Power, Conflict, and Collaborative Decisions in Partnerships to Improve Public Education

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Abstract: Many collaborations with power disparities among their members exist to address contentious policy issues. How do power differences and conflicts among collaborative partners influence collective decisions? How and under what conditions do collaborative governance structures and processes affect the exercise of power and conflict? This paper proposes a theoretical framework and research considerations to answer these questions, situated within a contentious policy environment, US public education, specifically STRIVE/Collective Impact networks. Addressing these issues is important to advance understanding of how and under what conditions deeply ingrained and often institutionalized bases of power engender conflict and influence the process and content of collective decision-making.
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The design and implementation of public policies increasingly occurs through collaborations among multiple organizations with different missions and capabilities. The partner organizations in these collaborations face numerous collective decisions (Ostron 2005, Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). They must decide which problems to address, define shared goals, and specify which activities to pursue and how (Gray 1989, Huxham and Vangen 2005). They must also design membership rules, governing structures, and processes for making decisions (Gray 1989, Provan and Kenis 2008).

Studies of collective decisions by collaborative partners are relatively rare, however (Choi and Robertson 2014). Research on power and conflict in collaborative governance is also underdeveloped, especially with regard to their impact on collaborative decisions and by extension the outputs and outcomes of collaboration. It is precisely when collaborative partners make decisions, nevertheless, that power and conflict are likely to cause the most problems. Decisions affect the focus and prioritization of collaborative activities, the allocation of resources, and ultimately a collaboration’s potential to produce results.

The literature on collaboration therefore needs a systematic understanding of how power differences and conflicts among collaborative partners affect collective decisions and the achievement of the partners’ aims. Some scholars argue that partners with greater power tend to exert more influence over decisions of all types (Ansell and Gash 2008, McGuire and Agranoff 2011). Others suggest that conflicts and power fluctuate among partners depending on governance structure, the issue(s) at hand, the decision process, and scope of participation (Kingsley 1997, Bozeman and Pandey 2004, Fung 2006).

To assess these claims, this paper first reviews the literature on power, conflicts, and decisions in collaborative governance and develops a conceptual framework to guide research on the relationships among them. In the second section, the paper discusses a promising setting for this research – the US public education policy arena – and characterizes the specific types of partnerships we propose to study. The third section presents a research design to investigate the effects of different sources of power and conflict on collaborative decisions. The conclusion presents the implications of the research proposed here for theory and practice.

Power, Conflict, and Decisions in Collaborative Governance

Power

Power in any social setting derives in part from actors’ dependence on one another to achieve their particular aims (R. Emerson 1962). When one actor has resources that affect others’ needs or desires, the first actor holds power over the others, and can induce them to comply with his
wishes or otherwise influence decisions to his own benefit (Lukes 1974). Beyond influencing decisions, actors holding power over others may use it to control the agenda of issues or problems that are open for discussion (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, Lukes 1974). Powerful actors may, for example, deny or minimize the significance of a potential problem or issue, discredit or threaten other actors seeking to address an issue, or limit the dimensions or scope of a problem under consideration (Cobb and Ross 1997, Cook 2015). Finally, some actors or institutions may shape language or categories of thought in ways that affect other actors’ very conceptions of their own needs or desires. This sort of ideological influence represents a “third face” of power (Lukes 1974).

In an inter-organizational collaboration, power exercised through control over resources enables a partner to support the collaboration’s work directly, to offer or withhold influence to advance other partners’ interests, or to use the resources to pursue its own aims outside the collaboration, thereby decreasing its own dependence on the collaboration (R. Emerson 1962, Hardy and Phillips 1998). Typical resources include finances, human capital, knowledge, expertise, information, and technologies. An especially important resource within a collaborative setting includes relationships with others that facilitate inter-organizational communication or influence. These relationships derive from a partner’s embeddedness or connections to other actors in a policy field (Huxham and Beech 2008, Ingold and Leifeld 2016).

Another source of power is formal authority, which often rests with the governmental partners in a collaboration. Formal authority to make binding decisions that affect a collaboration’s policies, resources, or management gives a partner substantial influence over the collaboration’s work, and hence a measure of power over the other partners (Hardy and Phillips 1998, Huxham and Beech 2008, Purdy 2012, Ingold and Leifeld 2016).

In addition, some partners may exert influence within a collaboration because they invoke or speak on behalf of ideals or values that hold moral authority among the other partners. These partners exercise power through the “discursive legitimacy” that derives from the respect that they or the issues they raise inspire in the other partners or in the larger collaborative environment (Hardy and Phillips 1998, Huxham and Vangen 2005). Invoking issues that other partners see as legitimate in collaborative discussions can make the arguments of a particular partner more persuasive or more difficult to discredit. While the issues that generate discursive legitimacy vary with a collaboration’s setting and internal dynamics, examples include the rule of law, the logic of economic rationality, democratic principles, respect for diverse cultures, or environmental preservation. Because “[d]iscursive power…stems from the ability to manage meaning by influencing how information is presented” (Purdy 2012, 411), it can help a partner exercise the “third face” of power by affecting the way partners understand the fundamental definitions of problems and how to address them.

While the literature on power in collaborations calls attention to the origins and the exercise of power in collaborative governance, it tells us little about how power affects collaborative decisions. Because attempts by partners to wield power may prompt objections or strategic moves by other partners that generate conflicts, the precise effects of power on collaborative decisions are likely to depend on how those conflicts unfold. To understand the influence of power on collaborative decisions, therefore, we need to understand the sources and focus of
Conflict in collaborations as well as the structures and processes through which partners make decisions.

Conflict

All organizations strive to maintain their autonomy (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Collaboration among organizations, however, creates interdependence, increasing their levels of interaction and hence the likelihood of conflict among them (Molnar and Rogers 1979, 407). Conflicts among collaborative partners may originate in the institutional environment surrounding the collaboration or in differences among the partners’ institutional logics, identities, or core beliefs. Power differences among the partners are likely to play out differently depending on how the partners individually and collectively frame and address these sources of conflict.

The institutional environment surrounding a collaboration may generate conflicts for several different reasons. A collaboration’s institutional environment includes a range of vertical (to authorizing or supervisory entities) and horizontal (to partner institutions and nonstate actors) relationships that cut across public jurisdictional areas (Scott and Meyer 1991) and directly affect collaborative purpose, structure and outcomes (McGuire and Agranoff 2011). Any collaboration that includes one or more government agencies and works to address public problems operates in a context featuring accountability demands to citizens and elected officials with a mix of political interests and priorities (Behn 2001). It may also face competing institutional environments and demands from different government agencies or jurisdictions, as well as from various non-governmental partner organizations. Elements of the institutional environment especially likely to cause conflicts among collaborative partners include: formal intergovernmental authority structures (e.g., regional or local decision authority), mandates surrounding the collaboration’s goals (Agranoff and McGuire 2003), and the contentiousness of the political climate (Ansell and Gash 2008).

The different institutional logics of partner organizations may lead to conflicts during collaboration that revolve around the partners’ distinct structures and beliefs. Institutional logics are deeply embedded historical and cultural patterns that provide interpretations of appropriate actions, norms, processes and structures (Friedland and Alford 1991). Logics compete when what some actors see as legitimate or appropriate based on one logic appears less legitimate or illegitimate according to another logic (Kraatz and Block 2008, Pache and Santos 2013). In a collaborative setting, competing logics may include the market, which values efficiency; bureaucracy, which values adherence to rules; or democracy, which values participation (Bryson, Crosby and Stone 2006). Institutional logics, furthermore, are often manifest or rooted in an organization’s goals, functions, and structures. Hence conflicts may arise in a collaboration because the partners have distinct missions, programs, or cultures that lead them to act on or think about the same issue in fundamentally different ways from other partners (Molnar and Rogers 1979, 408).

Conflicts also arise among organizations because those in a collaboration often have dramatically different histories, experiences, and identities that lead them to interpret and understand information in unique ways (Forester 2009). When the interpretations or understandings of issues or problems that are central to a collaboration’s work clash with one another, conflicts are
likely to result. Specifically, deep core beliefs about questions of morality, right and wrong, and authority tend to cluster with one another (Haidt 2012). Actors with contrasting deep core beliefs about these fundamental values also tend to differ in their policy core beliefs about the appropriate role of government in different aspects of social and economic life (Sabatier and Weible 2007). When the partners in a collaboration hold contrasting deep core beliefs, therefore, conflicts over policy questions and related issues are likely to arise in the course of their work together.

These sources of conflict may affect collaboration in several different ways, depending on the nature of the conflict and how the partners manage it. Fundamental differences in actors’ identities or core beliefs can inhibit collaboration by reinforcing their social and cognitive distance from one another and creating communication barriers among them (Weible 2005, Ingold 2011). At worst, these circumstances may lead to sustained mistrust (Leach and Sabatier 2005), ongoing policy controversies that are immune to resolution (Schön and Rein 1994), or even the complete breakdown of discussions among partners (Forester 2009).

Even conflicts that do not revolve around deep-seated differences in beliefs are likely to increase transaction costs in making collective decisions and coordination costs in implementation (O’Leary and Bingham 2007). Conflicts thus can easily complicate or derail collaboration, preventing it from achieving its aims.

When fruitful and constructive, however, conflict can generate breakthrough innovations in collaborative relationships, problem definitions, and policy and program solutions (Hargadon and Bechky 2006, Ansell 2011). Hence, "on the one hand, conflict improves decision quality; on the other, it may weaken the ability of the group to work together" (Schweiger, Sandberg and Rechner 1986, 67). More specifically, “cognitive conflict” around substantive issues supports improved decision making, while “affective conflict” around partners’ relationships hinders decision quality (Amason 1996, Kahwajy, Eisendhardt and Bourgeois 1997).

Because of the importance of constructive conflict for collaboration, the research on conflict management and conflict resolution highlights ways to manage the deleterious effects of power and conflict on collaborative processes (O'Leary and Bingham 2007, Forester 2009). What scholars have yet to determine, however, is exactly how power and conflict shape the collective decisions – and in turn the outputs and outcomes – of an inter-organizational collaboration.

**Decisions**

Collaborative partners make numerous decisions together (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). Some decisions deal with the substance of policy or programs (e.g., the core purpose or goals of the collaboration, making policy recommendations to an authorizing body, or delimiting the boundaries of debate on an issue). Others have to do with the structures or processes of conducting collaborative work (e.g., the design of the collaborative governance structures, or establishing a sub-committee to study a particular question). Power and conflict among the partners in a collaboration are likely to be particularly important when decisions about three topics or questions – participation, problems and solutions, and governance – are at stake (Purdy
2012), because those topics often prompt partners to disagree about both means and ends (Kingsley 1997).

First, decisions about membership and participation within a collaboration provide clear opportunities for the exercise of power and heightened conflict. For example, partners with power over others may use it to affect the others’ membership or participation in a collaboration (Gray 1985, Hardy and Phillips 1998). Deciding whom to exclude from the collaboration is as important as deciding whom to include (Hardy and Phillips 1998). Once a collaboration’s membership is constituted, moreover, a partner may use its power to restrict or discourage other actors from participating actively in certain collaborative discussions. Decisions concerning participation in a collaboration therefore may be subject to conflicts or attempts to exercise power over the inclusion or exclusion of particular stakeholders, or over who should be involved in addressing what types of issues.

The second decision topic likely to prompt the exercise of power or conflict centers around the definition of the problem(s) the collaborators are addressing together, and by extension what solutions they should consider (Page, Stone, et al. 2016). Because collaborations often form to tackle complex, multi-faceted problems that lack clear parameters and solutions, establishing shared definitions of problems and securing agreement on how to pursue them – setting the agenda for collaborative work (Purdy 2012) – is particularly important. Conflicts concerning problems and solutions are common in collaborations because stakeholders representing opposing views often collaborate expressly to tackle issues that have gone unresolved in more traditional governance settings, such as legislatures or administrative agencies (Gray 1989, Quick and Feldman 2014). Partners may disagree about whether a problem stems from past injustices, current inequities or inefficiencies, or performance issues that revolve around different definitions of effectiveness. Such disagreements about problem origins often translate into differences in partners’ preferences about what solutions or outcomes to pursue or how to pursue them, since different problem definitions are likely to favor distinct outcomes, values and interests. Debates about the problems and solutions on a collaboration’s agenda therefore may be particularly contentious (Gray 1989, Hardy and Phillips 1998, McGuire and Agranoff 2011, Purdy 2012).

The final topic for decisions that tend to be fraught with power differences and conflict concerns initial choices about the governance structures and processes of collaboration itself, which allocate decision-making authority among the partners and shape the partners’ interactions (Purdy 2012, Page, Stone, et al. 2016). Because collaborative governance structures and processes are central to how collaborations conduct their work, they are prime targets for the exercise of power by partners. In consequence, conflicts often emerge among partners or coalitions of partners seeking to privilege their own voices or interests in the design of a collaboration’s governing board, discussion procedures, or rules for making joint decisions. Critical design questions include the number of seats on the governing board and which partners hold seats; the structure of any leadership roles, standing committees or work groups; procedures for putting issues on the governing board’s agenda; and voting or other types of decision rules. Collaborative partners’ decisions about these questions influence the speed and likelihood with which they are likely to reach agreements (Choi and Robertson 2014), as well as the way in
which power and conflicts among them are likely to affect their subsequent decisions (Kahwajy, Eisendhardt and Bourgeois 1997).

**Governance as a Forum**

In addition to being an initial *topic* or focus of collaborative decisions, governance also functions subsequently as a critical *forum* in which collaborators make collective decisions. The impact of collaborative partners’ power and conflicts on their collective decisions therefore depends not just on the sources of power and conflict discussed earlier, but also on how those sources are modified by the collaboration’s governance structures and processes.

In single organizations, laws specify governing structures (e.g., boards of directors), which then imply certain governance processes (e.g., hierarchical decision making following the chain of command). In inter-organizational collaborations, by contrast, governance can take many forms, depending on how the partners or their authorizers design structures and processes for collective decision making (Stone, Crosby and Bryson 2014). Provan and Kenis (2008) identify three “ideal types” of governance in collaborations: participant-governed structures where members collectively perform monitoring and coordinating activities; lead organization structures where a single, central partner makes major decisions; and a network administrative organization that exists separately from the collaboration and coordinates all activities and decisions.

Governance processes also have important effects on how power and conflict influence collective decisions (Ansell and Gash 2008, Kahwajy, Eisendhardt and Bourgeois 1997). For example, some argue that a collaborative process featuring “principled engagement” increases the likelihood that conflicts among partners are constructive and fruitful rather than divisive and destructive. Principled engagement enlists the partners in jointly: defining a shared purpose and goals; discovering fundamental background information about one another as well as important data about the target problem(s); and deliberating about how to address the problem(s) and issues (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). Through these processes, partners’ working relationships, mutual trust, and joint capacity to address challenging public problems may improve (Ansell and Gash 2008).

Governance structures and processes are related; rules about collective decision-making provide a bridge between them. These rules may be formal, such as written ground rules for working together (Gray 1989), or informal, arising from partners’ interactions over time (Ostron 2005). When member interactions are positive (as in instances of principled engagement), moral obligations and commitments increase and trust builds (Larson 1992, Jones, Hesterly and Borgatti 1997). Conversely if partners violate rules and norms, trust is undermined and hard to rebuild. Rules function at several levels. Constitutional rules capture partners’ shared commitments and purpose for working together; collective choice rules establish principles for making joint decisions (e.g., voting rules, generic characteristics of acceptable solutions); and operational rules govern partners’ interactions, including ground rules, discussion guidelines, or behavioral norms (Ostron 2005). Creating these three levels of rules, along with the processes and structures to exercise and enforce them, gives a collaboration the ability to monitor itself, build commitment, and make important collective decisions (Stone, Crosby and Bryson 2014).
Because the design of a collaboration’s governance structures and processes can prompt conflicts or attempts to exercise power among the partners, those structures and processes may end up reinforcing existing power inequities among the partners (Hardy and Phillips 1998, Moe 2005). As Ansell and Gash observe, “If some stakeholders do not have the capacity, organization, status, or resources to participate, or to participate on an equal footing with other stakeholders, the collaborative governance process will be prone to manipulation by stronger actors” (2008, 551). Depending on their design and implementation, governance structures and processes may modify the exercise of power by some collaborative partners without removing power altogether from the relationships among the partners (McGuire and Agranoff 2011). A critical topic for research, then, is the specific ways in which governance structures and processes serve as decision forums to shape the exercise of power by some partners over others, the way the partners handle conflicts, and the influence of both power and conflict on collective decisions.

**Relationships among Power, Conflict, and Decisions in Collaborative Governance**

Figure 1 provides a visual overview of the relationships among power, conflict, decisions, and governance in collaborations. As it shows, the sources of power and conflict reviewed above crucially influence collaborative partners’ collective decisions about important topics, including participation, problems and solutions, and governance. The effects of the partners’ power and conflicts on their collective decisions are modified, however, by the forums in which those decisions get made, which consist of the collaboration’s governance structures, processes, and rules.

**[Figure 1 about here]**

**Community Collaborations to Improve Education**

US public education is a contentious policy field with many centers of power and significant conflict (Henig, et al. 2015, Louis and Felber-Smith 2012). The field contains a vast array of actors, including those from all levels of government and all three sectors of our economy. In public education, two crucial sources of power – resources and formal authority – are fragmented across governmental levels. While state legislatures are central in the field – they establish funding levels and set statewide student achievement standards – the federal government institutes broad policy goals (such as equal access to education) and funds specific programs to implement those goals. Local school districts, meanwhile, negotiate pay directly with teacher unions and other staff; determine staffing levels, curriculum, and student assessments; and are held accountable by publically elected school boards. The involvement of all three sectors in public education – public, nonprofit, and for-profit entities – further complicates the field. For example, nonprofit organizations with substantial private resources, such as foundations, have historically played central roles in shaping public education policy and its implementation at the federal, state, and local levels (Quinn, Tompkins-Stange and Meyerson 2014). Nonprofit teachers’ unions are also significant actors involved in a range of public education issues at the national, state, and local levels. In some states, moreover, for-profit corporations have directly
entered the public education field as charter school operators (Quinn, Tompkins-Stange and Meyerson 2014).

Because deeply held, contested values lie at the root of many public education debates (Louis and Felber-Smith 2012), conflict in the field is deep-seated and longstanding, especially regarding the central question, “what is the purpose of schooling?” For example, public education in this country and elsewhere has long been seen as promoting strong societies and democracy through the development of a broad array of personal and academic competencies (Louis and Felber-Smith 2012). However, this view of public education as promoting both public and individual benefits contrasts vividly with an historical account of the development of public schools in the US (Callahan 1962) that examines the extent to which the curriculum, views of teachers and students, and school facilities themselves were modelled on tenets of late 19th century industrial capitalism and its fascination with efficiency. Schools were literally designed as factories and students were viewed as finished products, that is, skilled workers to fuel greater industrialization. Core beliefs about the purpose of public education, therefore, often conflict regarding its primary role as a contributor to democratic societies versus a supplier of a skilled workforce in a competitive world economy.

Conflict is also prevalent regarding the appropriate roles of government in the field, especially at the federal level. The conflict concerns whether serious problems in public education, such as lagging student achievement or persistent racial gaps, are best addressed through federal regulation (such as the 2001 No Child Left Behind law) or through competition and parental choice at the local level (Peterson 2016). Underlying this debate are fundamentally different institutional logics (Friedland and Alford 1991): federal regulation and oversight emphasize the logic of the bureaucratic state, while competition and choice privilege the logic of the market. Neither approach, unfortunately, can claim to have made significant progress toward either improving overall student achievement or closing the racial achievement gap in the US.

A fragmented policy field, persistent and deep conflict over the purpose of public education, and lack of significant improvements in student achievement have provided the impetus for many education reform efforts, stretching back to the late 19th century (Henig, et al. 2015). In the last decade, reformers have developed a renewed interest in designing approaches that use collaborations and networks at local levels to improve public education. These approaches take a holistic perspective on the root causes of poor achievement, identifying programs to strengthen schools as well as community institutions and families (Henig, et al. 2015). Prominent among these are the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), the federally sponsored Promise Neighborhoods (modeled after HCZ), and the Strive Together network. This research project focuses on collaborations in the Strive Together network because, as explained below, they are explicitly cross-sectoral in design and follow a model of collective action that involves a range of powerful actors.

Formed in 2003 in Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky, the first Strive site brought together college presidents, business and foundation executives, leaders of school districts and community-based organizations to improve the local workforce and the competitive advantage of the region. Its approach – which ultimately became its formal theory of change – emphasized measurable goals, attention to results, and replication based on data for programs that spanned birth to college and
career. Essential program elements included kindergarten readiness, student support in both schools and communities, high graduation rates, and college enrollment and completion (Henig, et al. 2015). Early successes in Cincinnati led to a growing national interest in Strive’s approach. In 2011, founders of Strive/Cincinnati decided to form a national support network of local collaborations, called Strive Together. Members can join the network only if they agree to the Strive theory of change, which emphasizes measurable goals and programs based on results-driven data. By 2017, over 70 sites in 31 states had joined as members (Strive Together website 2017).

The development of the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati also spawned one of the most widely used labels for collective action in recent times – Collective Impact. In an influential 2011 article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, FSG Consulting outlined the argument for high level collaboration among community institutions aimed at solving complex public problems that were beyond the reach of isolated actors (Kania and Kramer 2011). The Strive theory of change for education reform served as their central example of the Collective Impact approach:

• A common agenda agreed to by all partners that included a shared problem definition and approach to solving it;
• Shared measurement systems that all partners used to measure success;
• Mutually reinforcing activities that emphasized coordination among members to avoid duplication and inefficiencies;
• Continuous communication among members to build trust, motivation, and an understanding of common objectives; and,
• A separate backbone organization to support and facilitate the work of the collaboration (Kania and Kramer 2011).

Since the initial Collective Impact article, FSG has modified this model, notably dropping the necessity of a separate backbone organization and recognizing that collaborations often develop their action strategies in emergent ways (Hanleybrown, Kania and Kramer 2012). Despite these modifications, FSG and the Strive Together Network have maintained a strict adherence to evaluation based on clear, measurable indicators of success.

While the “collective impact” label has grown rapidly and is now used in fields other than public education and by the federal government and large foundations (Wolff, et al. 2017), it has also attracted vocal critics. In particular, its critics have pointed to the model’s assumptions about who holds the power to enact substantive change. Its top-down, business-oriented model and its emphasis on community elites imply that actors with formal authority and resources are best suited to defining problems and constructing solutions (Wolff, et al. 2017). Critics contend that those most affected by a problem need to be equal partners in addressing it, and that the collective impact model needs to be infused with issues of economic and racial equity in order to make substantive changes in most public problems (McAfee, Blackwell and Bell 2015).

Most relevant for our project, critics call for more research on Strive governance structures (Henig, et al. 2015). The collective impact model clearly emphasizes a governance model prevalent in many organizations – leadership by elite decision makers and staff who implement activities; however, the literature on governance in collaborations points to a wider variety of governance structures, some of which entail far greater participation by a wider range of actors.
(Provan and Kenis 2008). Across Strive sites, moreover, there is considerable variation across several governance dimensions, including the size, composition, and decision scope of their governing councils, the roles of program-focused “Action Networks” in setting the overall agenda for the collaboration, and the roles of staff in making strategic or operational decisions about collaborative direction. For all these reasons, Strive sites addressing education issues provide a particularly promising focus for research on the role and influence of power and conflict in collaborative governance.

**Research Design and Methods**

To study the relationships among power, conflict, and collective decisions in inter-organizational collaborations, we are developing a comparative, longitudinal analysis of four STRIVE sites. A study that is both comparative and longitudinal will allow us to document changes in power, conflict, decisions, and governance over time within sites and then compare those changes across sites. To enable such an investigation, we will select sites that are similar in several basic respects, and different in others.

**Sample Selection Criteria**

To ensure the collaborations in our sample follow similar principles for organizing and focusing their work, we plan to restrict our sample to local collaborations utilizing the Strive Together model of collective impact to improve educational outcomes for children (Strive Together web site 2017). So that all our sites reflect a comparable level of demographic density and diversity in the student population, all of the collaborations in our study will be located in urban communities. In order to compare the evolution of our constructs over time, we will study only collaborations that meet Strive Together’s criteria as “sustaining” sites, in which the partners have significant experience working together. 1 To ensure sufficient diversity of power, institutional logics, and beliefs among the partners in the collaborations in our sample, all of our sites will have cross-sector representation (from the business, government, and non-profit sectors) in their leadership councils or governing boards.

We will select sites that vary, meanwhile, in their institutional environments and their local contexts, so that we can compare the effects of different sources of power and conflict on collaboration and collective decisions. We plan to select two sites each from two different states, because states control most aspects of education policy in the U.S. Comparing pairs of sites in two states will help us distinguish the influence of the policy and political environments on local education challenges and collaborative decisions (across states), while allowing us to compare collaborative responses to the same policy and political environments (within each state).

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1 STRIVE distinguishes each of its collaborations based on whether:

- the partners are “exploring” their membership roster, shared vision, desired outcomes, and strategies;
- the same factors (membership, vision, outcomes, strategies) are “emerging;” or
- the partnership is “sustaining” those factors (Strive Together web site 2017).
We plan to vary the complexity of the local context for collaboration in two respects across our sites. First, because school districts are central actors with formal governmental authority in the U.S. education field, we will select two collaborations that include multiple school districts, while the other two include only one district. We will also select two sites that encompass an entire county or metropolitan region, and two that focus more narrowly on a few neighborhoods or communities. Second, we will select some collaborations whose governance structures have changed over time – for example, in terms of the number of seats or the types of organizations represented on the leadership council – and others whose governance structures have remained the same since the partners adopted the collective impact approach or the Strive Together model.

The institutional and contextual diversity embodied in these characteristics will ensure that the collaborations we study will vary in their sources and manifestations of power, conflict, and governance across sites and within individual sites. That variation, in turn, will enable us to compare power, conflict, decisions, and governance in a low complexity site (with one school district and a narrow geographic scope) with those same constructs in a high complexity site (with multiple school districts and a region-wide scope) in each of our two states. Figure 2 identifies some STRIVE sites we are considering for our sample, with their characteristics arrayed by state and local context. The variations and changes in individual sites’ governance structures will enable us to conduct longitudinal comparisons within and across sites of how governance modifies the influence of power and conflict on collective decisions.

[Figure 2 about here]

**Data Sources**

At each site in our sample, we plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with at least six people who have both broad and deep knowledge of the collaboration’s programming, history, and governance. While the titles of these individuals may vary from site to site, they will have responsibility for similar roles and functions, including:

- the executive director of the local Strive collaboration,
- at least two members of the local Leadership Council or governing board (including the current chair),
- the chairs of one or two local Action Networks (responsible for most programming decisions in local Strive sites), and
- the staff who coordinate or manage the Action Networks.

In addition to conducting interviews, we will review plans, evaluations, reports, web sites, media reports, and other documents related to the work of the collaboration in each site in our sample. These reviews can reveal the history and evolution of each collaboration’s governance and program activities to improve education. Reviewing meeting minutes, where they are available, will enable us to highlight or triangulate data from our interviews regarding important collective decisions. Reviewing report cards or other sources of data on educational outcomes and important factors that affect them can help us gain insight into the performance and impact of each collaboration’s activities.
More specifically, our interviews and document reviews in each site will examine:

- the history and role(s) of specific individuals and organizations in the collaboration
- prior local histories of collaboration or other efforts to improve educational outcomes
- the collaboration’s goals and strategies (and any changes in those over time)
- the evolution of the collaboration over time, including its membership, governance, informal dynamics among the partners, and local perceptions
- major challenges the partners have faced together (whether related to education or collaboration issues)

- key decisions the partners have taken (or failed to take, in the case of non-decisions), including:
  - the topic, importance, and timing of the decision or non-decision
  - who participated in any discussions and in the decision itself (if one occurred)?
  - who exercised power, including how much and how?
  - the focus, level, and consequences of any conflicts that occurred
- perceptions of power differences among the partners or others involved in the collaboration’s activities, changes in them over time, the reasons for them, and how they have affected the partners’ collective decisions and actions.

**Data Analysis**

We will organize and analyze the data we collect using prompts related to the primary constructs in Figure 1 above. (We present the prompts here in outline form rather than in full text in order to preserve the specificity of the constructs and to stimulate useful feedback about our research design and coding plans. The goal is to improve our prospects for capturing these constructs during our field work in order to support rigorous data collection and analysis.)

**Power:**
- We will identify any systematic power differences among the partners in each collaboration.
- We will identify the sources and amount of power of *each partner* involved in *each decision* by a collaboration, including their:
  - Resources – finances, human capital, technologies, knowledge/expertise/information, or relationships within the Strive collaboration and the regional education policy network;
  - Authority – originating:
    - within the collaboration’s governance structure (e.g., board president, lead agency, network administrative organization), or
    - outside the collaboration (e.g., governmental authority over regulations or rules that affect the network’s efforts); or
  - Discursive legitimacy (fostered by invoking issues that other partners deem morally desirable).

**Conflicts:**
- We will identify the sources of each conflict we document in our cases, such as:
  - Aspects of the institutional environment surrounding the conflict, including:
- intergovernmental authority structures (e.g., relevant federal or state policies, school districts or other government agencies involved, etc.),
- shared goals or program activities mandated by funders,
- political contention surrounding education issues in the community;
  - Key characteristics of the partners involved in the conflict, including their:
    - institutional logics – market efficiency, bureaucratic rules, community participation
    - identities, as embodied in important histories or experiences
    - beliefs about authority, morality of right and wrong, or the appropriate role of government in social and economic life.
- We will distinguish cognitive conflicts (disagreements about substantive questions relevant to a decision) from affective conflicts (rooted in relationships between partners and evidenced by mistrust, animosity, or decreases in participation).
- For each conflict we identify, we will document the consequences, such as:
  - Partner alienation;
  - Mistrust;
  - Transaction costs in decision making, including communication barriers, difficulties building coalitions, or time spent redressing conflicts;
  - Coordination costs in implementing activities, including communication challenges or mis-aligned work processes; or
  - Innovations or new ideas.

**Topics of decisions and non-decisions:** In each site, we will analyze the partners’ collective decisions and non-decisions about:
- the participation of specific partners and other stakeholders in:
  - the governing board or Leadership Council
  - different Action Networks or committees
  - specific projects or programs;
- the design and implementation of the collaboration’s governance, including:
  - the bylaws
  - the structure and role of the Leadership Council or governing board, the Action Networks, and any committees
  - the use of principled engagement processes (definitions, discovery, deliberation);
- the problems and solutions the partners consider for joint action, including shared goals, strategies, and major activities or programs; and
- the administration and implementation of the collaboration’s strategies and activities.

**Governance forums:**
- We will identify key characteristics of the governance structures in each site we study, including:
  - the design of the governing board (number of members, representation of different sectors or types of organizational partners, terms of office, formal leadership roles and who serves in them, etc.);
  - the type of governance structure (network administrative organization, lead agency, or shared governance); and
  - the use of different committee structures and Action Networks.
• We will document the use and impact of formal and informal governance processes in each site we study, such as the presence or level of “principled engagement” tools in use for each collective decision or non-decision the partners make, including:
  o explicit definitions of desired goals or outcomes for the decision,
  o discovery processes for data collection and analysis to inform the decision, and
  o structured deliberation or neutral facilitation.
• We will analyze the process(es) that the partners in our sites use to reach each collective decision they make, by documenting:
  o non-decisions – successful efforts by one or more partners to:
    ▪ deny or minimize the significance of a potential problem or issue,
    ▪ discredit or threaten other actors seeking to address an issue, or
    ▪ limit the dimensions or scope of a problem under consideration by the network;
  o the rules (if any) used to reach the decision (e.g., unilateral decision by a partner with formal authority, majority vote, supermajority vote, modified consensus, full consensus); and
  o the breadth and influence of any informal advice or consultative processes that precede the formal decision.

**Types of Hypotheses**

Consistent with Figure 1 above, analyzing these data will generate hypotheses about:

1. How collaborative partners’ sources of power affect consistent differences in power among partners;

2. How the sources of power and consistent differences in power among partners affect conflicts among them, and vice-versa;

3. How the sources of power and consistent differences in power among partners affect collective decisions on different topics (e.g., participation, problems and solutions, governance);

4. How different sources of conflict affect collective decisions on different topics (e.g., participation, problems and solutions, governance);

5. How governance structures, processes, and decision rules modify the effects of power and conflict on collective decisions; and

6. How collective decisions about different topics (participation, problems and solutions, governance) feed back to affect power and conflicts among collaborative partners.
Conclusion: Contributions to Theory and Practice

The benign connotations of “collaboration” and the best intentions of many practitioners notwithstanding, power disparities and conflicts have important impacts on inter-organizational collaborations (Hardy and Phillips 1998, Ansell and Gash 2008, McGuire and Agranoff 2011, Purdy 2012). Those impacts are likely to be particularly salient when the partners in a collaboration make collective decisions that allocate power, opportunities, or other resources to particular program areas, actors, or priorities. While acknowledging that power and conflict affect collaborative decisions, scholars have yet to study those effects systematically. This paper therefore has proposed a theoretical framework and research considerations to answer two specific questions about power, conflict, and collective decisions in inter-organizational collaborations:

• How do power differences and conflicts among collaborative partners influence their collective decisions?
• How and under what conditions do various collaborative governance structures and processes modify the influence of power and conflict on collective decisions?

It situates these questions within a highly contentious policy environment – US public education – focusing on local collaborations participating in the Strive Together network.

Addressing these questions is important to scholars, policymakers, and managers if we are to move beyond simplistic assumptions of collaborative advantage. The framework we present in this paper provides an initial conceptual map of the relationships among power, conflict, decisions, and governance in inter-organizational collaborations. We anticipate that our comparative case study research will modify and refine the map, clarify the relationships among these key constructs, and advance theoretical understanding of how power and conflict manifest within collaborations and affect the partners’ collective decisions. For practitioners, our research should help collaborative partners understand more systematically the effects of power differences and conflicts on their decisions (and, ultimately, on long term outcomes). We also hope to offer guidance on how important design elements of collaboration, such as governance structures and processes, affect the exercise of power and conflict.
Figure 1: Essential Concepts for the Study of Power, Conflict, and Decisions in Collaborations

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

POWER
- Differences
- Sources
  - Resources
  - Formal authority
  - Discursive legitimacy

CONFLICT
- Sources
  - Institutional environment
  - Partners’ institutional logics, identities, core beliefs

DEPENDENT VARIABLES (Intermediate Outcomes)

DECISION TOPICS
1. Participation
2. Problem definition and solutions
3. Governance

MODERATING VARIABLE

GOVERNANCE FORUM
- Structure
- Processes
- Rules

Long term outcomes

Time
**Figure 2:**

Comparative Characteristics of Some Local Strive Together Collaborations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXTUAL COMPLEXITY</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>States</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Eastsie Pathways</strong>, Bellevue</th>
<th>single school district, own backbone org, smallish Board of Directors (16); started in 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduate Tacoma</strong></td>
<td>over 200 partners; may be stand-alone or part of school foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Road Map Project</strong></td>
<td>Lots of work groups, grassroots Community Leadership Team, own organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commit! Dallas</strong></td>
<td>one of largest in country, 83 member Leadership Council, 6 support councils and 23 staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E3 Alliance, Austin</strong></td>
<td>medium complexity. Very targeted at economic growth, small Board of Directors but lots of partners and 15 school districts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>P16 Plus, Bexar County</strong></th>
<th>focused, 22 member Board of Directors, own organization, low-medium complexity?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Works Cited


