



MEASURING THE IMPACT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS: LEARNING LAB REPORT



About Early Childhood-LINC Learning Labs

Early Childhood-LINC is a learning and innovation network for communities – a network of communities that have come together with the Center for the Study of Social Policy (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.

Learning Labs are a process by which leaders from Early Childhood-LINC communities share expertise and local experiences and develop recommendations for action. Over a period of 6-8 months, leaders talk regularly, pool ideas and refine their recommendations about how to improve services, supports and community strategies to assist young children and their families. Their recommendations are then shared with the full Early Childhood-LINC network and the broader early childhood field.

Coordinated, community-based early childhood systems connect many types of services, supports and opportunities for young children and their families – from the prenatal period through third grade. When these 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 child 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.

Leaders of early childhood systems with strong track records in six communities participated in a learning lab in 2015 through Early Childhood-LINC (see right) to explore this common challenge and explore how best to measure their impact and “tell the story” of early childhood systems and their value. Learning lab participants shared their evaluation experiences and challenges, and worked to identify drivers of change in early childhood systems. This report provides a high-level summary of those conversations and highlights themes that emerged from the learning lab, illustrated with examples from member communities.



Hallmarks of Early Childhood Systems: A Starting Point

The learning lab discussed the hallmarks of effective early childhood systems in order to consider how to measure their impact. Initial conversation was wide-ranging and identified four potential hallmarks for further exploration:

- 1 Family experience** - An early childhood system ensures that expectant parents and families can easily navigate the array of services and supports and engage in effective programs that are a good fit with their needs and interests.
- 2 Quality services** - An early childhood system promotes a high quality of services to children and families through professional development and support for service providers.
- 3 Safe, supportive and equitable communities** - An early childhood system enhances community infrastructure to provide the spaces and opportunities that promote strong relationships and healthy development, and sure that vulnerable children and families are receiving services, benefiting from services and achieving outcomes on par with their peers. In addition, an early childhood system works to build and reinforce norms that value families and promote health and safety.
- 4 Well-functioning and sustainable systems** - An early childhood system enhances coordination, sustainability and efficiency among multiple service providers and sectors, with a specific entity supported to convene and coordinate other partners.



BUILD's Framework for Evaluating Systems Initiatives

A framework developed by Julia Coffman for the BUILD Initiative provides a useful tool for applying more precision to evaluations of systems building efforts. [“A Framework for Evaluating Systems Initiatives”](#) identifies five areas that systems might focus on: context, components, connections, infrastructure and scale. The framework includes questions and evaluation methodologies related to each of these areas, and identifies potential impacts and whether they directly connect to changes for children and families.

While the member communities could identify activities in each of these areas, much of the discussion in the learning lab focused on strategies in the area of “Connections” – the integration, linkages and alignments between parts of the system.

Examples from the Current Measurement Landscape

Through the learning lab, participating communities presented current, local approaches to measuring the impact of their system-building efforts and using data for quality improvement. Each presentation provided examples of useful methodology and provided the opportunity to explore particular aspects of system evaluation. Snapshots from these presentations are arranged below as they relate to the areas of focus for early childhood systems described above.

1 Family experience

Three participating communities shared information about studies focused on family engagement and participation in services; a fourth presentation described how system-level data was used to expand a service that filled a particular gap and met families' needs. Kent County First Steps, Palm Beach County Children's Services Council (CSC) and Thrive in 5 Boston each presented studies that addressed questions about who is contacted, who participates in assessment or intake, who enrolls in services and where attrition occurs.

In Kent County, Michigan, a series of studies have assessed parents' access to services. The most recent, the Great Start 2015 Service Access Survey, asked parents and other caregivers to indicate what child and parent services they had needed, looked for, found and/or used in the past year. Among the 535 respondents, 42 percent reported finding services they needed without difficulty, but 58 percent reported some level of difficulty, including 15 percent who reported that it was extremely difficult to find the services they needed. Along with a quantitative analysis of community metrics, the survey findings informed the development of Kent County's 2015-2018 Strategic Plan.¹



used in the past year. Among the 535 respondents, 42 percent reported finding services they needed without difficulty, but 58 percent reported some level of difficulty, including 15 percent who reported that it was extremely difficult to find the services they needed. Along with a quantitative analysis of community metrics, the survey findings informed the development of Kent County's 2015-2018 Strategic Plan.¹

In Palm Beach County, the CSC hired a third party evaluation firm that gathered supplemental data through a phone survey to understand the experience from the mother's perspective and their reasons for disenrolling or not staying with programs. The survey found that the primary reasons for dis-enrollment were time constraints (55 percent of respondents), lack of awareness or understanding of the system and its processes (33 percent), and feeling they did

not need the services (32 percent). The study also found a number of obstacles to participation that varied by race/ethnic background of the mother.² As a result, CSC is introducing lighter-touch programs; investigating how to offer more flexible service options; revising their assessment process to ensure they are partnering with families to identify strengths, needs and preferences for services and resources; and revising materials to better inform families about how they can be connected to services.

An analysis of service utilization in Thrive in 5 in Boston identified a significant number of families who enrolled as members, but did not participate in additional activities beyond that initial engagement with Boston Children Thrive. As a result, evaluators conducted targeted interviews and engaged in community conversations about where folks were being reached and how activities might be modified to be more appealing. While 54 percent of enrolled families did not appear to have participated in BCT activities, interviews with a subset of those families found that they had actually participated, typically in activities offered by partners which were not included in participation data. Some non-participating families reported that they saw activities were offered in a particular language or targeted to a specific group, and interpreted that to mean the activities were not for them.³

Finally, an evaluation of population-wide school readiness data showed that children who participated in First 5 Alameda County's 6-week Summer Pre-K program scored higher on kindergarten readiness assessments than their peers who did not attend any preschool. Combined with an analysis of characteristics of families accessing the program, this data was influential in securing funding to sustain the pilot program in 8 school districts – increasing access to a program that met the needs of a particular subset of families who were not using licensed preschool.⁴

Examples from the Current Measurement Landscape

2 Quality Services

In order to demonstrate and improve the quality of services provided, early childhood system leaders must find ways to use and integrate data about program quality and participant outcomes. Two examples, from Early Childhood-LINC members in Denver and Alameda County, illustrate strategies for assessing and improving the quality of services in the community.

In Colorado, Early Childhood Councils across the state have taken on a data integration effort to better understand the effectiveness of these local councils in achieving common outcomes around access, quality and equity for young children and their families. Denver's



Early Childhood Council's work on an online portal for administration of quality improvement grants became a cornerstone of the statewide effort to integrate data across local councils and across systems, linking quality improvement data with the state's tiered quality rating and improvement system for early care and education programs.

By defining clear results and using them to shape strategies and evaluation efforts, First 5 Alameda intentionally uses evaluation to inform program development, engage partners and stakeholders and make the case for growing effective strategies. They use an integrated data system and supplemental data from partners to look at results across programs and establish comparison groups.

3 Safe, Supportive and Equitable Communities

None of the studies presented were explicitly focused on issues of safe, stable and equitable communities. However, each of the studies explored the degree to which services are reaching children and families based on conditions associated with risk (e.g., income, education, insurance status). In order to assess disparities, the analyses must disaggregate data by race, ethnicity and/or socioeconomic status. More precise documentation of inequities in access to services and supports can inform the design of systems to reach specific populations or communities. With a better understanding of the experience of subgroups, these studies can provide insights to shape the array of activities to address the gaps in outcomes for children and families. Blending performance data with supplemental information about the experiences of children and families is critical for a deeper understanding of the different obstacles facing subgroups who reside in the same community.



Examples from the Current Measurement Landscape

4 Well-Functioning and Sustainable Systems

Many systems evaluations seek to understand how services are connected or layered to achieve common outcomes. This “big picture” approach requires data collection and management systems that can speak to the experience of families and/or neighborhoods across programs, as well as information about service connections and navigation.

Thrive in 5 in Boston convened a cross-strategy Evaluation Advisory Group that focused on family engagement, universal child development screening and quality programs, which led immediately to a richer understanding of their impact and opportunities for evaluation innovations to focus on service integration. The four-year evaluation concluded that BCT accomplished its goal of reaching families more likely to be disconnected from services (low income families, families of color, immigrant families, and non-English speaking families). These families participated at similar rates as all other families. It also found that the parent-partner model encouraged parent participation and community leadership; that there was evidence of social cohesion among families who participated in activities; that parents reported enhanced parenting skills and learning new ways to interact with their children through BCT participation; and that the membership card system was an effective tool for family engagement.⁵

First 5 Ventura County prepares a biannual Accountability Report, which measures family participation against benchmarks to determine service capacity and coordination. This evaluation focuses on the components of the system to understand the constellation of services accessed by children and families. With a data system used by all First 5-funded service providers in Ventura County, evaluators are able to analyze performance compared to benchmarks aligned with desired results. A clear results framework has allowed decision-makers to refine the evaluation design to reduce the evaluation burden and focus on key performance areas. A point-in-time parent survey allows the analysis to make connections between services and impact on family knowledge, behaviors and well-being. The FY2014-15 report found that 79 percent of children 0-3 participated in early learning activities; it also showed increases in parent education participation and in identification of children with developmental needs, with nearly 8,500 screenings completed.⁶



Evaluation Challenges and Questions for Further Exploration

While all of the Early Childhood-LINC member communities are working to refine measures and methodology to document the impact of integrated systems, the evaluation of systems is still in its formative stage as leaders develop the language and practices to tell the complex story of how their work improves outcomes for children, families and communities. Many of the learning lab conversations identified challenges and questions for further exploration.

Challenges

Three key challenges include relevance of available data, limited focus of many current evaluations and the tension between individual vs. population outcomes.

- **Relevance of available data.** Relying on available data is a major challenge when trying to evaluate systems initiatives. Data systems designed for case management, reporting to funders or program evaluation may often be inadequate for systems evaluation. Systems evaluation requires some understanding of how services are layered or sequenced and how transitions are managed. When the data are available, systems evaluations are likely to draw on multiple sources, often from different institutions, such as health providers, early education programs and schools. Some communities have made progress toward developing data sharing agreements and establishing technological links among willing partners.
- **Limited focus of current evaluations.** While the studies presented in the learning Lab focused on the delivery of formal services, this is only one element of systems initiatives. Each of the Early Childhood-LINC member communities is involved in strategies to address policy, to create informal supports for families and to influence community norms. The methodologies for evaluating these sorts of strategies are less well defined and may impact children and families less directly.
- **Program vs. population outcomes.** When results of systems strategies for children and families are assessed, they are most often measured at the program level. One of the functions of an early childhood system can be to aggregate that program-level data from a variety of programs and systems, but even this does not capture population-level outcomes. There is a gap between knowing how programming affects participants, and how the early childhood system affects the community as a whole. More work is needed to understand both what it will take to bring strategies to scale and how evaluation can be conducted in order to see impacts at the population level. (The learning lab did not explore the Early Development Index since it is not in use in any of the participating communities, but did note that it is designed to map service systems and results for young children at the population level.)

Questions for Further Exploration

Learning lab participants raised a number of questions for further exploration, including:

- How can we use our understanding of the impact of early childhood systems to advocate for increased investment in their development and maintenance? What findings would be most compelling for policymakers and community members
- What do funders need to know, and what can they do differently, to support early childhood systems to achieve greater impact and efficiency?
- What are the best strategies for data management, integration and analysis in a system comprised of programs and services with varying units of analysis, reporting requirements and focal outcomes?
- What are the best strategies for using system and program performance measures in conjunction with outcome measures for program participants and the population as a whole? How can performance measures be used for quality improvement processes at the system and program level?
- Is there a set of common metrics and/or measurement tools that can be applied across communities?

Next Steps

Through the conversations of the learning lab and other ongoing work with early childhood system leaders, a set of measures of system performance is beginning to emerge. These are measures that could be collected and tracked to understand the effectiveness of the system and to see progress over time. The work to identify meaningful and measurable indicators of system performance continues in 2016 with an Early Childhood-LINC Learning Lab on Outcomes and Metrics of Early Childhood Systems.

Endnotes

1. The Great Start Service Access Survey report and Early Childhood Indicators report are included in the appendices of the strategic plan: http://media.wix.com/ugd/68151d_be762655938641dcbf1c6804418f934e.pdf.
2. A report from this evaluation is available at: http://cdn.trustedpartner.com/docs/library/ChildrensServicesCouncil2011/Client_Engagement%20and%20Attrition%20Issue_Brief.pdf.
3. An evaluation report is available at: https://www.umb.edu/editor_uploads/images/centers_institutes/center_social_policy/Boston_Children_Thrive_YR4_Evaluation_Brief_3-31-2016.pdf.
4. See report at: http://www.first5alameda.org/files/eval/-Alameda_Co_School_Readiness_Rpt_2013_ExecSumm_10.31.14_FINAL.pdf.
5. See the full report at: https://www.umb.edu/editor_uploads/images/centers_institutes/center_social_policy/Boston_Children_Thrive_YR4_Evaluation_Brief_3-31-2016.pdf.
6. See the full report at: <http://www.first5ventura.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/FY-2013-14-AER-FINAL.pdf>.

Acknowledgments

Vicky Marchand facilitated the EC-LINC Learning Lab on Measuring the Impact of Early Childhood Systems for the Center for the Study of Social Policy and prepared an early draft of this report. Other contributors included Cailin O'Connor, Amy Fine, Steve Cohen and Precious Graham.

This work was generously supported by the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County.

Members of the Early Childhood-LINC Learning Lab on Measuring the Impact of Early Childhood Systems



[First 5 Alameda County](#)



[Thrive in 5 Boston](#)



[Denver's Early Childhood Council](#)



[First Steps Kent County](#)



[Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County](#)



[First 5 Ventura County](#)

1575 EYE STREET, SUITE 500
WASHINGTON, DC 20005
202.371.1565

50 BROADWAY, SUITE 1504
NEW YORK, NY 10004
212.979.2369

1000 NORTH ALAMEDA STREET,
SUITE 102
LOS ANGELES, CA 90012
213.617.0585