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Lead, Advise, Witness: Shifting Mindsets to Achieving Impact at Scale

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Introduction

Funders have long been grappling with how to achieve impact at scale (Bradach & Grindle, 2014). While we know scaling impact effectively requires a different approach, what that looks like in reality in communities, over a 10-year initiative — and in the midst of a global pandemic — is quite another story. We share our reflections as Children, Families, and Communities 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.

We begin with our rationale for scaling impact and then describe our scaling journey from the outset of the initiative. And, at seven years into the strategy, we share our thinking on how our approach to scaling impact has changed over time, where we stumbled, and how we pivoted. As we plan for exiting the strategy, we offer insights into how we are thinking about supporting communities' ownership of their own scaling journeys to sustain lasting change, and how our roles changed as the strategy matured.

Starting Smart and Strong

Starting Smart and Strong is a place-based, community-driven initiative aimed at ensuring that every young child living in the California 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 systems, test and develop solutions, and take collective action to create lasting community change.

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, with a focus on impact at scale.
- Seven years into Starting Smart and Strong, we offer key insights into our experiences as program staff managing this complex initiative and how our approach to scaling impact has shifted over the course of the strategy. Listening deeply to communities and honoring how they define scale and drive their scaling efforts through the systems they built resulted in creative, locally owned solutions to achieve impact. This allowed us to think more expansively about impact, which led to the development of a bifurcated scaling strategy.
- Looking ahead as we plan for exit from the initiative in three years, we offer reflections on how our approach to scaling impact has changed over time, where we stumbled, and how we pivoted. We offer insights into how we are thinking about supporting communities' ownership of their own scaling journeys to sustain lasting change, and how our roles changed as the strategy matured.

Our hypothesis was that by supporting communities in building strong early learning systems and nurturing local early learning leaders, communities would then create the conditions needed to scale adult practices within their systems through training and professional development.

Starting Smart and Strong focuses on four pillars of work (David and Lucile Packard Foundation, 2017):

- testing and scaling approaches to professional development and training for teachers and caregivers;
- 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.

In addition to the three Starting Smart and Strong communities, other grantee partners supporting the initiative include evaluation and communications support, innovation and scaling partners, and technical assistance providers.

Our Hypothesis for Scaling Impact

All too often we've seen that intentions to scale the impact of a program fall short because it is difficult to scale a program beyond an initial pilot. Efforts to scale programs fail because what is being scaled is either context-specific, too

expensive, has limited evidence, or is scaled but doesn't produce the same results as the pilot. We felt that if we wanted to have systems impact — given that our three communities were diverse and one solution will not be appropriate for all three — we had to think differently about how to support impact at scale.

Starting Smart and Strong aims to improve early learning systems by scaling high-quality adult practices across all settings in which young children learn and grow. Our hypothesis was that by supporting communities in building strong early learning systems and nurturing local early learning leaders, communities would then create the conditions needed to scale adult practices within their systems through training and professional development. We believed that by combining strong systems with strong leaders, school readiness for young children would improve.

Our original idea was that these three California communities would serve as proof points that would inform early learning policy, catalyze broader systems change statewide, and, ultimately, achieve “impact at scale,” a phrase that would take on different shades of meaning over time. Not surprisingly, as we embarked on our scaling journey, we encountered twists and turns with some missteps, periods of confusion, and breakthrough moments along the way.

The Scaling Journey

In the early days of implementation of Starting Smart and Strong, we assumed the responsibility for identifying scaling resources that we thought could be helpful to our three communities. To that end, we sought out partners who could help those communities understand what it meant to achieve impact at scale and, as a first step, we funded the development of a project called the Early Learning Lab. The goal of the lab was to enlist the help of scaling experts to bring new methods and tools from the social innovation sector to the early childhood field to catalyze the design, implementation, and scaling of high-impact products and programs. The Early Learning Lab was built on principles of human-centered design, where teams from each community would co-create effective solutions

in a rapid-cycle format to accelerate scaling of effective adult–child interaction practices.

In hindsight, creating the lab turned out to be a great idea that should have been developed before we launched the strategy. We were just introducing our communities to the strategy itself when the lab invited leadership teams from each community to a deep presentation about designing learning solutions. With minimal grounding to our strategy and limited understanding of what human-centered design meant, people left the training confused and overwhelmed. And we ourselves did not yet have a handle on how the Early Learning Lab fit into our scaling strategy, what we were asking communities to scale, or what part the lab would play in supporting our communities. Our initial misstep was about the timing and sequencing of introducing innovation into Starting Smart and Strong — which was not at all calibrated to the pace of change in our communities.

After about a year into Starting Smart and Strong, once communities had a better sense of the strategy, the lab started to gain traction and proved to be enormously helpful in identifying what each of the communities would be scaling. Further, the lab convened early childhood researchers to identify the “5 Priority Practices,” a set of research-based adult practices that predicted later school success (Early Learning Lab, 2021):

1. providing rich learning activities that build on a child’s interests;
2. reading, singing, and telling stories;
3. knowing the stages of a child’s development and what comes next;
4. creating nurturing relationships and using positive guidance, and
5. being responsive and expanding verbal and nonverbal communication.

These practices, we posited, could be put into the hands of adults caring for young children

regardless of setting, and improve adult–child interactions.

Over time, and with much relationship-building work, the lab engaged with each of the Starting Smart and Strong communities to identify and develop innovative approaches to professional development for teachers, and the five practices were embedded in each approach. In collaboration with the lab, San Jose focused on the social emotional development of young children, Oakland focused on trauma-informed professional development, and Fresno focused on professional development for young dual-language learners.

A second step that we took early in our scaling journey was a decision to work with the New Teacher Center (NTC) to infuse the practices into its teacher coaching practices. The center is a national organization that helps to build capacity within school districts and district partners to drive student learning, teacher effectiveness, and teacher and leadership development. Based on the center’s strong reputation, our communities were eager to have the NTC work with their early learning teachers. For the first two years, the center set out to adapt its own K–12 coaching model to specifically support early learning teachers. The NTC then proceeded to infuse the five practices into its coaching approach with early learning educators. As we began to formulate a scaling strategy in the third year, we thought that the center, with its reach into districts of all sizes across the country, could become a scaling engine for quality practice in early learning across California, beginning with our Starting Smart and Strong communities.

Conversations with the NTC about assuming a lead role in our scaling efforts languished for several months, until we realized that each of us was operating with different ideas about what scaling meant. The center’s scaling goal was to spread its coaching model to a greater number of school districts — marching through, one at a time. For us, scaling meant increasing the number of children who were ready for kindergarten as a result of teachers being better prepared to meet their needs. Further, for us, achieving

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impact at scale would be accomplished not by working one district at a time, but instead by developing a holistic system of support. Our second misstep was not taking the time to fully unpack each of our working definitions of scale to check for understanding and resonance.

Identifying Frameworks for Scaling

From the very beginning of Starting Smart and Strong, our communities knew that achieving impact at scale was a core principle. But we were not at all clear about what scale meant and how it was going to be achieved. This caused a great deal of confusion among our communities, and they asked us for more clarity and guidance around what and how to scale. In truth, we were learning about scale ourselves and struggled to clearly articulate what we meant by scaling impact.

To further unpack what scale meant for us, we developed a theory of scale that focused on why we were scaling, what we were scaling, how we were scaling, and what the drivers of scale were. This theory of scale would ideally allow the Packard Foundation, our three communities, and our partners (e.g., evaluators, the Early Learning Lab, the NTC, technical assistance providers) to come to consensus about how we would achieve scale in the Starting Smart and Strong communities and statewide. Also, because the lab and the NTC were both working on scaling with the three communities but through different approaches, we needed to

clarify the connection between them and what their respective roles were in supporting the communities in achieving impact at scale.

The initial draft theory of scale, developed through discussions with our evaluation partner, was shared with the lab and the NTC for input. Our discussion with them was fruitful and provided more clarity around their distinct approaches to scale, which informed the next revision of the theory of scale. Once we had a version that we felt best captured how scale was going to be achieved and the common data that would measure progress, we shared it with our three communities for their input and thoughts on how to operationalize scaling efforts. We were surprised by the communities' reactions. While they thought that the theory of scale depicted scale in Starting Smart and Strong, they pointed out that the theory of scale was the foundation's theory, and not theirs. What became clear to us was that each of the communities was on its own unique scaling journey, and our theory of scale did not allow for any variation based on context.

We were committed to providing tools and frameworks to help our communities think about scale and thought that the theory of scale would be a way to achieve that. When it did not achieve its desired result, we went back to the drawing board and learned about the Billions Institute's Skid Row School, which offered a practical framework for designing and leading large-scale change (Billions Institute, 2021). After participating in the institute's training ourselves, we thought our three communities could benefit from it. So, we invited them to join a special Billions Institute training tailored to meet their needs. The communities generally benefited from learning about the practical approaches to scale and it expanded their understanding of scale. In fact, spending a week together with their teams and with the other communities sparked a different kind of conversation about scaling impact. We came to a common understanding that not all the work that the communities had engaged in had to be scaled.

As a result, communities began to take ownership of their scaling goals by identifying what was most important for them to scale and what they were willing to let go of. This experience also unlocked our thinking about scaling impact, and we pivoted to a bifurcated scaling strategy. One part of the strategy offered us a path to reaching our larger aspiration of scaling adult practices through state systems, and the other part freed communities to drive their own scaling journeys, which would be useful for other communities to learn from.

Along Came a Pandemic

Although our communities were strengthening their systems and scaling effective programs and processes over the first seven years, we often wondered about their durability, flexibility, and ultimate sustainability. During this time, Starting Smart and Strong communities had weathered changes in leadership at all levels as well as the impact of financial and political pressures, and the systems were able to withstand those challenges without losing their focus or momentum. But when school districts in California began to shutter their doors in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were concerned that the systems the communities had worked so hard to build would crumble under the weight of the crisis. In the weeks and months immediately following a statewide lockdown, we were relieved to learn that each of the communities had retooled and pivoted their early learning systems to meet the immediate needs of young children and their families.

Scaling capacity was greatly increased when the communities expanded their systems by bringing new partners to the table to fill immediate gaps that opened due to the lockdown. Families struggled to make ends meet and essential goods became out of reach. This opened opportunities for our communities to think bigger, and as a result, they were able to tackle complex issues like transforming closed school campuses and child care centers into distribution sites that provided food, diapers, and baby formula to families with young children. They were also able to push resources through these systems that armed parents and caregivers with critically

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important information ranging from applying for cash assistance and unemployment benefits to seeking rent subsidies and avoiding eviction. Professional development trainings for teachers and caregivers that had been created by each community migrated to online platforms, making them accessible to larger and more diverse audiences. And when lack of access to technology and broadband connectivity emerged as a barrier to online learning opportunities for young children, community partners reached out to private corporations and public providers to close technology gaps and arranged for hands-on technical support for families who were unfamiliar with its use.

Watching the Starting Smart and Strong communities rise to meet the critical needs of young children and their families in response to the pandemic taught us about the nature of resiliency in the face of crisis. In truth, many communities across the country joined forces to support families impacted by the pandemic, many of whom were marginalized even before the crisis took hold. In that way, our communities were not unique. What set our three communities apart from others, we believe was their ability to lean into crisis response mode almost immediately because the networks that were built over the years became the

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foundation upon which they developed crisis management plans for the pandemic. The result was that systems grew stronger through the pandemic, and that is something that we could have never predicted.

Lessons Learned

As we grappled with scale during the first seven years of Starting Smart and Strong, we learned many lessons along the way.

Do Your Homework

As we reflect on our initial approach to achieving impact at scale, it is clear we started off on the wrong path. Instead of engaging our Starting Smart and Strong communities in conversations about how they conceptualized scale, we moved right into implementation efforts according to us. The reality was that in the early days of the strategy, we did not know enough about scale to be of much help to our communities. Although we had created a narrative about the importance of impact at scale, we dove headfirst into identifying ready-made solutions rather than taking the time to fill our knowledge gaps. We hunted for off-the-shelf frameworks, but each one came up short. We identified models for scale, but none seemed to fit. Simply put, we were grasping at straws.

The lesson: Take the time to do your homework and understand the context in which you're working before you start an initiative. Acknowledge what you don't know and figure it out together with grantees.

Determine Who Owns Scale

It wasn't until we began to explore some foundational questions about scale that we were able to regain our footing and find a new direction. First and foremost, we asked ourselves if we had a point of view about scale, and, if so, how we were defining it. What was the "it" we were asking communities to scale: school readiness, professional development, the "5 Priority Practices"? And who owned the scaling strategy, anyway?

We have written at some length about the power dynamics that are often at play in place-based strategies (Sunshine & Sangalang, 2018), so it came as no surprise when tensions surfaced in scaling conversations with our Starting Smart and Strong communities. We struggled with the idea that we had to provide direction about scale, but the reality was that our communities were asking for direction from us. We felt a tension between being responsive and strategic. Once we understood that our communities needed to own a scaling strategy much like they had owned most other parts of the Starting Smart and Strong strategy, we were able to rebalance our roles and work with them as co-learners in a scaling journey.

The lesson: Keep your eye on the strategy's goals and leave its implementation to the communities.

Demand Drives Local Scaling Efforts

A few years into the strategy, we were surprised to learn that scale was already happening in communities despite much ambiguity along the way. All along we assumed communities needed a theoretical framework to guide them before they started embarking on their scaling journeys. But scaling was actually happening organically. Communities started scaling when they saw a demand for the work they were doing along with the encouraging data they

were receiving. All three communities began to scale, either within their systems or to other communities.

We were reminded that our grantees knew what was best for their communities, and we just needed to get out of their way. As engaged grantmakers, the best we can do to support our grantees is to be available when they need us instead of inserting ourselves in their work.

The lesson: Listen deeply to communities and honor how they approach scale to meet local demand.

Not Everything That Is Built Will Scale

When managing a large, complex initiative where the elements fit together seamlessly, it was easy to be lulled into believing that all that had been built by our communities over 10 years would eventually scale. The reality is that, at the end of 10 years, without Packard Foundation funding, communities simply will not have the resources to maintain the totality of what they created. Instead, communities will be forced to make some tough choices about what parts of the work they would let go as they focused on scaling those elements that were most important to them.

The lesson: When scaling impact, it's elements of the strategy that are scaled, not the strategy itself.

Invite Others to Poke at Your Strategy

Because this was a 10-year, emergent strategy, it was important to us to periodically invite outsiders to give us honest feedback about our strategy and how we were evaluating it. Every couple of years we invited three external experts from different fields to hear about the status of our strategy and what we were puzzling over, learn about the evaluation, ask hard questions, and offer advice on how we should be thinking about our work going forward.

The initial intent was to form an ad hoc external evaluation advisory committee (EAC) to help us and our external evaluation partners reflect on how we were doing specifically around the

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evaluation of the initiative. But since we were engaged in a developmental evaluation where strategy and evaluation were closely linked, any advice about the evaluation had implications for the strategy itself.

The first EAC focused on generating insights and implications for the Starting Smart and Strong evaluation, and suggested we develop a theory of scale to identify more clearly what was being scaled and to further clarify the initiative's scaling approach. A few years later, the EAC helped focus our thinking on systems, which led us to a better understanding of the differences between spread and scale. At that time, we were wondering what amount and type of evidence would let us know if the communities were ready to scale. Our most recent EAC pushed our thinking even further about scale and helped us shift our frame from one of sustainability — which can be perceived by some as funder-centric — to community ownership, where communities are leading the way.

With a complex, long-term strategy in three different communities, we knew we wouldn't always get it right. We were so focused on the work that it was helpful to step back occasionally and hold a mirror up to ourselves. Having an EAC share its views deepened our reflective practice and at the same time made our thinking visible. This has strengthened our organizational learning culture and, most importantly,

enabled us to become better strategists and partners to our communities.

The lesson: Stay open to learning and allow others to weigh in on your strategy.

Moving Toward Exit

With three years remaining in the Starting Smart and Strong strategy, it is time to focus on our exit. All three communities are proud of the resiliency of the systems they built over the last seven years, and learned that they are strong enough to withstand the impact of a pandemic. They also learned that their systems could scale exponentially and adapt to changing needs.

As they slowly climb out of the COVID-19 crisis and prepare for the next crisis, whatever that might be, conversations are emerging about “what” and “how” they want to scale in the final years of Starting Smart and Strong. In fact, new energy and creativity was unleashed by leaning into conversations focused on scale. The use of technology eliminated barriers for participation in professional development and, as a result, larger, more diverse audiences have attended professional development trainings. System leaders are also taking a more holistic view of how to support teachers’ social and emotional needs as they return to classroom instruction, recognizing that everyone has experienced some level of trauma during the pandemic. Importantly, communities learned to grow, scale, and iterate their classroom innovations to equip teachers and caregivers with new ways to meet the needs of young learners and their families.

Our next step will be to take stock of each community to understand where it is in its systems development and scaling efforts, and invite them to begin thinking about what resources and/or technical assistance they might need to sustain their efforts once our investment sunsets. Instead of approaching these conversations with a predetermined set of resources to offer to our communities, we are starting with a series of conversations to better understand what their needs are. As those become clear, we will work

together to develop a sequenced plan that will spread the needed resources across the final years of the strategy.

The Shifting Nature of Our Roles

As the strategy has evolved, we have become attuned to the ways in which our roles shift over time but struggled to find the words to describe the pivots we made. Just as the EAC was created to poke at the Starting Smart and Strong strategy, our Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) program colleagues also come together periodically to share their insights into how the work has unfolded and to harvest the learning. In a recent session, CFC Director Meera Mani offered her reflections on how our roles had changed as the strategy matured. For the first three years, we created the conditions for change and had a definite role in building basic strategy elements; our role then, Mani observed, was to lead the strategy. As the strategy took root in the fourth year, system leaders started to move the strategy forward and we gradually released control of it to them; at that point, she identified our role as advising the strategy leaders rather than leading them.

As we approached year seven, we experienced yet another pivot that was hard to understand. Systems were scaling and our communities were calling us with less frequency. It felt as if we had lost the wind in our sails. In this final stretch of Starting Smart and Strong, Mani has summed up our role as witnessing the strategy. And she is exactly right, because communities are leading the way. These three, distinct roles perfectly capture the evolution of our position in the strategy.

The final few years of Starting Smart and Strong offer us an opportunity to reflect on what we have learned about ourselves as leaders of a complex, place-based initiative. It will take time to sift through what we have learned, but what is immediately clear is the importance of showing up as our authentic selves and engaging in this work with humility and a deep respect for what it takes to scale impact and create lasting change.

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