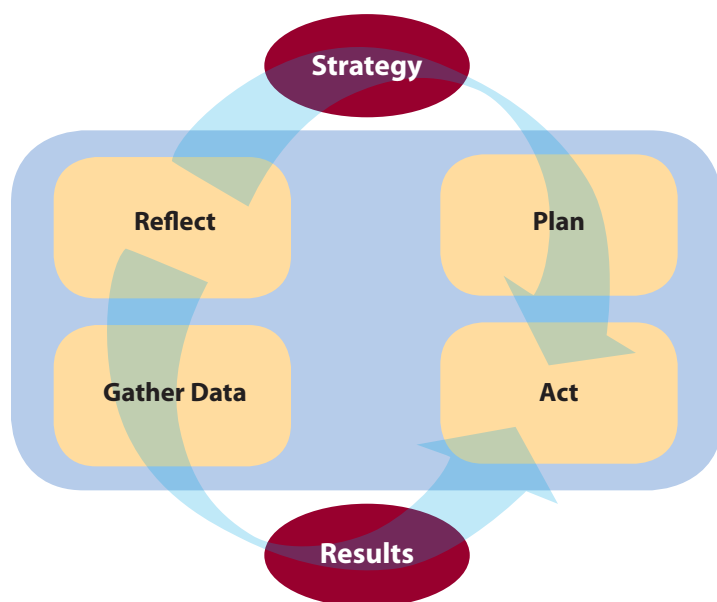
FIGURE 4 **Typical Logic Model Format**



making. In the logic models we studied, the most important learning opportunities seemed to be concentrated in what we thought of as the little arrows between boxes (Figure 4). Each of those arrows represents a hypothesis about what it will take to produce a particular outcome (“If we take this action or produce this intermediate outcome, then we will get that outcome or impact.”).

### Focusing on learning how to produce intermediate outcomes offers a vehicle to break through some of the complexity of learning through grantmaking.

If foundations can “forecast” what tools, applied in which ways, in which environments, will achieve what results (and why) within those small arrows, then as has happened with meteorology, they can use that knowledge to tackle their larger challenges. Focusing on these little arrows is not, however, just about how to deliver an “effective” capacity-building program, for example. It is about learning how the choices foundations make in designing and delivering these programs interact with the environments in which they are being delivered to produce a certain result. Done deliberately, and keeping short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes in sight (the “compass in the woods”), these little experiments can add up to stronger capacity to contribute to long-term impact.

FIGURE 5 **Designing Reflection to Close the Learning Loop*****D. Reflection: Connecting the Dots***

For our purposes, reflection is the process of making meaning of observations, data gathered, external research, and lessons offered by peers. Even the best data will not produce change until grantmakers and grantees take the time to make meaning of it and to think fairly explicitly about how and when they will use it to produce better results. The foundations in this study are all experi-

**Done deliberately, little experiments can add up to stronger capacity to contribute to long-term impact.**

menting with different models for creating time and space for reflection. Nevertheless, reflection tends to get set aside due to the pressures of “real work.”

**Connecting the Dots**

Our research interviews confirmed previous observations in foundations and other arenas: orga-

nizations tend to equate learning and reflection, which leads them to over-invest in ad hoc reflection sessions and under-invest in linking reflection back into the learning cycle (Figure 5).

The reflection practices we heard were often designed as ad hoc meetings to reflect on a particular past program or across programs on some common question. The link to future action was more of an aspiration than a specific plan. In some cases, reflection was explicitly kept separate from action to preserve the time to think and to avoid slipping into tactical problem solving. We were not surprised, then, that overcommitted program staff often resisted taking precious time away from what they considered to be their mission work.

To improve future action and results, foundation staff members need to train their thinking as well as their actions. That means that reflection on past results needs to include reflecting on the thinking behind the actions. When foundations take the time to reflect on the thinking behind the choices that created those results, it helps staff prepare to make better decisions in the future, including occasionally adjusting their theory.

In every sector we have studied, organizations are easily able to link planning to action. If they take the time, they are able to link action to reflection. The weak link in the learning cycle is almost universally from reflection to planning. A first step to creating this link can be as simple as asking “how will you apply what we talked about today?” at the end of reflection sessions.

**Who Are the Right People?****When Is the Right Time?**

We heard three approaches that foundations take to choosing when to reflect:

- **Ad hoc** – based on something that happened, such as an initiative that “went south”
- **Periodic** – built into regular program staff meetings or as their own regularly scheduled events

- **Linked into the grantmaking cycle** – preparation for grant decisions and board meetings

A strength of ad hoc reflection is the emotional connection participants have to what happened and the need to make sense of it. The two weaknesses include lack of clarity about when and how insights will be applied, and failure of an ad hoc practice to build good learning habits into the culture of a foundation.

A strength of periodic reflection is that it builds a learning discipline. The biggest weaknesses are that meetings may be cancelled in the face of other priorities; reflection may become abstract and disconnected from work: learning for learning's sake.

Reflection that is linked into normal work processes offers the greatest potential for transforming learning practices into “just the way we do work around here.” Adults – especially overcommitted professionals – learn best when they need to.<sup>3</sup> Not every reflection opportunity lends itself to this format, but it is worth drawing on this wisdom to make sure that reflection is designed to enable peers to learn together in a way that respects their need for relevance. For reflection that is done as part of preparing for something, it is clear who needs to be involved. But especially when preparing to reflect in ad hoc meetings about past events and, even more so when the purpose is to capture lessons to disseminate to others, finding some relevance to specific immediate or near-term opportunities can greatly amplify the value to participants.

### **An Emergent Learning Agenda**

Given our findings, what do foundations need to do to build the capacity to produce better outcomes, reduce the risk associated with larger, more strategic investments, and ultimately contribute to moving the impact needle? In this section, we describe the elements of an emergent learning agenda and some ways to tackle the kinds of challenges reported by our participating foundations (Figure 6, p.10).<sup>4</sup>

### ***Framing Questions: “What Will It Take to...?”***

In the same way that what you measure drives what you manage, the frame that foundation leaders set for learning drives where people direct their attention. Big, theoretical questions (e.g., “What are the biggest drivers of rural poverty?”) lead to big, theoretical conversations. Summative or retrospective questions (e.g., “Did our choices about which partners to support actually contribute to increased preschool enrollment?”) lead to reflective conversations. Both of these can be useful conversations at the right time for the right purpose, but we heard that the former can make

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busy program officers and grantees squirm in their seats, and the latter is useful only in proportion to how well it can inform what's coming next.

Just as a foundation needs to choose a strategy that represents a subset of great potential actions, it needs the discipline to focus on a few powerful questions to avoid getting whipsawed by too many simultaneous lines of inquiry. The very act of holding a dialogue about which questions are important is, in itself, a step toward becoming an organization that learns: “If we could improve our ability to achieve just one thing this year, what would make the biggest difference to our mission?”

Framing Questions focus on the most important uncertainties or challenges – those that present the greatest apparent risk to strategy effectiveness. Or they may focus on a foundation's biggest opportunities or leverage points. They set the stage for learning through work, which speeds up the learning cycle and allows program teams to adjust as they go.

## The very act of holding a dialogue about which questions are important is a step toward becoming an organization that learns.

We observed above that there is a weak link between theory and action – between looking back to reflect on the theory that led to the action and looking forward to target when and how insights will be applied. Framing Questions are a way to forge that essential link (Figure 7).

To write a pragmatic, forward-focused Framing Question, start with either:

- “What will it take for us to...?” or
- “How can we...?”

For example:

- What will it take for us to increase the capacity of our network of grantees to make a compelling case for the desired policy changes?
- How can we promote outreach, education, and advocacy across the region?
- Given the economic challenges our state is facing, how can we ensure adequate points of access across the state for preventative, primary, oral, and behavioral care?

Some foundations find it challenging to craft a complete theory from scratch. For others, the process becomes more of an intellectual exercise required to move a grant through, rather than a statement of what a group really believes to be true and upon which it is prepared to act. If foundations get in the habit of asking “what will it take to achieve our goals in this phase of our work?” and writing down and collecting their hypotheses related to their big Framing Questions, a body of theory will begin to emerge. It may be messy at

FIGURE 6 **Learning Agenda**





first, but the process of sorting it out will help the foundation begin to build a framework around which to learn.

### Action Learning Plan

As we heard from many foundations, the intention to learn is not by itself enough to make it happen. An action learning plan takes each Framing Question and lays out specific steps to weave learning about the question into implementation planning. An action learning plan:

1. picks the best action learning opportunities from among the whole plate of planned activities that make up a program;
2. builds in a step of reminding everyone of their thinking about what will make them succeed in these key actions and transforming this understanding into learning experiments;
3. specifies when and how the group will reflect on those actions and their results; and
4. provides a means to link this reflection back to theory and forward to inform future actions.

### Speeding Up the Cycle:

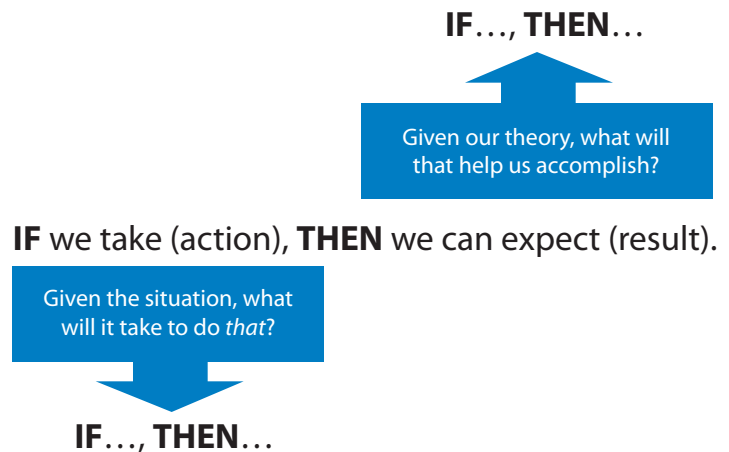
#### Before and After Action Reviews

An action learning plan looks for the natural “punctuation points” in a workflow and uses them to prompt learning activities. Board preparation, grantee contracting and reporting, convenings, and even preparing to meet with peers at conferences can serve as punctuation points for learning. Before Action Reviews (BAR) and After Action Reviews (AAR) are a simple discipline some foundations are adopting to speed up the learning cycle. BARs help everyone involved to remind themselves about their intended short- and longer-term outcomes and their thinking about what it will take to get there before launching into action. AARs help them deliberately reflect just after an activity about whether their thinking and actions moved them toward their intended outcomes and what they intend to sustain or improve through the next set of actions.<sup>5</sup>

### Growing Know-How Plan

One of the most fundamental challenges organizations face as they make the effort to capture what

FIGURE 7 The Relationship Between Theory and Action



**An action learning plan looks for the natural “punctuation points” in a workflow and uses them to prompt learning activities.**

they have learned has always been getting people to use it. If nothing gets captured and brought into the community to reflect on, knowledge quickly dissipates. What matters is that foundations and their communities find ways to make it easy for program officers, grantees, and other stakeholders to capture nuggets of news and insight in a single place, and find natural points in the work process to reflect on what has been collected.

If foundations are able to identify those parts of the theory that are most uncertain or highest leverage, and keep Framing Questions related to them actively in sight, then as everyone goes about their work, they are more likely to notice something newsworthy that holds a lesson for the foundation. This practice is one more way in which theory remains visible and linked to work.

### Learn How to Learn from Failures

As the focus on demonstrating impact has increased, philanthropy has become serious about recognizing and learning from failures and disappointing results. Learning from philanthropic

failures is challenging for a number of reasons. In a recent Center for Effective Philanthropy guest blog post, Bob Hughes, VP and Chief Learning Officer for Robert Wood Johnson Foundation,

observed that “failures can puncture deeply held beliefs about what works and why in bringing about social change. They can generate conflict and disagreement among people with common

## Good Practices

**W**e’ve heard about many good practices that worked because of the unique characteristics of the foundations that discovered them. *There is no single best practice that fits every situation.* Here are a few simple ideas that this research suggests as a starting point.

### Involve potential grantees and other stakeholders in creating program theory.

Whenever possible, involve people who represent all parts of the change you are aiming to achieve in thinking through what short- and long-term outcomes will look like and what it will take to get there.

### Keep theory visible and editable.

The moment the theory you put on paper disconnects with your theory in action, it loses its value as a compass for your learning process. Revise the theory if it doesn’t reflect the choices you are making; the actions you are taking; the way you will recognize program success.

### Use Framing Questions to turn key actions into learning experiments.

As you plan the next critical step of action in a program, ask yourselves what little arrow in your theory this piece of action supports. Turn that into a Framing Question and consciously state your shared hypothesis about what it will take to succeed.

### Create information flows between grantees and foundation staff during implementation.

Hone in on the Framing Questions that are most important for both grantees and the foundation. Pay attention to the “news and insights” related to those questions and find ways to bring that information in front of program staff to discuss regularly.

### Use a complement of internal and external real-time and summative evaluation to support learning.

Find ways to have your evaluation and action learning plans support each other. Aim to be able to report in the summative program evaluation not just about what you collectively accomplished, but what you learned along the path as you ran into challenges and course-corrected.

### Focus on learning around the “little arrows” to strengthen the building blocks of your craft.

Think of the little arrows in your theory as spaces for experimentation and innovation. Develop the discipline to focus on the most critical arrows and “peel the onion” about what works when to accomplish what.

### Reflect not just on actions, but on the theory behind them.

Be sure that when you declare success, it is not just because you completed a task. Use reflection to test your thinking as well as your actions and do the deeper learning that will build the foundation’s capacity to think through complex challenges in the future.

### Use a learning agenda to guide who should reflect when, for whose benefit.

To be respectful of everyone’s time, don’t ask people to reflect without first knowing when and where insights gained can be applied to improve future work.

## Recommendations for Leaders

### Get good as a foundation at figuring out the important questions.

Know your most important learning questions. A foundation may ask lots of questions as they come to mind, but it may lack the disciplined follow-through to learn

aims and values.” He observed that “failures involve people, institutions and reputations that might be harmed through full disclosure. Failures have the risk of jeopardizing future funding.”<sup>6</sup>

effectively from them. If staff members feel whipsawed by random but seemingly important questions, they will grow weary of the quest.

#### **Learn how to learn from failures.**

Leaders create safe spaces for honest reflection. They reward the people on their staff who are willing to learn from their mistakes, and they lead the way by their own honesty.

#### **Close the loop.**

If leaders don’t insist on closing the loop, staff members begin to doubt the foundation’s commitment to learning.

#### **Be humble and curious.**

Leaders can set the tone of humility and curiosity that creates a virtuous cycle where there are no right answers, only hypotheses to be tested, and where program staff and grantees keep the important questions in mind and are conscious about learning through action.

#### **Don’t call yourself a “learning organization” too soon.**

Calling yourself a learning organization without having a clear rationale to back it up can create an immune response. A good dose of skepticism and a rigorous “due diligence” process helps organizations create learning practices that are focused and fit-for-purpose.

When disappointing results are not addressed early, their significance grows, and it becomes more and more difficult to bring them into the light.

Organizations often “fix” a failure by tossing out the “failed” approach and replacing it with another. This classic baby-and-the-bathwater mistake leads foundations to oscillate back and forth between fads. Swapping out approaches is not the same

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**The most powerful way to learn from either a failure or a success is to compare it with other similar situations to discover more robust insights.**

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as learning. And if the reason for the failure was not the approach, but the execution of it, what lesson does the foundation learn? For a foundation to learn from such a change requires that staff reflect on what it was about the situation that made one approach work better than another or what else might have contributed to the failure, and to form a hypothesis about which approaches work in which situations – to build the toolbox rather than discarding tools along the path.

What does it take, then, to truly learn from a failure?

There is little information contained in a single failure about what will work. There is a tendency to over-learn on the one hand (e.g., lessons that include the words “always” or “never”) or to write it off on the other. The most realistic thing to learn from a single failure or success, therefore, is a set of pointers about patterns that might present themselves in future programs. Rather than thinking of them as “lessons learned,” they might be better thought of as “lessons to be learned.”<sup>7</sup> What should we be looking for next time that might lead us toward success or failure?

The most powerful way to learn from either a failure or a success is to compare it with other similar situations to discover more robust insights. Using comparison also relieves the pressure of learning from a single, painful failure. Why did this approach work here and not there? Were there similar reasons why these two programs failed/succeeded or did they both fail/succeed for different reasons? If so, what should we really learn

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### **Foundations need tools that make it easier to bring news and insights from programs back into the foundation and make meaning of them.**

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from them? To that end, if done in a safe, trusting environment where people can openly reflect on decisions and actions, reflection can help uncover deeper insights.

If the weak link is between the lesson and its application, then foundations need to invest as much or more on learning from lessons as they do on sharing them. The collective know-how of the field of philanthropy would, we propose, grow much more quickly if foundations increased their investment in reflecting on their work, setting up deliberate experiments to try out new ideas, and bringing new insights from those experiments back to the field.

#### ***Closing the Loop***

A learning agenda helps make program staff and grantees more attentive to learning opportunities that might otherwise pass unnoticed. It can stimulate a strategic dialogue with grantees and intermediaries about their respective theories of change and indicators, and create a regular

information flow between grantees and foundation staff. It makes building a learning discipline easier to do and staff less resistant, because learning is in service of the real work that is at the heart of the foundation's mission.

The better a foundation gets at closing the learning loop, the more innovative and emergent it can be in accommodating new thinking. It allows the space for – and even encourages – competing hypotheses to be explored simultaneously or in faster sequence. A clear learning agenda helps a foundation mitigate the risks involved in placing its full heft behind new, more strategic approaches to social change.

#### **Stronger Networks, Greater Impact**

What we take away from this research: Foundations need tools that make it easier to bring news and insights from programs back into the foundation and make meaning of them. They need easier ways to generate theory from grantmaking decisions and actions; methods for collecting data around the little arrows, including pulling together data from across programs; and ticklers to help busy staff remember to use the punctuation points in their work to strengthen the links and close the learning loop.

The field as a whole needs to make it easier for foundations to grow know-how with their peers: to collaborate on identifying the important Framing Questions they hold in common and easy ways to gather and learn from the news and insights generated by, and captured from, the entire community. As foundations set their sights on becoming “learning organizations,” they need to think carefully about what that means to avoid learning for learning's sake and to invest in ways that manage the risks of being strategic. The outcome should be stronger networks and greater impact. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 This article is dedicated to the memory of our friend and research partner, Bruce Boggs. His vision, insight, and passion continue to inspire us daily.
- 2 This section draws from the writings of John H. Holland on complex adaptive systems, including his books *Emergence* (Perseus Books, 1998) and *Hidden Order* (Perseus Books, 1995).
- 3 Knowles, M., Holton, E., Swanson, R. (1998). *The Adult Learner*, 5th Edition. Butterworth-Heinemann.
- 4 For more details about emergent learning, see "Growing Knowledge Together: Using Emergent Learning and EL Maps for Better Results," Marilyn Darling and Charles Parry, *Reflections*, V8N1.
- 5 For more information about AARs and BARs, see "Learning in the Thick of It" by Marilyn Darling, Charles Parry, and Joseph Moore, *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 2005; the article is also available at [www.signetconsulting.com](http://www.signetconsulting.com).
- 6 "Can Failure Be the Key to Foundation Effectiveness?" [www.effectivephilanthropy.org/blog](http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/blog), Jan 11, 2010.
- 7 "Lessons (Not Yet) Learned," by Marilyn Darling and Jillaine Smith, *The Foundation Review*, Volume 3, Numbers 1–2, 2011.

## FEATURE 11.3

# It Takes a School to Raise a Village

CAROL GORELICK

Today, most of us recognize that the educational system doesn't terminate at the boundary of school property. The concept of community schools has developed from a preference for teaching children in neighborhood schools to a movement that sees the school as a hub that brings together many partners to offer a range of support and opportunities for children, youth, families, and the larger community. From 2007–2010, the ABC Connects program applied a systems approach and organizational learning tools to the challenge of transforming two schools in South Africa and two schools in Detroit, Michigan, into vibrant centers of community life. These schools engaged with parents and other education stakeholders to address the challenges of poverty, improve teaching and learning, and support students' well-being and development. At the same time, students and teachers benefited from taking part in cross-cultural learning opportunities with their counterparts on the other side of the globe. ABC Connects continues to build on the lessons learned from this pilot program.



Carol Gorelick

**“** *We as children have power to change the whole world. Learn as much as you can. Be somebody in life. Try to change the world.”*  
Akhona Sokutu, a ninth grader at the Willow Park School in East London, South Africa, made this moving statement at the launch of the ABC Connects project, attended by 1,000 students, teachers, school leaders, partners, and community members. ABC Connects uses a systems approach and organizational learning tools to improve the quality of education for children and young people in poor areas. From 2007–2010, through a three-year action research pilot program funded by the Kellogg Foundation, my partner and I sought to transform two schools in South Africa and two schools in Detroit, Michigan, into vibrant centers of community life. These schools engaged with parents and other education stakeholders to address the challenges of poverty, improve teaching and learning, and support the well-being and development of students in becoming empowered, active, and informed citizens.

We began with the awareness that the role of education in developing productive, responsible citizens in a chaotic environment is a complex problem. We believed that our approach would improve the pilot schools and build stronger communities. Our intention was to identify similarities and differences among the schools as well as collect lessons learned. To a large extent, we achieved our objectives. The principals and teachers in Detroit were excited about the opportunity for their students and parents to see the hope that exists in South Africa despite extremely limited resources. In South Africa, the schools learned from experienced U.S. teachers, specifically about language and literacy instruction. Future plans exist for building on this short but rich experience by continuing to create educational environments that use the ABC Connects approach and by creating cross-cultural opportunities for students, teachers, and schools.



## Origins of ABC Connects

In 2000, I was a visiting professor at the Graduate School of Business at the University of Cape Town. Apartheid had ended only six years before my trip. In addition to the requisite tourist stops, I immersed myself in the culture and met local people as much as time allowed. To be sure that I saw many sides of life in post-apartheid Cape Town, I made it a priority to tour the townships.

Townships are residential settlements that were built to segregate nonwhites under the apartheid system. A large percentage of Cape Town's population still resides in townships. Despite their poverty, these areas are abuzz in culture. I visited the township of Langa, not far from Cape Town. The tour driver scattered stray dogs and chickens as he drove the minibus through a muddy parking lot and pulled up in front of two brightly painted shipping containers. A guide greeted us and led us into one of the containers. The walls were covered with crude yet cheerful artifacts: the alphabet, numbers, children's work papers, and shelves of books. These shipping containers were home to the Chris Hani Independent School.

According to our host, Maureen Jacobs, the principal and one of two teachers, this innovative structure was originally designed to hold 100 students, but 200 learners were present. This community school served functionally illiterate, culturally deprived children, mostly girls, ranging in age from five to 16. The purpose was to transform them into school-ready learners who could be mainstreamed into the state-supported public education system.

Ms. Jacobs signaled to the children to move to an open space at the back of the shipping container. They quickly formed groups and performed several songs and dances. Their energy and enthusiasm were palpable. When the tour guide indicated that it was time to leave, I asked if I could do anything that would be helpful.

Softly, Ms. Jacobs responded, "Clothes for the girls."

I was overwhelmed by this experience. Despite the extraordinary hardship in the township, I felt a real sense of hope. The spirit of this makeshift schoolhouse was infectious. I saw the potential for breaking the cycle of poverty through small, strategic interventions and was determined to learn more about community schools.

## The Challenge

The concept of community schools has developed from a preference for teaching children in neighborhood schools to a movement that sees the

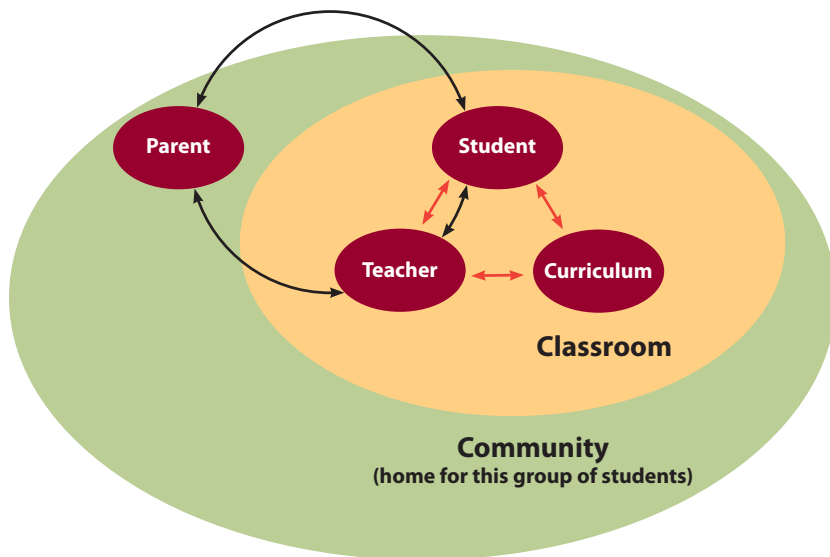
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**The concept of community schools has developed from a preference for teaching children in neighborhood schools to a movement that sees the school as a hub.**

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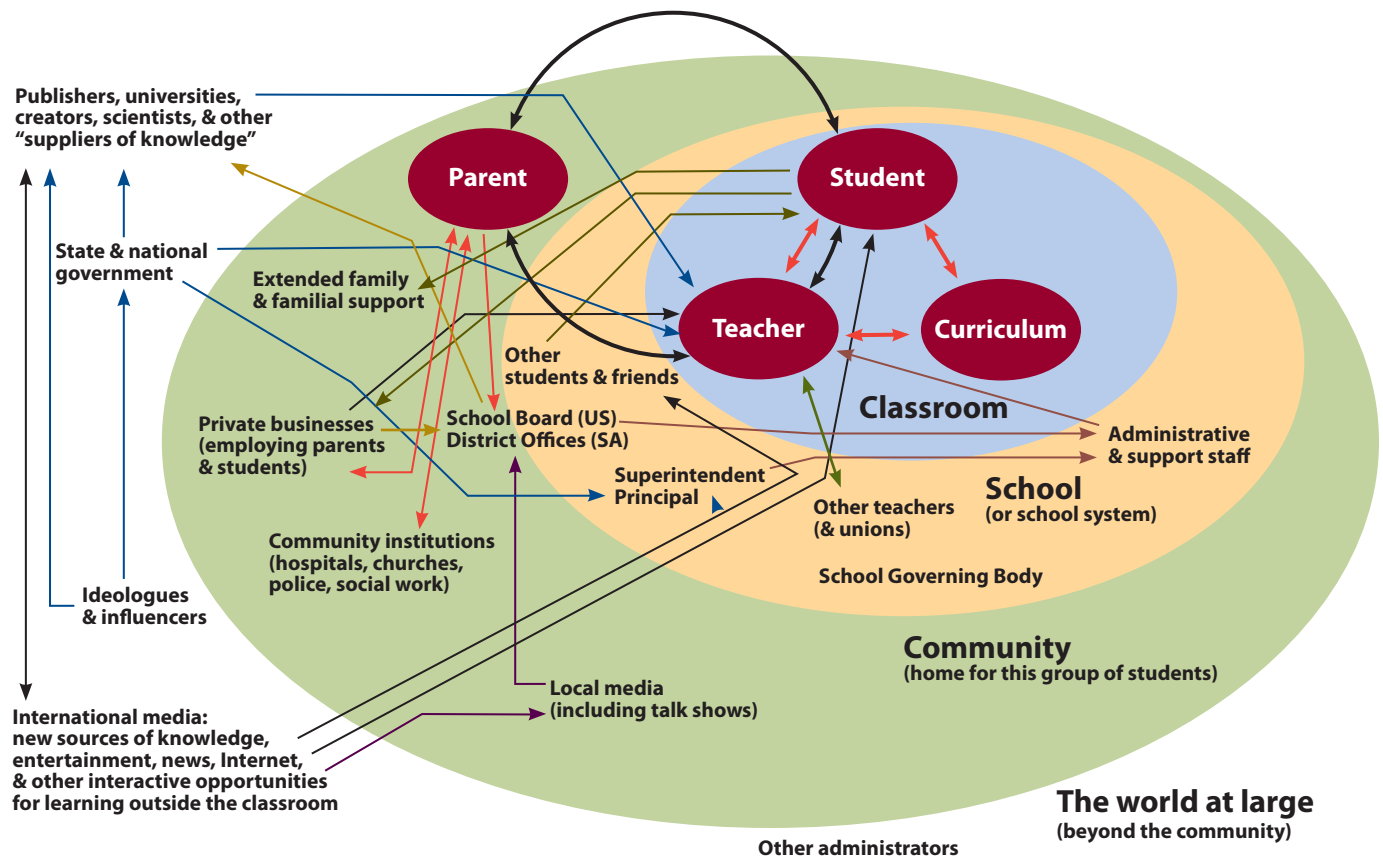
school as a hub that brings together many partners to offer a range of support and opportunities for children, youth, families, and the larger community. The traditional focus of schooling has been teaching and learning, the instructional core (Figure 1, p.18). As populations shifted and increased, educational institutions grew from one-room schoolhouses into organizations with added layers of complexity. Modern advancements, such as changes in technology, government, media, culture, and other socioeconomic factors, directly and indirectly impact the classroom experience. Figure 2 (p.18) represents the stakeholders that participate in today's educational process.

For many children, however, these modern advancements do not ensure a quality education. If learners come to school hungry, have witnessed violence in the neighborhood, are concerned about the well-being of parents and caregivers, or are plagued by the myriad of other social issues that occur in struggling communities, the educational process cannot be effective, no matter how well administered or well intentioned. Social

FIGURE 1 **The Instructional Core**

problems are always interconnected and collectively limit or deny children and young people the ability to take advantage of educational opportunities.

Today, we recognize that the educational system doesn't terminate at the boundary of school property. Addressing the many challenges that students and teachers face requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to community building that cuts across environments and incorporates a wide range of interventions. Social and personal problems are not exclusive to poor communities but are exacerbated in such environments, because the opportunity to get a good education is often the only hope for students and their families to move out of poverty.

FIGURE 2 **Stakeholders in Today's Educational Process**

## Making It Happen

The opportunity to work in community schools presented itself when I met Allistair Witten while he was working on his master's degree at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Al was a South African principal who had transformed a once-dilapidated public school in a dangerous Cape Town township into a vibrant center of community life. He eventually received a scholarship to Harvard to codify what he knew implicitly into a replicable theory and model for a systems approach to learning. We decided to launch ABC Connects and used what we named the "School-Based Community Learning Model" as the conceptual framework for ABC Connects' action learning projects.

Al and I believed that persistent poverty and inequality affect the life experiences and opportunities of young people and their families by undermining their potential to participate as active citizens in building sustainable local, national, and global communities. The need for educational programs that influence community change, and community change that influences educational programs, has never been greater in the U.S. or South Africa. Al and I shared a passion for education, South Africa, and the scores of children in underprivileged communities who could benefit from a new approach to education.

Through ABC Connects, we sought to involve all of the stakeholders in the extended community, using the school as a central hub. We planned to facilitate interventions and develop programs to provide youth and their families with support and services to enhance their cognitive, social, and emotional development. With the support of a Kellogg grant,\* we created a practice field for action learning projects to apply the conceptual theory while simultaneously developing methods and capturing lessons learned.

## Our Goals

By facilitating collaborative events and ongoing support with and for school principals, teachers,

## Allistair Witten

Allistair Witten was a teacher and principal at Lavender Hill Primary School in Cape Town. At that time, the South African Minister of Education was planning a Safe School program to provide schools at risk with electric fences. Al spoke out against this intervention, suggesting instead that "we must invite the community in." He started to think about what connects parents and youth to the school, and how they can be persuaded to see the school as an asset to the community.



Al began by raising the funds to run a skills development program to make bricks and blocks for building new houses, with the support of a local technical college and the University of Cape Town Business School. Within eight months, the brick-making venture had created jobs for local workers. Also, the number of break-ins in the community dropped.

Witten's experience led him to Harvard's Graduate School of Education, where he developed the School-Based Community Learning Model that provided the conceptual framework for the ABC Connects pilot projects. Al returned to South Africa after completing his dissertation in 2010. In August 2011, he was appointed Director of the Centre for the Community School within the Faculty of Education at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

parents, and other community partners, our objectives for the ABC Connects pilot program were to:

- implement the School-Based Community Learning framework at four schools;
- establish active linkages with the community and other external stakeholders aimed at supporting projects that used the framework;
- strengthen community relations, promote civic participation, and increase the intellectual and financial resources in the school community;

\* SoL and then-executive director Sherry Immediato were the official recipients of the grant and managed the funds.

## The School-Based Community Learning Model

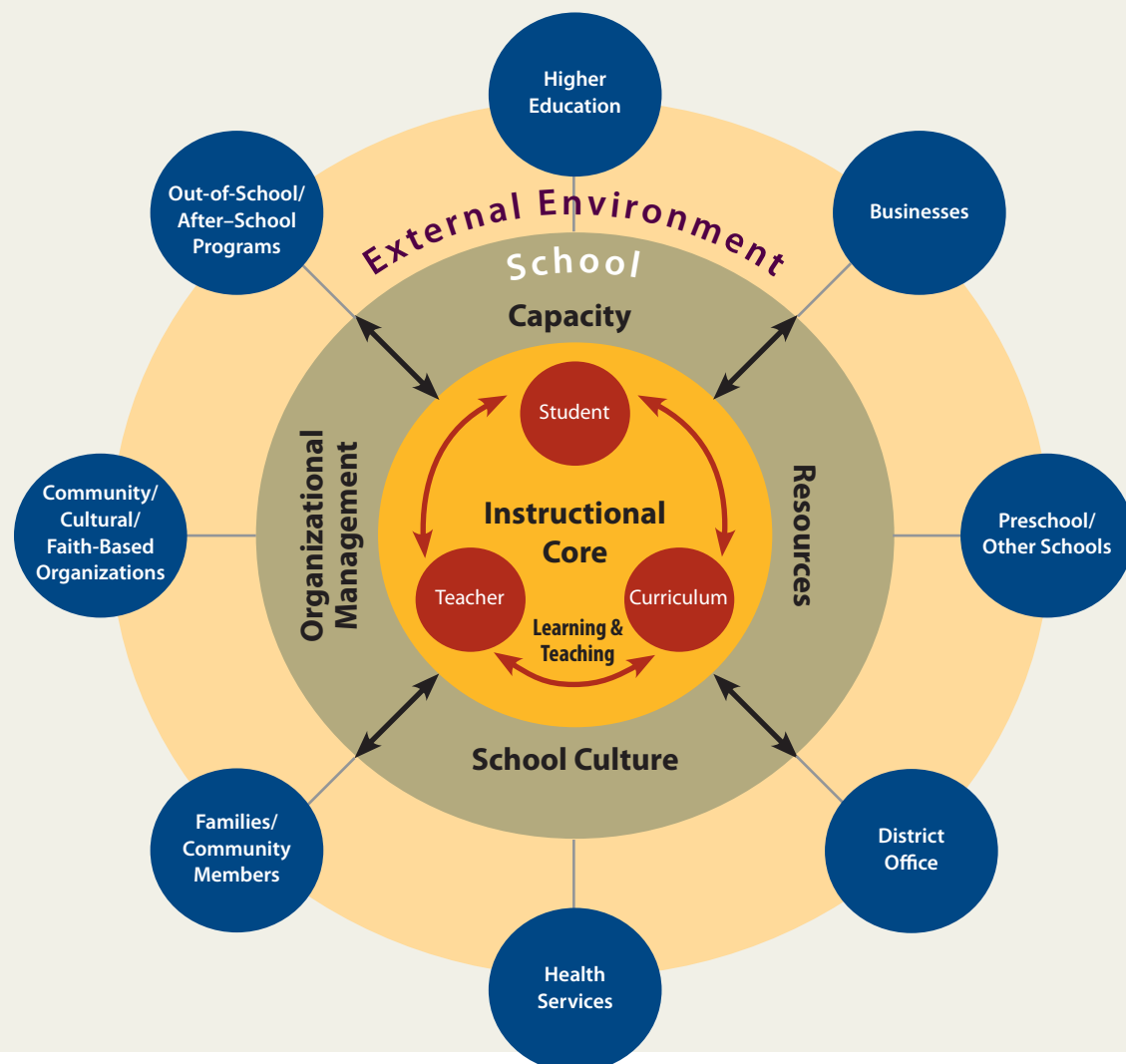
The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) developed the concept of “complementary learning,” which focuses on the different contexts in which children develop and learn. HFRP research has shown that deliberate and focused efforts to link the various learning contexts foster positive, consistent educational and developmental outcomes for youth and their families.

For his doctoral dissertation, Allistair Witten proposed the notion of “School-Based Complementary Learning,” in which the school becomes the central hub that is explicitly connected to other learning contexts (Witten,

A. M. 2010. “Building the community school: How school principals can lead in addressing educational and social challenges in South Africa”). For practitioners, it is called the “School-Based Community Learning Model.”

Schools and their leaders can play a key role in building school–community partnerships. They can act as *initiating agents* who start relationships and projects with other stakeholders, or as *integrating agents* who connect existing initiatives to students, parents, and other partners. Figure 3 is a visual representation of the School-Based Complementary Learning Model.

FIGURE 3 **School-Based Complementary Learning Model**



- build capacity in each local community to sustain the work beyond the pilot;
- create methods and tools as well as measurement and evaluation instruments to scale up and expand the program; and
- host a conference at the end of the pilot to launch a community of practice for the four pilot schools and Allistair Witten's three dissertation schools.

To implement the School-Based Community Learning framework in the pilot schools, we developed a six-step process. Our aim was to help communities in a lasting and sustainable way without being prescriptive. The community stakeholders themselves needed to identify problems and implement solutions, supported by the process we provided.

### The Pilot Project

The ABC Connects project team initiated pilot interventions in two schools in East London, South Africa, and two schools in Detroit, Michigan.

**Year One (2007–2008):** During the first grant year, each of the schools developed a vision and identified high-priority projects to achieve that vision. From the beginning, a critical component was strengthening relationships within each school and with its immediate network, and forging new relationships and partnerships with businesses and other previously unengaged stakeholders. For example, in South Africa, PetroSA committed significant funding for school improvement. The principals and staff were also inspired by the future opportunity to connect South African and Detroit students and teachers.

**Year Two (2008–2009):** In the second year, we did a culture survey at each school to collect empirical data to understand the current situation. We used the results to focus our professional development and project plans. We also began to connect the South African and Detroit schools through a penpal exchange for students and a "Critical Friends" literacy project for teachers. PetroSA sponsored an ABC Connects launch event at both South African schools.

## The Six-Step Process

The steps are not intended to be a linear structure, but rather an iterative process:

**Step 1. Build Relationships** by reaching out to community members, groups, and organizations.

**Step 2. Create a Vision** by collecting desires for the school from its teachers, leaders, students, and the community.

**Step 3. Assess "What"** by asking all partners tough questions about obstacles and assets.

**Step 4. Develop Pathways** to the future by drawing a roadmap of how to get "where we want to be" by identifying organizations, groups, and individuals needed to support the journey.

**Step 5. Build Capacity** for the future by guiding school communities in becoming training grounds for the work they will do on their own tomorrow. Our commitment is to create sustainable local communities rather than achieve specific program outcomes.

**Step 6. Measure and Evaluate** by looking back at the results and asking: What happened? What do we keep? What do we change or improve?

**Year Three (2009–2010):** During the third year, we focused on supporting the schools with their projects and on developing people's confidence with using a systems approach and organizational learning tools so that they could continue the work after the pilot officially ended. We planned a conference to celebrate, communicate, and disseminate the outcomes and learning, and to launch a community of practice to support ongoing and expanded work.

Here are some of the specific features of and outcomes at the different sites:

### *Willow Park Primary School in East London, South Africa*

Even before ABC Connects arrived, Willow Park Primary was a community school. It had been a



## Core Project Team

Name	Function	Location
Carol Gorelick	Project Director	New York, NY
Al Witten	Co-Director	Boston, MA
Sarah Bruhn	External Evaluator, Detroit	Ann Arbor, MI
Gordon Brode	Communications Manager	New York, NY
Jennifer Downing	Culture Survey Evaluator	Boston, MA
Pat Goosen	Local Coordinator, South Africa	East London, South Africa
Lorraine Lawrence	External Evaluator, South Africa	East London, South Africa
Duke Stump	Strategy, Branding	Brentwood, NH

“Model-C” (whites only) school during apartheid. Upon desegregation, the middle-class white students were replaced by black and colored students from at least three remote townships and squatter settlements. This demographic shift

resulted in serious tensions between the school and its adjacent white neighborhood and an immediate collapse of school-fee revenue.

Mr. Swanepoel, the principal, and the school’s administrators also had to adapt to the fact that, while instruction took place in English, many learners spoke only Xhosa or Zulu. In addition, many of the students’ parents came out of an educational system where parent involvement in schools was minimal. Not knowing how to interact with their children’s teachers and others at the school, they often chose not to participate in parent meetings.

Even with these challenges, the principal was undaunted. He successfully demanded funds from the school district, worked overtime to reach out to the surrounding community, and methodically expanded parental involvement. These efforts resulted in an increase in revenue from school fees and better relationships with the parents. The school established a system so that unemployed parents could work at the school five days per month as their payment of school fees.

Many South African children so rarely have had their photos taken that a chance to appear on camera incites a joyful frenzy at Willow Park Primary.





To bring the staff and leadership team closer together, the ABC Connects project held three offsite staff development sessions. In addition, administrators attended management and leadership courses. Teacher Eleanor Hansio said, “The project encouraged us to work together as a team. We now tend to consult one another more about learners.”

During the ABC Connects project, the school purchased a school bus to enable sports teams to compete with other schools and built a netball court. A computer, laser printer, and wireless Internet were installed. With community support, the student meal program was expanded; a new mobile library provided reading opportunities for each child. Beyond Basics, a Detroit-based NGO, facilitated art and book-making projects that gave kids the opportunity to see what they could create, improving their self-esteem.

Willow Park’s initial visioning workshop identified a community food garden as a high priority for employing community members, stocking the school’s kitchen, and offering agricultural training to students. The plan was to acquire a large plot of land adjacent to the school for the garden. Local farmers offered to provide materials and training. A small prototype garden was planted on the school property as proof of concept. Unfortunately, the large project still has not come to fruition due to legal and political conflicts over zoning and ownership of the land.

### ***Pefferville Primary School in East London, South Africa***

In 1973, a temporary prefabricated building was erected on the outskirts of the Pefferville community to serve as a school until a proper structure could be built. Almost 40 years later, this structure faithfully stands as the Pefferville Primary School. Over time, the school has been plagued by vandalism, break-ins, and hard luck. Campaigns to engage the community in cleaning up and participating in the school were largely unsuccessful.

By the time ABC Connects arrived in 2007, morale among staff was extremely low, and serious divisions existed. Dilapidated school buildings were surrounded by overgrown scrub. There were no boys’ restrooms in the school. Administrators and teachers were skeptical about the prospects of change through ABC Connects.

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### **By the time ABC Connects arrived in 2007, morale among staff was extremely low, and serious divisions existed.**

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An early ABC task was to purchase modular furniture for the unused staff room to encourage collaboration. Acquiring the furniture served to break down staff cliques, create a culture of scheduled meetings, and provide an informal setting for teachers and administrators to interact. The initiative led the teachers to prioritize their needs. With funds from corporate partners, people from the community repaired the facilities. ABC Connects installed a computer, laser printer, and wireless Internet; sent educators to team-building sessions; and provided training for school leaders. The school opened its first physical library with major help from the U.S.-based NGO Room to Read and the efforts of two passionate teachers.

Nevertheless, parent involvement remained low. A turning point occurred when the school planned a meeting and sent parents invitations written in English and Xhosa, the most prevalent African language in the Eastern Cape. At least 140 people showed up, and the excitement was palpable. When asked, parents enthusiastically volunteered for school activities.

As a result of the activities at the school, one of ABC Connects’ local partners recommended Pefferville for a nationally televised community self-improvement contest called “Kwanda.” More than 2,250 residents were trained and employed in an eight-month project focused on building



© Pat Goosen



© Pat Goosen

**Pefferville Primary, before and after. Visible improvements to the school have an impact beyond the cosmetic: They spark local pride and the motivation necessary to go forward with more complex community interventions.**

skills. Among the goals were preventing new HIV infections, assisting orphans and vulnerable children, reducing alcohol abuse, combating sexual violence, and generating economic growth. The community selected Pefferville Primary as the administrative hub for these interventions.

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**South Africa's people are reborn:  
One is either of the first generation  
of citizens to never know apartheid  
or of the generation that  
conquered it.**

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After three years of work, Pefferville Primary and the local community are transformed. The buildings are still old and in need of repair, but they are well kept and tidy. The community maintains a thriving garden in the central courtyard, and the school kitchen incorporates the vegetables into student meals. Members of the community are constantly at work in the school, which is becoming a center of community pride. Proof of this shift is that during the last year of the ABC Connects project, Pefferville Primary did not experience a single burglary, and community functions are fully attended.

### ***Barbara Jordan and Jamieson Elementary Schools in Detroit, Michigan***

The initial meetings with the principals at the Barbara Jordan and Jamieson Elementary Schools in Detroit were similar to those in South Africa. We conducted a follow-up visioning session with both schools, including staff, parents, and community members. ABC Connects offered to provide support in terms of capacity building and professional development for implementing the projects identified, but access to both schools was extremely difficult, and we had no on-the-ground presence to keep the work going. We had small successes from language and literacy projects that took place between the Detroit schools and Willow Park Primary.

Vivian Johnson, a Barbara Jordan teacher, spoke about the level of energy and excitement at the early professional development sessions. She enthusiastically described how her students wanted to know more about the lifestyles of South African teenagers and how they frequently asked about the status of their pen-pal project letters. As an educator, Ms. Johnson felt that the experience helped her realize that the issues she faces in the classroom are not local and that teachers across the globe are striving to develop better strategies for learning and behavior.

The third year of the pilot project coincided with major upheaval in the Detroit Public School system. Ultimately, little improvement occurred in either Detroit school. We attribute our inability to gain momentum and produce substantive results in Detroit as compared to South Africa to many factors:

### **Failing to Clarify the Scope, Mission, and**

**Purpose:** We realized after the fact that a vast disconnect existed between the expectations of the leaders and teachers in Detroit and ABC Connects' mission of transforming the institutions into community schools. While both schools established broad vision statements, teachers were focused on the possibility for immediate impact on their students, primarily through the cultural exchange with South Africa. This disconnect also seemed to be a source of frustration for stakeholders outside the classroom. Our SoL corporate partners, DTE Energy and Ford, were willing to support the ABC Connects initiative, but the schools did not take advantage of the opportunity offered.

### **Not Having an On-the-Ground Presence in**

**Detroit:** In East London, we had engaged a retired principal, Pat Goosen, to be our project coordinator. Because of Al's and my proximity to Detroit, our partnership with DTE and Ford, and resource constraints, we delayed hiring a project coordinator in the U.S. We later learned that beyond managing logistics, Pat played an essential role in the South African schools, establishing ABC Connects' presence, facilitating communication and engagement among the staff, and building links from the school to the surrounding community.

**Leading with Resources:** Unlike in South Africa, where projects were initiated between the school and ABC Connects, we launched the Detroit initiatives with industry at the forefront. Instead of mentoring the principals in developing relationships with these outside stakeholders, we provided them at the outset. By doing so, we created the expectation that ABC Connects would supply services and resources as opposed to our developing the school's capacity to identify its own needs and engage appropriate partners.



Students at Barbara Jordan Elementary in Detroit, inspired by their connection to South African pen pals, don African costumes for a Martin Luther King Day appreciation event.

© DTE Energy



Jamieson Elementary School in Detroit looks modern by comparison to the schools in East London, yet its students face the same challenges as their South African counterparts.

© Carol Gorelick



Barbara Jordan educators brainstorm project possibilities at a professional development workshop.

© Carol Gorelick



**Overlooking the Cultural Context:** South Africa's people are reborn: One is either of the first generation of citizens to never know apartheid or of the generation that conquered it. Despite the overt poverty, the spirit among the people is one of pride and possibility. Detroit, by comparison, has been on the brink of collapse after a sustained period of prosperity, and the overarching mood is one of desperation.

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**For all of our emphasis on meeting each school's individual needs, we downplayed their desire for connection, inspiration, and global relevance.**

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Both Detroit principals were motivated to engage with ABC Connects for the cultural exchange with South Africa. They believed that their students and staff would benefit from seeing their counterparts who had fewer resources and less reason for hope. Our strategy to use the connection as incentive through the early stages of the project did not work. For all of our emphasis on meeting each school's individual needs, we downplayed their desire for connection, inspiration, and global relevance. Instead, we focused on capacity building and professional development for specific projects. For that reason, most of the recommended work never got off the ground.

**Failing to Sustain Victories:** When we finally facilitated the connection between the Detroit and South African schools through a pen-pal project and the formation of a "Critical Friends" community of practice around literacy, we didn't have much time left to build capacity to keep those projects going beyond the three-year Kellogg grant. These projects had the most impact on teaching and learning in the Detroit schools, but we did not sustain them in an ongoing way, and they did not continue after we left.

## Lessons Learned

One key lesson we learned during the three-year process was that the power of relationships is stronger than organizational structures. ABC Connects' role in creating social capital and cross-sector multi-stakeholder relationships was a critical success factor in generating and sustaining transformational change in Pefferville and Willow Park. We worked with the schools and their communities to build bridges among stakeholders and create long-term relationships at multiple levels: within the school, between the school and community, and from school to school.

### *Within the School*

**Culture of Collaboration:** For the School-Based Community Learning Model to be effective, school leaders must create a culture that encourages collaboration. In South Africa, the project team encouraged collaboration by building trust and respect with the schools' principals and teachers, which ultimately led to increased confidence and pride in accomplishments for the whole school and community.

**Rigor at the Start:** Engaging a school fully with multiple stakeholders, parents, community members, NGOs, and companies is imperative. This factor was noticeably lacking in Detroit due to external pressures on principals. We learned that ABC Connects and each school should develop a written agreement. At the start of an ABC Connects project, the project team needs to administer a culture survey and gather baseline statistics, with a follow-up survey and updated statistics at the end of the intervention to effectively evaluate project results.

**On-the-Ground Coordination:** A critical success factor is local coordination at two levels. First, each school needs to have an experienced project manager to ensure that the work stays on track. Second, a respected community organizer, ideally someone with local school experience, adds credibility to the work. A community organizer can build relationships with stakeholders that generate and maintain momentum. During the capacity-

building phase of the work, these functions must be transferred to local workers, preferably in the school.

### **School to Community**

**The Model:** We found the School-Based Community Learning Model a powerful lens for assessing school-community cohesion and for organizing interventions. Additional effort is required to develop a replicable, scalable implementation methodology and curriculum.

**The Role of a Champion:** PetroSA served as a corporate champion, providing significant funding for the South African schools. In this role, it had an enabling effect that allowed ABC Connects and the schools to take concrete actions aimed at addressing the schools' challenges. Second, it had an initiating effect in that many subsequent partners became involved as a result of the initial PetroSA-funded projects and PetroSA's support of the ABC Connects launch event.

**Strategic Engagement:** An inevitable tension arises between the desires to do projects and to be strategic. Limited resources require a method for evaluating and focusing attention on high-payback initiatives. Ultimately, each initiative must create needed improvements in the school community and build capacity among community members to improve teaching and learning after we leave.

### **School to School**

**International Impact:** One of the core purposes of this international partnership was to develop a professional learning community for schools to share their learning. The students, teachers, and principals who participated highly valued the interaction – however little – between the East London and Detroit schools. The Willow Park and Barbara Jordan students remarked that they and their schools were more alike than different. Expanding the interaction between schools is an opportunity for research and next steps.



Hundreds of community members, students, and faculty gather under an enormous tent, compliments of PetroSA, for the ABC Connects launch, a celebration of work completed and a commitment to the future.

© Pat Goosen



A choir from Pefferville Primary School greeted visitors for the ABC Connects launch with an exuberant song.

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**Critical Friends:** Teaching literacy was one of the principal challenges in the South African schools. A master's student addressed this issue as a final project. To improve classroom practice, she established an international ABC "Critical Friends"



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**Leaders, staff, and educators from both East London schools came together for a residential weekend at a seaside retreat center, an opportunity for learning, mutual support, relaxation, and planning the path forward.**

group. The group came together virtually so members could reflect on, analyze, and give each other feedback around their work. The Detroit teachers were enthusiastic and helpful in identifying useful teaching aids for the Willow Park teachers. The participating teachers were disappointed that the Critical Friends initiative did not continue and expand after the project manager completed her required coursework. An ongoing community of practice – something that teachers in both countries would value – requires a structured project plan with a committed project manager.

#### **Communication Logistics and Technology:**

Technical issues made communication with our coordinator challenging and connection between the schools difficult. Additionally, the time difference between the schools in East London and Detroit (6 hours) made synchronous collaboration impractical.

**Going Deeper Events:** For Pefferville and Willow Park to get the “whole system in the room,” Al and I organized a series of yearly off-site weekend events. We combined *Schools That Learn*-based organizational learning modules and facilitated breakout sessions in which the schools produced and delivered presentations of their visions, goals,

and project plans. Each session expanded on the previous year’s work. Though each school worked separately to formulate its vision and action plans, the participants saw value in coming together.

**Community of Practice:** In late 2010, a professional learning community that integrated the ABC Connects schools with Al Witten’s dissertation schools was launched at the Manyano Conference at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). The level of enthusiasm and positive response to the conference corroborated our belief in the need for a province-wide conversation on how to make schools the center of communities. We learned that the conference content and design seeded supportive relationships that have already had impact throughout the learning community. A positive unintended consequence was the benefit to the schools from the opportunity to reflect, prepare a presentation, and tell their stories to a multi-stakeholder audience.

**The Power of Personal Artifacts:** Low-tech objects such as handmade learner-authored books and quilts were enormously effective in developing relationships and building connections. They serve as artifacts of accomplishment for the children who helped create them and for younger children who see new possibilities.

#### **Looking Forward**

Although the pilot has officially ended, the work is continuing. In South Africa, the community of practice initiated at the Manyano Conference has become a self-organized network of 13 schools with a local coordinator. The Faculty of Education at NMMU established the Centre for the Community School (CCS), a first of its kind in the country, to integrate research and programmatic activities to inform and support school improvement initiatives in South Africa.

The ABC Connects work is continuing in Willow Park and Pefferville. The Kwanda project recently contacted Pat Goosen, the ABC Connects coordinator, to launch a second initiative in the Pefferville community with the school as the hub.



In the U.S., we are exploring university connections as potential partners with the Centre for the Community School at NMMU and international programs such as Operation Hope, Operation Respect, Facing History and Ourselves, and Microsoft Partners in Learning. We hope to expand the interaction among the schools in both countries.

The community school movement in the U.S. is getting attention and support from the Department of Education. In addition, recent educational research includes work on school–community relationships. David Kirp's recently published book, *Kids First: Five Big Ideas for Transforming Children's Lives and America's Future*, advocates for linking schools and communities to improve what both offer children. Sally Kilgore and Karen Reynolds include a chapter on family and community partnerships in *Silos to Systems: Reframing Schools for Success*.

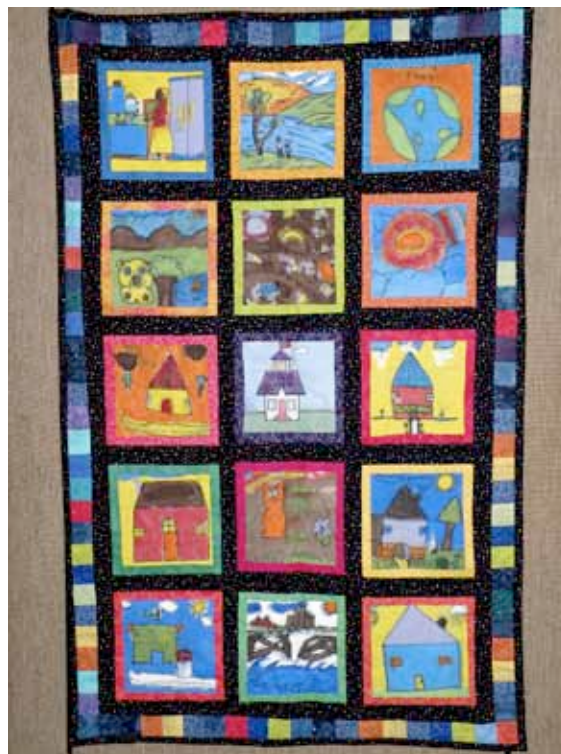
My next steps will be to focus more strategically on partnerships and alliances and to experiment with methods of cross-cultural connection. I would like to continue training the next generation of educators and social entrepreneurs using the community schools model and methods.

Creating a community school is fundamentally about culture change, leadership, and relationships – all of which take time. But many of the administrators and teachers were encouraged by the results they experienced in three short years. As Mr. Swanepoel, the Willow Park principal, said: "We all learnt . . . a small school can do things." Alicia Theron, a Pefferville teacher, reported: "When ABC Connects came, I was despondent. I was going to leave teaching after 34 years of service. When I saw what ABC Connects was planning for the school, I was so enthusiastic I hung on to see what was really going to take place. . . . I am renewed and feel so enthusiastic and excited about what's happening."

I am grateful to have experienced the work in South Africa and Detroit and to have witnessed the interactions among committed, professional



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**ABOVE:**  
Students at Willow Park illustrated their conceptions of gratitude on fabric squares, which were then assembled into a quilt and greeting cards by literacy partner Beyond Basics.

**LEFT:**  
A Gratitude Quilt is proudly displayed in the entranceway to each school as a sign of accomplishment to the young people who helped create it and of possibility for younger children.

educators in both countries. This as an exciting point in history, full of potential to close the door on social inequality and poverty as we know it and enter a time when every child can grow as a whole person. ■

In an Earth Day performance at Pefferville Primary School, students demonstrate literacy and public-speaking skills as they affirm their commitment to their environment.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## FEATURE 11.3

# A Systems Approach to Increasing the Impact of Grantmaking

DAVID PETER STROH AND KATHLEEN ZURCHER

**Why do many foundations fall short in their efforts to improve the quality of people's lives over the long run? The reason lies in part in our tendency to apply linear thinking to complex, nonlinear problems. Through research and case studies, this article shows the benefits of combining conventional processes that facilitate acting systemically with tools to help stakeholders transcend their immediate self-interests by thinking systemically as well. Using this approach, a project to end homelessness and a comprehensive initiative to improve food and fitness and reduce childhood obesity managed to achieve lasting systems improvement by making a few key coordinated changes over time. Authors David Peter Stroh and Kathleen Zurcher illustrate how the application of a five-step systems thinking process can help foundations make better decisions about how to use their limited grantmaking resources for highest sustainable impact.**



David Peter Stroh



Kathleen Zurcher

In the summer of 2006, a group of local foundations supported the leaders of Calhoun County, Michigan (population 100,000), in developing a 10-year plan to end homelessness.<sup>1</sup> The agreement forged by government officials at the municipal, state, and federal levels – along with business leaders, service providers, and homeless people themselves – came after years of leadership inertia and conflict regarding what needed to be done to solve the problem. Moreover, the plan signaled a paradigmatic shift in how the community viewed the role of temporary shelters and other emergency response services. Rather than see them as part of the solution to homelessness, people came to view these programs as one of the key obstacles to ending it.

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**“I learned the difference between changing a particular system and leading systemic change.”**

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The plan won state funding, and a new executive director supported by a multi-sector board began steering implementation. Service providers who had previously worked independently and competed for foundation and public monies came together in new ways. One dramatic example was that they all voted unanimously to reallocate HUD funding from one service provider's transitional housing program to a permanent supportive housing program run by another provider. Jennifer Schrand, who chaired the planning process and is currently Manager of Outreach and Development for Legal Services of South Central Michigan, observed, “I learned the difference between changing a particular system and leading systemic change.”



Calhoun County has done a remarkable job of securing permanent housing for the homeless, especially in the face of the economic downturn. For example, in the plan's first three years of operation from 2007–2009, homelessness decreased by 13% (from 1,658 to 1,437), and eviction rates declined by 3%, despite a 70% increase in unemployment and a 15% increase in bankruptcy filings. Readers can follow the ongoing progress of the initiative at the Coordinating Council of Calhoun County website.

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**The temporary shelters provided by Calhoun County led to the ironic consequence of reducing the visibility of its homeless population, which diminished community pressure to solve the problem permanently.**

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Why was this intervention so successful when many other attempts by foundations to improve the quality of people's lives fall short? For example, urban renewal programs of the 1960s were backed by good intentions and significant funding, yet they failed to produce the changes envisioned for them. Moreover, the programs often made living conditions worse – leading to outcomes such as abandoned public housing projects and increased unemployment that resulted from what appeared to be successful job training programs.<sup>2</sup>

Stories of well-intentioned yet counterproductive solutions abound, as we learn that food aid can lead to increased starvation by undermining local agriculture, and drug busts can cause a rise in drug-related crime by reducing the availability and increasing the price of the diminished street supply. In other cases, short-term successes frequently fail to be sustained, and the problem mysteriously reappears. We see this dynamic when civic leaders invest in programs to reduce urban youth crime only to have the crime rate

subsequently rise, or when international donors fund the drilling of wells in African villages to improve access to potable water, with the result that the wells eventually break down and villagers are unable to fix them.

By applying a systems thinking–based approach, the project to end homelessness managed to overcome the pitfalls of these other initiatives. Foundations and other partners combined two significant interventions: a proactive community development effort that engaged leaders in various sectors along with homeless people themselves, and a systems diagnosis that enabled all stakeholders to agree on a shared picture of why homelessness persists and where the leverage exists in ending it. In other words, the approach combined more conventional processes that facilitate *acting* systemically (such as bringing the whole system into the room) with tools to help the stakeholders transcend their immediate self-interests by *thinking* systemically as well. Likewise, a comprehensive initiative to improve food and fitness – and in the process address childhood obesity – illustrates how the application of systems thinking can help foundations make better decisions about how to use their limited grant-making resources for highest sustainable impact.<sup>3</sup>

**The Non-Obvious Nature of Complex Systems**

Lewis Thomas, the award-winning medical essayist, observed, “When you are confronted by any complex social system . . . with things about it that you're dissatisfied with and anxious to fix, you cannot just step in and set about fixing with much hope of helping. This is one of the sore discouragements of our time.”<sup>4</sup> The stories above about the failed interventions epitomize this poignant insight. They share other specific characteristics:

- The solutions that were implemented seemed obvious at the time and in fact often helped achieve the desired results *in the short term*. For example, it is natural to provide shelter, even temporary, for people who are homeless and offer food aid when people are starving.



- *In the long term*, the intervention neutralized short-term gains or even made things worse. For example, the temporary shelters provided by Calhoun County led to the ironic consequence of reducing the visibility of its homeless population, which diminished community pressure to solve the problem permanently.
- The negative consequences of these solutions were *unintentional*; everyone did the best they could with what they knew at the time.
- When the problem recurs, people fail to see their responsibility for the recurrence and blame others for the failure.

How can the interactions over time among elements in a complex system transform the best of intentions into such disappointing results? The reason lies in part in our tendency to apply linear thinking to complex, nonlinear problems. Systems and linear thinking differ in several important respects, as shown in Table 1 (p.34).<sup>5</sup>

For instance, a linear approach to starvation might lead donors to assume that sending food aid solves the problem. However, thinking about it in a systemic way would raise concerns about such unintended consequences as depressed local food prices that deter local agricultural development and leave a country even more vulnerable to food shortages in the future. From a systemic view, temporary food aid only exacerbates the problem in the long run unless it is coupled with supports for local agriculture.

### **Systems vs. Linear Thinking**

Because the problems addressed by foundations are exceedingly complex, one step they can take to increase the social return on their grantmaking investments is to *think systemically* (vs. *linearly*). Implementing a systems approach involves the following process:

1. Building a strong foundation for change by engaging multiple stakeholders to identify an initial vision and picture of current reality

TABLE 1 **Distinguishing Linear Thinking from Systems Thinking**

	Linear Thinking	Systems Thinking
<b>Causality</b>	There is a direct connection between problem symptoms and their underlying causes.	System performance is largely determined by interdependencies among system elements that are indirect, circular, and non-obvious.
<b>Time</b>	A policy that achieves short-term success ensures long-term success.	The unintended and delayed consequences of most quick fixes neutralize or reverse immediate gains over time.
<b>Responsibility</b>	Most problems are caused by external factors beyond our control.	Because actions taken by one group often have delayed negative consequences on its own performance as well as the behavior of others, each group tends to unwittingly contribute to the very problems it tries to solve and to undermine the effectiveness of others.
<b>Strategy</b>	<p>To improve the performance of the whole, we must improve the performance of its parts.</p> <p>Tackle many independent initiatives simultaneously to improve all the parts.</p>	<p>To improve the performance of the whole, improve relationships among the parts.</p> <p>Identify a few key interdependencies that have the greatest leverage on system-wide performance (i.e., leverage points) and shift them in a sustained, coordinated way over time.</p>

- Engaging stakeholders to explain their often-competing views of why a chronic, complex problem persists despite people's best efforts to solve it
- Integrating the diverse perspectives into a map that provides a more complete picture of the system and root causes of the problem
- Supporting people to see how their well-intended efforts to solve the problem often make the problem worse
- Committing to a compelling vision of the future and supportive strategies that can lead to sustainable, system-wide change

Based on the insight that non-obvious system dynamics often seduce us into doing what is expedient but ultimately ineffective, the Food and Fitness (F&F) initiative of the W.K. Kellogg

Foundation (WKKF) followed these steps in taking a comprehensive systems approach to planning, implementing, and evaluating the program. Initial planning began in 2004, and the first work with systems thinking in the field started in 2007. Implementation continues today in nine communities throughout the U.S.

F&F began as a response to staff and board member concerns about the rising rate of childhood obesity and early onset of related diseases such as type 2 diabetes. The WKKF program officers who initially led F&F, Linda Jo Doctor and Gail Imig, knew that many well-intentioned programs had attempted to address childhood obesity by focusing on nutrition, education, or exercise. Some targeted policy change, whereas others focused on individual behavior, but data clearly



showed undesirable outcomes continuing, especially among children from poor families.

WKKF had long supported developing a healthy, safe food supply and increasing consumption of good food. Because the issue was highly complex and prior efforts to address it had been unsuccessful, the program officers determined that a systemic approach would be essential to achieving long-term goals. They believed that applying this kind of process to F&F would increase the likelihood of engaging a diverse group of people and organizations, fostering collaboration and finding innovative strategies to change the underlying systems, and thereby creating and sustaining the healthy results everyone seeks for children and families.

### **Applying Systems Thinking to Program Planning**

Of the three major foundation programming functions – planning, implementation, and evaluation – systems thinking can play an especially important role in improving planning. Here are suggestions for how to integrate these steps into the program planning process.

#### ***Step 1: Build a Foundation for Change***

Building a strong foundation for systemic change involves engaging diverse stakeholders in the planning stage. This is a cornerstone of the F&F initiative. WKKF developed its knowledge base by bringing together researchers and theorists from around the country in fields such as public health, nutrition, exercise physiology, education, behavior change, child development, social change, and social marketing. The foundation also assembled a group of community thought leaders for a conversation about the current realities in their communities, as well as their visions for communities that would support the health of vulnerable children and families. In addition, WKKF engaged with other foundations throughout the U.S. in conversations about their collective thinking on childhood obesity and the roles foundations might play. From all of this outreach, a collective vision for the initiative began to emerge – not as a reaction to the immediate circumstances, but from an enriched understanding of current realities, as well as deeply shared aspirations for the future:

*We envision vibrant communities where everyone – especially the most vulnerable children – has equitable access to affordable, healthy, locally*



*grown food, and safe and inviting places for physical activity and play.*

Asking powerful questions is an especially effective way of inviting people onto a level playing field and surfacing and strengthening everyone's mental models.

### **Questions for Building a Foundation for Change**

- *Who needs to be engaged in this conversation? Who has been historically excluded but needs to be invited into this conversation?*
- *What is the future we and our partners truly care about creating?*
- *What is our intended impact? What long-term results do we want to achieve, and for whom?*
- *What events and patterns of behavior over time do we notice that are related to this vision?*
- *What are the key gaps between our vision and current reality?*

**In the ensuing conversation, participants came to realize that no single explanation, including their own, could fully explain the health outcomes they saw.**

### **Step 2: Engage Stakeholders to Explain Often-Competing Views**

Ricardo Salvador, program officer at WKKF, notes that one characteristic of social systems is that different observers view them differently. Jillian Darwish, executive director of the Institute for Creative Collaboration at KnowledgeWorks Foundation, adds that conversations in which people clarify their own mental models, listen deeply to others, and find a way forward together are essential to creating sustainable change.

Building on the results of Step 1 above, systems mapping is one tool to help stakeholders see how their efforts are connected and where their views differ. This tool extends the more familiar

approaches of sociograms or network maps to show not only who is related to whom, but also how their different assessments of what is important interact.

F&F's conversation among community thought leaders was structured using the systems thinking iceberg model. Examples of questions included, "What is happening now regarding the health and fitness of children in your communities that has been capturing your attention?" "What are some patterns related to health and fitness of children that you're noticing?" "What policies, community or societal structures, and systems in your communities do you believe are creating the patterns and events you've been noticing?" "What beliefs and assumptions that people hold are getting in the way of children's health and fitness?" This conversation ended with the question, "What is the future for supporting the health of children and their parents that you truly care about creating in your community?"

Initially, each participant's comments reflected his or her own work and the competition for resources that typically accompanies community engagement. Some believed the lack of mandated daily physical education caused childhood obesity. Others faulted school lunches. Some hoped parents would prepare more meals at home rather than eating out. Several blamed the rise of fast-food establishments. In the ensuing conversation, participants began to consider one another's thinking. They came to realize that no single explanation, including their own, could fully explain the health outcomes they saw. The conversation revealed different perspectives and experiences but also began aligning participants around common beliefs and a deeper, broader understanding of the issue.

### **Questions for Engaging Diverse Views**

- *Why have we been unable to solve X problem or achieve Y result, despite our best efforts?*
- *What solutions have been tried in the past, and what happened as a result?*
- *What has been working? What can we build on?*



### ***Step 3: Integrate Diverse Perspectives***

Systems maps integrate diverse perspectives into a picture of the system and provide an understanding of a problem's root causes. Participants in F&F came to see that the obesity epidemic in children was the result of national, state, and local systems failing to support healthy living, rather than a consequence of accumulated individual behaviors. They began to recognize the interrelationships among systems such as the food system, the quality of food in schools and neighborhoods, the natural and built environment and its role in supporting active living, safety, and public policy such as zoning. They also started to understand how individual organizations' good intentions and actions could actually undermine one another's efforts. These conversations paved the way for collaboratively creating strategies and tactics in later phases of the work.

### **Questions for Integrating Diverse Perspectives**

- *How do the underlying factors contributing to the problem relate to one another?*
- *How do changes in one factor influence changes in others?*

### ***Step 4: Support Responsibility for Unintended Consequences***

One characteristic of social systems is that people often unintentionally contribute to the very problems they want to solve. Systems thinking enabled communities working in the F&F initiative to uncover potential unintended consequences of their efforts.

For example, marketing the concept of eating locally grown food without developing a food system that can provide it can lead to increased prices for that food, putting it out of reach for schools, children, and families in low-income communities and thus decreasing the consumption of good food among that population. By focusing on documenting the incidence of disease and health problems, the public health and medical community could unintentionally pull attention and resources from supporting communities in creating environments for healthy living. Pushing for policies to allow open space to be used for community gardens could have the unintended consequence of reducing access to outdoor areas for children to play and be active.



## A Shared Vision of Ending Homelessness

In Calhoun County, Michigan, the local Homeless Coalition had been meeting for many years to end homelessness. Their shared desire to serve the homeless had been undermined by disagreements about alternative solutions, competition for limited funds, and limited knowledge about best practices. Although many understood the importance of a collective effort to provide critical services, housing, and jobs to both homeless people and those at risk of losing their homes, they were unable to generate the collective will and capacity to implement such an approach. They lacked a shared vision of the future they wanted to create, an understanding of current reality, and a common appreciation of how they were all contributing to that reality. Finally, the promise of state funding if they could agree on a 10-year plan to end homelessness, the provision of funding for developing the plan by local donors, and the use of a team of consultants experienced in community development, systems thinking, and national best housing practices enabled them to break through years of frustrated attempts.

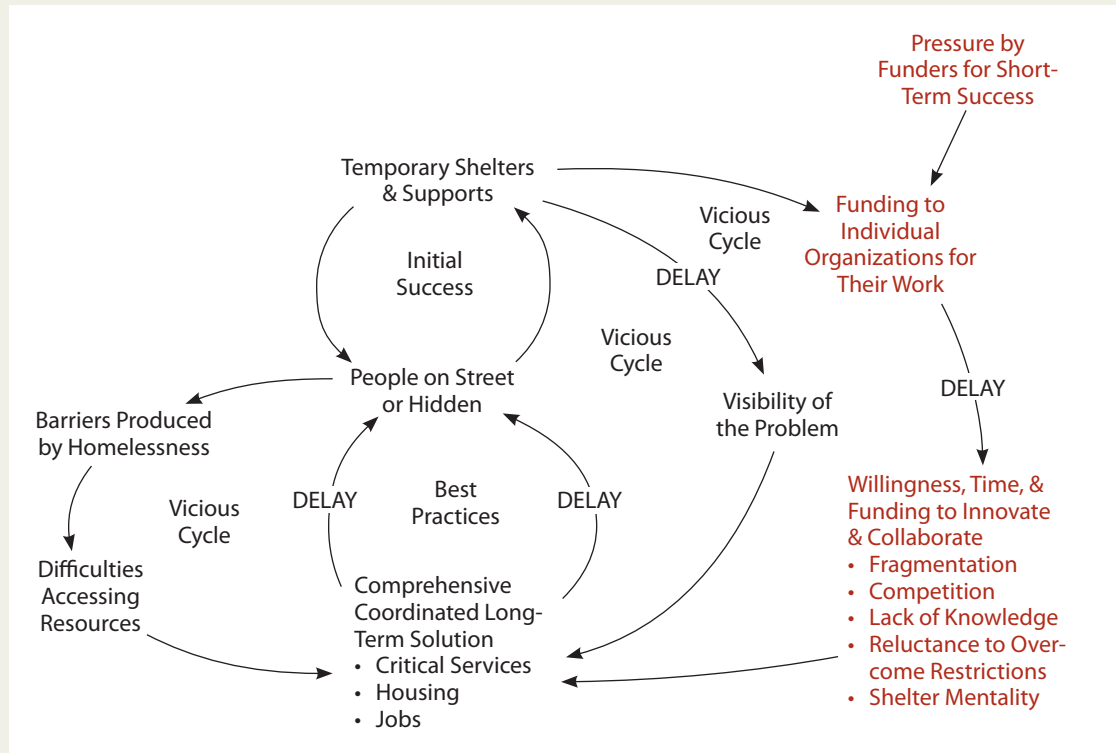
With the help of consultants David Stroh, Michael Goodman, and Alexander Resources Consulting, the Coalition enlisted and organized the support of community leaders across the nonprofit, public, and private sectors along with representatives from the homeless population. They established a set of committees and task forces as well as a clear and detailed planning process. While they began by articulating a shared vision of ending homelessness, they would not be able to really commit to this result until they fully understood the system dynamics that perpetuated the problem.

The consultants led the group in applying systems thinking to (1) understand the dynamics of local homelessness, (2) determine why the problem persisted despite people's best efforts to solve it, and (3) identify high-leverage interventions that could shift these dynamics and serve as the basis for a 10-year plan. Through interviews with all key stakeholders, they analyzed a number of interdependent factors that led people to become homeless in the first place, get off the street temporarily, and find it so difficult to secure safe, supportive, and affordable permanent housing.

We learned that *the most ironic obstacle to implementing the fundamental solution was the community's very success in providing temporary shelters and supports – an example of the "Shifting the Burden" systems archetype (Figure 1)*. These shelters and supports had led to several unintended consequences. One was that they reduced the visibility of the problem by removing homeless people from public view. The overall lack of visibility reduced community pressure to solve the problem and create a different future.

The temporary success of shelters and other provisional supports also tended to reinforce funding to individual organizations for their current work. Donors played a role in buttressing existing funding patterns through their pressure to demonstrate short-term success. Such reinforcement decreased the service providers' willingness, time, and funding to innovate and collaborate because it led to:

- Fragmentation of services
- Competition for existing funds
- Lack of deeper knowledge of best practices
- Reluctance to overcome government restrictions that made it difficult to innovate
- A shelter mentality

FIGURE 1 **Shifting the Burden to Temporary Shelters**

The community's collective ability to implement the fundamental solution was undermined as a result. In response to this insight, the consulting team helped the county define goals that formed the basis for a 10-year plan subsequently approved by the state:

- Challenge the shelter mentality and end funding for more shelters.
- Develop a community vision where all citizens have permanent, safe, affordable, and supportive housing.
- Align the strategies and resources of all stakeholders, including funders, in service of this vision.
- Redesign shelter and provisional support programs to provide more effective bridges to critical services, housing, and employment.

Today, the county continues to make progress toward these goals. The program has an executive director, in-kind funding for space and supplies, additional funding focused on long-term strategies, and a community-wide board supported by eight committees with clear charters producing monthly reports on their goals. A community-wide eviction prevention policy was changed to enable people to stay in their homes longer, and a street outreach program is going well to place people into housing.



If people understand how they contribute to a problem, they have more control over solving it. Raising awareness of responsibility without invoking blame and defensiveness takes skill – yet it is well worth the effort.

#### Questions for Exploring Unintended Consequences

- *What well-intended actions in the past have led to where we are now?*
- *How might we as a community or foundation be unwittingly contributing to the problem?*
- *What unintended consequences can we anticipate that might arise from our work together?*

#### Step 5: Commit to a Compelling Vision and Developing Strategies

Once a foundation for change has been developed and the collective understanding of current reality has deepened, the last planning step is to affirm a compelling vision of the future and design strategies that can lead to sustainable, system-wide change. This step entails

1. committing to a compelling vision,
2. developing and articulating a theory of change,
3. linking investments to an integrated theory of change, and

4. planning for a funding stream over time that mirrors and facilitates a natural pattern of exponential growth.<sup>6</sup>

The systems approach to this work resulted in unanticipated positive consequences. Developing relationships, engaging in high-quality conversations, and committing to a common vision during the planning phase produced immediate results in many of the communities. In Northeast Iowa, Luther College, the public school district in Decora, and the city council created a proposed community recreation plan under which Luther College would grant a no-cost lease on 50 acres of land for a citywide sports center and would raise the money to build an indoor aquatic center; the city would build soccer and tennis courts; and the school district would raise money for maintenance. Documenting these results during each phase of work is critical to maintaining momentum and funding for long-term system change.

#### Questions for Affirming a Shared Vision

- *What goals is the system currently designed to achieve (i.e., what are the benefits of the way things are)?*



- *How can we reconcile differences between espoused goals and current benefits? For example, can we align people around a meta-goal or achieve both espoused and existing goals at the same time?*
- *What is the shared vision that people commit to work toward together?*

### Social vs. Competitive Advantage

Our continued work in applying systems thinking to social change in such areas as homelessness, early childhood development, K–12 education, and public health affirms the importance of integrating approaches for acting and thinking systemically. We have seen people deepen their understanding and empathy for other's viewpoints, communicate their own experiences more honestly and transparently, and create more robust strategies together that serve their collective – though not necessarily their own immediate – best interests.

Acting systemically is perhaps better understood than thinking in this way, and many people have become familiar with tools such as stakeholder mapping and community building, and methodologies for getting the whole system in the room to bring together the range of interests and resources vital to social change. These are positive steps toward overcoming the pitfalls of the failed interventions referenced at the beginning of the article.

However, unless we drastically shift the way we *think*, all too often, bringing diverse stakeholders together fails to surface or reconcile the differences between people's espoused (and sincere) commitment to serving the most vulnerable members of society and the equally if not more powerful competing commitment to optimizing their individual contributions and maintaining their current practices. For example, shelter directors want to end homelessness, but they actually get paid according to the number of beds they fill each night. Donors want to end homelessness, but their benefactors get more immediate satisfaction from housing people temporarily. Service providers

who specialize in helping the homeless may find themselves competing for funds that might otherwise be allocated toward prevention, even though research suggests that \$1.00 spent on keeping people in their homes saves \$6.00 in treating and then moving homeless people back into permanent housing.

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### Integrating thinking and acting systemically is increasingly important given our country's growing income inequality and additional threats to social safety nets.

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As one nonprofit noted, the greatest challenge in creating social change can be mustering the courage to ask different kinds of questions, such as, *"What is our organization willing to give up in order for the system as a whole to succeed?"* Thinking systemically helps people answer that question in a way that serves their higher intentions. It does so by enabling them to see the differences between the short- and long-term impacts of their actions, and the unintended consequences of their actions on not only other stakeholders but also themselves. The result might be that one shelter director decides to close his facility, while another reinvents her organization to focus on helping the homeless build bridges toward the safe, permanent, affordable, and supportive housing they ultimately need to heal. The net outcome is that people act in service of the whole because it naturally follows their thinking about how the whole behaves.

Integrating thinking and acting systemically is increasingly important given our country's growing income inequality and additional threats to social safety nets. People committed to helping the underprivileged are challenged by growing demand and declining resources. It can be difficult for them to accept that there might be relatively little leverage in the part of the system where they

have committed their efforts, or that their well-intended actions might actually make problems worse.

At the same time, the challenges represent opportunities for thinking and working differently. In cases where a systems approach has been successful, growing budget pressures have actually motivated people to collaborate in new ways and reassess their distinct *social* (vs. *competitive*) advantage.

### A Few Coordinated Changes

There are many ways in which foundations can align their programmatic approaches and systems with the behavior of the social systems they seek to improve. It is useful to begin by clarifying the reasons for applying systems thinking and then work over time to integrate systems thinking into the core function of planning followed by imple-

mentation and evaluation.<sup>7</sup> One strategy we have highlighted in this article is asking staff, board, grantees, and other stakeholders systemic questions that help transform how they think about their goals and approaches.

From a grantee's perspective, Ann Mansfield, co-director of the F&F program in Northeast Iowa, summarized the benefit of using systems thinking: "The tools helped us put a pause on the quick fix." Systems thinking provides frameworks and tools that can enhance philanthropy's efforts to achieve lasting systems change results by making a few key coordinated changes over time. By following the five-step change process for achieving sustainable, system-wide improvement as spelled out in this article, we can increase the chances that our interventions will have the results we fervently desire. ■

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Stroh, D. P., & Goodman, M. (2007). "A Systemic Approach to Ending Homelessness," *Applied Systems* (Topical Issues No. 4). This article is available online at [http://www.appliedsystemsthinking.com/supporting\\_documents/TopicalHomelessness.pdf](http://www.appliedsystemsthinking.com/supporting_documents/TopicalHomelessness.pdf)
- 2 Forrester, J. (1969). *Urban Dynamics*. Pegasus Communications.
- 3 Much of the first part of this article was adapted from Stroh, D. P. (2009). "Leveraging Grant-Making: Understanding the Dynamics of Complex Social Systems," *Foundation Review* (Vol. 1, No. 3). This article is available online at <http://www.bridgewaypartners.com/FR1-print.pdf>
- 4 Thomas, L. (1979). *The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher*. Viking Press. P. 110.
- 5 For example, see Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Doubleday.
- 6 For details about each of these processes, see Stroh, D. P., & Zurcher, K. (2010). "Leveraging Grant-Making—Part 2: Aligning Programmatic Approaches with Complex System Dynamics," *Foundation Review* (Vol. 1, No. 4). <http://www.bridgewaypartners.com/FR2Color.pdf>
- 7 See Stroh and Zurcher, 2010, for details on these latter phases.

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# Reflections

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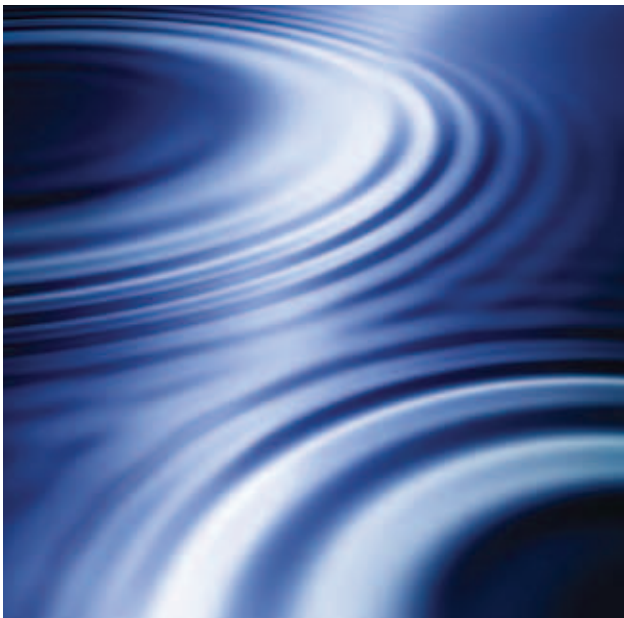
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