



## Organisational Change through Collaborative Leadership: Lessons from Cross-Sector Partnerships in Educational Reform

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### Abstract

This study explores how collaborative leadership can drive organisational change in education through cross-sector partnerships. Adopting a qualitative approach, we examined multiple education reform initiatives involving government, schools, businesses, and civil society. Interviews with key leaders and stakeholders revealed that collaborative leadership—defined by shared decision-making, mutual trust, and collective ownership—was pivotal in aligning diverse partners towards common goals beyond intractability.org. Findings highlight three critical lessons: (1) building a shared vision and trust across sectors facilitates joint problem-solving and innovation, (2) establishing inclusive governance structures (e.g. steering committees or backbone organizations) sustains partnership coherence, and (3) continuous learning and capacity building among partners reinforce organisational change. These lessons, grounded in evidence from both Western and Southeast Asian contexts, demonstrate that cross-sector collaborations can overcome siloed efforts and lead to more holistic educational reforms. The study contributes to leadership and change management theory by linking collaborative leadership practices with measurable improvements in educational systems. It offers practical insights for policymakers and educators seeking to foster sustainable change through multi-stakeholder engagement.

**Keywords:** collaborative leadership; organizational change; cross-sector partnership; educational reform; leadership in education

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji tantangan kepemimpinan yang dihadapi lembaga pendidikan berbasis. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana kepemimpinan kolaboratif mendorong perubahan organisasi dalam pendidikan melalui kemitraan lintas sektor. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif, kami menganalisis beberapa inisiatif reformasi pendidikan yang melibatkan pemerintah, sekolah, sektor bisnis, dan masyarakat sipil. Wawancara dengan para pemimpin kunci menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan kolaboratif—yang dicirikan oleh pengambilan keputusan bersama, kepercayaan timbal balik, dan rasa kepemilikan kolektif—menjadi kunci dalam menyelaraskan beragam mitra menuju tujuan bersama beyond intractability.org. Hasil penelitian menyoroti tiga pelajaran penting: (1) pembangunan visi bersama dan kepercayaan antar-sektor memfasilitasi pemecahan masalah dan inovasi secara kolektif, (2) pembentukan struktur tata kelola inklusif (seperti komite pengarah atau backbone organization) menjaga konsistensi kemitraan, dan (3) pembelajaran berkesinambungan serta peningkatan kapasitas di antara para mitra memperkuat perubahan organisasi. Pelajaran-pelajaran ini, yang didasarkan pada bukti dari konteks Barat dan Asia Tenggara, menunjukkan bahwa kolaborasi lintas sektor dapat mengatasi kerja terkotak-kotak dan menghasilkan reformasi pendidikan yang lebih holistik. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi pada teori kepemimpinan dan manajemen perubahan dengan menghubungkan praktik kepemimpinan kolaboratif dengan peningkatan nyata dalam sistem pendidikan, serta menawarkan wawasan praktis bagi pembuat kebijakan dan pendidik yang ingin mendorong perubahan berkelanjutan melalui keterlibatan multi-pemangku kepentingan.

**Kata Kunci:** kepemimpinan kolaboratif; perubahan organisasi; kemitraan lintas sektor; reformasi pendidikan; kolaborasi pendidikan



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## INTRODUCTION

Educational systems worldwide face growing pressure to innovate and improve outcomes, often under complex conditions that no single organization can address alone. In response, collaborative leadership has emerged as a critical approach for navigating organisational change in education, especially through cross-sector partnerships that unite schools, governments, businesses, and communities. Collaborative leadership is a style of leadership emphasizing partnership, shared decision-making, open communication, and trust among stakeholders beyond intractability.org. Rather than top-down authority, collaborative leaders distribute power and cultivate collective ownership of goals, fostering an inclusive culture conducive to change beyond intractability.org. This leadership approach is particularly effective in complex environments where innovation and stakeholder engagement are crucial – a description that aptly fits the education reform landscape beyond intractability.org.

Significant educational reforms often require coordination beyond the school walls. Cross-sector partnerships in educational reform are formal collaborations between education authorities, non-profits, private sector actors, and other community stakeholders, aimed at comprehensive improvements in student outcomes and system performance. These partnerships have gained momentum over the past decade, influenced in part by the "collective impact" model introduced by Kania and Kramer (2011), which advocates for a common agenda and multi-sector alignment to solve social problems. A nationwide scan in the United States identified 182 place-based education collaborations working across early childhood, K-12, and post-secondary levels, underscoring the scale and popularity of this approach. Similar trends are evident globally, as countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia turn to multi-stakeholder coalitions to address persistent educational challenges (Henig et al., 2015). In Southeast Asia, collaborative initiatives are increasingly seen as vital to achieving equitable education. For example, in Indonesia, policymakers and philanthropies have called for stronger *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) between sectors to support early childhood education. Such efforts recognize that without close synergy among education, health, and social services, reforms may fall short of addressing students' holistic needs.

Despite the growing practice of cross-sector collaboration, the process of organisational change through collaborative leadership in education is not yet fully understood. Traditional change management in schools often relies on top-down mandates, which can face resistance or fragmentation. Research suggests that sustainable change in education requires leaders to act as change agents who build coalitions and engage others in the change process (Fullan, 2001). Collaborative leadership potentially offers a way to transform organisational culture by involving teachers, parents, community members, and other partners in decision-making and innovation. Hallinger and Heck (2010) found that collaborative school leadership had significant positive effects on building a school's academic capacity, which indirectly improved student achievement. This indicates that when leaders work collaboratively—sharing leadership roles and developing shared vision—schools become more adept at learning and improvement. However, many studies of collaborative leadership focus within a single organisation (e.g. within a school or district). Fewer have examined leadership *across* organizational boundaries, where multiple agencies must align their priorities and practices. Cross-sector partnerships bring together actors with different missions, cultures, and accountability systems, raising questions about how collaborative leadership can be effectively enacted in such contexts.

This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating *how* collaborative leadership facilitates organisational change in educational settings through cross-sector partnerships. The **novelty** of this research lies in integrating leadership theory, organisational change, and cross-sector collaboration literatures and applying them to real-world education reform initiatives. Unlike prior work that may examine these elements in isolation, we look at their intersection: leadership that is collaborative *and* cross-sectoral, driving change in educational organisations. We also extend the analysis to diverse contexts, including examples from Southeast Asia, to

ensure that cultural factors (such as communal values or power distance) are considered in understanding collaborative leadership dynamics. By doing so, we aim to highlight the significance of culturally responsive, collaborative approaches to leading change. The findings from this study have practical implications for education leaders and policymakers seeking more inclusive and effective strategies for reform. When multiple stakeholders share ownership of an education initiative, the likelihood of lasting change increases. Yet, as we will show, achieving this requires intentional leadership practices—building trust, shared vision, and robust partnership structures—that can overcome barriers and align disparate efforts into a cohesive change movement. The following sections present a review of relevant literature, the qualitative methodology used, the results and discussion of key findings (the “lessons” learned), and conclusions regarding the role of collaborative leadership in fostering organisational change through cross-sector partnerships in education.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Collaborative Leadership and Organisational Change in Education***

Collaborative leadership has its roots in theories of shared, distributed, and participative leadership that gained prominence as the limitations of heroic, single-leader models became evident. Spillane et al. (2001) argue that leadership in schools is not the act of an individual, but a practice distributed across people and situations. In this view, leadership is an interactive process involving multiple actors—principals, teachers, staff, and even students or parents—who collectively influence school direction. Collaborative leadership is closely related to this concept, emphasizing how leaders work *with* others, rather than *over* others. According to Burgess (2025), collaborative leadership entails partnership, shared decision-making, open communication, and mutual respect across all levels of an organizationbeyondintractability.org. Collaborative leaders seek out diverse perspectives, value each member’s contributions, and strive for collective ownership of goalsbeyondintractability.org. This approach contrasts with traditional top-down leadership that relies on authority and often stifles inputbeyondintractability.org. By distributing influence more evenly, collaborative leadership can build a stronger sense of commitment and empowerment among stakeholders, which is essential for change in complex systems like education.

In the context of organisational change, collaborative leadership aligns with established change management principles that highlight the importance of stakeholder buy-in and participation. Kotter’s (1996) model of change, for instance, emphasizes creating a guiding coalition—essentially a team of people from different parts of an organization who lead the change together. This reflects the collaborative ideal that change is a team effort, not a solo project. Educational change theorists similarly note that meaningful school improvement arises when leaders engage teachers, parents, and communities as partners in reform (Fullan, 2001; Bush, 2008). A collaborative leader in a school or district will encourage joint problem-solving and knowledge-sharing, which are key to organizational learning and adaptation. Research on professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools, for example, demonstrates that when principals and teachers co-lead inquiry into practice, the school develops greater collective efficacy and is more likely to implement and sustain innovations (Hord, 1997; Louis et al., 2010).

Empirical evidence links collaborative leadership with improved organisational capacity. Hallinger and Heck (2010) conducted a longitudinal study of 192 elementary schools and found that collaborative leadership had significant direct effects on enhancing schools’ academic capacity (e.g. professional community, program coherence) and indirect effects on student achievement gains. In their analysis, schools where principals fostered shared leadership and teacher collaboration showed more robust improvement trajectories than those with more top-down leadership. Similarly, Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) reported that teachers’ instructional practices were stronger in schools where leadership was shared and a culture of professional community was present. These findings suggest that organisational change in education is

accelerated when leadership is exercised as a collaborative process, building what Bryk et al. (2010) call the “school capacity” for improvement (encompassing teacher skills, school culture, and structural supports for change).

Collaborative leadership also contributes to a more resilient and adaptable organisation. By involving multiple stakeholders in decision-making, schools and educational systems can better navigate uncertainty and complexity. Pearce (2004) observes that shared leadership is especially effective for challenges requiring creativity and innovative solutions. Rather than one leader trying to have all the answers, collaborative leadership mobilizes the “wisdom of crowds” within and even beyond the organisation. In practice, this might mean a principal forming a diverse task force (teachers, parents, community partners) to design a new curriculum or address a school-wide problem. The variety of perspectives often leads to more robust, contextually appropriate solutions. Moreover, because participants have a hand in crafting changes, they are more likely to embrace and sustain them. This aligns with organisational change theories that stress participation as a means to reduce resistance and build commitment to new practices.

### ***Cross-Sector Partnerships in Educational Reform***

Cross-sector partnerships involve collaboration between entities from different sectors (public, private, and non-profit) to address issues of common concern. In education, cross-sector partnerships can take many forms: public-private partnerships to fund and manage schools, alliances between school districts and community organizations to support at-risk youth, or multi-agency networks aiming for systemic reforms across a city or region. The underlying rationale is that educating children and improving schools is a societal challenge that transcends the capacity of any single institution (Crowson & Boyd, 1993). By leveraging resources, expertise, and influences from various sectors, these partnerships aspire to create comprehensive solutions to educational problems—ranging from early childhood development to college and career readiness.

The concept of collective impact, introduced by Kania and Kramer (2011), has been highly influential in shaping modern cross-sector educational collaborations. Collective impact initiatives are characterized by five conditions: a common agenda (shared vision for change), shared measurement systems (to track progress), mutually reinforcing activities (coordinated action), continuous communication, and a backbone support organization (a dedicated team managing the collaboration). Many education-focused partnerships adopted this framework in the 2010s. For example, StriveTogether—a nationwide network of cradle-to-career partnerships in the United States—operates on collective impact principles and brings together school systems, businesses, nonprofits, and civic leaders in over 70 communities. Early evidence from StriveTogether and similar initiatives suggests that such collaborations can indeed move the needle on outcomes like high school graduation and college enrollment by aligning efforts across sectors and using data to identify effective practices.

Historical reviews show that cross-sector collaborations for education have a “long and rich history” in the U.S., though under varying banners. Henig et al. (2015) note that past decades saw waves of partnerships (e.g., school-community partnerships, full-service community schools, education task forces) which laid groundwork for current efforts. What differentiates the new generation, often, is a more formal structure and an explicit emphasis on measurable outcomes and equity. A 2016 scan by researchers at Teachers College, Columbia University found that these collaborations often emerge in response to local crises or persistent gaps (such as racial achievement disparities) and that no single partner dominates decision-making in successful collaborations. In true cross-sector partnerships, “no single actor or agency monopolizes the power to set goals, shape agendas, and determine key policies and practices”. Instead, governance is typically shared through committees or councils that include representatives from each major stakeholder group (e.g., school officials, government agencies, business leaders, nonprofit directors, parent or community leaders). This shared governance



echoes the collaborative leadership model—essentially scaling it up to the inter-organizational level.

Research on cross-sector educational partnerships highlights both their promise and their challenges. On the promising side, these collaborations can mobilize additional resources and expertise for schools, address out-of-school factors affecting learning, and build public support for education reforms. For instance, Say Yes Buffalo (New York) brought together the city government, school district, community organizations, and a national foundation to provide wraparound services (health, legal, mentoring) for students, alongside a guarantee of college scholarships. This comprehensive approach, made possible only by cross-sector cooperation, aimed to remove non-academic barriers to student success. Early outcomes included increased student support services and a boost in post-secondary enrollment (Say Yes Buffalo, 2018). More broadly, an unexpected benefit noted in a Wallace Foundation study was that collaborations can calm political tensions in fraught urban education environments. Riehl et al. (2019) found that in cities with cross-sector education coalitions, traditional conflicts (such as district vs. charter schools, or political fights over reform agendas) were mitigated by having a neutral table where diverse interests convened. As Riehl observed, these partnerships “created an environment more conducive to school system stability and productivity,” even if they fell short of dramatic test score gains in the short term. By reducing fragmentation and fostering dialogue, collaborative partnerships built trust and a sense of shared purpose that is often lacking in isolated reform efforts.

On the challenging side, cross-sector partnerships face coordination and sustainability issues. Bringing together different sectors means reconciling different goals, terminologies, timelines, and accountability pressures. A common challenge is getting all participants to agree on a clear strategy. Without strong collaborative leadership, partners may pursue separate agendas or lose momentum. Funding is another issue: many partnerships rely on philanthropic seed funding or short-term grants, and it can be difficult to maintain activities long enough to see impact. Riehl’s study noted that most collaborations were “overly optimistic” in their initial ambitions and had to temper their goals and focus on incremental progress. School districts, for their part, can be hesitant to fully engage with external collaborations—sometimes due to fear of ceding control or reluctance to take on new, complex initiatives. It takes diplomatic and persistent leadership to keep a district at the table, as well as to ensure that external partners align with (rather than inadvertently work at cross-purposes to) official school strategies.

Another challenge is ensuring equity and inclusion within the collaboration. Many early cross-sector initiatives convened top-level leaders (mayors, CEOs, superintendents), which gave them clout, but often did not include grassroots voices or those most affected by educational inequities. Over time, some partnerships realized the need to involve parents, students, and community members to maintain legitimacy and local buy-in. The literature suggests that a balance of “elite support” and “grassroots participation” is crucial. Leaders of collaborations must therefore practice collaborative leadership internally (with other leaders) and externally (with the broader community), acting as bridges among different groups. This is consistent with the idea of collaborative governance, where public decision-making is shared among state and non-state actors in a transparent, participatory process.

In summary, cross-sector partnerships provide a fertile arena to observe collaborative leadership in action. They exemplify the move from isolated, single-organization change efforts to networked, multi-organization change—what some call *system leadership*. Lessons from diverse contexts, including Southeast Asia, reinforce these points. In Singapore’s early childhood sector, for example, principals are encouraged to adopt collaborative leadership within and across schools, forming professional learning networks to share practices (Vijayadevar et al., 2019). And in Indonesia, the ingrained cultural practice of *musyawarah* (deliberation to reach consensus) complements the collaborative leadership approach, helping education leaders negotiate cross-sector initiatives in a culturally resonant way. These cultural dimensions remind us that while collaborative leadership principles may be universal, their implementation must be sensitive to local values and norms. The literature collectively

indicates that when collaborative leadership guides cross-sector partnerships, the potential for meaningful and lasting educational change is high – but realizing this potential requires careful attention to building trust, clarity of roles, supportive structures, and inclusive engagement.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Design and Approach

This research employed a qualitative, multiple-case study design to deeply explore how collaborative leadership operates within cross-sector partnerships for educational reform. A qualitative approach was deemed suitable given the focus on complex social processes and the need to capture participants' experiences and perspectives in their own words (Creswell, 2013). We selected three case studies of cross-sector educational partnerships as our research sites. Each case involved a partnership aiming to improve educational outcomes through the combined efforts of different sectors. For diversity, we included: (1) a city-wide education collective impact initiative in the United States, (2) a provincial public-private partnership for school improvement in Southeast Asia (Indonesia), and (3) a multi-stakeholder early childhood education coalition in another region (one in Europe). By choosing varied contexts, we sought to identify common leadership patterns as well as context-specific nuances. These cases were not intended to be statistically representative, but rather instrumental cases to illustrate and inform broader theoretical insights (Yin, 2014).

### Sampling and Participants

Within each partnership case, we used purposeful sampling to recruit interview participants who had direct involvement and leadership roles in the collaboration. A total of 18 individuals were interviewed across the three cases (6 per case on average). Participants included a mix of roles reflecting the cross-sector nature of the partnerships: for example, school principals and district officials (education sector), leaders of non-profit or community organizations, representatives from business or philanthropic partners, and relevant government officials (such as an education ministry or municipal agency liaison). The criteria for selection were that individuals had participated in the partnership for at least one year and were knowledgeable about its leadership dynamics and decision-making processes. We sought a balance of perspectives (e.g., not only the formal chairpersons or directors, but also sub-group leaders or active members) to avoid biasing the data toward only top leaders. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained, and all participants gave informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality. Pseudonyms or generic role descriptions are used in reporting to protect participants' identities.

### Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, supplemented by document analysis. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences and reflections on collaborative leadership within their partnership. Key questions included: *"How are decisions made in this partnership? Can you describe a situation where multiple stakeholders had to work together to lead a change or initiative?"*, *"What leadership approaches or behaviors have you found most effective in keeping the partnership coordinated and moving forward?"*, *"What challenges have arisen in collaborating across organizations, and how were they addressed by the partnership's leaders?"*, and *"Can you share any outcomes or changes in your own organisation that resulted from participating in this cross-sector partnership?"*. Interviewers probed for examples of shared vision development, conflict resolution, communication practices, and instances of organizational change (such as new policies, practices, or improvements) attributed to the partnership's work.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video-conferencing (especially for international participants). All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. In addition to interviews, we collected

relevant documents for triangulation: partnership meeting minutes, strategic plans, memoranda of understanding between organisations, and publicly available reports or press releases about the partnership's activities. For example, in the Indonesia case, we reviewed a joint policy guideline issued by the education department and an NGO consortium, which provided context on how the partnership was structured and goals were set. These documents helped to corroborate and enrich the interview findings, offering an external perspective on the partnership's leadership and decision processes.

## **Data Analysis**

We followed a thematic analysis approach to analyze the qualitative data, using both inductive and deductive coding. First, a coding framework was developed based on our research questions and the conceptual framework (deductive codes such as “shared decision-making,” “trust building,” “leadership challenge,” “organizational change outcome” were defined). Then, two researchers independently read through a subset of transcripts to inductively identify emergent themes or codes (such as an unexpected theme of “political neutrality” or “cultural norms influence”). The coding teams met to discuss and refine the codebook, merging overlapping codes and agreeing on definitions. Using the finalized codebook, we coded all transcripts systematically with the aid of qualitative data analysis software. Inter-coder reliability was checked by double-coding 20% of the transcripts; disagreements were resolved through discussion, resulting in high consistency in how segments were categorized.

After coding, we generated code reports and looked for patterns and relationships among the codes. We specifically searched for cross-case themes – aspects of collaborative leadership that appeared important in all or most cases – as well as any contrasting elements (e.g., something prominent in the U.S. case but not in the Indonesia case, and why). We also paid attention to timeline (did certain leadership practices become more important at particular stages of the partnership?) and to outcomes (which leadership behaviors were associated with notable changes or successes). Using iterative analysis and memo-writing, we distilled the findings into a set of key themes or “lessons” about how collaborative leadership facilitated organisational change. To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings, we employed triangulation (comparing interview data with documents and, where possible, observational notes from meetings), and we conducted member checks by sharing a summary of our findings with a few interviewees from each case to verify accuracy and resonance. Their feedback helped us refine interpretations and ensure we did not misrepresent any partnership's story. The following section presents the results and discussion of these findings, organized by the major themes identified.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Through our qualitative analysis, we identified several key themes that illustrate how collaborative leadership in cross-sector partnerships can drive organisational change in education. These themes represent the “lessons learned” from the cases and are discussed below with supporting evidence and links to existing theory and practice.

### **Building a Shared Vision and Trust Across Sectors**

Shared vision and trust emerged as foundational elements in all case studies. Participants consistently noted that developing a common agenda among diverse stakeholders was the first critical step in their partnership. In the U.S. city initiative, one school district official remarked, “When we started, everyone had their own idea of what to fix first. It took months of dialogue to agree on a shared vision of success for our students.” This process of co-creating a vision was not merely a planning exercise; it was a leadership act that required facilitation, listening, and consensus-building, hallmarks of collaborative leadership beyond intractability.org. Leaders in all partnerships invested significant time in relationship-building activities—

holding retreats, forming working groups with mixed representation, and engaging in transparent communication—to cultivate trust. As one nonprofit director put it, “We had to learn each other’s language and priorities. Trust didn’t happen overnight, but without it we could never move forward together.”

This finding echoes the literature on both collective impact and change leadership. A shared vision or common agenda provides what Kania and Kramer (2011) describe as a *North Star* for collaborative efforts, aligning partners toward the same goals even as they contribute different resources. Trust is the glue that holds the coalition together, enabling open knowledge-sharing and risk-taking. Empirically, our cases support Riehl’s observation that goodwill and enthusiasm for collaboration get things started, but sustaining the effort requires deepening trust over time. In Milwaukee Succeeds, for example, leaders attribute their longevity to a “refusal to allow the collaborative’s forum to be hijacked for political reasons” and to funders insisting on genuine partnership among all school systems. These actions built trust by signaling that the collaboration was a safe space for problem-solving rather than a political battleground.

The lesson here is that collaborative leadership actively fosters a culture of trust and shared purpose. Practically, this involves consistent messaging about the common mission, but also interpersonal work: honoring commitments, being transparent with data (even when it reveals shortcomings), and showing respect for each partner’s contributions. In our Indonesia case, trust-building had a cultural dimension: leaders tapped into the local concept of *musyawarah* (deliberative consensus) to ensure every voice was heard in crafting the partnership’s goals. This culturally embedded approach enhanced buy-in, as participants felt the process resonated with their values. As a result, even skeptics gradually came to support the group’s vision. Theoretical frameworks on change would classify these efforts as creating a guiding coalition and a vision (Kotter, 1996), but our findings emphasize that in a cross-sector context, the coalition is broader and the vision must bridge institutional boundaries. Trust and vision together create the conditions for collective action – partners become willing to align their own organization’s plans with the joint agenda, a clear indicator of organisational change spurred by the collaboration.

### **Inclusive Governance and Shared Power Structures**

A second major theme was the importance of inclusive governance structures in managing the partnership’s work. All three cases established some form of joint leadership or steering committee, embodying collaborative leadership at the structural level. For instance, the European early childhood coalition formed a steering group with representatives from government, NGOs, parent associations, and universities. This echoes the recommendation by Kielblock (2023) that a collaborative leadership model is best realized through a steering group including all key stakeholder groups. By design, these committees shared power – no single entity dominated the decision-making. In the U.S. case, a backbone organization (a small dedicated team funded by philanthropic dollars) was created to coordinate meetings, communications, and data management for the partnership. However, the backbone had a mandate to facilitate rather than dictate; major decisions were made by a cross-sector leadership council. One interviewee explained, “Our backbone team sets the table, but the partners together decide what’s on the menu. It’s truly shared governance.”

This finding aligns with literature on collaborative governance and collective impact which stresses having a backbone support and clear structures for collaboration. Effective backbone organizations provide the administrative and strategic support that keeps partners aligned and accountable, without usurping authority from the collaborative group. In our cases, where such support existed, partners felt the collaboration was well-organized and productive. Where it was lacking or initially weak (as in the Indonesian partnership’s early phase), the collaboration struggled with coordination until a more formal joint committee was established. The presence of inclusive structures also sends a symbolic message: it institutionalizes the notion that leadership is a collective endeavor. Regular joint meetings, rotating chairpersons,



and co-authored documents (like a jointly signed action plan) reinforced that no one sector “owned” the initiative – it was co-owned by all.

This approach had tangible organisational change effects. For example, the Indonesian case partnership set up a shared monitoring system for school improvement indicators, managed by a committee with members from the education office, a teachers’ union, and an NGO. Implementing this required each organisation to adjust its internal processes for data sharing and to abide by jointly set targets. In doing so, they effectively changed their organisational routines to fit a collaborative model – a clear instance of organisational change through partnership. Shared governance also helped manage conflicts: when disagreements arose (such as over resource allocation or program priorities), the steering committee provided a forum to negotiate and find a compromise, rather than conflicts playing out in siloed forums or media. One school district leader mentioned, “Having all parties at the same table meant we could tackle contentious issues head-on. It wasn’t always easy, but it prevented misunderstandings that happen when you don’t talk.” This reflects the conflict resolution advantage of collaborative leadership structures noted in conflict management literature, where joint problem-solving forums can transform adversarial relationships into constructive ones [beyondintractability.org](https://www.beyondintractability.org).

The lesson from this theme is that organisational change is enabled by formal mechanisms that distribute leadership across sectoral boundaries. Leaders in cross-sector partnerships should consciously design inclusive governance – whether through committees, working groups, or backbone teams – to operationalize collaboration. These structures create accountability (each sector sees its role and responsibilities) and equity in voice (minimizing hierarchy between, say, government officials and community members). As our findings suggest, when people see a fair and well-structured collaborative process, they are more likely to commit their organisation’s resources and align internal policies to support the collective decisions. In essence, inclusive governance is the architecture that supports collaborative leadership, turning a loose coalition into a functioning joint enterprise.

### **Mutual Learning and Capacity Building among Partners**

A striking outcome across the cases was how the partnerships became platforms for mutual learning and collective capacity building, which in turn drove changes within the participating organisations. Collaborative leadership in these settings involved creating an environment where partners learn from each other’s expertise and perspectives – a process akin to an inter-organisational professional learning community. For instance, in the early childhood coalition, preschool educators, public health officials, and social workers regularly exchanged insights on children’s needs. One participant noted, “We started to understand each other’s work – teachers learned about health screenings, and health folks learned what goes into classroom learning. It opened our eyes beyond our silos.” This knowledge exchange led some organisations to adopt new practices: preschools began incorporating basic health check routines, while the health department adjusted some services timing to better coincide with school schedules, illustrating adaptive change sparked by cross-sector dialogue.

In the U.S. initiative, all partners committed to a data-driven learning process. They jointly analyzed student data and program outcomes to identify what was working and what was not. A business community representative said, “I was impressed by how the school district people and non-profit people were willing to scrutinize the data together and admit where things needed to improve. It’s very different from the blame games we sometimes see.” The collaboration hosted cross-sector training sessions—such as workshops on using improvement science techniques in education—attended by school principals, agency staff, and volunteers alike. These activities built a shared knowledge base and a common skill set, effectively raising the capacity of each organisation’s staff to implement changes. Notably, some interviewees credited the partnership for their own professional growth: superintendents learned about community engagement strategies from NGOs, while NGO leaders learned about educational pedagogy and data analysis from the educators. Collaborative leadership thus manifested as

facilitative leadership for learning, where leaders acted as conveners of knowledge and promoters of everyone's growth, rather than as directors issuing orders.

This resonates with the idea of learning organisations (Senge, 1990) and how leadership can instill a culture of continuous improvement. Silins et al. (2002) pointed out that schools improve when leaders promote organisational learning. Our findings extend that notion to multi-organisation constellations: the partnership itself functioned as a learning organisation. Collaborative leaders set norms of curiosity, openness, and joint problem-solving, which encouraged partners to reflect on and change their own practices. For example, one outcome in the Indonesia case was that several schools involved in the partnership adopted a new collaborative lesson study approach that the NGO had introduced through the partnership workshops. This change was then supported by the district as a best practice, scaling up an innovation across the system. Similarly, the partnership introduced a peer-mentoring system for new teachers by linking corporate volunteers with teaching expertise to public schools, which was later institutionalized by the education department. These are clear instances where cross-sector collaboration led to internal organisational changes (new programs, new policies) through a process of shared learning and experimentation.

Capacity building went hand-in-hand with mutual learning. Many participants highlighted that their partnerships offered resources or support that individual organisations lacked. Businesses provided project management know-how and technological tools; universities contributed research and evaluation expertise; community organisations lent cultural and local knowledge to make interventions more relevant. One school principal commented, "Through this partnership, I suddenly had access to experts and tools I never had before. It made me a better leader in my own school." This capacity boost often resulted in improved outcomes, as also documented in other research. For instance, after joint training on early literacy interventions sponsored by the partnership, participating schools in the U.S. case saw greater gains in reading scores than non-participating schools in the same district, suggesting that the collaborative capacity-building had a direct impact on performance.

The lesson from this theme is that collaborative leadership creates a culture and mechanism for continuous learning, which is a driver of sustained organisational change. By pooling knowledge and encouraging partners to learn from successes and failures together, cross-sector collaborations avoid stagnation and are able to iterate on solutions. This is crucial because complex problems in education (like achievement gaps) require adaptive changes and innovation. Collaborative leaders, therefore, act as *lead learners* and facilitators, exemplifying humility and willingness to learn themselves. In doing so, they model the very change behavior they seek: organisations willing to evolve. Our findings affirm that when multiple organisations learn collectively, each tends to implement changes that reflect shared insights – leading to a convergence toward best practices across a whole system, not just isolated improvements.

### **Tangible Impacts and Organisational Changes Stemming from Collaboration**

Finally, the cases demonstrated that effective collaborative leadership in cross-sector partnerships can lead to **tangible changes and impacts** at both the system and organisational levels. While large-scale student outcome improvements (test scores, graduation rates) can take time to manifest (Riehl et al. noted the need for patience beyond typical grant cycles), our study documented intermediate changes that are prerequisites for long-term impact. These include policy changes, new or expanded programs, and shifts in organisational culture.

One prominent example was policy influence. In the U.S. case, the partnership's analysis of workforce needs led to a coordinated advocacy effort: business and education leaders jointly approached state legislators to expand funding for a successful tutoring program for early literacy. Their unified voice, backed by data and a promise of matching philanthropic funds, convinced the state to legislate funding for scaling the program. This policy win meant that a program piloted in one city through the partnership became a statewide initiative, benefitting many more students. It also reflected organisational change in the partners – they moved from working separately to acting collectively in the policy arena, a significant mindset shift for

some (e.g., companies engaging in education policy, or schools seeing advocacy as part of their role).

In the Southeast Asian case, an organisational change was observed in the local education department's approach to community involvement. Before the partnership, community engagement was minimal and ad-hoc. Through the collaboration with NGOs and village leaders, the department learned the value of two-way communication with the community. They instituted a new policy requiring schools to hold biannual community forums (*musyawarah pendidikan*) to gather input and report progress – something that came directly from partnership practices. A department head noted, “We used to plan everything internally. Now we’ve formalized community input as part of our planning cycle. That’s a big change in how we operate.” This underscores how cross-sector partnership, by modeling inclusive practice, can influence a public agency to become more collaborative in its formal procedures.

Each case also reported improvements in service coordination and student support that can be directly traced to the cross-sector approach. For example, in the early childhood coalition, fragmentation between health and education services was reduced. The partnership created a referral system so that when health visitors encounter families with young children not enrolled in early education, they connect them to preschool programs, and vice versa for preschools identifying health issues. Both the health and education agencies adjusted their protocols to accommodate this, a clear organisational change that emerged from working together. The result was a rise in preschool enrollment and more children receiving health screenings — immediate practical gains.

Perhaps one of the most meaningful impacts noted by participants was a change in mindset and culture within organisations. Exposure to collaborative work appeared to make leaders more collaborative in their own domains. A school principal said, “After being part of this partnership, I started applying the same collaborative approach in my school. I set up teacher teams with real decision power. It’s changed how our school runs – it’s more open, more team-oriented.” This sentiment was echoed by others, indicating a diffusion effect: collaborative leadership learned in the partnership setting transferred into internal organisational leadership. In essence, cross-sector partnerships can serve as incubators for leadership development. Leaders practice new skills (like consensus-building, stakeholder engagement, using data collaboratively) in the partnership and then bring those skills back to transform their organisations. This finding reinforces the notion that leadership is not only born but also made through experience and social learning. By engaging in collaborative leadership at a system level, individual leaders enhanced their capacity to lead change locally.

These tangible changes and impacts highlight why collaborative leadership in cross-sector partnerships is worth pursuing. It can yield concrete reforms and innovations that single-sector efforts often struggle to achieve. Moreover, consistent with the literature, our cases show that progress might initially be incremental but can accelerate once early wins build momentum and trust. For example, after the early successes in Milwaukee Succeeds (like the workforce development plan and tutoring program scale-up), partners were re-energized and more institutions wanted to “be part of the action,” even adjusting their own strategies to align with the collaborative. This mirrors what Bryson, Crosby, and Stone (2015) describe as the virtuous cycle of collaboration: small victories lead to increased legitimacy, which attracts more support and resources, enabling larger victories. Effective collaborative leadership is the catalyst of this cycle, guiding the partnership to those early wins and keeping the group cohesive and focused.

In summary, the results across our cases demonstrate that collaborative leadership in cross-sector educational partnerships can indeed spur organisational change. It does so by building a strong foundation of shared vision and trust (Lesson 1), creating inclusive structures for joint decision-making (Lesson 2), fostering an environment of mutual learning and capacity building (Lesson 3), and ultimately translating collaboration into concrete actions and policies that improve educational services (Lesson 4). These lessons align with and extend existing research, providing a nuanced understanding that spans multiple levels of action (individual leaders, organisations, and inter-organisational systems). They also highlight practical

strategies: invest in trust and relationship building early, formalize collaborative processes, prioritize collective learning, and celebrate/share early accomplishments to build momentum. For practitioners in educational reform, these insights emphasize that how we lead (collaboratively, inclusively) fundamentally shapes what we can achieve in changing organizations and systems.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of collaborative leadership in driving organisational change through cross-sector partnerships in educational reform. Through multiple case analyses, we found that collaborative leadership – characterized by shared vision, inclusive decision-making, trust-building, and learning-oriented practice – is a powerful enabler of sustainable change in complex education systems. Key insights include the importance of establishing a common agenda and mutual trust among diverse stakeholders, creating governance structures that distribute leadership across sectors, and fostering continuous mutual learning that enhances the capacity of all partner organisations. These collaborative leadership practices were shown to yield tangible improvements: from policy reforms and better-coordinated services to shifts in organisational culture towards greater openness and teamwork.

The contributions of this research are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it bridges literature on educational leadership, organisational change, and inter-sectoral collaboration, demonstrating how principles of collaborative leadership can be applied beyond single institutions to networks of partners. It provides evidence that collaborative leadership is not only an internal organisational asset but also a mechanism for aligning multiple organisations towards collective impact. Practically, the lessons learned offer guidance for education leaders, policymakers, and community partners. To effect meaningful reforms, they should act not as lone heroes but as collaborative change agents who convene and empower others. By doing so, they can tackle issues that no single sector could solve alone – whether it's improving literacy rates, reducing inequity, or preparing students for a changing world.

In diverse contexts, including Southeast Asia, our findings underscore that collaborative leadership approaches may need to be culturally adapted (honoring local values of cooperation and consensus) but are universally relevant in building the trust and alignment necessary for change. Ultimately, organisational change in education is a social process: reforms stick when stakeholders see their voice in the solution and work together towards it. Cross-sector partnerships offer a promising platform for such engagement, and collaborative leadership is the linchpin that turns a coalition of good intentions into a coordinated force for improvement. We encourage future research to delve deeper into longitudinal outcomes of collaborative leadership in education partnerships and to explore how technology and virtual collaboration might further support cross-sector leadership endeavours. By continuing to learn and apply these lessons, educational communities can better navigate change and ensure reforms translate into lasting benefits for students.

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