

0.2 Infrastructure for System-Building

Level at which the early childhood system has the foundational elements needed to achieve impact

Purpose

This measure is meant to help early childhood system-builders evaluate their early efforts to build a strong foundation for future success. It examines the system's progress in four areas.

The first of these is the emergence of a trusted “backbone organization” that convenes the partners and guides the development of a common agenda, supported by common data. This role has been played by different types of organizations, including local foundations, planning bodies such as the First 5 organizations throughout California, and local government units. The second and third areas relate to early signs of effective work by the backbone organization: guiding the development of a common vision and strategy, and supporting aligned activities. The final area is building the foundation needed to work effectively towards equity. In each of these areas, the measure highlights actions that can be taken relatively early in the work of developing an early childhood system.

We encourage communities in the early stages of system-building efforts to use this measure together with a companion measure 0.1 Core Sector Engagement. A strong overall score (3 or 4) on this measure may be an indication that a community is ready to move on to other parts of the toolkit, to gauge progress associated with more advanced stages of development. These include, for example:

- ▶ Shared measurement (2.4 Using Data)
- ▶ Public will, policy, and funding (the Commitment measures, 3.1 – 3.3); and
- ▶ More advanced efforts to promote parent leadership and advance equity (4.1 Parent Engagement and 4.2 Advancing Equity)

Definition

This measure provides a tool for early childhood system leaders to examine their progress in laying a foundation for a well-functioning early childhood system, including having a trusted and effective backbone organization, a common vision and strategy, aligned activities, and foundations for advancing equity.

Implementation

Tool or Survey

Using the measure requires conducting a survey of partner organizations followed by aggregation of data and one or more conversations among partners to analyze results, come to consensus on overall system performance, and identify actions aimed at improvement. Communities are invited to use the rating tool provided at the end of this section. Because the measure covers aspects of the backbone organization's performance, you may want to have a partner organization or neutral facilitator send out the survey and aggregate the data, rather than asking the

backbone organization to do that work itself. The Summary of Steps section below provides more detail on the recommended sequence of activities.

Summary of Steps

1. **Set intention:** Decide your community's goals with respect to evaluating how you are constructing the infrastructure for system-building
2. **Stakeholder engagement:** Identify early childhood system leaders or representatives to participate in the assessment process. Decide which organization will manage the work of distributing the survey, collecting responses, and aggregating the data. With the stakeholders, affirm or revise intentions and consider reviewing the tool together, before fielding, so that questions can be surfaced and discussed beforehand.
3. **Complete tool individually (recommended):** The early childhood system representatives participating in the assessment may complete the tool individually before meeting and discussing as a group. An online version of the tool using [Google Forms is available here](#); communities using this will need to save the tool in their own Google account, and customize as needed, before distributing.
4. **Convene stakeholders:** Convene the group to review and explore the data. Questions might include:
 - a. Across items, which stand out as having high average ratings, and which have lower ratings?
 - b. Are there items for which perspectives varied widely among respondents—for example, several very low scores and several very high scores? Discussion of these items, aimed at eliciting both points of view rather than trying to resolve the differences immediately, may be especially helpful.
 - c. Which areas are most ripe for improvement, in terms of both importance and capacity? What improvements would participants propose—or, for complex issues, what process would participants propose to decide upon an improvement plan?
5. **Rate:** Come to a consensus on the level that best describes where the system as a whole falls at this time. This overall rating sets a baseline for future assessments of progress.
6. **Plan:** Determine how to proceed. Communities can use the action plan template in this toolkit to help plan next steps for building your system's capacity for collective impact.

⁴ The idea of a backbone organization, along with a considerable body of work about the functions of such organizations, has been developed by the consulting firm FSG as part of their broader ideas about collective impact.

Stakeholders

Early childhood system leaders, from both the backbone organization and all of the sectors that are meaningfully involved in the early childhood system, should participate. If the early childhood system has begun to engage parent leaders, their participation would be especially helpful.

Data Sources

This performance measure uses a self-assessment tool. No additional data sources are needed to complete this assessment.

Limitations

The value of the tool for local communities lies primarily in clarifying issues to prioritize for early childhood system-building. It is not intended for cross-community comparison, since the landscapes differ in terms of sectors, current engagement, desired engagement, resources, priorities, and how early childhood systems are conceptualized.

Resources

- ▶ [Early Learning Community Action Guide](#). Center for the Study of Social Policy and National League of Cities, 2019
- ▶ [Getting Started with Collective Impact](#) (webinar series), FSG, Collective Impact Forum, 2017

0.2 Infrastructure for System-Building: Rating Tool

For the statements in each of the four domains, stakeholders should assign a rating on a scale from 1-4 that best captures the extent to which the practices are in place:

1—Not yet in place or just beginning to be developed

2—Partly achieved, perhaps with promising early signs, but not yet having a significant effect on the system as a whole

3—Significantly achieved with at least a few examples of how it has contributed to the effectiveness of the system

4—Fully achieved and largely effective; while occasional problems have to be addressed, this is now an important and generally reliable element of the system

DK—Don't have enough information to rate

| FUNCTION 1—BACKBONE ORGANIZATION OR CONVENER | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1. | There is a backbone organization that effectively convenes partners and facilitates productive communication among them. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| 2. | The backbone organization effectively collects and analyzes data to inform the early childhood system's decisions. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| 3. | The backbone organization effectively represents the interests of the early childhood system to legislators, funders, and other key stakeholders. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| 4. | The backbone organization has or reasonably expects sufficient funding to continue to play this role. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| FUNCTION 2—COMMON VISION AND STRATEGIES | | | | | | |
| 5. | The early childhood system has developed a common agenda. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| 6. | The common agenda is widely known and acted upon. Asked what the early childhood system is trying to accomplish and how it plans to do that, partners would give similar answers. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| 7. | Partner organizations take action in support of common goals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| 8. | Partner organizations believe that other partners are taking action in support of common goals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| FUNCTION 3—ALIGNED ACTIVITIES | | | | | | |
| 9. | Partners communicate with one another regularly, both together with and independent of the backbone organization. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| 10. | Partners believe that the time they are spending collaboratively is time well spent. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| 11. | Partners report that the scope of work they do collaboratively is substantial and/or growing. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| 12. | Partners work together effectively to mobilize the funding needed to achieve the goals of the initiative. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |

FUNCTION 4—PROMOTING EQUITY

| | |
|---|---------------------------|
| <p>13. Partners have endorsed an explicit goal of achieving equitable results for all children in the community regardless of race, ethnicity, immigration status, neighborhood, and other demographic characteristics.</p> | <p>1 2 3 4 DK</p> |
| <p>14. Leadership within the early childhood system is diverse with regard to race and ethnicity.</p> | <p>1 2 3 4 DK</p> |
| <p>15. Leadership within the early childhood system includes parents of young children, especially parents in under-invested communities.</p> | <p>1 2 3 4 DK</p> |
| <p>16. The system promotes parent involvement by: compensating parents for their time; addressing needs for transportation, child care, and translation; and ensuring that parents receive the same data as other leaders.</p> | <p>1 2 3 4 DK</p> |

After compiling the results of the survey completed by individual partners, communities can convene to collaboratively assess where their system as a whole falls, according to the following levels. While each level has several components and your system may be further ahead or behind on certain components, participants are encouraged to choose the rating that best characterizes their system at this time:

Level 1—Our system is in the very early stages of system-building. We are still identifying the backbone agency, or our backbone agency is working on developing the resources and relationships necessary to bring early childhood partners to the table. We have not yet pursued a common agenda. Aligned activities, if they exist, are sporadic. Our work to promote equity is in the beginning stages.

Level 2—System actors have expressed a commitment to build the system and our backbone agency is in the early stages of formalizing that commitment. Agencies may work towards similar purposes, but this is not yet articulated as a formalized agenda. Agency-to-agency aligned activities exist, but they are not widespread enough to have a significant impact on the system. We have begun to make some efforts to promote equity.

Level 3—Our backbone agency is actively supporting our emerging system-building work and there is a growing level of trust across system actors. Our system has a common vision, which may cover some but not all of the early childhood system’s goals. There are many examples of aligned activities and how these are having a positive impact. We are working to embed a commitment to equity within our common vision and there is growing evidence of more diverse representation in system leadership, including work to elevate the voice of parents.

Level 4—Our backbone agency effectively supports system-wide collaboration and is actively promoting the needs of children and families to leaders and key stakeholders. We have a fully articulated early childhood vision and strategy, and we have a high-level of trust that actors within the system are taking action to implement that vision. Partners experience their interactions as effective and aligned. Equity is embedded in our common vision and diverse representation within leadership is widespread, including a strong parent voice.