

Transforming Community-Designed Programs through Capacity Building

In 2018, Best Starts for Kids (BSK) funded robust capacity-building support for partners who received awards to design programs in two prenatal-to-five strategy areas: home-based services and community-based parenting supports. All partners received tailored, culturally responsive services from a team of capacity builders. BSK partnered with Cardea to conduct an evaluation to understand if capacity building supported initial program implementation, enabled the scale up to full implementation, and helped to achieve positive shifts in organizational capacity. The findings shared are from data collected between August 2019 to March 2021.

The Challenge

Historically there has been a lack of investment in program development that centers BIPOC communities.

To address this challenge, Best Starts deployed a two-phase capacity-building strategy (informed by implementation science¹) to support 19 partner organizations to develop and refine the programs they had been funded to create. Phase 1 focused on **well-defined programs** and Phase 2 focused on **effective implementation**. Best Starts also funded a coalition of home-based service providers focused on centering the voices of Black, Indigenous, and all people of color to create a **supportive anti-racist environment**. Capacity building was intended to build stronger data and organizational infrastructure, increase partners' ability to sustain their programs, and strengthen individuals, programs, and systems so that organizations operate effectively and provide high-quality, culturally responsive services to families.

Phase 1 (2018-2019): Program Planning

Focus:

- Design, develop, and plan for program implementation
- Support community-designed programs in describing and documenting program models and associated budgets

Most Frequent Activities: Structured workshop series with six sessions to develop tools and documentation for racial equity theory of change, practice profile, budget, and implementation plan with one-on-one capacity builder support to review files created

Phase 2 (2020-2021): Program Implementation

Focus:

- Increase the ability of community-designed programs to collect and use data
- Increase organization and/or program capacity in operations management, strategy, and more
- Amplify voices and improve structural supports for BIPOC communities

Most Frequent Activities: Staff development, supervision training and support, board development, data analysis and database support, tool creation, and reporting support

¹ Fixsen, D., Blase, K., Metz, A., & Van Dyke, M. (2015). Implementation Science. International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, 11, 695-702.

What we learned

Guiding principles serve as the foundation for capacity-building work

The capacity builders engaged in a process to develop a set of 10 guiding principles for how they wanted to do their work. The guiding principles include race equity, sustainability, cultural responsiveness, relationship-based, intersectionality, continuous learning, transformational, information informed, trauma-informed, and contextually responsive. These principles provide a foundation for all capacity-building work. **When interviewed about their work, three principles resonated most strongly with the capacity builders and the partners they supported:**

Relationship-Based

Partners that were engaged in capacity-building support shared that capacity builders made relationships a priority, building trusting and personal relationships through time and consistency. Flexible and consistent communication with the same capacity builders over time allowed for continuous feedback and responsive services and support.

Culturally Responsive

Capacity builders said they learned about each organization's culture and the culture of the organization's community. They then adapted and implemented their services in ways that best served the culture of each organization. In interviews, partners that engaged in capacity-building support agreed that capacity builders learned about and were responsive to organizational culture. Capacity builders worked within the culture and style of the supported organizations and did not impose their own working style on staff.

Contextually Responsive

Capacity builders were contextually responsive by centering and adapting to the needs of programs, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when priorities changed rapidly. Partners shared that their voices were heard and needs were met by capacity builders consistently. Capacity builders were also contextually responsive by tailoring the information they shared to meet organization needs in addition to creating space for shared learning between organizations, creating a stronger network of knowledge.



Cultural responsiveness...is big for our organization. We run the programs as we want to run them and...are aware of accounting for the cultural nuances of how we conduct meetings. That has been really uniform across the board with all of the capacity builders, as we build tools internally, and in the work that [the capacity builders] do to ensure that they're meeting the needs of our staff as well."

— *Community-Based Parenting Support Partner*

Capacity building supported organizational and personal transformation

- Partners said capacity building helped them develop robust data systems and cultivate a strong internal data culture. These improved data systems and processes led to streamlined workflows, increased staff interest in data, and improved ability to tell the story of their work through data.
- Partners said their work with capacity builders helped them strengthen relationships with one another. Strengthened relationships supported improved workplace culture and ability to collaborate, and managers were better able to anticipate and resolve staff conflicts.
- Partners also gained confidence in their work as a result of capacity building. Staff believed that capacity-building training allowed them to learn new skills, feel more confident in their work, and in some cases, get promoted within their organization.

Capacity building fostered resilience and helped organizations thrive

Both partners and capacity builders said that their work together helped them and their communities thrive while building the resilience of the participating organizations.

Capacity-building support helped organizations pivot to best meet community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic

Capacity builders supported organizations during their transition to work from home and pivot from in-person to virtual program activities, data collection, and community engagement. Capacity builders also helped locate resources and basic needs supplies (food, rental assistance, etc.) to share with their community. Capacity builders also helped grantees document their shift in programming.

Capacity building supported organizational development which aligned staff to the mission of the work

Capacity builders supported participating organizations to develop their organizational culture centered around their mission, vision, and values. They also led trainings with program staff focused on developing a collaborative workplace culture and team support. Through this work, program staff were better able to collaborate and meaningfully serve their community. This cohesion supported program resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What's next?

Evaluation next steps

- Continue to collect and analyze capacity-building documents and complete the analysis of data from interviews and focus groups with capacity builders and partners.
- Discuss findings from the evaluation with partners, capacity builders, and Best Starts staff, and integrate their input and perspectives in a final report to be completed by the end of 2021.

Recommendations for future evaluation work

- Explore the long-term impacts of capacity building on community-designed programs. This might include exploring the sustainability of changes attributed to capacity building.
- Explore the continued use and iteration of guiding principles as a foundation for capacity-building work. Exploring how the use of guiding principles evolves over time could help illuminate emerging partner and community needs.
- Explore how staff transition and level of staff engagement in capacity building affects sustainability of capacity-building outcomes. While all partner organizations participated in phase 1, only about half of the staff at partner organizations that were interviewed as part of this evaluation were in their roles during phase 1. Staff transition is inevitable, and thus it is important to explore ways to support the transfer of knowledge and ensure minimal disruption to capacity building to maximize the potential for positive, sustained outcomes.

Acknowledgments

Best Starts for Kids thanks the community-designed home-based services and parent/caregiver information and support grantees for their contributions to this work: Atlantic Street Center, Center for Human Services, Coalition for Refugees of Burma, Divine Alternative for Dads Services, East African Community Services, El Centro de La Raza, Families of Color Seattle, HopeCentral, Iraqi Community Center, Korean Community Service Center, Open Arms Perinatal Services, Open Doors for Multicultural Families, Refugee Women's Alliance, Somali Health Board, St. Vincent de Paul of Seattle/King County, United Indians of All Tribes Foundation, Voices of Tomorrow, and West African Community Council.

Thank you to capacity-building support providers who shared their experiences with capacity building: DSK Culturally Responsive Educational Services, LLC; RVC and subcontractors, The Capacity Collective, and YWCA Seattle | King | Snohomish.

Best Starts for Kids thanks following Cardea staff for conducting the evaluation: Avanthi Jayasuriya, MPH; Naome Jeanty, MPA; Olivia Lutz, MPH; Elizabeth Menstell, MPH; Malvika Nair; Wendy Nakatsukasa-Ono, MPH; and Amanda Winters, MPH, MPA.