

March 2016

The Strength of Jointly Developed Strategies

A report from the Georgia Family Connection Partnership Outcomes Team

THIS IS THE FIRST of a three-part series that provides results of testing our beliefs about Collaborative vitality. In part one, we evaluate whether a Collaborative that engages diverse partners is more likely to raise and direct funds to implement strategies those partners developed together. We hope this series will be a helpful tool for your local Collaborative, as we continue to improve conditions for all children and families in Georgia.



The Rush family: Ray, Crystal, Jason, David, and Lillie

Restoring Hope in Jasper County

Ray Rush's gravestone bears the epitaph, "Loving Father and Husband," and an etching of an 18-wheeler—an eternal emblem of a life dedicated to hard work as a truck driver. His wife, Crystal, and children—Jason, age 9, and twins, David and Lillie, age 6—frequently visit the peaceful plot since he unexpectedly passed away in fall 2015 at age 35 of a heart attack and brain aneurysm.

The harsh reality of getting by without three quarters of their income while paying for Ray's funeral swiftly set in for Crystal, who recently put her education on hold to focus on her children's mounting medical needs. Jason has ADHD and issues with his legs, and David and Lillie are autistic. David also suffers from severe asthma, has a heart condition, and is at high risk to develop diabetes.

"I want to earn an associate's degree and then get a job, but I can't really do anything, because I'm always going to the doctor with

one of the kids," said Crystal. "We have health insurance, but after I pay my bills, I barely have enough left for food and gas."

Even in the face of adversity, Crystal is determined to see her children succeed. She is grappling with severe economic problems, which has become part of the culture in Jasper County, where persistent extreme poverty isolates families and deprives them of hope.

"People are living in trailer parks without running water or electricity," said Targie Folds, Jasper County Family Connection (JCFC) coordinator. "A lot of parents question why they even have to send their children to school. More than 1,000 students miss at least 11 days in the first semester."

Most children look forward to carefree weekends. But for the 90 percent of children in Jasper County who receive free and

reduced-price school meals, Friday afternoon means going home not knowing if there will be food on the table for two days.

Unwilling to stand by as Jasper's children went hungry, Collaborative members agreed to take on poverty. A key component of the Collaborative's plan to reduce poverty in the county involved recruiting new partners.

"We made a list of people missing around the table who could help us," said Folds. "After that we assigned Collaborative members someone to contact with whom they already had a good relationship. We gave recruits a job description from our bylaws and asked them to attend our monthly meetings. That's how we've brought additional resources to our Collaborative and to the community."

To secure stakeholders in the effort, JCFC needed to gain visibility, trust, and credibility with prospective and existing partners. Folds said being transparent, keeping an open dialogue, following through, and making necessary changes establishes trust with partners—and with the people they serve.

"It's important to have confidence that the coordinator is getting the work done," said County Manager Mike Benton. "We trust Targie. She's authentic, straightforward, and efficient."

A Shared Strategy

The Collaborative needed to raise \$10,000 to feed 60 students for the year and quickly exceeded that goal. A local Presbyterian church assured the County Commissioner's Office that if they invested \$2,500 that the church would guarantee that it would raise the rest of the funds to make it happen.

Once the resources were in place, the Collaborative borrowed a strategy that Green and Jackson counties had already applied. JCFC implemented Backpacks for Kids in fall 2015, providing meals for children in need to take home on weekends during the school year.

"Attendance has increased at our meetings because of this initiative," said Folds. "People want to volunteer. It's just overwhelming how people have really grasped this program because they just love it."

When Jasper County Schools announced that JCFC was implementing Backpacks for Kids, Crystal signed up David and Lillie. "It especially helped tremendously during the holidays, when the kids were home all day," she said. "They look forward to going

to school on Fridays, because they know they're going to bring home that backpack. It gives them confidence."

Building a Stronger Support System for Jasper's Children and Families

The project has the potential to bring confidence to even more children in 2016, and JCFC continues to recruit partners, from local government to faith-based organizations, with a common goal that connects the community.

"Everyone wants to help improve the lives of children and families in Jasper County, so they're all for anything we can do to combat child poverty," said Folds. "We engage partners to get more resources—not just dollars. Things like meeting space or supplies are also essential."



"Family Connection is the hub where all these partners—both private and public—come together to assist those in need."

—Mike Newton
Jasper County School Superintendent

According to Jasper County School Superintendent Mike Newton, JCFC embodies the simple yet powerful motto of the school system: "Our Children, Our Community, Our Responsibility."

Newton pointed out that for a small, rural school district like Jasper County, it's imperative to combat limited resources with strong partnerships. "Family Connection is the hub where all these partners—both private and public—come together to assist those in need," he said. "When families are looking for support services, we can always refer them to JCFC. That community outreach is so vital, because we cannot accomplish our goals alone."

One challenge the Collaborative continues to face is engaging families, who are often afraid to get involved. "So many of them want to do better, but they don't know how," said Folds. "We have to gain their trust."

The Collaborative does that by inviting families to meetings and hosting

bimonthly workshops that are advertised through the schools, and Folds said a parent mentor encourages parents to come. JCFC also uses family events like the annual Back to School Bash to raise awareness of the resources available to them.

"It all goes back to education," said Folds. "We're educating families about poverty and what it takes to come out of it—and they are receptive of hearing what we have to say."

Crystal agrees. "Ray's hope was that our children would get a good education and lead a better life than he had," she said. "Their daddy was a truck driver. But he wanted them to go to college and do whatever they wanted. I just want them to fulfill their daddy's wishes."

Is a Collaborative that engages diverse partners more likely to raise and direct funds to implement strategies those partners developed together?

We believe that when Collaboratives invest funds in shared strategies, systems are strengthened and outcomes for children and families improve. That's why we care about this link. By identifying Collaborative characteristics that are connected to investments in shared strategies, we better understand the resources members of the Georgia Family Connection statewide network need to improve the lives of children and families.

The Georgia Family Connection Partnership (GaFCP) Theory of Change is a model that clearly connects our work to better outcomes for children and families. An

essential component of this model is for partners to invest in—and implement—powerful joint strategies that engage all available resources—people, funds, and other tangible items.

When partners invest resources in strategies they developed together, it's a sign the Collaborative has effectively facilitated the planning and decision-making process. According to the GaFCP Theory of Change, accomplishing that piece of work should yield stronger support systems and, in turn, improve overall conditions for children and families.

Short-term outcome ➡ Intermediate outcome ➡ Long-term outcome ➡

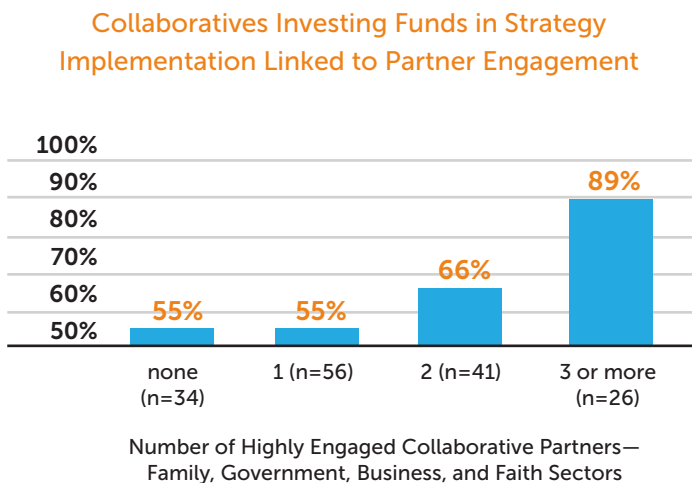
Partners increase joint planning and decision-making

Partners invest in, and implement, powerful joint strategies

State and local systems support children and families

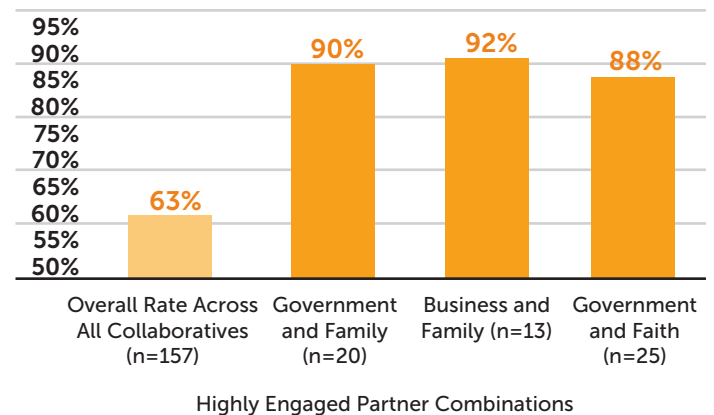
More Partners, More Investments

Our evaluation revealed that Collaboratives with highly engaged partners from at least three of the four sectors we studied—business, faith, family, and government—had much higher rates of investment than those with fewer highly engaged partners. Almost all Collaboratives—88 percent or more—with three or more highly engaged partners reported that they invested funds in strategy implementation. By comparison, less than 60 percent of Collaboratives that engaged none or one of these sectors reported having these types of investments.



We also found that certain combinations of partners from the four sectors—business and family, faith and government, and family and government—were associated with higher rates of investment than the overall rate across all Collaboratives.

Collaboratives Investing Funds in Strategy Implementation Linked to Combinations of Engaged Partners



Having more highly engaged partners, especially from three or more of the sectors we analyzed, can help move a Collaborative from joint planning and decision-making to investing and implementing funds, ultimately leading to stronger support systems for a community's children and families.

Engaging Multiple Community Sectors

Here are some recommendations for reaching out to four main sectors—business, faith, family, and government—to acquire multiple highly engaged partners, leading to greater fund investment and solid support systems for a community’s children and families.

The Business Sector

Inform business leaders about how the Collaborative’s work contributes to the bigger economic picture for your community. Use data and research to help connect the dots between healthy, educated children and sustainable economic success.

Show that you are reliable, strategic, and conscientious of business partners’ time and resources. For example:

- Don’t commit to fixing everything for everybody. Stick to tackling issues related to the strategies in your Collaborative plan.
- Make sure gatherings are efficient and stay on schedule.
- Prioritize the Collaborative’s short-term and long-term financial needs. Be strategic about how and when to ask local businesses to make financial or in-kind contributions.
- Learn about your business partners’ individual preferences. Some may be willing to invest money, while others may prefer to donate goods or volunteer services.
- Commit to evaluation that ensures accountability, then adjust program implementation as needed. Show business leaders how their contributions helped produce outcomes.

The Faith Sector

Ask Collaborative members to seek out involvement from their pastors.

Explain to local faith leaders how becoming involved with Collaborative efforts can help their church have a far-reaching, meaningful impact.

Host issue-based events that highlight the greatest needs in the community, promote services and resources that already exist, and invite faith-based organizations to join as partners or as attendees.

Use **KIDS COUNT** and local data to show religious leaders what’s happening in the community and ask them to help.

Share Family Connection publications with the faith community so they can learn about problems facing Georgia’s kids and families, and how to address those issues.

Ask for space to hold meetings and activities in return for sharing your expertise about community issues.

The Family Sector

Host a Community Resource Fair during school open houses to spread the word to parents about volunteer opportunities.

Make sure parents, partners, staff, and board members are actively involved in the decision-making processes, and develop a strategy that infuses parent engagement in Collaborative activities and showcases successes resulting from parent partnership.

Ask local partners, including schools and civic organizations, for referrals of engaged and reliable parents and youth. Then build parental capacity through leadership training and meetings by:

- mobilizing and supporting parents to be leaders and to advocate for themselves, their children, and their communities;
- involving parents in conferences, workshops, and other learning and networking opportunities for family-serving professionals; and
- providing incentives—refreshments, childcare, transportation, gift certificates, or free passes to events—to encourage attendance while helping to overcome economic barriers to participation.

The Government Sector

Attend legislative events, as well as county commission and city council meetings. Present to these audiences at least annually to showcase the needs of families and children in your community, and how the Collaborative’s work is helping meet those needs.

Cultivate strong relationships with state and local officials. Thank them for supporting the Collaborative’s work and capitalize on opportunities to talk and correspond with them by:

- sharing new data when **KIDS COUNT** reports are released,
- providing updates about the Collaborative’s activities, and
- providing credible resources and data about policy issues.

Let local leaders know how they can support the Collaborative, and show how the Collaborative can help officials achieve their goals by:

- sharing how the Collaborative connects partners and agencies to make services in the community more effective and efficient, and
- describing how the Collaborative’s work with children and families contributes to specific economic goals.

Evaluation Snapshot examines how Georgia Family Connection county collaboration affects indicators of child, family, and community well-being in communities across the state. This series is based on reports from the GaFCP Theory of Change Workgroup, a team of researchers from EMSTAR Research, Metis Associates, Georgia State University, and GaFCP. GaFCP is a public-private nonprofit created and funded by the state of Georgia and investors from the private sector. We support Georgia Family Connection, a statewide network of collaborative organizations in all 159 counties committed to improving the quality of life for children and families.

Please send questions or comments to Steve Erickson, Ph.D., at eval@gafcp.org. For more information, visit gafcp.org.