

Outcomes and Metrics: *Measuring the Impact of Early Childhood Systems*



RESEARCH TO ACTION
PROJECT SUMMARY

When early childhood systems function well, they can enhance the effectiveness of programs and services in the community, while ensuring better experiences for children and families and improving outcomes such as school readiness and optimal health and development. However, documenting the impact of systems-level activities has been an ongoing challenge for communities investing in the coordination, infrastructure building and alignment of early childhood systems.

This Research to Action (RTA) grant was part of an ongoing effort by CSSP and EC-LINC communities to better measure the impact of early childhood systems, in order to understand how well young children and families are doing; evaluate the performance of early childhood systems; learn from one another and improve work in EC-LINC communities; and able to influence important policy decisions. This grant focused on developing and collecting common metrics. It began the process of identifying measures of system performance, and built on work done during an earlier learning laboratory, which had identified a set of common indicators of child well-being.

The primary objective of the grant was to achieve “proof of concept” – that is, to demonstrate that participating communities could create standardized and detailed operational definitions of each common indicator, and then collect and report those data. Participants also hoped to make further progress on defining measures of system performance, and to provide an assessment of feasibility, lessons learned and next steps for ongoing work.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED

The consultants worked with the six participating communities to review data sources related to the identified common indicators for each community. They then developed detailed implementation plans to guide and structure data collection and reporting efforts in each community. The plans included information about data sources and contacts; precise data definitions; and parameters for data collection that would encourage close alignment among the communities. The consultants also researched multiple options for a long-term structure for housing, cleaning and reporting on the data.

ACTION TAKEN

The six communities gathered five years of data for each of the common indicators. The consultants compiled and cleaned the data, and added comparative data for the country as a whole when available. They summarized the results and provided trend and community comparison charts, including narrative descriptions and detail by income or race/ethnicity, when available. Specific data characteristics and sources were identified to facilitate cross-community interpretation. An online survey collected information from participants on the data collection process and on their interpretation of the pilot results. The survey also solicited feedback on the indicators and the system performance measures, with regard to their data power (availability and reliability of data); communication power (extent to which the data would be understood by, and meaningful to, a wide audience); and proxy power (extent to which the data say something important about the intended results). The consultants then produced a summary report incorporating all of the data and key learnings to drive future action, including indicator implementation successes and challenges, possible solutions and proposed next steps.

About EC-LINC

Early Childhood-LINC is a learning and innovation network for communities – a network of communities that have come together with CSSP to demonstrate effective approaches to developing local early childhood systems. Together, the participating communities tackle tough problems, test new solutions and accelerate progress toward ensuring that all young children and their families thrive.

About the Research to Action Projects

With support from an anonymous donor, small groups of EC-LINC member communities worked together in 2016 on four “**Research to Action**” projects designed to advance the field of early childhood systems through actionable research.

EC-LINC member communities worked collaboratively to develop proposals that would allow them to address a topic of interest to both the EC-LINC network and a wider audience of early childhood systems builders. Grantees then undertook research that provides new insight into a question or potential strategy of interest, implement or test their findings within their local context and communicate and share lessons learned from the overall experience to both the EC-LINC network and other relevant stakeholders.

FINDINGS

Overall, the implementation of the RTA grant was successful, and the participants continue to consider this work valuable for its potential to promote dialogue on joint quality improvement, encourage data alignment nationwide and influence policy and programming. All of these elements can contribute to improved outcomes for children and families.

Challenges encountered centered on data availability and alignment. For some indicators (e.g. kindergarten readiness), not every community collects the data. For others (e.g. the incidence of childhood obesity), data definitions vary significantly enough to make comparisons of results across jurisdictions difficult. And for others, readily available data (e.g. rates of child poverty) may be of limited value for comparison, given significant differences between communities (in this example, with regard to the cost of living.) The participants are discussing a data development agenda that could begin to resolve some of these challenges, and also contribute to national understanding of the most important issues facing young children and their families.

PRODUCTS

The primary public product of the grant is an abridged version of the [Final Report](#) from the consultants. This version contains complete information about the common indicators and the system performance measures, including data definitions and sources of data. It also describes the work done under the grant and identifies next steps for continuing this project. It includes, for the purpose of illustration, the full set of data displays for one indicator (incidence of low birthweight). Because the communities have only recently received and begun to analyze the data, they are not yet prepared to disseminate the full report containing data for all of the indicators.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

The identification of common outcomes and metrics for early childhood systems, and exploration of the viability of collecting and comparing data across communities, may be useful to leaders of other early childhood systems who wish to assess and document their own progress as well as to compare their accomplishments to those in other early childhood systems.

Two other groups (the First 5 Association in California and the National League of Cities network working on the Early Learning Nation campaign with CSSP) have already expressed interest in the content of this work and begun to explore how to join or to adapt it for their own purposes. First 5 Los Angeles will be joining the next phase of the work, and we expect that additional communities will be interested in doing so at a later date when the full set of system performance measures is added.

NEXT STEPS

To maintain momentum and build on the accomplishments of this grant, Parsons Consulting, Inc. has been engaged to continue to work with member communities in 2017. The work will include:

1. Data development for a first set of system performance measures,
2. Literature review of past or existing efforts and best practices in using data to support joint continuous quality improvement,
3. Initial continuous quality improvement work using one or more indicators and
4. Research into the feasibility and cost of an online reporting platform for the indicators.

PARTNERS

Alameda County, CA

- Jane Wellenkamp - First 5 Alameda County



Palm Beach County, FL

- Beth Halleck, Children's Services Commission of Palm Beach County



Boston, MA

- Gina Mittal - United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley



Ventura County, CA

- Petra Puls - First 5 Ventura



Lamoille County, VT

- Steve Ames - Building Bright Futures
- Scott Johnson - Lamoille Family Center



Center for the Study of Social Policy

- Steve Cohen and Cailin O'Connor



Orange County, CA

- Sharon Boles and Limor Zimskind - Child and Family Commission of Orange County



Consultants: Parsons Consulting, Inc.

- Kari Parsons, Kirsten Smith and Kendra Lodewick

