



Coalition Building: A Tool for Improved Community Literacy

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Literacy Powerline

*"In the long history of humankind...
those who learned to collaborate
and improvise most effectively
have prevailed."*

Charles Darwin



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Introduction

The notion of adult literacy collaboration is not new. Literacy coalitions have been working with community partners, promoting and advocating for literacy services since the 1980's. What is new is *collective impact*, a model of social change introduced by Kania and Kramer (Kania & Kramer, 2011). This model harnesses the power of partnerships to impact complex social issues. Collaboration and innovation were key concepts in the Adult Education Great Cities (AEGC) Summit project designed to advance adult education in large urban areas by building a collaborative process for community change. This brief will focus on AEGC Summit activities and two elements of collective impact: shared agenda and backbone support organizations.

Rationale

Social problems have a variety of root causes which require a coordinated and full spectrum approach to solve them. The problem of low literacy in the United States is one such issue which benefits from collective impact solutions. Literacy is an essential gatekeeper skill which would help more adults access the college and career opportunities that hold greater promises of self-sufficiency for them and their families.

Recognizing the challenges and opportunities that adult education stakeholder groups face in large urban areas are often times noticeably distinct from those confronted in other areas of the country, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) and the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) initiated the AEGC Summit project. The AEGC Summit capitalized on the potential benefits of collective impact. The AEGC Summit brought together representatives from five large urban cities to discuss the challenges and opportunities that adult educators face in sizeable urban areas. Participating cities were Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami and New York.

During the two year project, the representatives worked to build capacity and improve quality of literacy services with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for adult learners. Adult education and literacy coalition representatives from multiple organizations and agencies gathered to discuss challenges, share ideas, and develop plans for collaborative action to explore evidence-based reading instruction and to increase literacy rates in their communities. In June 2010, representatives from the five cities first met to discuss common issues and challenges and to outline shared values. They continued their interaction in three face-to-face meetings and five webinars throughout 2010 and 2011 to share expertise and develop plans for community change through collaboration. The AEGC Summit conversations brought attention to the common challenges shared by the cities. These challenges included serving large populations with high rates of poverty, unemployment, high school dropouts, and people with low English language skills.

Approach

Collective impact argues that...

Large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination, yet the social sector remains focused on the isolated interventions of individual organizations. ~ Kania & Kramer

The collective impact model provides a framework with which to build a collaborative process for community change. It includes the following five criteria for success (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Common Agenda. All partners have a shared vision for change; one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.

Mutually Reinforcing Activities. A diverse group of stakeholders working together; not by requiring that all participants do the same thing, but by encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others.

Backbone Support Organizations. A separate organization and staff with a very specific set of skills serve as the backbone for the entire initiative. Coordination takes time, and often the participating organizations have little to spare. The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails.

Shared Measurement Systems. Development of a shared measurement system is essential to collective impact.

Continuous Communication. Development of trust among businesses, school districts, nonprofits, corporations, and government agencies is a monumental challenge. Participants need several years of regular meetings to build up enough experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their different efforts.

The AEGC Summit process to greater/lesser degrees examined all five elements of collective impact. While work continues on shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities and continuous communication, in the limited space of this brief we will discuss the two that were particularly salient based on the cities experiences:

- ***Common Agenda.*** The participating cities came together with a goal of increasing literacy rates and improving outcomes for learners. Joining forces with city-wide partners, they built on their shared vision for the future with collaborative plans to address a shared agenda.
- ***Backbone Support Organization.*** The literacy coalition is the support organization that promotes and facilitates continuous communication along with the other support activities required to implement collaborative strategies. It is staffed and provides administrative, convening and community facilitation supporting all partner organizations.

Common Agenda

A shared agenda, supporting a shared community vision for improved literacy includes a common purpose, shared responsibility and trust. Sharing a common agenda, as was the case with the AEGC Summit, is one of the first steps for any community to initiate or improve collaborative and coordination efforts (Hanleybrown, et al, 2012). Sharing a common agenda helps to increase alignment across the employment, social service, and education spectrum, thereby improving educational outcomes (Alamprese & Gwaltney, 2010). When secondary, adult education, postsecondary, and employment are aligned, the student experiences a seamless education-to-work continuum. Students are prepared for the next educational step and don't become 'stuck' at points of transition.

The AEGC Summit cities discussed strategies whereby their shared agenda promoted increased collaboration, improved evidence-based practices and addressed common issues among partners. In Chicago (box on right), the collaboration between community-based and community college

Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition

One goal of Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition and its partners (community-based programs along with the community college adult education programs) was to broaden collaboration by strengthening relationships with local funders. While the partner organizations did not share common funding sources, they made joint presentations to local funders in the Literacy Funders Network, an affinity group of the Council on Foundations, and shared the needs identified in the AEGC Summit planning process. Funders included the Joyce Foundation, Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation, McCormick Foundation as well as other public funders in the human service and workforce sectors.



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partners was strengthened as partners worked together to increase professional development around evidence-based reading instruction. They also shared the common agenda with local funders and built additional creative and collaborative partnerships.

Just as alignment throughout the continuum is important to creating a seamless educational experience for the student and decreasing the challenges of transitions, cross-sector alignment is critical for making system-wide improvements in the social sector (Kania & Kramer, 2011). This calls for sharing the common vision of a more educated and trained workforce with community stakeholders while at the same time building collaboration and aligning agendas. The shared community vision then becomes part of the investment in community economic development.

This common agenda promotes and encourages literacy infusion throughout community organizations. Literacy infusion, the practice of including literacy as the foundational building block in all community initiatives, is a key example. It promotes literacy through a collective approach. Traditionally, separate agencies practice a “silo” approach whereby each works to achieve goals, with particular funding streams, measurements, and in isolation. Through the concept of literacy infusion, improved literacy becomes a common goal of all organizations. Each agency recognizes its role not only fulfills its unique specific mission, but it also contributes to the shared vision and to the development of community economic prosperity.

The implementation of literacy infusion is both bottom up and top down, both a grassroots and “grass tops” effort. All sectors can be included in community literacy initiatives. The AEGC Summit coalitions have diverse representation from across multiple sectors. Cross-sector collaboration was strongly encouraged as part of the AEGC Summit. Each city built new cross-sector connections and explored increased alignment as they identified activities in their shared agenda. Table 1 lists the types of partners representing the AEGC Summit participating cities.

Table 1

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

| | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Adult learners | Family literacy providers | Other coalitions |
| Business community | Health care providers | School districts |
| Chambers of commerce | Institutes of higher education | Social services |
| Child care providers | Libraries | State adult education |
| Civic organizations | Literacy providers | Vocational training organizations |
| Correctional institutions | Local government | Workforce investment boards |
| Faith-based organizations | Local media | |

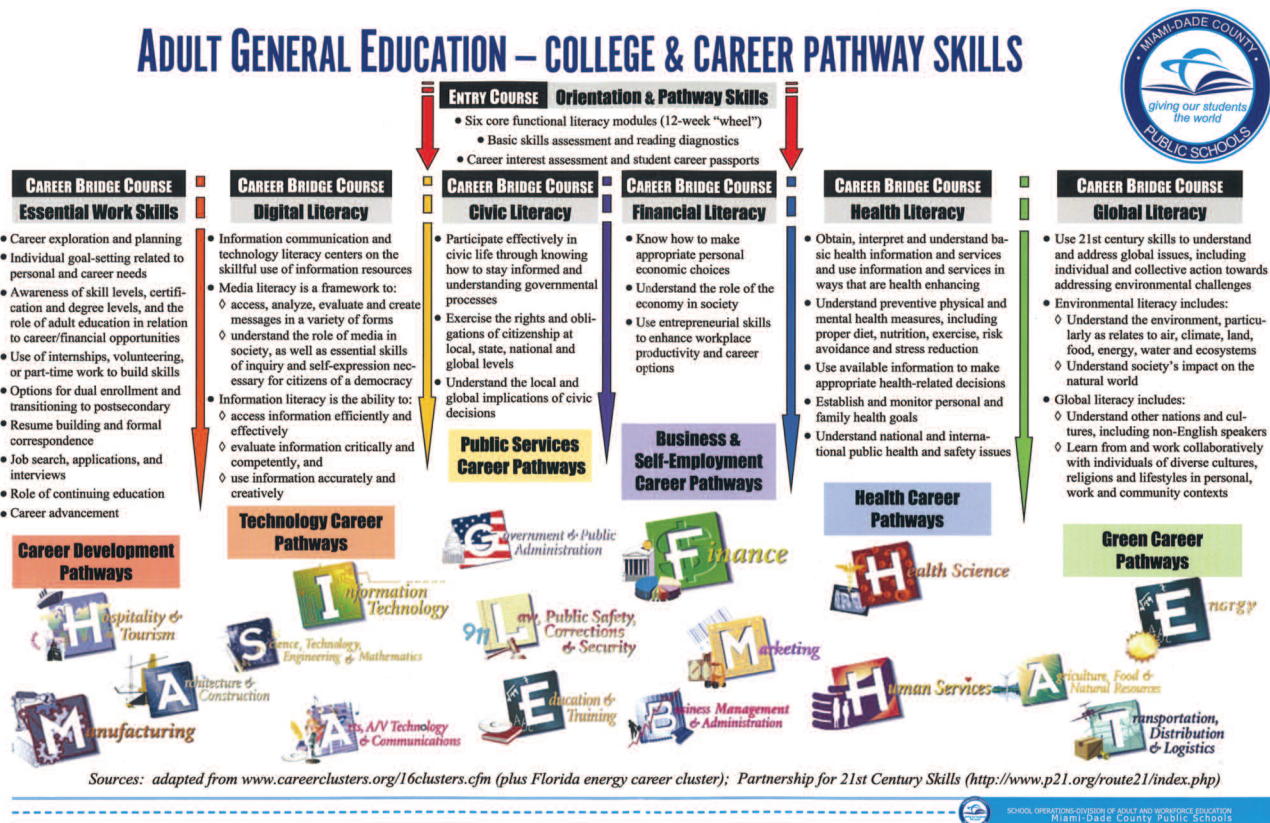
An illustration of cross-sector partners that have a shared agenda is the Houston coalition dialogue with the Texas Inter-agency Council. They share the mission of aligning systems, not only city-wide, but state-wide as well (box on right).

The box below illustrates the formal partnership of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools and Miami Dade College which serve one out of four Florida adult education students. With support of coalition partners and a cross-system vision, the 5-year plan for college and career pathways was initiated under a state grant in 2011. The AEGC Summit supported dialogue amongst the partners as they

Texas Inter-agency Council

The Texas Inter-agency Council includes stakeholders state-wide with the intention to:

- Assess literacy needs across the state
- Address barriers to improved literacy
- Identify evidence-based best practices
- Review partner services in order to increase alignment, reduce redundancies, integrate support services and increase accountability
- Build upon existing funding streams
- Engage community members and raise awareness



aligned curriculum and services at 12 college and district main campuses, 19 night school campuses, and 200 agency/off-campus sites.

Few communities today have fully integrated literacy systems led by a common agenda, not because it is impossible but because it is so rarely attempted (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The Workforce Innovation Fund, for instance, is encouraging a shared agenda and the kinds of cross-sector projects that AEGC Summit participants envisioned by seeking new ways to remove administrative, statutory, and regulatory barriers and enable a closer alignment and integration of agencies and programs with overlapping missions and clients (OMB Memorandum, 2011). For real and sustained community transformation to take place, common agendas with literacy infused across the age span, and across social issue initiatives, need to be in place.

Lessons Learned

Agenda alignment between community colleges and adult education smooth transition to post-secondary training.

While postsecondary education and training is critical for workers to succeed in the global economy, there appears to be limited availability of courses that bridge basic skills instruction to postsecondary opportunities and support adults' advancement along career pathways. Students who complete adult education struggle to move onto postsecondary education or training and face a variety of obstacles that include academic preparation, work obligations, schedules and financial aid (Alamprese, 2005). Postsecondary and adult education alignment in the process of shared agenda development encourages partnerships between community and faith-based service provision and community colleges. For example, Houston, New York and Chicago's increased



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collaborative leadership between AEGC Summit partners, including community colleges, led to greater communication and shared agenda development, especially around marketing the messages to raise awareness of the importance of improved literacy. Another example involved the nonprofit community partners in the AEGC Summit Chicago coalition who identified the challenges of infusing EBRI instructional practices in programs that were less structured than the college-based programs. They implemented EBRI professional development classes with community-based partners, taking program differences into account, which then led to more innovative action in the discussion of workforce literacy alignment.

Partnerships between workforce development, training, and adult education smooth transitions to work.

All participating cities continue to explore ways to infuse more workforce development and training into the adult education classroom as well as cross-sector alliances with the Department of Labor's workforce development system. Strong links between employers and community colleges can help prepare students for employment by ensuring that curriculum and instruction align with workplace realities (Sauzo DeCastro & Karp, 2009).

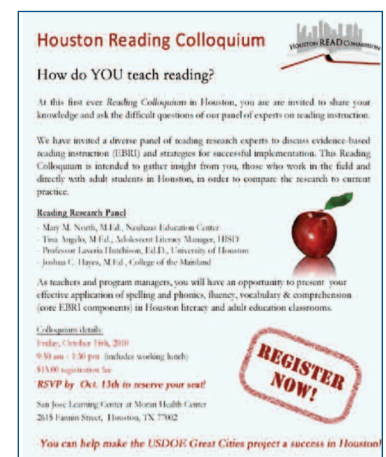
During the AEGC Summit timeframe, Chicago City Colleges underwent a reinvention process to better meet the educational and workforce needs of the community and to increase access to improved courses with better integration from all partners. This included the community-based service providers working to support those with low literacy levels and English language needs.

Alongside the Colleges' work, Chicago's Workforce Investment Council coordinated with Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition to align funding streams and programs, identify areas of potential collaboration and bring together cross-sector groups to explore increased partnership potential. This process is leading to new and innovative relationships that will better align services and strengthen the 'backbone' role of the coalition.

Sharing professional development resources results in greater instructional consistency and increased quality across all providers.

The Literacy Network of Greater Los Angeles had not previously engaged in evidenced-based reading instruction (EBRI), which was being provided by Los Angeles Unified School District (details in a separate Los Angeles Unified School District policy brief). The AEGC Summit provided the opportunity for dialogue concerning instructional quality and strategies to infuse EBRI both in the school district and in community-based partners such as the Literacy Network of Greater Los Angeles Literacy AmeriCorps project.

The Houston Read Commission, the Mayor's coalition for literacy, and its partner, the Houston Community College System, used the AEGC Summit process to expand professional development for both the adult education programs and the community-based programs in the coalition (the box shows their Reading Colloquium event flyer). Their goal was to deepen the knowledge of EBRI and to partner with local experts to develop tools to improve instructional quality in programs that include college-based adult literacy classes, community and faith-based literacy providers, and programs supported by volunteer tutoring. The long-term goal is to both improve educational services and to expand the number of adults served by this broad partnership of member organizations. The shared agenda and joint cross-organizational planning allowed for service improvements and offered economies of scale which were previously unavailable while organizations worked in traditional silos.



Backbone Support Organization

A literacy coalition is at once a distinct organization *and* a collective of many organizations and stakeholders. It is both the lead organization *and* its membership. The coalition's work is to act on behalf of the collective. Primary tasks for literacy coalitions are to facilitate change and track improvement in literacy in the community as a whole (National Institute for Literacy, 2008). A strong literacy coalition is able to address conditions necessary for successful collective impact. Indeed, literacy coalitions throughout the country use the strategies outlined in this policy brief to increase literacy levels and streamline literacy provision.

Literacy coalitions are backbone organizations that provide the overarching coordination and supports necessary for system-wide change. These organizations vary depending on the community, but usually support overall strategic direction, communications between partners, data management and analysis, community outreach and system reform. Over 120 communities across the United States, including the five cities participating in the AEGC Summit, have active literacy coalitions.

Backbone support organizations support data driven change across program types and funding streams. They serve as agents for partnerships and joint funding contracts. Backbone organizations are staffed and provide coordination and administration for shared projects. The five AEGC Summit city coalitions facilitated and convened partners. They gathered data, tracked changes and provided technical support to community partners. Equally important, they acted as a united community voice in raising awareness and interest in literacy-related issues. As a backbone organization, each city coalition worked in an environment of integrity and mutual support that was rewarded by community buy-in to shared city goals.

The value-added components of a strong backbone organization include:

- Partner networking
- Planning facilitation
- Relationship development
- Shared communications
- Administrative infrastructure
- Technical assistance and professional development
- Data collection and tracking
- Resource development

With these components in place, the AEGC Summit coalitions facilitated both teaching and learning by sharing tools, strategies, knowledge and understanding among partners.

Lessons Learned

Coalitions can address system-wide problems.

Developing and strengthening the coalitions' role, as a strong backbone organization, was a discussion driver for the participating cities in the AEGC Summit.

In New York City, multiple, diverse partners have come together to form a strong and viable coalition. The partners, who were also members of the New York City AEGC Summit team, have been collaborating on issues surrounding the High School Equivalency Diploma. Working with a wide range of stakeholders, including both city government and the private sector, inroads have been made to address the crisis facing residents of New York City without a

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high school diploma come 2014 when General Equivalency Diploma requirements and testing will change.

Also in New York City, finding information about what you need to do to prepare for the test was historically hard to find. New Yorkers can now easily navigate the system and:

- Enter a literacy program to improve basic skills
- Enter a literacy program that provides students with rigorous instruction
- Enter a literacy program where students can receive the support services they need to obtain their goals
- Enter a program that provides a pathway to employment, further job training, and college

Table 2

| AREA OF COMMUNITY NEED | POTENTIAL COALITION ACTIVITIES |
|---|---|
| Articulating a common agenda | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitating ongoing strategic planning Convening local leadership (key stakeholders) to establish a community implementation plan Providing strong leadership to lay the groundwork for identifying and coordinating financial resources |
| Developing and sustaining collaboration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training service providers to use various funding streams that operate within distinct systems to support services and employers Providing support for training and technical assistance aimed at helping local initiative leaders understand the funding landscape and tackle administrative barriers to coordination Managing specific initiatives that feature inter-agency partnerships Sustaining commitments for collaborative agreements Convening local decision-makers for collaborative planning across various agencies and programs Examining how specific local programs can work together to fund particular services/activities |
| Identifying resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying existing budget assets and gaps in their current use of potential funding sources Using resource mapping to identify funding for various services and activities, then matching funding streams to programmatic goals of the system Identifying and interpreting resource uses, restrictions, and reporting requirements Leading the development of grant and funding applications |
| Adapting administrative systems | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acting as fiscal agents, handling the task of coordination and efficient use of multiple funding streams Developing a data infrastructure that can provide the essential information needed to ensure accountability and demonstrate outcomes Evaluating the impact of efforts to blend and braid funds and resources, and encourage adjustments in strategies/activities based on this assessment Demonstrating program or initiative effectiveness to support continued funding |
| Providing technical assistance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing cross-training and technical assistance on aspects of services, such as evidence-based reading initiatives, job development, etc. Providing support for training and technical assistance for professionals and staff of collaborating agencies and organizations as they perform newly assigned roles Linking providers to important sources of training, technical assistance, and professional networks |

Working as a coalition led to increased awareness on how to scale and replicate best practices in New York City. The development of new tools, instructional approaches, and strong advocacy has furthered the advancement of a unified system, with new resources that serve coalition partners and students.

Any one provider could not have addressed these problems unilaterally. The example from New York City is only one of the many ways that literacy coalitions, as backbone organizations, can help improve literacy in urban areas. Coalitions can meet community needs as a backbone support organization. Table 2 outlines potential coalition activities and the area of community needs they address.

Conclusion

The AEGC Summit provided an opportunity to broaden local collaboration in five major cities, deepen joint partnerships, and improve strategies for coordination. Additionally, it provided the forum for inter-city dialogue and exchange of collective impact strategies, notably shared agenda, and backbone support organizations.

The AEGC Summit teams were focused on increasing literacy in their communities as literacy is the foundational tool for both individual success and community economic prosperity. Since ninety percent of the fastest growing jobs of the future will require education past high school (Pathways to Prosperity, 2011), AEGC Summit participants knew a trained workforce is critical if America is to remain competitive in today's world economy. To build such a workforce, our education system must evolve to prepare students for postsecondary education or training and beyond. "Advancing the goals of adult basic education from high school completion or its equivalency to college-and career-readiness is central to OVAE's vision of adult education in the 21st century"¹.

In an address to a Joint Session of Congress (February 24, 2009), President Barack Obama noted²

In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity—it is a prerequisite...whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.

With low literacy a persistent problem in major cities and thousands of low skilled adults not enrolled in skill development programs, adult learners and out of school youth represent a vast untapped resource that could substantially impact the American economy (Sauzo DeCastro & Karp, 2009).

System-wide change will require the collaboration of a variety of organizations sharing a common agenda. The benefits of collective impact are still being explored but the strategies are promising. Clearly, literacy coalitions provide communities with a means to make positive change in urban literacy.

From Darwin's times until today, those who learn to collaborate and improvise most effectively prevail. AEGC Summit participants assessed their cities' needs; created action plans to address them, learned about available federal resources to support implementation of these plans, formed supportive partnerships, and established a network for collaborative peer learning. This collaborative work continues beyond the life of the AEGC Summit as the cities continue their work both within their communities and with each other.

¹ Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education website available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/adulted/transitions.html>

² President Barack Obama speech to the Joint Session of Congress February 24, 2009. Available online at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press/remarks-of-president-barack-obama-address-to-joint-session-of-congress

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About the Author

Margaret Doughty, founder of Literacy Powerline, is an international literacy expert committed to supporting local governments, foundations, businesses and community organizations in their efforts to create effective systems for lifelong learning.

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