



OCTOBER 2015

Developmental Evaluation
(February 2014–July 2015)

BEST START LEARNING REPORT

KEY FINDINGS & REFLECTIONS



“ I AM BEST
START. WE ARE
THE AGENTS
OF CHANGE.
BUILDING SAFE
COMMUNITIES
STARTS WITH ME.”
~ PARTNERSHIP MEMBER

harder+company
community research

ssg Special Service
for Groups

1st LA
first 5 la
— BEST START —

BEST START LEARNING REPORT

KEY FINDINGS & REFLECTIONS



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Report Prepared
for First 5 LA

By Harder+Company
Community Research
and Special Service
for Groups (SSG)

October 2015

This final report is part of a developmental evaluation of First 5 LA's place-based approach known as Best Start. It highlights cross-cutting lessons, strategies, and emerging practices. It is based on evaluative observations, interviews, reflective sessions, and focus groups with First 5 LA staff, contractors, and community members from the 14 Best Start Communities. This report is designed to promote continuous learning and reflection in ways that shape and inform future strategies, collective problem solving, and decision-making.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

First 5 LA is a leading early childhood advocate working collaboratively across Los Angeles County to ensure that every child enters kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life. Through Best Start, First 5 LA focuses on building supportive environments where children and families can thrive in 14 communities across the county. While many of these communities face critical issues such as poverty, unemployment, and high teen birth rates, each has a strong network of local leaders and nonprofit organizations dedicated to making a difference. First 5 LA works in partnership with these networks to promote a common vision and collective will throughout each community that will give kids the best start in life.

The Evolving Field of Place-based Initiatives

Over the last several decades, complex place-based initiatives have gained momentum in addressing the needs of vulnerable communities, including health disparities, poor education, unemployment, obesity, and unaffordable housing. The underlying assumption of focusing on a “place” is that the unique characteristics of a place or neighborhood influence the health and well-being of the individuals who live there. Place-based initiatives examine the complex interconnections of the social issues operating within a particular area. Because the contexts of neighborhoods vary by social issues and socioeconomic factors, including the amount of resources and systemic infrastructures in place, adapting strategies and interventions to the unique features of any given “place” is essential to community change.

Aspen Institute. (1999). “Voices from the Field: Learning from the Early Work of Comprehensive Community Initiatives.” Washington, DC

Since its inception, First 5 LA’s place-based initiative has focused on engaging community partners, creating governance structures, and developing a shared vision to create safe and healthy communities where young children and families can thrive. Despite the wealth of knowledge and experience generated by funders and community advocates across the country, there is no playbook for implementing and managing a publicly funded place-based initiative as large and complex as Best Start. Given the dynamic nature of this work, First 5 LA opted to implement a developmental evaluation (DE) to help uncover what’s working and what needs to be refined to improve results. This report documents the progress of the Best Start initiative (including challenges, promising strategies and major milestones) and surfaces the most salient, timely, and usable findings in ways that inform ongoing learning. It highlights key lessons and insights from February 2014 to July 2015 and is informed by observations, focus groups, and interviews with diverse stakeholders working in all 14 Best Start Communities.



KEY FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Place-based initiatives are – at their core – an iterative process of learning that allows all stakeholders to test theories, deepen relationships and build capacity to realize collective goals.² The last 18 months have generated considerable lessons about what it takes to manage a large place-based initiative as well as foster increased capacity building and ownership at the community level. Key takeaways, milestones, and opportunities for growth are organized around three main themes outlined below and further detailed in the full report.

¹ <http://www.first5la.org/index.php?r=site/tag&id=576>

² Based on Literature Review conducted by Harder+Company (Nov 2011). “Best Practices in Place-based Initiatives: Implications for Implementation and Evaluation of Best Start.” In collaboration with Prudence Brown (national place-based consultant) and Juarez and Associates (Nov. 2011)

Learning and Adapting

THE PROCESS OF LEARNING AND ADAPTING

reflect

discuss

adapt

ACTION

- Structured opportunities to reflect and learn builds capacity and promotes shared vision:** The process of learning and adapting requires an intentional approach with structured opportunities to discuss, reflect, and translate learning into action.³ For Best Start, creating a learning environment was not an easy task and required a shift in practice and a commitment to honest and transparent dialogue. During the last 18 months, First 5 LA created structures for learning and reflection (such as gatherings and interactive reflective sessions) and worked to engage in deeper dialogue with the community. The full report highlights promising examples of community partners, contractors, and First 5 LA taking the time to reflect and use lessons to recalibrate strategies and turn learning into collective action. First 5 LA should continue to be intentional in incorporating reflective practice and evaluative thinking into its work. Dedicating time to reflect can help bring renewed clarity and direction to complex and ever-evolving community change efforts. Likewise, designating time in Community Partnerships meetings to build relationships and promote learning, while being responsive and adaptive to diverse learning styles, is also essential.⁴ It is also critical to make sure learning and reflection is translated into shared knowledge, improved practice, and actionable solutions within First 5 LA and in the Best Start Communities.⁵
- Effective management of Best Start requires flexibility and a commitment to listen, learn, respond, and adapt:** The implementation of place-based efforts is intrinsically influenced by a funder's structure, organizational culture and assumptions about what it takes to affect community change. The Best Start experience underscored the need for flexible structures and processes that focus on learning and transparency as well as clear, honest, and continuous communication with community stakeholders. During the last 18 months, structural constraints within the organization created barriers and frustration among Best Start stakeholders, but clear attempts were made to respond to community feedback and make adjustments to approaches, strategies, and practices. This included more open and deeper



³ Ibid

⁴ Meehan, D., Casteneda, N., & Salvesen, A. (2011). "The Role of Leadership in Place-based Initiatives." Report prepared for The California Endowment by the Leadership Learning Community. Available at: www.leadershiplearning.org.

⁵ Based on Literature Review conducted by Harder+Company (Nov 2011). "Best Practices in Place-based Initiatives: Implications for Implementation and Evaluation of Best Start." In collaboration with Prudence Brown (national place-based consultant) and Juarez and Associates (Nov. 2011)



Key Learning and Evaluation Questions

- **Learning and Adapting:** How is the Best Start initiative evolving? What have the Community Partnerships and First 5 LA learned in the past 18 months and how is this learning being used to adapt, strengthen, and focus efforts?
- **Strengthening Social Connections and Collaboration:** Who is at the table? How are Community Partnerships strengthening their networks and social connections? How are Best Start partners collaborating and working together?
- **Building Capacity and Fostering Community Ownership:** How are Community Partnerships building their capacity to lead and own the community change process? How are they advocating for more favorable policies, resources, and services for young children, families, and the communities where they live?

dialogue with Community Partnership members at quarterly learning communities as well as the engagement of a community transition team to serve as liaisons and support communications between Community Partnerships and First 5 LA's management of Best Start. First 5 LA's operational structure was complex and confusing for some community members. Many Best Start participants wanted to better understand how decisions were made and where there were opportunities to influence process, decisions, and practices. First 5 LA should continue to explore opportunities to demystify the organization's

structure and help develop the skills of residents and parents to effectively engage with First 5 LA and other public institutions. In addition, stakeholders identified the need to improve both internal (within First 5 LA) and external communications and suggested that more needs to be done to communicate in transparent, consistent, and nontechnical ways.

Strengthening Social Connections and Collaboration

- **Opportunities to strengthen connections and collaboration are critical ingredients for building and sustaining the work of Best Start:** Best Start is about community building and seeks to harness the energy of community stakeholders to act collectively and improve outcomes for young children, families, and the communities where they live. While participation in Best Start has ebbed and flowed over time, the last 18 months revealed the power and potential of social connections and collaboration within Community Partnerships and the broader community. Partnership members formed stronger bonds, extended and diversified their networks, and provided social support to individuals and families who had been socially isolated. They also connected and collaborated with other community efforts and networked across the 14 Best Start Communities to support and extend the vision of Best Start. While community members deepened their skills and knowledge about community needs and solutions, more can be done to extend capacity building opportunities beyond a small core group of emerging leaders. Moving forward, community members will also benefit from the ability to advocate and effectively engage with formal institutions and organizations. This will help broaden their social networks to include other stakeholders, supporters, and organizational partners that help advance the work. Finally, more can be done to help partnerships effectively leverage their networks and connect with other organizations, funding streams, and resources that share similar community or systems change agendas.

Building Capacity and Fostering Community Ownership

- Leadership development and decision-making guidelines are key ingredients for community ownership:** Best Start placed emphasis on engaging community members and building their capacity to advocate, participate in decision-making, build leadership skills, and engage in collective efforts to improve their communities. While capacity building is a long-term endeavor, during the last 18 months community members strengthened their skills and capacity to make data-informed decisions, co-design and co-lead meetings and planning processes, and to respectfully engage in difficult conversations with stakeholders who have diverse and divergent points of view. They also engaged in collective efforts ranging from events that improved community parks to working with local officials to improve relations and advocate for resources. During the past year, the concept of community ownership has been a hot topic among Best Start stakeholders. Community ownership can mean different things to different people and is complicated by tensions about who has the power, resources, influence, and authority to determine priorities and make decisions. Stakeholders expressed the need to clarify opportunities for Best Start Communities to *influence* decisions and opportunities to actually *make* them. More conversation and clarity is needed to help stakeholders better understand evolving roles, accountability structures, and by whom and how decisions are made. Finally, the literature acknowledges the importance of discussing race, equity and power in place-based initiatives. Addressing these significant inequities in marginalized communities requires many honest and uncomfortable conversations that take considerable facilitation skills. As difficult as the conversations may be, several Best Start stakeholders expressed that this capacity building area is essential to creating sustainable and positive community change.

Throughout this evaluation, the developmental evaluation team worked with diverse stakeholders to elevate key learnings and collectively interpret and make meaning of the many challenges, lessons, and achievements. It was a journey marked by transition, adaptation, and growth on multiple levels. This report highlights how First 5 LA and the Best Start Communities have learned and adapted through critical reflection; how social connections and collaboration have led to stronger networks and collective action; and how the Best Start Communities have increased their capacity to lead and own efforts to make their communities safe and healthy places for young children to grow and thrive.





INTRODUCTION

7

**BROADWAY-
MANCHESTER**

**CENTRAL
LONG BEACH**

**COMPTON-
EAST COMPTON**

**EAST
LOS ANGELES**

LANCASTER

METRO LA

**NORTHEAST
VALLEY**

PALMDALE

PANORAMA CITY

**SOUTHEAST LA
COUNTY CITIES**

**SOUTH EL MONTE/
EL MONTE**

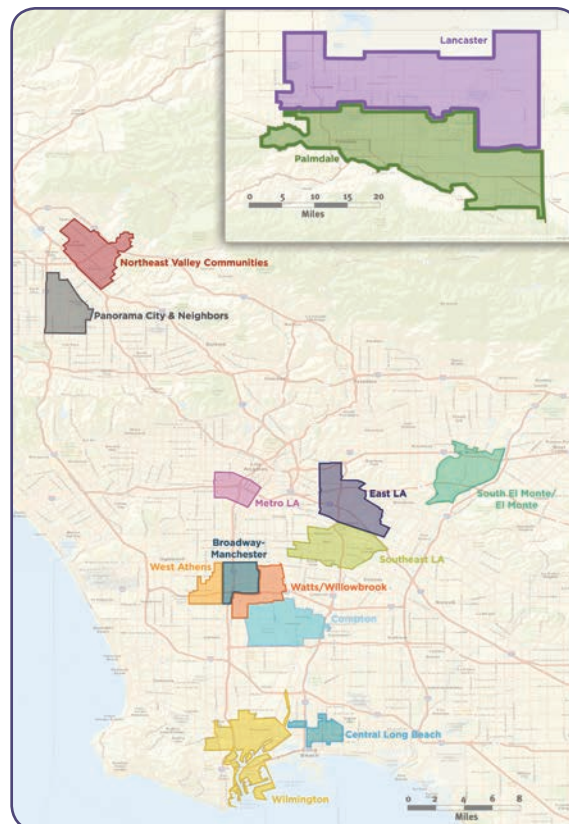
WEST ATHENS

**WATTS-
WILLOWBROOK**

WILMINGTON

Best Start is a place-based initiative of First 5 LA designed to improve the well-being of children and families in 14 communities across Los Angeles County. While all of these communities face critical challenges such as poverty, unemployment and high teen pregnancy rates, each has a strong network of local leaders and nonprofit organizations committed to making their communities a better place to live. Through Best Start, First 5 LA partners with parents and caregivers, residents, organizations, businesses, government institutions, and other stakeholders to promote a shared vision and collective will to create vibrant communities where young children and their families can thrive.⁶

Since the inception of Best Start in 2010, considerable time and energy have been invested in engaging diverse stakeholders, building trusting relationships, developing capacity, and creating the structures and processes to effectively engage in collective action. In early 2014, First 5 LA introduced several new and pivotal elements to help bring greater clarity and strengthen the overall work of Best Start. This included the introduction of a developmental evaluation that was designed to facilitate continuous learning and better understand what it takes to achieve results in a complex community change initiative.



**First 5 LA
Best Start Communities**

- Broadway-Manchester
- Central Long Beach
- Compton
- East LA
- Lancaster
- Metro LA
- Northeast Valley Communities
- Palmdale
- Panorama City & Neighbors
- Southeast LA
- South El Monte/El Monte
- Watts/Willowbrook
- West Athens
- Wilmington

⁶ Best Start website. <http://www.first5la.org/index.php?r=site/tag&cid=576>



THE EVOLVING NATURE OF BEST START

In early 2014, First 5 LA formally introduced the Building Stronger Families Framework (BSFF) which is based on the belief that families are central to ensuring that children are healthy, safe and prepared for school. It also recognizes that families thrive in the context of communities that provide them with support, services and opportunities to connect with one another.⁷ In addition to the BSFF, First 5 LA introduced a variety of other processes, structures and supports (described below) to advance capacity building efforts in the 14 Best Start Communities (BSCs). The Learning By Doing (LBD) process was implemented in early 2014 and was designed to lead Community Partnerships through the decision-making stages that ultimately lead to results-focused activities that strengthen families and their communities. LBD is an iterative process that allows all stakeholders to adjust and refine their strategies while deepening their relationships and building capacity for effective implementation. In the context of Best Start, the LBD process consisted of five main stages including: 1) choosing a family core result, 2) gathering the story behind the data, 3) choosing the target population, 4) identifying and choosing appropriate activities and strategies, and 5) implementing activities and tracking progress. As of the writing of this report, all 14 communities participated in this iterative process and are implementing or preparing to implement specific strategies in their respective communities.⁸ Both the BSFF and LBD process represented a pivotal shift in First 5 LA's place-based work with the goal of helping stakeholders better understand the complexity of community issues by focusing on results.

Building Stronger Families Framework (BSFF)

In 2014, First 5 LA began the rollout phase of the BSFF in the 14 Best Start Communities. With a six month investment of \$4.9 million, the plan emphasizes six family and community-level core results including:

- Family capacities – knowledgeable, resilient and nurturing parents
- Social connections – families participating in positive social networks
- Concrete supports – access to services and support that meet families' needs
- Coordinated services and supports that meet families' needs
- A common vision and collective will to strengthen families
- Social networks and safe spaces for recreation and interaction

⁷ From Commission meeting notes (June 26, 2013). <http://www.first5la.org/files/BestStartFrameworkRetreatPowerpoint.pdf>

⁸ See appendix A for an overview of the 14 Best Start Communities' core results and strategies.

In addition to introducing the new framework and LBD process, several other key components and players were introduced in early 2014. These new contributors joined an existing group of Best Start staff and community facilitators who had been supporting the 14 Community Partnerships since 2010. In the years leading up to this shift, each community had been working to engage members and build support, develop and strengthen their governance structures, and better understand community needs and assets. The new supports are briefly described below.

- **New Best Start Department Leadership:** First 5 LA hired a new Best Start director and an assistant director of planning and implementation, providing new perspective and direction for the initiative.
- **Developmental Evaluation (DE):** Given the complex and evolving nature of Best Start, First 5 LA opted to implement a developmental evaluation, contracting Harder+Company Community Research and Special Service for Groups (SSG) to help surface key learnings and insights in ways that inform and strengthen the work of all parties.
- **Resident Outreach Coordinators (ROCs):** Thirteen Resident Outreach Coordinators (ROCs) were hired through South Bay Center for Community Development (SBCC) to support outreach and engagement. Their role focused on outreach and engagement of community residents in Best Start activities.
- **Capacity Builders:** The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) was engaged to provide capacity building and technical support to each Community Partnership. Each community was assigned a capacity building liaison to identify capacity building needs and provide technical support that aligned with the BSFE.
- **Learning Teams:** First 5 LA introduced the learning team concept as a way to coordinate the existing and new contractors involved in Best Start, to provide technical assistance and help build capacity in the partnerships. Each community had a dedicated learning team comprised of a Best Start program officer and various contractors including a facilitator, capacity builder, resident outreach coordinator (ROC), and developmental evaluator. The purpose of the team was to support the partnership (specifically smaller workgroups within the partnerships known as “LBD workgroups”⁹) in planning, co-designing, and facilitating the LBD processes.



⁹ LBD workgroups consist of a small group of partnership members within each BSC who take part in planning and designing the LBD process.

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

Given the learning and adaptation inherent in place-based work, First 5 LA elected to employ a developmental evaluation (DE) approach to bring evaluative thinking to the community building process. This approach also used rapid feedback to help stakeholders refine their approaches and surface key learnings to inform decision-making.¹⁰ Unlike traditional evaluation where the focus is on summative assessment and accountability, DE is adaptive, nimble, and responsive to emerging issues and questions during the developmental phase of an initiative. While the evaluation was guided by key evaluation questions, it was also highly sensitive to themes as they unfolded. As new issues emerged, key evaluation questions (and therefore methods) were refined to address new areas of inquiry. Unlike traditional evaluators, developmental evaluators played the role of strategic partners and facilitators versus “passive observers,” continuously sharing information, asking questions, and encouraging critical thinking and reflection.

The evaluation team used a collaborative strengths-based approach with a heavy emphasis on stakeholder engagement, facilitated learning, and continuous reflection (for more information about the specific methods and limitations, please see appendix B). It is important to note that the design was intentionally flexible and responsive to issues and themes as they emerged in real time. It also placed emphasis on generating timely feedback in ways that promote continuous learning through oral debriefs, rapid feedback memos, learning briefs, facilitated reflective sessions and various other reports and discussions. The evaluation was not intended to assess change at the population level, but rather capture and share emergent issues and information about what aspects of the community building process were working and what could be reworked to improve results. Throughout the evaluation, the team attempted to rapidly elevate timely themes and insights in ways that helped shape, refine, and change strategies as needed. The developmental evaluation of Best Start took place over an 18-month period and included two phases or “learning cycles,” each approximately nine months in length with a set of guiding learning questions. The first learning cycle (Feb-Oct 2014) focused on:

- how learning contributed to adaptation and the evolution of the initiative
- challenges and effective strategies for engaging diverse stakeholders
- how diverse stakeholders collaborated and worked together toward a shared vision and collective action

The second learning cycle (Nov 2014 – June 2015), continued to examine many of the same areas with a focus on understanding:

- the facilitators and barriers to learning and adaptation
- how partnerships were collaborating and strengthening social connections
- how partnerships were strengthening their capacity to lead and own the community building process



¹⁰ First 5 LA (2013) “Building Stronger Families Framework Learning and Accountability Plan”

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report summarizes key learnings and insights from February 2014 – July 2015 and is based on various data sources, including field observations, focus groups and interviews with Best Start staff, contractors, and Community Partnership members in all 14 Best Start Communities. With an emphasis on collective learning, this report seeks to elevate key insights and catalyze discussions about ways to strengthen efforts moving forward. Specific goals include: (1) to document the progress of the Best Start initiative during the last 18 months, including challenges, promising strategies and major milestones; (2) to surface the most salient, timely, and usable findings in ways that inform ongoing learning, decision-making, and recalibration of strategies to create safe and healthy communities for young children and their families.¹¹ Throughout this report, particular attention is given to the following areas of inquiry:

- **Learning and Adapting:** How is the Best Start initiative evolving? What have the Community Partnerships and First 5 LA learned in the past 18 months and how is this learning being used to adapt, strengthen, and focus efforts?
- **Strengthening Social Connections and Collaboration:** Who is at the table? How are Community Partnerships strengthening their networks and social connections? How are Best Start partners collaborating and working together?
- **Building Capacity and Fostering Community Ownership:** How are Community Partnerships building their capacity to lead and own the community change process? How are they advocating for more favorable policies, resources, and services for young children, families, and the communities where they live?

¹¹ There is a substantial body of literature related to systems, community, and organizational change that points to the importance of adaptive factors such as the ability of individuals, organizations, communities to learn, adapt, and be nimble.





LEARNING & ADAPTING

BACKGROUND: WHY LEARNING AND ADAPTING MATTERS

Place-based initiatives are – at their core – an iterative process of learning by doing that allows all stakeholders to test theories, deepen relationships and build capacity to realize collective goals.¹² As simple as it may seem, learning while doing requires an intentional approach with structured opportunities to discuss, reflect and translate learning into meaningful knowledge, improved practice, and action. Even with a commitment to learning, a funder’s institutional culture and practices can sometimes undermine this critical aspect of place-based work. Likewise, dynamics in the community – including lack of trust and underlying tensions about equity and power, can also stifle attempts to create an open and respectful exchange that values diverse and divergent opinions. This is a common challenge among place-based initiatives and, like Best Start, the literature suggests that many place-based initiatives struggle to strike a balance between the need to act and taking the time to pause and reflect on what’s working or what needs to change.¹³ Ultimately, one of the most important aspects of learning by doing is that learning is translated into new skills, improved practice, and reformulated strategies.¹⁴

Several Best Start staff and contractors acknowledged that creating a learning environment was challenging and required a shift in culture and practice as well as a commitment to honest and transparent dialogue. This section highlights key challenges, insights, and progress related to learning and adapting at both the funder and community-level. Specifically, it focuses on (1) how First 5 LA created more space, structure, and opportunities for organizational learning and learning in the 14 Best Start Communities and (2) how both First 5 LA and Best Start Communities used lessons learned to refine their thinking, adapt their approach, and chart a future course for the initiative.

“WHEN YOU DO, YOU FEEL MORE CONFIDENT AND WANT TO DO MORE. PEOPLE FEEL THEY ARE MORE A PART OF SOMETHING AND EXPRESS THEMSELVES IN A TANGIBLE WAY AND CAN GET RESULTS AS OPPOSED TO SOMEONE TELLING THEM WHAT TO DO.”

COMMUNITY MEMBER

¹² Based on Literature Review conducted by Harder+Company (Nov 2011). “Best Practices in Place-based Initiatives: Implications for Implementation and Evaluation of Best Start.” In collaboration with Prudence Brown (national place-based consultant) and Juarez and Associates (Nov. 2011)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid



Overcoming Challenges: Reflections on Learning and Adapting

In the early phases of LBD, community members, contractors, and Best Start staff identified the following challenges to learning and adapting:

- **Fast-paced nature of LBD process:** Initially there was considerable pressure to complete LBD phases based on unrealistic timelines that ultimately did not support learning and capacity building.
- **Overly complex concepts:** Contractors and community members alike struggled to translate theoretical concepts and terms into language and experiences with which the community could relate.
- **Fear of making mistakes:** Pressure to get things right and stay on track often led staff and contractors to do more leading than coaching and supporting.
- **Lack of role clarity:** Similar to other place-based initiatives, stakeholders grappled with role clarity, especially as roles changed and evolved over time.
- **Translating learning into action:** According to some stakeholders, the initial stages of the LBD process were overly focused on “business meetings” and had “crammed agendas” with little focus on actionable steps to improve the community.

KEY FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED



KEY FINDING: Structured opportunities to reflect and learn build capacity and promote shared vision

The literature on place-based initiatives indicates that structured spaces and opportunities need to be in place to promote learning. Different approaches are often necessary to engage diverse types of learners, including peer networking, team problem-solving, small group exercises, communities of practice, reflective practice, learning retreats, collaborative inquiry, and exposure to experts and readings.¹⁵ As part of the introduction of the Building Stronger Families Framework in early 2014, First 5 LA began to implement several approaches and strategies to better support learning and capacity building efforts in the 14 Best Start Communities. As mentioned earlier, each community engaged in a structured Learning by Doing (LBD) process which was designed to guide planning using data and insights to make informed decisions about community priorities. Technical assistance contractors formed learning teams to support the Community Partnerships with facilitation, data and evaluation, capacity building and outreach efforts.

First 5 LA created a variety of opportunities and venues to promote learning during the last 18 months, some of which were planned and intentional (i.e. cross-site learning communities) while others emerged in response to opportunity or need (i.e. reflective sessions with contractors, staff, and partnerships). Attempts were made to engage participants with diverse learning styles and different roles at key points in time. Specific examples for both organizational and community learning are outlined below.

Examples of structures and strategies for organizational learning

- **Contractor reflective sessions** convened learning teams (Best Start program officer, facilitator, capacity builder, ROC and DE) to discuss emerging issues and potential steps for improvement, while smaller **lead contractor meetings** brought together leaders from each contractor agency to discuss challenges and identify ways to better align their work. Contractor meetings took place every 3-6 months, while the community-specific learning teams were meeting, reflecting and planning on a regular basis.

¹⁵ Meehan, D., Casteneda, N., & Salvesen, A. (2011). “The Role of Leadership in Place-based Initiatives.” Report prepared for The California Endowment by the Leadership Learning Community. Available at: www.leadershiplearning.org.



- **A Best Start Department “Spirit Week,”** held in December of 2014, was not initially planned and was driven by the need to take stock and give staff time to reflect on the key lessons from the early phases of work and clarify goals and next steps to guide their work.
- **Department leadership meetings** and **developmental evaluation coffee hours** were facilitated by developmental evaluators to bring “rapid feedback” to staff regarding implementation issues. These meetings provided opportunities to discuss cross-community issues and themes and identify ways to strengthen implementation efforts.
- **Organizational rapid feedback memos** were also developed by the DE team to surface timely issues that emerged across the Best Start Communities and provide a deeper dive on certain topics (e.g., capacity building, implementation of LBD, learning team dynamics). Given the fast-paced nature of the work, written communications in the form of rapid memos or emails, allowed the DE team to quickly bring issues to the attention of Best Start staff and contractors, which helped to ensure a more timely response. The DE team also gave reflective feedback to the learning teams on a regular basis through e-mails, conversations, and meetings.

Examples of structures and strategies for community learning

- **Learning communities:** To facilitate learning at the community-level, First 5 LA created opportunities for the 14 Best Start Communities to share experiences through quarterly **peer learning communities** that brought together members to learn and share promising practices and strategies and engage in open dialogue with Best Start staff. The Best Start department also hired a program officer to focus exclusively on supporting learning within the department as well as coordinate learning across Best Start Communities. A total of five peer learning communities were organized by First 5 LA during the 18 month period.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE & RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Since the implementation of LBD, nearly all Community Partnerships have created space and opportunities to share, learn, and raise awareness about local resources. Community members, Best Start staff, and contractors have all noted the transformation of partnerships into “community hubs” where residents, parents, and providers come together to share information and resources. Providing a venue where parents and residents can learn about community resources is vital in getting them connected to the services and resources they need.

Many of the communities have set aside time at monthly meetings for local organizations and leaders to present and share information. For example, **Best Start Palmdale** invited the city mayor, librarian, and the Los Angeles County Fire Department to talk about resources, respond to questions, and listen to recommendations for improving local services. The **Best Start Panorama City & Neighbors (PCN)** leadership members regularly reach out to local service providers to arrange presentations at partnership meetings. Ongoing discussions between presenters and leadership members help to ensure presentations are responsive to community interests.

A few communities have worked to raise awareness about timely issues in their respective communities. For example, **Best Start Southeast LA (SELA)** partnered with the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (DMH) to coordinate and provide parenting and stress management workshops at partnership meetings. The **Best Start Compton/East Compton** partnership members coordinated and hosted an educational resource fair to help teen parents learn about counseling, college, and other educational resources. Over 100 teen parents attended the fair. Best Start Compton/East Compton also sponsored a high school graduation ceremony for teen parents and reported that 90% of those at the ceremony are pursuing higher education.



- **Community reflective sessions and debriefs:** These sessions were facilitated by developmental evaluators in the 14 communities and included various interactive activities that gathered community knowledge and insights about a particular issue (e.g., social networks, building capacity, and social capital) and provided opportunities for members to learn from and share with one another (see appendices C & D). The reflective sessions formally happened at three different points during the 18 month period and were used to gather input as well as engage community members in using and discussing data. **Community-specific briefs** were developed following these sessions as a way to document and share key learnings as well as catalyze further discussions among community members. In addition, the evaluation leads were continuously engaging in reflective discussions at the community-level on a monthly basis.

“...WE HAVE TO BE COMFORTABLE WITH MAKING MISTAKES... THAT IS LEARNING BY DOING.”

BEST START STAFF MEMBER

While some of the structures mentioned above were planned from the start, many were opportunistic or adapted to strengthen the frequency and diversity of learning venues. Through some experimentation, these venues and learning opportunities led to deeper discussions about emerging issues and collective problem-solving among stakeholders. For example, the release of the mid-term DE report was accompanied by the first official reflective session, engaging all Best Start staff and contractors in discussions about progress and challenges during the initial stages of LBD. This facilitated venue proved to be an effective approach to learning by creating structured space to pause, take stock, clarify collective goals, and identify strategies for strengthening the work ahead. Participants also expressed that these opportunities, which were sometimes rich with divergent views and debate, helped to build a sense of collective purpose. Based on that initial success, it was later replicated at various points in time and within each of the Best Start Communities.



KEY FINDING: Effective management of Best Start requires flexibility and a commitment to listen, learn, respond, and adapt

Reflection is that point in the learning cycle where stakeholders pause to make meaning and use it to inform future action.¹⁶ With more structured venues and intentional opportunities to pause and reflect, the Best Start department and Community Partnerships began to more fully integrate a reflective practice into their ongoing work. As mentioned in the previous section, structured reflective sessions created space for thoughtful discussion and a much needed opportunity to refocus on the big picture. Many Best Start staff, contractors, and community partners expressed value in opportunities to reflect on lessons learned as well as the overall purpose and vision of Best Start. A Best Start department staff member described the integration of a reflective practice as a turning point for the department, “We are constantly running a million miles a minute. We are in doing mode. We don’t have a lot of time to think through and reflect in order to make adjustments. [...] When we decided to stop for a moment that was the first time we – as a complete staff – took a comprehensive view of what we’re doing and what actually happened.” Specific examples of reflection and adaptation are highlighted on the next page.

¹⁶ Based on literature review conducted by Harder+Company (Nov 2011). “Best Practices in Place-based Initiatives: Implications for Implementation and Evaluation of Best Start.” In collaboration with Prudence Brown (national place-based consultant) and Juarez and Associates (Nov. 2011)



- **Responding to community feedback and needs:** During the early months of LBD, there was considerable push-back from community members and contractors who felt the process was overly complex and driven by funder timelines and agendas. For many, this led to the feeling that the work was “all planning and no action.” Evaluation feedback during the first learning cycle also surfaced confusion about the roles and expectations of learning team members and how that was diverting attention away from learning and community capacity building efforts. As issues surfaced and evaluation feedback was shared with the Best Start department, difficult decisions needed to be made about staying the course or making adjustments. The initial response of Best Start leadership was to take steps to slow down, reconsider timelines, and listen to community feedback. Best Start leadership acknowledged that they “made things too complicated,” from the language used to the number of people involved, which was ultimately, “a recipe for confusion.” While it was difficult to make significant course corrections in the midst of the LBD process, the Best Start department responded with more flexible timelines, clearer parameters and guidelines, and increased communication with the Best Start Communities about the work. More time and attention was also given to learning, reflection and capacity building, all of which became more prevalent in the second learning cycle (Oct 2014-July 2015).

- **Fostering deeper dialogue with community partners:** Through the learning communities, First 5 LA provided a venue for community members to share and deepen their connections while engaging in more dialogue with First 5 LA. One Best Start staff member described how the quarterly learning communities evolved from sessions designed to present information to “more genuine conversations with the community” over time. While recognizing that these conversations had sometimes been contentious and difficult, staff noted “we need to have more reflections together with the community.” One stakeholder observed that First 5 LA is “even more inclusive of community input and is actually using it. In the past [First 5 LA was] seeking input but didn’t know how it impacted the work.” Additionally, these meetings created space for community members to voice their concerns and help shape the future direction of Best Start. For example, at one learning community, participants asked for more information and transparency about how Best Start is structured and how funding decisions are made. During a post meeting debrief, staff reflected on the need to demystify and better communicate how First 5 LA functions (including funding decisions and structural constraints). As a result staff intensified their efforts to more clearly

communicate, share, and discuss how organizational operations impact the work. In general, this feedback loop has started to influence First 5 LA in other ways. Most recently, the Best Start department has engaged community representatives to support communications and work with First 5 LA as it navigates upcoming transitions and phases of Best Start. While this is still in an early stage of development, it is another example of how learning and reflection is shaping relationships and informing adaptations to strategies, practices and next steps. Finally, community reflective sessions and debriefs allowed members to dive deeper into community-specific issues and use data and community wisdom to reflect, discuss, and strategize about how to respond to the conditions in their communities.

“**DE HAS HELPED BUILD THE CAPACITY OF THE COMMUNITY TO GET TO KNOW DATA AND KNOW THAT DATA IS THEIR FRIEND, AND THAT DATA IS A VERY IMPORTANT PIECE IN MAKING INFORMED DECISIONS.**”



- **Refining roles and models:** Another example of using lessons to strengthen Best Start is exemplified in the evolving role of Best Start staff and contractors. During the first learning cycle (Feb-Sept 2014), it became increasingly clear that the role and purpose of learning teams was posing challenges and the LBD process had become “contractor and staff heavy.”¹⁷ Both Best Start staff and contractors acknowledged that considerable time was spent trying to clarify team roles and expectations rather than focusing on community capacity building. Furthermore, multiple stakeholders and observations revealed that many community members wanted to take the lead in facilitation and outreach in their communities, questioning why contractors were paid to do this work. In other communities, members expressed appreciation for the support of contractors but were eager for the opportunity to take on more leadership. Developmental evaluation (DE) feedback (via rapid feedback memos) and facilitated reflective sessions with staff and contractors led to a common agreement that all members of the learning team (contractors and Best Start staff) shared the responsibility of building the communities’ capacity to ultimately take on leadership roles. As a result, both staff and contractors began to more intentionally engage community members in meaningful ways and contemplate their roles as “coaches” rather than “implementers.” For example, learning teams began to engage more community members in co-designing and co-facilitating meetings, as opposed to just using

them as sounding boards. Part of this shift came from the realization that learning teams were holding the reigns too tight or were afraid that things wouldn’t go smoothly if they handed them over too soon. As a result of these reflections, First 5 LA began to discuss transitioning program officers and contractors to support roles and creating opportunities for community members to take more leadership. At the time of this report, these transitions were still a work in progress and caused some anxiety and confusion in the community. Engaging a community advisory group to help First 5 LA manage these transitions is a positive step, however, it will continue to be important to develop transition plans and clear messaging about why and how these transitions will take place.

“NOW WE ARE REALLY STARTING TO CREATE SPACES TO HAVE THE COMMUNITY INFORM OUR PROCESS.”

BEST START STAFF MEMBER

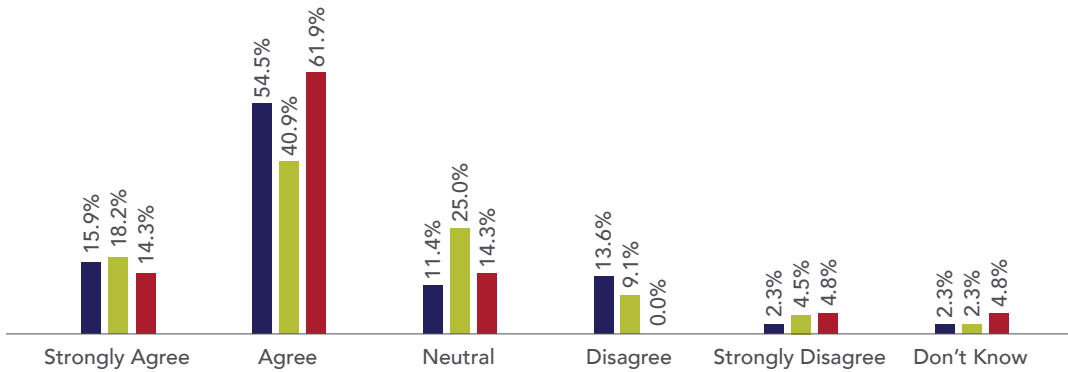
- **Institutionalizing a culture of learning and reflection:** In June 2015, the DE team surveyed Best Start staff and contractors to seek input on the extent to which continuous feedback, learning and reflection contribute to shared knowledge, improved practices, and the strengthening of Best Start.¹⁸ Of the 44 individuals who responded, the majority (76%) agreed or strongly agreed that the developmental evaluation helped bring a learning lens to the work by promoting a culture of learning and evaluative inquiry. Nearly 60% agreed or strongly agreed that this learning orientation helped to support adaptation at the funder-level by providing feedback that informed refinements to processes, procedures, and communication (see Exhibit 1). While some staff and contractors felt that changes at the funder-level were either slow or difficult to discern, many mentioned that rapid feedback helped to improve the implementation of LBD by surfacing challenges and community concerns to Best Start leadership. Staff and contractors also noted changes and adaptations at the community-level, highlighting how evaluation feedback helped to ensure that decision-making included the voice of community members, was informed by community-specific data, and reflected the community experience. They also observed that community members became more reflective, applied critical thinking and data in their decision-making, and increased their confidence and ownership in the planning process. Others noted that the rapid feedback and reflection helped communities evaluate their decision-making processes and increase meeting effectiveness by focusing on goals and objectives.

¹⁷ Based on DE observations as well as feedback from Best Start staff and contractors

¹⁸ The DE Reflection survey was sent to 86 individuals, including Best Start staff, Best Start support staff and contractors that made up the learning team. Out of the 86 individuals, 44 completed the survey for a response rate of 51%.



EXHIBIT 1. Best Start Staff and Contractor DE feedback (n=44)

**DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION HAS HELPED...**

- ...First 5 LA and the Best Start department incorporate learning and reflection into their process and practice.
- ...support First 5 LA and the Best Start Department in making adaptations or refinements to their processes or approach (e.g. procedures, criteria, communications, etc.)
- ...promote a culture of learning, evaluative inquiry, and reflections within the Best Start Partnerships and leadership bodies.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

Learning and Adapting

Creating intentional time and space for reflection and learning is a common challenge for many place-based initiatives. In the last year and a half, First 5 LA made important strides in creating structures and bringing a learning lens to the work, both at the community-level and within the organization. Through this process, staff came to reflect on existing organizational mindsets and practices that can either facilitate or impede genuine reflection, learning, and adaptation. The following highlights key considerations for First 5 LA as it strives to model and embed continuous learning into the DNA of the organization and the Best Start initiative.





- **Assess existing learning structures.** Through the various learning structures and venues (learning communities, reflective sessions, and contractor convenings), First 5 LA provided opportunities to engage in collective learning and knowledge generation in real time. Some of these structures were planned while others were opportunistic or emerged out of need. Moving forward, First 5 LA should continue to create and assess opportunities to take stock of how its organizational structures, practices and expectations facilitate or hinder efforts to incorporate a learning culture – both within the organization and the Best Start Communities. First 5 LA and the Best Start Communities should continue to be nimble and attuned to the ever-changing context as well as key points in time when stakeholders may need to pause, take stock and re-focus on the shared vision and goals of Best Start.
- **Institutionalize space and time for reflection, learning and adapting.** First 5 LA should continue to be intentional in incorporating reflective practice and evaluative thinking into its work. Dedicating time to reflect – whether at the end of a meeting or at key points in an initiative’s development, can help bring renewed clarity and direction to complex and ever-evolving community change efforts. For example, the one week pause in December 2014 (described as “Spirit Week”) gave Best Start staff an opportunity to reflect on what they were learning and what needed to shift moving forward. Several staff noted the importance and positive impact of this pause and felt it was an important practice to continue.¹⁹ Likewise, designating time in partnership meetings to build relationships and promote learning is also essential. It is also critical to make sure learning and reflection is translated into shared knowledge, improved practice, and actionable solutions within First 5 LA and in the Best Start Communities.²⁰
- **Continue to use diverse approaches to meet the different learning styles of various stakeholders.** Given the diversity of learning styles, multiple vehicles and approaches are often needed to make learning relevant and meaningful to all parties.²¹ First 5 LA refined and adapted various approaches during the first year, such as promoting more community-friendly language, fewer formal PowerPoint presentations, and more hands-on and dynamic activities that promoted social connections. Finally, reflective sessions often involved informal interactive activities that helped participants learn, share and discuss their points of view on a particular topic in small group settings. Reflective sessions have shown to be effective learning approaches at the organizational and community-level, and the Best Start initiative would benefit from their continued use.

¹⁹ Based on focus groups with Best Start staff. (See appendices E & F.)

²⁰ Based on Literature Review conducted by Harder+Company (Nov 2011). “Best Practices in Place-based Initiatives: Implications for Implementation and Evaluation of Best Start.” In collaboration with Prudence Brown (national place-based consultant) and Juarez and Associates (Nov. 2011)

²¹ Meehan, D., Casteneda, N., & Salvesen, A. (2011). “The Role of Leadership in Place-based Initiatives.” Report prepared for The California Endowment by the Leadership Learning Community. Available at: www.leadershiplearning.org.





STRENGTHENING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS & COLLABORATION

BACKGROUND

Why social connections matter

Historically, social change efforts have been the product of many people and organizations working together in tight or loosely connected groups to improve conditions, address inequities, and strengthen communities. Like other community change initiatives, Best Start is about community building and bringing people together to improve conditions for young children, families and the communities in which they live. Trust and relationship building are key ingredients for successful place-based work and create the necessary conditions for residents, community-based organizations, service providers, and policy makers to engage in collective action.^{22,23}

According to the literature, trust is a dimension of social capital, defined as the “features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act more effectively and pursue shared objectives.”²⁴

A key area of inquiry for the developmental evaluation of Best Start was to understand how Best Start Community Partnership members were strengthening their relationships and building their social networks within and outside the partnerships. The following section provides key insights, challenges, and progress related to the evolution of social connections and networks. Specifically, this section will provide (1) an overview of partnership member demographics to understand the stakeholders who are working together in this initiative, (2) structures and opportunities to build connections within Best Start and in the broader community, (3) the strengthening of social connections and collaboration within the Community Partnerships, and, (4) the expansion of social networks in the broader community.

²² “Place-based Initiatives Transforming Communities,” Proceedings from the Place-based Approaches Roundtable. (2012). Murdoch Children’s Research Institute.

²³ Kubisch, A. C., Auspos, P., Brown, P., & Dewar, T. (2010). “Voices from the Field III: Lessons and Challenges from Two Decades of Community Change Efforts.” Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute.

²⁴ Putnam, R. D. (2000). “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.” New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.





Best Start Community Partnership demographics: Who is at the table?

First 5 LA's Building Stronger Families Framework highlights the importance of building social connections, collective action and shared vision. Through Community Partnerships, Best Start created opportunities for parents, service providers, and community stakeholders to connect, build relationships, and collaborate to improve outcomes for children ages 0-5 and their families. Best Start also facilitated connections with the broader community and built momentum across all 14 communities to ensure that families and communities are stronger and "children are healthy, safe and prepared for school."

EXHIBIT 2 Race/Ethnicity (n=555)

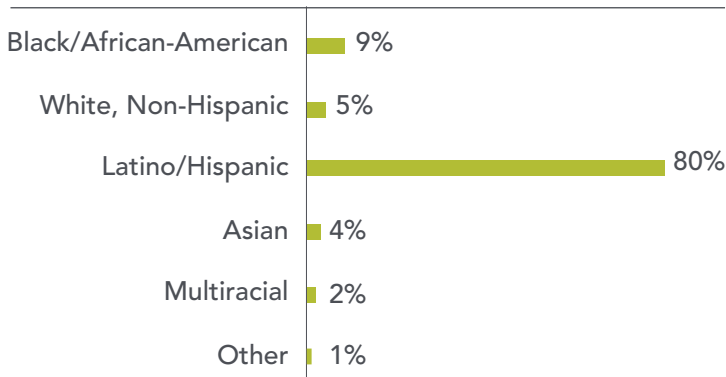


EXHIBIT 3 Primary Language (n=566)

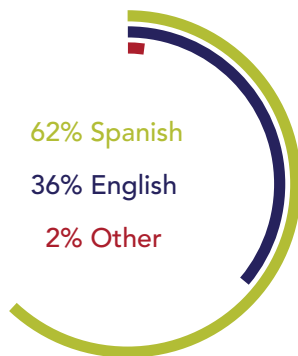


EXHIBIT 4 Roles



63%
PARENTS



56%
COMMUNITY RESIDENTS

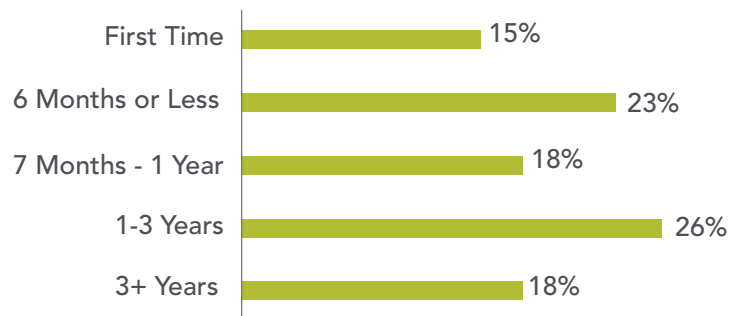


34%
SERVICE PROVIDERS



13%
OTHER

EXHIBIT 5 Length in Best Start Partnership (n=543)



Throughout the last 18 months, data was gathered (through community reflective sessions, focus groups, and observations) from the Best Start Communities to better understand member engagement, social connections and collaboration. In the spring of 2015, community reflective sessions were conducted in the 14 communities, gathering demographic information and community insights regarding social connections, collaboration and network building. While not all Best Start Partnership members participated in these sessions, the data reflects a fairly representative sub-sample of the total number of partnership members and provides an initial understanding of who is at the table and how members are working together. Overall, 566 members of Best Start Partnerships participated in the reflective sessions, with the majority identifying as parents/residents (56-63%), Hispanic/Latino (80%), primarily Spanish-speaking (62%) and female (90%). Partnership members were a mean age of 43.6 years and 38.5% had at least one child under the age of six. In terms of participation, about 44% have been attending meetings for more than 1 year, while 15% were new and attending their very first meeting at the time of the reflective session.

²⁵ see Appendix C for methods used in these sessions

²⁶ see Appendix D for more descriptive cross-community data from the community reflective sessions



KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED



KEY FINDING: Best Start has created structures and opportunities to strengthen social connections and collaboration

Throughout the last 18 months, Community Partnerships have strengthened social connections, working collaboratively and making decisions around shared goals. However, the first several months of LBD implementation made strengthening connections difficult given the complex and timeline-driven nature of the process. Early in the process, many stakeholders expressed that more focus was placed on completing the stages of LBD and less on making the time and space for meaningful connections and allowing relationships to flourish. There was also concern about keeping existing members engaged and orienting new members to the work. In addition, it takes time to develop trusting relationships especially between parents/residents and formal organizations (i.e., community based organizations, First 5 LA) given the history of mistrust and negative experiences many of these communities may have had with formal systems and institutions.

Regardless, many Best Start Communities were able to address these challenges. During interviews and focus groups with contractors and staff, many noted more active participation among community members at meetings, and respectful sharing of diverse opinions and points of view. Building social connections became the priority for many of the Best Start Communities and five of them chose social connections as their priority focus, recognizing that without strong relationships it would be difficult to achieve their collective goals. In many ways, Best Start played a critical role in creating space and opportunities for residents to come together in both organized and informal ways, which helped to address some of the challenges that emerged early on. Specific examples for these Best Start structures are outlined on the next page.

Overcoming Challenges: Reflections on Social Connections and Collaboration

Community members, Best Start staff, and contractors shared the following key challenges to building social connections and collaboration.

- **Trust takes time.** Genuine trusting relationships among stakeholders take time to develop, and require patience, mutual respect, and understanding of diverse perspectives and needs.
- **Minimal opportunities to connect.** During the early implementation of LBD, stakeholders expressed limited opportunities for partnership members to connect and strengthen relationships in meaningful ways.
- **Few members in leadership groups.** Smaller numbers of partnership members engaged in more focused planning work (e.g., leadership/guidance bodies), limiting opportunities for more members to engage in collaborative work.
- **Difficultly keeping momentum.** Due to the fast-paced, and timeline-driven complex LBD process, Community Partnerships struggled with keeping existing members engaged and new members up to speed with the work.



Structures promoting social connections and collaboration

- **BSC Partnership meetings** convened on a monthly or bi-monthly basis to discuss issues related to the health and well-being of children ages 0-5, as well as plan and develop strategies to address their community's needs. The work of the Community Partnership was an opportunity for members to share their concerns, work collaboratively to identify solutions, and vote on key decisions. Many communities included “ice breaker” and “parent café” activities to promote fun and interactive ways for members to get to know each other on a personal level.
- **Leadership (or guidance body) meetings and LBD workgroups** brought together a smaller group of Community Partnership members to engage in more focused planning. Leadership members worked closely over the last 18 months with learning team members during the LBD process. This included collaborating and co-developing agendas and strategies.
- **Learning communities** brought together representatives from all 14 Best Start Communities to discuss their work and share what they learned through interactive activities. Several stakeholders expressed the benefit of having a shared space for members from across all the communities to have open and honest dialogue about promising strategies and challenges.
- **Community learning teams** were initiated by residents in a few communities (in addition to contractor teams) to help interpret, use, and share data with the broader partnership. These community-driven groups helped unpack concepts, requirements, and processes in a way that makes sense for their communities.

“THIS HAS REALLY IMPACTED MY LIFE. BEFORE I WAS ISOLATED; I DIDN'T KNOW TOO MANY PEOPLE. THROUGH THESE CONNECTIONS AND MEETINGS I'VE FELT BETTER.”

COMMUNITY MEMBER



“WE’VE SEEN A STRENGTHENED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SERVICE PROVIDERS AND PARENTS/RESIDENTS. AN INTENTIONAL REACH ACROSS THE AISLE.”

PARTNERSHIP MEMBER

- **Outreach and communications committees** were formed in several communities to help promote new participation and members, and to support member engagement. These groups were typically led by First 5 LA staff (e.g., program officers or public affairs staff) in collaboration with partnership members. Often, these committees worked closely with the Resident Outreach Coordinators to ensure alignment of activities. In some communities, these committees were exploring processes for how Best Start Partnerships can participate in and sponsor local community events.

In addition to the existing internal Best Start structures that promoted social connections and collaboration, there were efforts implemented outside the immediate partnerships that encouraged greater connections between members and the broader community. According to some stakeholder groups, the Resident Outreach Coordinators (ROCs)²⁷ played a role in helping build connections that take place in the broader community. As one stakeholder explained, “One of the ROCs has been asked by the external workgroup to teach participants how to approach a resident and how to invite them to be part of the movement. A year ago, they would not ask [the ROC] for any training, but a year later they realized I can learn something from the ROC.” The role of the ROCs also evolved over the last 18 months. Initially their focus was to help bring new members to the partnerships and share the needs of the broader community back to the partnerships. Now they are working more closely with partnership members to identify ways to strengthen relationships outside of meetings and build leadership capacity. For example, some Community Partnerships worked with ROCs to form “connection groups,” where parents can meet outside partnership meetings to discuss issues that are important to them, all while engaging in interactive activities such as knitting circles.





KEY FINDING: Best Start Community Partnerships strengthened their connections and capacity to collaborate as a leadership body

The Best Start Community Partnerships were described by focus group participants as community “hubs” where parents, residents, and community-based organizations come together to build relationships, learn about community needs and assets, build social support, and work toward shared goals. During the last 18 months, community-level data (e.g., observations, reflective sessions, focus groups) examined the evolving relationships between these stakeholder groups and the various structures (e.g., partnership meetings, leadership groups) that promote social connections and collaboration.

While the structures noted earlier were intended to promote social connections and collaboration, there were also some challenges. For example, while partnership meetings created space for social connections to occur between the majority of partnership members, workgroups such as leadership or guidance body meetings brought a smaller group to collaborate in planning and co-developing agendas. Stakeholders expressed both benefits

and drawbacks to this approach. Many stakeholders explained that smaller groups fostered deeper connections and trust, noting, “I often hear community members referring to the leadership group as a family. That bond and connection has really taken root over the last 10-11 months.” On the other hand, this approach relied on a small number of leaders to move the work forward and caused some members to feel fatigued. As one stakeholder explained, “The model is great, but it falls on 14 people, and how do we extend the network?”

“**PARTICIPATING HAD OPENED DOORS TO CONNECT WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS...COMING TO BEST START MEETINGS HELPS MAKE THOSE CONNECTIONS.**”

PARTNERSHIP MEMBER

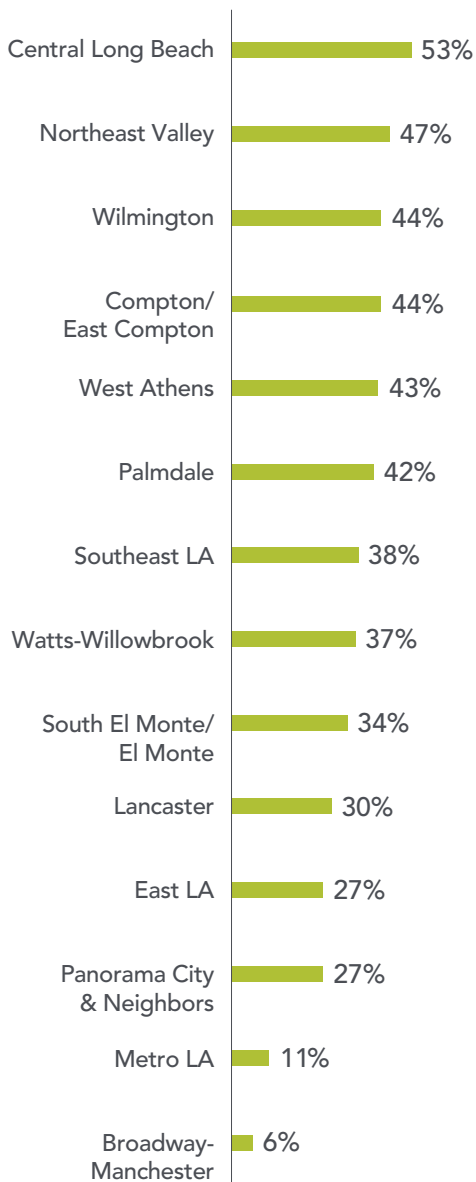
Another challenge was the limited representation and engagement of CBOs in the partnership and in the smaller workgroups (see Exhibit 6). Across most communities, leadership groups and committees were primarily composed of parents and residents, while agency representatives had a limited presence and role. As one participant described, “We don’t have a lot of CBOs involved in our leadership meetings.” Others explained that the role of service providers was often limited to providing informational presentations. DE observations during the last year also found that CBOs remained somewhat segregated to “CBO tables” in some communities, (sometimes due to language barriers), preventing CBOs from deeper engagement with community members. While the goal was to have resident-driven partnerships, CBOs were considered a valuable asset. Overall, this implies the need for more opportunities for organizations and parents to strengthen their relationships and engage more fully as partners in the process.

²⁷ As mention earlier in this report, Resident Outreach Coordinators (ROCs) were hired through South Bay Center for Community Development (SBCC) to support outreach and engagement. Their role focused on outreach and engagement of community residents in Best Start activities.



Despite these challenges, feedback from community stakeholders, Best Start staff, and contractors clearly indicated important gains in building social connections and support between individual residents and with community based organizations that are part of the partnerships. Specific examples of the evolving nature of these relationships and networks are highlighted below.

EXHIBIT 6 Percentage of Community Based Organization Representatives in BSC Partnership



* This data is based on the number of participating members during reflective sessions and therefore may not be a true reflection of actual CBO representation.

- **Providing social support and reducing isolation:** While partnership meetings brought people together to achieve common goals, they also provided a type of social safety net for residents who may have few opportunities to connect with other parents and caregivers with young children or who were reluctant to connect with others due to language barriers. Partnership members found opportunities to connect on an individual level, share their struggles and achievements, and offer each other emotional and social support. For example, during focus groups and observations, many community members said the opportunity to connect with other parents and individuals was one of the most beneficial aspects of Best Start. One parent explained how hearing about others' diverse experiences and struggles resulted in a mutual understanding that, "My concerns are their concerns as well." Another community member explained, "More than anything we support each other morally." For others, Best Start was a place for acceptance and belonging. "I thought it was awful when I moved here. Then I started coming here. I found my people. It's been amazing. I feel like you guys are my people." Contractors and Best Start staff also had similar sentiments about the impact the partnership meetings had on members' sense of social and emotional support: "Some of our parents and residents had a feeling of isolation, but now there is a venue for them to come and talk about their issues. [They] now have a community forum to meet other parents. People come to share information and it's almost become like a social hub."
- **Strengthening connections between residents and community organizations:** Findings from focus groups and reflective sessions suggest the need for increased engagement and connections between residents and service providers to overcome mistrust and increase awareness about community resources. Presentations by CBOs at partnership meetings were an important way for parents and residents to learn more about community resources and how to engage with local service providers. One stakeholder observed, "I noticed how engaged community members were with those presentations. They are talking to the agencies at the end. That partnership has helped build connections to the agencies." CBOs also benefited from these connections by learning firsthand about the community's needs and priorities. As one service provider explained, "It's all about building relationships. I felt like in the past I didn't have much connection to the community. The partnership has helped me learn from the community itself." Additionally, providers learned more about each other and their broader social service network as explained by one service provider, "It is good to see more partnerships between agencies. Before, they were 'siloed,' now they are building contacts, sharing resources, and re-referring."



BEST START COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS ARE BUILDING CONNECTIONS AND ENGAGING THE BROADER COMMUNITY

During the last 18 months, the Best Start Communities were strengthening connections within their partnerships and in the broader community. Many communities were able to bring new members to the table and others were discussing ways to engage other residents and partners, such as faith-based organizations or groups who are not well-represented.

In **Best Start Lancaster**, through the support of the Resident Outreach Coordinator (ROC), Best Start members have carved out spaces to connect with other parents and residents. In July 2015, they held a Family Fun Day which over 350 parents, children, and community residents attended. People were able to learn about Best Start and other community resources, connect with other parents and families, and enjoy a day of family activities. Partnership members were pivotal in the creation and success of this event and spoke about the importance of social connections, especially in a community where parent isolation is a large concern.

The South LA Best Start Communities have worked on engaging specific populations. For example, Best Start West Athens and Best Start Compton/East Compton aim to engage teen parents as a core part of their partnership. They have worked with First 5 LA public affairs and an outside communications agency to create an outreach and communications plan to engage teen parents. Best Start Watts-Willowbrook partnership members have already seen great success in engaging pregnant teens and young parents. Over the last 18 months, the Watt-Willowbrook leadership worked with a local continuation school, which has a large population of pregnant teens and teen parents, to increase their involvement in Best Start. Pregnant teens and teen parents, particularly women, have started attending the Best Start Watts/Willowbrook meeting, have increased their involvement in regional Best Start activities, and now have a voice in the leadership group.

Lastly, **Best Start East LA community members** have increased social connections and collaboration as a result of their work in the Community Based Action Research (CBAR) project. Part of the East LA CBAR project looked at the access and utilization of green spaces in the community. Parents and community residents worked closely for almost a year – they met biweekly, conducted surveys and observations, and worked together to develop recommendations for the partnership and for policy makers. As a result of this process, parents noted that they feel more connected to one another and the community. A subset of this group has become increasingly involved with the LA Neighborhood Land Trust and other partners who work to increase access to and utilization of green spaces in East LA. They have joined park clean ups and have helped conduct surveys as part of larger ‘green spaces needs assessments’. **By coming together parents are increasing their collaboration, capacity, and leadership.**



KEY FINDING: Best Start Community Partnerships strengthened their connections with the broader community

Observations and reflective sessions with the 14 communities revealed that partnerships were building awareness of Best Start in the broader community and strengthening their connections with groups outside of the partnerships. Some partnerships tried to partner and leverage resources with other organizations but had challenges keeping external groups engaged. As one stakeholder described, “There is a structure for collaboration to happen, I just don’t think it is being put into practice in the most meaningful and authentic way.” Several participants also shared that there is a disconnect between First 5 LA and the BSCs in understanding the opportunities for partnership and leveraging. For example, there is an unclear relationship between BSCs and other First 5 LA-funded programs such as the Welcome Baby Home Visitation Program. As one stakeholder explained, “First 5 LA doesn’t really tell you about their connections, you have to figure that out on your own.” Recent observations from the learning community revealed that some parents and residents continue to feel a lack of shared vision and consistent messaging about the goals of Best Start (and First 5 LA in general), which prevents partnership members from effectively reaching out to external stakeholders.

While challenges remain, BSCs made significant strides in developing new relationships with the broader community. The following provides key insights on the areas that showed the most significant growth.

- **Connecting with families outside the partnership:** Several parents mentioned how they are sharing what they’ve learned with their families and friends outside of Best Start. One resident noted, “I share everything I learn with my community and about the good things going on. I feel like my ideas count.” Additionally, the connection groups supported by the ROCs, as well as outreach and engagement committees led by community members were promising strategies in building relationships with parents and residents in the broader community. As one stakeholder explained the impact of the connection groups, “Things really happen organically. It helps to remember that every resident has something to offer. One example, a mother helped another mother transfer her kid into the other’s school. Another member is offering Spanish speakers classes on how to write and read. I’ve seen that more in the connection groups than in the partnership. It’s [the partnership] bigger, but the people don’t get the space to actually interact.”
- **Networking and collaborating with community groups.** During the 18 month period, several BSCs worked collectively to connect and build partnerships with organizations and groups in the broader community. Some promising strategies include the work done within outreach and communications work-groups that focused on bringing in new members. Some communities invited new organizations into their partnership meetings. As one partnership member explained, “There have been organizations that come into the community and we do information-sharing with them, bring them up to speed as to what we need and what we are doing.” Partnership members were actively involved in connecting and partnering with other civic groups, businesses and institutions including police departments, parent support groups, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, educators, and

“**WE HAVE BEEN BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL LIBRARIES, CCRC (CHILD CARE RESOURCE CENTERS) AND LOCAL NONPROFITS. THESE ARE AGENCIES IN OUR COMMUNITY THAT ARE REALLY THRILLED THAT WE ARE GOING TO BE BUILDING THE PARTNERSHIP.**”

PARTNERSHIP MEMBER



other community advocacy groups to help move their work forward.²⁸ Exhibit 7²⁹ is based on data collected from community reflective sessions and provides an overview of the types of connections Community Partnerships made with various stakeholder groups in the broader community. Overall, findings revealed that across the 14 communities, more members were strongly connected to parent and neighborhood groups and less connected to faith-based efforts and local elected officials. This suggests that many parents were actively involved in other groups that help build their parenting and advocacy skills. Additionally, these findings highlight areas where BSCs can target future outreach efforts (i.e., connect to faith-based organizations and elected official offices).

EXHIBIT 7 Types of Connections with Broader Community

Parent and Neighborhood Groups	Neighborhood Action Councils (NACs), Resident Outreach Coordinator (ROC)-led groups, and other groups where parents and neighbors are coming together to better their community.
Community Based Organizations	Includes community members that are involved with local CBOs through advisory boards, volunteerism, and advocacy. This does not include parents and community residents employed by local organizations.
Education	Involvement in local schools through PTAs and other parent councils as well as involvement in education policy and reform.
Community Advocacy Groups	Groups that are actively involved in topic-specific advocacy efforts such as housing and homelessness or health.
Faith-based Community Groups	Local worship centers and faith-based programs.
Collaboratives	Formalized groups of people, usually professionals in their field, coming together to share information, leverage resources, and impact service delivery, policy and advocacy efforts. Examples include the CLB Home Visitation Collaborative, the Valley Communities Care Consortium, and the AV Partners in Health.
Local Government	Connections with elected officials.
Topic-specific Classes	Workshop on topics such as parenting or domestic violence.

²⁸ For specific examples of how connections to broader community groups and institutions resulted in collective action, refer to the section on “Building Capacity and Fostering Community Ownership”

²⁹ This data was gathered during the community reflective sessions across all 14 BSCs during the spring of 2015. Social network analysis was conducted to examine the strength in connections with these community groups across all 14 BSCs (see Appendix G)





OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

Strengthening social connections and collaboration

Overall, the Best Start Communities were strengthening their social connections within the partnerships as well as with the broader community. Stronger relationships and increased collaboration among members has helped build more social capital. Additionally, making connections with the broader community suggested that partnership members set the foundation for strengthening opportunities to leverage resources and civic efforts to improve their communities. While social connections and networks have grown, these efforts are far from complete. Below are some opportunities to continue building stronger collaborative networks within the partnerships and in the broader community.

- **Promote engagement and collaboration beyond leadership groups.** Findings suggested that deeper levels of collaboration were taking place within smaller leadership bodies. Identifying more leaders within the partnerships and providing opportunities for them to work together toward a common goal will strengthen their relationships and foster the trust needed to increase resident engagement and genuine collaboration.³⁰ This can include identifying additional workgroups (e.g., new member orientation workgroups, “reflection leader” workgroup) that are needed to improve the partnership, and then identifying members who have the assets, skills and interests to participate in these groups.
- **Increase participation of CBOs and other local social service entities in Best Start Communities.** While the Community Partnerships were made up mostly of parents and residents, several stakeholders feel that a stronger representation of CBOs would be beneficial. Connecting to CBOs not only helps parents and residents better understand the resources in the community, but can create stronger trusting partnerships with formal service providers. Identifying ways to bring in other community entities like local businesses can also help create a stronger support network beyond parents and residents, as well as opportunities to leverage resources (e.g., meetings spaces, food accommodations for partnership meetings). Some communities have already engaged in these types of efforts forming workgroups that develop plans for reaching out to local businesses (door to door) asking for their support, while others have invited community based organizations to partnership meetings to highlight their work and local resources.

³⁰ Geller, J.D., Doykos, B., Craven, K., et al. (2014) “Engaging Residents in Community Change: The Critical Role of Trust in the Development of a Promise Neighborhood.” *Teachers College Record*, 116, 1-42.





- **Promote learning and collaboration across the 14 BSCs.** Currently there are a few structures in place to promote social connections across the 14 BSCs. The learning community that was held quarterly brings select members from each community to share and learn about their work and promising practices. While those who participated in these have expressed the benefit of learning and networking, others are not aware of this opportunity. As one stakeholder explained, learning communities created space for “inter-partnership communication,” but “right now, there is very little discussion about what the learning community is for.” During the most recent learning community in August of 2015, community members expressed interest in starting additional learning communities in regions where more partnership members could attend. Creating additional opportunities for partnership members from across the 14 communities to get to know each other and learn from one another will strengthen their broader social network, and provide opportunities to work collectively around shared goals.
- **Develop a communication toolkit to support outreach and engagement efforts.** Developing a shared vision is important in communicating and reaching out to new members and potential partners. Community members expressed the need to build the capacity of residents to speak about First 5 LA and Best Start with the broader community. Some suggestions from the recent learning community included developing a communication toolkit for members to use during outreach or while engaged with broader community efforts. This can include developing clear talking points for how to introduce Best Start to the broader community as well as a basic overview of how Best Start connects with other First 5 LA initiatives and efforts sponsored by other agencies in Los Angeles County. In some communities, these discussions have already started in the outreach workgroups, but there is continued need for consistent language and messaging to reinforce the shared vision of the work.

“IT HAS HELPED ME
CONNECT WITH OTHER
PARENTS AND SHARE
WHAT I LEARNED HERE
WITH PEOPLE WHO
DON'T ATTEND THESE
MEETINGS. I SHARED
WITH THEM WHAT
THESE MEETINGS
ARE ABOUT.”

PARTNERSHIP MEMBER



BUILDING CAPACITY & FOSTERING COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

BACKGROUND

Why community ownership and community capacity matter

Place-based initiatives such as Best Start aim to achieve community change through shared vision and collective action. Those engaged in place-based work across the nation continue to champion, “the power of people to solve their own problems when a platform is offered for them to come together and work on issues of common concern.”³¹ The literature in this field supports **community ownership** as an essential ingredient for sustaining place-based initiatives, noting “ownership and responsibility for change need to be shared,” in order to be sustained.³² *Community* can include parents and residents, as well as the local agencies that serve them.

Overcoming Challenges: Reflections on Capacity Building & Community Ownership

- **Capacity building and leadership development take focused energy and time:** Stakeholders come from diverse backgrounds with unique learning and capacity building needs. Training and skill development require time and appropriate approaches that build onto existing assets and skills to increase leadership.
- **Overly prescriptive processes can limit capacity building and stifle innovation:** The initial roll out of the LBD process was overly complex and driven by top-down funder timelines and agendas. This resulted in contractors holding the LBD process, rather than community members. It also prevented community members from learning from actions and responding with innovative solutions.
- **Frequent shifts and changes can lead to confusion and distrust:** While adaptability and nimbleness are important in place-based work, frequent shifts and mid-course adjustments created confusion and frustration among community members. This results in unclear expectations for what types of capacities and skills need to be strengthened.
- **Narrow focus on building the capacity of a small number of leaders:** Throughout the last 18 months, numerous stakeholders expressed the need to expand capacity building and leadership opportunities to members outside of the smaller leadership/guidance bodies.

Capacity building is also considered an essential building block that “anchor[s] community change efforts in the reality of residents’ lives while also providing a platform that allows the work to grow and build vibrant, healthy communities over time.”³³ Many place-based initiatives provide community members with the space to practice and learn a variety of skills, including: developing agendas, facilitating meetings, and building consensus; public speaking and presenting; collecting, analyzing and using data to make decisions; mediating or resolving conflicts; and outreach and engaging other community members. Such individual-level capacity building not only levels the playing field so that members from marginalized communities can participate equally with confidence, information, and decision-making authority³⁴, but it also grows the number of leaders who are prepared to work together towards a common goal.³⁵ By developing problem-solving capacity among a broad set of stakeholders, capacity building promotes sustainable community ownership by not having to rely on any one person’s knowledge, expertise, and short-term involvement.³⁶

³¹ USC Sol Price Center for Social Innovation (2015). Place-Based Initiatives in the Context of Public Policy and Markets: Moving to Higher Ground. Available at: <https://socialinnovation.usc.edu/files/2014/12/Prioritizing-Place-Moving-to-Higher-Ground.pdf>.

³² USC Price, p. 49.

³³ The Aspen Institute and JCNi (2013). Building Block 2: Build Trust and Capacity. Resident-Centered Community Building: What Makes It Different? Available at: <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/images/rcc/rcc-CCLE-Report-April-2013.pdf>.

³⁴ Chaskin, R. (2000). “Lessons Learned from the Implementation of the Neighborhood and Family Initiative: A Summary of Findings.” Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Available at: www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/old_reports/47.pdf.

³⁵ Meehan, D., Casteneda, N., Salvesen, A. (2011). “The Role of Leadership in Place-based Initiatives.” Report prepared for the California Endowment by the Leadership Learning Community. Available at: www.leadershiplearning.org.

³⁶ Kubish, A., Auspos, P., Brown, P., Buck, E. & Dewar, T. (2011). “Voices from the Field III: Lessons and Challenges for Foundations Based on Two Decades of Community Change Efforts.” *The Foundation Review*, 3(1&2), 138-149.



Like many other place-based initiatives, Best Start placed emphasis on engaging community members to identify and prioritize goals, cultivating leadership skills, and creating a sense of ownership for the community building process. This is particularly important in marginalized communities that have historically had limited influence and opportunities to contribute to institutional and systems-level decisions that directly impact their lives (e.g., schools, police, and social service agencies).^{37,38} This section highlights accomplishments, challenges, and opportunities to further expand capacity building and community ownership. Specifically it focuses on how community members are (1) building their capacity, (2) taking more ownership of community building efforts and (3) translating new knowledge and skills into collective actions.

BEST START COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS ARE TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THE COMMUNITY BUILDING PROCESS

The Learning By Doing process served as a platform to build leadership capacities of parents and residents throughout the Best Start Communities. The desire of participants to expand their leadership and apply their emerging knowledge is demonstrated through the following examples.

In **Best Start East Los Angeles** members of the advisory group scheduled regular retreats to deepen relationships and clarify their roles. They also identified new positions such as an Evaluation and Data Champion and a representative for their outreach and engagement committee. In **Best Start Metro Los Angeles**, guidance body members created a process to request and obtain trainings on table facilitation, public speaking and decision-making. As a result, they were able to modify the partnership's governance structure to be more conducive to inclusive decision-making and co-creation of the LBD process. In **Best Start Panorama City & Neighbors**, guidance body members asked the original contractor-only learning teams to develop community learning teams that would direct the LBD process. The community learning team created their own unique governance rules and decided their purpose was to co-design and co-present not only elements of the LBD process, but eventually all elements of the full community partnership meeting agenda with little to no contractor guidance.

In **Best Start Northeast Valley**, Community Learning Teams and Guidance Body members were eager to demonstrate their community wisdom and apply their skills by co-developing the LBD worksheet. As parents and residents, they expressed the need to have full ownership over the worksheet process and met weekly for over two months to complete it. They also shared and received approval via vote from Community Partnership members for their work. In **Best Start Palmdale**, leadership members have strengthened internal governance processes such as bylaws, membership requirements, and roles and responsibilities. They have also developed sub-committees (Internal Affairs and Community Relations) that allow more members to be involved in moving the partnership work forward. The focus on governance has allowed them to create the necessary structures to collaborate more effectively.

³⁷ Bolivar, J.M. & Chrispeels, J.H. (2011). Enhancing parent leadership through building social and intellectual capital. *American Education Research Journal*, 48(1), 4-38.

³⁸ Geller, J.D., Doykos, B., Craven, K., et al. (2014). "Engaging Residents in Community Change: The Critical Role of Trust in the Development of a Promise Neighborhood." *Teacher College Record*, 116, 1-42.



KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED



KEY FINDING: The Learning By Doing process helped build key skills and leadership capacity at the community-level

The introduction of the Building Stronger Families Framework and LBD process was intended to more clearly articulate what it will take to improve the lives of young children and their families. LBD was not the first planning process for these communities and represented a reset in the Best Start initiative after a pause in the previous year. Not surprisingly, some community members expressed skepticism about its purpose. As one partnership member stated during the initial phases of the LBD process, “There was a shift when First 5 LA inserted themselves into the process. It stopped being a bottom-up evolution to now top-down. There is a lot more bureaucracy from First 5 LA. It’s unclear where we’re going and when we can engage in community collaboration again.”

As part of the first learning cycle, the DE team released a mid-term learning report to share emergent themes and key lessons from the early implementation of LBD (February – July 2014). The mid-term report highlighted stakeholder concerns that the LBD process was overly complex and driven by funder timelines and agendas. As a result, capacity building opportunities for community members were limited.

Despite those limitations and frustrations, Best Start Community members shared how much the LBD process had helped them grow as parents and develop as community leaders. Focus groups and interviews with partnership members, Best Start staff, and contractors provided further confirmation for what developmental evaluators were observing in the communities. At the individual-level, community members have strengthened their leadership and capacity skills in the following ways:

- **Leaders support clarification of complex concepts:** Developmental evaluators in a few communities observed that, because of the complexity of the new framework, more established members took on the responsibility of orienting newer attendees to make them feel less intimidated by the discussion. With help from the learning team, community leaders used their own words and stories to explain more abstract concepts like “social connections” and “concrete supports.” These supportive environments helped members who were less vocal feel more comfortable speaking up. These actions provide some evidence of how community members were able to take funder-driven concepts and translate them into their own lived experience. As a result, Best Start contractors began to develop LBD guidelines and processes, such as root cause analysis, that tapped into community members’ experiences to help them understand theoretical concepts and effectively use them in their decision-making.





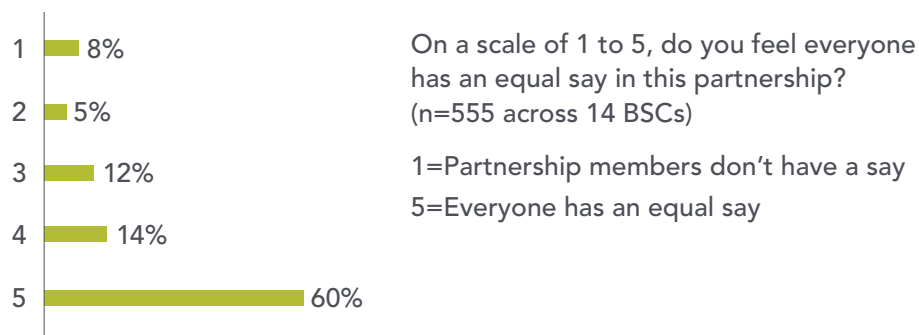
- **Strengthened facilitation and presentation skills:** The LBD process gave many partnership members an opportunity to hone their facilitation and public speaking skills. This is especially true in those BSCs that used parent cafés as a method for gathering more community feedback and making decisions. In these instances, parents facilitated table discussions during partnership meetings. Other examples include community members presenting data and indicators as well as sharing LBD updates with the broader partnership. As one stakeholder explained, “Having community members explain the target population to the guidance body and the partnership helps them [residents] understand the information better.” As more people speak up, Best Start staff and contractors noticed more dynamic community meetings. One Best Start staff observed, “More people are talking. Some of them have really become active during the LBD process. They found a voice.” A community member shared, “We have learned to express ourselves, to not be scared or ashamed or nervous about expressing ourselves.”

“**MORE PEOPLE ARE TALKING. SOME OF THEM HAVE REALLY BECOME ACTIVE DURING THE LBD PROCESS. THEY FOUND A VOICE.**”

COMMUNITY MEMBER

- **Making data-informed decisions:** A key indicator of learning and adapting is the ability to make data-informed decisions, and community members increased their capacity in this area. The learning team shared community-specific data for each core result and facilitated discussion with community members to identify priorities for their community. Community members grew increasingly more comfortable and astute in discussing, interpreting and using data for planning purposes. For instance, they inquired about how survey questions were structured, what languages were used to administer the surveys, and whether samples were representative of their communities. When available data was insufficient to guide decision-making or community members wanted to confirm their interpretation, a few communities took on the task of gathering more information from the broader community. With support from the learning team, they developed their own questions and collected their own data by administering surveys. In other cases, the Resident Outreach Coordinators performed this task with guiding questions from community members. The learning team also trained and coached many community members in presenting data to the broader partnership and to create a shared understanding of community conditions based on the data.

EXHIBIT 8 Partnership Influence & Voice



³⁹ Parent café (or world café) is an activity that involves community members answering and discussing key questions based on a particular topic (e.g. core result). Each discussion station focuses on an issue and allows parents to share their personal experience as well as any relevant data. As community members move to the next station, they are able to discuss the issue and build upon what they have learned from previous discussions. At the end, a large group discussion is held to “share out” what members learned about their community neighborhood.” Teachers College Record, 116, 1-42.



KEY FINDING: Best Start Community Partnership members are eager to lead and assume more ownership of the community building process

Both the Best Start experience and the literature on place-based initiatives suggest that effective community governance structures require substantial guidance and time to grow. Evaluations of other place-based initiatives suggest that building effective governance structures takes at least 2 to 3 years⁴⁰ and typically includes: getting the right diversity of people to the table, setting up leadership structures that have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and establishing practices that allow for transparent and democratic participation. Some place-based initiatives, for instance, may devise structures and practices to make sure residents' voice and influence are not overshadowed by service providers and other community leaders.⁴¹ By supporting the development of robust governance, partnership-level capacity building encourages collaboration, reduces confusion and conflicts, and promotes shared vision and – ultimately – community ownership.⁴²

Findings from the mid-term learning report indicated many community members were able to gain some leadership skills through the LBD process and have an appetite for more capacity building and meaningful community ownership. As a result of these mid-term reflections, important adjustments were made to refocus attention on capacity building and to create spaces and opportunities for community members to lead the process. The Learning Team made a deliberate shift to a coaching model that builds leadership and supports community ownership. Indicators of progress for the subsequent months are outlined below:

- **Increased community participation in co-designing and agenda-setting:** Since the release of the mid-term report, evaluators observed a shift in all Community Partnerships in the level and quality of community participation and leadership. This included the active involvement of community members in both the co-design and debriefing processes. In some communities, this was accomplished by including community members on the learning team. In others, much of the planning discussions were moved from the learning team to the leadership/guidance bodies, LBD workgroups and “community learning teams.” For instance, in an effort to foster a more reflective culture, community input was often included in the debrief sessions after each partnership meeting, and the community input was used to inform the design and agenda-setting for subsequent meetings.
- **Improved governance structure for broader participation:** In some communities, the learning team helped the partnership refine their governance. This resulted in smaller structures or committees with more clarity about areas of responsibility and the decision-making process. A stronger governance structure also allowed community members to take on leadership roles and perform functions that were previously done by Best Start contractors. For instance, in most partnerships, community members started to facilitate partnership meetings. The learning team, including facilitators (who used to perform this function) supported these members through training, coaching, rehearsing, and developing presentation materials. This allowed community members to reinforce the skills they learned and gained the confidence to participate equally with Best Start contractors in the co-design and implementation of the LBD planning process.

⁴⁰ Chaskin, 2000; FSG Social Impact Advisors, 2011; Fiester, 2011, to name a few.

⁴¹ Brown, 2011 [Cite from H+CO, p. 10.]

⁴² Fiester, L. (2011). “Good Neighborhoods, Good Schools, and Skillman’s Strategy for Place-based Change.” Report to the Skillman Foundation. In press.



“THEY [CONTRACTORS] ARE DOING THIS PROCESS THAT WE AS COMMUNITY MEMBERS COULD HAVE DONE OURSELVES. IT’S TAKING POWER AWAY FROM THE COMMUNITY. WHAT’S OUR PURPOSE? IT’S SAD THAT SOMEONE ELSE IS GETTING PAID FOR IT WHEN WE CAN BE LEADERS.”

BEST START COMMUNITY MEMBER

- **Increased discussion about decision-making and accountability:** More recently, with the release of Requests for Proposals (RFPs) for contractors to implement the strategies identified by the partnerships during the LBD process, First 5 LA created space for more community ownership by involving partnership members in the interview process. Including the community in the contractor vetting process will be important in building early community buy-in and mutual expectations of collaboration and accountability. It also represents a new and community-responsive practice for First 5 LA. While this is still a work in progress, observations show that there are early indications that community members and First 5 LA are working to better understand and articulate how to ensure accountability and that strategies are implemented as intended.
- **Assuming more ownership of the partnerships.** Both DE observations and more recent focus groups with BSC stakeholders confirmed that promoting capacity building and making room for leadership development increased community ownership of the partnerships. This was evident in the increase in their attendance at partnership meetings and promotion of other Best Start activities. As one Best Start contractor stated, “There were three events in one day [for the BSC]. The community took on the ownership to commit people to each event. We’re seeing more and more of that. Attendance has increased because of their own promotion. We’ve seen them be more vocal at commissions meetings, and they’ve been champions of their own cause.” A parent, who had come to Best Start out of a sense of isolation, summed up her transformation this way: “I don’t live my life for myself anymore. I am Best Start too. I want to help people. I feel responsible for people.”

EXHIBIT 9 Collective Action





KEY FINDING: Best Start Community Partnerships are translating new knowledge and skills into collective action

The transformation described in the previous section is a common story across Best Start Communities and many community members were leading and engaging in collective action in a variety of ways. Using Best Start as a platform, many community members began to see themselves as a resource for the broader community. There were notable examples in each community where, in addition to the rigorous and intense LBD planning process, community members came together to act on other issues and priorities in their community. While the partnerships brought many community members together, sometimes they channeled their collective energy to support existing community engagement efforts. Findings from the community reflective session in early 2015 suggested that a large majority of partnership members felt that there were opportunities to make a difference in how the broader community supports families (see Exhibit 10). Beyond their work with Best Start, community members organized community events and awareness campaigns, developed better educational resources for children, forged better relationships with law enforcement, beautified parks and gardens, volunteered for community events and joined local organizing campaigns that focused on transportation issues and immigration reform.

The following table provides examples of various types of collective actions that Best Start community members engaged in or initiated. For many community members, these collective actions created an important sense of accomplishment and helped solidify and promote their identity as Best Start leaders.

“**BSC MEMBERS ARE PART OF A LARGER MOVEMENT... TO BRING ALL THESE COMMUNITIES TOGETHER ON BIGGER POLICY ISSUES. THEY BEGIN TO SEE THEMSELVES AS THE VOICE OF LA COUNTY.**”

PARTNERSHIP MEMBER





EXHIBIT 10 Examples of Collective Action and Civic Engagement Across the 14 Best Start Communities

Best Start Community	Collective Action Efforts
Broadway-Manchester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Built relationships with fire and police departments to leverage resources for community events Organized schools and churches to provide backpacks for children
Central Long Beach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long Beach Child Abuse and Neglect Network, a Best Start Central Long Beach Collaborative, worked with city council to sign a resolution recognizing April as Child Abuse Prevention Month
Compton/East Compton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volunteered and/or raised money for WIC Back to School Immunization Health Fair and the Sacred Heart Church 5K Run/Walk Created comprehensive decision-making process that were acknowledged and adapted by local organizations
East LA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focused on better utilization of green spaces in the community that prioritized community involvement and partnership participation Participated in and fiscally sponsored community events like Día de los Niños Developed outreach plans for populations under-represented in the partnership
Lancaster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organized Family Fun Day to provide more free family friendly activities in Lancaster
Metro LA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed a resource guide that BSC parents used to refer their friends and neighbors to local services Supported local campaigns around Medi-Cal funding and the density of alcohol retailers, leading to more collaboration with city councilman's office Raised money to support families in need, such as family members who had become disabled or lost loved ones Initiated their own Facebook page to connect with each other and share events and resources
Northeast Valley	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked with local groups to put on community events, such as Summer Fest
Palmdale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invited local officials (mayor, city librarian, fire department) to partnership meetings to listen to residents and share resources with them Organized Family Fun Day event in Palmdale
Panorama City & Neighbors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created and distributed the Ready for Kinder workbook in both English and Spanish to increase literacy skills for preschool children
South El Monte/El Monte	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked with local community based organizations to create workshops that build parenting and leadership capacities Marched in Sacramento to advocate for universal preschool access Participated in and contributed support to local community events like The Children's Parade
Southeast LA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked with Department of Mental Health to bring workshops to parents in the community on positive parenting and stress management Participated in advocacy to increase funding for schools and improve services in the community
Watts-Willowbrook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided input to local organizations on new parks, community gardens, and outdoor spaces
West Athens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaged local agencies to advocate for better access and service coordination Advocated to county supervisor's office for field trips for seniors in the community Participated in West Athens/Westmont Community Task Force, that includes local elected officials, law enforcement, churches and schools Participated in local marches for peace to discourage violence and bring community together
Wilmington	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participated in PhotoVoice project to advocate for better food marketing policies Sponsored a local ShareFest Workday project to beautify alleyways with murals painted by residents



OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

Building Capacity and Fostering Community Ownership

The transition to the implementation phase of LBD provided another opportunity for reflection on how to increase community capacity and foster community ownership. The following capacity building opportunities and considerations emerged across various data sources and stakeholder groups.⁴³

- **Expand capacity and leadership opportunities to more community members:** While the learning teams made progress in transitioning to a support role, leadership and capacity building opportunities continued to be relatively limited to a small group of partnership members - specifically leadership groups. Providing capacity building opportunities for a select handful of community members may have had the unintended consequence of disempowering others and ultimately hindering sustainability efforts. Given that LBD was primarily a planning process that focused on making decisions rather than acting on them, nonvoting members in some Community Partnerships did not feel their voice mattered as much as those who had voting power. Another contractor commented, “I think a big component is getting people to understand that Best Start is not just the 100 people that go to the partnership or the 12 people on the guidance body, that it is actually a community movement, that all are welcome.” Some BSCs started re-examining their governance structure to provide broader and more transparent decision-making. Focus group participants also identified several capacity building areas for all community members, not just those in leadership. They included: advocacy, governance, conflict resolution, leveraging resources, budgeting, and even grant writing. The implementation phase of LBD may also provide opportunities for more community members to get involved and become leaders.

“A LOT OF CAPACITY BUILDING IS CONFINED TO THE LEADERSHIP MEETINGS. THEY ARE NOT BALANCING POWER AND EQUITY.”

BEST START CONTRACTOR

⁴³ Based on DE-facilitated reflective sessions in the BSC focus groups with Best Start staff and contractors and DE observations.





- **Address basic infrastructure in partnerships to ensure community sustainability:** In some communities, it has been difficult to build capacity due to significant turnover among partnership and leadership members. One stakeholder explained, “We’ve tried to implement various interventions to get community leadership, but it hasn’t turned out as we had planned for various reasons. It is still a goal for these Community Partnerships to be self-sustaining, but I don’t see that the organization [First 5 LA] has shifted in a way to help them with that in the best way that it could.” DE observations found that some community members felt their leadership roles only went so far given the highly prescriptive nature of LBD and limited room for their input to influence the process. As a result, leaders in a few communities quit participating. This phenomenon has been particularly challenging in communities where there were no term limits or bylaws to elect new leaders, creating a leadership vacuum filled primarily by contractors and First 5 LA staff. Developmental evaluators observed some partnerships requesting to address the leadership problem. However, this request was sometimes put “on hold,” either intentionally or unintentionally, given the pressure to move through the LBD stages, complete worksheets and issue RFPs. A few communities also experienced significant turnover at the partnership level. As one stakeholder explained, “At the beginning, ROCs were charged with connecting community members to each other and inviting members to the Community Partnerships. Then people were not returning to the Community Partnerships. We found that [LBD] concepts were too confusing and we raised that to Best Start.”

While some communities were able to adjust and engage community members, other communities have still not been able to address the retention issue. DE observations also revealed that community members’ expression of dissent varied community by community. In some communities, leaders and partnership members have been very vocal about their criticisms and frustrations. In other communities, some of the most vocal and often long-time partnership members quit attending. The newer members may not have felt as empowered or inspired to voice their frustrations explicitly in front of a large group and instead chose to quit participating. One community member at the recent learning community in August 2015 remarked, “We keep bringing people in the front door and they are leaving out the back door.” Without stable partnership attendance, the “keepers of the vision” in these communities are the contractors and First 5 LA staff. In the coming months, it will be important to understand each community’s readiness to engage with the LBD contractor and move forward with implementation of strategies. Some communities may require a different level of capacity building and restoring of trust before issues such as governance and decision-making can be addressed.



- **Foster discussion about the role of race, equity, and power:** Many members in a few communities recognized that their partnership did not represent the racial diversity of the community. Yet, these communities had not been successful in reaching out to and retaining under-represented populations. They tended to have a strong track record of engaging Latina/o parents, but they were slowly making inroads into other communities of color. From ongoing DE observations as well as community reflective sessions, some members saw the need to broaden their engagement, while others were ambivalent, either because they were concerned that the partnership would lose the familial feel they enjoyed or they did not have a lot of experience working with members from other communities. Even in more diverse BSCs, there had been occasions of racial tension that surfaced during the LBD process that needed to be addressed. Many stakeholders believed that this is more than just a matter of improving outreach and representation, but that it requires deep and critical conversations about race and equity. This is a capacity building area that had not been fully addressed by First 5 LA. As one stakeholder noted, “I think the reason that we don’t go past certain points in the conversation with communities of color is because we’re not there as First 5 LA to help communities become more culturally savvy. That’s a capacity we as First 5 LA are lacking and we’re not able to support the partnership in true capacity building in that way.” The literature from the field acknowledges the importance of discussion about race, equity and power in place-based initiatives. The Aspen Institute notes that “When trying to change the systems that have kept people disempowered over time, a deep understanding of local history of race and class inequality is key to building powerful leadership and engaging people in communities,” and therefore, “Effectively making change in a place is about challenging and undoing those deep-rooted inequities.”⁴⁴ Addressing these significant inequities in marginalized communities requires many honest and uncomfortable conversations that take considerable facilitation skills. As difficult as the conversations may be, this capacity building area is essential to creating sustainable and positive community change.
- **Clarify the role of the partnership during the implementation phase:** As all BSCs transition into the implementation phase of LBD, a new LBD contractor will be selected to implement the strategies that BSC members identified. Partnership members (who hold the shared vision of these strategies) need to have a meaningful role during the implementation phase to ensure that strategies are implemented effectively and that Community Partnerships retain a sense of ownership and shared accountability.

⁴⁴ The Aspen Institute (2014). “Towards a Better Place: A Conversation about Promising Practices in Place-Based Philanthropy.”





In addition, program officers had been hands-off during the LBD planning process because of potential conflicts of interest. Their upcoming role managing the LBD contractors may cause confusion, and some stakeholders expressed concern that the work will once again be more funder-driven, stating that this posed a “danger of regression.” A few BSCs asked to include requirements in the RFP for the selected contractor to involve partnership or community members in various ways. Many community members also hoped that the involvement of parents and residents in the selection process would lead to the identification of a contractor who has a good understanding of community engagement or even demonstrated history of working with the BSC. However, the focus on community ownership needs to extend beyond the RFP and selection processes into contract negotiation, implementation, and evaluation. A strict focus on contract requirements and deliverables may not be enough to maintain and promote community ownership. A deliberate and meaningful discussion about roles, responsibilities and accountability needs to occur for partnership members, LBD contractors and First 5 LA as the LBD implementation begins. In addition, if the role of partnership members in the implementation remains unclear, it could undermine the goals of capacity building. In other words, if community members do not know what they are expected to do, they and the capacity builders will not know what skills or infrastructure they need to strengthen.

- **Clarify long-term goals of Best Start and First 5 LA’s commitment to the community:** Capacity building is an essential path to community ownership in place-based initiatives, but it needs to be complemented by trust between funder and community. LBD was not the first planning process for the BSCs, and its introduction was met with some skepticism. For many partnership members it represented another funder-driven change that disregarded previous planning efforts and collective actions. During the process, the language of the new framework as well as mid-course adjustments (while sometimes necessary and beneficial) sometimes confused and frustrated community members. While funders of place-based initiatives often have “ultimate and periodic decision-making power,” it can undermine efforts to promote community ownership.⁴⁵ When funders shift parameters often, the role of the community members and what they have authority to decide on is confusing and can lead to distrust. Recent changes, like the phasing out of the learning team (facilitators in particular), caught many community members by surprise. In addition, the length of time it has taken to release RFPs for each community makes some community members question whether their ideas and strategies from the LBD planning process will actually be implemented. As one community member stated in a community reflective session, “It was made to seem like this is ours - you have full ownership, we want you to take the lead. But then, in the past, we did work under that thinking, and it was kicked back out...And you’re dealing with groups of people who don’t like that. They already feel on the defense about outsiders who come in telling us how to do our community. So, when you start changing the game in the middle of the game, then that causes people to not want to be involved.” Community members cited “follow through” and “accountability,” as a means to rebuild this trust, and the LBD implementation is an opportunity to reiterate First 5 LA’s commitment to Best Start and community members. Some ideas for “follow through” and “accountability” include: an RFP that reflects the ideas and strategies developed by community members during the LBD process, timely selection of LBD contractors to begin implementation as soon as possible, and clear roles and responsibilities for partnership members during implementation.

⁴⁵ Movement Strategy Center (2013). “Powerful Places: Principles for Effective Community-Driven Change.”



ADVOCATING FOR BETTER POLICIES AND PRACTICES THAT AFFECT YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

During the last 18 months, nearly all BSCs were actively engaged in advocating for improved access to services, increased resource allocations, or improved policies that directly impact their communities. Best Start Communities demonstrated their ability to coalesce around concerns affecting the community and advocate for change. For example, in **Best Start Wilmington**, residents and organizational representatives participated in a PhotoVoice project to highlight current nutrition concerns and food marketing policies in the area. Partnership members voted to use their regularly scheduled meeting to discuss concerns about fast food advertisements and their proximity to businesses and organizations frequented by families with young children. Participants brainstormed practical actions to help parents better understand their families' nutritional needs and ways to advocate for changes in food marketing practices.

The **Best Start Central Long Beach** Community Partnership has a strong history of mobilizing the community to focus on issues related to child abuse and neglect. Long Beach Child Abuse and Neglect Network (LBCANN), a collaborative of local organizations and parents/residents, was formed to address this community concern and recently presented a resolution to the Long Beach City Council that explicitly includes families with children ages 0-5 in citywide violence prevention initiatives and recognizes the importance of engaging in a comprehensive violence prevention plan that incorporates community-wide perspectives. The city council has since passed this resolution, illustrating the power of collaborations and community voice in shaping and influencing policy.

The **Best Start Metro LA** Community Partnership also mobilized community residents to influence urban development practices. When a land developer proposed plans to develop a nightclub selling alcohol within close proximity to local schools, Best Start Metro LA immediately assembled a community group to study the implications. They invited Council Member Gill Cedillo to their community meeting and were successful in sharing Best Start Metro LA's priorities, as well as potential alignment with the council member's policy agenda. Community members also met with the developer and voiced their concerns to the LA City Council. By activating social connections and quickly mobilizing community members, Best Start Metro LA was able to delay the process for at least 30 days while the LA City Council reviews the project and community concerns.



CONCLUDING REMARKS & CONSIDERATIONS

“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, leadership, organizational capacity and political leverage).”

CHASKIN (2000)

Despite the wealth of place-based knowledge and experience generated by funders, practitioners, and community advocates across the country, there is no golden playbook or well-articulated script for implementing and managing a publicly funded place-based initiative as large and complex as Best Start. The last 18 months produced a considerable amount of learning through both trial and error and the initiative has grown and evolved. At the funder-level, Best Start staff and contractors worked to refine and operationalize effective models, strategies, and practices while simultaneously learned to shift, adapt and respond to the unique and sometimes changing needs of each Best Start Community. At the community-level, parents, residents and organizational partners were demonstrating their commitment and desire to improve their neighborhoods while taking increased ownership of the community change process. This section briefly highlights key takeaways for First 5 LA and Community Partners to consider as they continue their important work together. Specifically, it highlights considerations for (1) First 5 LA's management of the Best Start initiatives (streamlining structures, defining its role as a funder, and strengthening communications); (2) building capacity and catalyzing networks and social connections; (3) fostering a deeper understanding about the role and impact of race, equity and power in place-based work, (4) identifying pathways to community ownership.

Potential Actions

- Develop a communications strategy to ensure that new decisions and processes are messaged to all stakeholders in a consistent, timely, and clear way.
- Identify ways to facilitate more efficient and fluid channels for communicating with community leaders that don't have access to computers or internet. This might include lending old laptops to help facilitate communication and planning.
- Develop a communications toolkit to help Partnerships develop communication skills, strategies, and messaging.



Management of the Best Start Initiative

- **Identify opportunities to streamline structures and define the funder role:** The implementation of place-based efforts is intrinsically influenced by a funder's structure, organizational culture and assumptions about what it takes to effect community change. The literature on place-based initiatives highlights the importance of flexible structures and adaptive leadership as well as more intentionality among funders about how they define their role, implement the work, and learn from it.⁴⁶ During the last few years, First 5 LA has come to realize the complexities of public sector structures that are often ill-suited for work that requires a high-level of a flexible and nimble approach. The Best Start department has reflected on ways to incorporate a more adaptive leadership model that focuses on learning, transparency, inclusion and partnership. This is still a work in progress, but feedback from various stakeholders suggested that lessons learned are being used to make adjustments, improve interdepartmental processes, and strengthen relationships with Community Partnerships. More recently, the Best Start department began to more openly share and discuss First 5 LA's structure and decision-making process with the Best Start Community Partnerships. While the organization's operational structure may have seemed complex and confusing, community members wanted to better understand how decisions were made and where there were opportunities to influence process, decisions, and practices. First 5 LA should continue to explore opportunities to demystify the organization's structure and help develop the skills of residents and parents to effectively engage with First 5 LA and other public institutions. In addition, the organization may wish to assess the extent to which certain organizational policies, practices and procedures can be refined or modified to better meet the dynamic needs of place-based work.
- **Implement a communications strategy to improve internal and external communications:** Communications within any place-based initiative and the broader community requires considerable thought and attention. Throughout the Best Start initiative there have been many bumps in the road, ranging from a lack of clarity about purpose, roles, and processes, to finding a common and meaningful language to discuss complex concepts in ways that are understandable and accessible to diverse stakeholders. While communication has improved through the integration of efforts, stakeholders (staff, contractors and community partners) noted ongoing challenges with the timeliness, messaging, and ways information is shared with staff, contractors and BSCs.



Learning

Transparency

Partnership

Communication

Race, Equity &
Power Dynamics

Focus group participants identified the need to improve both internal (within First 5 LA) and external communications and suggested that more needs to be done to communicate in transparent, consistent, and non technical ways. In the past year, increased attention has been given to removing the jargon from language and consulting with community members to help translate concepts and messages into relatable language. This will likely be an ongoing challenge. It is compounded by the unresolved tension between the use of community-friendly language and the desire to build capacity to engage with formal institutions and advocate for the needs of their children and communities. As one Best Start program officer noted, "We hope the community can speak our language as well [...] We need to both explain the jargon and use community-friendly language – it's a push and pull effect." Other staff members acknowledged the need "to improve internal channels of communications which is hard because everything happens so quickly." Feedback clearly suggests the need to develop and implement communication strategies and mechanisms to strengthen both internal and external communications.

⁴⁶ "Best Practices in Place-Based Initiatives: Implications for the Implementation and Evaluation of Best Start (2011)." Prepared for First 5 LA by Harder+Company and Juarez Associates.



Continue to build capacity and catalyze social networks and connections

Participants stressed the need to expand the reach of Best Start and continue to support capacity building efforts of community members and the partnerships. This includes building the capacity of more community members to engage in data-informed decision-making, advocate for resources and family-centered policies, and participate in collective efforts to improve their communities. Best Start Partnership members have made considerable progress but more work is still needed to expand beyond the core group of leaders. Additionally, building the capacity to engage with formal institutions and organizations can help broaden the social networks to include other stakeholders, supporters and organizational partners that help advance the work. Numerous examples of this were highlighted in this report, including stories of partnerships engaging with elected officials to voice their concerns and advocate for their communities. Still more can be done to help partnerships effectively leverage their networks and connect with other organizations, funding streams, and resources that share similar community or systems change agendas.

Respectfully foster deeper understanding about race, equity and power

Issues of race, power, and equity are tenaciously woven into the fabric of disadvantaged neighborhoods and are often at the core of place-based work. The literature on place-based initiatives stresses the importance of understanding and fostering respectful conversations about race, equity, and power by listening, learning, and demonstrating a commitment to honest exchange.⁴⁷ These issues are complex and uncomfortable to discuss, but have continuously surfaced within Best Start Communities as well as in funder-community discussion about roles, expectations, and accountability. As with all place-based efforts, these discussions often give rise to underlying tensions, power dynamics, and conflicts about who is driving the process and making decisions.⁴⁸ In focus groups with staff and contractors, participants emphasized the need for a deeper understanding of equity, diversity, culture, and power dynamics both at the community-level and within First 5 LA. During a recent reflective session with Best Start staff, one program officer acknowledged that these issues, “often come up organically and you need to be prepared to deal with it; not just push it aside.” Other staff concurred saying, “I think we try to focus on ‘feel good’ things, protective factors and strengths-based things, that we don’t take the time to talk about things that are uncomfortable.” While some staff questioned whether it’s the funder’s role to initiate these conversations, most felt it was important, “to be prepared to address and work on these issues in the communities.” This could include providing training, technical assistance, and support in the community, but as one program officer stressed, “We don’t even talk about these things internally. Maybe we need to have this conversation with staff first ... it’s a timely subject and is long overdue.”

Potential Actions

- Expand efforts to build the leadership of a broader base of Best Start parents and residents.
- Expand efforts to increase resident advocacy skills and to effectively engage diverse partners and supporters in Best Start efforts.
- Provide staff training and/or facilitated discussion about the role of race, power, and equity in the context of place-based work.
- Provide community-level training and technical assistance to support respectful and crucial conversations about race, power, and equity.

Best Start staff also discussed the impact of funder-community power dynamics and the need to engage residents and parents in meaningful ways to improve their communities. As one staff member noted “We need a conversation about power in these communities or it will remain status-quo.” It’s a conversation about how to build power, together, and Best Start provides a space for that to happen.

⁴⁷ Brown et al., 2001

⁴⁸ Ibid



Clearly articulate pathways to decision-making and community ownership

During the past year, the concept of community ownership has been a hot topic among Best Start stakeholders. Like so many terms, community ownership can mean different things to different people and is complicated by tensions about who has the power, resources, influence, and authority to determine priorities and make decisions. The literature on place-based initiatives emphasizes the importance of clarity in this area, stressing that the way a funder engages and treats residents in the initial stages of an initiative will set the tone for the entire enterprise. As part of a reflective session with Best Start staff, one program officer acknowledged the need to be clear about opportunities for Best Start Communities to influence decisions and opportunities to actually make them. There are certain decisions that need to be made by the funder, but those decision-making parameters have not been clear. Some staff and contractors talked about the issue of autonomy, suggesting that First 5 LA create more space, support, and resources for BSCs to move their own work forward. One person noted, “If they want to meet on their own they should be able to. They should be able to put in requests for resources and receive them. That’s the kind of autonomy that they need, capacity building.” Another participant explains the need for communities to have a voice in decision-making, “The only way is to allow time and space and resources for the community members to build on their work. A community can have a plan, but then they are pushed to accomplish some First 5 LA goal. There has to be some kind of flexibility. They should be part of the decision-making.” Best Start staff openly acknowledged these issues and spoke of “emerging intentionality around an engagement plan that spells out decision-making.” In fact, the department is looking for opportunities to engage a recently formed “transition team” advisory group (made up of representatives from each community) to discuss this and other critical topics.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the many inherent challenges of place-based work, Best Start has continued to harness the energy of diverse stakeholders who are deeply committed to building stronger families and vibrant communities. The developmental evaluation of Best Start was designed to document and elevate key insights from this dynamic and ever-evolving effort. Throughout this process, First 5 LA and the Community Partnerships have continuously demonstrated a willingness and ability to listen, reflect, adapt, and translate learning into new approaches, strategies and actions. At the core of this work is trusting relationships, stronger social connections, and the desire to engage in genuine and meaningful collaboration. Reflecting on the challenges and strengths discussed in this report can help improve communication, clarify decision-making processes, engage community leaders as equal partners, build capacity toward community ownership, and address the deeply rooted issues of race, equity, and power.

Potential Actions

- Develop decision-making guidelines with community input and discuss guidelines with the BSCs to ensure greater clarity about the parameters of how and why decisions are made, and by whom.

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