Achieving "Collective Impact" with Results-Based Accountability™

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Creating Measurable Results

Community organizations nationwide are in search of methods that help them achieve measurable results for the children and families they serve. Sometimes these organizations seek like-minded partners in order to reach common goals. Partnerships are formed. Meetings are held. But to what end? Too often, these meetings are held without a clear, common, and measurable result in mind. Over time meeting attendance falls and partners end up falling short of achieving their goals.

What causes these well-intentioned efforts to flounder? Perhaps what the members thought was a common purpose was actually more of a general idea - one open to multiple interpretations. When this happens collaborative efforts are likely to fail because without a common vision there won't be measurable results.

So how can partnered organizations align their efforts to achieve results? What are the necessary components for greater community impact and sustained change? In "Collective Impact," an article in the recent issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review by* John Kania and Mark Kramer explain how commitment from a group of actors from different sectors can result in a common agenda for solving a specific social problem." The authors further argue that "Large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination[.]"

To achieve that level of social change, Kania and Kramer suggest that five conditions of collective success must be met:

Five Conditions of Collective Success:

1) a common agenda;
2) shared measurement systems;
3) mutually reinforcing activities;
4) continuous communication; and
5) a backbone support organization.

The Results-Based Accountability™ (RBA) framework is used by community, state, national and even foreign organizations working towards collective impact. Developed by Mark Friedman and detailed in his book *Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough*, RBA provides a "disciplined way of thinking and taking action that can be used to improve the quality of life in communities," as well as "the performance of programs, agencies and service systems." Application of the core components of RBA enables organizations and communities to put each of the "collective impact" conditions into operation, helping these groups to turn ideas into action.
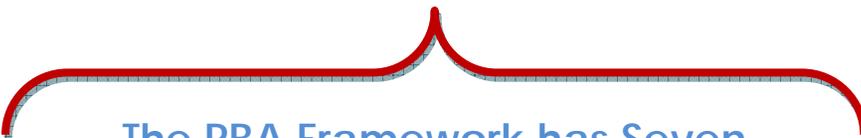
The RBA Framework has Seven Population Accountability Questions:

1) What are the quality of life conditions we want for the children, adults, and families in our community?

2) What would these conditions look like if we could see them?

3) How can we measure these conditions?

4) How are we doing on the most important of these measures?

5) Who are the partners that have a role to play in doing better?

6) What works to do better, including no-cost and low-cost ideas?

7) What do we propose to do?
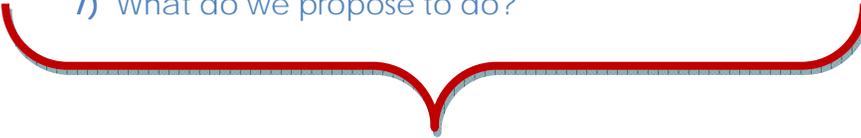
By answering these seven specific questions, community stakeholders can more quickly meet the five conditions of collective success and, in turn, support communities in achieving collective impact.

Kania and Kramer's first two conditions of collective success--"a common agenda" and "shared measurement systems"--align well with the first three questions of population accountability. That's because RBA is based on the idea of "ends-to-means" decision-making. Within this framework, stakeholders begin by identifying the end results they want for the community. Next, groups work together to develop a deeper understanding of how community members would experience those results. Then stakeholders choose data sets and indicators by which they can measure their progress.

The next two conditions of collective success--"mutually reinforcing activities" and "continuous communication--match up with the remaining questions of population accountability. After selecting results and indicators, stakeholders work to discover the "story" behind the data and tease out the factors that have shaped the data in the past. Each stakeholder then explains his or her role in addressing the factors using strategies that are likely to succeed in improving the data.

Many successful RBA implementations have employed trained RBA facilitators and project managers to guide community leaders though the development of a results-based community action agenda. This team provides what Kania and Kramer call a "backbone support organization" which frees stakeholders to focus their efforts on better results and better outcomes.

As a growing number of communities implement their results-based actions agendas, newcomers to RBA should learn from these efforts to achieve similar results. Communities are creating a culture of results that can serve as models both nationwide and abroad. And they're doing so by implementing RBA and meeting the five conditions of collective success to achieve collective impact.

Condition #1: Common agenda
A shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions

RBA has a few simple core components. Friedman explains, "Success at the population level depends on partnerships… It is unfair to hold any single agency responsible for community conditions."

That's why communities (and organizations) begin by defining quality of life goals, such as ensuring children are ready to learn when they start school, keeping communities safe, or guaranteeing living wage jobs. These are translated into results statements that concisely express the desired "condition of well-being," that partners will work together to achieve. This process encourages communities to collaborate on clearly defined goals.

In order to ensure all partners understand the concepts behind the result statement, they meet early in the process to ensure they share a common language. Working towards a common language, with definitions established for frequently used (and confused) terms, reinforces the notion that each organization may use a different word to refer to the same idea.

Kania and Kramer provide an example, Strive, a non-profit subsidiary of KnowledgeWorks, that "focused the entire educational community on a single set of goals, measured in the same way." Although Strive brings together hundreds of partners to focus on a stated, measurable result, their success is not a function of their size. Positive impact can also result from a smaller core of partners, as long as they are all committed to change.

The Children's Trust, a Children's Services Council in Miami-Dade, Florida, has been working towards a positive impact for the community. The Children's Trust Board, representative of thirty-three individual and agency partners in the county, came together using RBA to develop a Results-Based Strategic Plan for Investments for 2010-2015. The Plan outlines four result areas with statements representing what the Board desires as conditions of well-being for children, adults and families in Miami-Dade County. The community's success will be measured using several headline indicators for each result area.

The Children's Trust has recently taken the initiative for improving the 3rd grade-reading indicator for Miami-Dade County. They convened a community collective impact initiative in the specific result area "Children Are Succeeding in School and Society." No single agency can take responsibility for changing a community level indicator alone. So the Trust organized a Read to Learn Mini-Summit, drawing together over 150 individuals from the community, including critical partners such as public school officials, county representatives, and staff from the county public library to focus on each partner's role in improving 3rd grade reading proficiency by 2020.

Modesto E. Abety-Gutierrez describes the challenges of collective impact:
President and CEO of The Children's Trust

"As we implemented our Results-Based Strategic Plan, it became clear that helping service providers to improve by incentivizing performance on agreed upon performance measures was easier than moving an entire urban community to collective action towards a shared goal. The National Campaign for 3rd grade reading came at the right time to bring us all together, as it centers on an indicator related to all our results. RBA and collective impact provide tools enabling us to move together as a community to achieve our desired results."

Condition #2: Shared Measurement System

Collecting data and measuring results consistently on a short list of indicators at the community level, including the use of web-based technology

Another core component of RBA focuses on the selection and tracking of headline indicators and performance measures that quantify the achievement of results at both the community and program level. One of the core attributes of RBA is the use of data to make decisions. The RBA process begins by incorporating the best available community indicator data.   These data will help determine the community's progress in reaching its desired results.

Communities are encouraged to choose only three to five headline indicators for each result and then work with *shared* accountability for improvement. Through this collaboration focusing on a few indicators in each result area, local organizations can take appropriate responsibility *and* joint accountability for the indicator data. Each organization can then clarify its specific role in implementing strategies that indicate better outcomes.

The *2010 Striving Together Report Card* illustrates how Strive Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky used the RBA framework to determine what community indicators would best represent and measure the achievement of the result area, "Students are Supported In and Out of School."   Using the focus group format and the RBA criteria of communication power, proxy power and data power, fifty organizations rated possible indicators as either high, medium or low. The process yielded a list of prioritized candidate indicators to measure success.   This application of RBA supports a deeper understanding among community groups by establishing initial agreement about the most important measures. In addition, the tool is useful for the selection of headline program performance measures.

The Family and Children First Council of Montgomery County, Ohio (FCFC) was introduced to RBA in 1996. Beginning in 1998, FCFC began publishing an annual Progress Report on Community Outcomes, Indicators and Strategies.   This comprehensive report shares date with the community on how Montgomery County is doing in six outcome areas. FCFC has moved the community to action around this data by engaging in "community conversations" about the core components of RBA and using RBA's Turn the Curve™ exercise to prioritize steps needed to improve data and achieve results.

Another important factor emphasized by Kania and Kramer is the use of web-based technology. They note, "Web-based technologies that have enabled common systems for reporting increase efficiency, reduce cost… and can improve the quality and credibility of the data collected."

An excellent example of this technology that is growing in use to track and share data across community partnerships is   the Results Scorecard, designed by the Results Leadership Group.   This web-based software tool, based upon the principles of the RBA framework, is helping public-sector leaders collaborate, make data-driven decisions, and align the performance of their programs and initiatives with the impact that they create in the community.

The Promise Neighborhoods Institute recently selected the Results Scorecard to assist in the RBA process promoted in sixty neighborhoods across the country. It is being used to inspire a vision of what is possible, and provides a container to capture the contributions of partners.

Additionally, the United Way of Central Iowa has fully integrated the use of RBA and the Results Scorecard into its internal operations and its work in the community.   Not only have they defined results and indicators that articulate the community impact they want to achieve in Education, Income and Health, but also they are aligning the performance of all grantees and promoting ongoing performance improvement with the use of the built-in tools.   They have also embedded live community scorecards on their website to engage stakeholders and communicate progress that can be found at www.unitedwaydm.org.

Angela Glover-Blackwell, Founder & CEO of PolicyLink:

"We need to help leaders see what is going on in real time on the ground, change up strategy if it's not working, and press ahead if it's getting the job done, and that's exactly what those Promise Neighborhoods in Detroit and Brooklyn and Hayward have begun to do. They're using a wonderful tool called the Results Scorecard to continually improve their work based on real results, and to share those results. **The Results Scorecard, provided by the Results Leadership Group, creates the vision and the passion that helps communities take action."**

Condition #2: Mutually Reinforcing Activities

"A diverse group of stakeholders working together, not requiring that all participants do the same thing, but encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels"

It is important to note that each of the RBA questions include the key word "**we**". The deliberate use of the word "we" highlights a central concept behind the RBA framework. No agency can change a community level result and indicator alone. This type of change requires the collaborative, focused work of numerous cross-sector partners. The fourth question of RBA's population accountability," how are we doing on the most important of these measures" is asked of all stakeholders, residents and community members. As partners share their perspective on how the community is doing, they can develop a narrative that informs all involved about the *factors* that have contributed to the history of the data.

The "story behind the data" is, arguably, one of RBA's most powerful components. Although similar factors might be consistent across communities, each community should identify those that are particularly central to the children, adults and families present in their own geographic area.

As communities start these conversations, often informed by local needs assessments or environmental scans, a shared understanding emerges about the significant factors that may have caused the current conditions described by the data.

Once the community has identified the salient factors, the next population accountability questions should be, "Who are the partners that can have a role to play in doing better? Who can take actions to address each of the identified factors"? What non-traditional partners can be added to the conversation? At this stage, it is helpful to ensure that the collection of partners is focused on making a measurable difference. As the group moves into the next phase of work, the focus must be on *impact*.

What actions would work to "turn the curve" on the community indicator(s)? Each partner must be willing to direct attention to what Kania and Kramer call "mutually reinforcing activities." RBA asks groups to consider what activities have a high probability of effectiveness. What evidence based practices would be a good fit for the community? It may be necessary to research best practices or to scale up local, innovative, and useful ideas. Common to both collective impact and RBA is that each agency pursues a strategy that likely to show positive, measurable results. Once community-wide strategies are agreed upon, each agency can play its part with a clear understanding of how their strategy affects the community as a whole.

Still, there are challenging questions about ineffective strategies. How can communities determine if strategies include "mutually reinforcing activities? Fundraising and other efforts must be directed to those actions that meet pre-determined criteria. RBA suggests that strategies meet the following criteria before incorporation into a community action agenda:

Strategy Evaluation Criteria:

✓ **Leverage:** How much difference will the proposed strategy/action make on results, indicators, and turning the curve™?

✓ **Specificity:** Is the idea specific enough to be implemented?

✓ **Values:** Is it consistent with our community values?

✓ **Reach:** Is it feasible and affordable?

RBA includes a simple method for groups to select from among numerous actions. The method is similar to the previously mentioned method used for rating indicators.

Each proposed action item could be rated as "H" for high, "M"=for medium, or "L" for low on each criterion. Actions that receive all highs or "HHHH" will be prioritized, funded and implemented by various partners. This rating method distinguishes the most powerful actions that can be taken *immediately*, usually no-cost and low cost ideas, from those that take longer to achieve. Note that both RBA and Collective Impact are flexible, given that it is not necessary or expected for each partner to implement the same actions. Partners are only expected to take actions that are the best fit for their agencies and which can be implemented with a reasonable expectation of success. "The power of collective action comes not from the sheer number of participants or the uniformity of their efforts, but from the coordination of their differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action."

The Division of Early Childhood Development at the Maryland State Department of Education illustrates the strength of RBA within a collective impact initiative. As early as 1999, Maryland was on the path to Results-Based Accountability, indicated by the selection of eight results areas for children, youth and families. The early childhood result area "Children Enter School Ready to Learn," was supported by not only a trifecta of focus, coordination and funding, but was also guided by the RBA framework to bring together partners, focus on a common indicator, understand the story behind the emerging data on school readiness, and to eventually develop an action plan for improved child outcomes.

In order to equip Maryland leaders to work with collective impact, a leadership development program was formed. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Maryland Subcabinet for Children, Youth and Families, and the Council for Excellence in Government Leadership in Action Program (LAP) convened state leaders from diverse backgrounds to "accelerate the rate at which children enter school ready to learn in Maryland and increase the leadership capacity of those accountable for that result."

In October 2002, after facilitated collaborative leadership meetings over the course of ten months, the group of Maryland leaders presented "Achieving School Readiness: A 5-Year Action Agenda for Maryland," a plan for improving children's' school readiness by "turning the curve™ on the baseline data. The action agenda is replete with strategies, steps, and even recommendations for implementation partners. Performing the suggested "mutually reinforcing activities", along with the cumulative impact of replicating the LAP for school readiness in several local jurisdictions, was key to the successful efforts. The trend line for Maryland's percentage of children fully ready to learn is shown below.

Turning the Curve

State: Children entering school ready to learn composite

State: Percentage of children fully ready
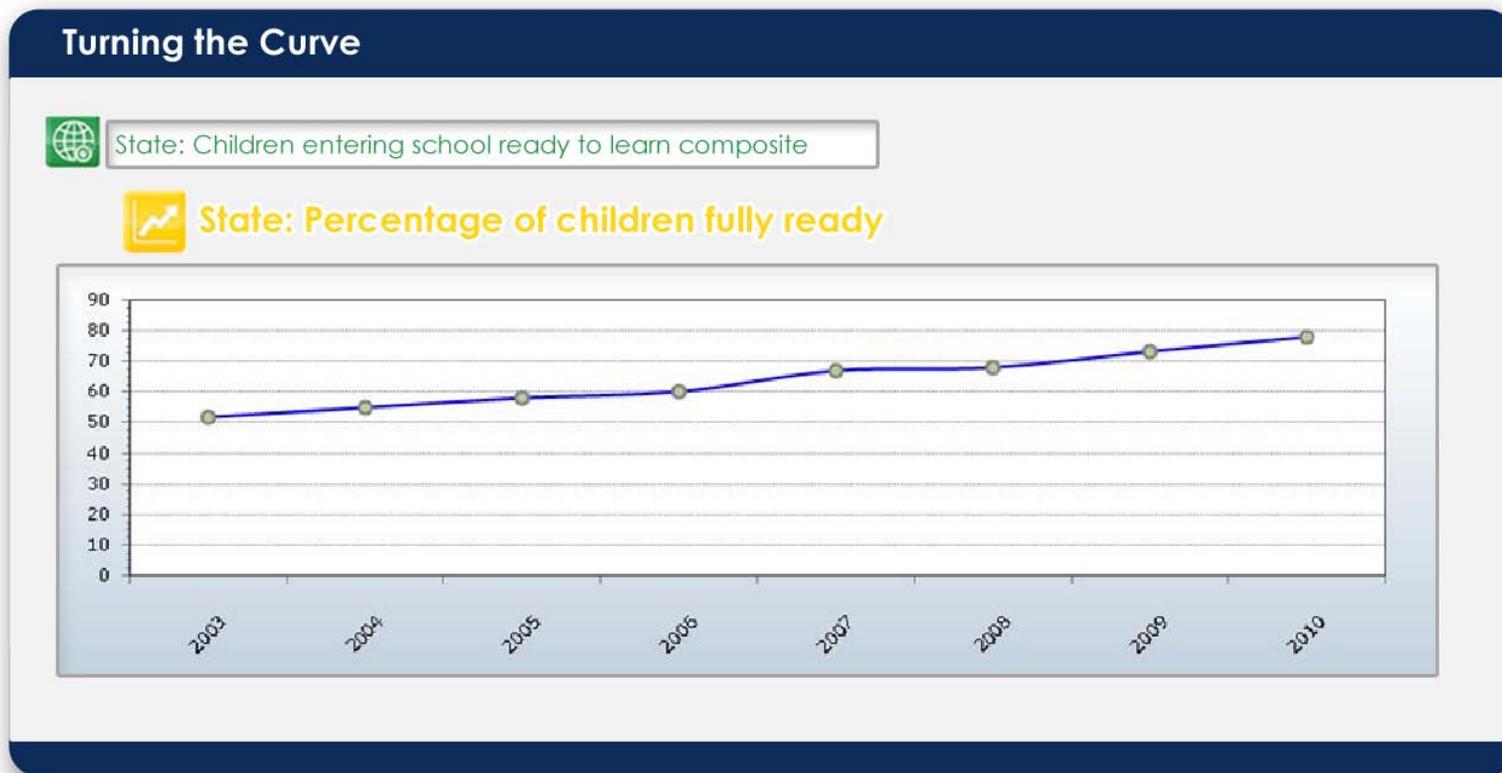
Condition #4: Continuous Communication

"Participants need several years of regular meetings to build up enough experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their different parts"

Early in the RBA process, groups begin to develop a common language. The goal of a common language does not require that all community partners adopt the same words and definitions. It is more important that community partners understand the key ideas needed to collaborate successfully. The history of this work is one in which jargon has been both confusing and intimidating. In order to implement RBA with collective impact, partners must agree on labels for a few key ideas. The most common terms are given as labels for three key ideas that distinguish *population accountability* from program *performance accountability*:

Population Accountability:

Result: A condition of well-being for children, adults, families and communities;

Indicator: A measure that helps quantify the achievement of a result

Performance Accountability:

Performance Measure: A measure of how well a program, agency or service system is working

RBA includes 3 types of performance measures:
- **How much did we do?**
- **How well did we do it?**
- **Is anyone better off?**

Continuous communication is supported when there is trust among group members. Building trust takes time. The work of RBA is structured to accelerate the development of trust, beginning by breaking down the barriers of language confusion. Once the concepts that distinguish population from performance accountability are understood, groups can begin the work of translating their agency's language with the RBA language. Even though it may be helpful to have a shared community language, it is not necessary, or practical, for every agency to use the exact same words. Rather, a handful of definitions are needed to do collective work can be used by the partnership so that the meetings are held with a common understanding of the work at the community and program performance levels. If the partners are at their own agencies and agency meetings, it may be necessary to use the "home language" unless they decided to adopt the common language of the partnership.

As the Director of Research and Evaluation at The Children's Trust, K. Lori Hanson oversaw the development of a common language to support the organization's internal work as well as with community partners. Hanson notes,

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"As we began larger conversations about defining and achieving results for children & families, it was critical to develop common definitions of terms used to move the work forward – results, indicators, outcomes, performance measures – everyone had slightly different understandings. We found this was not only important in working across organizations, but also within our own organization since staff all have different training and backgrounds."

When groups have clarity about the fundamental ideas of their work, they are able to communicate more effectively about the work itself.

Once the members of a group have a commonly understood language, they will need to consider the impact of new members to the group. Adding new members generally necessitates continuing teaching, whether formally or informally, of this language to those who are unfamiliar. Kania and Kramer note, "All the collective impact initiatives we have studied have monthly or even biweekly in-person meetings among the organizations CEO-level leaders. Skipping meetings or sending lower-level delegates was not acceptable."

RBA practitioners have dealt with this in a variety of ways:

1) Ongoing RBA training for all interested parties;

2) Leadership programs focusing on a specific result and targeting key mid to high level leaders in competency development in systems thinking, collaboration, interest-based negotiation, and understanding yourself and others;

3) Specialized community "results teams" with participation on each team limited to relevant partners; and

4) Meeting agendas that integrate and track the RBA thinking process.

Regardless of the design, a key factor in continuous communication within the RBA framework is the group's understanding of the core RBA concept distinguishing community or population results and indicators from program performance measures. This basic understanding enables all partners to focus on what it would take, to impact population level outcomes.

Condition #5: Backbone Support Organization:

Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization and staff with a very specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative.

What has success looked like in communities that have implemented RBA and sustained the success over time? A backbone support organization can make the difference between success and failure in achieving measurable results. In the case of LAP in Maryland, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Maryland's local management boards, and other funders provided support over several years for skilled facilitation and project management. . This consistent support enabled state and local organizations and leaders to focus on their common results: ensuring children entering school ready to learn.

Many communities who have provided local training and are using the RBA framework develop what Kania and Kramer call "social sector networks." These communities usually have a local lead agency with an RBA champion leading the efforts to train local providers from the community. They have results and perhaps common indicators to measure success and meet regularly to discuss the story behind the data and current strategies to improve the indicators. These groups usually do not have a backbone support organization, but carry out RBA training and technical assistance through a lead agency.

As many of the communities have discovered, merely hosting RBA training is, in all probability, insufficient to equip leaders to shift towards implementing community change and collective impact. Facilitating leaders as they manage and implement change takes a level of skill and expertise in several areas, including training. When adding Results Based Accountability™-- public community level accountability for impacting change--other issues begin to emerge: transparency concerning the quality, availability of community data, authentic sharing of the story behind the data, inherent disparities, competing priorities, among others. With the current economic climate, organizations often struggle to meet the demand for services with less funding being provided. It is an unlikely that these same organizations can solely lead and facilitate community change and accountability efforts.

Application of Results-Based Accountability™ with full implementation and collective impact sustained over time requires a long-term commitment to training, technical assistance, coaching and skilled facilitation, along with project management support. Internal capacity building should be included in the implementation design, with the long-term intention that local leaders can sustain the work. Leadership development supports the collaborative work necessary to achieve collective impact. Without this level of commitment the risk of unintended consequences, such as reduced focus on the results, increases and indicators show loss of group momentum.

Some communities begin with a cadre of highly skilled trainers and facilitators to pursue a comprehensive, top-down, bottom-up approach to community-wide implementation of RBA, equipping everyone from board members and funders to public, private and community-based leaders to understand and practice the core concepts. Once RBA is fully adopted by the community, there are options for sustaining the work over time. Although, managing several results groups over time can be a challenge. Some organizations decide to sustain the work by hiring a local staff person. Another option has been to build the capacity of those leading the RBA Results Groups and use the framework to track, monitor and improve upon their action plan. Building cross-integration among the groups occurs when representatives of each group meet periodically to devise strategies across result areas. Any method chosen needs to incorporate the complex and dynamic nature of the work required to transform communities across several result areas that affect children, youth and families. The best option should include ongoing work with the "backbone support organization" in order to make certain that the community maintains its focus on data-driven decision-making and shared accountability for collective impact.

If achieving collective impact were easy, more partnerships would succeed. That's why effective collaboration is important. When communities seek to create a collective impact initiative, Results-Based Accountability and a backbone support organization can accelerate the achievement of results and improved community indicators.

How can collective impact become a reality in communities? Often the key ingredients already exist and are accessible to make change happen. The seven population accountability questions of RBA provide a simple, disciplined framework that enables stakeholders to collectively develop, measure, and achieve community results. Communities across the United States and in ten other countries are successfully implementing RBA, accelerating change, and making collective impact a reality.

The World's Leading Results-Based Accountability™ Resource

About the Author:

Deitre Epps is a Partner and Senior Consultant with Results Leadership Group, LLC. (RLG). Deitre serves as a highly skilled trainer and an effective facilitator with public, private and non-profit leaders, supporting their work towards achieving better results for their agencies and communities. She provides consultation services, training and technical assistance, guiding leaders through Results-based Strategic Planning, Performance Accountability, and Effective Community Collaboration for improved indicators. Deitre's expertise is in the practical application of Results-Based Accountability™, enabling leaders to move on an accelerated track from talk to action.

Deitre's focus on leadership development plays a key role in getting achieving improved outcomes for clients and communities. She served from 2005 – 2010 as a consultant with Annie E. Casey Foundation's Leadership in Action Program. She was a Leadership Coach /Facilitator for several results leadership programs, including groups in Southern Maryland, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, and the US Virgin Islands. Deitre provided community leaders with leadership development for results in the areas of 1) Results-Based Accountability™ 2) Collaborative Leadership, 3) Race, Class and Culture, and 4) Leading from the Middle. Each group worked

collaboratively to impact a selected community indicator within a specific time period. From 2008-2009 she was a Senior Fellow with the University of Maryland, and lead faculty with the Maryland National Capital Parks and Planning Commission's Transformational Leadership Program.

As the Director for Baltimore's School Readiness Initiative from 2005-2007, Deitre had oversight of the implementation of Baltimore's Five Year Action Plan Towards Achieving School Readiness. Through the efforts and contribution of numerous community partners, school readiness increased from 27% in 2003 to 58% in 2007.

Deitre earned her Bachelor of Science degree in microbiology from Howard University in Washington, DC and Master of Science degree in Human Services Administration from a collaborative program at the University of Baltimore and Coppin State University. Her diverse background in both the sciences and human services equips her to support measurable improvements in agencies and communities.

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