

## Starting Smart & Strong is focused on transforming early learning. But how is systems change viewed by those on the ground—the practitioners who manage and support direct services for children and families?

Starting Smart and Strong (S3I) strives to ensure that all children grow up healthy and ready for kindergarten by improving the quality of adult-child interactions across all settings where young children learn and grow. In order to “scale what works,” communities are applying a systems-change approach to their work—cultivating leadership, building connections and relationships across stakeholders, and developing new and more cohesive ways of operating.

**But how are systems change concepts translating to practitioners working on the ground?** By practitioners, we mean the people managing or otherwise supporting the direct delivery of services to young children and their families. It includes positions such as coaches, program managers, and mid-level administrators—people who play important community implementation roles and yet are often removed from executive and cross-sector discussion tables at which system improvement efforts are designed and negotiated.

As part of Engage R+D’s learning evaluation of S3I, the team interviewed practitioners across the three S3I communities. This report focuses on findings from the Oakland interviews, exploring how S3I work is gaining traction across the broader early learning system (i.e., beyond formal settings), and how this work is being understood and interpreted by practitioners.

To explore these questions, the evaluation team applied a field framework for measuring early learning systems change efforts. The framework is based on one developed by Julia Coffman, Director of the Center for Evaluation Innovation, for Build, an initiative that works with state and national early childhood leaders to develop programs, services, and policies tailored to the needs of young children and their families.<sup>1</sup> Following this framework, Engage R+D asked practitioners about the extent to which Oakland has:

1. Expanded the number of **high-quality programs and services** that produce results for beneficiaries
2. Created **strong and effective linkages and infrastructure** across programs and services (and across pillars) that further improve results for system beneficiaries
3. Made gains toward **scaling the work** so that a comprehensive and inclusive system is available to as many people as possible.

The interview list was carefully crafted with input from lead grantees and the Foundation. While the majority of practitioners responded to our request for an interview, some practitioners could not participate due to last-minute scheduling conflicts, and we were not able to reschedule interviews with these practitioners in time for this report. Also, we were not able to reach some practitioners as they were unresponsive after multiple emails/messages. For a full list of interviewees (and non-participants), please refer to the appendix.

### Interviews

A total of **10** practitioner interviews from Oakland inform this report, representing the following **6** agencies:

- Oakland Unified School District
- First 5 Alameda County *Quality Counts*
- First 5 Alameda County *Help Me Grow*
- Alameda County Early Care and Education Program
- Lotus Bloom
- BANANAS

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Coffman, J. (2007). A framework for evaluating systems initiatives. Boston, MA: Build Initiative. Retrieved from <http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Framework%20for%20Evaluating%20Systems%20Initiatives.pdf>

### High Quality Programs and Services:

**Overall, practitioners reported with confidence that quality has improved and progress has been made in several areas since the start of S3I, but there is room for much growth as well as opportunities to build on progress to date.**

Improving quality has been a central focus of communities' S3I efforts, especially in the formal sector. We asked practitioners to characterize the quality of early childhood programs and services and describe any significant efforts that contributed to quality improvement since the start of S3I. Practitioners in Oakland cite major improvements in the quality of early care and education provided in formal settings. Perspectives on the quality of programs for informal caregivers and the implementation of developmental screenings were more mixed. Key themes from interviews in Oakland are summarized below:

- **Practitioners believe that increased awareness of and supports for effective teaching practices have driven improvements in the quality of early learning in formal settings.** Practitioners were readily able to identify efforts to improve classroom quality through professional development programs for early educators. They emphasized that quality has greatly improved, facilitated by Oakland's commitment to spreading Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) districtwide, along with a focus on facility improvements. With all sites rated at a 4 or 5, practitioners recognized the need to maintain this quality through the spread of New Teacher Center (NTC) coaching, which was described as "invaluable" and meeting the needs of teachers. Furthermore, by hiring the "right people" at the "right levels" (i.e., early learning director and staff, additional site administrators), Oakland was able to ensure quality was prioritized and at multiple levels. As a result, one practitioner shared: *"Oakland is suddenly more collaborative. Teachers feel valued. They are happier. Their interactions with kids and families as a result are better. We're more focused on hiring high-quality instructional aides."*
- **Many practitioners reported greater understanding of and appreciation for the use of data to inform quality improvement efforts in the formal sector.** Practitioners in Oakland discussed the importance of data, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), as primary mechanisms for assessing whether programs are of high quality. They reported making great strides in using data to inform teaching practices. The expansion of the QRIS is viewed as a key driver of improving quality as teachers are now accustomed to using QRIS data to inform their practice. As one practitioner observed, the *"DRDP shows improvements in language and cognition. And, teachers are doing great. [We are] seeing continuous increase in Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and CLASS scores. So, they are listening and making adjustments."*
- **Interviews suggest that S3I has helped to raise awareness of the importance of informal settings as part of the broader early learning system.** Practitioners report that programs are being "incubated" with quality in mind. The creation of Oakland Starting Smart and Strong (OSSS) helped to elevate the importance of informal care and created opportunities for learning, partnership, and collaboration—something practitioners noted had never happened before.
- **Practitioner interviews suggest varying levels of awareness and understanding about the quality of the developmental screening and referral system.** Practitioners directly involved in development screening efforts (e.g., Help Me Grow), discussed the marked expansion of screenings and referrals. Now that developmental screenings are universal, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and Help Me Grow practitioners noted that they are prioritizing ensuring families are supported and engaged through the screening process and get the services they need. They recognize that it is *"not just about screening; that's just the first step."*

## Strong and Effective Linkages and Infrastructure:

### Practitioners believe deep partnerships have been formed across programs that are improving services for children and their families.

In addition to high-quality programs, strong early learning systems are characterized by coordination and linkages across programs that facilitate seamless delivery of services to young children and their families and ultimately improve outcomes. These types of connections can take a variety of forms, such as collaborative partnerships, referral relationships, sharing of data and information, adoption of common standards, and cross-organizational training. We asked practitioners to assess the extent of coordination across programs, and which efforts have been most effective in strengthening connections throughout the early learning system. Across all three communities, S3I has supported the growth of new partnerships, helped to deepen existing ones, and ultimately reduced siloed service delivery. Many of those interviewed view strategic partnerships as central to their systems improvement efforts and highlighted the importance of supportive leaders that encourage cross-program coordination. The impact of these connections was most prominently discussed in Oakland, where the OSSS table plays a central role in facilitating formal partnerships and linkages around central goals. Key themes from interviews in Oakland are summarized below:

- **Practitioners affirmed the importance of alignment across programs and services, and identified deliberate efforts to create connections across programs.** Practitioners talked about the importance of OSSS in bringing stakeholders together and deepening relationships. One practitioner noted, *“We’re all sitting at the same table monthly, constantly sharing data, collaborating for the benefit of families, provider-agnostic. I have relationships now with people and agencies that I never had before. [Oakland] used to be very siloed, and it makes a big difference to make sure the right organizations are represented. It’s truly key to the success of this initiative.”* Consistent funding and messaging has helped keep stakeholders at the table in service of ongoing collaboration.
- **While relationships have been developed and collaborative work has increased, practitioners also identified areas for improvement.** Interview participants in Oakland that some efforts remain siloed. One practitioner shared, *“Even though we all come together, we still do our work in silos. We are still just kind of scraping the surface, and need to do better at sharing what our agencies are doing—our goals/objectives. There’s still a ways to go.”*
- **Practitioners referenced cross-sector leadership tables where stakeholders can come together to align and coordinate their efforts.** From inception, Oakland focused on creating a formal and broadly inclusive cross-sector leadership table (OSSS). This table is widely recognized by practitioners for catalyzing new collaborations, improving communication across the formal and informal sector, and creating space for articulating shared goals and strategies. Practitioners noted that OSSS’s value was demonstrated when it was able to sustain and advance cross-sector dialogue and partnerships while the was district contending with severe budget issues. *“The existence of a place where people from different systems — CBOs, HS, OUSD, public health, First 5, Help Me Grow – regularly in conversation... has been successful,”* noted one practitioner. Practitioners described the importance of their partnership with Head Start for their professional development work on trauma-informed care and practices (ROCK!). Working jointly with City of Oakland Head Start can become an effective vehicle for scale to address a community-wide issue and align with and leverage a federal grant to the city on trauma. While practitioners celebrate these successes, they also highlighted the need to find sustainable funding streams to continue these efforts.

Practitioners in Oakland also reported increased awareness of the importance of sharing and using data across organizations, in addition to within their organizations. They highlighted their expanded use of data systems as an area where their communities are making progress. The use of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) data in the dashboard system in Oakland has been an important tool to build on their results-based accountability work, drive decision-making, particularly around targeting specific communities.

## Scaling the Work:

**Practitioners conveyed different interpretations of scaling and expressed concerns about whether programs are adequately funded and reaching all families in need.**

Scale is a central concept in S3I and one that has taken time to understand and unpack. To assess how practitioners are thinking about and seeing scale, we asked them about their familiarity with strategies to expand the reach of existing programs and supports. The interviews shed light on how practitioners on the ground are interpreting scale and its implications for their work. Key themes from interviews in Oakland are summarized below:

- **Practitioners do not have a uniform understanding of scale and interpret this concept in many different ways.** When interview participants were asked about the scaling or spread of programs and services, they talked about scale in a variety of ways. Some described their efforts around *“alignment” of practices across grades and settings*. Practitioners in Oakland also described successful scaling efforts as *programs that “started small, worked, then spread systemwide.”* They cited specific examples, such as QRIS, developmental screening, and differential coaching, all of which are now districtwide.
- **Communities are concerned about whether efforts to scale programs are reaching children and families in need.** While practitioners in Oakland pointed to multiple scaling successes, they were concerned that efforts still are not reaching or affecting families and children who experience the highest levels of poverty. As one partner said, *“High-quality child care is a protective factor and helps kids living under those circumstances be more resilient, but, we’re not able to scale to where all the neediest kids are.”* Another interview participant articulated a sentiment that was shared by others, observing that, *“Oakland is up against the big challenges of multi-generational long-term poverty, housing costs, and [low wages], that are broader than child care quality.”* This was affirmed by another participant who described these issues as the “social determinants of school readiness.” Practitioners also discussed that children attending early education sites in OUSD are only a fraction of children who end up in their kindergarten classrooms, so they are now seeking to increase early education enrollment through targeted, neighborhood-based enrollment outreach.
- **Practitioners also flagged concerns about the resources that are available or needed to support scaling.** Practitioners viewed OUSD resources as limited and unstable and identified the importance of leveraging resources from other partners and funders to accomplish what they have thus far. The concern is how these programs will continue when these funds are no longer available. One participant expressed, *“We get concentrated [funding] when we get a pilot or special program but then can’t scale it like we’d want to, to reach all kids.”* Coaching from NTC has successfully spread districtwide; practitioners recognize that this has all been supported by the Foundation and that eventually NTC’s support will sunset as part of its model. Interviews suggest that practitioners recognize the need to figure out how to sustain what has been scaled districtwide with limited district resources.
- **Increasing parent awareness of available programs to ensure full access to existing services also was identified as an ongoing challenge.** Oakland practitioners noted the challenge of establishing trust in the community. Bringing Parent Voices, Head Start, and High Expectations to the OSSS table has been crucial to addressing parent and family engagement.
- **Communities’ advocacy efforts are beginning to show progress in building collective will toward supporting young children and their families.** According to one practitioner, *“The current political environment around early childhood education is heightened. More and more, people outside of the early childhood education sector are aware of the brain science of a child from birth to 5 and the importance of early learning.”* Oakland has achieved policy and funding wins, including expanded professional development time for educators and instructional aides. In addition, implementing QRIS has opened up new funding streams to support quality improvement efforts. This awareness can also be seen in the campaign for Oakland’s Measure AA for early childhood education, which narrowly missed passage after receiving nearly two-thirds of the popular vote in the city’s 2018 elections.

## Questions for Reflection

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To what extent have systems change concepts penetrated to those working on the ground? How important is this for driving community-level results?

Is our community exhibiting meaningful signs of interim progress? Is progress thus far sufficient to achieve quality and results at scale?

How might insights from these interviews be used to support and accelerate progress within our community?