Best Practices in Place-Based Initiatives: Implications for Implementation and Evaluation of Best Start

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Introduction

During the last several years, place-based community change[1] initiatives have experienced renewed attention across the country with considerable funding and support from both public and private funders. Despite the growing number of such efforts, their implementation has not been systematically evaluated and literature on place-based process evaluations is very limited. Nonetheless, there is a growing body of place-based literature that highlights best practices, considerations, and lessons learned. These learnings and best practices provide a useful framework for evaluating the implementation of the First 5 LA Best Start initiative.

Purpose & Approach

The purpose of this literature review is to inform the development of a framework for the implementation evaluation of Best Start based on best practices and learnings from the field. Four developmental milestones common to most placed-based initiatives were identified through the literature review: (1) engaging the community, (2) developing a governance structure, (3) building community capacity for implementation, and (4) learning while doing. These components have been well documented by funders and evaluators of other place-based initiatives and thus provide a set of best practices and useful learnings to guide the implementation of Best Start. Additionally, many of these are key components of Best Start [2] providing a relevant framework and benchmarks for assessing the implementation of the initiative. Based on our review of the existing implementation literature and our knowledge of First 5 LA's organizational goals, we added two additional topics: (5) managing a place-based initiative and (6) defining an effective role for the funder.

Together these six topics comprise the section of the review titled *Findings from the Place-Based Initiative Implementation Literature*. Each section includes a summary overview of the issue (including current thinking and challenges) and a review of key findings with special attention placed on debates or inconsistencies across initiatives. Each section concludes with several insights for funders. In an effort to focus the literature review, we drew selectively from the literature with particular attention to implementation issues that **funders like First 5 LA** can expect to address in one way or another. The primary audience for this review is funders (as opposed to community stakeholders) although there is of course useful information for both parties. We chose to draw upon published references (including technical implementation reports, evaluation reports and journal articles) so that readers can follow up for more depth.

The next section of this report, *Implications for Process Evaluation*, highlights best practice findings as *potential* benchmarks during initiative development. It offers process evaluation questions for each of the six key implementation topics laid out above. This is intended to frame and guide thinking about the ongoing implementation evaluation so that First 5 LA can effectively use evaluation data to identify areas for course correction and improvement as well as promising strategies and practices across the 14 Best Start communities.

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[1] Previously referred to as comprehensive community change initiatives

[2] These have been identified as milestones and/or sequencing activities at various times throughout 2011 Best Start implementation. See original Best Start Timeline in Appendix A.

Findings from the Place-Based Initiative Implementation Literature

Engaging the Community

Overview

Effective community engagement can create a powerful asset for advancing community change goals. Engaging community residents and other stakeholders in identifying and prioritizing needed changes and devising and implementing strategies to achieve these changes has long been a cornerstone of place-based work. Local "ownership" is both consistent with the values of self-determination and respect and necessary for sustaining results that outlast the funder's support.

However, defining the terms of local ownership and fostering a process that is genuinely rooted in the needs, assets and goals of residents and stakeholders present significant challenges for funders who aim to invest resources and implement strategies that enable them to carry out their mission and produce intended outcomes. Lack of strategic clarity about the purpose and role of community engagement has been a critical limiting factor in some initiatives.

Typical Community Engagement Strategies[3]

The literature identifies a wide range of strategies that place-based initiatives use to engage the community. These strategies can be grouped into three broad categories, although many initiatives draw from all three to create their own hybrid approaches:

1. ***Community outreach and organizing.*** Engaging residents through outreach and organizing can serve multiple functions: getting to know the community, developing relationships, publicizing and promoting an initiative, identifying shared interests, building social capital and networks, and so forth. Successful strategies for engagement range from door-knocking, focus groups, monthly neighborhood dinners, and community meetings to deep tenant and block organizing, neighbor circles, or network organizing (see, for example, Ahsan, 2008; Boston Rising, 2011; Traynor, 2002). Some initiatives find providing services or making service referrals a useful engagement tool (Brown, Branch, and Lee, 1998; Harlem Children's Zone 2010), while others conduct outreach into community schools and use various social media tools to recruit parents (Lester, 2010).

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[3] Our primary focus here is on resident engagement, although other stakeholders—local government, nonprofits, business, other partners—clearly need to be engaged depending on an initiative's goals and strategies.

2. ***Structured community planning.*** A community planning process provides opportunities for residents and stakeholders to work together to produce a plan of action that reflects a consensus view of participants' vision and goals. A structured Quality of Life planning process, currently used by LISC and others undertaking place-based community development efforts, tends to generate a broad development agenda (Greenberg et al., 2010; Miller and Burns, 2006), whereas other initiatives undertake more sharply focused community planning to identify cross-program strategies to achieve a specific set of key outcomes such as increasing high school graduation rates or improving child health. Ideally community planning provides a means for diverse community stakeholders to express their particular ideas and perspectives to one another, debate their priorities, and build a consensus on a plan that can guide and legitimize, both inside and outside the community, subsequent implementation (Cornerstone, 2002). It is also a way to increase community access to information and data that residents learn to use to make their case for outside investment (Kubisch et al., 1997).

3. **Early action investment**s. Early place-based initiatives sometimes got "stuck" or lost momentum in extended planning (Miller and Burns, 2006). More recent efforts have emphasized the need for early action that reinforces initial engagement and generates some immediate, tangible results. For example, LISC's Building Sustainable Communities initiative encourages sites to support early action projects that produce visible improvements in community appearance and amenities that build community pride, such as community-wide arts/cultural events or a new youth sports league (Walker, Watson and Winston, 2010). Particularly successful have been small grants programs in which resident-led neighborhood committees make small grants (usually ranging from $500-$5,000) to nonprofits and unaffiliated residents for community improvement projects they propose (Saasta and Senty, 2009). Besides visible results, early action investments serve to nurture local initiative and leadership.

Community Engagement for What?

Ultimately the choices a funder makes about how to enter and engage a community should be clearly tied to how the initiative frames the community engagement process in light of its goals and assumptions about how these goals will be accomplished (David, 2008). *Voices from the Field III* (2010) underscores the message that broad community engagement is not necessary or even desirable in every initiative or at every stage of an initiative. An initiative that wants community input or feedback on a plan needs a very different engagement strategy than one that aims to build a permanent group of neighborhood leaders championing its goals. One initiative veteran concludes that it is possible to spend so much time try to engage communities that the goal of achieving better outcomes on specific indicators falls off the table (Fiester, 2011). On the other hand, engaging stakeholders has many obvious benefits (Bourns, 2010). The key point is to align the scope, scale, and approach to community engagement with the initiative's purpose and change strategies.

Selected Insights for Funders about Community Engagement

Among the many lessons learned and "tips" that emerge from the literature on community engagement are several especially relevant for funders:

+ ***Allow time to build a deep understanding of the neighborhood that can shape the pace and nature of engagement.*** Efforts to develop relationships between neighborhoods and external partners take time and care. Each side must learn about the other's aspirations, resources, limitations, and realities (Brown et al., 2001). This means reviewing the community's social and demographic data, getting to know its history and culture, its social and political dynamics, and its leadership and institutional strengths. Different engagement strategies are usually needed to reach different segments of the community (Ahsan, 2008). Beware of relying on community gatekeepers whose voices and opinions are most easily heard by outsiders (Kubisch et al., 2010). Special efforts may be needed to engage the views and participation of less visible, less connected residents and to make sure that agency leaders do not speak for residents (Fiester, 2011).

+ ***Specify clearly what is meant by terms like "community ownership" and "resident driven."*** Defining these terms operationally early in an initiative can go a long way to reducing misunderstanding and conflict as the initiative unfolds. In one initiative, "resident-led" meant that residents were offered paid staff positions and stipends to take on service provider roles (Ahsan, 2008), whereas another initiative refers to community "ownership," one dimension of which is financial (Jacobs Center, 2010). Newer work frames the funder-community relationship in co-investment terms, and residents as co-investors rather than beneficiaries, to counter what is perceived as a "caretaker culture that dominates most agencies" (Traynor, 2002; Boston Rising, 2011). Clarity matters here: how a funder engages and treats residents in the initial stages of an initiative will set the tone for the entire enterprise (David, 2008).

+ ***Respectfully engage issues of race, class and culture***. The fact that poverty, race, and place are tenaciously linked through various structural and institutional forces should inform funders aiming to engage with neighborhoods of disadvantage. For newly established relationships between external funders and communities to mature, there must be ways to address these core issues. Often they are framed in the language of mutual respect (Brown et al., 2001). Respect is about being able to listen and learn, and convey a commitment to honest exchange. It is about the humility with which an outsider approaches a community with a genuine desire to learn. It is also about honoring and supporting residents' competence as leaders (Satterwhite and Teng, 2007).

Developing a Governance Structure

Overview

Place-based efforts often create governance or community partnership groups designed to bring together diverse segments of the community who are charged with guiding the work.

Although their charge may vary considerably in terms responsibility and authority, the broad notion is that such groups enable stakeholders to express their particular interests and concerns to each other and develop a shared agenda that is grounded in resident needs and priorities and well positioned by virtue of its diverse membership to support ongoing collaboration across sectors. While creating a new group from scratch is unlikely to be an efficient platform for program implementation, funders taking this approach often view their investment as creating new long-term community capacity above and beyond the delivery of specific programs or revitalization strategies.

The experience with collaborative governance in place-based initiatives is mixed. While the need for cross-sector collaboration to address complex problems is universally acknowledged, and a growing knowledge base about collaborative best practice is available, the place-based initiatives that have been able to apply this knowledge successfully are more limited. Sometimes this is because the governance group is asked to take on too much too soon without sufficient support. In other cases, collaborating partners have not been able to negotiate institutional arrangements that reinforce their own perceived interests while creating synergies among them. Still, some collaborative groups manage to sustain their work following the end of the place-based initiative that launched them.

Creating a Governance Group

The way in which the different functions of governance—participation, planning, decision-making, oversight, program implementation—are carried out in place-based initiatives varies considerably. One familiar debate for funders has involved the pros and cons of working through an existing strong lead agency in a community or creating a new governance mechanism such as a collaborative board (Kubisch et al., 1997). On one side are those who believe that a collaborative is an effective and democratic way to organize a place-based program. On the other are people who see such an approach as "the equivalent of setting sail in difficult waters with neither captain nor compass" (Millier and Burns, 2006).

Current place-based initiatives continue to draw upon both approaches as well as various hybrids: for example, the Building Sustainable Communities initiative (Walker et al., 2010) works through established lead agencies (largely community development corporations), whereas Skillman's Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools initiative has created resident community partnerships in each of its target neighborhoods (Fiester, 2011).[4] The **key is to ensure that form and function are well matched** and accompanied by appropriate supports and accountabilities (Kubisch et al., 1997).

Starting a new collaborative governance group or community partnership is hard, time-consuming work that involves:

1. **Getting the right people at the table.** The "right" people depends, of course, on what the group aims to accomplish. But to establish legitimacy and local ownership, community collaboratives typically try to assemble a diverse and representative

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[4] Another option for a place-based funder, though not the focus here, is to operate the initiative itself, often from within the community. Two current examples of this approach include the Steans Family Foundation in North Lawndale (Sojourner et al., 2004) and the Jacobs Family Foundation in the Village at Market Creek (Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation, 2010).

membership that includes those directly affected by the work as well other community stakeholders and people with ties to resources and decision-makers outside the community (Chaskin, 2000). Sometimes when the initiative begins with an intensive period of organizing and community meetings (as in Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools), residents and stakeholders hold elections for governance group membership. Other times, the funder recruits a core group and then charges that group with expanding itself to fill in gaps in membership (McNeely et al., 1999).

2. **Developing structures and processes to get the work done.** Decisions about collaborative leadership, committee structure, operating procedures and practices, financial management and so forth are typically a function of both the funder's guidelines and the collaborative's preferred practices within these guidelines (Kubisch et al., 1997). Effective structures and processes include: a) clearly defined and frequently articulated roles and responsibilities; b) transparent distribution of resources; c) a set of defined expectations that holds each member accountable to one another and the group's goals; and d) open avenues of communication across all levels of the enterprise (Kellogg, 2008).

3. **Building capacity.** The task of building strong collaborative teams is typically carried out by various technical assistance providers, coaches, and/or structured workshops, facilitated retreats, charrettes and so forth. These are discussed in the section below entitled, Building Capacity for Implementation.

Engaging low-income residents in governance. Evaluations of two multi-site place-based initiatives found that engaging residents in a time-limited planning process was less challenging than in ongoing governance when the hard work of implementation has begun and struggles over power and control tend to emerge (Walker et al., 1999). These evaluators report that following planning, residents were more likely to experience burnout, along with uncertainty over roles and increasing distrust of their institutional partners as decisions about allocating funds and setting policy came to the fore.

Many initiatives find they need to devise structures and practices to make sure residents' voice and influence are not overshadowed by service providers and business and church leaders. One funder, for example, met separately with agency representatives prior to the launch of the first community meeting and said "*we need you to participate but your voice can't be the loudest voice. . . We all have to learn how to trust the community, how to hand off the mike to the community*" (Brown, 2011).

For low-income residents to be effectively engaged in the planning and governance of structured community initiatives, they should be represented in sufficient numbers and be supported to participate with equal confidence, information, and power (Chaskin, 2000). The need for leadership—whether provided by staff or skilled and well-respected participants—to bridge differences and mediate between resident and other interests is also cited as important. One strong source of such mediation can sometimes be the presence (but not dominance) of professionals who both work and live in the neighborhood (Chaskin, 2000).

New resources coming into the community can "grease the wheels of collaboration" among organizations that have traditionally competed for funds and turf, but Greenberg et al.

(2010) found that in "historically disinvested neighborhoods, mistrust sometimes derailed implementation efforts" at which point "mediation by the funder and the full engagement of respected local leadership were sometimes required to ensure that groups could continue to come together after planning." When and how to intervene when groups are floundering or in conflict also challenged funders observing conflicts between residents and agency representatives in initiative governance groups (Walker et al., 1999).

Selected Insights for Funders about Governance

Besides significant literature on collaboration, some key insights for place-based funders include:

+ ***Define the rules of engagement from the start.*** Discussions about roles and accountabilities take up valuable time and tend to raise underlying conflicts, just when funders and their community partners are eager to build good will, find unity and move ahead. But lack of clarity and communication about these important issues has seriously undermined implementation success in a number of initiatives (Brown et al., 2001; Brown and Fiester, 2007; FSG Social Impact Advisors, 2011). Moreover, it's safe to assume that communication "issues" and even occasional violations of trust *will* happen, despite all well-intentioned efforts to the contrary. Determining a process, in advance, for how to deal with these violations or other conflicts that arise increases the likelihood of weathering them down the line (Backer and Kern, 2010).

+ ***Be clear about the long-term expectations for the group***. As Fiester (2011) writes, the importance of expressing goals clearly, explicitly, and frequently has been duly noted in many placed-based initiative reports. She suggests that the reason the field keeps returning to this point is because it is both so crucial and so hard when people are attempting to work in new ways that are fundamentally different from what they are used to. One question that is often overlooked when establishing a governance group is whether the goal is to build long-term organizational capacity to stimulate a new way of doing business in the community, create a time-limited body to guide the initiative or even to simply get input around a plan, or something else? This question, like others about goals and priorities, has obvious implications for how go about implementation.

+ ***Be prepared for the time and sustained capacity building it takes to build a strong governance group.*** New community collaboratives/governance groups/partnerships typically need substantial guidance and support over an extended period of time. Evaluations and reports from many different place-based initiatives that set up such structures suggest that this is a two-three year process (Chaskin, 2000; FSG Social Impact Advisors, 2011; Fiester, 2011, to name a few). This doesn't mean that the groups cannot implement important activities over that time, but simply that they are likely to need sustained support to do so.

Building Capacity for Implementation

Overview

All place-based initiatives with change agendas that call for a new way of doing business need ongoing capacity building. A rich array of technical assistance materials and strategies has been developed over the last couple of decades, both technical and more process-oriented in nature. Technical assistance providers have become more attuned to the complexities and dynamics of implementation in long-term community change work and the skills, leadership, and organizational capacities needed to do the work well.

Technical assistance that attempts to build such capacity requires sustained, dedicated, frequently engaged, and readily available support over a sufficient period of time. It also needs to be flexibly applied, sequenced based on the initiative's stage of development and intentional about transferring the essential knowledge, techniques, and tools to the community. Managing technical assistance within a multi-site initiative also requires clarity and coordination among different providers, sites and the funder.

Technical Assistance Strategies and Roles

The range of technical assistance roles and functions required to support initiative action—establishing and maintaining commitment to a guiding mission; fostering communication and breaking down silos among participants; collecting, analyzing, and presenting data; promoting effective planning, outreach and organizing; increasing awareness of and reliance on evidence-based practices; developing management systems and staff capacity—have been distributed by different initiatives to different constellations of providers, and roles have been traded off among funders, evaluators, intermediary organizations, independent consultants, and providers of specific kinds of technical assistance. Depending, in part, on how this has been structured, there have been more or fewer problems with coordination, more or less tension around the source of authority and lines of accountability, and technical assistance has been more or less responsive and effective (Chaskin, 2000).

Managing technical assistance—deciding when and how to introduce which kinds of support at what level of intensity over what period—has challenged many initiatives for at least two significant reasons. First is simply coordinating different providers and making sure everyone shares a common vision and is reinforcing each other's work. This requires "careful and coordinated contract management" to keep activities in sync with care taken to "avoid 'silos'" among contractors (Hill et al., 2011).

A second factor that contributes to the challenge of managing capacity-building investments is related to predictable inside-outside tensions—who decides what is needed and when; who selects the providers and oversees the work; and to whom are the providers accountable? Numerous initiatives report that the ways these questions are addressed can become an arena in which broader tensions about roles, responsibilities and decision-making authority get raised (Brown and Fiester, 2007). In too many cases, TA has been funder-defined and driven, contracted by the funder to provide help to the neighborhood site to achieve the funder's vision. In these and other situations in which the site has little ownership of the TA process, TA may seem to the site more like what one lead organization director called "snoopervision," a means for the sponsor to promote its agenda and

priorities or monitor the site's progress than an effective way to deliver assistance (Brown et al., 1998).

Chaskin (2000) reports that, not surprisingly, TA was more effective in the four-site initiative his team studied when: 1) collaboratives were clear about their needs, had access to information about skilled providers, and had the capacity and commitment to use technical assistance when provided; and 2) accountability was clear, so that technical assistance providers were not receiving conflicting direction from different local actors.

Guided by an understanding of the value of "demand-driven" TA, funders often aim to embed as much authority as possible with its users. Sometimes this means providing a flexible pool of resources that the collaborative or lead agency can use at their discretion or in consultation with the funder (Kubisch et al., 1997). Alternatively, some funders maintain control of TA resources but respond flexibly to site requests (Miller and Burns, 2006). Such an approach requires the funder to be confident that sites know enough about possible sources of support (as well as their own needs) to ask when appropriate. Still other funders manage TA centrally but work to ensure the providers with whom they contract are capable of adapting what might be their "standard" approaches to the particular needs and assets of participating communities (Kubisch et al., 1997).

Capacity building strategies are an integral part of the "learning while doing" process that is addressed more fully in the next section. We focus here on two capacities that experience suggests are central to effective place-based initiatives: the capacity to use data and leadership capacity.

Capacity to Use Data Effectively

Good local data and analyses are key to successful place-based efforts. Local data intermediaries—some freestanding, others linked with city government or a local university—negotiate for access to data on a range of topics, transform the data into indicators, and work to build the capacity of community residents, stakeholders and policymakers to use the information effectively. The Urban Institute has linked 35 of these data intermediaries into a network (see www.nnip.org) guided by a commitment to democratize information and facilitate its direct, practical application in distressed urban neighborhoods.

Using such data can promote a shared understanding of neighborhood context, improve planning, foster informed public discourse, and help decision-makers target resources effectively (Greco et al., 2010). Place-based initiatives find that neighborhood data can be a galvanizing force for mobilizing diverse stakeholders around a shared agenda (Kubisch et al., 2002), for creating a way for local groups to examine an issue they want to address, target resources, and measure their progress in tackling it over time (Fiester, 2011), and for providing key data about changing neighborhood conditions as one component of cross-site, cross-city evaluations (Walker et al., 2010).

Place-Based Leadership Development

Believing that meaningful long-term community change requires strong leadership, most place-based initiatives provide support for some form of leadership development. This

strategy is not intended to denigrate existing talent or remedy an existing deficit (Meehan et al., 2011), but rather to expand the number of leaders who are prepared to work together toward a shared community vision.

Funders take a wide variety of approaches to both formal and informal leadership development. Illustratively:

+ Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative's Resident Development Institute (RDI) has developed a set of core leadership competency training modules covering topics like values, vision and power; meeting design and facilitation; community organizing; developing leaders; resource development; strategic thinking and planning; and public policy advocacy. RDI aims to provide "practical, tested, useable tools, resources, approaches, and trainings that contribute to good community decision-making (see www.DSNI.org). A related approach, Resident Leadership & Facilitation (RLF), has been developed by the Casey Foundation (Ahsan, 2008).

+ The National Community Development Institute (NCDI) has developed a capacity-building approach for developing leaders in communities of color (Satterwhite and Teng, 2007). NCDI embedded its eight-session Leadership Academy, which it conducted multiple times, in a larger set of strategies to develop core leadership and mobilize a critical mass of leaders in Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools, a six-neighborhood initiative targeting youth (Fiester, 2011).

+ Small grants programs, administered by community residents, have proved to be a valuable tool for developing leadership (Saasta and Sentry, 2009). Evaluation of the Community Connections program, for example, found that over almost five years a program that distributed 430 small grants in six neighborhoods engaged many residents who acquired new skills and went on to other leadership roles like membership on the neighborhood's governance board (Scheie et al., 2011).

Reinelt, Yamashiro, and Meehan (2010) contend that traditional approaches to leadership development that emphasize individual knowledge and skill development do not suit the leadership needs of low-income communities and communities of color that are working to address complex problems. The need to overcome fragmentation by working across organizational and sector boundaries in place-based initiatives calls for a more collaborative approach. Backer and Kern (2010) recommend using peer networking, through its group problem solving and information sharing components, to stimulate leadership development.

McNeely et al. (1999) also emphasize collaborative leadership through which a leader becomes more of a facilitator than a singular driving force: "leaders learn to initiate a venture and to recruit others to do it without owning the venture." They also develop conflict resolution skills, including the ability to "bring conflict into the open in a constructive way that does not immobilize the collaboration."

The Kellogg Leadership for Community Change program (2008) focuses on what it calls community-based *collective* leadership that becomes possible when "the members of a group, motivated by a common purpose, begin to build relationships with each other that are genuinely respectful enough to allow them to co-construct their shared purpose and work." Despite the emphasis on the collective, the program acknowledges that "people new

to community-change work need hands-on opportunities to learn tactical leadership skills that are part of implementing community change. These include learning and using strategic-planning, sharing decision-making practices, learning policy and political assessment processes, employing participatory evaluation methods, and using effective facilitation and community organizing strategies."

Meehan et al. (2011) argue that "developing these competencies requires a neutral and supportive environment where leaders can experiment, practice new behaviors and skills, form authentic relationships, have real conversations and solve conflict in order to support the collaborative work of making aligned contributions."

These recommendations are echoed by Bailey and Jordan (2006) whose work in a place-based initiative generated the following "tips" for developing new leaders:

+ Find ways for leaders to practice new skills and to learn whether and how to act when leadership opportunities arise.
+ Encourage risk taking, and then tell the truth about positive and negative consequences.
+ Constantly reach out to new leaders and bring them into the mix. Orient new leaders to the skills and knowledge they need to participate fully.
+ Foster leaders' collective process skills (e.g., team building, accountability, understanding and undoing racism, analyzing power, and creating opportunities for community action) as well as individual skills, such as public speaking and fundraising.
+ Debunk community myths. Infuse efforts with data, information, and validation from trusted sources (especially community residents).

Selected Insights for Funders about Capacity Building

+ ***Reach clarity about the various roles and responsibilities related to technical assistance***. Funders need to think about their preferences and constraints in this area, share this thinking with community partners before a strategy gets rolled out, and decide together how to modify it along the way should that be desirable or necessary from either party's perspective.

+ ***Determine when investments in developing strategic capacity for implementation make sense and provide needed time and resources.*** Given pressures to generate visible results, communities sometimes feel that they do not have the luxury of time to build capacity—at some level, they just want TA providers to tell them what to do or to do it themselves (Brown et al., 2003). It is true that outside consultants can sometimes accomplish needed tasks more efficiently. But for communities to develop sustainable capacity, they must be given the time and resources for active learning to take place and be integrated into daily practice.

+ ***Carefully align leadership development strategies with the goals of the initiative.*** A myriad of effective strategies exist for leadership development. The

key is to be intentional in selecting strategies that will produce the "right" type of leaders for the goals of the program.

Learning While Doing

Overview

At the core of the work of complex, multi-partner place-based initiatives is the iterative process of learning and doing that allows all the parties to adjust and readjust their strategies in response to initial results and, in doing so, deepen their working relationships and build further capacity for effective implementation. Funders are increasingly giving learning a more central place in place-based initiatives, viewing it as a way to improve strategies and increase the impact of their investments. And new strategies and tools for enhancing real-time learning are being developed and implemented.

Despite this progress, learning by doing only works if learning is translated into action in the form of new skills, improved practice, and reformulated theories. This translation does not happen without dedicated time, intention and resources. Not infrequently initiatives report that: time to examine and reflect is trumped by the need to act; a culture of learning is challenging to establish between funders and grantees; and learning that occurs in isolation is rarely shared.

Creating Time for Learning

Learning, networking, and documentation have traditionally been conceptualized as "process" activities that compete with the time and energy needed for implementation. Newer work frames them as key to making implementation smarter, more powerful, and more sustainable over time (Kubisch et al., 2011). Reflection is the point in the learning and doing cycle where meaning gets made that informs future action. Nonetheless, report after report laments the lack of time for reflection and learning.

One strategy to addresses the time problem is working to integrate a learning stance into the DNA of the entire enterprise. In one place-based initiative Darling and Smith (2011) recommended that the most powerful way to improve learning was to focus on making small improvements in the work (as opposed to trying to take people's attention away from their mission-critical work to "learn"). They suggested, for example, that simply making a habit of sharing the thinking behind decisions would enhance understanding and ultimately become a tool to build alignment and shared knowledge. Similarly, spending no more than a few minutes to debrief regular meetings and activities and articulate one or two useful insights could provide a good discipline for building collective learning.

Darling and Smith (2011) also highlighted the difference between course correcting and learning in order to improve future performance. They found that program officers and neighborhood partners working on the ground were able to learn when something wasn't working and change their approach in that neighborhood. But these neighborhood-specific lessons were not being captured in meaningful ways that could support learning to improve

future performance throughout the network of players in the initiative's six target neighborhoods. The task of aggregating lessons on the ground and translating them into accessible knowledge (and ultimately improved practice) is a challenge that does require extra time and intention, but it is clearly an investment that can directly improve performance rather than an academic exercise in learning. We found few multi-site place-based initiatives reporting on intentional strategies to do this.

Structures and a Culture to Support Learning

Place-based initiatives have employed a range of structures for learning. Peer networking, team problem-solving, small group exercises, communities of practice, reflective practice, learning retreats, "homework" assignments between meetings, collaborative inquiry, exposure to experts and readings. Many initiatives use social networking sites to increase connectivity, learning and collaboration among multiple participants (Meehan et al., 2011).

Using multiple vehicles fosters learning among participants with diverse learning styles and with different roles (Hamilton et al., 2005). One initiative devised a number of structures to promote learning among its staff, partners, and community liaisons: small Learning Grants for residents to collect useful data to inform planning; quarterly Learning Partners meetings that convened key staff, technical assistance providers and evaluators; Community Builders Leadership Institutes to deepen knowledge about community change; informal "Lunch and Learns" for staff sharing; and cross-neighborhood Learning Groups on particular topics generated by the work on the ground (Fiester, 2011).

Another initiative used learning-circle partnerships among grantees and foundation staff to explore how best to support leadership capacity development in low-income communities to create health (Reinelt et al., 2010). The design drew upon five principles of effective group learning: create a supportive environment, build trusted relationships, be clear about purpose, focus on results, and promote synergistic learning. The learning circles offered, among other things, an effective strategy for "*building evaluation thinking and capacity among grantees, mining cross-program learning, and testing out promising practices without making too many demands on the limited time and resources grantees have available*" (Reinelt et al., 2010).

The funder of a multi-site initiative targeting the education needs of children birth through age eight spent several years working with community collaboratives to develop a self-assessment tool (Frusciante and Siberon, 2010). The process of developing the tool surfaced tacit knowledge, built a shared language and framework, and helped the partners clarify how they would define and measure collaborative success. While challenging and time-consuming, the process constituted a useful vehicle for learning—within and across sites—as well as for the development of a practical tool that could be used to track progress from year to year.

All three of these initiatives worked intentionally to foster transparency and trust among participants, significantly reducing the power dynamics between grantees and funders that complicate their ability to be in a learning relationship with each other (Brown and Garg, 1997). Trust is built over time as people see that others can be relied on to do what they said they would do. A culture that values and supports learning gives participants permission to admit confusion, struggle with what they did not know, experiment with new

approaches that might not work, revamp, and try again (Hamilton et al., 2005). The creation of a common language and consistent framework help diverse groups connect and learn from each other (Brown et al., 2009).

Other principles that have been generated from the different approaches to learning in place-based initiatives include:

+ Engaging stakeholders in developing learning agenda and vehicles for cross-site learning cultivates ownership of the learning process and increases the likelihood that results will be useful, relevant and credible for potential users (Kubisch et al, 2011).

+ An active and vital learning community draws upon two different kinds of knowledge: formal knowledge from experts in the field and tacit or informal knowledge that is often the purview of experienced practitioners. A learning program dominated by experts undervalues the wisdom of experience and context and can stifle self-directed learning, while total reliance on peer learning limits a group's growth through exposure to stimulating outside experts who can challenge the group to think critically about their ideas (Hamilton et al., 2005).

+ A multicultural approach to learning honors different ways of knowing, and recognizes that groups have different learning questions, (Reinelt et al., 2010).

Coaching for Community Change

One approach that combines learning with capacity building in place-based initiatives is coaching (Hubbell and Emery, 2009). This approach may be particularly helpful as a complement to more targeted technical assistance in initiatives with many players who are being called on to take on new roles, develop new relationships, and adopt new institutional practices. Although community stakeholders and organizations may embrace an initiative's goals and approach, they often resist or are unable to implement the changes in organizational structure, operation, and culture that such an approach requires. While coaching in place-based initiatives is relatively untested (Emery 2011), it seems like a promising approach to learning new ways of doing business.

Although a coach typically works in operational terms for both the funder and the site(s), conceptually he or she is accountable to the vision and goals of the initiative. Such a role involves close relationships with—but also autonomy from—both the site and the funder. This position allows the coach to view initiative dynamics and actions in their complexity and within context over time. From this vantage point, the coach is well situated to see and speak freely and to help participants discover when their actions are out of alignment with the initiative's broader goals and ideas, to provoke and energize, and to help them steer back on course (or reconsider the initiative's goals and change the course).

The coach can resort to a range of strategies to carry out this aim: actively challenging individuals about why they are pursuing a certain strategy or going in a particular direction, acting as a mirror to reflect back to them the actions and behaviors that are interfering with the achievement of agreed upon goals, suggesting different options by reframing the

process, or raising the implications of making one choice over another. Ideally this kind of reflection gets institutionalized within the initiative, providing a robust capacity to solve problems as they emerge.

One of the advantages of a coaching approach is that the coach's charge is to be invested in the long-term success of the initiative and its participants rather than in any one component or set of players within it. Having the "big picture" while attending to the contributions of its various moving parts positions the coach to identify and promote learning opportunities and strategies that are contextually relevant and important for moving the initiative forward.

Selected Insights for Funders about Learning

+ **Work hard to create a trusting environment.** People need to feel safe to say what they think and have an honest discussion across differences of race/ethnicity, education, funder/grantee status, sector, or role. Sites and funders must be willing to move forward together through a learning process of informed experimentation. The bottom line is that they cannot learn from each other without trust. There are many ways to create trust but all of them take time and effort (Backer and Kern, 2010).

+ **Invest in collective or collaborative learning**. The long-term success of a complex community change enterprise depends more on building broad problem-solving capacity among diverse players than on developing any one player's short-term knowledge or expertise (Kubisch et al., 2011). This is why a learning community orientation (Meehan et al., 2011), peer networking (Backer & Kern, 2010), and various forms of learning teams and partnerships (Hamilton et al., 2006), within a community and across communities and the broader field, are increasingly critical elements of long-term place-based work.

+ **Be creative about ways to build intentional learning strategies into day-to-day operations**. The consistent adoption of some relatively small changes in daily practice, such as debriefing meetings and articulating reasons for decisions as an initiative evolves, can generate powerful learning. A learning coach may be a good tool for fostering the daily capacity for critique and reflective action that is likely to improve the initiative's performance and build sustainable community capacity.

Managing a Place-Based Initiative

Overview

Managing a complex community change process with so many moving parts and players presents significant challenges. Management structures must support ways of working that are inherently complex: they cross sectors, address a multitude of interdependent problems, involve an array of partners and program strategies that need to be knit together over a sustained period of time. This complexity within place-based initiatives highlights

the critical role of at least three major management tasks: 1) maintaining a large number of productive working relationships; 2) ensuring that a wide range of activities and investments are geared in a mutually reinforcing way toward shared goals; and 3) creating accountability structures that promote individual and organizational commitment to these shared goals.

As funders move out of their siloed approaches, they necessarily become more attuned to the interdependence of cross-sector strategies that converge in specific places and look for new ways to leverage their efforts while staying sufficiently focused on the goals for which they are accountable. The concepts of collective impact (Kania and Kramer, 2011) and alignment (Kubisch et al., 2010) come up frequently in current conversations about how to manage these challenges.

Creating Effective Management Structures and Processes

The debate about governance (lead agency vs. collaborative governing body) is mirrored in the discussion about effective management for place-based initiatives. Backer and Kern (2010) reflect a general consensus that "unified leadership (spearheaded by a single broker or keeper of the vision…) is essential within the community, both to mechanically coordinate the initiative's many activities and to implement a single vision for change." The Harlem Children's Zone (2010), for example, believes that "while collaborative partners and stakeholders have an important role to play in building an initiative and expanding the breadth of services, one local organization must lead the effort, be accountable for results, and hold others accountable for meeting common goals."

Greenberg et al. (2010) describe another version of unified leadership as embodied in what researchers found to be an effective management structure for the New Communities Program in 14 Chicago neighborhoods: a lead agency in each neighborhood was charged with reaching out to community partners and coordinating the actions of many different local groups, while LISC/Chicago served a "managing intermediary" role, managing grants, providing technical assistance, mediating community conflict, and enforcing accountability by replacing grantees that were not performing well. Expectations about roles within this structure were established in written Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) to avoid confusion and disagreements.

The Jacobs Market Creek initiative represents a somewhat different approach by carrying out all its work in staff/resident teams that set their own metrics and report to a shared management group (Jacobs Center, 2010). Many of the current Promise Neighborhood planning sites are managing the multiple players in their work with a combination of strong governance structures and management teams that use outside consultants, guiding timelines, MOUs, data sharing agreements, performance-based contracting, and other coordinating management tools (Lester, 2011). Simply coordinating all the consultants and TA providers is a major task.

Kania and Kramer (2011) make a case that collective impact initiatives, defined as "long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem," are best supported by a "shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization." The backbone organization brings dedicated staff who can support the many collaborating organizations through "ongoing facilitation,

technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the initiative to function smoothly."

One way that many place-based initiatives try to align multiple partners and actions regardless of their particular management structures is through "managing for results." Farrow (in Kubisch et al., 2010) describes the processes, structures and tools that the Casey Foundation used in Making Connections to create a culture of results and results-based accountability. The goal was to infuse the entire initiative with a relentless focus on specific outcomes that discipline the choices and approaches partners take in fulfilling their commitment to achieving those outcomes. Another example is Good Neighborhoods/Good Schools: not only did the initiative set specific goals to be achieved by 2016 to which the funder is holding itself publicly accountable, but it also convened a 2016 Task Force of partners who agreed to meet regularly over a seven-year period to assess progress toward the 2016 goals (Fiester, 2011). These meetings aim to reinforce collective focus and create a sense of urgency that almost had a campaign-like flavor.

It goes without saying that managing a complex place-based initiative with a broad range of participants and partners requires talented leadership and staff capacity with strong organizational and communication skills, political acumen, and an ability to work across a number of substantive areas at once. A talent for convening, facilitating, focusing, and mediating conflicting interests trumps deep substantive expertise in these initiatives (Kubisch et al., 1997).

Communications

Comunications both within an initiative and to the larger environment is another arena that requires management attention in place-based initiatives. Foster-Fishman and Long (2009) report that it can be difficult to keep all the players in a place-based initiative connected to the initiative's larger vision when they are funded to implement specific programs and strategies: "organizations became mired in the process of establishing their new programs, and residents became enmeshed in the hard work of improving their local neighborhood. As a result, important connections or changes that were critical to the larger vision were often ignored or forgotten." The evaluators recommend a communications strategy or social marketing campaign for continually communicating the initiative's larger collective vision and strategic goals.

This recommendation is consistent with findings from Hill et al. (2011): the complexity of the multi-faceted model with so many moving parts and multiple contractors makes it challenging to describe the initiative in a way that "residents can 'put their arms around,' underscoring the importance of effective and persistent marketing and messaging."

Communication is also important for reinforcing a shared framework and collective commitment, sustaining momentum, and guarding against mission drift. A typical challenge once planning is complete is the tough task of translating vision into action while maintaining the engagement of residents and other stakeholders (Kubisch et al., 1997). One initiative's experience (Greenberg et al., 2010) highlights the importance of building in regular communication among partners: lead agencies stay connected with local stakeholders by providing regular information, holding community meetings, distributing newsletters, and so forth.

Communications, like other functions of an initiative's operations, need to be negotiated and clarified among all the players. One funder and the intermediary with whom it was sponsoring a multi-site community initiative negotiated an arrangement detailing which kinds of communications needed review and/or approval by which parties (Auspos et al., 2009). Once again, clarity about roles and authority helped the partnership flourish despite predictable differences of opinion down the road.

Selected Insights for Funders about Management

+ ***Establish clear roles and responsibilities and then revisit them regularly***. "As implementation of an initiative progresses, pressure and tensions can lead parties to either overstep or relinquish their agreed-upon responsibilities. Creating regular opportunities to discuss and negotiate roles and responsibilities, therefore, improves both operational clarity and accountability" (Trent and Chavis, 2010).

+ ***Engage adaptive leadership***. Management of a complex place-based initiative is enhanced by embodying "the principles of adaptive leadership: the ability to focus people's attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders" (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

+ ***Develop and implement a communications strategy***. Develop a communications strategy or social marketing campaign using community-friendly methods and vehicles to continually communicate the initiative's larger collective vision, strategic goals and progress.

Defining an Effective Role for the Funder

Overview

Sponsors (whether foundations or government) play critical and complex roles in the development, implementation, and monitoring of place-based change. Increasingly over the last decade, they have recognized their own critical role in determining the outcomes of this work and have become more intentional about how they *do* the work and how they *learn* from it. They are also paying more attention to the alignment between their internal structure and operations and their external community-change goals, understanding that misalignment can directly undermine these goals.

While funders differ considerably in the ways they structure and operate their place-based investments, for the most part they have tried to craft their role as a kind of "partnership" with community stakeholders. Like any partnership, the clearer the terms and the more consistently they are implemented, the more successful the enterprise is likely to be.

Effective Funding Roles and Practices

Much has been written about how funders can increase their effectiveness in community change work (Brown and Garg, 1997; Brown et al., 2003; Kubisch et al., 2011).[5] Trent and Chavis (2010) identify five steps that funders can take to set the stage for success:

+ **Know thyself**—take the time to clearly articulate the foundation's own motivations and expectations regarding the initiative
+ **Do your homework**—build a solid understanding of the problem and what is needed to solve it
+ **Stack the odds in favor of success**—make sure the initiative has the necessary ingredients for success
+ **Be accountable**—performance matters, and foundations should be prepared to hold grantees - and foundation staff - accountable for performance. Poor performers drag down the success of everyone involved.
+ **Keep it manageable**—limit the number of sites to those ready and prepared to engage at the expected level of performance.

Chaskin (2000) underscores the role of funder clarity, communication and consistency:

+ *Funders should be clear from the beginning about their expectations, assumptions, and interests.* This does not mean dictating terms and requirements unilaterally or inflexibly, but being explicit about expectations, forthcoming with information and guidance, and prepared to negotiate with clarity and specificity the details of funding, governance, programmatic scope, outcome expectations, benchmarks of progress, and appropriate measures of success. Roles, responsibilities, lines of accountability, and outcome expectations and indicators need to be defined and agreed upon among funders, intermediaries, and initiative participants.

+ *Communication is important.* Lines of communication between sponsor and CCI should be open, and parties need to have developed a level of mutual understanding, respect, and trust.

+ *Consistency is important.* This does not mean that decisions made cannot be unmade, but that shifts in direction, refinements of expectation, changes in funding patterns or protocol, or amendments to outcome expectations should be addressed explicitly and their implications negotiated. Changes in funder staff or program priorities over time should be explicitly acknowledged and discussed, and their implications collectively understood.

While many funders play a traditional grantmaking role, perhaps working through an intermediary to support their place-based investments, others have moved into a more activist "changemaking" role that involves utilizing their full range of assets—knowledge,

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[5] Most of the research on funder roles has focused on foundations, but much of it is relevant for other public and private funders. A recent federal interest in place-based initiatives, as reflected in Promise and Choice Neighborhoods, as well as initiatives at the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services, has stimulated discussion about the kinds of supports these multi-site initiatives will need to be successful (White House, 2010; Price, 2011).

networks, credibility and political capital, as well as their financial resources—to advance their place-based goals (Brown, 2012). A study of funders identified six civic roles foundations were playing in their community change work (Auspos et al., 2009):

+ Convening and leveraging diverse networks of relationships
+ Developing local data and plans for community change
+ Leveraging new resources on behalf of communities
+ Mobilizing political will
+ Framing new messages about community development and communicating more strategically
+ Generating and testing new ideas and building and sharing knowledge

While not all foundations can or should play these roles, and government funders must shape the way they implement them to be consistent with public support, what is important for this discussion about implementation is that whatever roles the funder takes on, it must make sure that it has or works to develop the capacities to play it well. This is an important component of internal alignment (Kubisch et al., 2010).

To illustrate, when the Skillman Foundation decided to shift its strategies and resources for children from a broad program of grants to an intensive place-based approach in six neighborhoods with high concentrations of children and youth, it recognized the need for internal changes to support the new roles and practices that staff would be challenged to play. Job descriptions were restructured to reduce program silos, flexible work schedules were instituted to accommodate the evening and weekend work required for community engagement, and the Foundation added new communications and knowledge management capacities (Brown et al., 2009).

Foundation leadership reported that it took two years to evolve to a place-based strategy and a few more to get to substantial program alignment (Fiester, 2011). Particular attention was devoted to engaging Trustees in an ongoing series of learning opportunities about community change work. The field can point to many examples of community initiatives that were undermined because staff and board expectations were not aligned regarding the pace of change or how its progress—or even long-term success—would be measured (Brown and Fiester, 2007; FSG Social Impact Advisors, 2011). Given predictable board and staff changes over the life of a long-term initiative, this alignment needs regular attention.

Managing a multi-site initiative

The literature on good practice for funders managing multi-site place-based initiatives is pretty thin and has generated almost as much about what to avoid as what to do. A key task is to create vehicles for cross-site communication and learning. Many of the recommendations included in Backer and Kern's (2010) thought piece for The California Endowment are relevant here, including strategies for promoting cross-site learning and sharing of best practices, arranging peer matches, and creating networking activities with sensitivity to multicultural and multi-linguistic differences. For example, Frusciante and Siberon (2010) report that the self-assessment instrument that they developed with their collaboratives represented a shared tool that fostered communication and helped to build a shared identity across sites.

But Foster-Fishman and Long (2009) caution that sometimes funders impose tools that are not flexible enough for meaningful local adaptation. Further they found that when TA was designed for a cohort of sites, it failed to accommodate the range of local site needs, leaving some behind and inadvertently undermining the momentum in others. Most multi-site initiatives end up customizing their approach to some extent because it is unrealistic to expect that a cohort of sites will have the same capacities and local opportunities and are able to move at the same pace through the life of an initiative (Kubisch et al., 1997). So the funder's challenge is to customize its timeline, grant size, and capacity-building strategy sufficiently to be responsive to site needs without compromising its core implementation and learning goals.

Another key challenge is managing the "traffic" generated by consultants, evaluators, funders and others in and across neighborhoods. As one initiative moved into implementation, it found that substantially more attention needed to be devoted to alignment among the foundation staff, intermediaries, neighborhood governance boards, and technical assistance providers (Fiester, 2011).

Selected Insights for Funders about Funder's Roles and Practices

+ *A strong initial theory of change is a good start.* A clearly articulated, evidence-based theory of change that identifies explicit points of entry and a sequence of activities toward clear outcomes is worth struggling with before a funder engages community partners. The discipline and clarity demanded by such an exercise can stimulate the funder to consider how it wants to position itself within the action and how it will communicate that position to potential partners. The initial theory of change will necessarily evolve over time but thoughtful attention upfront can be very useful.

+ *Share responsibility for learning and results with grantees and partners.* A funder who can model effective learning practices—listening well, communicating respect, and engaging fully as a learner—contributes significantly to an initiative's potential to do this more widely. Funders are typically key actors in place-based initiatives so learning collaboratively with grantees and partners and assuming shared responsibility for results makes sense. Greeley and Greeley (2011) suggest that a funder must be prepared to take responsibility for results and create the internal structures that promote accountability and collaboration. Fiester (2011) mirrors this conclusion, observing that community change is not the sole responsibility of the people who receive the funder's resources but also of the funder's staff and leadership. The fact that such a stance puts the funder's reputation at stake in a very public way should reinforce, not deter, its commitment to learning.

+ *Coordinate with other efforts in the community.* Implementation takes place within a larger community ecology that may include other place-based efforts. Backer and Kern (2010) underscore the need to avoid "collaboration fatigue" and other symptoms of organizational dysfunction suffered by communities (and individual leaders) who are involved in too many community efforts. While funders have sometimes operated initiatives as if they were freestanding enterprises, much

more attention is being given these days to the strategic connections among them for collective impact. This means building intentional linkages across program strategies, leaders and evaluations (Kubisch et al., 2011).

Summary and Conclusions

As Chaskin (2000) underscores, "implementation of cross-sector, multi-partner place-based initiatives is extraordinarily difficult. The range of issues, actors, relationships, and processes involved are many and complex. They are embedded in historical relations, contexts of inequality and shifting circumstance, and structural constraints that defy pre-planned linear progress and require a combination of strategic opportunism, alliance building, negotiation, flexibility, and significant resources (including money, time, knowledge, leadership, organizational capacity, and political leverage)."

It is not surprising then that weak implementation capacity and ineffective management have been found to undermine many otherwise promising initiatives whose community-level activities may have been well-theorized, well-designed, and well-planned (Auspos et al., 2009). As complex enterprises, they can lack strategic capacity; get mired in the day-to-day responsibilities of managing the initiative's administrative demands and keeping multiple lines of work on track; get stalled by political issues, fatigue, or temporary lack of will. This is why building readiness for implementation among all parties is so important (Brown et al., 2009).

The concept of *internal and external alignment* provides a useful frame for a place-based initiative to assess what actions need to be taken to maximize opportunities for successful implementation (Kubisch et al., 2010). Trent and Chavis (2009) contend that "agencies and organizations will not develop comprehensive, collaborative responses to complex social problems unless the core interests of the stakeholders are aligned with and served by the new program or strategy." So alignment depends, in part, on a nuanced understanding of potential partners' interests and motivations in order to identify and act upon areas of mutual self-interest that advance the initiative's mission.

Strong implementation depends on striking and maintaining a delicate balance between structure and flexibility. The most successful initiatives have organizational structures that have been carefully aligned to the work at the onset. However, the structure itself is revisited frequently in order to assess if it still offers the best support of the initiative at its current stage of development. Funders who implement thoughtful structures to ensure their initiative is "learning while doing" and intentionally use this information initiative-wide to make timely and responsive changes increase the likelihood of successful implementation. Learning only after the fact is common, and unfortunately, only of minimal value to strong implementation.

Implications for Process Evaluation

A process evaluation is intended to document, assess, and help organizations learn from the early development and implementation of a program or initiative. Building upon the best practices literature, we offer suggestions for key evaluation questions and potential indicators that can be used for assessing progress and framing discussions for organizational learning and continuous improvement. They are intentionally general with the expectation that they will be tailored to emergent Best Start plans and goals, as well as to individual communities where appropriate.

Community Engagement

The implementation literature reviewed here is rich with techniques and strategies for community engagement. There is no one best "universal" level of engagement, in fact the literature shows that in some cases broad levels of engagement can serve as obstacles to progress. In order for the evaluation to determine if Best Start is "on-track," it will be important for program leadership to clearly articulate and communicate desired levels and composition of community engagement. It is equally important that those levels of engagement are carefully aligned with program goals.

	Community Engagement	Potential Indicators
Outreach & organizing	How are engagement strategies aligned with goals and assumptions? How is trust developed among the funder, community members and organizations?	A high degree of intentional alignment between engagement strategies and goals Evidence that new strategies are implemented to bring in under-represented community members Efforts to develop relationships are given adequate time and care
Planning	How are community members included in planning processes? How are roles for community members defined?	Inclusion of community members in planning processes is in alignment with goals for participation Roles of community members are clearly defined and communicated.
Early Investmen	How is momentum sustained throughout the planning period?	Modest early investment projects underway/emerging Intentional strategies employed to sustain participation of core members

Developing Governance

The literature suggests two key components relative to developing governance structures in place-based initiatives: Having the right people at the table and development of effective structures and processes to get the work done. The process evaluation should examine the degree of alignment between initiative goals and leadership group composition as well as process factors, such as clarity of roles and responsibilities, communication and

accountability systems to determine progress towards establishing effective governance in Best Start communities.

	Governance Structure	Potential Indicators
Right people at table	Are the right people at the table to reach the goals of Best Start?	A high degree of alignment between actual and intended leadership group composition Membership reflects those directly affected by the work, people/organizations with ties to resources, and other community stakeholders
Structures and processes	Does the governance body have effective structures and processes so they can get the work done?	Clearly defined roles and responsibilities Transparent distribution of resources Clearly defined expectations Development of systems for holding the members accountable to the group's goals Open avenues of communication across all levels (e.g., funder, community members, CBOs) Structures and practices in place to ensure residents' participation and influence is equal to that of other participants

Building Capacity for Implementation

As described in the implementation literature, capacity building is a critical component that has received much attention in place-based efforts. We identified three key activities relevant to the work of Best Start that should be considered in the process evaluation: technical assistance, capacity to use data effectively, and leadership development. Learning from previous initiatives has shown that intentional, sustained and demand-driven TA is the most effective at building capacity. Community members need access and assistance interpreting data in order to identify needs, assets, priorities and resources. Finally community members need leadership development and opportunities to practice leadership skills and decision-making.

	Capacity Building	Potential Indicators
Technical assistance	How is Technical assistance (TA) used to build the capacity of the community to engage in the work?	TA is sustained, dedicated, frequently engaged and readily available over time TA is flexibly applied and developmentally appropriate in relation to the initiative's stage TA is intentional about transferring knowledge, techniques and tools to community members
Capacity to use data	How is data being used to understand the community and target resources?	Community data is provided in accessible and understandable formats on an ongoing basis Data is intentionally used to promote shared understanding of community context, improve planning, inform public discourse and target resources effectively
Leadership development	How is leadership being developed within Best Start communities?	Leadership development is purposeful and closely aligned to the goals of the work Emerging leaders are given opportunities to practice new skills and to learn from their experiences

Learning While Doing

The literature review highlighted that not enough time and attention is allocated to sharing and disseminating the tremendous amount of learning that typically occurs during the implementation of place-based initiatives. This information has significant practical value for documenting progress, replicating successful strategies, and making course corrections. The process evaluation could provide useful feedback by examining the tactics, structures, dissemination, and culture established by Best Start around learning while doing.

	Learning While Doing	Potential Indicators
Time	How is "learning while doing" fostered?	Thinking behind decisions is routinely shared Time for reflection and learning is deliberately carved out and executed Community-specific lessons are captured and shared in meaningful ways throughout all communities
Structure &	What types of structures are used to support a learning culture?	A range of structures are intentionally employed (both within and across communities) to support learning while doing (e.g., team problem solving, small group exercises, communities of practice, learning retreats, etc.

Managing a Place-Based Initiative

Managing a place-based initiative is complex and multi-faceted, and there is a plethora of learning in the literature about effective strategies for doing so. In the early stages of implementation, emergent themes in the literature suggest a balance between clear structure and the ability to adapt is key to success. Structure and clarity is required around roles and responsibilities but mechanisms that allow managers to make timely changes in the face of changing conditions is equally critical.

	Managing	Potential Indicators
Management structures & processes	How does the management of the initiative contribute to effective implementation?	Roles and responsibilities are clearly established and revisited regularly Leadership is adaptive and responsive to changing conditions Communication and marketing campaigns continually communicate the larger collective vision and strategic goals of the initiative

Designing an Effective Role for the Funder

There are a multitude of possible and appropriate roles for the funder in a place-based initiative. The implementation literature suggests that funders are increasingly hands-on players in significant ways, connecting networks, leveraging resources and mobilizing political will. The process evaluation can be used to assess the degree of alignment between a First 5 Los Angeles' intended and actual roles, and the degree to which the organization has, or is developing, the necessary capacity to effectively fulfill those roles.

	Role of Funder	Potential Indicators
The role of the funder	What role(s) has First 5 LA defined for itself? How well do the intended and actual roles of funder align?	The role and responsibilities of the funder have been clearly defined and communicated to all participants The role of the funder is well-aligned with the organization's capacities or those capacities are being actively developed

Evaluation: Summary and Conclusions

Process evaluations of place-based community change initiatives can be an important tool for guiding the work of funders and community members alike. We hope the framework suggested here supports the work of First 5 LA by stimulating ongoing inquiry and discussion among staff, Commissioners, contractors and the community about how Best Start is doing in the context of best practices in the field.

The implementation evaluation of Best Start offers a unique opportunity to build the field of evaluation, lending new insights into best practices for evaluating complex systems-change initiatives along the maturing best practices literature focused on the implementation of such efforts.

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