STAR
A Biogen Foundation Initiative
SCIENCE | TEACHER SUPPORT | ACCESS | READINESS

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Biogen Foundation™

The STAR Initiative: Advancing Equity in STEM Education Through Collective Action.

Launched in 2018 by the Biogen Foundation through a 4-year, $10 milion investment, the STAR Initiative drives STEM education equity in Cambridge and Somerville, MA. Through STAR (Science, Teacher support, Access & Readiness), the Biogen Foundation is investing in six high performing nonprofits and coordinating a multi-stakeholder network that centers serving students historically and underrepresented in STEM college and career pathways- notably, students of color.

The STAR Initiative is premised on the understanding that building a diverse, inclusive and equitable STEM talent pipeline and workforce must include investing in the coordination of stakeholders who support students along the STEM pathway. Building equitable STEM education ecosystems requires the involvement of schools. The STAR Initiative has engaged leadership and key stakeholders from both Cambridge and Somerville public schools at all stages of the work. They remain key in ensuring STAR grantees are maximizing their reach and impact on the students that need them most. Moving the needle in advancing educational equity requires long term commitment, and new forms of collaboration. STAR is designed to address these two critical pieces.

Root Cause, the backbone organization for STAR, started work with Biogen Foundation in 2017 to develop a theory of change for the initiative, design the model, and advise on the network development. Root Cause continues to partner with Biogen to strengthen relationships and coordination amongst STAR grantees and other stakeholders in Cambridge and Somerville as STAR grows, develops, and looks to sustain the work for years to come.

For more information, visit Biogen Foundation or Root Cause's web pages. To get in touch with the Root Cause team, please email jhennick@rootcause.org.
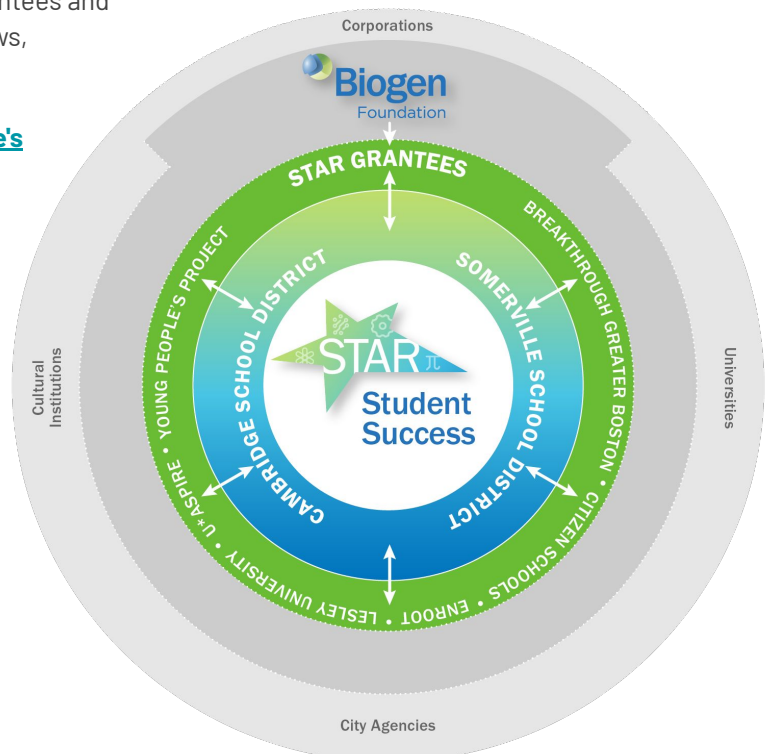

Root Cause's role as Backbone Organization:
- Convene stakeholders
- Data collection, analysis & reporting
- Communications strategy and implementation
- Program design
- Strategy & sustainability planning

Location: Cambridge and Somerville, MA
Topic: STEM Education, Youth Development
Dates: 2017- present

Root Cause's Collective Action:
A NETWORK-BASED APPROACH TO IMPROVING LIVES

Collective action is the action taken together by a group of people who share knowledge, resources, and effort to achieve a common purpose.

Collective Action is an approach to systems change that brings together grantmakers, nonprofit service providers, public agencies, and the business community in the pursuit of a common purpose for improving people's lives.

Collective action aims to improve lives across a community by aligning philanthropic resources, direct social services, public institutions, and community efforts to reduce barriers to success, such as those connected to race, class, gender, and geography.

Root Cause helps partners design, implement, and measure the performance of collective action initiatives. We apply a holistic Collective Action Framework that is grounded in relationships to guide networks in designing strategy, facilitating partnerships, coordinating service delivery, and sharing responsibility for outcomes. Each component of our Collective Action framework is interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Collective Action Framework

Elements of Collective Action

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Common Purpose

A common purpose is the organizing principle at the center of any collective effort to improve people's lives. The common purpose is grounded in the needs of the community, emphasizes equity, and aims to reduce disparities. It shapes the design of the network, activities of its partners, and measures of success.

Cross-Sector Partnerships

Collective action initiatives are co-created with a cross-sector of local partners to ensure the network is positioned to influence the broader systems that help or hinder people's success in the community. When a diverse network of partners brings to bear its collective expertise and resources, and designs its activities to be synergistic with the efforts of key stakeholders and institutions (i.e. school districts and public agencies), the network can affect greater change than if it consists of a limited set of partners.

Mutually-Reinforcing Activities

Partners in collective action align and coordinate their efforts - including service delivery, fundraising, and communication. Network members collaboratively shape their work to maximize their collective reach so that more people access and participate in the services they need to thrive. In designing collective strategy, service providers work to minimize redundancy, build referral pathways, and fill gaps in service delivery so that people can advance from one resource to the next to help them succeed at each stage in life.

Collective Performance Measurement

Partners use data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve their individual services as well as their collective action approach. Network members define common outcomes that align with and advance the common purpose. Each partner measures progress against their individual goals, while the network's performance data is managed centrally and shared transparently with all stakeholders.

Shared Accountability for Outcomes

Partners in collective action initiatives are invested in and hold themselves and fellow stakeholders accountable for achieving outcomes agreed upon during the design of the initiative. Accountability to shared goals strengthens as stakeholders trust and value each other and their respective contributions to the common purpose.

Backbone Support

Backbone organizations are an independent coordinating organization that ensures highly effective and adaptive networks by managing the logistical aspects of the project and ensuring all partners are equally represented while maintaining focus on a common purpose. Backbone organizations ensure that decision-making is shared, strategic, and reflective of the network's needs while promoting a culture of trust and accountability among stakeholders.

Continuous Communication

Networks foster strong formal and informal communication channels to build a culture that fosters relationships, trust, respect, collaboration, and shared accountability. Backbone organizations design forums and protocols for regular, transparent communication that often includes network convenings, working group meetings, and the use of online platforms (email, Slack, etc.).

Funding for Collaboration

Funding is allocated for partners to invest the time and energy needed to develop strong relationships and create and maintain tools, processes, and systems to work together. While collective action may happen without philanthropic investments, it is more likely to succeed with designated funding so participating organizations have the capacity to fully participate in and sustain their contributions to the common purpose.

Sonja Okun, Principal Consultant

Sonja has more than two decades of experience developing and leading successful positive youth development intervention programs for justice system-involved youth. At Root Cause, Sonja's work focuses on strategy development and implementation projects and collective action initiatives. She is skilled in program and organizational development, building and managing diverse teams, bridging diverse perspectives and functional areas of expertise/experience, and more.

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Root Cause Projects: Biogen STAR Initiative, Irving Harris Tenets, Farash Foundation Strategic Planning

Jamie Hennick, Senior Manager of Strategic Initiatives

Jamie comes to Root Cause with more than a decade of experience as an educator and youth development consultant in the nonprofit and public sectors. Her current work focuses on K-12 and postsecondary education, collective action, network facilitation, business and strategic planning, STEM education, and program design.

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Root Cause Projects: Biogen STAR Initiative, Boston WINS, State Street Grantee Capacity Building

Alekhya Chaparala, Manager

Alekhya believes that empathy, self-awareness, and an appreciation of history are crucial for building inclusive, just, and equitable conditions that allow all people to thrive. Alekhya comes to Root Cause with a background in public health, research, education, and advocacy.

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Root Cause Projects: Biogen STAR Initiative, AAACF Community Mapping, Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative