



Best Start: Insights from a 15+ Year Investment in Communities to Inform Future Direction



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Ideas into Action

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Background

In November 2025, First 5 LA contracted the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to produce this report on the Best Start Communities place-based initiative. While the review considered the evolution of Best Start since its inception, this report focuses primarily on 2018-2025, capturing the period following the shift to a regional network grantee approach across Los Angeles County.

The report is intentionally limited in scope to the objectives set by First 5 LA. CSSP was engaged to conduct a review of over 400 written documents and 10 key stakeholder interviews¹, however this was not intended to be a comprehensive assessment. Rather it is a summary synthesizing eight years of documentation and perspectives related to the Best Start investment. While a broader review and additional data might offer further insights, this report was designed to address the specific questions and purpose established by First 5 LA for strategic planning and considerations for future investment decisions.

Overview

INTRODUCTION

The First 5 Los Angeles (LA) Commission was formed as a public entity in 1998, after California passed Proposition 10. First 5 LA was charged with developing and overseeing

¹ Interviewees included representatives from the five Regional Neighborhood Grantees, current and former First 5 LA staff, and the First 5 LA Commission.

early childhood focused initiatives and managing investments from the California Proposition 10 tax revenues. First 5 LA's mission is to advocate for children and their families, amplify community voice and partner for collective impact so that every child in Los Angeles County reaches their full developmental potential throughout the critical years of prenatal to age 5. In 2010, First 5 LA launched Best Start, its signature long-term, place-based initiative aimed at partnering with high-need communities to strengthen local systems and improve conditions for children from prenatal to five and their families.

By highlighting lessons learned, successes, and challenges from First 5 LA's Best Start initiative implementation from 2018-2025, these findings are intended to support First 5 LA's ongoing decision-making and strategic planning as it advances its 2024-2029 Strategic Plan, offering perspectives and additional considerations to help strengthen future investments in communities, children, and families across Los Angeles County.

WHY A PLACED-BASED APPROACH MATTERS

Place-based community change efforts in the United States over the past 30 years have focused on transforming neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and inequitable outcomes through comprehensive, long-term, and community-driven strategies. Generally, these initiatives integrate education, health, housing, and social services, grounded in the belief that children thrive when their families and broader environments are stable, supportive, and responsive.ⁱ

Best Start learned from and alongside other well-known local, national and statewide efforts including the Harlem Children's Zone, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections Initiative, the California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities, and the Obama Administration's Revitalizing Communities initiatives, which included the Promise Neighborhoods, Choice Neighborhoods and Building Neighborhood Capacity grant programs. Major lessons from these and other place-based efforts include the importance of supporting communities as needs and priorities evolve over time, continuously connecting to a broad range of stakeholders and partners, addressing racial inequity, and reorienting local institutions to be responsive to community needs.^{ii iii iv} A recent report noted that among six emergent philanthropic funded place-based models, including Building Healthy Communities, the Clinton Health Matters Initiative, Community Partnerships for Health Equity, and Rural Community Building, there was a shared set of outcomes that included activating new work in communities that would not have happened without the initiative, a clear systems change focus and strategies, shifts in community context, service availability and partnerships, and capacity building among those who participated.^v Best Start's evolution and impact is clearly aligned with what is emerging more broadly in the field and can be seen as another example of how place-based efforts can have a deep and lasting impact in communities.

BEST START'S ORIGIN, EVOLUTION AND UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION TO PLACE-BASED APPROACHES

Origin and Evolution

From its launch in 2010, the Best Start initiative targeted 14 geographic areas in LA County, home to 19% (roughly 163,000) of the county's young child population. These areas were selected based on data related to child vulnerability, poverty, and other indicators of need.^{vi} Best Start focused on four priority outcomes: **1. Children are born healthy; 2. Children maintain a healthy weight; 3. Children are safe from abuse and neglect; and 4. Children are ready for kindergarten.**^{vii} To achieve these outcomes, First 5 LA initially adopted a two-pronged strategy: strengthening families directly through support services while simultaneously building the capacity of communities and strengthening local systems to create the conditions necessary for young children to thrive.

- **Family Strengthening** - Ensures families can access high-quality supports – a coordinated set of direct services in select LA County communities beginning in pregnancy and continuing through age five, aimed at strengthening families and supporting optimal child development.^{viii}
- **Capacity Building** - A collaborative, community-driven approach that connects and strengthens local assets—among families, informal networks, and formal organizations—and leverages them toward shared goals. Its purpose is to foster stronger and new relationships that enable communities to take collective action on behalf of children prenatal to five and their families. First 5 LA's model requires leaders across multiple sectors within a geographic area to collaborate with residents to design and implement strategies that improve community conditions.^{ix}

By 2014, as First 5 LA's first strategic plan was concluding, the organization engaged in a deep learning process to maximize impact amid demographic shifts and declining Prop 10 revenues. In that learning process with partners, they shared:

- **Investments were spread too thinly** to produce sustained impact;
- **Systems change activities**, such as public education, technical assistance, capacity building, and innovation grants, were **highly diverse, insufficiently coordinated, and lacked a unified, outcome-oriented framework**;
- **There was limited clarity**, internally and externally, about First 5 LA's goals and its specific role in driving improvements for children from prenatal to age five; and
- Because revenues were declining, **First 5 LA needed to shift from funding direct services to prioritizing systems-level change** to achieve long-term impact.^x

Building on these insights, First 5 LA moved toward a new phase in Best Start's evolution, marked by significant shifts in the initiative's design and in First 5 LA's approach, leading to the **regional grantee model**.^{xi} In 2018, the First 5 LA Board of Commissioners approved five

Regional Network Grantees (RNGs), marking a move toward a regional model for community engagement and systems change.

Each RNG convenes partners to collaborate, learn, and take collective action, oversees the progress of local networks, and coordinates with contracted partners to advance broader policy and systems change outcomes.^{xii xiii xiv} This model recognized and built on the assets already present in communities, including strong relationships and deep local knowledge, while creating new opportunities for organizational network building, cross-community learning, and collective advocacy.

Building on the transition to a regional approach and the expanded focus on systems change, First 5 LA's work continued to evolve toward addressing the deeper, systemic factors influencing child and family well-being, recognizing that improving outcomes for children and families requires more than enhancing individual service systems. It demands addressing systemic root causes and transforming the underlying conditions—policies, practices, relationships, and mindsets—that shape community life. Driven by the changing fiscal landscape and ongoing learning and feedback from communities, RNG's became more focused on developing regional strategies to address families' basic needs, such as housing, food, and transportation, as well as foundational supports to child and family well-being. This change is also driven by what First 5 LA saw in the data that areas of highest needs are shifting across the region.

Consequently, around 2020, equity was embraced as a core organizational value and formally adopted by the Commissioners as one of the agency's investment guidelines. Additionally, First 5 LA's current strategic plan (2024–2029) established a primary goal focused on ensuring that children prenatal to age five and their families have their basic needs met, along with objectives aimed at reducing poverty, advancing equity by reducing racial, economic and geographic disparities, and addressing housing insecurity.^{xv}

Unique Contribution to Place Based Approaches

Best Start's influence spans efforts to improve policies and practices, deepen cross-sector collaboration to strengthen public systems, and partner with communities to improve the environments where young children live, learn, and play.^{xvi} Additionally, Best Start's substantial investment, over fifteen years, is unique in that they not only have continued to focus on community-based efforts, they have evolved their approach in response to what they have learned in partnership with communities, all while navigating changing demographic conditions, and declining revenue. Concrete examples of its unique contributions include:

Intentional Community Capacity Building as Infrastructure: The focus on community capacity building was intentionally designed to fill a gap in other place-based efforts that tended to focus more on programmatic and population level outcomes from the start, rather than recognizing that communities often need more time and support to build the infrastructure to do work differently. That intentionality on building community capacity at

the same time that efforts were being made to improve service coordination, built trust with residents and local organizations, and the deep partnership from a funder like First 5 LA was a thoughtful approach that centered community need and priorities at the outset.

Learning While Doing—Embedding Continuous Improvement: Another important aspect of this was the investment into learning while doing that has been a key part of Best Start throughout its evolution. The documentation of lessons learned, investments in a community of practice and development of a learning agenda allowed for transparency in real time of what was working and what could be improved, allowing First 5 LA to adjust the strategy and their support as the work evolved. Embedded learning is a rare but critical feature that sets Best Start apart, offering a model of how place-based initiatives can remain responsive in complex environments.

Managing the Complex Transition from Local to Regional Scale: Finally, the move from community-based work to a more regional approach is not without challenges and many place-based efforts have not survived this transition. Best Start has documented these challenges, and the lessons learned from these provide invaluable insights for the field. The work to improve population level-outcomes is critical for any community, yet the cross-sector, systems change, advocacy and mobilization that it requires can only move at the speed of trust and partnership, something that Best Start has deeply invested in over the years. That investment is a critical lesson for other initiatives contemplating similar transitions and underscores the importance of patience, transparency, and relationship building for sustainable impact.

These learnings offer a roadmap for place-based and systems change efforts nationally. Best Start's approach demonstrates that lasting change depends on more than just programmatic success or policy shifts alone. It requires cultivating equitable community ecosystems where residents share power and shape the very systems that affect their lives. As First 5 LA moves forward, centering these principles will continue to advance equity and improved outcomes for children and families in LA County and as a model for the broader field.

Key Findings and Reflections

First 5 LA's move to fund local RNG's to support the five regions enabled cross-community learning, resource mobilization, and unified advocacy agendas, positioning Best Start to address inequity at scale. This transition reflects a recognition that systemic change requires not only strong local leadership but also regional alignment to influence policy, institutional practices, and funding priorities countywide. The regional approach delivered measurable progress and surfaced critical insights for future work. However, declining revenues will necessitate shifts in how First 5 LA's investment into Best Start evolves and is built upon to continue to drive towards systems change and contribute to improvements in population level outcomes for LA County's youngest children. The following findings highlight both the progress made and the ongoing challenges, illustrating the initiative's resilience and adaptability as it continued to evolve.

- **Place-Based Focus on Equity Works:** Regions embedded equity principles into governance, piloting participatory grantmaking, and advocacy agendas—moving from representation to structural reforms such as housing justice, food sovereignty, and maternal health equity.
- **Supporting Leadership and Capacity Building:** Regions also addressed development for the early care and education workforce through funding the training, recruitment, and retention of childcare workers and building policy agendas to support the workforce.
- **Crisis Responsiveness with a Systemic Lens Matters:** During COVID-19, ongoing targeting of immigrant communities, and the aftermath from intense fires ravaging Los Angeles communities, regions pivoted rapidly to provide food, PPE, and emergency relief while maintaining momentum on long-term systems change goals—demonstrating resilience and adaptability. This was possible with the support and flexibility of First 5 LA as a funder to support RNGs in meeting the needs of the community over strictly adhering to measurables within existing contracts.
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration Advances Systems Change:** Partnerships bridged community-led initiatives with institutional actors, influencing practices in healthcare, housing, education, and local government, and modeling authentic inclusion strategies to address racial and cultural divides. This requires transparent communication and a commitment to partnerships with a shared vision towards improving outcomes for young children.

SUCCESSSES

The successes highlighted here are just a sample of the achievements and cumulative results produced by Best Start during its 15+ years of investment and support from First 5 LA.

Strong Local and Regional Partnerships Can Advance Equity

First 5 LA's investments in RNG's across five regions enabled targeted efforts to develop processes to address racial, economic, and regional inequities while building leadership capacity and strengthening partnerships across sectors and communities. These investments empowered communities to identify their unique demographic needs and support initiatives that addressed both shared challenges and distinct concerns within each region. Across the regions, this commitment translated into identifying diverse leaders, the development of authentic community leadership and decision-making, and ensuring that systems change remained rooted in communities' direct expressed needs.

Across the five regions, Best Start demonstrated a commitment to racial equity by recruiting diverse local leaders from the community and by supporting them through addressing cultural barriers and power imbalances. Best Start sites recognized that to properly represent community interests in the different regions, explicit attention needed to be given to ensuring that a diversity of families were at the table and could effectively participate in decision-making, grantmaking, and advocacy efforts.

Critically, Best Start’s work in the five regions did not merely engage parents and residents as consultants, but also as decision-makers. In adopting governance philosophies that further codified transparent communication, equal and equitable voice, trauma-informed approaches, cultural responsiveness, and participatory planning processes the Best Start regions framed equity as something they practiced everyday not just an intended value.^{xvii} A key example of how RNG’s operationalized shared decision-making was through their approach to engaging community members in deciding the communities’ priorities.

Across regions, efforts to develop diverse leadership and address systemic barriers were paired with the recognition that meeting families’ basic needs is critical. Direct service providers are essential contributors to the broader ecosystem of organizations working toward systems change at both regional and county levels.^{xviii} Their work not only meets immediate needs but also creates the stability necessary for families to participate meaningfully in longer-term systems change efforts. This understanding is reflected in First 5 LA’s 2024–2029 strategic plan, which established a primary goal focused on ensuring that children prenatal to age five and their families have their basic needs met, along with objectives aimed at reducing poverty and addressing housing insecurity.^{xix} The strategic plan also reflects the need for, and a commitment to, addressing racial, economic, and regional disparities.

Investing in Regional Capacity and Connections Can Move Towards Systemic Change

First 5 LA’s investments in RNG’s across five regions also created new opportunities to connect community priorities with systems leaders who can advance change, build organizational networks, and pair direct service with collective advocacy. This fostered collaboration, cross-community learning, and resource sharing critical to sustaining long-term change.

Regions opened new learning and networking spaces that had not previously existed, offering partners valuable opportunities for collaboration and shared growth. These spaces allowed partners to exchange critical information, learn from one another, and better understand how to deploy their resources in ways that strengthened their own work and the regional network as a whole.

A key element of this approach was the development of a core community leadership body, which allowed community residents to stay central to the initiative instead of as a peripheral or token group. Furthermore, the various approaches RNGs took to share decision-making—participatory budgeting, developing the community change agendas, pursuing the agendas in regional meetings with external stakeholders—all aimed to ensure that Best Start’s community members were not just informers or advisors, but partners with skills that will persist separately from First 5 LA and continue to have a lasting ripple effect in local early childhood efforts. Best Start’s approach to leadership development of parents and other

community members did not just benefit the initiative itself; it also built the capacity of community members to share their knowledge throughout their respective regions.

Adopting a regional network structure fostered cross-community learning and resource mobilization that moved community priorities forward and supported the health of organizations in the regions. By aligning local partnerships under a shared philosophy, Best Start streamlined resources and coordination while honoring local context—a critical insight for scaling place-based work without diluting community ownership.^{xx}

Beyond progressing the Best Start community agendas, the regional structure also strengthened partner organizations in the regions through critical professional development and technical assistance, which was vital for smaller organizations with fewer resources. This significantly helped smaller community organizations remain stable and participate effectively, reducing competitive barriers and ensuring those closest to the community could lead.^{xxi}

CHALLENGES

Many of the challenges that surfaced during the transition from 14 communities to the RNG model remain relevant and should be considered when shaping the next phase of work. The challenges uncovered during the Best Start initiative highlight a fundamental truth: advancing equity through systems change demands far more than programmatic tweaks—it requires transforming the deep, interconnected conditions that sustain inequities.

Need for Ongoing Capacity Building With Declining Revenue

Sustainable transformation requires intentional, simultaneous shifts focused not just on the RNGs and Best Start communities, but also on the public systems and funded entities. These shifts must occur internally (e.g., how RNGs and public systems operate as distinct entities) and externally (e.g., how RNGs and public systems operate together as collaborators). It also requires attentiveness to power dynamics involved when larger institutional actors pursue change in community conditions and outcomes. In many instances, the intention is there to do equitable work, but less attention is paid to the power dynamics at play, particularly with philanthropic, local government and systems leaders leading collective impact work, and only marginally allowing for community residents to be at decision-making tables. Participants in the RNG Community of Practice noted how challenging it can be to maintain a sense of ownership as the work expands to an even larger regional scale. They elevated concerns about power dynamics—specifically, how to preserve the autonomy communities have built, and how to ensure parent and family voice remains centered when the shift towards population-level outcomes and systems change can feel distant from immediate neighborhood priorities.

Addressing Basic Needs While Advancing Systems Change

Shifting population level outcomes for families and children requires addressing multiple systemic factors, something place-based initiatives, even working across sectors, find

challenging to do. First 5 LA's Best Start Learning Agenda, an effort focused on documenting and communicating the initiative-level results emerging from the Best Start effort, revealed the challenge of pivoting to systems change through entities that did not all have prior experience with such an approach. Early findings of the Learning Agenda revealed a recurring theme across all regions: partners described a persistent tension between meeting immediate community needs, such as housing, food security, childcare access, and transportation, and advancing long-term systems change work.^{xxii} While every region reported engaging in systems change activities, some RNGs with longstanding direct-service backgrounds acknowledged that shifting toward systems change work was challenging.^{xxiii}

Although Best Start was designed to reduce silos, regions continued to experience difficulty moving fully into advocacy and systems change work, especially implementing practice-level changes aimed at strengthening social conditions, when local partners themselves felt unable to advance systems change or felt fragmented and disconnected. Challenges to systems work also applied to the funded entities and public systems, with the Best Start communities having to contend with developing relationships with systems leaders and pushing against mental models in which community members are passive residents instead of leaders and decision-makers themselves.

Best Start partners were ultimately able to work intentionally to blend these approaches, addressing basic needs through direct services while simultaneously using advocacy and political education to influence policy and systems change over time.^{xxiv} However, these initial struggles highlight the importance of coordination in a place-based initiative focused on systems change to ensure that all partners are able to do the work that entails, and why the capacity-building efforts Best Start provided were so critical. The inclusion of systems change work would not be possible without dedicated resources and time spent working with partners to build the skills needed for advocacy.

Considerations

As First 5 LA looks ahead to achieve the goals outlined in its 2024-2029 strategic plan, it is clear that the Best Start model will need to continue to evolve. First 5 LA's declining revenues present a salient constraint that requires judicious identification of what aspects of this Best Start work can best inform future efforts. The next phase and any future investments made by First 5 LA should build on the trust, hard work, and capacity cultivated within local communities and RNGs. These relationships are the foundation of authentic engagement and durable systems change. At the same time, it is important to consider how best to support existing RNGs in the near term, focusing on sustaining their current work and preserving the trusting relationships they have built with communities, while also planning for a longer term- strategy that does not require ongoing or indefinite organizational support. This is important to preserve the infrastructure of community leadership and advocacy as well as ensure equity remains at the heart of this work. By continuing to invest in regional

communities and honoring the lessons learned, First 5 LA can contribute to a more just, inclusive, and resilient LA County.

Invest in Capacity and Network Support to Advance Systems Change

First 5 LA has a legacy of investing directly in communities for the past fifteen years through Best Start. As they continue to develop the next funding approach, identifying high need areas within LA County and continuing to support local communities, it will have to make tough decisions based on funding constraints and declining revenue. Whatever direction First 5 LA goes next must be clearly communicated, so that current grantees understand the decisions and what factors were considered, including how lessons learned from the current investments have informed future efforts. This approach helps to preserve trust with communities by reinforcing local and regional partners' agency in the work.

First 5 LA has invested much in community capacity and network building, resulting in demonstrated trust built with organizations and communities in each of the RNG areas. Yet challenges with trust and communication remain. The findings from the RNG community of practice demonstrate that RNG's still struggle to feel deeply connected with each other and to maximize their efforts to do systems change and advocacy work, yet they agree it is critical to continue to work together to ensure broader impact for children and families across LA County. As First 5 LA considers how to approach future investments in communities, these considerations will be important. The successes of the current relationship infrastructure should be considered in any future design – whether that be a community of practice, the RNG cross-regional alignment group, or others that foster a sense of community, ensure transparency of decision-making, and facilitate information sharing. This not only helps to retain and build trust, but it can also allow grantees to better align their efforts to address shared priorities, collaborate across regions, and work together on approaches to address systemic level issues, like housing, poverty alleviation, and culturally affirming services.

Establish Clear Metrics for Success

As First 5 LA moves forward with the 2024–2029 Strategic Plan having a strong understanding of how future investments are expected to contribute to population level outcomes will be important for credibility and sustainability. Using frameworks like the Results-Based Accountability framework, First 5 LA can work with grantees to develop measures of progress that show the difference these investments are making, and how they are contributing to improved child well-being outcomes across LA County, and in particular high-need regions. This will be important for documenting the success of any systems change and advocacy related efforts, demonstrating the ability to influence change at scale across LA County. Strategies and evaluation efforts should be considered alongside neighborhood and demographic trends in Los Angeles County, including a sustained decline in the child population. Between 2018 and 2025, the number of children ages 0–17 declined from 2.64 million to 1.89 million (a 28.5% reduction), and the population of children ages 0–5 decreased from 731,363 to 524,600 (a 28.3% reduction).^{xxv xxvi}

Focus on Systems Change

Achieving population level change in a county the size of Los Angeles is difficult, yet Best Start has demonstrated that a regional approach can result in clear systems change efforts, based on years of relationship building, trust, and partnership. While there may not be a “one size fits all” approach to this work, or one type of organization that can lead it, a closer look at the key components of RNG’s successes could offer insights for future funding approaches. One organization may be best positioned to support and lift up the voices of community members, while another might be better positioned to convene cross-sector partners and sway local government through policy advocacy. As First 5 LA looks ahead, preserving these core strengths will be essential.

No one organization can carry the weight for systemic change alone. That is where First 5 LA’s role as a funder and convener becomes vital, bringing the range of partners together that can work across regions to collaborate on a greater scale. This will be critically important as they seek to improve population level outcomes, and working across sectors, with partners involved in the design of a new approach, will be key to ensuring a focus on identifying the systemic drivers of inequities are being addressed.

As noted earlier, a key lesson learned is balancing immediate community needs, such as housing, food security, childcare access, and transportation, with the long game of systems change. Encouragingly, with support from First 5 LA, Best Start partners are working intentionally to blend these approaches, addressing basic needs through direct services while simultaneously using advocacy and political education to influence policy and systems change over time.

Moving forward, continuing to support regional approaches that can address both urgent needs and systemic transformation will be important for First 5 LA’s future funding decisions.

Closing Summary

This report is intended to inform First 5 LA’s decision-making as it charts its path ahead ensuring the at future efforts respond to evolving challenges and build on the successes and lessons of Best Start to create a more equitable and resilient Los Angeles County for children and families. First 5 LA has an incredible opportunity to build on the strong foundation of community investment and systems change through its work with Best Start. This report distills valuable lessons from their fifteen-year investment, highlighting the power of regional collaboration, authentic community leadership, and sustained partnerships in advancing equity and improving outcomes for young children and families. These findings underscore the importance of preserving and strengthening the trust, relationships, and leadership capacity that have been cultivated across communities and regions. These elements are essential as First 5 LA considers how to align its future investments with goals outlined in its 2024-2029 Strategic Plan. At the same time, the fiscal reality of declining revenue, and the data that shows that disparities in outcomes for young children across LA County continues to persist. First 5 LA should consider what is feasible, and what elements of the existing

model should continue. It is clear that a continued focus on equity, capacity building, and supporting organizations to address basic needs while tackling the systemic drivers of inequity remain critical aspects of this approach. Thinking about what organizations will need to succeed in an ever-shifting political environment will also be important. Moving forward, balancing immediate community needs with long-term systems transformation will be critical. Transparent communication, shared decision-making, and clear roles will help maintain the momentum and trust necessary for meaningful change.

ENDNOTES

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- ^{xii} Rooted in Community: Cultivating and Ecosystem of Care for Young Children and Families, 2025
- ^{xiii} Regional Support Network Request for Proposals Memo to First 5 LA Executive Director, 2017
- ^{xiv} Best Start Learnings Memo to Board, 2021
- ^{xv} 2024-2029 First 5 LA Strategic Plan
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- ^{xvii} Compton/East Compton Community Identified Project Funds, Proposed Funding Priorities, 2018; Region 2 Regional and Local Network Partner Organizations, 2021; Findings from Interviews with Best Start Region 2, 2025
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- ^{xxvi} California Department of Finance, 2022 Projections