In March 2011, First 5 LA’s Research and Evaluation Department convened 21 members of the Research Advisory Committee (RAC) in Los Angeles to review First 5 LA’s preliminary plans for evaluating the Best Start investment. Meeting materials and agenda are available by clicking on the links. Throughout a full day of presentations and discussions, First 5 LA staff communicated details about the Best Start program and its evaluation strategies to the RAC, and in turn, RAC members provided valuable feedback and ideas. This Research Brief summarizes the most important issues arising from the meeting, but first it presents the highlights of the Best Start investment.

OVERVIEW OF BEST START INVESTMENT

On June 11, 2009, the First 5 LA Board of Commissioners approved a new Strategic Plan for FY 2009-2015. This strategic plan represents a new commitment by the Commission to direct funding to specific communities in LA County, called “Best Start Communities.” Through Best Start, First 5 LA plans to create environments in Los Angeles’s diverse communities where young children are born healthy and raised in supportive surroundings that allow them to grow up eager to learn, and with the ability to reach their full potential. All of First 5 LA’s investments, particularly in the 14 Best Start communities, will be focused on changing outcomes in four priority areas representing First 5 LA’s long-term goals of ensuring that:

- Babies are born healthy
- Children maintain a healthy weight
- Children are safe from abuse and neglect
- Children are ready for kindergarten

The strategic plan outlined a theory of change linking funding activities through a set of articulated pathways leading to a number of intermediate and long-term outcomes. Most significantly, the Best Start Communities investment represents a shift in First 5 LA’s grant making approach from primarily funding programs based on specific initiatives that serve specific populations and the needs of those populations, to a community-based approach called “place-based.” The place-based approach enables
First 5 LA to focus its human and financial resources in specific designated communities or places to improve the lives of children and families. This shift to a place-based approach is based on the growing literature validating an ecological model of children’s development. A place-based strategy operationalizes the ecological model by proposing that communities need to be healthy so that children and families living in those communities will grow up healthy; the larger systems that support the health, safety, and early learning of children need to be integrated; and infrastructures and relationships already exist that First 5 LA can leverage in certain communities. Through the place-based approach, First 5 LA aims to strengthen the family as well as build the capacity of their communities. At the same time, First 5 LA will invest in countywide initiatives that will support children across the county and supplement the work being done within each Best Start community. Through both the place-based strategy and the countywide approach, First 5 LA aims to collectively improve the larger community as well as directly improve the lives of the children and families living in these communities.

**RAC MEETING HIGHLIGHTS**

This research brief highlights issues related to three components of the planned Best Start program of research: the longitudinal study, the implementation evaluation, and the cross-community evaluation. In addition, it reviews methodological issues that span the studies. The brief concludes by reviewing the major overarching issues about which RAC members tended to reach agreement in the advice they provided. The one-day meeting provided First 5 LA staff with many ideas to take under consideration and questions to ponder. Through the coming months, First 5 LA staff will undertake extensive internal discussions, and perhaps further RAC meetings, to sort through all of the suggestions received from the first RAC meeting.

**LONGITUDINAL STUDY.** In winter 2011, First 5 LA developed a preliminary longitudinal study evaluation plan to approximate the impact of Best Start on the communities where it is being implemented by following a sample of community residents from before the birth of a child until the child completes third grade. The two components are a study focused on outcomes and one emphasizing qualitative process evidence. Longitudinal study research questions include ones that will guide analysis of three sets of outcomes: outcomes for children, for parents and caregivers, and for communities.

A number of RAC members urged First 5 LA to consider the value of using various sources of administrative data. These could include data from public health records (such as immunizations), hospitals (birth records), and the schools (test scores, attendance records). A next step would be for First 5 LA to explore whether there are ways to leverage data from the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the LA County Office of Education (LACOE), and the other school districts serving the 14 communities. The main advantages of using administrative data (rather than collecting new data in the proposed longitudinal study approach) are lower costs than creating and conducting surveys or interviews and the ability to obtain data that are likely to be maintained consistently across the 14 communities. A major gap, however, is likely to be kindergarten readiness data. RAC members recommended that First 5 LA not wait until third grade to obtain test scores that at that point may not be indicative of kindergarten readiness. Another concern raised is that, depending on the size of the community, some administrative data may not be aligned with current Best Start community boundaries.
IMPLEMENTATION STUDY. In addition to observing long-term change longitudinally, First 5 LA believes it is important to document short-term changes at the community and organizational levels. First 5 LA will conduct two evaluations to directly observe changes across all communities and organizations and to contextualize any changes that occur by documenting the implementation of place-based initiatives. The place-based implementation evaluation documents implementation at both the level of First 5 LA’s internal decision-making processes and the level of the community partnerships implementing their plans in each of the 14 communities. (The second implementation evaluation, the cross-community study, is described in the next section of this Research Brief.)

RAC members responded positively to First 5 LA’s proposed plans for conducting qualitative research, both as qualitative studies in their own right as well as qualitative data to supplement what can be learned quantitatively. RAC members cautioned, however, that First 5 LA might miss children in foster care or the child welfare system, for whom certain methods of qualitative data collection, such as photographs or videos might violate children’s confidentiality rights. One RAC member went even further, suggesting that it would be better, from an evaluation research perspective, to maintain a focus on the quantitative numbers.

Another RAC member suggested that First 5 LA focus on the implementation “stories” about the processes that illuminate outcomes, and use formative methods to provide input into the community processes. First 5 LA was asked to consider adding small, targeted ethnographic studies.

CROSS-COMMUNITY EVALUATION. First 5 LA’s second strategy for examining short-term community and organizational change is the cross-community evaluation. Its purpose is to document change through an aggregate analysis of all Best Start investments at the community and organizational level in four areas: (1) community capacity building (including engagement, leadership, investment, and infrastructure), (2) community investment, (3) family strengthening programs, and (4) policy and advocacy.

RAC members encouraged First 5 LA to focus on what needs to happen in the communities so that First 5 LA can be successful in showing the connection between the community activities and the goals they achieve. By focusing on the ultimate outcome goals, First 5 LA can see some of the important process goals, such as building strong community leadership, as intermediary steps, and not the ends in themselves. First 5 LA was encouraged to show how leadership and other capacity-building variables relate to children’s school readiness. In this context, it should be noted that First 5 LA wants to achieve sustainability of outcomes, not just of the processes. The RAC suggested that a good theory of change, or logic model, will show how all the pieces are linked—the research questions, sampling strategy, community processes, and outcomes.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES. Methodologically, First 5 LA was advised to think about how the qualitative study can inform the quantitative—and vice versa. Blending the two types of data can enrich the understanding First 5 LA is able to achieve about the communities, their residents, and how they benefit from the interventions.

Obtaining cooperation, and participation, from undocumented residents in many of the communities is an important issue the study design and implementation need to address. But participation of these residents is crucial to the success of the study.
One particularly compelling suggestion is that First 5 LA look for ways to link into other longitudinal studies that are ongoing or being planned. For example, the large National Children’s Study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has one of its sites in LA County; the study team leader is UCLA’s Center for Healthier Children, Families, and Communities, in cooperation with local universities, community groups, local health departments, and hospitals. They plan to enroll about 5,000 children before birth, starting next year, and follow them until they reach age 21.

Another example is The California Endowment’s place-based Building Healthy Communities effort begun in 2010 in 14 communities across the state (one is South Los Angeles). The BHC and Best Start share some goals (for example, the BHC’s goal is to create places where children are healthy, safe, and ready to learn.) If Best Start can use some of the same interview questions there will then be parallel data that can be used for comparison purposes. Another possible area for collaboration is USC’s grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) for a similar place-based study.

RAC members discussed particular analytic strategies to be undertaken with the longitudinal study. For example, there was discussion that propensity matching would not be a realistic approach and that time-series analyses might be conducted using administrative data. An important issue raised by a few RAC members was advising that First 5 LA carefully consider what the unit of analysis would be for the longitudinal study—the family, the entire community, or the partnerships. One of the most overarching and basic concerns raised by the RAC related to designing analytic strategies that would enable First 5 LA to attribute outcomes to the intervention activities in light of all the other forces (such as the local politics community leaders are engaged in, other funded initiatives in the Best Start or comparison communities, and so forth) acting on and within the 14 communities.

OVERARCHING ISSUES

DEFINING “COMMUNITY.” One central theme running through the RAC comments was an urging for First 5 LA to create a more complete conceptualization of what is meant by the “community” in this place-based community intervention. First 5 LA and RAC members had considerable discussion about how a “community” is defined, how boundaries are set, and so forth. From this discussion it became clear that issues that First 5 LA needs to deal with range from (1) understanding community leadership dynamics to (2) identifying the individuals and groups that represent the community to (3) grappling with the process of democratic decision making among groups in the diverse communities. How do communities deal with staff and leadership transitions? How does First 5 LA hold communities accountable for setting goals and following their strategic plan? Most important, it is crucial that the community facilitator that First 5 LA contracts with be connected with the important community players and leaders.

OUTCOMES. In discussions about the expected outcomes to be assessed in the Best Start studies, RAC members encouraged First 5 LA to think differently about the children and their parents. RAC members advised that many policymakers are most concerned about outcomes for children and care less about the outcomes for their parents.
THE BEST START PROGRAM. Some RAC members questioned a placed-based approach that puts too much reliance on the communities themselves to initiate their programs. These advisors argued for a more prescriptive approach: talk with the communities about implementing clearly articulated activities based on research evidence indicating that these activities are most likely to achieve the Best Start goals.

Finally, some RAC members expressed skepticism about a place-based strategy as being the best approach for achieving the four established priority goals. For example, with respect to the school readiness priority goal, one RAC member felt that the best strategy would be a focused, well-implemented, strong early childhood intervention in preschool for one or two years before kindergarten.

KEY TAKE-AWAY MESSAGES

First 5 LA asked RAC members to offer particularly focused advice before the meeting closed. Several RAC members responded, leaving First 5 LA with an important set of major messages from the meeting:

- It is very important to get this right. Statewide, First 5 agencies are facing diminishing resources with which to tackle increasing problems, as poverty and its attendant stressors and dysfunctionalities are getting worse.
- Do your best to get the Best Start programs right, see that they are well organized and saturated, keep the four goals in focus, and find or create the community leadership you need to be the catalysts for change.
- Clearly articulate the design of the programs to increase the likelihood that evaluators will be able to observe and track the change that results from the efforts of the Best Start communities.
- Provide the necessary technical assistance so that communities can offer best practices aimed at Best Start goals.
- When you make a dent in fighting the effects of poverty in even a few LA communities and document it well, it creates an opportunity for someone somewhere else to learn from your experiences and replicate it elsewhere in the state and the country.