



Children & Families
Commission of Orange County

Recommendations for the Early Learning Portfolio Strategy

June 2, 2010



The Bridgespan Group

The design of our reengagement with the Commission

- Our current work together builds on our prior assessment and the associated recommendations to achieve greater impact
- Since that time, the Commission has wrestled with how and when to shift a greater proportion of the portfolio to early learning
- This transition has been hindered by the economic downturn, and the consequent increase in community health and housing needs
- To aid the transition, the Commission asked Bridgespan to help to design a portfolio of early learning investments that:
 - Is as focused on evidence and outcomes as the rest of the portfolio
 - Has the potential to achieve significant impact with limited resources
 - Demonstrates the power of a catalytic approach to investment

The objectives of today's discussion

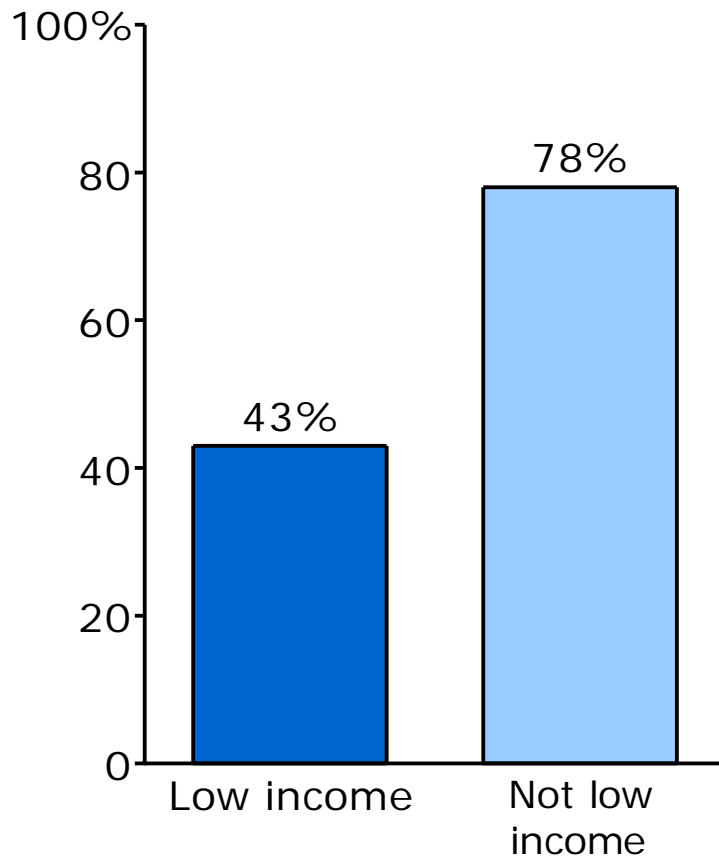
- To provide a brief recap of the objectives of our work together and the process we used to create the recommendations
- To recommend a goal for the Commission's Early Learning portfolio and to discuss the implications of that goal
- To describe and discuss the principles and evidence we used to develop our investment recommendations
- To recommend a set of four early learning investment areas and to discuss the benefits of investing in these areas
- To share thoughts on how the Commission might migrate its investments toward these objectives

Our approach in a nutshell

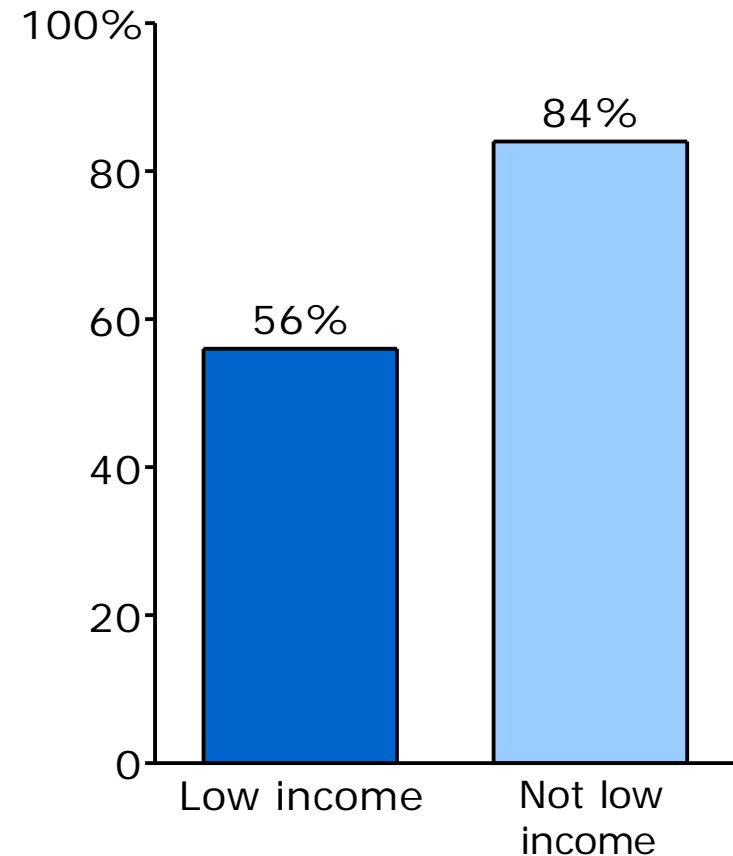
- A community-centric, outcome-based goal
- An evidence-based, outcome-focused screening process
- A survey of research, practice, evidence, and expert opinion
- A thematic, catalytic, portfolio-based investment approach
- A process for monitoring progress and learning

Context: There is a large “achievement gap” between low income and higher income students in Orange County

% of O.C. 2nd graders achieving proficiency or above on English Language Arts CST



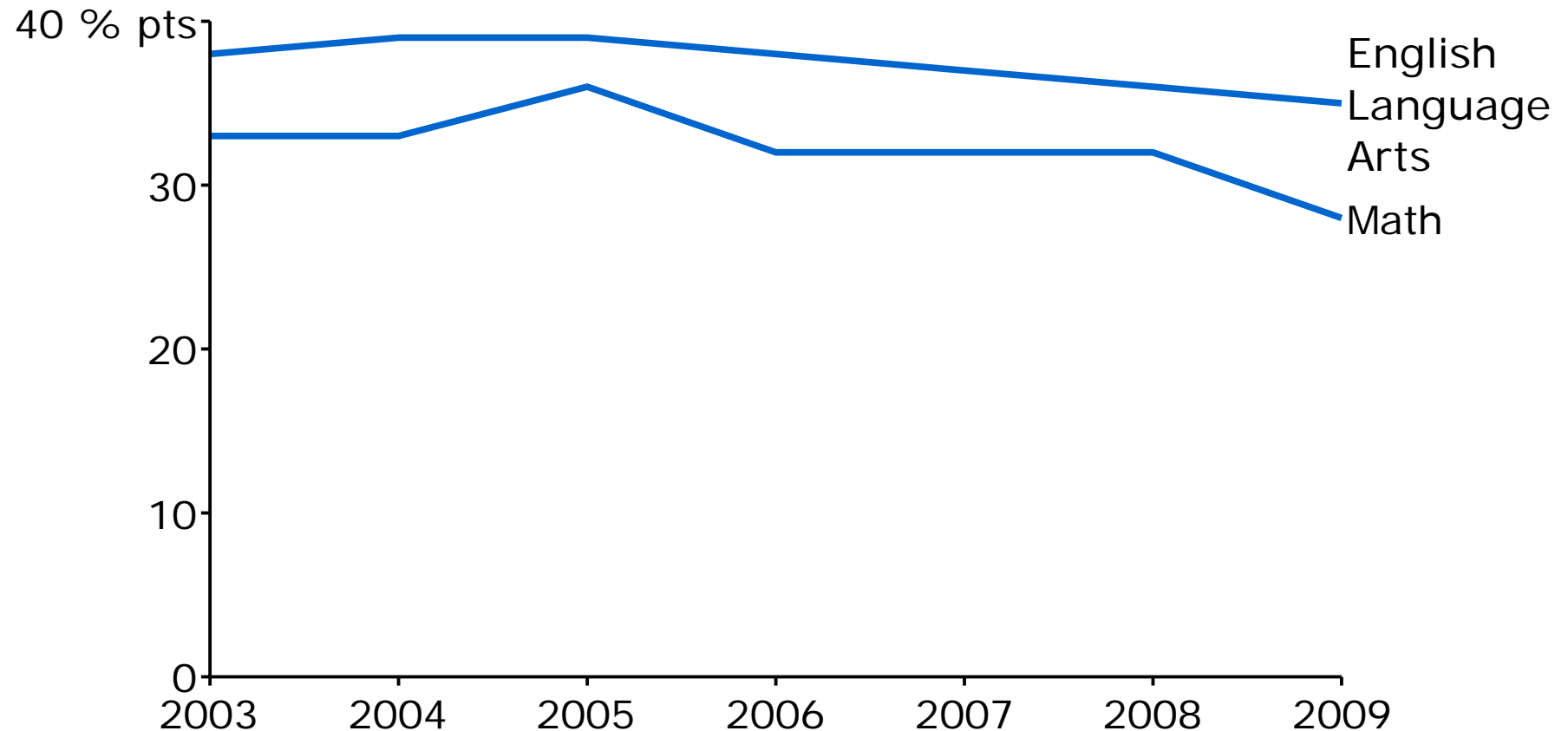
% of O.C. 2nd graders achieving proficiency or above on Math CST



Note: Low income defined as students participating in the free and reduced lunch program, or whose parents did not graduate from high school
Source: California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program 2009, CA Dept of Education Dataquest

And while progress has been made, this achievement gap has persisted over time

Gap between the % of non-low income and low income O.C. 2nd graders achieving proficiency or above



Note: Gap measured as the % of non-low income 2nd graders achieving proficiency less the % of low income 2nd graders achieving proficiency on the California Standards Test in English Language Arts and Math in Orange County

Note: Low income defined as students participating in the free and reduced lunch program, or whose parents did not graduate from high school

Source: California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program, CA Dept of Education Dataquest

We recommend that the goal of the Commission's Early Learning investments be to reduce the achievement gap

- In our prior work together, we recognized that this achievement gap was the primary community early learning need in Orange County – and was not being well addressed
- This gap is apparent prior to Kindergarten and is largely the manifestation of deficits in early learning for children ages birth to 5
- Left unaddressed early, this gap tends to persist in the K-12 years
- There are interventions capable of narrowing this gap – and a goal that focuses the Commission on the pursuit of these interventions is good

Commissioners and experts were aligned on the wisdom and benefit of a goal of reducing the academic achievement gap

"Ultimately we want to close the achievement gap... when we have a measurable, lasting effect on the children we serve—I mean test scores—then we get an 'A'."

- Commissioner

"I feel we've made a huge impact, but kids can be healthy and they might not know anything. We've got to do more prior to Kindergarten to help kids close the achievement gap."

- Commissioner

The goal of narrowing the achievement gap has two implications for the focus of the early learning strategy

1. We must identify where those children on the wrong side of the achievement gap are (i.e., which geographic regions, which early learning settings)
2. We must focus as many resources as possible on these children

Adopting a singular outcome-based goal implies a focus on investments with three features

1. We seek to make investments that have an evidence base in improving the educational achievement outcomes for children
2. We seek to make investments at a scale or dosage capable of delivering measurable changes in the achievement gap
 - Evidence of statistical significance is not enough if the effects on children are too small to affect the size of the achievement gap
 - Evidence-based approaches are not sufficient if we cannot afford to invest at a level required to change the outcomes of children
3. We seek to invest in early learning settings that are able to be influenced by catalytic investments
 - Evidence-based approaches will not affect the outcomes of children if they are not adopted by the systems serving the children

What research, practice, and evidence tell us about what is required to narrow the achievement gap

- Outcomes of the nature and magnitude required to narrow the achievement gap follow (only) from “high quality” early learning interactions between adults and children
- Where “high quality” generally refers to:
 - The presence of intentional learning opportunities and, in formal care settings, a research-based “curriculum” that engages children
 - A nurturing environment with room for individual attention and, in formal care settings, a sufficient number of well-trained, qualified staff
 - Sufficient time and intensity levels to ensure that those children who are behind have the time and space required to catch up

Interventions that are not of “high quality” or not of high-enough dosage would not be expected to result in a measurable narrowing of the achievement gap

- For example:
 - Pre-K settings that are not of at least “medium” quality on accepted measurement scales (unfortunately, most sites serving disadvantaged kids do not yet meet this standard)
 - Programs that have demonstrated evidence, but whose “effect size” is too small to move the needle on the achievement gap
 - Programs that have demonstrated evidence and could move the needle, but which are implemented at lower intensity than is required to deliver the evidence-based outcomes

There are seminal studies that demonstrate, and proven approaches that deliver, terrific outcomes – so what makes this so difficult?

- Multiple objectives in the early learning field that are not always aligned with social, emotional, and academic development
- The qualifications and experience of the early learning teaching force relative to what the research tells us is required
- The level of funding available for early childhood education relative to what would be required to deliver high quality to more kids

The general spirit of our recommendations

- As a county-level commission in a field largely supported by state and federal funding streams and certification requirements, the Commission cannot directly have much impact on large funding streams or on the composition of the teaching force; however:
- The Commission may be able to affect the objectives and incentives of the field within Orange County,
- The Commission may be able to support the adoption of approaches and programs that increase the effectiveness of early learning instruction without changing the composition of the teaching force,
- The Commission may be able contribute to the convening of multiple approaches and funding streams in particular places, and
- And the Commission may be able to demonstrate the power of an evidence-based, outcome-focused, catalytic investment approach

We recommend that the Commission adopt a small number of early learning investment themes, each supported by a portfolio of investments

- **A handful of multi-year investment strategies**, each centered on a particular place or system for which there exists a compelling “theory of action” as to how the Commission could achieve a measurable impact on the achievement gap
- **A related “portfolio of investments”** each of limited duration and catalytic in nature, providing flexibility over time
- **An associated learning agenda and means of tracking outcomes** which would make clear the conditions under which the investment strategy would warrant continued funding

Specifically, we recommend four areas of investment in the Commission's Early Learning Portfolio

- 1. Pathways:** Investing in instructional approaches with the potential to increase the quality of the interaction between teacher and child *and* fostering their use across settings
- 2. Preschool:** Promoting the use of data and assessments in care settings to spur cycles of continuous improvement to improve the quality of interactions between teacher and child
- 3. Parents:** Building the capacity of organizations that help disadvantaged parents to become excellent first teachers for their children
- 4. Place:** Investing in select geographies in partnership with other funders and community organizations to demonstrate the power of holistic supports for disadvantaged children and families on the early learning outcomes of children

Pathways: Moving from pilots of promising approaches to pilots and adoption (creating pathways to kids)

The context

- There are tools / approaches that have delivered gains in academic achievement for disadvantaged kids
- The Commission supports some (e.g., MIND) and is interested in others (e.g., from the STEM summit)
- However, demonstration and pilots are rarely enough to get such proven approaches to the kids that need them most:
 - Most sites will not know of the pilot results nor know how to implement
 - Many sites do not use curricula at all

Elements / Examples

- Focus on scaling in preschool settings
- Pilot adoption in select school district-operated preschool networks that are willing to roll out the approach across the network
- Build demand for evidence-based instructional tools and approaches by codifying results from pilots and disseminating to practitioners
- Provide support to train the trainer

Preschool: Changing our own, and the field's, orientation from quantity to quality

The context

- The Commission invests in pre-K–through SRCs in each district – and has supported a significant increase in pre-K slots
- However, the quality levels of state pre-K slots need to be improved to deliver the outcomes capable of narrowing the achievement gap
- We cannot afford to fund high-quality slots directly, but we may be able to catalyze changes in the system that would support growth in quality
- This could be done by creating greater information on outcomes and their drivers, by creating a culture of data, and by creating supports and incentives for improving quality

Elements / Examples

- Focus resources on quality improvements in district-operated state funded preschools
- Codify the lessons from the Anaheim Expansion project to create demand within other school districts
- Recast the role of the School Readiness Coordinator (SRC) to focus on improving preschool quality (prioritize quality over quantity)
- Establish preconditions for funding / require districts to collect pre- and post-outcome data from their sites

Parents: Supporting the scaling of approaches that work in creating high-quality home-based early learning

The context

- Parental behavior has a direct impact on early learning; low-income parents are less likely to exhibit the behaviors that support early learning
- There are programs that work to transform parental behavior at the level needed to improve student outcomes – and the Commission funds two of them (NFP and HABLA)
- These programs are highly intensive and require well-trained staff - and therefore are challenging to scale
- The highest-impact role for the Commission is not to fund ongoing service provision, but rather to invest catalytically to support the scaling of programs like HABLA

Elements / Examples

- Provide business planning assistance and funding to build existing provider organizational capacity to serve more children
- Provide technical assistance support for funding to existing providers of evidence-based programs like NFP and HABLA
- Provide business planning and fund development assistance support to help new providers launch such programs
- Support convening of providers and knowledge codification

Place: Supporting holistic approaches to increasing academic outcomes in select geographic areas

The context

- Disadvantaged children and families often experience multiple and significant challenges that inhibit children's success in school
- There is growing interest among experts and policymakers in coordinating supports to more seamlessly address these multiple challenges
- There is some evidence in the early learning field that more holistic interventions have greater impact on children's outcomes
- The Commission is involved in a promising partnership in Santa Ana, led by the California Endowment, that is applying for a large federal "Promise Neighborhood" grant

Elements / Examples

- Focus in Santa Ana for the next three to five years
- Provide technical assistance for strategic planning and project coordination
- Coordinate program delivery of evidence-based programs in health and education
- Advocate among partners for what works

The transition to the new Early Learning portfolio

- We recommend that the Commission invest approximately \$10M to \$12M annually from fiscal years 2011/2012 to 2015/2016 (or about 40% of the overall portfolio) in the Early Learning portfolio
- We recommended differential amounts for each of the four recommended investment themes; the specific figures are detailed in the written recommendation
- Moving to the new portfolio will involve a transition out of the portfolio for some current areas of investment; the written recommendation contains thoughts on specific investments
- We recommend that the Commission consider taking a similar catalytic perspective on other elements of the overall portfolio – as a means to increase impact and as a means to release funding to enable the transition to the recommended Early Learning portfolio

Appendix

Our process included interviews with experts, a survey of research and practice, and a review of the current portfolio

Interview field experts

- Interview leading national and state experts in early learning
- Interview select First Five peer organizations
- Interview select Commission grantees

Engage Commission leaders and staff

- Interview Commissioners
- Interview staff and consultants

Survey research and practice

- Survey research on best practices in early math and early literacy
- Identify potential funding streams to leverage
- Research other promising efforts to address the achievement gap (e.g., best practice programs, organizations, etc.)

Review current early learning portfolio

- Review current program objectives, budget, approach, and evidence of impact achieved
- Test findings with relevant early learning staff and consultants
- Identify recommended changes to the current portfolio

An overview of key interview insights

Improving preschool quality is a tremendous opportunity for impact, but hard to do

- Quality matters in early childhood education. High-quality preschool programs can reduce the achievement gap, while low-quality programs have not been demonstrated to do the same
- The most promising context in which to increase quality at scale is preschool systems like those operated by school districts
- Two catalytic opportunities with the potential to improve preschool quality are:
 - Launching continuous quality improvement in Orange County's district preschool systems through the use of assessments, data systems, and training and development
 - Increasing the effective use of high-quality instructional tools and approaches in Orange County preschools, particularly focused on early math and science

Changing parental behavior is a powerful lever, but it is time and resource intensive

- Parents and primary caregivers are their children's first, most consistent, and most important teacher. Therefore, changing parental behavior so that it promotes early learning outcomes is perhaps the most powerful means to close the achievement gap
- However, the only programs shown to make a significant impact on parental behavior are those of high intensity and high dosage, which are also extremely expensive. The same is true for Family, Friend, and Neighbor caregivers
- There may be catalytic opportunities to draw public funding to evidence-based, high-intensity parent education programs in Orange County

Comprehensive place-based approaches are promising

- There is a consensus that place-based approaches, which target multiple services and programs to each child and family, are promising and make sense; however, the evidence base is still developing
- Given the wide interest of philanthropic and public funders in comprehensive place-based approaches, there are significant opportunities for catalytic investments to advance place-based approaches in Orange County

Preschool and formal care settings: the context

What we heard...

...From the experts

Formal care and preschool settings pose a tremendous opportunity for impact

- *"I would absolutely put all of my money into improving quality of centers, starting when the kids are under the age of 3. Research shows that disparities are visible by 9 months."*

Preschool systems present the greatest opportunity for impact

- *"If I were looking for a lever – I would pick center-based care where it's possible to affect more children, but only center-based care connected to school districts. The quality of school district preschool centers is usually higher to begin with, and teachers are paid more and stay longer, which helps training to have a lasting impact. The co-location also increases the likelihood of aligning curriculum and standards with K-12."*
- *"For the Commission's limited dollars to have an impact, it is critical to build on the existing system. You have to tie the work to some big system where the funding is."*

Quality matters: increase quality before increasing quantity

- *"I don't think you should focus on increasing slots until you have solved the quality question. I'm not convinced if low-quality childcare is better than the alternative."*

Improving quality is hard work and some systemic attempts to do so have failed

- *"A focus on systems-level quality doesn't always translate into improved teacher-student outcomes. The traditional way that Head Start has invested in quality is to invest at the systems level, setting up proxies for quality, but these don't actually translate into a difference in how the teacher interacts with the child. For example, we know that teachers with credentials do better...but it's not enough. If it were, we wouldn't have problems in K-12 system."*
- *"I'm not convinced that QRIS actually increases quality beyond giving high-quality places more dollars. You can't fatten a pig just by weighing it."*
- *"I'm skeptical of QRIS because it tends to focus more on the furniture than the kids."*

Preschool and formal care settings: the opportunity (1 of 2)

What we heard...

...From the experts

Quality improvement may be possible by establishing processes of continuous quality improvement

- *"A Continuous Quality Improvement system is key to creating lasting quality improvements in pre-K. At the core of a CQI effort are:
 - Clarity on how quality is defined and measured
 - Coaches to help teachers to change the way they teach
 - Data systems to measure outcomes and quality and track improvement
 - Thoughtful training and PD for these coaches
 - Financial incentives to promote and pay for quality."*
- *"With the Program for Infant and Toddler Care we are creating a cadre of trainers who work with preschool and family childcare teachers to help them improve quality. So far, we have seen fantastic outcomes from our evaluations."*

Assessments and data systems are foundation of continuous quality improvement

- *"I would create data systems and teach people how to use them, because turnover with individual teachers is so high."*
- *"We use tools to measure how people are doing, consistently across the state. These three—DRDP, ECERS, CLASS—are the standards. Orange should stick with these, as well as pushing EDI."*
- *"Invest in data systems that will tell you where to make the biggest impact, where to get other people to invest, and will help change the culture. These could change the way resources are aligned and deployed in Orange County."*
- *"Even when implementing a curricula or program tried elsewhere, evaluation is important to make sure it is working in each unique setting."*

Effective teaching is essential, but perspectives differ on whether to focus professional development on teachers or directors

- *"If the teaching and interaction between the students and teachers isn't good enough, then the outcomes won't be there."*
- *"Strong programs need skilled staff, and today Community Colleges focus more on socio-emotional content than on early literacy and math."*
- *"You don't get lasting results with training for teachers. Professional development doesn't last if professionals don't last. A better approach is to invest in training and development for directors."*

Preschool and formal care settings: the opportunity (2 of 2)

What we heard...

...From the experts

(cont) Effective teaching is essential, but perspectives differ on whether to focus PD on teachers or directors

- *Coaching for just center directors isn't enough – you also need coaches to work with teachers directly. Pulling system levers alone (such as credential requirements or financial incentives) isn't enough to improve quality – you also need to have a way for directors and teachers to learn how to improve.*
- *"It is powerful to show directors what high-quality care looks like – often they just really don't know what it looks like. They have a business to run and often just don't have the time."*

Effective use of curriculum is rare today, but an important component of quality

- *"If I had to choose one place to put limited resources, I would mandate a content-rich curriculum, and invest in the training and data to support it."*
- *"I'd put more money into the curriculum aspect of quality rather than the teacher aspect. In other words, get a good curriculum and train the teachers well to implement it."*
- *"Use and fidelity to curricula in preschools is poor – probably less than 10%. But there is a vicious cycle where a state/center chooses a curriculum, doesn't invest sufficiently in training, results don't measure up, and the curriculum is blamed."*
- *"Because preschools and centers are part of a system, changes like the introduction of high-quality curriculum outlast the tenure of a single teacher."*

Early math is an essential curricular element and there is potential to build on emerging instructional tools in that area

- *"Early math is important, and should not be ignored: The number one predictor of school achievement through high school is pre-K math skills."*
- *"I would pilot and adopt an existing early math curriculum rather than developing a new one. The world is better served by doing a second pilot and evaluation of an existing curriculum, rather than starting from scratch. I would see what is out there and then pilot it."*

Socio-emotional competencies are important but approaches that focus on those alone are not recommended

- *"I'd put my money first on the content achievement skills being developed early on, although I am intrigued by the attention and executive functioning skills."*

Family child care homes: the context and opportunity

What we heard...

Family child care homes have a great deal of need for quality improvement, and improvement is possible

However, this is not where the greatest 'bang for the buck' can be achieved, due to a unique set of challenges associated with family child care homes

...From the experts

- *"We are including family child care homes in the emerging QIS system we are building at the state level, because this is where large numbers of children are."*
- *"Earlier in my career I worked with family child care home providers and found that it was absolutely possible to work with them to improve quality. However, it was very expensive."*
- *"In our Program for Infant and Toddler Care program, we are working with thousands of family child care home providers and have found many of them eager and excited to improve the quality of their care and teaching. It's certainly possible."*
- *"Studies have shown that you get the most bang for your buck when you work to help a mid-quality site increase to high-quality, than in trying to work with the lowest quality sites. Unfortunately, family child care homes are often at a much lower starting point than preschools and centers."*
- *"There is a problem of scale in any work with family child care home providers. Most of these providers work with small numbers of children, so it is very expensive to reach them. This is not where I'd start if I had limited money."*
- *"There is a culture barrier to working with family child care home providers. Care givers are less likely to think of themselves as 'teachers' or to be comfortable in thinking about how to structure the day or deliver a curriculum. Thus, you need to cherry-pick the providers who are truly 'ready' for quality-improvement work."*

The home: context and opportunity

What we heard...

...From the experts

Parents are children's most important teacher

- *"When it comes to early learning outcomes, parents and families matter most."*

Low-dosage and low-intensity parent education programs are not effective in changing parental behavior

- *"I know of no research that supports light-intensity work. Not to say people won't say they enjoyed the parenting class or the book bag. This is in a whole other category—it is almost PR. In these economic times to be out there spending money on something you can't say changed behavior is risky business. A parenting class has never been proven to change behavior."*
- *"Programs that are light touch with parents are what I call 'Mitzvah Programs.' You do them because they feel good, but you're not actually helping the child. I wouldn't spend much money on these programs."*
- *"We haven't seen much impact from light-touch, standalone parent engagement programs. But working with parents in the context of other sustained involvement might stick."*

Effective parent education programs are intensive, sustained, and expensive

- *"Parent education needs to be consistent and intensive to be effective."*
- *"There are some promising home visiting programs, but high intensity and dosage is required, which is expensive. Changing parent behavior is hard and requires time."*
- *"Because these programs that work are so expensive, not every family has access to them. We need to increase access to high-quality programs. There are some promising federal funding streams for this."*

Similarly, little has been shown to improve Family, Friend and Neighbor care quality

- *"I don't know of any FFN evidence. It is a little bit like the low-impact literacy services...I haven't seen anything that really affects the kid."*
- *"Although there are many children in FFN, it is much more difficult to influence these caregivers. First, these children aren't counted – you literally don't even know where they are, making them nearly impossible to reach. Second, even if you could reach them, FFN caregivers are very difficult to influence. Because care often occurs within a family context, with aunts or grandmothers acting as the caregiver, they don't consider themselves professionals. Third, it is really difficult to even define what quality looks like in an FFN context, due in part to the specific cultural contexts. Some people I really respect who have tried to improve the quality of FFN now feel that it's impossible."*

Comprehensive place-based interventions: the context and opportunity

What we heard...

There is a consensus that place-based approaches are promising and make sense

However the evidence base is still developing

But given high interest by private and public funders there are many opportunities for catalytic investment

...From the experts

- *"Don't get caught up in the tendency to dab programs and services everywhere. While this feels good, it doesn't have lasting impact. It takes a concentrated, full-out effort to help these kids become successful."*
- *"I believe that smothering an area with services can have beneficial effects, based on my experience with the New Hope project in Milwaukee."*
- *"I think that there is a multiplicative effect that comes from smothering an area with services, but in terms of research, the jury is still out on this. In the Harlem Children's Zone it is hard to know what the critical components of HCZ are – the Fryer study showed that the school had an effect, but was inconclusive with respect to Baby College or Harlem Gems."*
- *"Taking an intensive geographic focus allows you to comprehensively serve not just the kids, but also their family and environment. A Syracuse study showed a multiplicative effect of this approach."*
- *"There are certainly funding opportunities for place-based approaches currently, given the Promise Neighborhoods initiative of the Obama administration."*
- *"There has been an increase in interest in place-based investing both by foundations and by the government in recent years. However, it is most likely that the efforts that win Promise Neighborhood grants will be those that already have a 'head start,' such as those that foundations have already started to invest in."*

Interviewee list

Interviewees

- Celia Ayala, Los Angeles Unified Preschool
- Jose Banda, Anaheim City School District
- Linda Clinard, University of California, Irvine
- Sean Casey, Contra Costa First Five
- Greg Duncan, University of California, Irvine
- Ellen Frede, NIEER
- Cathy Grace, Children's Defense Fund
- Pat Halberstadt, Boys and Girls Club of Garden Grove
- Lorie Hoggard, Newport Mesa School District
- Don Howard, The Bridgespan Group
- Gary Mangiofoco, Los Angeles Universal Preschool
- Peter Mangione, West Ed
- Virginia Mann, University of California, Irvine
- Susan B. Neuman, University of Michigan
- Kris Perry, California First Five
- Barbara Sarnecka, University of California, Irvine