Introduction

“Systems improvement strategies focus on the formal and informal structures through which health and human services are provided in L.A. County...”
~ First 5 LA Strategic Plan

As noted in the organization’s current strategic plan, First 5 LA recognizes the critical role of strong, coordinated and responsive systems that support families and improve outcomes for children prenatal to five. With a focus on family strengthening and fostering safe and supportive environments for children, First 5 LA seeks to enhance the structures through which health, human, and educational services are delivered, as well as improve less formal systems of support and care. Through its investments in systems improvement, First 5 LA strives to have a more profound and lasting impact on young children and their families in Los Angeles County.

In an effort to understand past contributions to countywide systems improvement and to inform future efforts, First 5 LA contracted Harder+Company Community Research to conduct an evaluation of four intertwined countywide systems improvement (CSI) strategies. These strategies include efforts to build the capacity of organizations, leverage additional resources beyond First 5 LA’s direct investments, educate the public about important issues related to young children, and improve the broader policy environment. The evaluation will examine achievements, challenges and the evolution of CSI strategies over the last five years as well as reflect on where the organization is today.

As First 5 LA initiates a new strategic planning process, this learning brief reflects on a number of fundamental questions that are both retrospective and prospective in nature.

- How is systems improvement defined and what systems is First 5 LA trying to impact?
- What are the CSI strategies included in this evaluation and how do they fit in the broader systems context?
- What will the CSI evaluation answer and how does it support organizational learning, planning, and strategy development?

This learning brief represents the first in a series to provide continuous feedback that supports organizational learning, strategy development, and decision-making. The goal of this particular brief is to provide First 5 LA staff, Commissioners, partners, and stakeholders with common definitions for the organization’s systems improvement efforts and basic background information about the four key strategies mentioned above. Future learning briefs (topics yet to be determined) will explore themes and preliminary findings that emerge during the course of the evaluation.
Defining Systems
How is systems improvement defined? What systems is First 5 LA trying to impact?

First 5 LA has long recognized the importance and long-term benefits of strong, coordinated and responsive systems, especially in the face of declining revenue streams. But improving systems in the nation’s most populous county is no small feat. Like many funders who invest in systems improvement, First 5 LA has wrestled with a range of questions and implementation issues, including differing definitions and understandings of what systems improvement and systems change actually means. Within the organization, systems improvement means different things to different people and the strategies for achieving change can be equally unclear. Adding to this complexity, efforts to improve systems seldom follow a linear path and results can often take years – if not decades – to be fully realized. As circumstances change, it’s easy to lose direction and focus along the way.

“Children and communities do not exist within a vacuum, but rather function within a larger countywide system. This countywide system refers to the actual structures through which health and human services are provided in LA County as well as to less formalized systems such as the economic system, the policy environment, and overall public will for early childhood issues.”

~ First 5 LA Strategic Plan (2009-15)

According to the literature, systems are dynamic and complex webs of entities with many subsystems and interrelated parts that, in theory, work together as a whole to produce a common outcome. In practice, many systems are often fragmented or lack the coordination to achieve the best possible results. Systems change has been defined as intentional organized efforts to transform an existing structure, function, and/or culture of a system by shifting existing policies and practices, resource allocations, relational structures, community norms and values, and skills and attitudes.” Systems improvement tends to focus on enhancing specific components of the system, but the literature confirms that the terms systems change and systems improvement are used inconsistently and therefore do little to distinguish the difference.

The early childhood system typically encompasses an array of separate systems, including health, education, human, and child welfare services, which in turn have multiple programs, policies, and agencies all striving to support the needs of children and their families in the most efficient and effective way possible.

The Build Initiative provides a useful “whole systems” framework (see Figure 1) that places special emphasis on quality and the connections between early childhood systems and subsystems. This framework includes the following overlapping areas:

- **Health, Mental Health and Nutrition** – systems and services focusing on biological, medical and physical concerns as well as social factors and determinants

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4 [www.buildinitiative.org](http://www.buildinitiative.org) An Early Childhood Funders Collaborative.
contributing to a child’s healthy development.

- **Special Needs and Early Intervention** – systems and services that address learning disabilities, and environmental factors including child abuse and neglect.
- **Early Learning** - systems and services that promote safe, healthy, nurturing early learning experiences for all children.
- **Family Support** – systems and services that strengthen families and ensure parents have sufficient support to provide nurturing homes and meet basic needs that are essential to children’s development.

In the context of First 5 LA, _systems improvement_ efforts have varied widely in target and approach. For example, some efforts have focused on improving access, quality, and efficiency of services and programs for children and families as well as improved coordination between providers. Other systems improvement efforts have been focused on increasing or influencing resource allocations, educating and building the capacity of providers, influencing legislation and/or institutional policies and practices, and empowering parents and caregivers. While the CSI evaluation is focused on four specific cross-cutting strategies - policy, public education, resource mobilization, and organizational capacity building – it is important to understand how these strategies fit into the larger context of countywide systems improvement and the early childhood system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Systems</th>
<th>Examples of First 5 LA Investments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health, Mental Health &amp; Nutrition</td>
<td>• Home Visiting LAUSD Wellness Centers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Funding for access to healthy food and physical environments</td>
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<td>Early Learning &amp; Education</td>
<td>• Family Place Library</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Campaign for Grade Level Reading</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Los Angeles Universal Preschool</td>
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<td>Child Welfare (early intervention)</td>
<td>• Safe Sleeping Campaigns</td>
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<td>• Safe Surrender Campaigns</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Partnership for Families Initiative (PFF)</td>
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<td>ECE Workforce</td>
<td>• LA County Early Care and Education Workforce Consortium</td>
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As a first step towards clarifying First 5 LA’s system improvement goals, the evaluation team worked with a cross-department team of First 5 LA staff to identify the systems they believe the organization is trying to impact as well as specific examples of programmatic and staff-driven activities (see Figure 2). The systems the group identified represent the areas that have been funding priorities for the organization. The examples are not comprehensive in nature but illustrate the types of specific systems improvement activities and programs that First 5 LA has supported during the last several years.

**Understanding CSI**

What are CSI strategies and how do they fit in the broader systems context?

First 5 LA’s current strategic implementation plan identifies seven specific countywide strategies including policy, information resource and referral, public education, resource mobilization, workforce development, data systems integration, and health access. The organization also supports an array of other countywide investments in areas such as universal screening and assessment of newborns, nutrition and physical activity programs, and parent support programs. In many ways, the CSI strategies that are part of this evaluation represent some of the most cross-cutting and foundational efforts that support the organization’s larger systems improvement goals. These strategies are fundamentally about cultivating relationships, influencing others, mobilizing and leveraging resources, and improving the capacity (quantity and quality) of organizations to provide services and advocate for children 0-5. While First 5 LA regularly evaluates initiatives that have implications for systems-level changes (such
as home visiting and the Partnership for Families initiative), it has not until now taken a more in-depth look at how these complex and cross-cutting strategies contribute to systems improvement. Definitions for each strategy are provided below.

- **Resource Mobilization**: Leveraging fiscal and non-fiscal resources to secure the financial viability of a program, strategy, or initiative.
- **Public Education**: Using mass media and/or targeted outreach methods to create awareness about specific issues or to motivate people to change their behavior.
- **Policy**: Advocating at the local, state and/or federal levels for resources and policies with the goal of achieving large scale and lasting change.
- **Organizational Capacity Building**: Strengthening an organization’s performance and effectiveness through customized support, technical assistance, and training that ensures services and resources are high quality, coordinated, accessible and responsive to the assets and needs of beneficiaries.

As a starting point, an initial CSI visual was created to illustrate the connections between these four strategies and how they contribute to intermediate and long-term outcomes (see Figure 3). Over the course of the evaluation, data and findings may help to inform refinements and clarifications to this framework as well as the development of a Theory of Change.

### Assessing Progress

**What will the CSI evaluation answer and how does it support organizational learning?**

The primary goal of the CSI evaluation is to understand how the four strategies (public education, policy and advocacy, resource mobilization and organizational capacity building) *have contributed to changes* in policy, public knowledge, and resources available to serve children 0-5 and their families throughout LA County. Another central goal is *organizational learning* and generating feedback that contributes to strategy development, organizational planning, and collaboration both internally and with external partners. The evaluation is intentionally designed to be *utilization-focused* and to document the evolving nature of CSI strategies as well as the many contextual factors that influence systems improvement efforts.

Given the evolving and long-term nature of CSI strategies, it will not be possible to assess the ultimate impact on the broader population within the time-frame of this evaluation. However, the evaluation will shed light on intermediate outcomes and progress made towards longer-term goals. Overarching evaluation questions include:

- What have been key accomplishments in the areas of policy, public education, resource mobilization, and organizational capacity building?

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5 Utilization-focused evaluation is done for a specific group of users and with a specific purpose in mind. It focuses heavily on how information will actually be used and applied in a real world setting.
In what ways is First 5 LA contributing to improvements in systems, policies, and infrastructure?
What practices, activities, pre-conditions, and/or factors have facilitated progress? What have been the challenges or barriers?
In what ways does First 5 LA collaborate and coordinate internally and externally to advance its countywide systems improvement goals?
In what ways could First 5 LA potentially have greater influence or impact on countywide systems?

“The process of making changes in the larger system is a long, painstaking and sometimes frustrating task. By acting as a catalyst and convener of elected officials, agencies, non-profit organizations and the general public, First 5 LA can increase collaboration between sectors and systems and to achieve greater integration of services.” ~ L3 Learning and Accountability Report (2013)

The evaluation will pay particular attention to network-building, collaboration (internally and externally), the leveraging of resources, capacity building, and the organization’s ability to influence partners, policies, and practices. The evaluation team will use a mixed-methods approach, gathering information from a cross-section of diverse stakeholders, including First 5 LA staff, Commissioners, grantees, and institutional partners such as county departments and service providers. Methods include document review, interviews, surveys and social network mapping.

To support organizational learning, the evaluation team is working closely with the CSI evaluation workgroup, a cross-section of First 5 LA staff from various departments who help provide information and context, and ensure that the information gathered is meaningful and responsive to First 5 LA’s needs. Given that CSI strategies are constantly adapting to changes in the environment, the evaluation team will also work closely with the workgroup to provide feedback and framing questions to support strategic planning and decision-making.

**Informing Future Efforts**
How can evaluation feedback inform planning and strategy development?

While it is still too early in the CSI evaluation to provide conclusive findings, initial interviews with First 5 LA staff raise important questions for the organization as it embarks on the next strategic planning process. Key themes include the need for more focus, intentionality, and internal coordination around systems improvement efforts, as well as more clarity about what specific systems First 5 LA is trying to improve. As one senior program officer noted, the current strategic plan provided a “broad picture of the (CSI) intent, but we never fleshed it out. We never really said here is how we are going to change systems.” Given the current fragmented nature of systems improvement efforts, important questions to consider as part of the 2015-2020 strategic planning process include:

- How does the organization define systems and systems improvement?
- What is the intentional focus of First 5 LA’s countywide systems improvement efforts? What are the expected results and measureable outcomes?
- What are the best strategies to achieve results? How do First 5 LA’s countywide systems improvement efforts connect to and support other First 5 LA investments such as Best Start?

“Systems initiatives often unfold without a predictable script [and] efforts to evaluate them should inform initiative strategies … so that stakeholders can make choices and identify midcourse corrections as needed.”

~ Julia Coffman (2007)
References


