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Ideas into Action

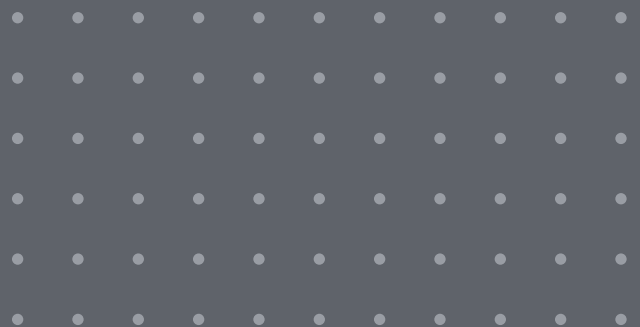


BEST PRACTICE BRIEF

Using Results-Based Accountability (RBA) for Performance Accountability with Community Partnerships



This Best Practice Brief is part of series funded by **First 5 LA** in order to document effective community capacity building strategies that have been utilized in support of Best Start, a place-based initiative designed to catalyze, strengthen and elevate empowering and innovative approaches that improve the lives of children prenatal to age 5.



Introduction

This issue brief is focused on how a results-based approach to community planning and action, specifically Results-Based Accountability™ or RBA, can be an important tool to help communities focus and accelerate their efforts to improve outcomes for children and families. A strong focus on results is essential when collective action by multiple residents and community stakeholders is required, as is the case with the Best Start Community Partnerships. RBA, developed by Mark Friedman, is now used in hundreds of communities nationally and internationally. (A short list of RBA resources and tools is included at the end of this Issue Brief.)

The primary author of this brief is Audrey Jordan; special thanks to her for her guidance, thought-leadership, and writing of this piece. In addition, we offer special thanks for the experience and lessons shared in this brief from the Capacity-Builders working with Best Start communities, with particular appreciation to Corina Espinoza and Chrysta Wilson, who were primary contributors. Deep appreciation goes also to the resident leaders of the Best Start Community Partnerships who developed the practices described here with their Capacity-Builders and who continue to provide outstanding leadership in their communities.

This series of Best Practice Briefs were commissioned by First 5 LA's Best Start Communities Department and authored by members of CSSP's Partnership Support Capacity Building Team. The purpose of the series is to:

- Highlight Best Start capacity building strategies that have been most effective, in order to support Best Start community leaders as they continue this work and share lessons learned from LA's Best Start Community Partnerships with the broader field.
- Add the richness and depth of on-the-ground and recent experiences of community partnerships in Los Angeles to the existing knowledge around results-oriented community approaches to improve outcomes for young children and their families.
- Enhance understanding of what community-led, place-based initiatives require to succeed.
- Identify helpful lessons and recommendations that can be used to shape future community change efforts.

Together with First 5 LA, which is committed to ongoing learning and improvement, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) welcomes the opportunity to document and share impactful Best Start capacity building strategies with those who are leading the next phase of its development, as well as others in the broader community change field committed to better and more equitable outcomes for children and families. CSSP is a national policy, research, technical assistance organization whose mission is to help create a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. CSSP has offices in LA, Washington, D.C., and New York.



Laying the Groundwork for Action and Accountability in Partnership Efforts

Results-Based Accountability (RBA) is “a disciplined way of thinking and taking action that can be used to improve the quality of life in communities, cities, counties, states, and nations.”¹ In the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s (CSSP) support with Best Start community leaders, Capacity Builders focused particularly on three questions that are used in the RBA approach to develop performance measures of progress in advancing a community action strategy, once an overall result is established and the indicators of that result have been identified. These questions are:

- **How much did we do?** This indicator addresses how much of an activity was conducted, the frequency of activities, etc.
- **How well did we do?** This indicator addresses quality: was the activity conducted with the level of quality expected and aimed for?
- **Is anyone better off?** This indicator addresses the highest priority, but often the most difficult to measure: did the action make a difference in someone’s life?

In Best Start communities, the goal was to use RBA methodologies to help Community Partnerships understand and track the performance of the non-profit organizations to whom First 5 LA had provided grants to implement action strategies designed by the Partnerships themselves. In a sense, RBA was intended as the way that Partnerships could make sure that their intentions were carried out by the grantees who were executing their plans. The Capacity Builders’ role was to ensure that Partnerships and the grantee agencies alike understood the concepts of performance measurement, had knowledge of RBA, and had the capacity and tools to use these methodologies to track the performance of the grantee agencies.

To prepare to engage Community Partnership members around RBA, Capacity Builders and CSSP developed a training guide on RBA and the use of performance measures.² The guide (a PowerPoint), along with other tools, used visual images,



¹ Trying Hard is Not Good Enough, Friedman, p 11.

² <https://cssp.org/our-work/project/best-start-la/#compendium>

stories, and real-life examples to make the concept of performance measurement less technical and more accessible. In addition to the guide, each Capacity Builder developed her/his own training materials, creating customized and interactive capacity building sessions for each Partnership. The approaches used for these sessions varied by community, but often included presentation-style trainings, interactive facilitation, games, storytelling, visual charting, and graphic recording. Additionally, the training for each Partnership was tailored to be culturally and linguistically appropriate for that community. All of the trainings were grounded in popular education and adult learning principles that emphasized the need for topics and content to be relevant or relatable to learners' lives. For example, as a way of grasping performance measurement principles, Partnership members engaged in interactive activities that developed performance measures for personal concern, i.e., losing weight, quitting smoking, or even developing a successful holiday party.

The experience of introducing performance measurement concepts to Best Start Partnerships suggests several questions that should be posed as early-on as community members grapple with how to track progress in their own communities:

- How can the concepts of performance measurement be made less academic, more real-world, and more grounded in day-to-day experiences of residents and community members?
- How will the professional staff involved in the performance measurement process share power and oversight with unpaid community leaders? How do you shift from a framework of “power over” to “power with?”
- How—a key issue in the specific instance of the Best Start Partnerships—how does a funder hold a service provider or community agency implementing a strategy developed by community members accountable? How is accountability shared between a funder and community members? How can a funder “co-construct” with community leaders shared responsibility for evaluating the effectiveness of strategies, especially when those strategies were developed by the community leaders?



Capacity Building in Action

Once Capacity Builders had developed relevant, community-focused RBA training materials and teaching approaches (often with the support of CSSP’s Partnership Support Team, or PST), they sought to help Community Partnership members actually develop performance measures, using the principles of RBA. In some communities, this was done in tandem with Partnership committees or workgroups dedicated to data and learning; in these instances, the members of the workgroup became the point people for on-going performance measurement. In other Best Start communities, no such workgroups existed. In either case, Capacity Builders discovered that, despite initial training, both the grantee organizations who worked with the Partnerships and the community members themselves often had limited knowledge of RBA. The Capacity Builders needed to continually build the skills of *both* resident leaders and grantee organization staff so that performance measures could be developed in a way understandable to community residents and applicable to the strategies and activities the provider organization was implementing.

This on-going capacity building process varied across communities according to local dynamics, but in general three steps were common to most Partnerships:



STEP 1: ASSESS AND ORIENT THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

This step is about ensuring that people understand the purpose and utility of performance measurement. It involves explaining the process in an applied, relatable way. Partnership members need to understand what they are being asked to do and why it is important to their work and their community. When this is true, they can make an informed decisions about committing their time and effort to this process.

In this step, Capacity Builders make no assumptions about how much or how little people already know about evaluation or performance measurement: instead, they seek to learn “where people are” and go from there, building on whatever degree of knowledge people have. For instance, while the concepts of RBA and measuring performance initially felt foreign to many community members, with

the help of the Capacity Builders’ efforts (backed by the PST), Partnership members soon saw that every day they were making decisions based on data and evaluating the results of things they do. From making decisions about groceries to examining the report cards of their children, community members realized that data and performance measurement were already part of their lives. Once residents grasped these core concepts, based on their personal experiences, the Capacity Builders introduced the reasons why community groups and organizations should be just as focused on measuring performance and results. When approached in this way, resident leaders responded immediately to the idea that performance measures could demonstrate whether an investment they had designed was effective or not. They deeply valued not being “wasteful” of resources, and the importance they placed on this value was harnessed to make the connection about why measuring performances of funded activities and strategies was important.

STEP 2: ONGOING ASSESSMENT OF THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP’S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT RBA TERMS AND CONCEPTS.

Assessing capacity is not a one-time activity. Capacity Builders must be aware that people learn at different rates and that new people come into the community’s process all the time. Content must be taught multiple times and in different modalities, so that everyone can retain information. For Community Partnerships, ongoing assessments were often built into the beginning of each training session. Partnership members were asked what they remembered from the last session, or asked to explain in their own words the concepts of evaluation, results, and/or performance measurement. The resulting discussions helped the Capacity Builders to customize future training and maintain a continuous learning process. (This continual re-assessment was important for another reason: attendance at Community Partnership meetings can fluctuate, with new residents joining all the time; thus, ongoing assessments or “temperature checks” are helpful to ensure that people don’t get left behind.)

STEP 3: DEVELOP SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE MEASURES FOR THE GRANTEE ORGANIZATION’S STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES.

As community members demonstrated increased capacities around RBA and performance measurement, Capacity Builders started to develop actual performance measures for the grantee organization’s activities. In every instance, Capacity Builders found that dedicated time to building resident knowledge around RBA enabled them to have sophisticated conversations about developing performance measures.

Key to the success of the performance measures development process was making the grantee organization’s contract deliverables known to the resident leaders. Only with this knowledge could residents develop measures for the activities that grantees were contractually obligated to deliver. This moved performance measure development from abstract to concrete, with a significant “stake” for those who wanted to see the activities they had designed successfully implemented.

While moving through these steps, Capacity Builders kept several things in mind:

- **Consider language carefully:** Language equity is an important consideration for capacity building, especially with a complex, potentially technical topics such as RBA and performance measurement. Of course, there is the need to consider specific

language needs of the community residents, with the appropriate supports such as translation equipment and skilled interpreters. In addition, though, it is important to identify “shared language”—words or phrases that everyone can relate to and use in reference to RBA and performance measurement concepts. For example, in Best Start communities, it was important to be able to talk about “medida” as well as measures, to say “inmediato” as well as short term, to express an interest in “sugerencias” as well as for feedback. (Stop here)

- **Make the learning iterative, with “scaffolding”:** It is important to have a starting point that provides an overview of RBA and the concept of performance measurement. Though some members may already have exposure to assessment and evaluation, it is useful to conduct an “on the same page” session so that partnership members have a “common ground.” After this, “scaffolding” was the basis for maintaining the community leaders’ new knowledge: that is, new discussions built on prior discussions, and Capacity Builders would not move on to discussion of a new performance measure until there was thorough review and understanding of the one before it.
- **Allow for diverse learning styles:** Considering diverse learning styles is consistent with adult learning principles. The use of multiple modalities, methods, and practices can help address the diverse ways in which an individual learner receives and retains information. In the work with Community Partnerships, it was key to have tools that facilitated visual, auditory, and sensory/tactile learning styles in order that community members could not only *listen* to what was being said, but also see it through graphics and other visuals, and where possible *feel it* through hands-on practices. The use of interactive games and activities that allowed members to learn the material *and* practice the skill was essential.
- **Make the information relatable:** A key part of building on residents’ current knowledge (i.e., scaffolding) was the use of interactive and experiential two-way learning. Operationally, this included posing questions related to activities from everyday life to make sure there was a mastery of RBA concepts. Questions such as, “How would you know if your holiday party was a success?” were asked, and for every idea a resident shared, the Capacity Builder connected it to one of the three RBA performance measure questions. Then, grounding the group’s brainstorming in results that connected to the ultimate goal of the partnership helped the members become more discerning. This was a foundational skill that the RBA work was then built upon.
- **Build the capacity of residents to communicate to others/train their peers:** CSSP aimed to have community residents become adept in describing the performance measures they were using, and to be able to ask questions of the grantee organization specifically related to performance measurement of the activities the grantees were implementing. Achieving this goal varied across the Best Start partnerships. However, with structured facilitation and taking the time needed for community members to understand what was at stake, Partnership members developed a strong commitment to the importance of data and measurement for accountability purposes. In some partnerships, they began to review data and ask questions based on them, and in at least a few Partnerships where this process took hold strongly, adjust their strategies based on what they learned through performance measurement.

Challenges

The primary challenge to the capacity building described here was a “structural” one, relating to the nature of the contractual arrangements between First 5 LA and the grantee organizations funded to implement each Community Partnership’s action strategies. Specifically, Capacity Builders found that contractual obligations specified by First 5 LA often affected how deeply a grantee organizations could or would engage with the performance measures developed by Community Partnerships. Some explanation is needed here in order to understand why this became such a critical factor.

The PST had discussed frequently with First 5 LA staff the importance of Community Partnerships learning about RBA performance measures so that the partnerships could monitor the implementation by grantee organizations. However, when First 5 LA contracted with the grantees, there was no contractual obligation for grantees either to (a) lead co-design processes on measurement/evaluation with the Partnerships, or (b) develop RBA performance measures for their contracted activities. Grantee’s contracts with First 5 LA also didn’t mandate that grantees needed to track performance using the three RBA performance measurement questions to which community members were oriented (i.e., *How much did we do? How well did we do it? What difference did it make?*). As a result, some Community Partnerships never had the incentive to develop performances measures for the grantee’s activities. This contractual limitation also meant that in some Best Start communities, Capacity Builders were often the only actors working to integrate community leaders into conversations about performance and accountability. Under their contracts, grantees were not required to do this or even to participate with the Community Partnership in this process.

On the positive side, some grantee organizations hired external evaluators who helped develop data collection tools with residents and then collected information on the implementation of LBD activities. And, in a few communities, the grantee evaluator and the Capacity Builder co-facilitated performance measurement trainings and measure development sessions.



Measuring Success

As with most capacity-building work across the sites, the outcomes of the RBA/performance measurement activities varied across the Community Partnerships. As mentioned previously, the reasons for this variation largely centered around (1) the degree of engagement of the grantee organization with the RBA process, and (2) the extent to which the First 5 LA program officer promoted this engagement. In the communities where goals for RBA performance measurement were achieved, the Capacity Builder served as a helpful liaison between the grantee and the Community Partnership, often facilitating joint understanding of RBA by the grantee and Partnership members. At the heart of RBA is an informed agreement about accountability to results. When grantees understood the Partnership’s desired results, adopted them as the goals for their contracted work, and engaged the Partnership in ongoing monitoring and communication about progress, the intended performance outcomes were achieved.



We conservatively estimate that, in a little more than half of the partnerships, some adherence to RBA occurred, i.e., regular reporting and discussion about progress between the grantee and the Community Partnership regarding at least the first two RBA performance measurement questions (i.e., *How much did we do?* and *How well did we do it?*). In some sites—we estimate two to three of the 13—there was little accountability to the Community Partnerships for strategy implementation by the grantee; that is, there was little report-back and discussion and minimal accountability by the grantee organization for achieving the Partnership’s results goals.

Overall success of the capacity building activities related to RBA and performance assessment can be summed-up in one observation: the grantees were formally accountable to First 5 LA for the contracted work on behalf of the Community Partnerships, and accountability to the Partnerships was “strongly recommended.” Not optional, but also not mandated. Because of this disconnect—not really requiring the “accountability” part of Results-Based Accountability—grantees may have intended to engage in an accountable

partnership with communities, but they primarily responded to what their contracts required. This may or may not have aligned with the results goals set by the Partnership. Although technical assistance was provided to grantees to encourage accountability to Partnership results (including cross-site training sessions and technical assistance support from an evaluation firm), it was only those grantee organizations that worked in true partnership with Capacity Builders and the Community Partnership where genuine progress in aligned with the community's performance measures occurred.

With time, patience, and flexibility in facilitation, many of the Community Partnerships established metrics for each of their strategies and activities. This accomplishment is in evidence in the document that outlines the performance measures (see RBA tool). In addition, in at least one Community Partnership, when presented with data related to their metrics, the leadership engaged with the grantee evaluator to discuss gaps in meeting performance measures, demonstrating their understanding of the role of data in pointing the way to improvement. In this instance, members of the Best Start South El Monte-El Monte Advisory Committee invoked the three RBA performance measurement questions while discussing the potential contract extension of their grantee organization. The resident leaders asked First 5 LA and the grantee what was proposed in the original plan and what was accomplished, asking questions about impact and results. While the grantee's contract was ultimately extended, the vote within the Community Partnership was split 55/45. In the past, people voted with their loyalties: this time, people voted based on the performance measures and results. This was a strong demonstration of data-driven decision-making, most likely linked to the ongoing capacity building on RBA the resident leaders received.



Lessons Learned and Recommendations

There are many lessons to be learned from the Community Partnerships' experience with RBA and from the capacity building that supported it.

- ***From a management perspective, what stands out is the importance of aligning the accountability demands in the First 5 LA contracts with grantees, the grantees' understanding of the nature of their accountability to community members, and the expectations established through the RBA training.*** The length of time that elapsed between development of the Community Partnership's action plans and First 5 LA's grantee selection and contracting process; the diminishment of community accountability by grantees because they perceived they were primarily accountable to First 5 LA through the contracts; and the premise by Capacity Builders that all parties were genuinely committed to community accountability—there were not all aligned, and this interfered with timely and community-accountable implementation of Learning by Doing strategies in many Best Start communities.
- ***From an on-the-ground perspective, what stands out is the apparent reluctance and/or inability of many of the grantee organizations to understand their role with the Community Partnerships.*** The grantees held their accountability to F5 LA first and foremost. While understandable, given how the contracts were written, this emphasis—sometimes bordering on seeming to dismiss the communities' priorities—was to the detriment of engaging the Community Partnership members as valued and important partners. The result was conflict, miscommunication, and mistrust—all of which made both the Learn by Doing and the RBA work that was meant to accompany it more challenging.
- ***One takeaway lesson is this: when a funder like First 5 LA rolls out a countywide initiative, the ways of assessing performance (i.e., evaluating it) would benefit from some standardization across communities (which the RBA performance measures, co-designed with Community Partnerships, could have provided).*** The expectations should be accompanied by capacity-building for all the parties (i.e., for residents and for grantee organizations), so there is commitment and capacity for similar approaches to performance measurement, while still leaving room for local control and customization.
- ***An inspiring reflection from the Best Start experience is that community residents have a large capacity for learning technical skills related to evaluation, performance measurement, and continuous improvement.*** If provided the time, support, and resources, community members can

lead or co-lead successful evaluations. At times, Community Partnership members proved more effective at performance measurement, for example, than the professional staff of the grantee organizations.

With hindsight, it appears that more and more consistent expectations were needed to ensure that all parties understood the overall structure of accountability relationships and how the RBA methodologies could have advanced those. If this had happened, the various involved parties (grantees, Community Partnership members, Capacity Builders, etc.) may have been able to address the challenges described above. Insistence on alignment in developing, monitoring, and regularly reporting on performance measures to the Community Partnership would have also helped address these challenges. Given the varied levels of knowledge and competency on RBA (and evaluation in general), it is suggested that in future situations having complex accountability relationships, Capacity Builders (or whomever plays their role) would provide trainings to individual Partnerships, followed by a combined cross-community training session. This approach would require more time; however, it would have helped all those involved to be anchored in a common understanding of RBA and performance measurement, thereby bringing that discipline to the Community Partnerships' and grantee organizations' discussions on establishing metrics.

Perhaps most importantly, it is recommended that in these situations First 5 LA use its power to ensure that grantees are delivering results-focused activities connected to Community Partnership goals, and that the investment is yielding the impact promised to the community (or at least making this the highest priority).

For future attempts at implementation of an RBA approach with Best Start community-determined strategies by contracted grantees, we offer the following recommendations:

- Ensure clarity and agreement in the contracting process that accountability to community strategies/outcomes is required;
- Provide upfront and on-going capacity-building on RBA for all parties involved in the partnership work (consider joint-trainings of grantees and community partnership where feasible);
- Provide upfront and on-going training and support for service provider organizations/ grantees to make the necessary shift to engaging with community residents as accountability partners;
- Provide training and support in facilitation of evaluation-related content in community spaces for grantee organizations. We suggest this should include cross-site training as well as training and consultation with individual partnerships; and
- Invest the time and create the space necessary for relationship-building and trust development between grantees and community partnerships.

Additional Resources

The following is a partial list of resources on Results-Based Accountability (RBA) and performance measurement that were useful for Capacity Builders and the Community Partnerships:

- Conversation Starter: Results-based Accountability (RBA) Performance Measures for BSF Activities
- Performance Measures examples
- RBA 101 PowerPoint, <http://raguide.org/>
- South El Monte Best Start Families History & Renewal project

