

Theory of Change: A Practical Tool For Action, Results and Learning

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ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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PREPARED BY

ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH SERVICES

www.organizationalresearch.com

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INTRODUCTION

There is nothing as practical as good theory. So said Harvard researcher Carol Weiss in her advice to communities engaged in ambitious transformation efforts. Because change takes time, successes are not always recognized when they occur. Communicating to others exactly what you are trying to accomplish and how you will know that you are making progress can also be difficult. These challenges are compounded when partners in the change effort have different viewpoints about what difference they are trying to make and which methods and strategies to use.

Community problems are easier to recognize. They typically cannot be ignored and the dream of eradicating them fuels the energy and passion to make a difference. As usual, the devil is in the details. What type of evidence indicates progress? Which strategies are most likely to achieve desired results? Again, there is nothing as practical as good theory.

Every community needs a roadmap for change. Instead of bridges, avenues and freeways, this map would illustrate destinations of progress and the routes to travel on the way to achieving progress. The map would also provide commentary about assumptions, such as the final destination, the context for the map, the processes to engage in during the journey and the belief system that underlies the importance of traveling in a particular way. This type of map is called a "theory of change."

The label *theory of change* is often referred to by other terms, such as *pathway of change*, *engine of change*, *blueprint*, *logic model* and *theory of action*.

Regardless of the label, a theory of change offers a picture of important destinations and guides you on what to look for on the journey to ensure you are on the right pathway. As Alice observed in Wonderland, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there." In other words, without a theory of change, a community is vulnerable to wandering aimlessly. Communities and their partners have too much at stake to be aimless, amorphous or random in their actions. The theory of change is a practical and essential part of a successful transformation effort.

WHAT DOES A THEORY OF CHANGE LOOK LIKE?

Theories of change come in many shapes and sizes. You can use different techniques to match your community's tolerance for "planning" versus "doing." One recommended approach is to develop an **outcome map**, a visual diagram that depicts relationships between initiative strategies and intended results. These results will include both short- and longer-term outcomes and may also reflect changes at different levels, such as individuals, organizations, systems and communities. There is no right or wrong way to draw an outcome map; each map will look different, depending on the community's unique needs and preferences. The important thing is to listen to the views of *your* community so that your map reflects ***your community's view of how change occurs***.

Additionally, it is valuable to document the assumptions that underlie your initiative, including philosophies, principles or values; ways to work together; community context and other assumptions on which you have based your change effort. These assumptions can be presented in a list format or as a succinct narrative statement.

Thus, you will generate two products as part of your theory of change work:

1. An outcome map
2. A list of assumptions about change

WHAT TYPES OF CHANGES ARE MAPPED?

Community initiatives typically encompass myriad strategies, interventions and activities. Some are planned, clearly defined, staffed and funded – for example, an awareness-building campaign or community mobilization effort. Others may be spontaneous, emergent, informal or sporadic, such as networking, leadership development or alliance building.

For *Making Connections*, your ultimate goal is sizeable, lasting and positive change in the lives of vulnerable children and families. However, to achieve this desired result, many other types of changes must occur along the way. Some of these “on the way” changes reflect actual changes in people’s lives, either at the individual or population level. Changes in people’s lives can include changes in knowledge, skills, behaviors, health or

<p>Results and Outcomes A theory of change frequently refers to outcomes (or changes). <i>Making Connections’</i> outcomes are the core results for children, families and neighborhoods. These are the long-term outcomes that a community’s change efforts will ultimately point to.</p>

conditions for children, adults, families or communities. These changes are defined by the Annie E. Casey Foundation as **impact**.

Typically, changes for individuals are the first things that occur as a result of the programs, services, actions or planned strategies of a community initiative. As individual changes reach greater scale, they may contribute to population level changes. For example, if enough people increase their income, poverty rates may decrease. The individual impacts are the building blocks of community change; if they do not happen, it is unlikely that a community will improve. However, these individual changes are not enough, by themselves, to ensure that positive changes will last.

Many of the changes that affect *Making Connections'* desired results for vulnerable children and families occur in entities other than individuals. These changes can include changes in institutions, service systems, community norms, partnerships, public will, policies, regulations, service practices, business practices and issue visibility– a concept which the Foundation defines as **influence**. A related term, **leverage**, describes changes in public or private funders' investment strategies for community programs.

The tables below illustrate different types of impact, influence and leverage outcomes, representing the most likely steps on the pathway to community change. The tables provide examples of impact at both individual and population levels as well as changes in influence and leverage that may result from *Making Connections'* efforts.

Table 1. IMPACT: Individual and Family Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements

Outcome Area	Sample Outcome Statements
Changes in attitudes, e.g. perceptions and beliefs	<p>Increased view among parents that local schools are positive “hubs” for families.</p> <p>Increased desire among neighborhood residents to become engaged in community change efforts</p> <p>Increased feeling of safety among residents.</p> <p>Increased desire of parents to create a personal savings plan.</p> <p>Youth have increased belief that they will have a positive future.</p>
Changes in knowledge	<p>Increased knowledge among neighborhood residents of community resources.</p> <p>Increased knowledge of parents and caregivers about child development milestones.</p>
Changes in awareness	<p>Increased awareness among neighborhood residents of a neighborhood’s history.</p> <p>Increased awareness of US laws regarding acceptable child discipline among immigrants and refugees.</p>
Changes in skills	<p>Increased parents’ employment skills.</p> <p>Increased parent ability to locate child care.</p>
Changes in behavior	<p>Neighbors more frequently call on one another for assistance.</p> <p>Increased parent involvement in their child’s education.</p> <p>Residents vote more frequently.</p>
Changes in health	<p>Decreased blood pressure.</p> <p>Families have access to a “medical home”.</p>
Changes in family stability	<p>Families’ children attend the same school for all of their elementary grades.</p> <p>Families maintain a stable residence.</p>
Changes in financial status	<p>Increased family income.</p> <p>Increased family savings.</p>

Table 2. IMPACT: Population Level Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements

Outcome Area	Sample Outcome Statements
Changes in health	Reduction in the incidence of asthma attacks. Reduction in the incidence of lead poisoning.
Changes in education	Greater percentage of high school students graduate. Improved student scores on state standardized tests.
Changes in social conditions	Increased community cohesion.
Changes in economic conditions	Decreased poverty. Decreased unemployment.
Changes in safety	Decreased violent crimes.

Table 3. INFLUENCE: Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements

Broad Outcome Areas	Sample Outcome Statements
Changes in visibility of issue	<p>Local media accurately cover the message(s) of the media campaign.</p> <p>Media increase frequency of coverage of issue.</p> <p>Public or community raises issue to a higher priority.</p>
Changes in community norms	<p>Community decreases tolerance for certain behaviors or attitudes.</p> <p>Community increases belief in its own power to create change.</p> <p>Community increases acceptance of culturally diverse community members.</p>
Changes in partnerships	<p>Partnerships become more strategic.</p> <p>Strategic partners deepen their collaborative relationships.</p> <p>Strategic partners jointly implement actions toward agreed-upon goals.</p> <p>Partners improve group functioning</p> <p>Partnership increases ability to articulate a shared purpose.</p> <p>Partnership shares a plan of action.</p> <p>Partnership improves articulation of roles and responsibilities within the group.</p> <p>Partners increase formal interagency agreements and/or other collaborative protocols.</p> <p>Partners increase referrals to one another.</p> <p>Partners increase sharing of resources.</p> <p>Partners increase seamless presentation to consumers.</p> <p>Partners increase sharing of data.</p> <p>Partners routinely use data to evaluate their efforts and refine strategies to achieve specific results.</p>

Table 3. INFLUENCE: Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements (cont'd)

Broad Outcome Areas	Sample Outcome Statements
Change in public will	<p>Community is motivated to take action on an issue.</p> <p>Community (neighborhood, city) has decreased tolerance for a specific problem or condition.</p> <p>Community increases shared definition of specific problem or condition.</p> <p>Residents increase their willingness to demonstrate around an issue.</p> <p>Community members place a higher priority on a specific issue.</p> <p>Consumers of public services increase demand for improved services.</p> <p>Community members change attitudes and/or beliefs toward an issue.</p> <p>Community members increase their sense of community.</p> <p>Community members increase their awareness of an issue in the community.</p>
Change in political will	<p>Political leaders increase awareness of issue.</p> <p>Political leaders increase willingness to take action on issues.</p> <p>Legislators co-sponsor bills that support community priorities.</p>
Change in policies	<p>Specific policy changes.</p> <p>Increase in policy statements that support community goal.</p> <p>Policymakers adopt common language in policies and regulations.</p> <p>Policymakers draft legislation that reflects community priorities.</p> <p>Policymakers adopt new legislation that reflects community priorities.</p> <p>Policymakers maintain legislation that supports community priorities.</p> <p>Policymakers fund legislation that reflects community priorities.</p>

Table 3. INFLUENCE: Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements (cont'd)

Broad Outcome Areas	Sample Outcome Statements
Change in regulations	<p>Specific regulations change.</p> <p>Increase in regulations that support a specific community goal.</p>
Changes in service practice(s)	<p>Service providers increase cultural competence.</p> <p>All staff that directly interact with service consumers increase their knowledge of the cultural backgrounds and experiences of their consumer populations.</p> <p>Service providers increase their linguistic competence.</p> <p>Service providers change the hours of service delivery to better match the availability of consumers.</p> <p>Service providers change the locations of service delivery to better match the location of consumers.</p> <p>Service providers routinely elicit consumer feedback and otherwise evaluate their performance to improve effectiveness.</p>
Change in business practice(s)	<p>Key businesses (grocery store, drug store, bank) are newly available in community.</p> <p>Businesses/service employees in community improve day-to-day interactions with diverse customers.</p> <p>Businesses change practices (hours, advertising, product selection) to meet community preferences.</p> <p>Businesses change recruiting practices to attract a more diverse pool of qualified applicants.</p>

Table 4. LEVERAGE: Outcome Areas and Sample Outcome Statements

Outcome Areas	Sample Outcome Statements
Changes in public funds	<p>New public funds allocated toward community priorities.</p> <p>Public funds redistributed toward community priorities.</p> <p>New funding methods (pooled, matched, blended) increase monetary resources to support community priorities.</p> <p>Public funding practices (RFP process, selection criteria) change to increase availability of funds for community priorities.</p> <p>Public agencies provide detailed or loaned staff for work on a particular program or strategy.</p>
Changes in philanthropy	<p>Increased funding available for community priorities.</p> <p>New funding methods (pooled, matched, blended) increase monetary resources to support community priorities.</p> <p>Foundation funding practices (RFP process, selection criteria) change to increase availability of funds for community priorities.</p> <p>Foundations make new types of funding available (e.g., PRI).</p> <p>Foundations previously uninvolved in community begin to provide funding for community programs, agencies and initiatives.</p>
Changes in resources available to the community	<p>New physical resources (computer rooms, meeting rooms) are available to the community.</p> <p>New transportation resources (buses, taxis) are available to the community.</p> <p>New service resources (copying, printing, delivery) are available to the community.</p>
Changes in private investment	<p>Investments in commercial development increase.</p> <p>Private investments in housing development increase.</p>

HOW DO IMPACT, INFLUENCE AND LEVERAGE OUTCOMES RELATE TO CORE CAPACITIES?

Core capacities are the building blocks that enable powerful strategies to become actualized. These capacities include people, processes, supports, models, techniques, structures, plans, frameworks and other inputs needed to enact, bring to scale and sustain powerful change. Some examples of core capacities follow:

- ▶ Collective vision and results framework
- ▶ Governance structure
- ▶ Group processes such as governance, decision making, problem solving and conflict resolution
- ▶ Resident leadership and authentic civic demand
- ▶ Strategic use of data
- ▶ Effective partnerships among residents, institutions and others
- ▶ Support for collaborative learning and accountability to results
- ▶ Communication plan and structure

You can achieve impact, influence and leverage outcomes if you develop core capacities that function well. A good example is the influence outcome of changing community norms on tolerating crime in the neighborhood. Certain core capacities are vital to effecting this norm change, such as engaged resident leadership; collective vision for results; effective partnerships among residents, institutions and others; and capacity to communicate core messages, ideas and beliefs. As these building blocks of change are brought into play, neighbors may change their views on accepting the level of crime and become motivated to mobilize for action. For instance, flyers for block watch (based on a communication strategy) may be distributed in schools, stores, faith organizations and neighborhoods (effective partnerships among residents, institutions and others) based on the action plan of an engaged neighborhood group (resident leadership). The block watch activity may further mobilize residents, sparking them to forge new types of partnerships with law enforcement agencies. These shifts in behavior, partnerships and law enforcement strategies illustrate influence, the result of core capacities leading to strong building blocks of change.

If the changes in neighborhood mobilization and law enforcement strategies lead to a decline in the crime rate, the core capacities have achieved an impact outcome. If the new strategies are replicated in other neighborhoods throughout the city, the strategies will be brought to scale. Further, the engaged residents will remain in place to address other neighborhood issues.

In this sense, capacities are part of the continuum to achieve comprehensive community change. They are elements that enable influence, leverage and impact to happen. The line between capacities and influence, leverage and impact can sometimes be blurry, especially with respect to resident engagement and partnerships. The formation of a resident group is the beginning of capacity. The group's collaboration in developing a collective vision, creating group processes and learning represent a change in community behavior, which may be seen as influence. The same can be said for partnerships. The work of creating a collective vision for accountability among diverse people and groups, represents a significant change in community norms. Thus, the influence continuum begins with capacity but immediately reflects influence by the very acts of planning, acting, learning and achieving results through the work of the partnership.

When you document change, capacity may seem inseparable from influence, leverage and impact because they are all part of the same continuum. It is best to view capacity as the inputs or ingredients that are used to carry out influence, leverage and impact strategies.

LEARNING TIP: “SO THAT” CHAINS

Creating a picture of how different types of outcomes relate to each other can help clarify what you intend to do. You can use the “outcome map” as a tool to depict what you expect will happen as a result of your initiatives, strategies, activities and programmatic efforts.

Using an outcome map, you can visually lay out a pathway of change. Outcomes can be “mapped” in a linear or causal sequence, though change is typically more complex than a simple cause-and-effect relationship. In some cases, outcomes occur sequentially, while other times they occur simultaneously. Outcomes may occur independently from each other or be highly interrelated. Outcomes may result from a single strategy or multiple ones. They may lead to common goals or separate ones.

In order to create an outcome map, it helps to clarify the connection between all types of outcomes – those describing impact, influence and leverage – by creating a “so that” chain. The examples that follow show “so that” chains which reflect the work of building core capacities as well as implementing specific strategies and program actions. Note that many impact, influence and leverage outcomes are achieved when core capacities are developed and functioning well.

SAMPLE “SO THAT” CHAIN A

STRATEGY:

Communicate with key organizations, service providers, business networks and advocacy groups about the *Making Connections* vision

So That

There is increased attention on the focus of the *Making Connections* initiative
[Influence]

So that

1) There is increased knowledge of and interest in the *Making Connections* agenda
[Influence]

and

2) There is increased awareness of how partners can work together and what each partner can contribute to achieve *Making Connections* results
[Influence]

So That

1) There is increased shared commitment to a common vision for the community
[Influence]

and

2) There is increased investment of local resources in the *Making Connections* agenda
[Leverage]

So That

1) A shared plan of action is developed
[Influence]

and

2) There are increased resources available in the community to support children and families
[Influence]

So That

There are positive changes in the lives of vulnerable children and families
[Individual Impact]

As communities think about what they are trying to accomplish, they will likely see that many of their strategies are intended to achieve influence and leverage changes, such as changes in the nature of collaborative partnerships, changes in service delivery, changes in investments, changes in public will and changes in policies on the way to achieving individual or population level impact.

Here is another example of a “so that” chain.

SAMPLE “SO THAT” CHAIN B

STRATEGY:

Formal establishment of a local collaboration committed to children’s school readiness and early learning

So That

A shared collective plan is developed to address young children’s health and school readiness needs

[Influence]

So That

1) A pilot program is implemented to provide families with access to dental and health screening clinics and a WIC office on-site at two neighborhood schools

[Influence]

and

2) Support programs for parents of young children are offered on-site at the school in English and Spanish

[Influence]

So That

1) Children get their health needs addressed

[Individual Impact]

and

2) Children have improved nutrition

[Individual Impact]

and

3) Parents are more aware of how to support their young child’s brain development

[Individual Impact]

So That

Children enter school healthy

[Population Impact]

So That

Children are more likely to do well in school

[Population Impact]

Here is another example of a strategy which initially leads to impact changes and then contributes to influence changes that will, ideally, lead to the ultimate *Making Connections*' results.

SAMPLE "SO THAT" CHAIN C

STRATEGY:

Provide opportunities for neighborhood residents to receive positive information, hear positive messages and connect with fellow residents via a neighborhood newsletter and a new community center that hosts town hall gatherings and cultural events

So That

1) Residents are more aware of the historical, cultural and civic strengths of the neighborhood
[Individual Impact]

and

2) Residents get to know their neighbors better and share their views about the neighborhood
[Individual Impact]

So That

Residents begin to feel hopeful about the neighborhood's future
[Individual Impact]

So That

Residents feel an increased commitment to the neighborhood and share in the vision for community change
[Individual Impact]

So That

Residents become involved in cultural, civic and political activities related to the neighborhood
[Individual Impact]

So That

Public officials and the greater community become aware of residents' concerns about the neighborhood
[Influence]

So That

There are improvements in policies that address community conditions
[Influence]

So That

There are more effective services available for children and families
[Influence – Core Result]

This example uses information from Minnesota KIDS COUNT.

SAMPLE “SO THAT” CHAIN D

STRATEGY:

Increase media coverage about amount of money low-income families and individuals pay to the tax industry for tax preparation and Refund Anticipation Loans (RALs) and how these expenses reduce the net benefit they receive from the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and other tax credits *[using data strategically]*

So That

Public awareness of this issue increases
[Influence Outcome]

So That

Policy-makers increase their knowledge of and interest in this issue.
[Influence Outcome]

So That

Policies change to require the tax industry to provide specific disclosures to individuals seeking a RAL.
[Influence Outcome]

So That

Tax preparation businesses change their business practices to abide by the new policies.
[Influence Outcome]

So That

Individuals and families have increased ability to make choices to avoid paying interest and fees to the tax industry for services they may not need.
[Family Impact Outcome]

So That

Low-income individuals and families receive more cash from their EITC and other tax credits or refunds and can use these funds to meet their basic needs, pay off debts or save for the future.
[Individual/Family Impact Outcome]

So That

Families have increased levels of assets.
[Family Impact Outcome]

Each outcome map is unique, reflecting the context and belief systems that shape the work and pathway to change for a particular community. Thus, each community will determine in what order change should occur and what types of changes will pave the way for *Making Connections*' ultimate desired results for children and families.

As you can see from the “so that” chain examples above, some communities may need to work on developing the shared vision and partnerships among community organizations that will lead to changes in service delivery, policy and investment around the issues that affect the lives of vulnerable children and families. In other communities, the focus may be on mobilizing the community by changing awareness and public will.

Exercise

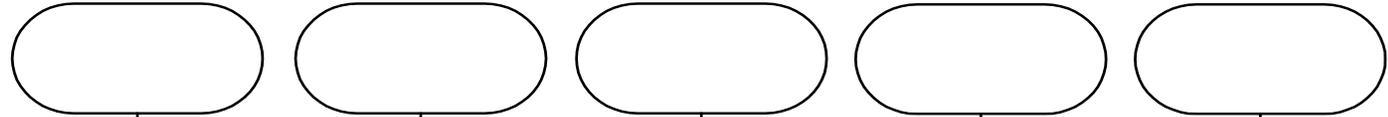
EXERCISE: CREATING A THEORY OF CHANGE WITH THE COMMUNITY

Use the blank chart provided on the next page to assist you in developing an outcome map.

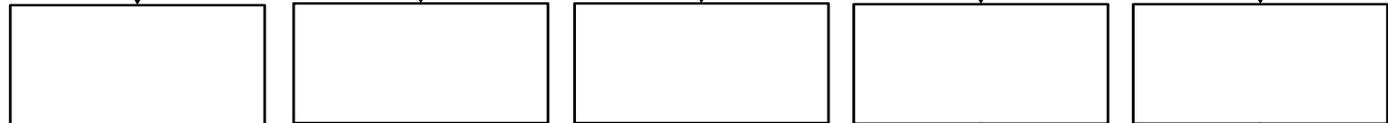
TIP: It is helpful to create this map on a large wall using half sheets of paper that you can arrange to match the template of the outcome map on the following page. Simply tape these half sheets of paper on the wall and move them around as the map is developed and refined.

Exercise: Outcome Map

POWERFUL STRATEGIES



SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES



(Complete Chain from Short-term Outcomes to Community Goal)

LONG-TERM COMMUNITY GOAL



Step 1: Clarify Goals. First, identify the ultimate impact you want to achieve in your community. The impact will generally be an ambitious visionary statement that stands for a healthy, thriving community – not specific program clients or the results of a specific strategy. Your impact statement will involve the contributions of many strategies and partners. Examples of ultimate impacts follow:

- ▶ Children have equal opportunities to succeed in school.
- ▶ Children are healthy and safe.
- ▶ Families are strong and united.
- ▶ Neighborhoods are strong and cohesive.
- ▶ All families and individuals have a roof overhead and food to eat.
- ▶ All families and individuals are self-sufficient.

List the ultimate impact in the **goal** rectangle at the bottom of the chart. It is important to develop a group consensus about this goal. Typically the statements are broad enough to make everyone feel comfortable, included and inspired. The distinction among impact statements is the level of focus (i.e., children, families, neighborhoods or communities).

Step 2: Identify Powerful Strategies. Consider specific **strategies** or programs (that are currently in place as part of your partnership) which address your ultimate impact. These strategies may include program strategies, campaigns, initiatives, collaborations, public awareness efforts, capacity-building efforts, community mobilization efforts and so on. Here are some examples:

- ▶ Case management services
- ▶ Media campaign
- ▶ Alliance for education
- ▶ Block organizing
- ▶ Leadership development
- ▶ Technical assistance
- ▶ Counseling services
- ▶ Courses and workshops
- ▶ Advocacy
- ▶ Resource development and distribution

List your strategies in the ovals at the top of the chart.

Step 3: Create "So That" Chains. Take the first strategy listed and create a "so that" chain based on the following question:

"We do X strategy so that (blank) results for individuals, families, organizations or communities?" The answer should be the direct **outcome** or result of the strategy. Repeat this question until you have linked each strategy to your goal.

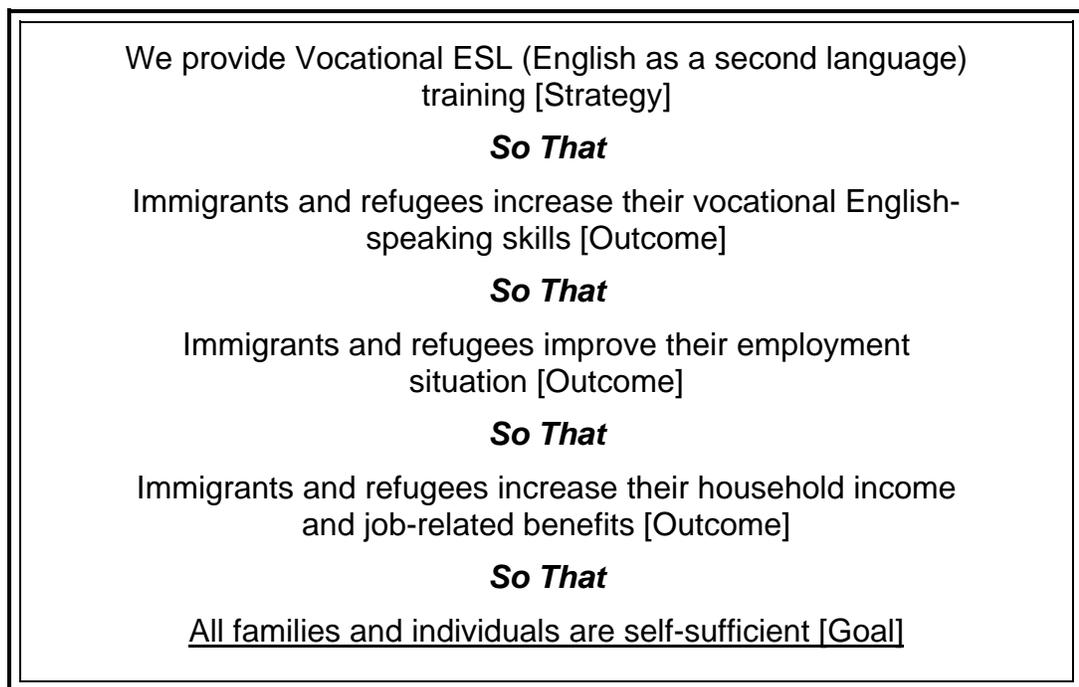
For example:



Notice that this chain of statements moved from knowledge of child care providers to behavior of child care providers and from health status of children in programs to health status of children in the community. Each link is a logical sequence of events showing how community change can occur through a specific strategy.

Rarely is one strategy alone sufficient to achieve community change. Some parallel strategies could be to launch a public awareness campaign to focus on the importance of child care quality in the selection of care or to advocate for increasing the health and safety standards for licensing requirements.

Here's another example:



In addition to this strategy, other strategies may include employer education about cultural competency in the workplace, advocacy for improved public transportation and family support programs to connect families with support networks. Again, each strategy is linked to the ultimate goal, and some strategies may link to a common intermediate outcome on the way to the goal.

Step 4: Link Strategies with Outcomes and Goals. Place the outcomes that form the "so that" chain in rectangles between the strategy and the goal. Draw arrows between these strategies and the connected outcomes and goal. Repeat this for each strategy.

This process may reveal that the strategies lead to a common outcome at some point in the map. This is not only acceptable but also very likely to happen because it typically takes more than one strategy to achieve a particular outcome. It is uncommon, but possible, for an outcome map to consist of multiple independent "so that" chains that do not connect to each other. Rather, most change strategies include a high level of interdependency among strategies and outcomes since it usually takes more than one strategy to influence particular outcomes.

Take the example of the outcomes related to the goal: "Children are healthy and safe." Along with technical assistance to child care providers, a program may use a public awareness campaign.

We promote public awareness about communicable diseases to parents and community members [Strategy]

So That

Parents increase their knowledge about prevention of communicable diseases [Outcome]

So That

Parents choose child care providers that implement sanitary practices in their child care centers or homes [Outcome]

So That

Children in child care centers and homes have fewer communicable diseases [Outcome]

So That

Children are healthy and safe [Goal]

As shown in the “so that” chain, separate but interdependent strategies lead to a common outcome (i.e., Children in child care centers and homes have fewer communicable diseases).

Step 5: Test the Logic and Relevance. Review your completed map and share it with other stakeholders. Test whether logical linkages occur between the strategies, outcomes and impacts; whether the most relevant outcomes are included and whether you have included all of the relevant strategies. Based on these tests, revise, test and revise some more. It is typical for a theory of change outcome map to be revised several times before it provides a complete and clear picture of your community change effort.

Step 6: Articulate Assumptions. While the outcome map offers a visual sketch of the pathways to achieving outcomes, this work is embedded in a context. It is helpful to complete the story by articulating the assumptions that influenced the map's design.

There are no hard and fast rules about what to list in the assumptions. It is useful to provide narrative information about the principles and belief system that underlie the outcome map. Often these statements will be part of the discussion while you are constructing the map. It helps to record the assumptions in an ongoing process while you are creating your map and to compile them once the map is complete.

TIP: You can maintain an ongoing list of assumptions that emerge during your theory of change work on a flipchart page.

Here are some examples of assumptions:

Principles

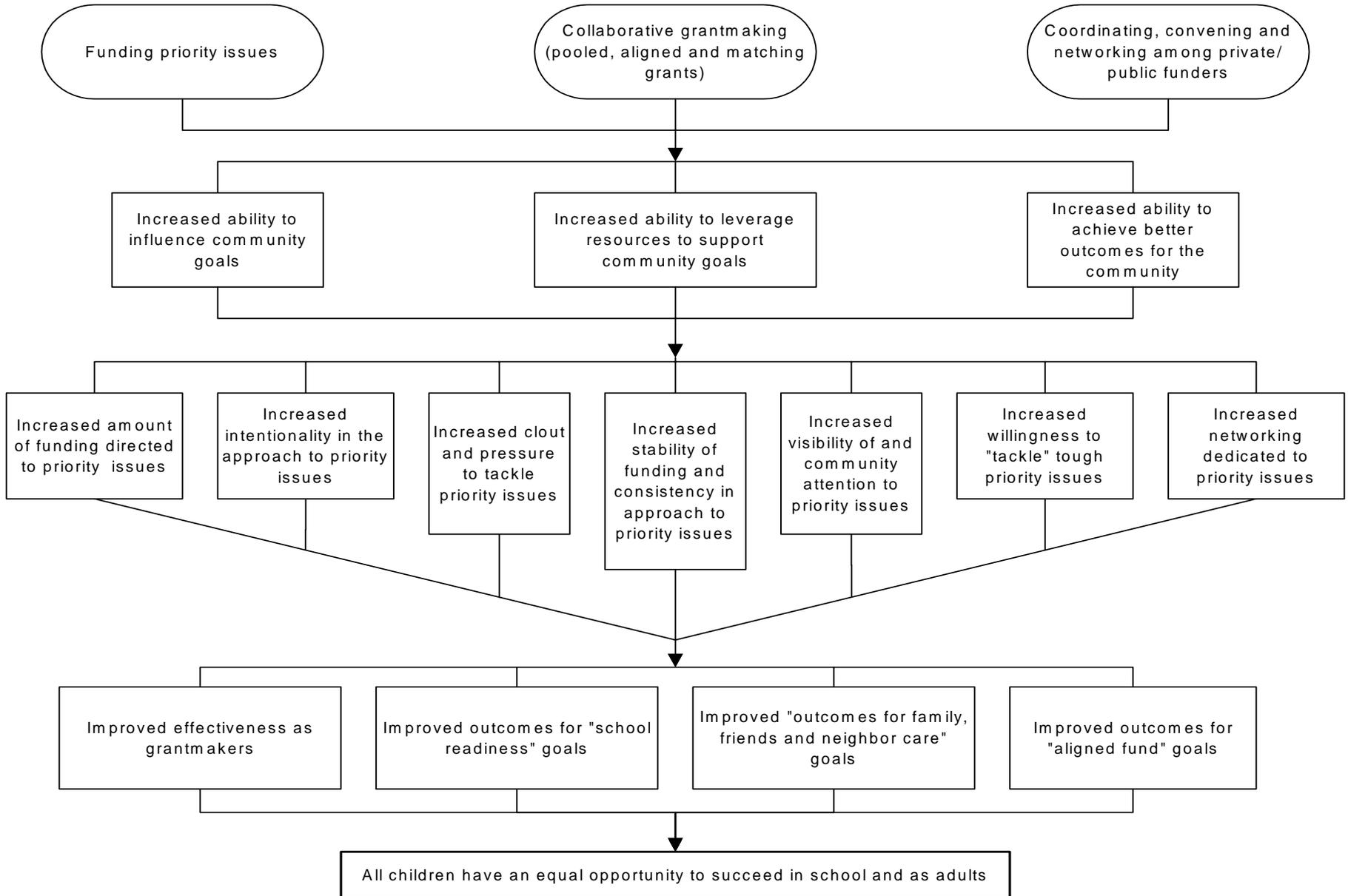
- ▶ Our partnership is based on the belief that community members know best what is needed in our community.
- ▶ Effective partnerships are built upon trust, consensus and collective belief in a common purpose.
- ▶ Public policies should prioritize the well-being of children over other interests.

Belief system about strategies and outcomes

- ▶ Skill training is a critical factor in employment, but so are supportive communities and employer workplaces.
- ▶ Child care quality will improve if providers have access to accurate information, parents care about the quality of child care and licensing regulations reinforce quality standards.

The following pages provide an example of theory of change for a partnership that is focused on helping children succeed.

SOAR Opportunity Fund Theory of Change



SOAR OPPORTUNITY FUND ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT CHANGE

DESIRED RESULTS

IMPACT: IMPROVED SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- ▶ The SOAR Opportunity Fund uses collective brainpower to invest in strategic and systemic improvements in the areas of: early childhood development, after-school programs, and youth development.
- ▶ Increasing the supply and quality of out-of-school learning opportunities so that all children can succeed is critical.

EXAMPLES

- Aligned and matching grants boost both supply and quality of children and youth learning and development opportunities.
- Hundreds of children are beginning to benefit from knowledge that family, friends, and neighbor caregivers have gained through support groups and workshops offered by our pooled fund grantees.

INFLUENCE: CHANGES IN POLICIES, SYSTEMS AND OPINION

- ▶ By focusing our time and money in certain issue areas, we gain knowledge, visibility, networks, and clout.
- ▶ Through influence, leverage and investments, we create positive change.
- ▶ The quality of out-of-school learning systems is not where it needs to be. Encouraging and supporting system improvements are critical, hard work that requires pooled knowledge and pooled capital.
- ▶ Members will support non-conventional grants to effect systems change by identifying strategic investments and appropriate grantees to carry them out.
- ▶ There is value in public and private funders working together and accomplishing more.
- ▶ A public-private partnership provides a unique opportunity to work on systems-level improvements, including policy change.
- ▶ The two sectors bring complementary resources: the public sector brings scale, information, and networks; the private sector can be more flexible and risk-taking.

- ▶ By working together, we can increase the pressure on both public and private grantmakers to “stick with” issues and approaches.

- EXAMPLES
- Our combined knowledge about family, friend and neighbor caregiving and our investments in it have generated both direct services and the recruitment of dozens of existing child/family organizations to become part of a sustainable system of supports and services for family, friend and neighbor caregivers.
 - Family, friend and neighbor caregiving was integrated into a recent federal Early Learning Opportunities grant proposal; a proposed statewide awareness campaign on early learning will use messages highlighting family, friend and neighbor caregivers.
 - After two years of funding organizations to support for family friends and neighbor, it would have been easy to jump to a new area and avoid the much harder work of changing caregiver support systems and public opinion and sharing our learnings—investments of time and money that will make a lasting difference.

LEVERAGE: CHANGES IN INVESTMENT LEVELS AND PRACTICES

- ▶ A single funder can't do it alone. Collectively, we need to leverage resources to address common goals.
- ▶ By working together effectively and publicizing our work, we continually grow in our membership and increase our grantmaking capacity.
- ▶ We raise the visibility of the issues we work on, thereby attracting more public and private investments to our issue areas.
 - Shift the use of existing resources to include the priority issues
 - Increase the inclusion of the issue in related efforts
 - Attract dollars to fund particular aspects of the issue.
- ▶ We seek to improve and streamline our individual and collective grantmaking practices so that we can better support kids' success.

- EXAMPLES
- Child Care Resources' work to engage child and family agencies in supporting family, friend and neighbor caregiving has resulted in organizations shifting existing resources to address this need.
 - The decision by over 20 private and public funders to invest in family, friend and neighbor caregiving with substantial investments has gained notice from both local nonprofit organizations and national research organizations and experts.

APPROACH

Individual and collective learning

- ▶ The SOAR Opportunity Fund offers its members an opportunity for diverse funders (from different sectors and using different approaches) to learn from each other and to engage in collective learning.
- ▶ Investments informed by sound research, community need, and best practices will be more strategic, cost-effective, and inclusive.
 - Research is a valuable source of information in making good grantmaking decisions.
 - We draw on the expertise of grantees and other groups and individuals with knowledge, expertise, and concerns to help us identify and improve our grants.
 - Effective grantmaking requires cultural competency and cultural sensitivity.
 - Increased contact with the community expands investment opportunities.
 - Good evaluation increases our learning and influences the effectiveness of our investments.
- ▶ By working together, the bigger picture becomes more visible and our energies are directed and intentional.
- ▶ By working together, we take on tougher work and stay with it when we hit hurdles because we support each other intellectually, emotionally, and financially.

EXAMPLES

- SOAR Opportunity Fund research and community connections, the University of Washington Human Services Policy Center, and the King County Communities Count data have provided a solid foundation for our work in the area of family, friend and neighbor caregiving.
- Our grantees have shown us creative ways to reach family, friend and neighbor caregivers in culturally appropriate ways.
- Because we are so different, we've been able to plan carefully and produce results. We're : developing a theory of change before plunging into school readiness work; but members who urged us to "just get going" in our family, friend and neighbor work helped produce early results that kept us at the table.

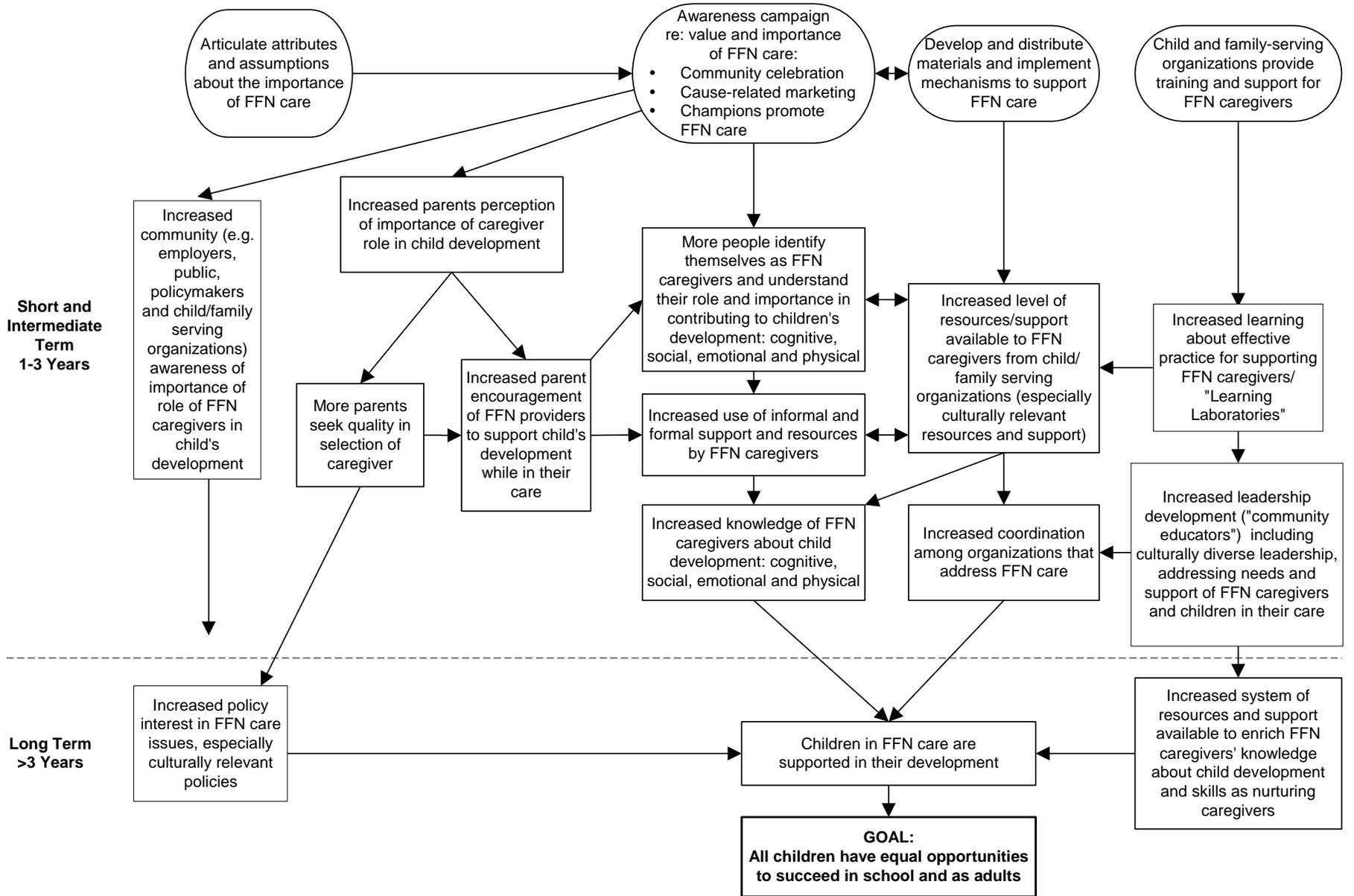
EFFECTIVE PROCESSES AND STRUCTURES

- ▶ The SOAR Opportunity Fund is "model-building;" we have a rare opportunity to build a model, e.g., public/private collaborative, respective relationships with grantees.
- ▶ Building relationships among members is an important component for moving the substance/goals forward. We know, trust, and appreciate each other.
- ▶ We increase and retain members by being open and flexible and by providing multiple engagement opportunities that reflect members' varying needs and resources
- ▶ We maintain a level playing field, where all come to the process as equal decision makers.
- ▶ We seek to "move the needle" and have a substantial impact with collective strategic investments.
- ▶ Public matching funds are an effective way to attract private funders to the table.

EXAMPLES

- We operate more efficiently and are better able to accommodate different levels of member engagement than two years ago.
- Our public and private members have found ways to leverage their resources with one another to have greater impact.

SOAR Opportunity Fund Theory of Change for Supporting Quality of Family, Friends and Neighbor Care



LEARNING TIP: CATEGORIZING CHANGE STRATEGIES

As your group considers its approach to community change, you may notice that some work is focused on a client or subgroup level of a population and other work is directed at a systemic or community-wide level. It can be useful to categorize your approach by considering the three ways of effecting change discussed earlier:

- ▶ Impact
- ▶ Influence
- ▶ Leverage

Each of these approaches effect ultimate change, although in different ways. Recall that the *Making Connections* Initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation defines the types of results that stem from these approaches as follows:

Impact: Changes in a condition of well-being for the children, adults, families or communities directly served by grants, programs, agencies or service systems. Examples of strategies that lead to impact include direct services and education and training.

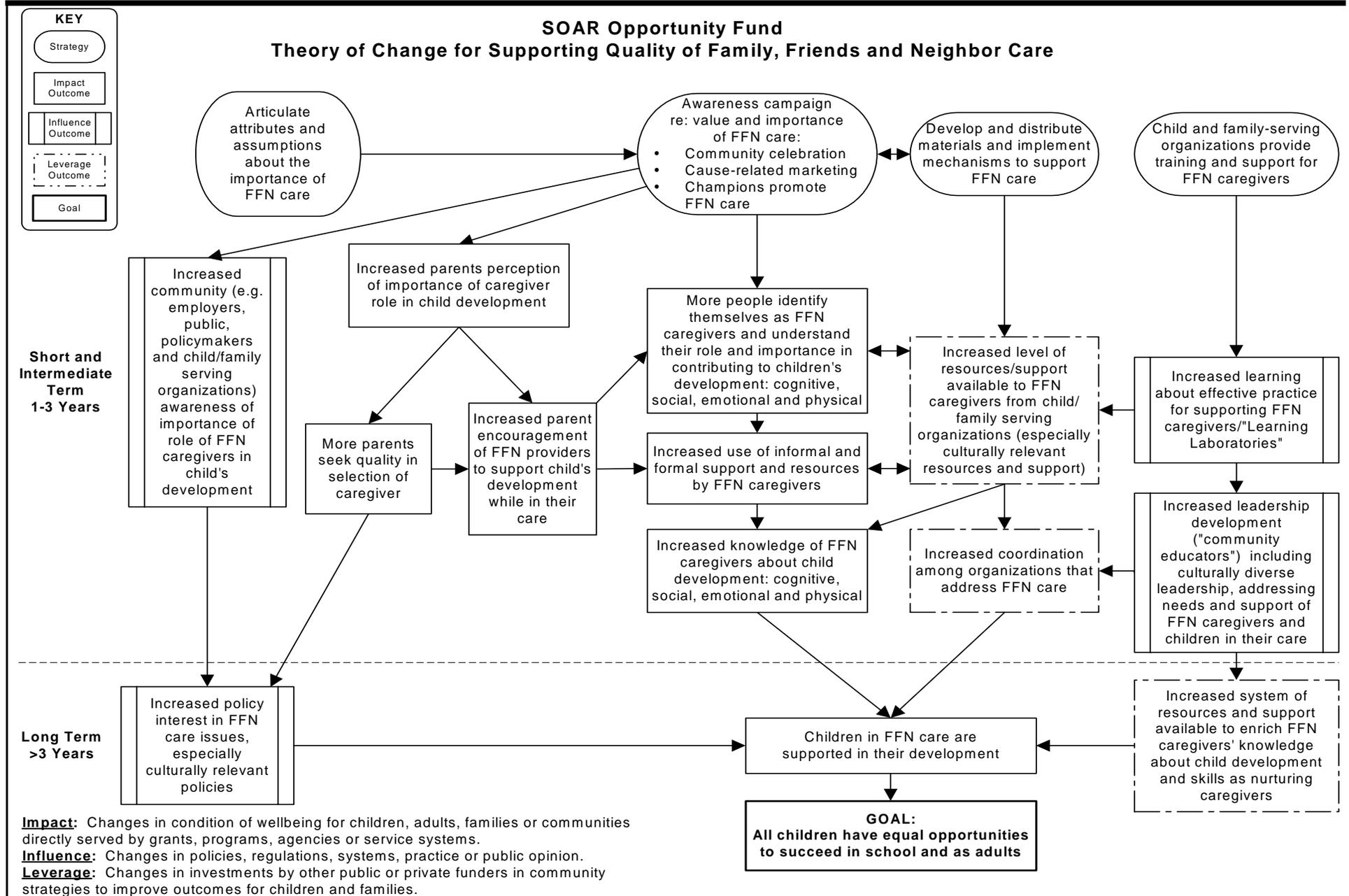
Influence: Changes in policies, regulations, systems, practice or public opinion. Examples of strategies that lead to influence changes are research, technical assistance, system or policy analysis, advocacy, dissemination and convening.

Leverage: Changes in investments by other public or private funders in community strategies to improve outcomes for children and families.

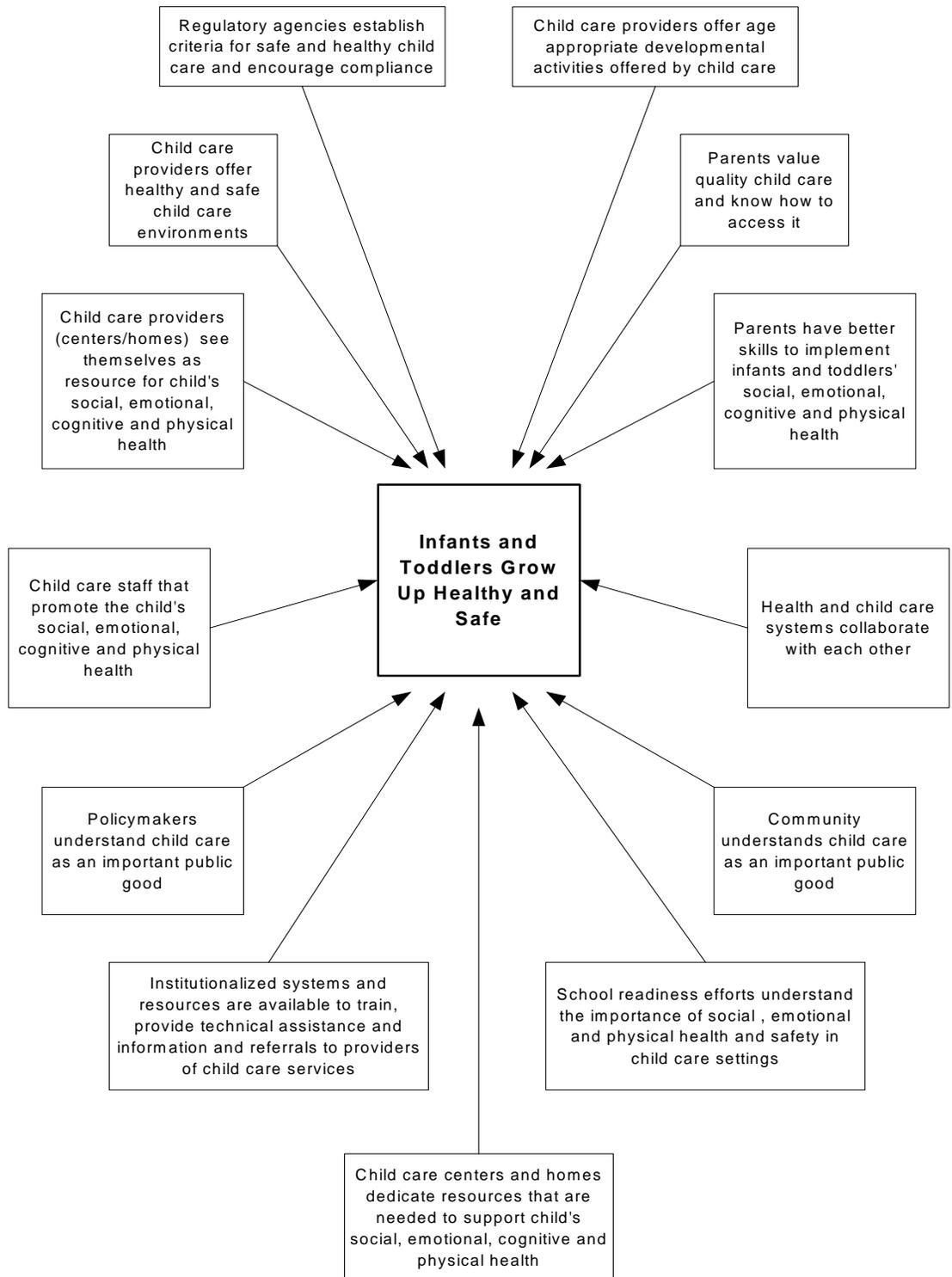
Examples of strategies that affect leverage are co-investment, capital investment and financing, funding and resource allocation.

You can organize your outcome map with each of these categories of change. Be sure you have considered whether each of these approaches makes sense for your change effort and revisit your outcome map if you add a new approach later.

TIP: Use different fonts or outlines to denote these different approaches to change on your outcome map.

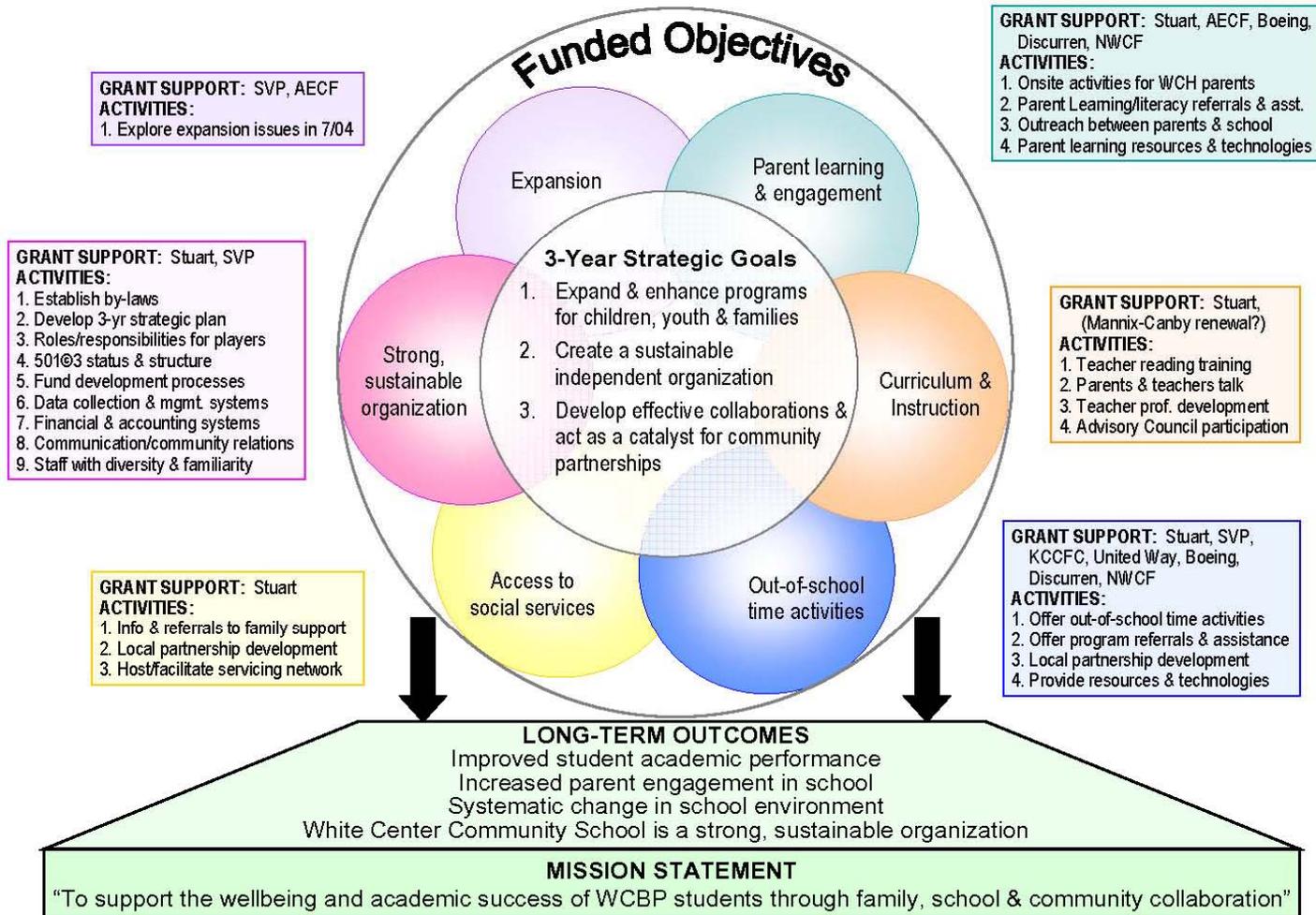


Healthy Child Care Washington Theory of Change (2/13/03)

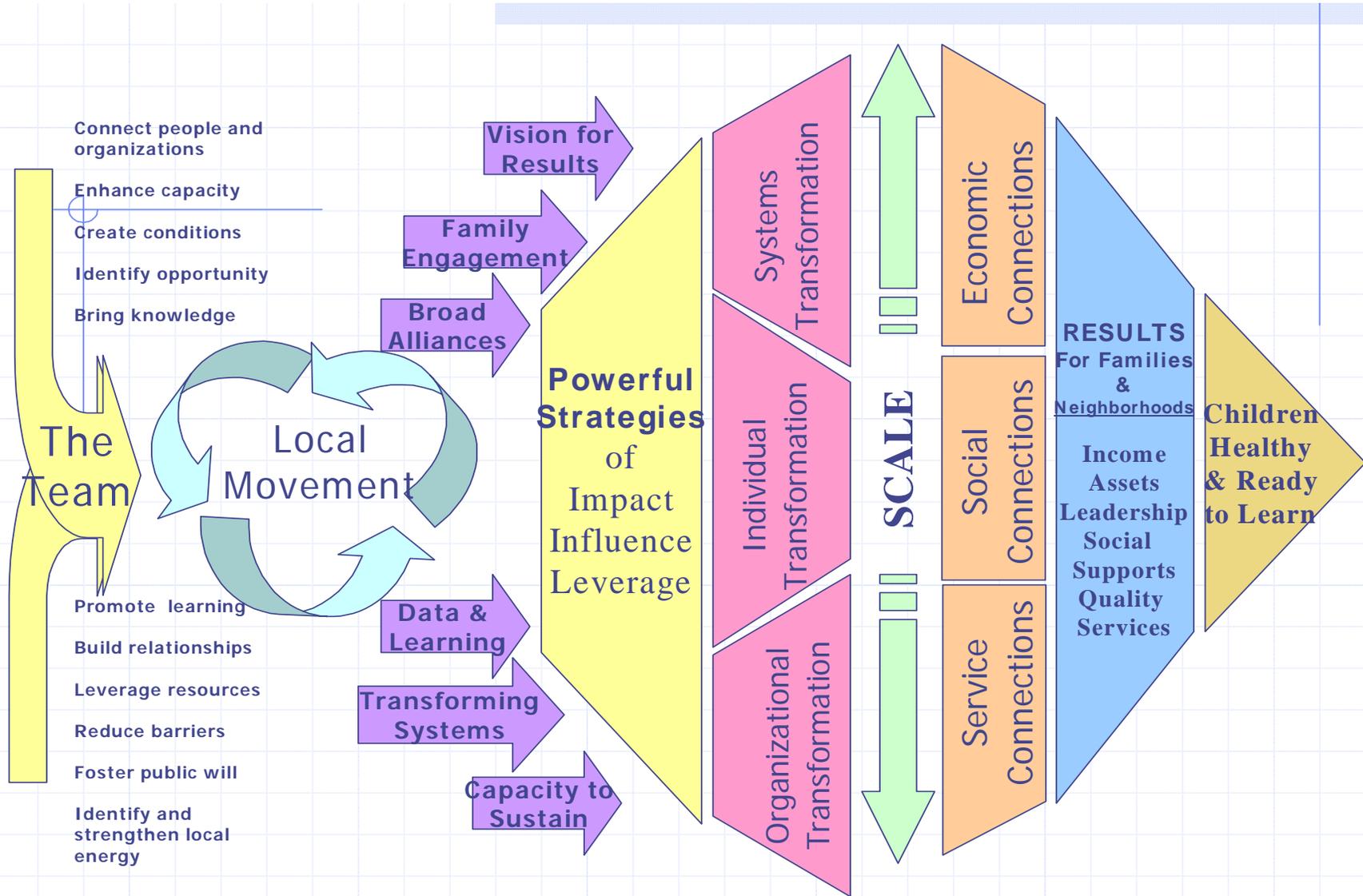


White Center Community School Coalition Possible Outcome Map (Draft)

WCCSC Theory of Change (4-14-04)



Annie E. Casey Foundation *Making Connections* Theory of Change



ENTERING THEORY OF CHANGE THROUGH DIFFERENT DOORS

While the purpose of a theory of change is similar for most groups – to define how strategies and actions will achieve change, communicate the vision for change and identify expected results – the process for building a theory of change and the particular picture of what the change looks like will vary immensely across communities.

The differences among communities are partly explained by the fact that there are many “doors” through which groups enter a theory of change building process. Sometimes the impetus is an evaluation requirement (e.g., a sizable grant requires measurement of specific long-term outcomes) so the group must create a theory of change that articulates how particular strategies and actions will achieve change and identifies short- and immediate-term outcomes, or “progress points,” that can be measured along the path to long-term change. In another scenario, a group may be involved in strategic planning and needs to determine the type, range and mix of strategies and activities that will lead to long-term change. In other cases, a group may want to achieve commonality of vision and purpose or communicate its plans to other audiences.

Some stakeholders may react in frustration to the theory of change development process because they view it as “taking time to think” which takes time away from “doing the work.” However, the thinking involved in building a theory of change does not in any way preclude doing the work. As mentioned earlier, it is almost impossible to determine whether progress has occurred in a community change initiative if you have not explicitly identified the steps to progress. Communities have too much at stake to engage in work without a clearly defined purpose.

As you begin to think about creating a theory of change, it is important to ask yourself what is driving your need for a theory of change. Is it to guide evaluation? Is it to articulate beliefs and assumptions about how change will happen? Is it to communicate with others or solicit grants or other funding? Knowing what inspires the process can help you determine how to initiate and shape your theory of change. No matter through which door your group enters, once you are “in” the theory of change building process, it will feel like you have entered a house with many different doors to many different rooms – with each room reflecting a different “scene.” Just as in a comfortable home, each scene connects to, complements and reflects the others as the “complete picture” takes shape.

Here are some of the types of “scenes” that are likely to show up in a theory of change picture:

- **A scene that describes the context and rationale for a community change effort:**

To truly understand *Making Connections* Denver (MCD), you must recognize how serious the group is about ensuring all change efforts are rooted in the community. MCD identifies one of its key roles as creating an environment in which communities can “develop their own power.” A central driver in the group’s theory of change is “resident mobilization,” a critical mass of empowered community residents who are motivated to work together on specific issues, engage with systems and institutions, and create lasting change for individuals and families.

MCD’s theory of change provides community members with an opportunity to communicate this context for community change efforts.

- **A scene that describe assumptions and beliefs about how change will occur:**

The White Center Community School Coalition is a group of community members, parents, community based organizations (CBOs) and school staff working together to transform the way White Center Heights Elementary School – an ethnically and culturally diverse school with students and families who speak more than 30 different home languages – “does school.”

Using the Community School model, the coalition hopes to forge partnerships among the school, parents and community organizations to more broadly address the many issues that impact students’ school achievement. The vision of the coalition is to promote academic achievement by being sensitive and responding to the ways in which children from diverse backgrounds learn best, offering a wide range of easily accessible academic enrichment opportunities and being seen as a critical community hub that supports students and their families.

The vision grew out of a local resident leadership group that was supported by *Making Connections* Seattle King County. The Community School is staffed by a Director and guided by a nine-person Advisory Council composed of parents, school staff and community members (e.g., representatives of community organizations that are potential Community School partners). Like the Community School, the Advisory Council is quite diverse, with members from Cambodian, Vietnamese, Samoan, African and Caucasian backgrounds. Despite its diversity, the group shares a universal commitment to the goals of increasing academic success for students and parent involvement in the school.

In the fall of 2003 the coalition began a process to define its strategies, design an implementation plan and identify short-term outcomes that would lead to long-term changes in student academic achievement and the school system. Discussions among stakeholders uncovered very different assumptions about how the Community School could achieve its goals and called into question the degree to which there was a common vision among key coalition members.

As the group began constructing “so that” chains, members debated what the short- and intermediate-term outcomes should be. These discussions revealed some of the individual assumptions that guided thoughts about program implementation and selection of short- and intermediate-term outcomes. The assumptions were quite varied, offering a “frame” for how people believed the general program strategies would unfold and what would result from WCCSC activities.

With help from outside consultants, the group spent time clarifying its assumptions, a process that served two important purposes: First, group members got to know each other better and developed a greater awareness of how they could work together. Secondly, they could see where their assumptions “overlapped” and how different assumptions fit together into an “ecological” vision of change.

The group agreed it was not important to select the “right” assumptions about what would lead to the coalition’s goals, but rather to get the assumptions “on the table” so members could see their range of beliefs about the intended work and desired results and then find “common ground.”

- **A scene that describes conditions which must be established before strategies and the impacts on people’s lives can be articulated:**

EXAMPLE ONE:

Making Connections Des Moines needed to create a common vision of its local initiative that would be understood and shared by community stakeholders, including service delivery systems, non-profit organizations, business networks and residents. Those involved in the team’s theory of change building process viewed forging local partnerships as critical to the initiative’s success. Specifically, the site team identified a need to do the following:

- ▶ Develop new partnerships and strengthen existing ones to create better service delivery systems.
- ▶ Build the capacity of local residents to work with institutions and systems to influence the development of better service systems.

- ▶ Build institutional capacity to listen to and work with residents as partners and not just as clients.

The Des Moines site team created a theory of change picture that described the group's intended results and highlighted the importance of building partnerships to develop the best strategies and actions. According to one site team member, "Everyone [in the community] believes in partnerships and resident leadership, so there has been positive reaction to that." Another site team member reflected, "The theory of change has helped people begin to say 'I understand where [*Making Connections*] is going.'"

The team's theory of change also identifies the types of partners who need to be engaged to achieve the intended results, but it does not specify the work of each partner or how each partner will contribute to change. As *Making Connection Des Moines* moves forward, team members may need to create another layer of their theory of change that better describes the robust strategies that will lead to desired results.

EXAMPLE TWO:

Members of the *Making Connections* Oakland team have engaged in some focused thinking about how change will occur in the Lower San Antonio neighborhood. The team has articulated the need to "build an organized power base of residents that exercise [their] collective power" as a key condition supporting achievement of lasting results for children and families. To see how this condition might be achieved, *Making Connections* Oakland could lay out their proposed strategies such as:

- ▶ Building residents' leadership and community organizing skills
- ▶ Bringing attention the neighborhood's strengths
- ▶ Improving perceptions of the neighborhood

Using a "so that" chain process, the team could begin to see how these strategies connect to change steps that lead to greater resident mobilization. In addition, other strategies might be identified that would directly effect what the group calls its "levers of change" – influence and leverage changes, such as policy changes, improved service practices and changes in resource investments. In addition to resident mobilization, Oakland's team believes lasting change for children and families will result from strategies that "push" these levers of change. Therefore, it would be important to show how its strategies and related impact, influence and leverage outcomes are connected and how these combined changes synergistically contribute to the desired long-term results.

- **A scene that describes how one or more strategic efforts within a multi-faceted community change endeavor will be accountable to funders and stakeholders:**

Within a large-scale community change initiative, one or more specific strategies or programs will typically receive support from a funder that requires some type of accountability reporting or outcome measurement.

A strong theory of change that shows how strategies are related to one another and contribute to results can help effectively establish the grounds for accountability. Within the theory of change, the short- and intermediate-term outcomes for separate strategies or programs can be clearly identified. Labeling these outcomes will not only bring a focus to evaluation and reporting but will also help show how the shorter-term changes contribute to the long-term vision of change.

USING A THEORY OF CHANGE AS A COMPANION TO ACTION

Your theory of change should be your companion to action. It should serve your community, not bog it down. It should help your community breathe life into its initiatives. It should help leaders lead and communities bond together with a common purpose. It should help break down silos, point out connectivity and attract collaborators working toward the same positive results in communities. It should communicate to broad audiences what you are trying to achieve, how you are going about it, your successes along the way and obstacles to overcome. Be sure to test your theory of change, learn from it and adjust your actions accordingly.

Here are some practical ways your community can use its theory of change.

Planning tool

- ▶ Define the scope and scale of your *Making Connections* work.
- ▶ Focus attention on key outcomes and powerful strategies for achieving these outcomes.
- ▶ Provide a framework for sequencing and prioritizing the part of the “work” your community selects for its contribution to neighborhood transformation.

Improve and assure accountability

- ▶ Provide a framework for gauging whether your *Making Connections* strategies are achieving tangible goals.
- ▶ Identify the prioritized outcomes and strategies your initiative intends to document and/or measure to gauge your progress.
- ▶ Provide a tangible foundation for “holding yourself accountable” to making a difference.

Resource allocation decisions

- ▶ Provide a framework for investing resources in strategies that are linked to your initiative’s prioritized outcomes.
- ▶ Guide decision making about how to spend limited resources.
- ▶ Provide a basis for discontinuing and refocusing funding to the most effective areas.

Communicate and market your roadmap to community change

- ▶ Communicate your *Making Connections* community change roadmap to partners, stakeholders, investors and the community.
- ▶ Provide transparency to your work by clearly identifying your prioritized strategies and expected accomplishments.
- ▶ Tell a consistent “story” about *Making Connections*.

Direct link to action

- ▶ Establish focus areas and direction for shaping programs, activities, policies, partnerships and other efforts that support neighborhood transformation.
- ▶ Act with a clear purpose in the context of *Making Connections* activities.
- ▶ Provide a reference point for measuring whether specific actions are effecting positive changes in the lives of children, families and neighborhoods.
- ▶ Maintain the “big picture” that guides your specific actions.

Most importantly, after you create your theory of change, be sure to use it. Review and apply it frequently, using the suggestions outlined above. Finally, keep in mind there is nothing as practical as good theory.

NOTES:
