



# Funders' Role in Promoting Collaboration to Improve Equity for Children, Families, and Communities

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## Meeting Themes and Implications

By Kate Meyers

*Kaiser Permanente Institute for Health Policy*

Philanthropic organizations have played critical roles in supporting improvements in social, economic, and health outcomes for children, families, and communities. At the same time, opportunities remain for funders to achieve greater impact by leveraging each others' diverse approaches to common problems. The Kaiser Permanente Institute for Health Policy, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and The California Endowment convened a small, diverse group of funders to explore such opportunities.

The meeting organizers are engaged in a variety of activities aimed at reducing health disparities, and at a convening last fall with a broad array of health stakeholders, they discussed the urgent need for cross-issue, multi-sectoral collaboration to address the complex causes of disparities.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, the organizers sought to "test the waters" regarding collaboration by hosting an informal discussion in July, 2007 between funders in education, poverty, and community development, as well as health and health care. The aim was to explore the common ground between these issue areas and to consider how collaboration could accelerate improvements in social equity and well-being among the nation's underserved communities.

Participants included national and local philanthropies and the discussion focused on:

- Common ground between these organizations' different areas of focus;
- How current approaches to grantmaking can enable or stand in the way of collaboration;
- What cross-issue or cross-sector collaboration might look like;
- What approaches or tools funders can use to "cross borders" themselves, and support grantees in doing so as well; and
- What potential next steps might lead funders further down the road of collaboration.

The themes and implications summarized here reflect many of the ideas that were discussed, but they are not intended to represent a consensus of meeting participants' viewpoints.

### **Common Ground: Social Equity**

The various funders in the room represented specialized interests and efforts in health care, education, poverty, and community development. Participants readily agreed that the common thread between these different "lenses" or approaches to improving well-being is social equity – equal opportunity for all people. Participants also recognized that these areas of work have closely intertwined, multi-directional common influences. This overlap underscores the need for efforts that simultaneously

address these influences – so that, for example, efforts to improve health outcomes do not ignore (but instead build on) the importance of what happens in local classrooms and communities. To bridge these “silos,” collaboration between experts and stakeholders in the various realms is necessary. With this recognition, participants considered opportunities for and challenges to collaboration in the world of philanthropy.

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

While many philanthropies recognize the value of collaboration to achieve common goals, and some are actively engaged in such work, insufficient progress has been made in increasing cross-issue collaboration among funders themselves or among their grantees. Given the complexity of the problems funders are working to address, increased attention to the following opportunities for and challenges to collaboration is needed.

***A place-based focus may be the best way to structure collaborative work.*** Given the enormity of the social problems being addressed by funders, any attempt to work on multiple problems at once could quickly become complex to the point of paralyzing. One approach to organizing funders and grantees around solving multifaceted problems is to focus activity in a particular geographic area. A focus on place, and the myriad intertwined issues faced by people living in that place, can quickly bring a variety of stakeholders to the table, clarify common goals, and provide some boundaries to the scope of work. However, simply focusing on place does not guarantee collaboration – many place-based initiatives have occurred in recent years, but have not had a significant impact on how funders work together. Opportunities remain, even in activities focused on place, to better understand what is needed to accelerate progress and change.

***Strategic focus and measures are needed, but can sometimes result in overly narrow approaches to problems.*** Many philanthropies approach their areas of work by developing a set of strategies and related measures to track progress. While thoughtful, strategic approaches to problems are necessary, if conceived too narrowly, such

approaches can challenge collaboration by promoting a narrower lens on problems. A balance must be struck between identifying clear goals and milestones to address a problem and recognizing (and incorporating into the strategy) the broader scope of influences on that problem.

***Foundation board or staff members can either impede or enable collaboration – and in either case, turnover can prevent development of a consistent vision.*** Meeting participants recognized that supporting collaboration is not “business as usual” for many philanthropies, and that resistance at any level of the organization – from Boards of Directors to foundation leadership to staff – can quickly impede progress. Depending on where these barriers exist, organizations will need to raise awareness of the rationale for and models of collaborative work, to address concerns and dispel misconceptions. The ability of a small number of people to stand in the way of a new approach to work – even if it seems critical to achieving significant progress – should not be underestimated. At the same time, some boards, leadership, or staff are the prime motivators for and enablers of collaboration through their commitment and attention to broad-based influences on social problems and through building relationships outside of their foundation. In either case, the “churn” of board and staff members can make it difficult to establish consistent values about collaboration.

***Clarity of purpose, goals, and roles and constant communication are essential for collaborations to succeed.*** When organizations come together to address a set of problems, all participants should understand and agree upon their reasons for working together and what they hope to achieve. Upfront work to define how the collaboration will achieve more than any of the organizations could individually, what goals and milestones are expected, and each organizations’ specific roles are critical to progress and to preventing misunderstandings. The individual internal requirements and priorities of each organization should be acknowledged and aligned wherever possible, and appropriate governance processes for the partnership should be agreed upon. While pooling funds across

organizations may enable flexible work within the partnership, the mechanics of doing this are challenging. Constant communication among partners is necessary to ensure ongoing agreement about goals and roles, to address developing problems, and to share learnings.

**Partnership between national and local philanthropies can be challenging, but may have a greater likelihood of success.** National and community-based philanthropies bring different – and often complementary – skill sets and resources to the table, and collaboration between these types of organizations can make the most of general and more community-specific expertise. Community-based philanthropies know the grantees and other stakeholders in their area, and may be better equipped to identify specific place-based opportunities to integrate work across silos and to lead those efforts. National organizations often bring resources, connections, and experience. National foundations seeking collaboration with community foundations should consider whether they are looking for a true partner, or whether they view the local organization as similar to a grantee. Such partnerships should be pursued when both parties can benefit from and agree to the terms of the arrangement.

**Philanthropies should create incentives and supports for collaboration.** A number of tactics could be used by philanthropies to encourage collaboration across topics and sectors, such as:

- Invest in grantees that focus on multiple issues;
- Identify a logic model or mapping of issues that encompasses not just the organization's specialized area of interest, but also how that area interacts with other social factors;
- Clarify the foundation's overarching goals and ensure all activities feed into that;
- Create a specific line item in the foundation budget to support cross-topic activities and experiments around collaboration, to encourage agility and responsiveness;
- Create pooled funds among partner organizations to enable flexibility in how to reach shared goals;
- Enable board and staff members to do site visits or to participate in educational activities in different issue areas or sectors;

- Structure strategic planning and presentations to the board around integrated, interdepartmental, and collaborative opportunities;
- Make consideration of potential partnerships a required part of all initiative planning activities;
- Include participation in cross-topic work in individual foundation staff performance evaluations; and
- Restructure incentives for foundation staff to de-emphasize individual innovations and distinctive programs, and to emphasize group achievement of shared cross-topic goals.

**Affinity groups could work together (and with grantmakers) to connect across topics and enable collaboration.** Philanthropic affinity groups have traditionally been organized by specialized topics of interest (such as Grantmakers in Health and Grantmakers in Education). Given the important role these organizations play within their respective sectors, they have significant potential to raise awareness of the need for cross-topic collaboration and to provide tools and opportunities that support funders in this effort. They should work in partnership with grantmakers themselves, who have the ability to commit their organizations to specific initiatives, to create broad interest among other grantmakers, and to work through the details to make collaboration happen.

**Timelines for cross-topic work may need to be longer than usual, and would benefit from clarity of goals and creative approaches to leveraging funds.** Many philanthropies view three to five years as the long end of the spectrum of grant funding cycles. But given the complexity of the problems to be addressed by cross-topic work and the traction these problems have in many communities, collaborative efforts will likely require longer timelines and greater patience. Longer timelines will necessitate clarity about realistic goals and milestones, so that funders can track progress and continue to justify the investment to their boards. Goals and milestones should be regularly reviewed with collaborators to ensure mutual understanding and commitment. Funders should also consider opportunities to leverage the money they are investing through collaboration with other philanthropies – for example, each partner organization could stagger their investment in the project over time to stretch out the timeframe of the grant.

**Evaluation and research on cross-topic or cross-sector collaboration is sorely lacking.**

Funders would benefit from a better understanding of key success factors of collaborations, what sets of problems best lend themselves to collaboration, and what types or features of collaborative approaches are most successful, but research on this topic is scarce.

Participants felt that the research/evaluation community suffers from the same “siloeed” practices as the funder community, and that the fields of interest would benefit from rigorous investigation into the benefits of collaborations, what works, and what does not.

**Philanthropies’ current emphasis on “branding” initiatives impedes collaboration.**

Much the same way that individual foundation staff members have incentives to develop their reputations and portfolios as individuals, foundations themselves seek to cultivate and raise the visibility of their organizational “brand” to differentiate themselves from other funders and to indicate success to their boards. This emphasis on branding is a very real impediment to collaboration, because once an initiative is identified with one organization, it is much more difficult to engage other partners as equals. An alternative approach would be to identify the brand as the place or problems being addressed, with the partner organizations’ own interests remaining secondary. This would be a real shift away from the current culture of philanthropy, which could be described as more competitive than collaborative.

**Government can serve as an external force to drive funders toward collaboration.**

Government has the capability to raise the profile of particular problems and marshal resources to address them. Since many governmental entities focus on the same issues as many funders, opportunities for partnership abound. Public leaders and agencies could convene funders around given issues and request that funders’ efforts cross borders between issues. By creating a vision, outlining expectations, and gathering key organizations around a topic, government could serve as a powerful external force for collaboration.

**Charting a Path toward Greater Collaboration — Next Steps**

Meeting participants recognized that among the opportunities and challenges raised above, a number of specific steps could lead toward increased collaboration to achieve common goals in the future. These ideas were not explored in detail, but they provide a jumping-off point for additional dialogue and action.

- **Utilize affinity and interest groups** – The existing affinity groups and other organizing bodies to which funders belong (e.g., Council on Foundations, Independent Sector) provide a natural home for future efforts to increase collaboration. These groups could identify incentives for collaboration, create tools for self-assessment, outline the principles and mechanics of successful collaboration, and use their meetings to explore successes and barriers.
- **Learn what works** – Developing research/evaluation and feedback loops on current cross-issue or multi-funder collaborative efforts – and identifying the lessons from past efforts – can help ensure smarter, more effective approaches in the future. In addition, creating opportunities for learning among philanthropy staff and boards, including exchanges across foundations and sectors, can help broaden understanding of the connections between different issue areas.
- **Build on what works** – Funders should identify examples of successful cross-topic or cross-sector collaborations already underway, and look for opportunities to enhance and build on them.
- **Focus on current and potential activities in a specific set of places** – By identifying a core set of 10 to 20 high-need places (e.g., cities) and mapping the current investments and initiatives in those areas, funders could identify opportunities for collective action, consider core support to organizations in those areas, and identify gaps in services that could be filled by cross-issue collaboration.
- **Provide and leverage leadership** – Philanthropy boards and leaders can set the tone and develop expectations and incentives for collaboration among groups and issues, or they can stand in the way.

Funders should look inward to assess the culture they are promoting in this area.

- **Leverage outside forces** – Other types of organizations outside philanthropy, such as government, employers, grantees, and consumer groups, can provide energy and urgency around particular issues, influencing foundation boards, leadership, and staff to move toward cross-issue activities.
- **Clarify goals** – Funders seeking to engage in cross-issue collaboration need to be clear about expectations and desired accomplishments.
- **Enable collaboration through appropriate incentives** – As explored earlier, philanthropies have numerous opportunities to develop incentives for cross-issue collaboration, including setting aside specific funds

dedicated to this pursuit. Creating a set-aside may be the quickest way a funder can show its commitment and see action.

- **Be patient** – Funders need to give initiatives enough time to work and should stay focused over time on the overall goal of improving equity across issue areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Meyers, K., *Reducing Disparities: Goals, Roles, and Opportunities — September 20, 2006 Roundtable Themes and Implications*. Kaiser Permanente Institute for Health Policy. December 2006. [http://www.kpihp.org/publications/docs/disparities\\_summary.pdf](http://www.kpihp.org/publications/docs/disparities_summary.pdf)

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## Meeting Participants

Ivy Allen, PhD  
Foundation for the Mid South

Anne Beal, MD, MPH  
The Commonwealth Fund

Maria Beylin  
The Rockefeller Foundation

Larry Clark, MPH  
Comprehensive Health Education Foundation

Patrice Cromwell, MBA  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Barbara Dyer  
The Hitachi Foundation

Robert Eckardt, DrPH  
The Cleveland Foundation

Earl Johnson, PhD  
The California Endowment

Jane Isaacs Lowe, PhD  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Kate Meyers, MPP  
Kaiser Permanente Institute for Health Policy

Robin Mockenhaupt, PhD, MPH  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Erika Poethig, MPP  
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Mark Popovich  
The Hitachi Foundation

Murray Ross, PhD  
Kaiser Permanente Institute for Health Policy

Charles Roussel, MBA  
The Atlantic Philanthropies

Marion Standish, JD  
The California Endowment

Nicholas Turner, JD  
The Rockefeller Foundation

Winston Wong, MD  
Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit

## Facilitator

Barbara Leonard, MPH  
The Leonard Group, on behalf of  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation