

REFLECTIONS

on Making Connections

A Reflection by Ralph Smith about What Sustainability Means, Why It Is So Important and How to Achieve It

During 2005, Leila Fiester and Tim Saasta have talked several times with Annie E. Casey Foundation Vice President Ralph Smith about his thinking on how to sustain the work of Making Connections and why he thinks that a focus on sustainability is so important. We have organized his reflections around several questions.



Why is sustainability so important?

A decade ago, we identified three unmet challenges.

- The first was *efficacy*: It wasn't clear whether the two preceding generations of comprehensive community initiatives had changed anything. We couldn't tell who had been helped.
- The second was *scale*: we could not find an initiative that had occupied enough terrain to have transformed either practice or policy so that best practice was now common practice.
- The third was *sustainability*: Even in the places where we were getting the best outcomes, the work was fragile. Success was contingent on our continued support and involvement and on specific local leaders staying in place.

When we started Making Connections, we explicitly tried to address all three challenges—efficacy, scale and sustainability. As everyone now knows, the need to show efficacy has prompted a

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relentless focus on results. The scale challenge, while not as prominent, has led us to ask questions about policy and to support efforts to promote policy reform.

We have sought to ensure sustainability by anchoring the work deep within communities, insisting at the outset on demonstrable evidence of local energy, momentum and will. We have also been working hard to establish local ownership and identify and support local partners and champions of the strategies and the results.

Sustainability is important for another reason. One lesson from other long-term initiatives is that, by the time measurable results are achieved, people have stopped supporting the changes that produced the results. So we need to think about sustainability every step of the way and be as clear as we can about what it takes to maintain the changes we do achieve.

What do you mean by sustainability?

For me, sustainability doesn't require that the "Making Connections" name continues or that specific activities continue. It does require a widely shared commitment to certain core principles, principles that we hope will have generated strong momentum for change. We think there are three principles:

- People will work together to achieve a set of results that will make life demon-

strably better for children and families growing up in these neighborhoods.

- People will be rigorous in using data and information to track results and keep the work accountable.
- The experiences, voices and energy of residents will help drive the work.

Ultimately what I think we hope to sustain is a different way of doing business in these neighborhoods. People work jointly. Residents are deeply involved. People focus on achieving results more than maintaining programs. Momentum for change builds.

We see sustainability as the final step of the Making Connections process. When Making Connections started, we talked about three phases.

- Phase 1 was about building relationships within the sites. During this phase the foundation's role was intentionally exploratory—listening, learning and leading with ideas.
- Phase 2 was about using these relationships to build consensus around a set of core results, support for the strategies to achieve those results, and the needed capacities. The foundation's role was intentionally that of providing catalytic leadership.
- Phase 3 was envisioned as the opportunity to pull back and let local stakeholders take the lead. One way we have described this is having the foundation's

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role change from that of catalytic manager to that of engaged investor.

By the time we were into Phase 2, we realized that sites operated along a continuum rather than in distinct phases, so we stopped talking about phases. For a while we referred to the third stage as the “transition to local ownership,” to emphasize the fact that we expected sites, ultimately, to carry the work forward. But some sites rightly pointed out that there already was a lot of strong local ownership. So we changed the terminology to “transition to sustainability,” which had the added benefit of bringing us back to our original framing of the challenge.

Is “sustainability” just a euphemism for the foundation’s exit?

Ensuring that Making Connections is sustainable is *not* a euphemism for exit. Surprising as it might seem, we feel absolutely no pressure to exit from our board. UPS is a stay-the-course company. That culture carries over to the foundation’s board. If we continue to make progress, I could see our board supporting this work for many more years.

The pressure we do get from our board is to demonstrate that the work is getting results. And the board strongly supports our effort to move intentionally to our new role as a long-term, engaged investor.

The board raises questions such as:

- ▶ “What gives us the confidence that we can move to this new role and that the work on the ground will continue?”
- ▶ “Have you built up enough momentum to keep this work moving forward locally?”
- ▶ “Is there enough demand for change locally that will keep this work moving?”
- ▶ “Is there some sort of structure locally that will allow local people to make decisions?”

We helped set in motion a process. That process is supposed to lead to specific successes that show that things can work in these communities. Some of these successes go to scale. If the theory is correct, these processes become self-renewing. There is more and more local energy, will, capacity. Our role then changes into that of an investor. This is what we mean by sustainability.

Where we are now is trying to define and be clear about what our changed role should be. In essence we have an opportunity to frame a new role for the foundation, not an exit.

How do you think the foundation’s role will change during this transition to sustainability?

At the beginning of Making Connections, our role was to invest considerable time and resources into building trusting work

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relationships with a broad range of local stakeholders, with the hope and expectation that the relationships would create a constituency of champions who are committed to measurable results.

For the next several years, we played an active, catalytic role in managing the work in and across sites—helping sites establish baseline measures, set targets, develop powerful strategies, build relationships, attract resources, collect the data to assess progress and make in-course corrections.

We set out to demonstrate that it is possible to reach families in tough neighborhoods, that these efforts are durable, and that they can be scaled up. Those were the challenges of the Foundation’s initial role as a “**catalytic manager**” of *Making Connections*, and we think the results show that we’ve met those challenges.

We knew from the outset that a key test of sustainability would be whether the commitment to results and the momentum could be maintained when Casey stepped back into the role of an “**engaged investor**”—one among many such investors within each *Making Connections* site. Over the next few years, we expect to implement a transition strategy that will allow us to assume that new role while local people and organizations assume the ongoing management of the work in their sites.

We already have some sense of what being an “engaged investor” will entail.

It obviously would mean providing some flexible dollars and having a technical assistance strategy. It probably would mean paying for the things we know would be enormously difficult for others to fund, such as building and maintaining a data system to capture results and supporting activities that act as the “glue,” helping hold together all these relationships and projects.

We also think it means other “leave-behinds,” such as program-related investments and access to other Casey reform efforts in the same site (e.g., JDAI, Family to Family, Plain Talk).

As we get feedback from the sites, we want to frame very concretely for our board what we see as the foundation’s role over time.

What do you think the foundation already knows about sustaining this work?

There are lots of things needed to sustain the work of *Making Connections* over time, but we are betting heavily on six factors:

- 1. Demonstrable progress toward results** in the six result areas we identified as priorities. People need to see that all this work we’ve been doing is actually making a difference in these neighborhoods.
- 2. Authentic demand.** We believe the results have to be owned, appreciated,

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wanted and embraced by the people who live, work, worship and raise children in the neighborhoods.

3. **Alliances.** We’re betting it will take strong alliances with influential elites and champions in the larger community. It will take alignment between the priorities of the people who live in these communities and the priorities of the people who wield power.
4. **Resources.** We define resources broadly. We see data, for example, as a critical resource. We think sustainability will mean having a dedicated revenue stream, volunteer support and new or re-programmed dollars from a range of funders.
5. **Leadership.** We also define leadership broadly. We think we need a constantly replenishing group of residents who take on leadership roles. We also need strong leadership across the board: in community-based organizations, public systems, private organizations. We need leaders who are willing to work across traditional boundaries and to serve as stewards of the results process. And I think we need to find ways to support all these leaders. This is especially true for resident leaders, who often have very complicated lives and who are being asked to do things that many of us don’t do in our own neighborhoods.
6. **Local Management Structure.** Finally, we know some type of structure to manage the work locally is essential.

While we know the work ultimately must be driven by a lot of momentum within each site, we don’t think this work can manage itself. If we are going to step back from our active/catalytic management role, we don’t want to create a vacuum.

We’re betting that, if we achieve success, it will be because we have found a way to achieve authentic demand, a focus on results, strong alliances, significant resources, powerful leadership and effective management. We need to envision what each of these factors would look like. What would authentic demand look like and how do we achieve it? What would alliances, resources and leadership look like?

We also know that the factors are very connected. You may need authentic demand, alliances and leadership in order to get resources. Or you may need demand, alliances and resources to get the leadership.

Why is a local management structure so important and what would it look like?

We know that the sites are already doing a lot of the day-to-day management of Making Connections locally. What we are thinking about are the broader management questions. How does the site make the big decisions about budget and direc-

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tion? How does it keep the focus on results and on residents? How does it keep a broad range of partners invested over time? How does it resolve conflicts? How does it pull in new resources and new leaders?

When will we know that a site is ready to take on all of these management responsibilities? And what management structure will work in a particular site?

Our goal here is a plan with options for how we expect the work to be managed. We do not have nor do we want a one-size-fits-all approach. What we have are a set of varied management models that can be adapted to the various situations. One question we are asking is which model will work in a particular local situation, with its particular local conditions?

What do you mean by “authentic demand?”

I put a lot of emphasis on achieving authentic demand. I believe it is critical to maintaining momentum for this work over time. What I mean by authentic demand comes down to questions like these:

- ▶ Do the results make sense to the people who live and work, worship and raise their children in these communities?
- ▶ Do they care about these results?
- ▶ Do they have enough information to know which results make sense and which do not?

- ▶ Can they visualize what they want and what achieving these results will mean for them and their children?
- ▶ Does their desire to achieve these results have an energy of its own?

I recall when a group of parents visited a school that had been cleaned to “industry standards,” which made it a much nicer environment than most schools. The experience of seeing this school led these parents to demand something similar in their kids’ school. It made the issue of how a school looks very concrete for them. It was real. They could grasp what it meant to have a school building that was clean.

All the concepts we talk about in relation to Making Connections, such as the importance of “school readiness,” need to be made palpable for residents. When you take parents to observe a good school, they inevitably say something like, “That is what I want for my kid.”

This changes the dynamic. When they talk about better schools, they know what they want. They develop a passion for change. That’s authentic demand. You are not just organizing around a concept.

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