An End to Business as Usual: Nurturing Authentic Partnerships to Create Lasting Community Change

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Introduction

Foundations often invest in complex, multisite community change efforts with many moving parts, and progress is typically achieved in a nonlinear fashion. Over the years the roles of foundations investing in community change efforts have evolved, with many serving more as partners with communities and less as the distant goal setters and check writers (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, Buck, & Dewar, 2011). Here we share our reflections as Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) program officers at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, managing Starting Smart and Strong, a 10-year place-based commitment to early learning in three California communities.

Three years into strategy implementation, we offer key insights into how and why we engage differently with our grantees from the way we have done so in the past. We describe shifts in our mindsets and commitments that challenge traditional foundation orthodoxies that we believe are essential for effectively supporting our grantees and catalyzing inclusive community change. We close with what we are learning along the way as we set out on a path to better understand what it takes to foster genuine partnerships with communities, as well as the importance of co-creating strategies with grantees to sustain lasting change.

Our Commitment to Children

Since the creation of the Packard Foundation over 50 years ago, the Packard family has remained committed to improving the lives of children. To that end, the foundation has

Key Points

- The David and Lucile Packard Foundation created Starting Smart and Strong, a 10-year place-based initiative in three California communities, to develop and test solutions that support parents, caregivers, and educators as they prepare young children to be healthy and ready for school. The initiative brings together public and private partners to create comprehensive early-learning systems and ultimately scale what works.

- This article offers key insights into the foundation's experience, three years into implementation, with managing this complex initiative and how program officers were compelled to think differently about the best roles staff can play to support grantee communities and amplify constituent voice. Shifts in mindsets and commitments that challenge traditional foundation orthodoxies were essential for effectively supporting inclusive community change.

- Program officers also had to develop new capacities that both focus on the development of systems that are locally designed and driven and work in service of the foundation's broader strategy goals. This juxtaposition has upended business as usual and set the foundation on a path that seeks to better understand authentic partnership with communities and the importance of co-creating strategies to sustain lasting change.

The foundation understands that changes to the underlying systems needed to address complex issues can sometimes take years. As a result, its program strategies often have long time horizons, which take into account changes in political, social, and community contexts that can either impede or accelerate change.

supported strategies that allow young children to reach their full potential by focusing on two critical aspects of their development: learning and health. Within these domains, the foundation has funded research, direct service programs, and systems-improvement efforts in a range of areas, including quality child care, preschool and transitional kindergarten programs, and parent education.

A combination of research and contextual factors have informed the foundation's development of its current Early Learning strategy. Brain science has offered increasing evidence of the rapid rate of brain development in a child's youngest years that calls for creating a set of quality learning experiences from birth through age 8 to lay the foundation for later success (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). Moreover, most children face several important transitions during their first eight years of life. Their first is very likely from home care to child care, then off to preschool, followed by transitional kindergarten or kindergarten, and finally into elementary grades. Consistency in approaches across settings can support children's development and learning, and later success in school.

Evidence shows that quality interactions between children and parents, caregivers, and teachers who facilitate learning and development can have a profound impact on child outcomes. When children do not get what they need from adults to learn and thrive, especially in the early years, the gaps are often insurmountable later on. More and more researchers and early learning and education leaders have recommended that the adults who interact the most with children during these critical years be equipped with the skills and resources they need to help children thrive (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). So, the question becomes how to set up systems of support across sectors and settings that provide adults with the resources, strategies, and tools they need to support a child's optimal learning and development. The Packard Foundation's long history of tackling complex issues fueled our commitment to addressing this question.

Starting Smart and Strong

The foundation understands that changes to the underlying systems needed to address complex issues can sometimes take years. As a result, its program strategies often have long time horizons, which take into account changes in political, social, and community contexts that can either impede or accelerate change. At the highest level, foundation trustees approve all programmatic strategies, while their design and implementation are developed and managed at the program level.

In 2013, trustees approved CFC's Early Learning strategy, the goal of which is to improve the quality of early learning and developmental experiences in both formal and informal settings for California children, birth through age 5, by supporting parents, caregivers, and educators. Upon strategy approval, CFC launched Starting Smart and Strong, a community-driven commitment to ensure that every young child living in the communities of Fresno, Oakland, and San Jose grows up healthy and ready for kindergarten. Each of the communities brings together public and private supporters, including service providers, school district staff, community members, advocates, and funders, to create

comprehensive local early learning ecosystems, to test and develop solutions, and take collective action to create lasting community change.

Starting Smart and Strong focuses on four pillars of work: testing and scaling approaches to professional development and training for caregivers and educators; resources and support for parents, families, friends, neighbors, and other informal caregivers; access to quality health care and developmental screenings for all children in the community; and creating strong and durable early-learning systems and a plan to scale what works (David and Lucile Packard Foundation, 2017). In addition to the three Starting Smart and Strong communities, other grantee partners supporting this place-based effort include evaluation, communications, innovation and scaling partners, and technical assistance providers.

Why a Place-Based Strategy?
Because Starting Smart and Strong relies heavily on changing parent, caregiver, and teacher practice over time, it made sense to us that its focus had to be on where children and families are served, which is in communities. A place-based approach offers several distinct advantages: first, it is an opportunity to engage with local systems leaders, such as school district and county office of education administrators, social service providers, and medical providers, who can work collaboratively over time to create cohesive early-learning ecosystems appropriate to their unique contexts. Second, working in communities provides opportunities to test new approaches and learn what can be scaled through local systems if they prove to be effective. Third, a well-coordinated ecosystem can help create a continuum of learning for children that accommodates their transitions from one program and system to another as they grow older. Finally, working deeply in communities creates an opportunity to amplify local policy wins that serve as proof points, connecting them to larger state policy goals.

Shifting Our Roles to Support a Place-Based Approach
For program officers, what does it mean to work within a place-based context? Because

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place-based community change efforts have long been part of funders' toolkits but have produced mixed results (Kubisch et al., 2011), we were quite careful as we approached our work with Starting Smart and Strong. In the CFC program, we see ourselves as engaged grantmakers, which has come to mean staying in close touch with grantees and their partners, listening purposefully, having ongoing strategy conversations, conducting frequent site visits, and, over time, forming solid, collaborative relationships. Through this approach to grantee and partner engagement, we feel quite involved and rooted in community. We contrast this to foundations who are "black box" grantmakers, an orientation to community change that is focused more on the goals and outcomes of grants than on ongoing engagement with grantees.

However, our lived experience through Starting Smart and Strong has taught us that working this way is far more personal, upfront, and immediate than we had ever imagined. We quickly learned that if we wanted a shot at becoming true collaborators in a community's transformative change, we would have to think and feel differently about how best to deepen our relationships with grantees and the community at large and amplify their voices. To effectively support inclusive community change, we have needed to challenge traditional foundation orthodoxy — particularly when it comes to the multiple roles we play in place-based work.

For example, as the work has matured we have been brought into deeper community

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conversations, and have found ourselves toggling among the roles of thought partner, confidante, and funder. The complexity of holding multiple roles simultaneously has forced us to become much more mindful of the delicate nature of boundaries and perceived power dynamics, and how they can shift over time. At times, it can be important to notice and recognize these dynamics and address them directly in real time. At other times, it can be equally important to notice and recognize them but, given the delicacy of a conversation, choose to reflect on their impact and address them at a later date, if at all. Below we describe the new and challenging ways in which we are approaching different dimensions of strategy implementation.

Who Owns the Strategy?

While the ultimate impact of achieving kindergarten readiness at scale was a foundation priority, we entered this work knowing that communities needed to believe in this outcome and embrace the goals that would help them achieve it. That means, as program officers, we have had to be in ongoing, open, and honest dialogue with grantees, educators, parents, and other community members, listening intently, pushing at times, being pushed at other times, but remaining clear that we wanted our communities to take the lead while offering the support structures that enabled them to do so.

This dynamic, while awkward at first, became easier over time. We also recognized when it was important to clarify our own expectations to provide direction for the work. For example, each community developed a different approach to systems change that closely aligned with its unique context. We provided resources, guidance, and support that complemented each community's approach, but ultimately our role was to learn alongside our grantees and support them as change agents. Our aim was to remain engaged with collective agreement about the ultimate goal and impact we sought to achieve, lay the foundation for co-creating solutions, and not prescribe solutions. As mentioned earlier, there is an inherent power dynamic that exists between funder and grantee (Guinee & Knight, 2013). However, through this real-time engagement and transparency about our role, we are learning, assessing, and adapting our strategy in partnership with our grantees. At times it has caused us to step back and ask ourselves the question, "Whose strategy is it anyway — yours, mine, or ours?"

Our experiences in the first three years of Starting Smart and Strong have taught us that a high level of engagement with communities is necessary if our goal is to cultivate meaningful relationships that make funder-grantee co-creation and co-learning possible and productive. And we are starting to see the outcomes of working this way. One community recently told us that in the past they always looked to us to tell them what to do, and now, three years later, they are leading the work and no longer solely rely on us for guidance.

A "Backbone" Role Can Cause Confusion

Funder approaches to place-based community change efforts are wide-ranging. Some funders are heavily involved in every aspect of their grantees' work, while others invest in intermediaries to manage their place-based initiatives. Still others take a more hands-off approach and have very limited contact with grantees once grants are awarded (Stevenson, Bockstette, Seneviratne, Cain, & Foster, 2018). For us, we wanted to find a balance along this continuum and develop an approach that would be best

suited for the community change outcomes we were hoping to achieve. Because each Starting Smart and Strong community is unique, we knew our approach had to be both flexible, to account for wide variations in the work, and specific, to guide implementation efforts. We also knew that to create meaningful partnerships, we had to earn community trust through authentic communication.

As program officers, we often lament the fact that there is never enough time to do our jobs, but we know, too, that in that regard we are not unique. What surprised us is how much time and energy deep grantee engagement takes. As our community relationships have deepened and we have become more trusted as partners in the work, demands on our time have increased. We have found ourselves invited to many more after-hours meetings, engaging in weekend phone calls, and attending weekend trainings with grantees. Depending on the situation, we have been asked to be a voice for community change, act as a sounding board, assist with problem solving, or learn alongside our colleagues. Much of the time, we find ourselves playing a supportive role as our grantees create the conditions necessary for change in their communities. Given that we have other grantmaking responsibilities outside of Starting Smart and Strong, the complexity of these tasks spread over three communities can be daunting.

There are ways that we could have mitigated these complexities. For example, in many collaborative systems-change efforts, there is a backbone organization that is specifically dedicated to paying close attention to the needs of the work and serves several roles, among them coordinating the various dimensions and collaborators involved in an initiative, guiding vision and strategy, and supporting aligned activities (Crespin & Moser, 2018). We could have invested in an intermediary to serve as the backbone function for Starting Smart and Strong, but chose, instead, to play a backbone-type role ourselves. Because the work was new and uncharted for us, we were concerned that if we outsourced the role we would have created a certain distance from our partners and the work, and might have

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had the unintended effect of diluting what we were learning about gaining traction in communities and ultimately, achieving impact at scale.

By the very fact that we are a foundation playing a backbone-type role, we knew we would be entering communities with an inherent imbalance of power. We surfaced this dynamic early on in initial community conversations and used the metaphor of "holding tight and holding loose" to describe it. For instance, the ultimate goal or "north star" of Starting Smart and Strong is that children arrive at kindergarten healthy and ready to learn. We hold that goal tight, meaning that it is nonnegotiable. However, communities decide how they are going to work toward achieving that goal, and we hold that loose.

But it can also be confusing because the balance of power can shift depending on the issue, and it calls for a level of deep negotiation that we had not anticipated. One such issue was around a data decision that the foundation made. It was important to us that each of the Starting Smart and Strong communities utilize a population-level measure so at the end of 10 years we would be able to talk about child outcomes across the communities. There was unanimous resistance about implementing a new measure

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for a variety of reasons, which forced us to think long and hard about whether this was an important enough decision to hold tight; we decided that it was. It took almost a year of conversation with each of our communities, and together we decided that they would implement the data measure but would have maximum flexibility in developing plans for its rollout. Overall, conversations about power dynamics have become less charged than then they used to be, primarily because we have a built a shared commitment to working through issues by engaging in honest communication and negotiation.

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Staffing a Complex, Place-Based Initiative

When we chose to play a central role in Starting Smart and Strong, we had little idea what it

would actually mean for us to staff it. Our communities are not close to one another geographically, and we knew that we would need to be present in each of them a fair amount of the time, especially in the first few years. Knowing we were not able to hire additional foundation staff, we decided to embed a technical-assistance (TA) provider in each of the Starting Smart and Strong communities. The TA providers are consultants who know each community deeply and have credibility in key areas such as early learning, systems change, and cross-sector partnerships. As such, they offer a critical link between the foundation and the communities. Not only do they each have deep content expertise and local knowledge, but they also work collaboratively with one another and share learning across the communities.

Embedding a TA provider in each community added another level of complexity to our relationship building. Technical-assistance providers are not foundation staff per se, but over time we have come to see them as honest brokers who work side-by-side with our community partners and bring their voices into foundation-led conversations while consistently representing our voices and strategy on the ground.

Together we defined roles and responsibilities. But we found that in the early days of Starting Smart and Strong, the role itself was sometimes confusing to us, to them, and to community partners. What were the limits of their authority when, ultimately, we as program officers made final decisions and triggered funding? When and for what did community partners turn to us, and when did they turn to their TA providers? What did it mean to have confidential conversations? Working through issues, managing strong opinions, moving forward in a conversation one day and back several steps on another but staying committed, led to a level of respect that we never imagined. We are most proud of how dynamic and deeply meaningful these relationships have become to each of us.

As our relationships with our TA providers have deepened, we have been pushed to grow in our roles as program officers. Over the years, the

TA providers have challenged our assumptions, pushed the limits of our thinking, and deepened our connections to the communities by bridging us into new and important relationships. Importantly, they have helped extend our voices in the Starting Smart and Strong communities through their ability to translate our strategy into practice, while understanding both the latitude and guardrails that exist as intermediaries and proxy ambassadors of the foundation.

Building Trust and Time for Evaluation and Learning

Because Starting Smart and Strong is a complex, multisite, long-term community systems-change effort with a large investment, we knew we needed an evaluation approach to go along with it that prioritized learning and reflection, and that framing it correctly was essential. This means that instead of a traditional evaluation that looked at outcomes at discrete time points along the way, we chose a developmental evaluation approach that supported the developmental arc of the strategy, especially at its beginning, and that would generate the insights needed to adapt to the complexity of the work (Patton, 2010).

Developmental evaluation also required a deeper engagement from us, which once again had us reflecting on the nature of our relationship with our evaluators. While we were nurturing deeper partnerships with grantees, at the same time we were developing closer working relationships with our evaluators, which morphed into also engaging them as thought partners along the way. In developmental evaluation, strategy and evaluation feed each other — because we are often in communities, we tell evaluators what we are seeing on the ground and vice versa. Looking back, asking our evaluators to play a dual role was sometimes challenging. There were times when engaging them as thought partners could have impacted the integrity of the data by jeopardizing their objectivity, so they pulled back from thought partnership. And through building a deeper relationship with them we became better equipped to have those conversations with each other.

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Our evaluators also needed to build trusting relationships with the three communities and partners in order for deeper learning and reflection to occur. Because it is developmental evaluation, almost every pivot point in the evaluation requires engagement from both the foundation and our grantees, and that has been different from how we have operated in the past in our experience as CFC program officers. To be successful in this approach, we needed everyone involved in Starting Smart and Strong — at all levels, including foundation staff, grantees, educators and other constituents, and partners — to learn together along the way from insights and data and create feedback loops to support the emerging strategy. This required a commitment of our time and sufficient financial resources to the evaluation. We also learned to be patient as trust developed among stakeholders around data and mindsets shifted from skepticism to an appreciation of the value of evaluation in the work. Our communities are now making important progress in building data infrastructure, developing practices in using data to understand what is and isn't working, and sharing results with their stakeholders and the community at large (Nolan, 2018).

Showing up in communities is an essential ingredient; it shows commitment in the truest sense of the word. Engaging in tough conversations, setting tables as a neutral broker, asking hard questions, being proud – all of that matters and we are the first to tell you that community members notice.

Creating Narratives

In addition to embedding TA and evaluation in the Starting Smart and Strong communities, we provided communications support in two ways. Locally, each community was given access to the expertise of a communications firm. Together, communities and their communications consultant drafted plans for how to best meet their needs, and then implemented the plans. On a level up from that, the foundation worked with a communications firm to do two things: (1) create a narrative about Starting Smart and Strong that would document its creation, implementation, and exit; and (2) assist with field-building efforts by highlighting bright spots and elevating stories, video clips, and blog posts so that other funders and community stakeholders could learn about the work of our grantees.

Not surprisingly, relationships with our communications providers have also shifted over time. Initially, we believed that the emphasis had to stay on the work and the communities, and not on ourselves or the foundation. As we developed closer relationships with our communications providers and felt more comfortable listening to and absorbing their feedback, we realized that we had become an important set of actors in the work. If we were committed to telling the full

story of Starting Smart and Strong, the narrative had to include how our voices as program officers impacted the community change process. This seemingly small shift has created large ripples in our thinking by putting us smack in the middle of the narrative rather than placing us on its periphery, where we are typically more comfortable sitting.

What We've Learned

Three years into Starting Smart and Strong, communities have achieved tremendous progress in their efforts to create comprehensive, local early-learning ecosystems. They have built and strengthened multiagency, multisector collaborations in their communities while intentionally including beneficiary voices and perspectives. They have invested in cultivating local leadership in their communities to lead and sustain the work. They have engaged in testing and learning efforts that aim to improve the quality of adult-child interactions and have improved how they use data to support learning from what works and what doesn't. In doing so, early evaluation findings indicate positive trends related to teacher practice and child outcomes (Nolan, 2018). The three communities are laying the foundation for lasting community and systems change. And in doing this work, we share a few important lessons we have learned along the way.

- *You've got to show up.* If you think you can create community change in a place-based approach, it would be practically impossible to do so from afar in the absence of developing deep local relationships. The road to community change is littered with philanthropies who have helicoptered into communities believing that if they dropped a bag of cash, change would happen. Showing up in communities is an essential ingredient; it shows commitment in the truest sense of the word. Engaging in tough conversations, setting tables as a neutral broker, asking hard questions, being proud — all of that matters and we are the first to tell you that community members notice.

- *Be clear about how you define community.* In the early days of strategy implementation,

we asked each community to create a local leadership table that would ultimately guide the work of Starting Smart and Strong. The majority of the people who were invited to join the leadership tables were systems leaders and actors, with little to no representation from teachers, administrators, caregivers, and parents — the very constituents who would ultimately be most impacted by the work. This revealed a blind spot, as we had made an assumption that all voices, from the ground up, would be invited to the table to guide the implementation of Starting Smart and Strong. We did not have an explicit equity lens when we started the work, and for us defining community at that time meant having all kids arrive at kindergarten ready to learn. As the work progressed and deepened, equity has taken on a deeper meaning to include the voices of teachers, caregivers, and parents as participants at the decision-making tables. What resulted was a foundation decision to ask communities to focus on including constituent voice in the ongoing strategy implementation of Starting Smart and Strong, and communities agreed to develop plans to authentically bring those voices to the table.

- *Model good practice.* We've come to realize that our actions and approach to working with our Starting Smart and Strong grantees are also reflected in how they themselves are trying to work within their local communities. For example, we value the importance of constituent voice and make sure to include grantee input into designing grantee meetings and learning sessions. Similarly, grantees are soliciting constituent voice (e.g., parents and caregivers) through focus groups and interviews to inform the development of their programs. Also, as we build trust and strengthen relationships with our Starting Smart and Strong grantees, the three communities are also building trust and strengthening collaborations with their local partners.

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- *Fall down, and get back up.* We have made lots of missteps in the past three years; we've overreached in our expectations, made connections that on the surface looked promising but turned out to be more trouble than they were worth, and at times provided resources without asking our communities what they really needed — the list goes on. But we learned from each one of those mistakes and committed to each other to not make the same mistake twice. What we know about ourselves, and what our community partners have learned about us, is that there was never any bad intent in our mistakes; we're simply being human. Get back up, turn around, and say I'm sorry. It works.

- *Get a coach, not a recipe.* Very early on in the implementation of Starting Smart and Strong, we didn't trust our own instincts

When confronted by the complexity of what we created, we could have moved in either of two directions, taking the path that led to business as usual or the path that seemed riskier and less known. We chose the riskier path, and this is what we can tell you: We learn something new about the work and about ourselves every day.

and went hunting for a recipe we could follow that would lead to deep community change. We learned about many collaborative systems frameworks that were available, but none of them seemed to fit. Instead we called upon the expertise of a trusted colleague outside the foundation who deeply understood systems and inclusive community change. We engaged her to pilot alongside us as an observer, to guide us over hurdles, and help us understand the complexities of place-based work. She has become an invaluable support to us.

- *Don't be afraid to peel the onion.* We always ask for feedback from our grantees. However, in preparation for writing this article, we sought specific feedback about our engagement with Starting Smart and Strong communities to check our self-perceptions and identify potential blind spots and areas for growth. One reflection by a community grantee which we found particularly interesting was that we were not using our voices to their fullest extent. Although we were having conversations in each of our communities, those conversations were fairly safe — which is not to say that they were easy. But what she observed

was that we weren't sparking deeper conversations about issues that we could be exploring together. For example, we have not directly spoken about the inherent power dynamics embedded in funder-grantee relationships, or how issues of race and equity dynamics were showing up in the Starting Smart and Strong communities. Conversations that touch on those issues and others can be deeply personal and feel riskier to open up and explore. But if our goal is to learn and grow together, perhaps we program officers have a responsibility, as do our community partners, to help open and voice issues that make us uncomfortable. Quite possibly, embracing discomfort might be the next frontier worth exploring.

It's no surprise that trust lies at the core of authentic relationships. As program officers, we have been able to build grantee relationships that have seemed to us to be "authentic enough." By that we mean that our grantee relationships were open and respectful, but lacking much depth. But in a place-based initiative, developing trust and striving for deeper connection has come to mean something more because the stakes feel higher, especially with a 10-year time commitment. Like all functional long-term relationships, we realized that it was important to learn how to work things through with our community partners. It has compelled us to share our uncertainties, foibles, challenges, and successes with humility. We feel vulnerable a fair amount of the time as we strive to keep conversations open and alive so that we can work through issues with our partners, even when we are unsure of their outcomes. This commitment to ongoing authentic communication has become the new normal for us.

Conclusion

We have asked ourselves whether we would have engaged in Starting Smart and Strong in the same way had we known then what we know now. We can honestly say that the shift in our approach to go deeper, to be more open, and to be vulnerable has had such a profound impact on us that as program officers, we are forever changed. When confronted by the complexity of what we created, we could have moved in

either of two directions, taking the path that led to business as usual or the path that seemed riskier and less known. We chose the riskier path, and this is what we can tell you: We learn something new about the work and about ourselves every day. Even with the constant attention that Starting Smart and Strong requires, the authentic exchanges we now have with our grantees and partners bring an incredible vitality to the work. It has changed business as usual, and that has made all the difference.

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Reflective Practice