



EVOLVING FOR EQUITY

Integrating Developmental and Equity-Focused Evaluation
A Case Study in Evaluating Long-Term Systems Change

FROM THE DAVID AND LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2014, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) team launched the Starting Smart and Strong Initiative (S3I), a 10-year, place-based initiative focused on enhancing early childhood development in Oakland, Fresno, and San Jose, California. S3I concentrated on four pillars:

- 1 Professional development for caregivers and educators
- 2 Support for informal caregivers
- 3 Access to quality healthcare and developmental screenings
- 4 Creating robust early learning systems

Recognizing the complexity of this initiative, the Foundation partnered with Engage R+D for a developmental evaluation, incorporating the Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF) to embed equity in the evaluation approach.

This case study tells the story of the S3I evaluation, starting with what CFC and its partners were seeking when they initially embarked on this effort, how the evaluation evolved in response to equity considerations, and lessons learned for others engaged in long-term, systems change work. It aims to offer practical insights and strategies about what it takes for foundations and evaluators to embrace and support community-led change more fully in their work together.

EVOLVING EVALUATION APPROACH

The S3I evaluation journey was marked by significant shifts:

From program to systems evaluation.

Initially focused on kindergarten readiness, the approach evolved to assess broader systems-level change, incorporating considerations of collaboration and equity.

From capturing data to empowering communities.

The evaluation transformed from merely gathering data to building community capacity in data-informed decision-making, positioning communities as primary users of the evaluation.

From equity-agnostic to equity-embedded.

Initially, equity was not an explicit focus for this effort. Over time, influenced by the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, the evaluation integrated a stronger focus on equity, particularly in addressing structural racism and inequitable outcomes.

From funder-driven to community-focused.

The shift to a community-centric approach recognized local communities as strategists, necessitating responsive and flexible evaluation practices.

From common benchmarks to diverse measures for scale.

The approach transitioned from fixed benchmarks to diverse, community-informed measures, recognizing the unique contexts and priorities of each community.

The evaluation process emphasized community engagement, requiring unlearning past practices and embracing diverse feedback. Communities' experiences and needs shaped the evaluation approach, emphasizing trust-building and a shift in the traditional power dynamics in funder-grantee-evaluator relationships.

KEY LESSONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

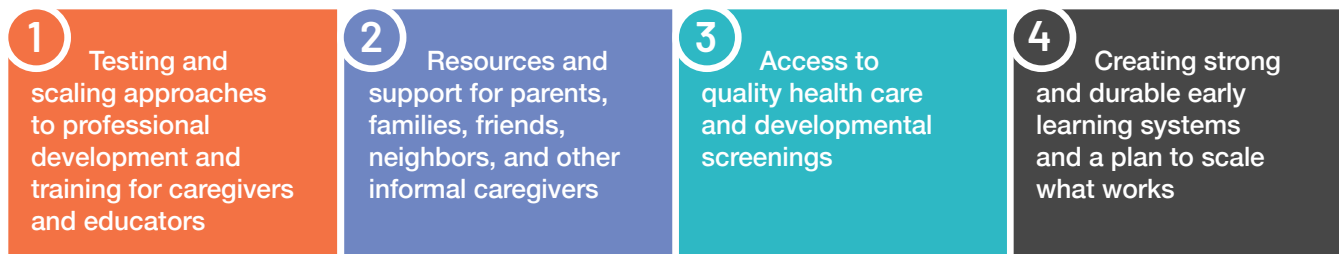
The report highlights several key lessons:

- 1 Systems change initiatives, like S3I, require **adaptive, responsive evaluation approaches** that accommodate the complexity and long-term nature of such efforts.
- 2 Effective developmental evaluations in this context should prioritize community leadership, equity, and continuous learning and **focus on community leaders as the central strategists** in guiding evaluation priorities and practices.
- 3 Transparent, collaborative relationships among funders, evaluators, and communities are essential for **overcoming traditional power imbalances** and fostering trust.

I INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) team at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation launched Starting Smart and Strong (S3I), a 10-year place-based initiative to explore concrete ways communities can ensure that every young child grows up healthy and ready for kindergarten. The team set out to work with three California communities—Oakland, Fresno, and the Franklin-McKinley School District in East San Jose—to improve the quality of early learning and developmental experiences by bringing together public and private partners to strengthen early learning systems and ultimately scale what works. Each community brings together service providers, school district staff, community members, advocates, and funders to create comprehensive early learning systems, develop and test solutions, and take collective action to make lasting community change.

Starting Smart and Strong focuses on four pillars of work:



In addition to the three S3I communities, other grantees include evaluation, communications, innovation, and scaling partners, and local technical assistance providers.

The Foundation recognized that the initiative was both ambitious and complex, and therefore, having an evaluator on board would be beneficial. It began working with **Engage R+D** in 2014 to conduct a developmental evaluation of S3I. *Developmental evaluation* is an approach designed to “assist social innovators develop social change initiatives in complex or uncertain environments.”¹ Developed by Michael Quinn Patton, it gained traction during the 2000s in the philanthropic sector in response to growing recognition of the complexity of systemic social change initiatives and the limitations of traditional evaluation in supporting strategic decision-making and innovation.

Developmental evaluations of long-term systems change efforts typically evolve over time to match changes in information needs at different stages of the work; this has certainly been true for the S3I evaluation. However, **one of the most notable evolutions at play in the evaluation of S3I was the integration of Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF) principles with a developmental approach**². Created by Jara Dean-Coffey, EEF calls for a paradigm shift in evaluation, with an emphasis on centering equity in all aspects of the evaluation process.³ It developed out of a recognition that traditional evaluation methods and the way evaluations are planned and commissioned often perpetuate systemic biases and inequities and seeks to address these issues by cultivating intentionality about the purpose, use, and practice of evaluation.

¹ Better Evaluation. (2021, November 6). *Developmental evaluation*. Retrieved May 9, 2023 from Better Evaluation: www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/developmental-evaluation.

² Equitable Evaluation Initiative. (2023). Equitable Evaluation Framework™. Retrieved February 13, 2024 from: www.equitableeval.org/framework.

³ Dean-Coffey, J. (2017). Equitable Evaluation Framework™ framing paper. Equitable Evaluation Initiative. www.equitableeval.org/_files/ugd/21786c_04631f8cfd44cb4a10a4097bf85acd5.pdf.

Embedding equity within the context of a developmental evaluation took time, intentionality, and collaboration. It required our evaluation team and CFC to unlearn past habits and practices and be open to new perspectives, diverse feedback, and ideas about how the evaluation could advance equity. **This case study tells the story of the S3I evaluation, starting with what CFC and its partners were seeking when they initially embarked as collaborators on this effort, how the evaluation evolved in response to community feedback and equity considerations, and lessons learned for others embarking on long-term, community-led systems change work.**

In crafting this case study, we, as the authors and evaluators, have navigated the intricate balance between being outside observers and embedded participants within the developmental and equitable evaluative process. Our narrative draws from our team's reflections, observations, and independent interviews with the CFC team and S3I grantees. We recognize that the goal of objectivity in traditional evaluation contrasts with the ethos of developmental evaluation, where our intertwined relationship with the community enriches our insights. This proximity means we are not detached spectators; our conclusions and storytelling are informed by a mutual influence between us and community leaders. With this transparency, we aim to share a more nuanced story, hoping it will inspire more foundations to embrace evaluation and grantmaking practices that empower community leaders. These practices should cultivate connections, shared learning, and sensemaking, and ensure community leaders have the autonomy and support necessary to drive sustainable, community-led change.⁴

II EMBARKING ON AN EVALUATION

Initially, CFC issued a request for proposals (RFP) for a one-year evaluation planning engagement focused on refining evaluation and learning questions for the first year of S3I, evaluating the initial implementation and gathering lessons learned for CFC and grantees, and recommending evaluation and learning approaches for subsequent years. The RFP also focused this work on grantees' efforts to improve training and professional development for caregivers and early educators of children as opposed to their systems improvement work more holistically.

While the RFP was short-term in nature and focused on a single strand of communities' S3I work, CFC knew at the time that it was looking for a **long-term strategy and learning partner**. As is the case with many initiatives that seek to influence systems and scale solutions, S3I required an emergent strategy that was responsive to the dynamic and complex environments in which each community's work would take place. Consequently, the evaluation had to mirror a similar approach. As one member of the Foundation team shared, "We knew the initiative would have a lot of different learning needs over time, and we needed a team who could support all or most of them, especially since we couldn't predict what they would be."

It was also crucial to CFC that the learning partner have the **capacity to measure whether children in S3I communities were better off** as a result of the initiative: "We had a clear guiding star, and we felt it was critical to track if and how kids were doing better in the classroom." Having that partner on board from the beginning was viewed as ideal to support effective implementation. As one team member shared, "I have been involved in far too many efforts when there were serious missed opportunities for learning and adjustment. Because the S3I strategy was going to be emergent, we wanted to make sure there was an evaluation from the beginning to support learning along the way."

⁴ For additional discussion on the role of funders in supporting community-led systems change, see: Lynn, J., Nolan, C., & Waring, P. (2021). Strategy resilience: Getting wise about philanthropic strategy in a post-pandemic world. *The Foundation Review*, 13(2). doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1564.

LISTENING TO COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES

CFC knew from experience that it was essential to prepare communities for engagement in evaluation and learning, and set clear expectations about this from the onset of the work. As part of the initial RFP for grant funding, the Foundation included expectations regarding participation in learning and evaluation, as well as how they saw evaluation and learning opportunities contributing to grantee success. Some of these preliminary guidelines included participation in an initiative-wide community of practice, engaging in local and initiative-level activities like interviews, focus groups and surveys, as well as the collection and use of child, program, and population-level data, including the Early Development Instrument (EDI).⁵

In addition to what was outlined in the RFP, communities brought their own assumptions and prior experiences with evaluation to the table. Many of these were deeply embedded in the norms and criteria that shape evaluation and research within public education contexts, where the focus frequently rests on collecting data primarily for accountability. Most notably, communities expressed different levels of **anxiety and ambivalence around being held accountable to traditional and rigid outcome measures**. As one community leader reflected, “It was made explicit that there were some very clear outcome expectations to be measured in a fairly traditional way.” The expectation around population-level outcomes gave pause to some communities, who were familiar with the challenges of systems change and the complexities involved in measuring success at the population level. One grantee reflected, “With the EDI, I worried about the initiative being held accountable to a population-level evaluation when the investment was relatively small...I knew it would take much bigger systems change and investments to move a population needle.”

As is the case with many new initiatives, the evaluation and learning expectations sparked uncertainty and confusion among grantees early on. Communities were motivated by the work but felt the pressures of accountability and a looming uncertainty regarding what the evaluation would look and feel like. As one community leader said, “I was a little bit afraid...I thought they were evaluating our performance,” which sparked concern given “it was a brand-new project [that involved] a lot of testing and learning.” Starting with sentiments of confusion and anxiety meant it would take time for the Foundation, communities, and evaluation team alike to build trust, overcome mental models regarding what the funder-grantee-evaluator relationships would look like, and gain clarity around the evaluation’s goals and value-add.

Amidst these reflections and concerns, it became increasingly clear that the success of this initiative hinged not just on the strategies or the funding but, critically, on the choice of an evaluation partner. This partner needed the insight to navigate the multifaceted landscape of community expectations and apprehensions while aligning with the Foundation’s vision of fostering a mutually beneficial, collaborative evaluation approach. The deliberate choice of such a partner was, therefore, a decisive step in shaping the trajectory of the S3I initiative.

⁵ The EDI is a validated, population-based measure of early child development in five key domains (physical health, emotional maturity, social competence, language and cognitive skills, and communications skills and general knowledge). More information about the instrument can be found on the University of California, Los Angeles Center for Healthier Children, Families, and Communities website: www.healthychild.ucla.edu.

SELECTING AN EVALUATION AND LEARNING PARTNER

The CFC team, with its history of fostering impactful evaluations, deeply understood the importance of a skilled learning partner, especially considering the extensive timeline and the intricate web of community collaboration intrinsic to the S3I initiative. As the search unfolded that ultimately found Engage R+D, certain key qualities emerged as essential, reflecting the team's understanding of the nuanced challenges at hand:

EXPERIENCE ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

“ Because we were working directly with school districts and other community partners, we wanted to have an evaluator that had experience working with communities and engaging them.”

“ We weren't looking for a research house. We were looking for a community-grounded evaluation team.”

SUBSTANTIVE EARLY LEARNING EXPERTISE

“ We were looking for early learning knowledge and expertise, and knowledge of classroom assessment tools. But other evaluation firms had that too; it was really the attention to communities that was most salient.”

KNOWLEDGE OF PHILANTHROPY

“ While strategy lived primarily in communities, we needed a partner who could support our strategy as Foundation partners, which was focused on how to help our communities to be successful.”

KNOWLEDGE OF THE ECOSYSTEM

“ It helped a great deal that the evaluation team knew the context and had experience with many of the players in S3I communities.”

NIMBLENESS

“ We wanted a smaller firm with whom we felt we could have a more nimble partnership, and for whom we would be an important long-term partner.”

Our organization was interested in this work for synergistic reasons. In addition to valuing early learning as a critical resource for families and communities, we appreciated the Foundation's long-term funding commitment, its emphasis on supporting communities to develop their own strategies and solutions, and the team's openness to using developmental evaluation as a conduit for gathering feedback, engaging in shared learning with grantees and partners, and making decisions about potential adjustments to its support of communities.

APPLYING AN EEF LENS, RETROSPECTIVELY

While the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI) had not yet launched, it is interesting to look back at this early phase of the evaluation with Equitable Evaluation Framework™ Principles and Orthodoxies in mind. For example, advancing progress toward equity was not articulated as a core purpose for engaging in evaluation by either CFC or our team (*EEF Principle 1*) nor was equity named as an explicit focus of the strategy. The Foundation also defined what success looked like by laying out expected outcomes at the 5- and 10-year marks of the initiative, such as the number of caregivers prepared to work with young children, the number of children with access to high-quality child development and early learning, and the passage of supportive state and federal policies (*EEF Foundation Orthodoxy: Definitions, Decisions, Perceptions*). Early on, grantees often prioritized accountability to the Foundation over pursuing their own goals, reflecting a common dynamic in grantor-grantee relationships (*EEF Foundation Orthodoxy: Productivity, Accountability*).

At the same time, CFC was also thinking in ways that questioned traditional orthodoxies at play in evaluation of philanthropic initiatives. For example, it was clear that CFC valued more than credentials and conventional notions of expertise in selecting the evaluation team (*EEF Foundation Orthodoxy: Expectations, Roles*). The Foundation team appreciated having a partner that had existing relationships with communities and the ability to engage with community leaders around learning in responsive and supportive ways (*EEF Foundation Orthodoxy: Relationships, Trust*). In addition, the Foundation did not center its own learning needs exclusively but foregrounded the needs of grantees and other initiative partners as critical users of the developmental evaluation (*EEF Foundation Orthodoxy: Definitions, Decisions, Perceptions*). It recognized that it would take time for the evaluation team to build trusting relationships with communities as part of this effort and provided resources and time for this as part of the original evaluation scope (*EEF Foundation Orthodoxy: Resources: Money, Time, People*). When the Foundation expanded the evaluation beyond its original scope, it offered grantees the option to choose their own local evaluation partners (*EEF Foundation Orthodoxy: Expectations, Roles*). When all three grantees decided to work with the Engage R+D team as part of this expansion, it sent a strong signal regarding the depth of relationships formed with community leaders. Finally, CFC also sought feedback about its own role in supporting communities rather than viewing grantees and strategies alone as the evaluand (*EEF Foundation Orthodoxy: Objectivity, Rigor, Evidence*).

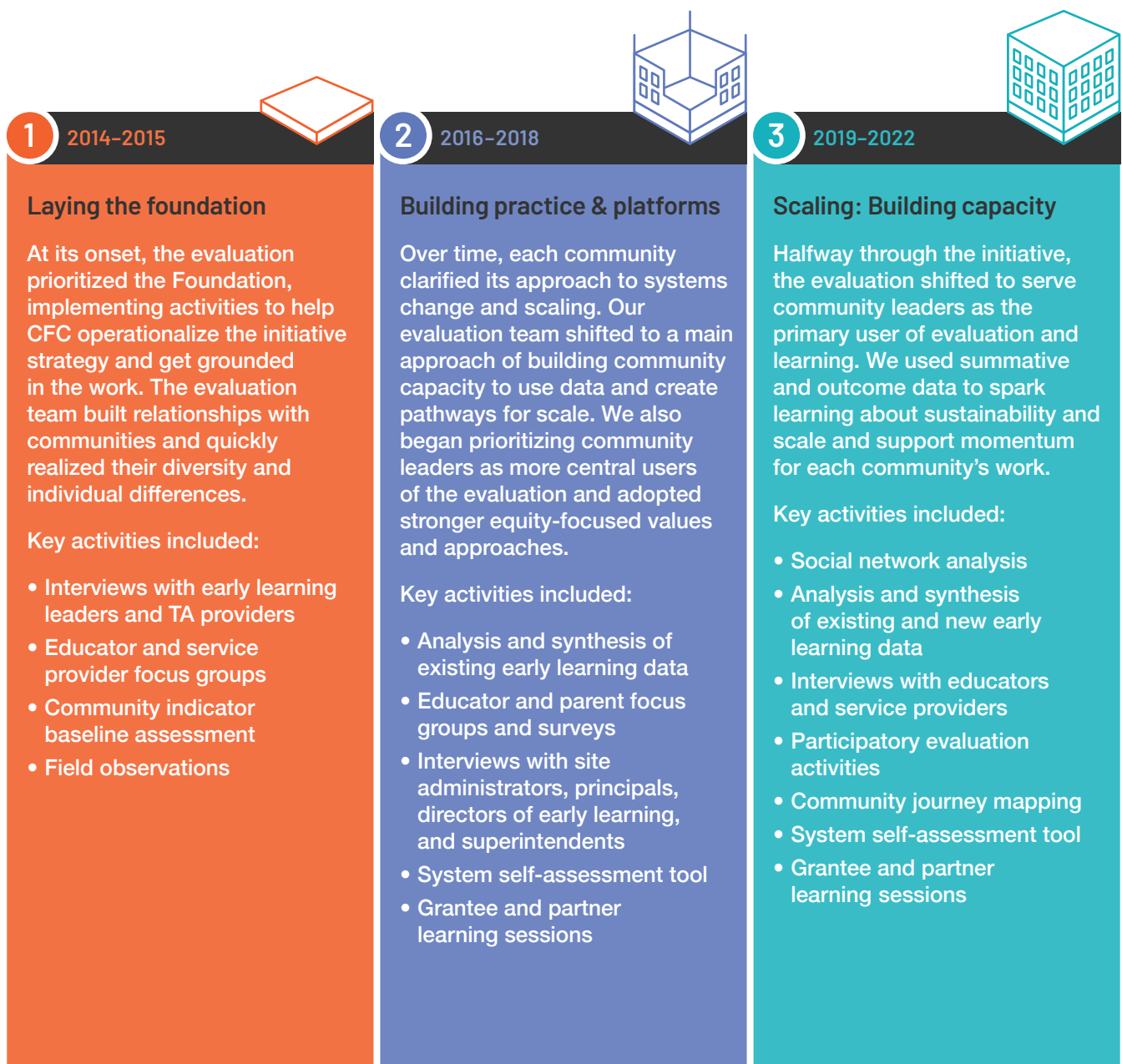
On the consulting side, our team consciously grappled with prevailing orthodoxies. We experienced tensions at times when it came to providing strategic advice while still maintaining our “outside” credibility (*EEF Consultant Orthodoxy: Objectivity, Rigor, Evidence*), balancing community-centered approaches with pressures around productivity (*EEF Consultant Orthodoxy: Resources: Money, Time, People*), and navigating our own authority to make decisions (*EEF Consultant Orthodoxy: Expectations, Roles*). We were motivated to test the boundaries of what was traditionally accepted without overstepping norms and causing undue challenge. Ultimately, we sought ways to make the evaluation more meaningful, inclusive, and impactful in ways that balanced our sense of expectations across communities, the Foundation, and our own team.

III THE UNFOLDING OF THE EVALUATION

At the heart of developmental evaluation is adaptation, meaning that there must be room for the evaluative approach to evolve. The S3I evaluation has done just that, constantly adjusting its focus and considerations based on real-time learning in collaboration with CFC and the communities at the center of the work. Arriving at what that approach would look like took time and required many shifts, pivots, and honest conversations around the role of evaluation, including who should be considered the primary users of evaluation and learning. The evaluation team sought to be responsive to initial foundation needs, what communities desired, and broader ideas shaping the field of evaluation and philanthropy.

ADAPTING OVER THREE PHASES AND KEY CONTEXT

In reflecting on the evolution of the evaluation—specifically the changes in the approach (spanning areas of inquiry, methods, and strategies) and in the evaluation’s priorities, goals and primary users guiding its trajectory—three distinct phases have come to light. These phases mark the initiative’s progression through 2022:



In reflecting on these phases, it's worth highlighting at a high level the **context in which this work unfolded**.

- The S3I evaluation started in 2014, a time in which the social sector was exhibiting a strong interest in social change strategies that involved scaling what works, changing systems, and collective impact.^{6,7,8}
- In 2017, the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI) was launched, accompanied by the release of the EEF™ Framing Paper.⁹ This pivotal moment catalyzed new hopes and opportunities for the role of philanthropic evaluation in contributing to equity.
- The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020 ignited global attention to police brutality and systemic racism. Since that time, there have been growing calls for a reexamination of the purpose and practice of philanthropy with an emphasis on centering trust, shifting power, and advancing equity.

Our team, along with CFC and S3I grantees, were responding to this changing context in real time, drawing upon past frameworks for evaluating systems change and scaling, taking in new ideas about what it meant to center equity in evaluation practice, and supporting CFC in reflecting on how it could best engage with S3I communities.

KEY SHIFTS OVER TIME

Throughout the three phases, the evaluation team made specific shifts in practice.¹⁰ These five fundamental shifts came to define central tenets of the S3I evaluation approach, underscoring the role of adaptation in shaping a process and framework suitable for complex systems change.

The Foundation's openness to and selection of a developmental evaluation approach was critical to making these shifts. A developmental lens uses an adaptive, context-specific approach with no prescribed methodology.¹¹ Our evaluation team was able to learn by doing, listen to and reflect on emerging needs and priorities, and implement responsive shifts in the evaluation. Grantees' perceptions of this approach matched the evaluation team's developmental intentions. As seen in the word cloud, when grantees were asked for three words to describe the evaluation, some of the most common words chosen included responsive, evolving, and flexible.

Communities were asked to name three words that described their experiences with the evaluation. The size of each word reflects how frequently it was mentioned, with larger words mentioned by multiple people.



⁶ See, for example: Bradach, J., & Grindle, A. (2014, February 19). Transformative scale: the future of growing what works. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. ssir.org/articles/entry/transformative_scale_the_future_of_growing_what_works.

⁷ See, for example: Gopal, S., & Kania, J. (2015, November 20). Fostering systems change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. ssir.org/articles/entry/fostering_systems_change.

⁸ See, for example: Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact.

⁹ Dean-Coffey, J. (2017). Equitable Evaluation Framework™ framing paper. Equitable Evaluation Initiative. www.equitableeval.org/_files/ugd/21786c_04631f8cfd44cb4a10a4097bf85acd5.pdf

¹⁰ Sunshine, J., & Sangalang, B. (2022). Lead, advise, witness: Shifting mindsets to achieving impact at scale. *The Foundation Review*, 14(1). doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1602.

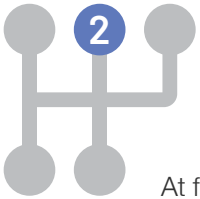
¹¹ Dozois, E., Langlois, M., Blanchet-Cohen, N (2010). DE 201: A practitioner's guide to developmental evaluation. Montreal, Quebec: J. W. McConnell Foundation and the International Institute for Child Rights and Development. www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/report/practitioners-guide-developmental-evaluation



SHIFT 1 EVALUATING PROGRAMS → EVALUATING SYSTEMS

During Phase 1, as the initiative was getting underway, the primary aim of the Foundation and communities was kindergarten readiness. The evaluation focused on assisting the Foundation with implementation of its strategy and relied on more traditional program evaluation assessments. Specifically, as a grantee put it, “In the beginning, it really felt like the goal was to assess our progress towards kindergarten readiness. That was the North Star that Packard always talked about and what the evaluation was really focused on, like individual child outcomes.” But as the complexity of the systems—and the strategies to encourage systems-level change—became more apparent, the evaluation team recognized that assessing systems and using evaluation to help communities take proven and promising practices to scale would better fit the work going forward.

In conversation with initiative partners, **our evaluation team expanded its questions and data collection beyond assessing programmatic progress in kindergarten readiness to explore impact on systems**, collaboration, and, as a grantee put it, “some of these issues around equity that are so much a part of our work now.” This expansion meant venturing into less charted territory in the early learning and development field, where limited evaluation of systems change had occurred. “Measuring systems change and collective impact—no one was talking about that,” a community partner pointed out. “Over time, the attention Engage R+D put into thinking of ways to really look at how the systems were coming together was great, and that’s newer to the field.”



SHIFT 2 CAPTURING DATA → SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES AS EVALUATION USERS

At first, the initiative’s structure positioned the evaluation team to gather data from grantee partners to inform the Foundation and, to some extent, the grantee communities. However, consistent data was not readily available from grantee partners either to meet initiative needs or for grantees’ own use, hampering their ability to make evidence-based decisions. As a Foundation staff member remarked, “We learned over time that communities would need more direct technical assistance on data-informed decision-making than we anticipated. The evaluation team filled that need.”

Responding to this more precise understanding of communities’ needs with regard to data, evaluation activities during Phase 2 of the initiative turned toward **building community capacity to collect and use data**. “As communities became more central users of the evaluation,” a partner recalled, “activities focused more on building community capacity to use data and build platforms for scale.” Our evaluation team worked closely with grantees, meeting each community where it was at. Helping embed and sustain data-driven decision-making at the community level required a different level of work in each community depending on its initial appetite for this kind of work, the types of data-sharing agreements in place, the quality of their data systems, and the level of IT support available over time. Another partner commented, “To be able to build our capacity, not only on knowing the data, but really to look at the data to make community changes—that was super crucial, and that’s something that we still use as our guiding point, especially with the equity lens.” The effort also importantly positioned community grantees as equal and capable partners in the initiative. As one explained, “The learning sessions from Engage around data really helped build the trust and the partnership. They were from the outside and it leveled the playing field.”

“ USING DATA TO SPARK LEARNING WITHIN COMMUNITIES AND ASK DEEPER QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT IT WILL TAKE TO SUSTAIN PROGRESS PUSHES BACK AGAINST TRADITIONAL USE OF OUTCOME DATA TO SOLELY SHOW IMPACT OR ACCOUNTABILITY.

- EVALUATION TEAM REFLECTION

The Foundation and community partners also came to see communities as the central end-users of the evaluation and supported S3I communities in **embracing the messiness of learning**. When grantees use data as a decision-making tool, they must look closely at what is not working, putting them in a potentially vulnerable position in the eyes of funders and evaluators. To put communities at ease with the process, the evaluation team took a strengths-based approach—“to highlight what it is that we’re doing well,” a grantee said—and the Foundation team emphasized their support of “failing forward.” A community partner described this idea as “a safe way to practice and see what worked and what didn’t work. That piece was like, ‘Oh, we’re going to be evaluated, but we’re supposed to be able to fail forward.’”



SHIFT 3 EQUITY-AGNOSTIC → EQUITY-EMBEDDED

When the Packard Foundation launched S3I in 2014, equity issues had yet to gain widespread attention from philanthropy, evaluation, and the general public. While the initiative aimed to improve access to quality health care, early learning, and developmental resources, equity was not an explicit focus of the strategy or evaluation. Over time, however, the evaluation team's **perspective on equity began to strengthen**. In 2017, during Phase 2 of the evaluation, EEI published its *Equitable Evaluation Framework™ Framing Paper*, a seminal piece that gave the evaluation team new language for how to think about its work.¹² While the CFC team initially expressed interest in maintaining neutrality on the topic of equity, meetings with Jara Dean-Coffey, founder and director of the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, and others involved in growing the field of EEF practitioners opened the door to more explicit consideration regarding how to embed equity in the evaluation and further deepen strategic learning support for communities. Grantees' focus on systems also pointed to the role of structural racism in producing inequitable outcomes for kids and was an explicit focus of Oakland's work, as described further below.

As a result of both readiness within communities and a growing desire across initiative partners to shift to a more equitable approach, **our team made equity-focused changes to its process and products**. Notably:

- Drawing from Chicago Beyond's *Why Am I Always Being Researched?* publication, the evaluation team reflected internally on how to sharpen its equity-focused evaluation approach.¹³ The team **articulated new practices and embedding of EEF™ principles in a memo** in early 2021 called ***Equity, Evaluation, and Starting Smart and Strong***.¹⁴
- The evaluation team **observed and learned from strong examples among the community grantees**, particularly Oakland's approach to incorporating equity into their strategy. Listening to families' input, Oakland decided to focus on trauma-informed care and practices for S3I, making equity the throughline across the four pillars of its initiative. Centering equity in early learning through deep engagement and collaboration with partners, teachers, and families made Oakland a groundbreaking model.¹⁵
- The evaluation team produced more **flexible and grantee-driven resources** by providing technical assistance to community partners and developing customized products that incorporated practitioner perspectives into the design. Further, the evaluation team used participatory methods, regular community check-ins, and responsiveness to community priorities to **facilitate community ownership of the work**.

“ [THE EVALUATION TEAM'S ORIENTATION AND THE WAY THAT THEY WORK WITH PEOPLE IS NOT LIKE 'WE'RE HERE TO EXTRACT DATA FROM YOU.' IT WAS VERY MUCH LIKE, 'WHAT DATA WILL BE HELPFUL TO YOU? HOW CAN OUR TEAM HELP BUILD YOUR CAPACITY AND NOT IN ACCOUNTABILITY, BUT REALLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF LEARNING?' ”

– FOUNDATION STAFF MEMBER

Communities have expressed support for how Engage R+D has worked to minimize the power imbalance inherent in an evaluator-grantee relationship and establish trust, respect, and understanding. One grantee, echoing others, noted, “Having an evaluator who is more like your partner [made it] comfortable for us to be super vulnerable.”

¹² Dean-Coffey, J. (2017). *Equitable Evaluation Framework™ framing paper*. Equitable Evaluation Initiative. www.equitableeval.org/_files/ugd/21786c_04631f8cfd44cb4a10a4097bf85acd5.pdf

¹³ Chicago Beyond. (2018). *Why am I always being researched?* Equity Series, Volume 1. chicagobeyond.org/researchequity

¹⁴ Engage R+D. (2021, January). *Equity, Evaluation and Starting Smart and Strong*. Report for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Starting Smart and Strong Initiative

¹⁵ Engage R+D. (2021, March). *Strengthening systems for quality and scale: Findings from the Early Learning Systems Self-Assessment (ELSSA)*. Report for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Starting Smart and Strong initiative.



SHIFT 4 FUNDER-DRIVEN → COMMUNITY-FOCUSED

In developmental evaluation, “strategists” are seen as the end-users of the evaluation, leveraging learnings to make decisions about what to do next. One of the most notable shifts from the S3I evaluation was the shift from a funder-driven to a community-focused evaluation, where communities were deemed the strategists. While this intention and expertise were there from the beginning, it took time for the evaluation plan and approach to address community needs and priorities comprehensively. For example, over time, the evaluation began to offer more resources for technical assistance and to implement evaluation projects requested by communities themselves. The evaluation team also implemented monthly check-ins with communities to more deeply embed themselves in the communities’ work and better understand the context and emerging needs that should inform the evaluation.

This shift took time and was not always perfect. Even with communities as the central strategists, the evaluation team struggled to make feedback loops efficient. A grantee noted, “Something that is very common across all evaluation partners is that the timing of getting data back [from the evaluation team] often is so delayed... We try to get the data as quickly as possible because there are decisions to be made around grants to apply for or programmatic changes to make.” Another commented that early evaluation products centered on CFC as the primary audience, saying, “In the beginning, I would learn that there were reports that were created [and] shared with Packard that weren’t shared with the community.” However, the same leader reported observing change, saying, “I feel like we are now considered along with the Packard Foundation; we are also an audience for the evaluation, and our community is even more important.”

Specifically, our team implemented several practices to ensure community needs moved from the periphery to the center of the evaluation, including:

- **Measuring what communities are interested in.** The evaluation team worked closely with community grantees to understand their data needs and evaluation priorities, then sought to respond to those interests. A community leader later reported, “The [evaluation team] respects the knowledge and experience and skills of our community members...and that helps to make sure that our needs are shaping the evaluation.”
- **Centering communities as the audience for evaluation products.** While CFC remained a core user of the evaluation, learning sessions and written products like data books and summaries began to center the communities as primary end users. “[The evaluators] would have data books that they developed for us that kind of brought everything together,” a community leader reported.
- **Providing flexible evaluation resources for communities to direct.** Early on in the evaluation, we realized that communities had unique information needs that the cross-cutting evaluation didn’t always address. To support this, our team worked with CFC to set aside part of our grant funds to support community-directed evaluation and learning. Communities appreciated the opportunity to harness our team’s knowledge and relationships in support of their unique needs. They tasked us with a variety of different activities including surveying educators, conducting focus groups with parents, advising on equity in data dashboards, and facilitating partner retreats. This approach engendered deeper levels of trust and collaboration across communities.
- **Making existing data more useful.** In some cases, existing data sources, such as the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) which is commonly used in California to measure the learning and progress of individual children in early care and education programs, did not yield findings analyzed or organized in a way that was useful for community partners. They realized the evaluation team could assist. “We had a hard time learning from just overall DRDP scores or DRDP student-level results,” a grantee explained. “So, one thing that we’ve asked [the evaluation team] for was looking at disaggregating the data by race, to get a little bit more of an equity lens on the data.”
- **Helping communities communicate progress with others.** A community partner spoke of how evaluation reports articulated findings in a way that enabled them to discuss these with others. “I remember reading the [evaluation] reports and being able to quantify or give talking points to things that were in my head, but that I didn’t necessarily always have the words for,” the partner said, adding that these takeaways were useful to “highlight or use with other policymakers or stakeholders.”



SHIFT 5 COMMON BENCHMARKS → A BROAD RANGE OF MEASURES AND INDICATORS FOR SCALE

As communities' S3I strategies matured through Phase 2, they were able to begin examining what it would take to spread their practices. To guide this process, the Foundation supported Engage R+D to work with communities on developing a unified “theory of scale” framework with common benchmarks to measure shifts in practice or outcomes. But the communities pushed back, viewing fixed benchmarks as too restrictive to capture the evolving and innovative nature of their work.

Listening to these concerns and wanting the initiative to center community ideas, the Foundation moved away from the unified theory of scale and common benchmarks to explore other ways to conceptualize and measure scale. Through coaching and facilitated learning sessions in Phase 3, community partners further articulated their scaling goals and measures that would meaningfully indicate progress. The evaluation team also introduced new tools, including the Early Learning Systems Self-Assessment (ELSSA)¹⁶ and social network analysis, to gather perspectives of those deeply involved in each community's work on how they were moving towards scaling their efforts. Data from these measures lifted up the importance of community-rooted leadership and collaborative partnerships and networks as essential indicators of progress towards scale.

SUMMARY

In summary, a growing focus on equity and the introduction of the Equitable Evaluation Initiative profoundly transformed the S3I evaluation team's approach under CFC's guidance. We consciously integrated equity into the core of the evaluation and learning support for communities. We changed not just our intent but our tangible practices:

- **Resistance to conventions.** The team actively resisted traditional evaluation orthodoxies highlighted by EEI, fostering a culture where community leaders were not just participants but the chief architects and beneficiaries of the evaluation process.
- **Community-centric success measures.** Success was no longer a one-size-fits-all metric but a tapestry of goals reflecting each community's unique aspirations. This flexible approach ensured that the measures of success were as diverse as the communities themselves.
- **Collaboration over observation.** The relationship with community leaders and the Foundation was a partnership of equals. The team moved away from the role of detached experts to that of engaged allies, walking alongside community leaders in their journey.
- **Diverse methods and tools.** We employed a broad spectrum of methodologies and instruments to acknowledge and elevate the wealth of lived experience within the communities.
- **Relationships and accountability.** At the heart of this endeavor was the commitment to nurturing strong relationships and ensuring mutual accountability, recognizing that these are the bedrock of meaningful and impactful collaboration.

As the initiative continues through 2024, the evaluation will continue to adapt and evolve as we learn in partnership with the communities and Foundation. CFC's endorsement of this evolving journey, allowing the fluidity needed for continuous process refinement and deeper understanding, has been instrumental in this transformative journey.

¹⁶ Takada, E., Nolan, C., & Mani, M. (2020). Assessing change and deepening impact in early learning systems: The Formal-System Self-Assessment Tool. *The Foundation Review*, 12(1). doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1506.

IV LESSONS FOR FUNDERS AND EVALUATORS

As we enter the concluding phase of the evaluation, a series of interconnected lessons has emerged that apply broadly to community-based systems change and evaluation. These lessons provide considerations for funders and evaluators working with community organizations to achieve and assess systems change.

1 Advancing systems change is categorically different from implementing a program.

Because systems change is complex, long-term work involving many players, it cannot be orchestrated according to a static plan. Embarking on systems change requires venturing together with partners into uncharted territory, making thoughtful, data-driven decisions en route. Comfort with trial and error and an orientation toward learning, humility, and self-reflection across initiative partners—with funders and evaluators leading by example—is necessary to support the adaptive nature of this type of work.

“TRUE TO AN EMERGENT STRATEGY, WE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW. THE EVALUATION HELPED US TO EXPLORE AND THINK THROUGH OUR OPTIONS. THEY WALKED IN THE WOODS WITH US FOR A WHILE.”

– FOUNDATION STAFF MEMBER

2 Positioning community leaders, rather than funders, as the central strategists in developmental evaluation can result in more practical and impactful results.

Prioritizing community leaders appropriately identifies them as the principal architects of systems transformation. Rather than viewing grantees as mere participants in or beneficiaries of evaluation, community leaders became the central users influencing the direction of evaluation questions, approaches, and application. As their interests became more integrated and ultimately central, the evaluation responsively supported their work, in stark contrast to the more rigid structures they had often encountered before. This approach more closely reflected EEF™ principles and made the evaluation process a more useful and less restrictive resource, genuinely aligned with the needs and goals of those closest to the change process.

“I FELT A BREATH OF FRESH AIR THAT [THE EVALUATION] FELT LESS CONSTRAINED. AS THE COMMUNITY WORK EVOLVED, WE WERE ABLE TO ARTICULATE FROM THE LOCAL LEVEL WHAT OUR CONCERNS WERE ABOUT THE EVALUATION AND WHAT TOOLS AND PROCESSES WERE MAKING SENSE [OR] NOT IN TERMS OF MEASURING PROGRESS. SO, WE WERE ABLE TO HAVE FEEDBACK.”

– COMMUNITY GRANTEE PARTNER

3 Overcoming power dynamics takes time and intention.

Power dynamics are inherent in community-led initiatives supported by funders and evaluators and can often get in the way of sharing open and honest opinions across these groups about how the work is going and what's needed to make progress. While power cannot be erased, these dynamics must be acknowledged and navigated with care. In S3I, the intentional trust-building by all partners involved navigating through tensions and overcoming mental models around how funders, grantees, and evaluators work together, resulting in strengthened working relationships characterized by open communication and a sense of minimized power dynamics. For example, when the evaluation team began actively seeking a deeper understanding of community partners' work and providing responsive assistance to their needs, most reported strong, positive, and trusting relationships in which they could share sensitive struggles and receive constructive help. CFC's 'fail forward' philosophy also demonstrated to communities that their funder was committed to the risk-taking and exploration necessary for systems change.

“THERE HAVE BEEN UNBELIEVABLE, WONDERFULLY IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN [FUNDER, EVALUATOR, AND COMMUNITY]. I COULD TALK TO ENGAGE ABOUT SOME CONCERN ABOUT THE FOUNDATION. I COULD TALK TO THE FOUNDATION ABOUT SOME CONCERN ABOUT ENGAGE. NOT TATTLE-TALING, BUT LIKE THEY WERE GOING TO HELP FACILITATE. THAT THREE-WAY COLLABORATION HAS BEEN EXCELLENT.”

– COMMUNITY GRANTEE PARTNER

“ WE WERE ALWAYS IN LEARNING MODE WITH [THE EVALUATION TEAM]. THE LEARNING AND REFLECTION SESSIONS HAVE BEEN REALLY HELPFUL. WE USUALLY WOULD HAVE TWO OR MAYBE THREE EACH YEAR, OFTEN AT REALLY GOOD TIMES TO BE ABLE TO TAKE A STEP BACK AND LOOK AT THE DATA.”

– FOUNDATION STAFF MEMBER

4 Evaluation in support of systems change must emphasize ongoing learning and adaptation.

Like the systems change initiative itself, its evaluation must embrace exploratory adaptation. Evaluating such efforts requires regular examination and responsiveness to a constantly shifting terrain of needs. While traditional, rigid outcome measures at the individual or program level may not apply, measuring success at the population level can involve its own limitations, including whether the scope and timeframe of the work can reasonably be expected to show population-level results. In a systems change context, developmental evaluation provides a useful approach by helping evaluation users make decisions based on ongoing data collection and reflection.

5 Community- and equity-focused evaluation requires investing in community capacity for evidence-informed learning.

Inherent in the idea of promoting community-led systems change is building communities' long-term access to relevant data and their capacity to use that data to inform decisions. Further, a system that supports equity needs data that reveals disparities and lifts up the voices of participants. Funders and evaluators can support equity by centering participant priorities and community leadership in design and decision-making and offering flexible resources for communities to direct themselves. Funders and evaluators can also use evaluation to translate data into actionable findings and offer coaching, tools, and learning sessions that strengthen key data tracking and analysis skills of community partners, aiming to serve them beyond the limits of grant funding.

“ [THE EVALUATION TEAM HELPED US] TAKE A STEP BACK TO MAKE SURE THAT WE'RE [WORKING WITH DATA] IN THE WAY THAT IT'S GOING TO BE USEFUL AND BENEFICIAL FOR STUDENTS AND NOT JUST AS A PART OF THE EVALUATION.”

– COMMUNITY GRANTEE PARTNER

As S3I embarks on the final stretch of its transformative 10-year journey, the pulse of innovation within communities beats stronger than ever. These communities are not just scaling groundbreaking solutions; they're also carefully considering how to continue their impact beyond the initiative's conclusion in 2025. Our team is preparing to complete, in partnership with grantees, a final comprehensive phase of data collection, analysis, and synthesis in 2025, and to support a summative assessment of overall progress and impacts.

This final phase is about more than wrapping up; it's about laying the groundwork for ongoing knowledge-sharing. We plan to compile a collection of insights, share impactful stories, and identify lessons that have emerged from our work. The tools and strategies developed through this process are meant to be practical contributions to broader conversation on sustainable systems change.

As we process and reflect on our years of work, we intend to provide a resource that others in the field may find beneficial. We anticipate that the culmination of our efforts will offer a nuanced look at the successes, challenges, and learning that have come from this decade-long commitment to change. The narrative we share will hopefully serve to illuminate further discussions and strategies among communities, practitioners, funders, and evaluators who are all navigating their unique paths toward enduring impact.

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APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

In addition to reviewing historical documents and data captured over time, findings in this report are informed by the distinct experiences of the evaluation team, the Foundation, and S3I community leaders. Methods used to capture perspectives across each of these groups are described below.

1 EVALUATION TEAM REFLECTION

In March 2022, the evaluation team participated in a journey mapping session facilitated by Julia Coffman, Executive Director of the Center for Evaluation Innovation. The team reflected on its work to date, taking stock of key milestones and events, discussing how evaluation methods and strategies evolved over time, and exploring external factors that influenced the overall approach. This session uncovered initial stories the team thought were important to share with the field.

2 CFC GROUP INTERVIEW

In May 2022, Julia Coffman conducted a group interview with four members of the Foundation's Children, Families, and Communities team. The conversation captured the Foundation's observations and insights on the evaluation, including how their goals for the evaluation evolved over time and what they learned from the evaluation team's approach. The conversation also helped test the assumptions that emerged from the evaluation team's journey mapping session.

3 COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

In June 2022, five small-group and one-on-one interviews were conducted with leaders from the three S3I communities. Interviews were conducted by Anna Saltzman, a member of the Engage R+D team not involved in the S3I evaluation, and explored communities' overall experience with the evaluation, including the extent to which they felt the evaluation prioritized their learning needs, strengthened local leadership and evaluation capacity, and centered relationship-building.