EC-LINC Research to Action:
Measuring the Impact of Early Childhood Systems

Project Summary

General Project Description

This grant was designed to build on the work of the Outcomes and Metrics Learning Lab which had identified eight of the anticipated nine or 10 common indicators of early childhood wellbeing (Common Indicators) and was in the process of identifying system performance measures by the close of the Learning Lab. As such, the <u>primary objective</u> of this grant was to provide a "proof of concept" of how to construct the measurement and reporting of cross-national, common indicators of early childhood wellbeing and provide an assessment of feasibility, lessons learned and next steps for ongoing work. A <u>secondary objective</u> was to work with participants to identify the additional population-level indicators, as well as the system performance measures, which were started, but not completed during the Learning Lab. <u>Finally</u>, an intended result of the original grant award was to strengthen the capacity of local, state and federal decision-making bodies to advocate for increased investments in early childhood systems at all levels. This is a long-term goal which has not been fully realized through this grant, however, substantial steps have been made to that end.

Partners

	Children and Families Commission of Orange County		Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County
	First 5 Alameda County	First 5 Ventura (Ventura, CA)	
	United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley		Lamoille Valley Building Bright Futures
	Parsons Consulting, Inc.		Center for the Study of Social Policy

Research and Action

The methodology employed by the Parsons Consulting, Inc. team, engaged by the Children and Families Commission of Orange County (Commission) to implement the key elements of the grant, is detailed in the Methodology matrix below. The following assumptions contributed to the development of the research methodology and related activities.

ASSUMPTIONS

1. Participants would provide their state and regional data for each indicator.

2. There would naturally be variance between regions in how data is reported for most indicators, as well as variance in community socio-demographic characteristics, which may impact cross-community interpretation.
3. The RTA grant would take on the completion of certain Learning Lab activities, including identification of system performance measures and additional performance-level indicators, but it would not be able to implement those identified measures and indicators.
4. The experimental, pilot nature of the effort would impact the ability to have a fully vetted dashboard ready for public consumption by the end of the grant period, although substantial progress could be made towards this end through the analysis provided in the final summary report.

METHODOLOGY

Research Goal	Activity
Assess indicator readiness and affirm project scope with project participants	Consultants hosted a kick-off conference call with the RTA participants to assess the level of implementation readiness of each identified indicator and confirm the focus and scope of the RTA grant project.
Assess data availability in participating communities	Consultants reviewed data related to the identified population-level indicators for each community to determine availability, quality, vintage, and associated questions.
Support uniform data collection	Consultants developed detailed, individualized implementation plans for each participating community to guide and structure their data collection and reporting efforts. The implementation plans included consultant research into each community's available data, possible local contacts and sources, precise data definitions, and parameters for data collection that would encourage close alignment with the other communities. Developed Excel-based data collection shell into which communities entered data. The shell included data validations to increase data quality. Conducted regular phone meetings with participating communities to track progress, field questions and address issues as they arose. Technical assistance was also provided ad hoc as needed.
Determine options for data sharing and reporting templates	Consultants analyzed, prepared and presented multiple methods and formats to support ongoing data collection and reporting at the September in-person meeting. Participants came to consensus on short- and long-term reporting tool options.
Define additional population-level indicators	Consultants facilitated a consensus workshop at the September in-person meeting to affirm the existing population-level indicators defined in the Outcomes and Metrics Learning Lab and to identify any additional indicators needed to provide a comprehensive assessment of early childhood well-being.
Define system performance measures	Consultants facilitated a consensus workshop to further define specific measures for these propositions using the value propositions defined in the Learning Lab as the baseline structure.

Compile and present pilot indicators results	Consultants <u>compiled and cleaned data</u> provided by all six participating agencies and added U.S. data, where available. <u>Results were summarized in trend and community comparison charts</u>, including narrative descriptions and detail by income or race/ethnicity, when available. Specific data characteristics and sources were identified to facilitate cross-community interpretation. These results were supplied in the Summary Report.
Assess implementation successes and challenges	Through an <u>online survey and participant review the draft indicator results</u>, researchers collected information from participants on their experience with implementation and their interpretation of the pilot results. Consultants also identified their own experience with implementation. These lessons learned helped inform next steps.
Summarize challenges, solutions and next steps	In the Summary Report, consultants provided <u>key learnings to drive future action</u>, including indicator implementation successes and challenges, possible solutions, and proposed next steps.

Findings

At the end of the RTA grant, participants were asked to assess the data power, communication power and proxy power of each indicator implemented and each system performance measure developed. The final Summary Report details the results of that analysis. Overall, the implementation was successful. While there are challenges to overcome, **the work continues to be considered valuable for its potential to encourage data alignment nationwide, promote dialogue on joint quality improvement, and influence policy and programming** – all of which have the potential to improve outcomes for children and families. To facilitate the long-term success of this effort, the following challenges encountered during this implementation are highlighted below, along with possible solutions, which will inform next steps.

Challenge	Possible Solutions
Lack of data alignment	- Select alternative indicators/system performance measures where alignment exists - Continue local efforts to obtain data that align with the plurality of participating communities - Focus on trends vs. actual rates
Lack of data or poor quality data	- Pursue efforts to develop or improve local data for both indicators and system performance measures - Select alternative indicators/system performance measures where data exist or are of higher quality
Lack of consensus on the strength of a particular indicator/measure	Review troublesome indicators or system performance measures to determine whether the issues identified are surmountable
Need for context to facilitate cross-community interpretation	- Select indicators with context built in - Provide community socioeconomic profile data along with indicators - Construct a measure of relative burden to assess an indicator's variable impact on different groups
Quality control	Refine data collection processes, including investigation into feasibility of a single entity collecting all data

Overwhelming data presentation with six or more geographies participating	• Investigate online user interfaces that enable users to select as many or as few variables as desired • Engage a professional designer to streamline chart presentations
Advocacy goals limited by data and reporting challenges	• Continue data development work • Start a dedicated report or online interface development process which identifies key data points, data visualizations, and explanations of trends. • Engage professional designer and/or communications expert to message indicators/measures effectively
Resources for continuing work	• Pursue investigation into funding availability and in-kind contributions for ongoing work

Products

The following products were created to accomplish the goals of this grant:
- Indicator Review and Decision Points for Population-Level Indicators Implementation, 7/26/2016 (Word and Power Point)
- Population-Level Indicators Data Collection Implementation Plan for [Region Name], 8/4/2016 (Word)
- Population-Level Indicators Data Collection Shell, 8/9/2016 and Addendum, 10/5/2016 (Excel)
- Sample Reporting Options Presentation, 9/21/2016 (Power Point, Excel, Tableau)
- September In-Person Detailed Meeting Notes, 10/21/2016 (Word) and Executive Summary & Next Steps, 10/21/2016 (Word)
- EC-LINC Research to Action: Measuring the Impact of Early Childhood Systems, Summary Report, Draft, 11/14/2016 (Word) and Final, 12/23/2016 (Word)
- Compiled Community Data, 12/23/2016 (Excel)

Implications for other early childhood systems

The progress made through the pilot implementation of cross-community Common Indicators and the identification of system performance measures may engage the interest of other early childhood service providers and advocates on the value of Common Indicators and System Measures for advocacy, quality improvement, and collaboration. Already the Common Indicators work has inspired the California First 5 Association to propose Common Indicators that are largely based on the work of the EC-LINC communities. Other stakeholders may become similarly inspired, particularly as work continues.

Next Steps

To maintain momentum and build on the accomplishments of this grant, Parsons Consulting, Inc. has been engaged to initiate work on some of the identified solutions. This work will be transitioned to CSSP leadership in April of 2017. Tasks to be initiated in January 2017 may include the following:
1. Data development work for one or more problem indicators or measures,
2. Literature review of past or existing efforts and best practices in using data to support joint continuous quality improvement,
3. Continuous quality improvement work using one or more ready indicators, and
4. Research into the feasibility and cost of an online reporting platform for the indicators

Longer-term actions can be informed by the identified challenges and potential solutions above.